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Wilāya, Enjoying Good and Forbidding Evil: Q 9:71 and the Qur'ānic Ethic of Reciprocity in Gender Relations

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Abstract

This article examines Q 9:71 to articulate an alternative ethical framework for gender relations in Islam, one rooted not in hierarchy but in mutual care and reciprocity. While pre-modern Islamic tradition frequently interprets verses such as Q 4:34 through a hierarchical lens that reinforces male authority – both within marriage and the wider social domain – this study argues that Q 9:71 offers a radically different paradigm. Through a comprehensive linguistic and thematic analysis of the term *wilāya* across the Qur'ān, the article demonstrates that this concept consistently signifies mutual support, protection, and closeness, characteristics foundational to a non-hierarchical model of male-female relations. The verse's adoption of *wilāya* with the communal command to "enjoin the good and forbid the evil" further signals an inclusive ethic that affirms women's equal participation in social and political responsibilities. By contrasting the narrowly contextual marital framework of Q 4:34 with the universal address of Q 9:71 to believing men and women, the article highlights the latter's potential as a normative ethical base. Furthermore, it explores how classical exegetes, including al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935), at times hinted at the reciprocal and participatory ethos within Q 9:71, even if such interpretations were not fully developed. Drawing on contemporary scholarship, the article situates

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this Qur'ānic ethic within modern efforts toward Islamic gender reform, advocating for interpretive methodologies that both engage with tradition and reclaim the Qur'ān's egalitarian potential.

Keywords

Q 9:71 – *wilāya* – gender ethics – reciprocity – enjoining good and forbidding evil

الولاية، والأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر: سورة التوبة الآية 71 وأخلاقيات المعاملة بالمثل في العلاقات بين الجنسين في القرآن الكريم

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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه المقالة الآية 71 من سورة التوبة لصياغة إطار أخلاقي بديل للعلاقات بين الجنسين في الإسلام، إطار لا يرتكز على التسلسل الهرمي، بل على الرعاية المتبادلة والمعاملة بالمثل. وبينما فُسِّرت آياتٍ مثل الآية 34 من سورة النساء في التراث الإسلامي ما قبل الحداثة من منظور هرمي يُعزز سلطة الرجل—سواءً في إطار الزواج أو في المجال الاجتماعي الأوسع—تُبيّن هذه الدراسة بأن الآية 71 من سورة التوبة تُقدم نموذجًا مختلفًا تمامًا. ومن خلال تحليل لغوي وموضوعي شامل لمصطلح «الولاية» في القرآن الكريم، تبين المقالة أن هذا المفهوم يشير باستمرار إلى الدعم والحماية والتقارب المتبادل، وهي سمات أساسية لنموذج غير هرمي للعلاقات بين الرجل والمرأة. كما أن ارتباط الآية لمفهوم الولاية مع الواجب الجماعي «بالأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر» يُشير إلى أخلاق شاملة تُؤكد على مشاركة المرأة المتساوية في المسؤوليات الاجتماعية والسياسية. بمقارنة الإطار الزوجي الضيق السياق في سورة النساء الآية 34 مع الخطاب الشامل في سورة التوبة الآية 71 للمؤمنين والمؤمنات، تُبرز المقالة احتمال حمل الآية الأخيرة قاعدة أخلاقية معيارية. علاوة على ذلك، تستكشف المقالة كيف ألمح المفسرون القدماء، ومنهم الرازي (ت. 606/1210)، وابن كثير (ت. 774/1373)، ورشيد رضا (ت. 1354/1935) أحيانًا إلى روح التبادل والمشاركة في سورة التوبة الآية 71 حتى وإن لم تكن هذه التفسيرات قد تطورت بشكل كامل. استنادا إلى الدراسات المعاصرة، تضع المقالة هذه الأخلاق القرآنية في إطار الجهود الحديثة نحو إصلاح

العلاقات بين الجنسين في الإسلام، داعيةً إلى منهجيات تفسيرية تتفاعل مع التراث وتستعيد في الوقت نفسه إمكانات القرآن في المساواتية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الآية 71 من سورة التوبة – الولاية – أخلاقيات الجندر – المعاملة بالمثل – الأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر

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> The believers, both men and women (*al-muʾminūna wa-l-muʾminātu*), support each other (*baʿḍuhum awliyāʾu baʿḍin*); they order what is right and forbid what is wrong (*yaʾmurūna bi-l-maʿrūfi wa-yanhawna ʿan al-munkari*); they keep up the prayer (*yuqīmūna al-ṣalāta*) and pay the prescribed alms (*yuʾtūna al-zakāta*); they obey God and His Messenger. God will give His mercy to such people: God is almighty and wise.
>
> Q 9:71

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1 Introduction

The pre-modern Islamic tradition frequently presents the normative ethical basis of gender relations as one rooted in male hierarchy and superiority. This is evident not only in the exegetical interpretations of Q 4:34 – commonly cited in support of male authority – but also in the areas around gender, including issues such as polygamy and divorce. These hierarchical formulations also permeate other domains of Islamic scholarship, such as legal and pietistic works reinforcing a vision of gender asymmetry. This article constructs and examines a Qurʾān-based model of gender relations rooted in reciprocity, focusing particularly on the interpretive potential of verse Q 9:71. This verse focuses on the concept of *wilāya* – a mutual relationship of care, support, and protection – between believing men and women. We undertake a comprehensive analysis of all Qurʾānic contexts in which *wilāya* appears, demonstrating how this term consistently signifies mutual ethical responsibility. Through this approach, we argue that *wilāya*, rather than *qiwāma*, should serve as the normative ethical

basis for gender relations. This study builds on the work of scholars such as Asma Lamrabet, who critically engages *wilāya* alongside *khilāfa* and *qiwāma* to advocate for an egalitarian reading of the Qur'ān and its approach to gender (Lamrabet 2015; 2018). In addition to establishing reciprocity, we also explore how Q 9:71 broadens the scope for women's socio-political participation. The verse's call to "enjoin the good and forbid the evil" (*amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar*) applies equally to men and women, thereby challenging traditional limitations on female public agency. By reinterpreting *wilāya* as a central ethical construct in the Qur'ān and tracing its resonance in the exegetical tradition, this article offers a Qur'ān-rooted framework for rethinking gender relations in Islamic ethics – one that is both theologically grounded and ethically expansive.

2 Hierarchy and Gender Relations

Q 4:34 is often drawn upon to underscore the hierarchical nature of gender relations. Previous studies have deconstructed the way exegetes interpreted and adopted the notion of *qiwāma* into a patriarchal concept by separating it from the context of previous verses such as Q 4:11, 4:12, 4:32 and 4:33, establishing it as an isolated principle and generalising it from a self-contained financial injunction to a general rule that governs all aspects of a marital relationship (Abou-Bakr 2015). To take but one example, the medieval commentator al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/1319) is somewhat typical of the hierarchical sentiments that are adopted when he states that the meaning of this verse is that "*God has favoured men over women* by endowing them with a perfect mind, good management skills, and superb strength" (al-Bayḍāwī 1997, 2:72). Q 4:34 is not only used to posit gender hierarchy but also used to restrict women's participation in the socio-political domain. Judith Tucker, for example, elaborates on the significance of this verse and how this had an impact on the gendered structuring of society at large:

> This verse has provided the most powerful basis for the legal elaboration of man as breadwinner and woman as obedient dependent within the family … jurists developed a number of discriminatory rules for marital relations … the construction of financial responsibilities as male and financial dependence as female, domestic authority as male and domestic subservience as female, inevitably resonated in the world outside the domestic sphere.
>
> TUCKER 2008, 25

Other studies have also shown, not just in the context of Q 4:34, but in other areas such as polygamy and divorce, how male privilege is read into the verses, even when they are not explicitly stated. Over time, such sentiments they become canonical, not due to divine authority but rather through a social process of canonisation which includes factors such as repetition and institutionalisation (Reda and Amin 2020). The notion of hierarchy and supremacy is not merely restricted to abstract interpretations of Q 4:34. Rather, it is embedded in other areas of the Islamic tradition. The most explicit arena in which a hierarchical relationship between men and women can be seen is with the institution of marriage itself, at least in the way it was composed by medieval jurists. As Kecia Ali has shown, marriage for women was often compared to the institution of slavery. Both were comprised of sexual ownership of a female by a male, where wealth was exchanged for sexual access (Ali 2010).[1] We can see this tendency enunciated in pietistic Islamic literature, such as in the words of Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 521/1201), who states:

> It is incumbent for a wife to know that it is like she is owned by her husband. She may not act on her own affairs or her husband's money except with his permission. She must prefer his rights over her own and over her relatives … it is incumbent upon a woman to endure her husband's mistreatment like a slave should.
>
> IBN AL-JAWZĪ 1992, 139–140

In a similar way, even though al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), asserts that a woman is not exactly parallel to a slave, he argues that she is still somewhat her husband's slave and hence is obliged to obey all of his commands as long as he does not command her to sin (al-Ghazālī 1982, 2:56). It should be noted that such statements are not strictly legal, but pietistic or more akin to preaching. However, they are still significant in the way they underscore the widespread attitude towards a hierarchical dynamic in marriage. These attitudes are not surprising. As Zahra Ayubi contends, classical texts depict the ideal moral subject as rational, elite, able-bodied and male. In this paradigm, women are excluded from having complete moral agency. Instead, they are assigned roles rooted

1 Although, it should be noted that some jurists, and in particular Mālikī jurists were concerned with distinguishing a wife from a slave in the context of domestic labour, holding that in contrast to a master-slave dynamic, a husband did not own his wife's labour power (Katz 2022).

in domesticity and dependence and framed as objects of ethical concern as opposed to objects of direct moral development (Ayubi 2019).[2]

Yet even in the strictly legal domain, we can see this dynamic in gender relations. An example is the process of contracting a marriage contract, which is based on an offer from one party followed by an acceptance from the other. A prospective groom has complete control and independence over his part of this process. However, largely speaking, women do not. According to most of the Sunnī schools of law, the Mālikī, Shāfiʿī and Ḥanbalī schools, a woman must have a legal guardian to conduct the marriage on her behalf, without which such a marriage would be invalid. The most well-known exception to this is the Ḥanafī school, which does allow a woman to act as her own agent, without a guardian.[3] However, even here, we should not see this as an unfettered right. In the Ḥanafī School, a woman's guardian still has the right to annul the marriage on the basis of suitability (*kafāʾa*). Such can occur, for instance, if the bride's guardian felt that the groom was not the social peer of the bride. For example, the Ḥanafī jurist al-Qudūrī (d. 428/1037) states: "Suitability in marriage is to be reckoned with. Thus, if a woman marries someone without equal status [to her], the guardian may seek separation between the two" (al-Qudūrī 2010, 383).[4] It should be noted that marriage is, of course, not a unilateral act, and there is a broader question of why a third party is needed for its validity, as opposed to a sale, for example, which only requires the consent of the buyer and the seller. Mohammad Fadel argues that this is due to the nature of the marriage contract, which occupies an intermediate position between a private relationship and a publicly regulated relationship. Hence, the function

2 Recent work has attempted to show how the Qurʾān itself does envision men and women as equal moral agents, each responsible not only for personal piety but also for collective ethical transformation. This is present in both the Meccan and Medinan *sūra*s, where women are portrayed as both exemplars of faith and active participants in shaping a just society. This concept of "patronage of piety" illustrates the Qurʾān's transformative vision, where household and communal roles are redefined to foster shared spiritual responsibility (Baur and Hamza 2023).

3 This came to be the majority opinion of the Ḥanafī school. Al-Marghinānī (d. 593/1197), for example states: "A free woman who is in her majority and of sound mind may enter a marriage contract by her own consent without a guardian, whether she is a virgin or a non-virgin, according to Abū Ḥanīfa [d. 150/767] and Abū Yūsuf [d. 182/798] … a woman disposes of her own rights because, if she is of sound mind and rational, she can dispose of property and also choose a husband" (al-Marghinānī 2000, 2:474–475).

4 Similarly, divorce is another area where the guardianship of women is apparent. The prerogative for divorce lies with the man through the procedure of *ṭalāq*. However, if a woman wishes to divorce her husband, the only way she is able to do so is through the court system. Here, a judge would dissolve the marriage on her behalf. Hence, other actors divorce a woman since she does not have the power or autonomy to do so herself (Spectorsky 1993).

of the third party would ensure that the public's interest in the marriage is protected (Fadel 1998). Nevertheless, the onus of having a legal guardian rests upon the woman as opposed to the man.

One would be mistaken to see this as solely being restricted to the medieval period. In many of the legal codes of Muslim-majority countries, we see this continued reinforcement of hierarchy of men over women in marriage, such as in Malaysia and Algeria, where the Shāfiʿī and Mālikī schools are widely followed. However, even in countries where the more lenient Ḥanafī school is followed, we still see this enshrinement of guardianship, such as in the Jordanian legal code. Other countries, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, which follow the Ḥanafī school, do allow a woman to conduct a marriage without a guardian, yet they still uphold the father's guardianship in the sense that the guardian could request an annulment if he felt that the marriage was unsuitable.[5] Furthermore, studies in the Moroccan context have shown that even though the law does not obligate guardianship for the validity of concluding a marriage contract, they still continue to be concluded with a male guardian as a social norm as opposed to a legal requirement (El Hajjami 2009).

The hierarchical nature of gender relations, especially within a marital context was acknowledged as problematic even among certain pre-modern jurists. We can see this most starkly with the fifth/eleventh century Ḥanafī jurist, al-Sarakhsī (d. ca. 483/1090), who states in relation to a marriage contract: "the basis of ownership over a woman is a type of humiliation … and self-humiliation is forbidden (*idhlālu al-nafs ḥarāmun*). The Prophet said, 'it is unbefitting for a believer to humiliate himself' and 'what is permissible is permissible out of necessity.'" Al-Sarakhsī then goes on to explain that a wife is subordinated to a husband on the basis of a husband's sexual desire, hence the humiliating aspect of their relationship. Hence, due to this, the law seeks to minimise her humiliation by ensuring that her husband is a peer who would not abuse her. This would occur in the context of a social inferior who may also engage in other forms of humiliation due to their class difference (al-Sarakhsī 1989, 5:23).[6]

Jurists may have declared that the Qurʾān was the primary source of legislation in Islamic law, but it was neither the only source nor even the most

5 For details of the provisions of these codes see Tucker (2008, 166–167).

6 Al-Sarakhsī's "proto-feminist" stance can perhaps be understood within the broader framework of early Ḥanafī thought. Yacoob (2024) shows how Ḥanafī jurists did not construct legal personhood around a strict binary of male-female. Rather they used a more complex relational framework which included factors such as age, class, enslavement and social role. Hence, gender in a legal context was not uniform or fixed but rather intersected with other forms of hierarchy.

important source. In many cases, the abstract and general Qur'ānic language was restricted and interpreted in light of Prophetic teachings and practice (*ḥadīth*) (or what was attributed to Prophetic teachings and practice), and the varying methodologies of the diverse legal schools. In many instances, Qur'ānic directives were mixed with conventional norms of pre-Islamic Arabia, such as in the case of inheritance.[7] Furthermore, in the early period, jurists would often derive legal and ethical principles from extra-Qur'ānic principles such as justice and equity. This made the Qur'ān, as Denny notes, a "rectitude guide but not the actual juristic basis of legislation" (Denny 2005, 268). In later juristic discourse, as Sadeghi has shown, adherence to the established position of a legal school was more important, and later jurists would go out of their way to justify earlier legal positions at the expense of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* (Sadeghi 2012).

The question then arises, how does the Qur'ān see the relationship between men and women? In the verses that speak of male-female relations, what is the underlying ethic, or the normative basis for this relationship? The Qur'ān is a value-laden text.[8] It passes judgment on various issues and adopts specific stances, often in reaction to and in conversation with the context of pre-Islamic Arabia. For example, with regard to the institution of marriage and maintaining chastity, the Qur'ān closely regulates and constricts the permissiveness of pre-Islamic Arabia. In certain cases, pre-Islamic practices are directly opposed, such as with female infanticide. While with others, such as polygamy and slavery, they are taken as norms but regulated and moderated (Reinhart 2005, 245–246).

We have already mentioned the emphasis that is placed on the notion of *qiwāma* as found in Q 4:34 and the corresponding hierarchical nature of gender relations. Despite this, the Qur'ān already adopts a dynamic between men and women that is based on the notion of *wilāya* in Q 9:71. The context of this notion is reciprocal and far more expansive for women. The verse reads:

7 Although Qur'ānic directives on inheritance are detailed, it does not provide a rule for every possible contingency. Hence, we find combinations of heirs that are not directly mentioned in the Qur'ān, or certain combinations of the various eligible contenders to an estate, that lead to over-subscription (*ʿawl*). Because of this, early jurists viewed the inheritance verses as abrogating contrary tribal inheritance customs, but not entirely displacing them. For example, Sunnī jurists continued to give priority to agnates above others (Kimber 1998, 291).

8 As Rahman notes, the Qur'ān may not be a strict book of abstract ethics, yet at the same time, it is not a legal document. Rather, it is a work of moral admonition and "if values and principles were to be derived from the entire Quran, it would be possible to build an ethical system that would be genuinely Quranic" (Rahman 1985, 8–9).

> The believers, both men and women (*al-muʾminūna wa-l-muʾminātu*), support each other (*baʿḍuhum awliyāʾu baʿḍin*); they order what is right and forbid what is wrong (*yaʾmurūna bi-l-maʿrūfi wa-yanhawna ʿan al-munkari*); they keep up the prayer (*yuqīmūna al-ṣalāta*) and pay the prescribed alms (*yuʾtūna al-zakāta*); they obey God and His Messenger. God will give His mercy to such people: God is almighty and wise.

This verse is found in *sūrat* al-Tawba, a Medinan *sūra*, which deals with conduct during times of war and political relations during times of peace. This verse appears specifically in the context of disagreements among the Muslim community over setting out on the expedition of Tabūk, which took place in 9/630. The *sūra* goes on to speak of the discord created by the hypocrites who did not want to go out with the Muslim army. One of the main themes the *sūra* discusses is issues of loyalty and allegiance.

The chronology of this specific *sūra* is also important in that it is one of the last *sūra*'s of the Qurʾān to have been revealed, hence its message and content cannot be argued to be subject to later abrogation. Furthermore, in contrast to Q 4:34, it is not restricted to a specific context. Even though some exegetes used Q 4:34 to underscore the general hierarchy of men over women, it is exceedingly clear that Q 4:34 by its own terms is situated within a marital context. This is clear when we bear in mind the verse in its entirety. After stating "men are the maintainers over women" (*al-rijālu qawwamūna ʿalā l-nisāʾ*), the verse then goes on to speak of marital dispute and the various steps towards reconciliation. The verse advocates that a man should first verbally rebuke his wife, and if this fails, then "ignore them when you go to bed." This statement of ignoring a woman in bed can only refer to a woman with whom the man is in an intimate relationship, i.e., his wife, rather than all women. Hence, even though the verse refers to "men" (*rijāl*) and "women" (*nisāʾ*), it is actually speaking of husbands and wives.

If the latter part of the verse alludes to a dynamic between a husband and a wife, then we would argue the former part of the verse equally applies. However, when we look at Q 9:71, there are no such restrictions. Rather, the verse explicitly refers to Muslim men and women generically, *al-muʾminūna wa-l-muʾminātu*. This is far more overarching than the notion of guardianship in Q 4:34. Even if one upholds the guardianship of men over women on the basis of Q 4:34, one would still need to account for Q 9:71, which, as we will show, is centred upon reciprocity. Hence, we would argue that Q 4:34 refers to a dynamic in marriage, while Q 9:71 refers to a general ethic of male-female relations, and hence the implications of Q 4:34, should be subsumed under the ethical underpinnings of Q 9:71.

3 *Wilāya* in the Qurʾān

After generically referring to Muslim men and women, Q 9:71 goes on to state that they are *awliyā* of each other (*baʿḍuhum awliyāʾu baʿḍin*). It is not a unidirectional *wilāya*, that is one way, but mutual. Men are *awliyāʾ* of women and women are *awliyāʾ* of men. It is significant that this is one of the few verses that explicitly addresses women. The Qurʾān employs gendered language and more frequently solely uses the masculine form. And even though there was grammatical ambiguity in determining the antecedent in classical Arabic of the third-person plural, most pre-modern scholars held that the use of the masculine was exclusively directed to men, this being the norm unless there was evidence to support the contrary. Hence, in such contexts women were included by way of analogy, not expressly. This includes verses that may be seen as more expansive and reciprocal between men and women, yet their significance may be dismissed through the sole use of the masculine. It is only in the modern period that the opposing stance to the issue of gendered language is increasingly adopted. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022), for example, upholds the presumption that revelatory language applies to both men and women, and the onus of proof falls on those who hold onto gender distinction (Fadel 2012, 13). However, Q 9:71 is significant in that it bypasses such concerns by explicitly addressing women.

To appreciate how the Qurʾān understands this relationship of *wilāya*, it is important to see its contextual usage in the Qurʾān. The word *wilāya* is derived from the root *w-l-y*, which, based on its strict dictionary definition, can mean protector, patron or ally (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2007, 1048). However, we can use the occurrence of this word in other places in the Qurʾān to get a better contextual meaning of the term. In doing so, we can better understand how the Qurʾān itself envisions what being a *walī* represents and hence extrapolate this to men and women. Such a linguistic approach to understanding key Qurʾānic terminologies has also been adopted in previous studies (Izutsu 2002; Karim 2021). When we extract all of the occurrences of the word from the Qurʾān, we see it occurring exactly 86 times (table 1). From all of these occurrences, we see the ascription of *walī*, in four contexts: God, Satan, people and a lack of a *walī*.

The most copious attribution of *walī* is to God himself, which occurs in 21 places. In many of these cases, God is directly stated as being the *walī* of the believers such as in Q 3:68, "God is the ally (*walī*) of the believers."[9] In other

9 See also Q 3:68, 6:14, 6:127, 7:196. In one context the Prophet is linked with God as also being the *walī* of the believers (Q 5:55). God is not only described as *walī* in this world but also in the hereafter, such as in Q 6:127, 34:41, 41:31.

TABLE 1 Ascription of *walī* in the Qur'ān

Theme	Ascription of *wālī* in the Qur'ān	Total
God	Q 2:257, 3:68, 3:122, 4:45, 5:55, 5:55, 6:14, 6:127, 7:155, 7:196, 10:62, 12:101, 17:111, 18:17, 29:22, 34:41, 41:31, 42:9, 42:28, 45:19, 62:6.	**21**
Satan	Q 2:257, 3:175, 4:76, 4:119, 6:121, 6:128, 7:27, 7:30, 16:63, 18:50, 18:102, 19:45, 29:41, 39:3, 45:10.	**15**
People	Q 2:282, 3:28, 4:89, 4:75, 4:139, 4:144, 5:51. 5:51, 5:57, 5:81, 7:3, 8:34, 8:34, 8:72, 8:73, 9:23, 9:71, 17:33, 19:5, 27:49, 33:6, 33:65, 41:34, 45:19, 48:22, 60:1.	**26**
No *walī* (except God)	Q 2:107, 2:120, 4:123, 4:173, 6:51, 6:70, 9:74, 9:116, 11:20, 11:113, 13:16, 13:37, 17:97, 25:18, 29:22, 32:4, 33:17, 42:6, 42:8, 42:9, 42:31, 42:44, 42:46, 46:32.	**24**

places, various figures, such as previous prophets, also affirm this.[10] Yet what does it mean for God to be the *walī* of the believers? What does this designation entail and what is this relationship? By focusing on the contexts where God is described as a *wālī*, we can better understand what the term signifies, and thereby extrapolate its traits to men and women who are described as *awliyā'* of each other.

The first point to note is that the trait of being a *walī* is in many ways a divine trait. In one place, it is designated as one of the names of God, "it is He who sends relief through rain after they have lost hope and spreads His mercy far and wide. He is the Protector (*huwa al-walī*), Worthy of All Praise" (Q 42:28). The context in which this name occurs also elucidates what this trait signifies. The verse speaks of people in a state of despair due to a lack of rain. It is in this context that God provides relief by sending down rain. This is also described as an act of mercy. Hence, from this context, we can say that a *walī* is one who looks after another by easing their affairs and showing mercy.

This sense of care and easing the affairs of another is also found in another verse in the context of a battle between the believers and the non-believers,

> [Prophet], remember when you left your home at dawn to assign battle positions to the believers: God hears and knows everything. Remember

10 Moses proclaims this in Q 7:155 and Joseph states this in Q 12:101. God is stated as the *walī* of the People of the Cave in Q 18:17. The Jews also make the claim that only God is their *walī* in Q 62:6.

> when two groups of you were about to lose heart and God protected them (*wa-Llāhu waliyyuhumā*), let the believers put their trust in God.
>
> Q 3:121–122

This verse was revealed in relation to the Battle of Uḥud (3/625), which took place after the defeat of the pagans at Badr (2/624) (al-Ṭabarī 2013, 4:90–91). The Prophet and the believers decided to leave Medina to face them head-on. However, while travelling, a group of hypocrites withdrew from the Muslim army. Before the battle, the Prophet assigned "battle positions," most notably commanding a group of archers to remain on a hill and ordering them not to leave their position. However, when the archers witnessed the Muslims winning, a section of them left their posts to seize the spoils of war. This led the Muslim army to be exposed from the flank, a gap which their opponents exploited, leading the Muslim army to suffer great losses. The latter part of the verse, where *walī* is used, refers to two tribes who were on the verge of withdrawing from the battlefield due to a loss of courage. However, "God was their *walī*" and they stood their ground. We can see how the notion of care is also present in this context. God was their *walī* and hence as a result they did not lose courage. Therefore, a *walī* eases fear and anxiety and provides comfort to another in circumstances where one might ordinarily expect people to lose heart.

So far, we have seen God as *walī* in the context of providing care, mercy and comfort. However, we can expand this further to another common ascription of *walī* to God, which is in relation to protection. We can take Q 10:62–3 as an example of this, "unquestionably, the allies of God (*awliyāʾ Allāh*) shall neither fear, nor shall they grieve. Those who believed and feared God." Here, those who are the *walī* of God, identified in the next verse as those who believe in God and fear him, neither fear nor grieve. The protection God grants those under His care even includes their emotional well-being. A stronger reference to this notion is also found in Q 4:45, "God knows your enemies best: God suffices as a protector (*kafā bi-Llāhi waliyyan*) and as an ally (*kafā bi-Llāhi naṣīran*)." Here, in the context of the enemies of the believers, God affirms that as their *walī* he is a sufficient source of protection. This also links back to our previous understanding of *walī* as one who is the source of comfort.

However, even though God is denoted with this relationship and closeness with the believers, the Qurʾān is careful to affirm God's transcendence. God's *wilāya* of the believers does not take away from God's supremacy over human beings. The Qurʾān makes it clear that God's *wilāya* flows one way since only humans are the object of God's *wilāya*. However, God does not need of any such support – "praise belongs to God, who has no child nor partner in

His rule. He is not so weak as to need a protector (*lam yakun lahu waliyyun min al-dhull*)" (Q 17:111). While the notion of *wilāya* is unilateral in relation to God and the believers, *wilāya* between men and women, as stated in Q 9:71, is mutual. By putting all these contextual traits of *wilāya* together and extending them to men and women, we can understand *wilāya* as a sense of friendship that is characterised by providing comfort, easing fears, and being merciful. It also denotes protection. This underscores a far deeper reciprocal relationship.

However, it is not only God who is ascribed with the trait of *walī*. The second most common ascription is to Satan. In contrast to God being the *walī* of the believers, Satan is depicted as the *walī* of the non-believers. For example, Q 16:63 states, "today, he is *their* [i.e., the unbelievers'] patron (*fa-huwa waliyyuhum al-yawm*)."[11] While God's *wilāya* is based on comfort and protection, Satan's alliance with the non-believers is based on misguidance and opposition to the believers: "the evil ones incite their followers (*la-yūḥūna ilā awliyā'ihim*) to argue with you: if you obey them, you too will become polytheists" (Q 6:121, see also Q 3:175 and 4:76). This goal of misguidance has been present from the very beginning of the Qur'ān historical chronology. For instance, in Q 7:27, the Qur'ān warns believers against following the seductions of Satan, as he seduced Adam causing his expulsion from paradise. The episode ends with the phrase, "we have made the demons the allies (*innā ja'alnā al-shayāṭīna awliyā'*) of those who do not believe" (see also Q 18:50). Even though Satan is the *walī* of the non-believers, the Qur'ān is emphatic in stating that such *wilāya* amounts to nothing. Being allied with Satan means being allied with no one. It is a *wilāya* that is weak like a spider's web (Q 29:41). Ultimately, Satan will be a source of sorrow for those who attributed *wilāya* to him in the hereafter, when all authority and power is placed with God (Q 6:128, see also 45:10). In a sense, then, the Qur'ān's use of *walī* with respect to Satan is a form of irony.

The notion of non-believers having no *walī* coupled with oft-recurring statements that God is the only *walī* is stated in multiple places in the Qur'ān. For example, we find in Q 2:107: "Do you not know that control of the heavens and the earth belongs to Him? You have no protector or helper but God (*min dūni Llāhi min waliyyin*)."[12] In some instances, where the Qur'ān states that God is the only *walī*, the believers are warned against taking others as *walī* over God. "Use the Quran to warn those who fear being gathered before their Lord, that

11 Other figures of the past also make references to Satan being the *walī* of a people. For example, Abraham fears that his father in persisting in disbelief will become an ally of Satan (Q 19:45).

12 See also Q 2:120, 4:123, 4:173, 6:51, 6:70. 11:20, 11:113, 13:16, 13:37, 17:97, 18:102, 25:18, 29:22, 32:4, 33:17, 42:8, 42:9, 42:31.

TABLE 2 Ascription of *walī* to people in the Qur'ān

Theme	People as *wālī*	Total
Warning to believers against taking disbelievers as *wālī*	Q 3:28, 4:89, 4:139, 4:144, 5:51. 5:51, 5:57, 5:81, 7:3, 9:23, 60:1	11
Believers to each other	Q 8:72, 9:71	2
Disbelievers to each other	Q 8:73, 45:19	2
Of Masjid al-Ḥarām	Q 8:34, 8:34	2
Of an incapacitated debtor	Q 2:282	1
As a family member	Q 19:5, 33:6	2
As a protector	Q 4:75, 33:65, 48:22	3
Avenger of a killed person	Q 17:33, 27:49	2
Doing good	Q 41:34	1

they will have no one but Him to protect them (*laysa lahu min dūnihi walī wa-lā shafīʿ*) and no one to intercede, so that they may beware" (Q 6:51, see also 13:16).

It is for this reason that the Qur'ān mockingly states that Satan, in his true state of powerlessness, is the *walī* of the disbelievers on the Day of Judgement, "Today, he is their patron (*fa-huwa waliyyuhum al-yawm*), and a painful punishment awaits them all" (Q 16:63). Commentators also drew upon this fact that to have Satan as a protector on the Day of Judgement is to have no protector at all (al-Rāzī 1999, 20:228–230). Therefore, we can see how the attributes that are associated with *wilāya* in relation to God and the believers are starkly absent in Satan's "*wilāya*." We now move to how the Qur'ān ascribes *wilāya* to human beings with other human beings (table 2).

The Qur'ān envisions individual communities as having *wilāya* amongst themselves. Hence, while believing men and women are *awliyāʾ* of each other, so are the non-believers and hypocrites to each other. For example, the people of the book are described as *awliyāʾ* of each other, and believers are warned against associating with them (Q 5:51). In light of this, we find that the most common ascription of *wilāya* to people appears in the context of warnings to the believers against taking non-believers as *awliyāʾ*, even if they are family members (Q 9:23).

The notion of protection, which we found with God, is restated in relation to humans who are *awliyāʾ* of each other. For example, we find in Q 4:75:

> Why should you not fight in God's cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, "Lord, rescue us from this town whose

> people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector (*min ladunka waliyyan*) and give us a helper."

The verse refers to the oppressed Muslims in Mecca who were unable to migrate to Medina. Here they pray to God to rescue them from their predicament. However, they specifically pray to God to send them a *walī* who will alleviate their hardship. Hence, we can affirm how a *walī* is one that protects and supports another.

Close kin are ascribed with the appellation of *walī* in two places in the Qurʾān. Hence, we can say that when the Qurʾān speaks of believing men and women as *awliyāʾ*, it imagines a close familial relationship. In one instance, Zechariah prays to God: "I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] when I am gone, for my wife is barren, so grant me a successor, a gift from You, to be my heir (*waliyyan*) and the heir of the family of Jacob. Lord, make him well pleasing [to You]" (Q 19:5–6). There is a sense here that a *walī*, by virtue of being a family member, is one who inherits from another person, and is characterised by having a close bond. The notion of a *walī* easing fears is also present in this verse in that Zechariah fears not having a child, and his child or "*walī*" is the very thing that will alleviate this fear.

In the longest verse in the Qurʾān, which refers to contracting a specific form of transaction, the debtor who is borrowing money is obliged to write down the specifics of the contract. However, if the debtor is unable to do so by virtue of being "feeble-minded, weak, or unable to dictate, then let his guardian (*walī*) dictate …" (Q 2:282). Hence, the debtor's *walī* is permitted to act on the debtor's behalf. A *walī* in this case, supports another person when they are unable to do so. In another context, we see this notion of duty and support when the Qurʾān states that in the case of a person who is killed unjustly, his *walī* is permitted to claim retribution (Q 17:33). In this context, a *walī* defends the rights of another person and entails a sense of responsibility that continues even after the death of another.

Finally, in one verse the Qurʾān describes how one becomes a *walī*: "Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better, and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend (*walī ḥamīm*)" (Q 41:34). Here the verse stresses that by acting with goodness to others, one will eventually become a *walī* to that person and hence the Prophet is commanded to repel evil with goodness.

Based on all these occurrences of *walī* in the Qurʾān, we find that it is a trait that is characterised by care, support and protection. Hence, this is an important dimension that characterises the relationship between men and women which should not be overlooked, since both men and women are mutually

described as being *awliyā'* of each other. This supports our contention that the ethical basis of gender relations should be based on such traits and reciprocity. Furthermore, this *wilāya* should also be taken into consideration when reading other verses that are more commonly used to emphasise hierarchy such as Q 4:34. Even if one ascribes Q 4:34 as supporting hierarchy, the reciprocity of Q 9:71 still requires consideration and informs Q 4:34. However, as we have argued, there is a stronger argument to see Q 9:71 as the normative ethical basis for gender relations, since it is general and unrestricted, unlike Q 4:34, which applies exclusively to married persons. Despite this, marriage is, of course, not an insignificant aspect of gender relations. However, as has been shown in previous studies, it is very reasonable to see this *qiwāma* as purely functional and hinging upon financial responsibility, as a plain sense reading of the verse would show.[13] Husbands have *qiwāma*, because of what they spend in support of their spouse – "*bi-mā anfaqū.*" By virtue of this, then, if a man fails to uphold this financial duty, his claim to *qiwāma* is also undermined (Wadud 1999; Abou El Fadl 2001; Barlas 2002). It is only based on this contextual and functional basis that we speak of *qiwāma*. On the other hand, the underlying ethic of gender relations should hinge upon the ethic of *wilāya*.

4 Enjoining the Good and Forbidding the Evil

We now move on to the second phrase that depicts the relationship between men and women in Q 9:71. After stating that they are the mutual *awliyā'* of each other, the verse goes on to state that "they enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (*ya'murūna bi-l-ma'rūf wa-yanhawna 'an al-munkar*)." It is only after this that the verse goes on to speak of religious duties, such as prayer and giving alms. This commandment of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil is significant since we would argue that it explicitly widens the scope for women to participate in the socio-political domain.

The formulation frequently occurs in the Qur'ān but how does the Qur'ān itself actually depict this concept? There are a plethora of places where this phrase occurs in the Qur'ān including Q 3:104, 3:110, 3:114, 7:157, 9:71, 9:112, 22:41 and 31:17. Some of these verses, such as Q 3:104 and 3:111 alongside 9:71, indicate which people should perform this duty. These verses underscore that it is a general collective duty, "Be a community that calls for what is good, urges what

13 Abdel Haleem's (2004) translation of this verse for example encapsulates this link clearly: "Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially."

is right, and forbids what is wrong" (Q 3:104). There is an allusion to a certain sense of unity among the believers with regards to this duty, as the following verse then juxtaposes the verse with the descriptions of earlier people who were divided, splitting off into factions and falling into dispute amongst each other (Q 3:105). It should be noted that the verse does not make a distinction between men and women and by virtue of its unity, women are also included in this command.

Certain verses mention the command in the context of specific people or situations, such as those engaged in self-defence, such as in Q 22:41 or those having been placed in leadership positions, as in Q 9:112. In a similar way, Q 31:17 recounts Luqmān advising his son to do the same. However, what is important to note is that these occurrences of the command do not restrict the command to men and is applicable to believers in general, including women. This is further supported by the fact that Q 7:157 mentions the command in relation to the Prophet Muḥammad who commands the believers to perform this duty: "who follow the Messenger – the unlettered Prophet they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel – who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong, who makes good things lawful to them and bad things unlawful …" Because it is the Prophet who commands this action to all believers, the verse, by its plain terms, applies to all believing men and women.

However, what does this duty of *amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* actually consist of? None of the verses that we have cited specify the form that this obligation should take. Michael Cook postulates that this has to do with underscoring that this is an affirmation of a general ethical duty to the world at large (Cook 2001, 14). If we examine further occurrences of what constitutes "good (*maʿrūf*)" in the Qurʾān we see it being applied in legal contexts (Q 2:178, 2:180, 2:228, 2:229), as in performing such duties in a way that is decent and honourable. But again, in such contexts, the exact conduct is never specified. There are further verses where the act of "enjoining" (*amr*) or "forbidding" (*nahy*) are accompanied by a range of general ethical terms instead of *maʿrūf* and *munkar*, which can serve as a parallel for the phrase. Such includes commanding justice, piety and God-consciousness; or forbidding evil, wickedness and immorality. Such parallels reinforce the notion that *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* is to be understood in a general sense (Cook 2001, 15).

Kevin Reinhart has written a comprehensive account of the occurrence of the term *maʿrūf* in the Qurʾān (Reinhart 2017, 71–80). He argued that the way the term occurs in the Qurʾān supposes that revelational knowledge in the Qurʾān is to be supplemented with conventional moral understanding of the term. He divides the occurrences of the term into three contexts. The first is the current formulation of "enjoining good and forbidding evil," and the second is

"candour" when making commitments. Most occurrences of the term, however, do not stipulate what is actually "known." The implication is that what is "known" is drawn from social conventions and moral intuitions (Reinhart 2017).

The fact that this is the case, we would also argue, shows that the command is not restricted in geography or time. Rather, its generality allows it to be applied in different periods and places, and dependent on what is well-known and established in a given society. This *includes* actions of a socio-political nature. In fact, certain occurrences of the phrase do give this impression such as in one of the phrases' occurrence in *sūrat* al-Aʿrāf (Q 7). The verse speaks of a town that was situated by the sea, where a group of inhabitants would fish during the Sabbath. A segment of this community would rebuke them for their actions, while another group would, in turn, ask those who were rebuking them as to why they did so, as God would punish these people anyway. The verse then goes on to say that those that had rebuked their people were eventually saved from God's punishment (Q 7:163–166). The occurrence of this episode underscores a general duty of speaking out against wrong and is not merely restricted to religious duties. In a similar way, another passage details those from among the children of Israel whom their prophets cursed "because they disobeyed, and they persistently overstepped the limits. They would not forbid each other when they would do wrong. How vile their deeds were" (Q 5:87–89). What is particularly interesting in this passage is that the forbidding of wrong occurs etymologically in a reciprocal sense, which may be better translated as they did not "forbid one another" (Cook 2001, 16). In other words, this is a duty that believers owe to one another, indicating an active process of reprimanding each other for wrongdoings. Again, the context of this verse does not restrict the phrase merely to religious duties. Hence, based on these verses, we would say that even though the duty of *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* is in most places left unstated and vague, this allows the phrase to also include actions of a more socio-political nature.

Although the Qurʾān may be vague in its detailing of what *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* is, the Islamic tradition goes into great detail regarding what the phrase means. It is uncontroversial among Muslim writers on this concept to link it to the community's political life. Certain scholarly currents, for example, saw in this concept a legitimisation of rebellion against tyrannical leadership, or, in the alternative, a requirement to at least speak out against those in power if they did wrong (Abou El Fadl 2001a). An oft-quoted tradition that is linked to this concept states: "Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart – and that is the weakest of faith" (al-Nawawī n.d., no. 34).

The fact remains that socio-political participation is clearly included under *al-amr bi-l-maʿrūf wa-l-nahy ʿan al-munkar* in Islamic thought (Cook 2001). What remains controversial is who is obliged to carry out this duty. The majority opinion is that this is a *farḍ kifāya* or a collective responsibility, meaning that if one or more members of the community undertake the obligation, then other members of the community are discharged from this obligation. A minority view sees this duty as the prerogative of scholars because laypeople lack the knowledge necessary to enable them to discharge the obligation. Another minor view excludes women and children from this obligation, on the theory that they are especially incapable of carrying out such a responsibility (Cook 2001, 18–20). However, based on the majority view and what we have seen of the usage of the phrase in the Qurʾān, it can be argued that Q 9:71 expands the scope for women's socio-political participation.

5 Q 9:71 and the Exegetical Tradition

So far, we have analysed Q 9:71 and argued for its significance in establishing an ethics of reciprocity between men and women as well as widening the scope for women's socio-political participation. Much has been made in modern scholarship of reclaiming what is argued to be the egalitarian thrust of the Qurʾān. Some of the earliest works in this field, such as Leila Ahmad's work, specifically make this point. Ahmad argues that there exist two voices in the Qurʾān in relation to gender: pragmatic regulations instituted earlier on, and an ethical vision that is "stubbornly egalitarian" (Ahmed 1992, 65–66). A tool that was articulated in early Muslim feminist scholarship was to negate what was claimed to be the source of patriarchy, namely, the pre-modern exegetical tradition. It was not the Qurʾān that was the source of such assumptions, but dominant interpretations of the Qurʾān. This exegetical enterprise was undertaken by men within a patriarchal environment, which subsequently influenced dominant misogynistic readings (Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002). However, as Hidayatullah has noted, in proportioning blame on exegetes and not the Qurʾān, such approaches draw attention to their own subjectivity. If such scholars argue that the interpretations of medieval commentators are faulty because of their own socially-produced biases, Muslim feminist interpreters are also open to the counterclaim that their own readings are subjective and influenced by contemporary notions of equality, which is then projected into the Qurʾān (Hidayatullah 2014). Other works have adopted a more nuanced engagement with the exegetical tradition, stating that pre-modern male exegetes were unconsciously or unthinkingly importing their own gender ideology,

as opposed to acting in bad faith. The question of subjectivity and bias is also starkly acknowledged in the sense that *all* scholarship – even one's own – is biased and hence on the basis of this general principle, the pre-modern tradition can be problematised (Geissinger 2015; Ayubi 2019). However, the question of subjectivity and enumerating a practical ethics remains an important one. How does one propose an ethic of gender relations that would potentially gain greater widespread approval? Al-Sharmani raises some of the epistemological and methodological challenges in developing an alternative model of interpreting the foundational scriptures. On one hand, scholars must deconstruct patriarchal interpretations, and on the other hand, engage in reconstruction in offering an ethically grounded alternative. However, this then often leads scholars to frequently encounter hostility, such as in post-2011 Egypt, where their work was viewed as un-Islamic and their epistemological legitimacy questioned (Al-Sharmani 2024). We would argue that to enumerate a practical ethics, it is important to link ideas to the tradition or a widely accepted scholarly past. By drawing upon the past, the conclusion one adopts is more likely to gain widespread acceptance. This has and remains the most important mode of providing legitimacy to own's reading or interpretation of the Qur'ān. In fact, as Baur notes, situating interpretation of the Qur'ān within the previous exegetical tradition has always been the dominant and most authoritative mode of Qur'ānic commentary. Exegetes provided legitimacy and authority to their conclusions precisely by drawing upon their predecessors (Bauer 2013).[14] A recent study has also shown in the context of Q 4:34, how traditional contemporary Muslim scholars are more receptive to "reform" positions that have some precedence or link with the classical tradition (Karim 2026). With this in mind, we now delve into the exegetical tradition to show how to a certain extent, exegetes also acknowledged the reciprocal potential of Q 9:71.

In approaching the exegetical tradition, we notice two currents. One that sees Q 9:71 as referring solely to men and women in relation to religious duties and the eschatological consequences of the hereafter. In such formulations, the potency of gender reciprocity is left unexplored, as well as the potential of the verse in expanding the socio-political participation of women. Exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) take this approach. This spiritual equality in religious duties and recompense is supported by the latter part of the verse, which states that believing men and women "keep up

14 Bruce Fudge also notes how "the exegete will draw from existing opinions in those fields. Much of exegesis therefore takes the form of excerpts of discussions found elsewhere, with the content largely taken from other genres" (Fudge 2006, 117).

the prayer and pay the prescribed alms." However, we would argue that the verse also has clear contours of socio-political participation and envisions a relationship based on reciprocity, because of the earlier two commandments, which are independent of this later phrasing. On the other hand, we have other exegetes such as al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), and more explicitly, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935), who do explore the meaning of this verse in domains outside of ritual and eschatology.

This former trend can be seen very early on with al-Ṭabarī's commentary on this verse where he begins by explaining who is referred to by the reference "male believers and female believers." He states that they are those that "believe in God, His messenger, and the signs of His book." He then goes on to explain that their description in relation to the allusion to *wilāya* is that "that they help and support each other". However, it is unclear what this help and support entails, and al-Ṭabarī does not go on to elaborate further. When it comes to defining what "enjoining good" represents, for al-Ṭabarī this is "ordering people to believe in God and His messenger and whatever comes from God." "Forbidding evil" is attached to the next command of "establishing prayer." Al-Ṭabarī groups these two prescriptions together and seems to gloss over the specifics of "forbidding evil." He ends by stating that "establishing prayer" refers to the obligatory prayer and correspondingly "giving alms" also refers to the obligatory amount. Overall, the way al-Ṭabarī explains this verse, he restricts the commandment of "enjoining the good and forbidding evil" solely to religious duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, he does not discuss the social or political implications of this verse (al-Ṭabarī 2013, 10:223).

In a similar way, al-Qurṭubī explains that the notion that men and women are *awliyā'* of each other is that their "hearts are united in friendliness and empathy." This is contrasted with an earlier reference to hypocrites in the *sūra* who are described as "from one another" (*baʿḍuhum min baʿḍ*) because their hearts are in opposition to one another. Al-Qurṭubī does not elaborate more upon what *awliyā'* might mean between men and women other than having an amicable relationship. When al-Qurṭubī arrives at the phrase of "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil," he restricts "good" solely to religious duties like "the worship and unity of God, and whatever is related to it." In a similar way, his commentary on "forbidding evil" is also restricted to religious duties, such as forbidding "idol worship and what is related to it" (al-Qurṭubī 2017, 8:143).

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's explanation of Q 9:71 is potentially more expansive in expanding the scope of women's participation in the socio-political sphere. He begins by devoting considerable space to juxtaposing this verse with the aforementioned verse in the *sūra* that refers to the hypocrites. The verse almost entirely mirrors the reference to the believers, with the primary exception of

omitting the word *awliyā'* and the inversion of the phrase "enjoining the good" and "forbidding the evil" (Q 9:67). We would add, based on what we have previously stated on the occurrence of *wilāya* in the Qur'ān, that the omission of the term *awliyā'* in the context of hypocrites is consistent with how the Qur'ān uses this term. The Qur'ān is careful to affirm that despite the veneer of Satan's *wilāya* to the unbelievers, and the unbelievers' *wilāya* to each other, this amounts to nothing. The *ersatz* character of unbelievers' *wilāya* is the likely explanation for why the Qur'ān did not use the term *awliyā* in Q 9:67's reference to the hypocrites. The hypocrites are bound by a relationship, but it is not a relationship based on genuine *wilāya*.

For al-Rāzī, the reason for this omission is due to the nature of hypocrisy, which he states is a characteristic which stems from the hypocrisy of those who were hypocrites previously. For him, therefore, hypocrisy and disbelief are the results of mere blind imitation of one's predecessors, without any higher mental process or criticality. Hence the verse states that the hypocrites "are of one another." In other words, their hypocrisy is the result of a historical process of compounded errors that derive from later generations blindly accepting the beliefs of previous generations. Believers, by contrast, are *awliyā'* of each other. Their relationship is not based on deference to the beliefs of prior generations, but instead is the result of the application of higher-order human rational faculties, such as deductive logic, and mutual criticism. This process leads to genuine guidance and belief. Hence, they break away from the practices of their forefathers, unlike the hypocrites and unbelievers. As a result, the believers support one another by guiding one another. Alongside this critical spirit, al-Rāzī also emphasises that the *wilāya* ascribed to men and women alludes to a sense of closeness: "know that *wilāya* is the opposite of *'adāwa* (enmity) and we mentioned previously that the origin of the world *wilāya* is closeness" (al-Rāzī 1999, 8:336).

In terms of explicating what *wilāya* means and the actions it represents, al-Rāzī associates it with the following five attributes: enjoining good, forbidding evil, establishing prayer, giving alms and partaking in war. These five are in direct contrast with the way the Qur'ān depicts the hypocrites' and the non-believers' approach to such actions. Instead of "enjoining good and forbidding evil," the hypocrites do the inverse by "enjoining wrong and forbidding right." Instead of establishing prayer, they approach prayer in a state of laziness. While the believers give alms, the hypocrites are stingy. Finally, when the believers are called to partake in war, they do so, while the hypocrites lag and urge others not to do so. Like al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī's examples are mainly restricted to the religious domain. However, his last point of partaking in war does intimate a greater degree of social-political participation. One could hazard,

therefore, that al-Rāzī is intimating that this also refers to women; however, he does not make this explicitly clear.

However, the most explicit acknowledgement of Q 9:71's potential for establishing an ethics of gender reciprocity and expanding women's socio-political participation can be found with two later exegetes. The first is the medieval exegete, Ibn Kathīr. Ibn Kathīr, like al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī, begins by juxtaposing the verse that refers to believers with the verse before it, which speaks of the hypocrites. He then goes on to state that *awliyā'* means that the believing men and women "help and cooperate with each other," which he states comes from *ḥadīth* found in both the collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875). The full narration reads: "The Prophet said, 'A believer to another believer is like a building whose different parts enforce each other.' The Prophet then clasped his hands with the fingers interlaced (while saying that)" (al-Bukhārī n.d., no. 2446; Muslim n.d., no. 2585). Ibn Kathīr then cites another narration which encapsulates what the notion of *wilāya* represents between men and women: "The similitude of believers in regard to their mutual love, affection, and fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any of its limbs aches, the whole-body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever" (Muslim n.d., no. 2586). By citing and utilising such narrations in explaining Q 9:71, Ibn Kathīr goes further than any of the other exegetes surveyed in this article in enumerating a reciprocal ethic between men and women that is based on a sense of egalitarianism and shared responsibility (Ibn Kathīr 2010, 4:313). His use of Prophetic narrations further bolsters and solidifies this position.

Ibn Kathīr, however, does not go any further to explain what is meant by "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil." Rather he draws the reader's attention to a previous verse that parallels this verse, in Q 3:104, which states "And let there be from you a nation inviting to good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful." When we go to Ibn Kathīr's commentary of Q 3:104, we find him adopting the position of al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 212/828) with regards to those "enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" as fighters and scholars. Much like the way the phrase was adopted in the legal literature, Ibn Kathīr also intimates, at least from his commentary of this verse, that this prescription broadens the scope for women's socio-political participation. He states, "what is meant by this verse is that there is a group from this nation fighting. This is obligatory *for every individual of this nation* according to his means" (Ibn Kathīr 2010, 2:393).[15] He

15 This is emphasised further when he quotes another narration which states "by God, you have been ordered to command the good and forbid evil, or God will hasten upon you punishment, then you will call to him and he will not respond" (al-Tirmidhī n.d., no. 2169).

then refers to the previously cited narration that encapsulates the way jurists generally understood "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil."[16] The use of this narration further solidifies a broader socio-political role from women. In sum, we can cite Ibn Kathīr's commentary of Q 9:71 as a source that supports our contention of a reciprocal gender ethics that is firmly rooted in the Qur'ān and Islam's intellectual heritage.

However, Ibn Kathīr is not the only exegete who adopts such a reading. We have a more explicit endorsement of this ethic in the modern period by Rashīd Riḍā. He states that what is meant by *wilāya* is mutual support of men and women in terms of "association, love, working together and mercy" (Riḍā 1947, 10:269). Such traits are in line with what we have previously shown as the contextual adoption of *wilāya* in the Qur'ān. The verse of *wilāya*, Riḍā argues, like previous exegetes, is stated in opposition to the previous reference to the hypocrites. Hence, when a description is given to the believers its opposite is attributed to the hypocrites. So, for Riḍā, one of the main attributes of the notion of *wilāya*, which the non-believers do not have, is "association," which leads the believers to have a sense of altruism toward each other. This in turn incentives the believers to fight for each other. However, the non-believers are described as having traits such as cowardice and stinginess, and hence a lack of altruism and mutual support. Like Ibn Kathīr, Riḍā also draws upon the same narrations of the believers as a "unified building" or "body," to bolster this ethics of reciprocity between men and women.

When it comes to the commandment of "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil," Riḍā states that this refers to "defending truth and upholding justice." This perspective implicitly alludes to the way the phrase was commonly formulated in the legal literature and understood by Ibn Kathīr, as a command that requires speaking out against an oppressive leader (Riḍā 1947, 10:269). Riḍā goes on to emphasise that this mutual support of men and women extends to times of war and on the battlefield. However, he states the caveat that for women, this does not have to do with physical fighting, but can take other forms of assistance. For Riḍā, there are "many ways of fighting … through wealth, one's body, and through ethical behaviour …" (Riḍā 1947, 10:267). He goes on to support his position with examples from the time of the Prophet. For example, he states how the womenfolk of the early Muslim community would accompany the army to the battlefield. Women would prepare food, give water, and bandage the wounds of the injured. Prominent and explicit

16 "Whoever among you sees evil, let him change it with his hand. If he is unable to do so, then with his tongue. If he is unable to do so, then with his heart, and that is the weakest level of faith" (Muslim n.d., no. 49).

examples of this include figures such as Fāṭima (d. 15/632) and Umm Sulaym (d. ca. 28/650), who during the Battle of Uḥud would rush around the battlefield with water for the injured and to wash their wounds (Riḍā 1947, 10:267). Another way women participated in the war effort was by inciting the Muslim army. An example Riḍā gives in this regard is that of al-Khansāʾ (d. 24/645), "the most affectionate and grief-stricken of women," who encouraged her children to fight with verses of war poetry. When one by one all three of her children were killed, she praised God for honouring her with their martyrdom (Riḍā 1947, 10:267).

It can be seen, therefore, how there was a current that did broach upon a more expansive interpretation of Q 9:71 and enunciate a more reciprocal and greater socio-political role for women. However, there are some limitations in drawing upon the tradition. Despite the more expansive articulation of certain exegetes to Q 9:71, this ethic was not taken further, nor the potentiality of it in gender relations in general explored further. One also should take into consideration the place of Q 4:34 in exegetical discussions and the hierarchical extrapolations that were articulated by exegetes. Hence, we can draw upon the tradition to show precedence to a certain extent, but at the same time acknowledge the limitations in doing so. One can perhaps understand the reason as to why these two verses were not harmonised in a more intentional way due to the nature of exegesis in general, which, as has been pointed out in previous studies, was broadly "atomistic." Classical works were broadly organised around a linear, sequential commentary of each verse, with each verse treated as a separate locus of interpretation. This was as opposed to being linked thematically across different *sūra*s (Rahman 2009). Nevertheless, our analysis of certain exegesis shows some precedence in the classical tradition, which can be used to further boost a more reciprocal ethic of gender relations.

6 Conclusion

This article has explored the ethical basis for gender relations in Islam, focusing on the dynamic tension between hierarchical interpretations of gender relations and the Qurʾānic potential for reciprocity. Through a perusal of the pre-modern Islamic tradition, we have traced how a dominant ethical paradigm of male superiority was institutionalised in Islamic legal and pietistic discourse. However, by re-evaluating the Qurʾānic concept of *wilāya* in Q 9:71, a different ethical model becomes not only possible but also deeply embedded within the Qurʾānic worldview. We began by outlining how Q 4:34 has traditionally been interpreted as affirming male authority (*qiwāma*) over women,

frequently being divorced from its immediate legal context and extended into broader socio-ethical hierarchies. The historical process of canonisation through repetitive interpretation and institutional entrenchment gave these hierarchical models an aura of divine legitimacy. These interpretations, as shown through the reflections of figures like Ibn al-Jawzī and al-Ghazālī, often framed marriage as a relationship of ownership and authority, analogising it to slavery in both legal and moral terms. While some pre-modern scholars, such as al-Sarakhsī, acknowledged the humiliating implications of this ownership model, legal structures nonetheless upheld asymmetry, particularly in matters like marriage contracts and guardianship.

However, our focus on Q 9:71 reveals a Qurʾānic ethical thrust that directly challenges these constructions. The verse not only affirms the spiritual equality of men and women but also describes them as *awliyāʾ* of one another – a term rich in connotations of mutual responsibility, empathy, and care. Our linguistic and contextual analysis of *wilāya* as it appears across the Qurʾān illustrates that this is not a term of hierarchy but one of partnership. Whether applied to God, Satan, believers, or even social constructs like kinship and justice, *wilāya* consistently signifies a relationship built on support and solidarity. Significantly, Q 9:71 is not contextually limited. Unlike Q 4:34, which is situated within a marital framework, Q 9:71 refers to believing men and women (*al-muʾminūn wa-l-muʾmināt*) in general terms, thereby offering a universal ethical model for gender relations. Even for those who maintain the hierarchical implications of *qiwāma*, the ethical foundation of reciprocity in Q 9:71 remains binding, thus requiring a revaluation of how Q 4:34 is approached in legal and moral reasoning.

Moreover, Q 9:71 does more than outline an ethic of mutual support. It also opens the door to broader socio-political participation for women. The commandment that men and women together "enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong" has historically been interpreted in Islamic thought as not only a spiritual obligation but also a communal and political duty. Although the Qurʾān does not explicitly define the parameters of this injunction, its broad application throughout different verses and its association with justice and moral accountability provide a basis for asserting women's equal right – and responsibility – in the public domain. This is further supported by prophetic traditions, legal discourse, and Qurʾānic episodes such as that of the Sabbath-breaking town, where moral intervention is portrayed as a collective obligation not limited by gender.

Our study also engaged with the traditional exegetical tradition, noting that while some scholars restricted the scope of Q 9:71 to spiritual equality or confined it to eschatological reward, others hinted at more expansive

interpretations. Al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, and Rashīd Riḍā, in particular, approached the verse with a broader lens, recognising its implications for cooperation and even military involvement. Riḍā especially emphasised the ethical and moral basis of *wilāya*, drawing from Qurʾānic context and Prophetic precedent to argue for a vision of gender partnership in both spiritual and social life. However, our engagement with the exegetical tradition is not uncritical. The limitations of atomistic exegesis, which focused on verse-by-verse commentary without thematic integration, often led to a lack of cohesion in interpreting verses like Q 4:34 and 9:71 together. This structural limitation, along with prevailing patriarchal norms, impeded a more holistic ethical vision. Nevertheless, we argue that pointing to the moments within the tradition that acknowledge or hint at reciprocity provides the most promising avenue for ethical reconstruction. This is particularly important in our contemporary context, where appeals to tradition often carry more legitimacy than wholesale departures from it.

In conclusion, this article has shown that while the Islamic tradition has often leaned toward hierarchical models of gender relations, there exists within the Qurʾān a powerful alternative in the concept of *wilāya* as articulated in Q 9:71. By grounding gender relations in reciprocity rather than superiority, and by acknowledging the shared spiritual and communal responsibilities of men and women, the Qurʾān offers a compelling basis for rethinking Islamic gender ethics in a way that is both textually faithful and morally relevant. Moving forward, a reorientation of Islamic discourse towards *wilāya* could offer a more inclusive, ethical, and theologically sound framework for gender justice.

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