Extending Aziz Al Azmeh's Framework to Include Feminist History

Elizabeth URBAN

I. Introduction:

One of the greatest contributions of Aziz Al Azmeh's work to the field of Islamic studies is its sheer interdisciplinarity. He challenges scholars of Islamic history to move beyond their "institutional and conceptual introversion and stasis,"[1] and to enter into conversations current in other humanities and social sciences fields. Modeling such a comparative approach, Al Azmeh combines his knowledge of Arabic-Islamic primary source material with a great deal of secondary scholarship from other fields, such as religious studies, anthropology, political theory, and literary theory. For instance, his *Muslim Kingship* seeks to contextualize the rise of Islam within wider Late Antique conversations about monarchy; he shows how Muslim rulers adopted and creatively adapted rituals, symbols, architectures that were already familiar to the Hellenized Near East (and even beyond, into South and Southeast Asian lands).[2] In his more recent work, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity,* he continues in this comparative vein. For example, he briefly compares and contrasts the ethnogenesis of Arabs on the Eastern side of the Roman Empire with that of Germanic tribes on the Western side of the Roman Empire.[3] He likewise suggests that scholars who study early Islamic writing—and the relationship between writing and orality—could learn much from scholarship on the history of Homeric texts.[4] Throughout his works, he draws upon theorists such as Weber,

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(1) Aziz Al Azmeh, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2014), x. Hereafter, *Arabic Sources*.

(2) Aziz Al Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

(3) Aziz Al Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 101–2.

(4) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources,* 102–3.

Barthes, and Foucault in order to enrich his historical analysis.

Another contribution of Al Azmeh's scholarship is his insistence that the earliest decades of Islamic history—a period he refers to as "Paleo-Islam"—should be viewed on their own terms. That is, scholars should not view Paleo-Islam anachronistically, "looking backwards" from the viewpoint of the Classical Islamic tradition elaborated in the eighth through tenth centuries in imperial centers such as Damascus and Baghdad; such an anachronistic view tends to assume that Paleo-Islam led directly and inevitably toward its later elaboration.[5] Instead, scholars should analyze Paleo-Islam in the context in which it emerged, namely, Late Antique Arabia. While situating Paleo-Islam within Late Antiquity, scholars should avoid facile (and often hostile) claims that Islam "borrowed" this or that concept from Christianity or Rome, which makes Paleo-Islam appear derivative rather than creative. As Al Azmeh rightly says, focusing on the "origins" of any particular concept or practice is "most often a charade" that ignores the many complex ways such concepts/practices are invoked, adapted, and re-appropriated.[6] Instead of either an inevitable precursor of Classical Islam or a pale imitation of existing Late Antique concepts, Paleo-Islam emerges as a creative "regime of exploration, innovation, adaptation, adjustment and assimilation, specific to a time and place."[7]

It is building upon these two foundations of Al Azmeh's work—interdisciplinarity, and placing Paleo-Islam in its Late Antique historical context— that I suggest feminist history as a possible avenue for enhancing our understanding of Paleo-Islam. First, I suggest that scholars can critically read the Qur'ān and certain *asbāb al-nuzūl* to uncover debates about the status of slave women within the earliest Paleo-Islamic community. The early Christian community appears to have similar debates, inviting further conversation about Late Antique

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(5) Al Azmeh, *Emergence*, 358. I take this point as axiomatic. However, I am not entirely sure how the term "Paleo-Islam" avoids the assumption of inevitability, as it still invokes the later term "Islam." More explanation is needed to show how replacing the English term "early" with the Greek term meaning "early" (paleo) solves the problem of seeming to prefigure a linear development into Islam. Avoiding the term "Islam" altogether is why Donner uses the term "Believers Movement," though Al Azmeh argues that Donner's analysis focuses too much on piety and belief (see *Emergence*, 403–7). Al Azmeh himself suggests that "Muḥammadanism" is an accurate term to describe Paleo-Islam, but perhaps avoids continuing to use the term because of the Orientalist baggage associated with it.

(6) Al Azmeh, *Emergence*, 36.

(7) *Ibid.,* 358.

conceptions of sexual ethics as a marker of communal belonging. However, other *asbāb al-nuzūl* material tends to present an archetypal model of a "good" Muslim woman, reflecting not the creative and dynamic debates of Paleo-Islam, but rather the normative view of a hegemonic Classical Islam that drew upon Late Antique models of patriarchy. Second, I agree with Al Azmeh that genealogy can be informative in constructing Paleo-Islam; in this case, it is informative about the types of marital and concubinal connections early Muslims were making. Such genealogical research, when done in tandem with a close reading of the Arabic-Islamic sources, helps us better understand the articulation of the "aristocratic Arab ethnicity" associated with the Umayyad empire.[8] In using feminist history to study Paleo-Islam, this article echoes some of Al Azmeh's methods and findings, while it challenges or refines others. By responding to Al Azmeh's work, and by inviting him to respond to mine, I hope to enter into a fruitful conversation that will push the boundaries of the field of Islamic studies.

II. Feminist History

I accept as foundational most of what Al Azmeh argues in *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources*. For example, I am convinced that the so-called "hyper-skeptical" school offers little to our understanding of early Islamic history, though it must be acknowledged that early skeptics pushed the field to be more critical and reflective about its sources. [9] I agree that the narrative features of the sources enhance rather than detract from their historical value,[10] and that analysis of textual variants can be illuminating.[11] While agreeing that such methods are useful for constructing Paleo-Islam, the scholar hoping to study women and gender in this context is immediately faced with a problem: none of our narrative sources were written by women, and probably none of our epigraphic, numismatic, or archaeological sources were made by women. To take at face value what male-authored texts say about women seems just as naive as, for instance, taking at face value what non-Arabic, non-Muslim sources say about the rise of Islam. To be sure, such male-authored texts can

(8) I take this phrase from *ibid*., 510.
(9) This critique of the "hyper-skeptical" school runs throughout *Arabic Sources*.
(10) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources*, 55–65.
(11) *Ibid*., 96.

give us an idea of the patriarchal norms of the growing Islamic polity, and can give us an idea of how Arabic-Islamic authors engaged with existing patriarchal structures and norms in Late Antiquity. However, such texts do not provide objective or obvious insights into how women experienced Paleo-Islam, or how women impacted early Islamic notions of community, ethnicity, or polity.

As Al Azmeh says, "The main task of the historian [is] going beyond the limits of sources in an effort towards historical reconstruction" (Arabs, 5). Accordingly, I draw upon the field of feminist history here to suggest ways to read these problematic sources to provide new insights on Paleo-Islam. Feminist history challenges scholars not merely to fit women into already-existing historical categories, but to completely re-frame our understanding of the past to include female perspectives, experiences, and interpretations. Feminist history can be used to interrogate patriarchal structures, an endeavor I imagine Al Azmeh might support, given that his own work studies specific "structural features" of Paleo-Islam and Late Antiquity.[12] Feminist history can also be used to interrogate cultural norms and gendered assumptions embedded in the texts, an endeavor about which I am less certain what Al Azmeh would think, for it enters into the realm of post-structuralism. Al Azmeh sometimes appears to conflate post-structuralism with the hyper-skeptical school that claims there is no "reality" to the events described in texts.[13] However, feminist history insists that it is important to take seriously multiple perspectives if one is to approximate uncovering something resembling the "truth" of the historical past. Recovering female perspectives from male-authored texts is a way to get closer to the historical truth, not a craven excuse to retreat from it.

Feminist historians can employ myriad methodologies to extract meaning from the sources. First, feminist historians simply ask new questions of the sources—questions that did not motivate the original authors, but questions to which the sources nevertheless provide

(12) Al Azmeh, *Emergence,* 44. I get the sense throughout Al Azmeh's work that he is something of a structuralist, though he never explicitly identifies himself as such. He appears to draw widely from structuralist social science fields such as anthropology and political theory, and encourages scholars to continue investigating social and political structures.

(13) See for instance Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources*, 65. It is sometimes simply unclear what exactly Al Azmeh thinks about a particular method or approach, given that his prose can be dense and sometimes difficult follow. It is hoped that this article might be taken as an invitation for greater clarity on certain theoretical and methodological issues.

an answer, such as, "What choices were available to women in this historical context, and what were the costs and benefits of making certain choices?" By asking such questions, I heed Al Azmeh's call to move beyond merely paraphrasing Arabic-Islamic sources, to "asking questions" of them.[14] Second, a prominent historian of Medieval European women's history, Judith Bennett, suggests that scholars should do micro-historical case studies of individual women, and that it might be particularly useful to focus on women who lived during "times of crisis"—in this article, I take Muḥammad's movement as just such a time of crisis.[15] When analyzing accounts about women, Ottoman historian Ehud Toledano has suggested that it is fruitful to analyze what women *do* (or fail to do) in these accounts, instead of accepting whatever motivation the authors ascribe to those actions.[16] The historian and theorist Gisele Bock moreover suggests that, in analyzing female actions, scholars can seek to recover the possible underlying female interpretations of texts or reactions to patriarchal structures.[17] Finally, prosopography—the study of groups using large data sets—has the power to reveal trends that go beyond the level of individual authors' awareness. Arabic-Islamic genealogical material precisely lends itself to prosopographical analysis. I offer examples of these methodologies here, as suggestions of how feminist history can enhance our understanding of Paleo-Islam.

A. Qur'ān 24:33

I take the Qur'ān as an authentic, almost documentary, source from seventh-century Arabia; I argue that any study of Paleo-Islam should take the Qur'ān as its foundational source. This article does not engage in arguments about the Qur'ān's chronology, literary style, orthography, or codification, as Al Azmeh's work does.[18] However, I do appreciate Al Azmeh's notion that "the paleo-Islamic Qur'ān was

(14) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources*, 82.

(15) Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender & History* 1, no. 3 (1989): 251–72.

(16) Ehud Toledano, "Understanding Enslavement as a Human Bond," in *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 35–36. As Toledano says, "'Actions speak louder than words' will be an essential concept and motto in our working space." (*Ibid*., 36).

(17) Gisella Bock, "Women's History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate," *Gender & History* 1.1 (1989): 7–30.

(18) For Al Azmeh's discussions of these topics, see *Emergence*, Chapter 7; and *Arabic Sources*, Chapter 8.

a process of communication in action,"[19] and that it is a "polyvalent communicative act" that should be read "*in statu nascendi* and in its pre-canonical forms."[20] Thus, here I consider how verse 24:33 was an act of communication with Muḥammad's followers, particularly, with slave women.

The Qur'ān makes it clear that chastity (*iḥṣān* and related terms) is a marker of belief and righteousness (see for instance Q 23:1–8, 24:30–33, and 33:35). However, extra-Qur'ānic sources also make it clear that slave women in pre-Islamic Arabia were not generally considered chaste. As such, slave women who hoped to join Muḥammad's movement might have wondered whether or not they could belong. Their question does not appear to have been about belief *per se*, but rather about behavior—about external markers of their belonging. This corresponds with Al Azmeh's assertion that belonging to this community was primarily about allegiance to Muḥammad, social reconfiguration, and ritual observance.[21] I read Qur'ān 24:33 as an answer to these slave women's question about their belonging to the community, and the answer is decidedly ambivalent.

This answer occurs in this phrase: "And do not force your young slave women into whoredom (*bighā'*) if they desire to emulate the sexual ethics of free women (*taḥaṣṣun*)...." While *bighā'* here may well mean prostitution *per se*, both a co-textual reading of the Qur'ān and the consensus of the Islamic tradition suggest that the term may simply mean "illicit sex" or *zinā*. Thus, the question here may not be so much about forced prostitution, as it is commonly taken in the exegetical tradition, but about whether being a concubine constituted a form of *zinā*. That is, while other Qur'ānic verses make it clear that concubinage counts as a form of "chastity" from the male perspective (see Q 23:6, and 70:30), it is unclear from the slave woman's perspective. Verse 24:33 may even be discouraging male members of Muḥammad's community from taking enslaved female members as concubines. In any case, although this verse is addressed to a masculine plural audience, the implied concern about slave women's "desire" signals that what the Qur'ān is really responding to here is not a male question but a female one. This verse seems to encourage slave women to practice *taḥaṣṣun,* a term that occurs only once in the Qur'ān, and which I translate as "emulating

(19) Al Azmeh, *Emergence,* 444.
(20) *Ibid*., 448.
(21) *Ibid*., 378, 403.

the sexual ethics of free women."[22] This term is related to, but distinct from, the more common Qur'ānic term *iḥṣān* (chastity). Semantically, *iḥṣān* has a stronger, more active force than *taḥaṣṣun,* which is more passive and reflexive. *Taḥaṣṣun* implies that slave women should *try* to be chaste, but that they would likely fail in this endeavor. If outward behavior was a primary way of signaling belonging to Muḥammad's movement, it seems that slave women could only partially belong, or that they could *try* (but inevitably fail) to fully belong.

It is worth considering the resonances, and the ruptures, between this Qur'ānic view and the early Christian view of slavery and sexuality. Jennifer Glancy has noted the polyvalence of the Greek term *porneia,* used by Paul in several of his epistles. This term can mean sexual irregularity more broadly, or prostitution more specifically; the exact parameters of *porneia* are unclear and open to interpretation.[23] The Qur'ānic terms *bighā'* and *zinā* thus appear to have a similar polyvalence. Paul urges his readers to shun *porneia,* and he instructs Christian men to "obtain their own vessel" (i.e. woman) for licit sexual activity. As Glancy shows, this "vessel" may have been understood to be either a wife or a slave—for first-century society assumed that masters may have sex with their slaves, who were "morally neutral sexual outlets."[24] Likewise, the Qur'ān considers under the rubric of "chastity" a man's sexual relations with his wife or his concubine. However, Paul remains pointedly silent on the question of whether such master-slave sexual relationships counted as *porneia* for the slave woman herself. Glancy wonders whether Paul's silence "indicates he believes slaves who are sexually involved with their owners are therefore alienated from the Christian body," or on the other hand, that "the forced sexual activity of slaves was beyond moral judgment."[25] That is, Paul's silence leaves open the question of whether slave women could truly belong to a group of Christians whose "bodies are members of Christ," and whose bodies were "not for *porneia*, but for the Lord."

In contrast to Paul's silence, I argue that the Qur'ān makes a more positive statement that slave women can indeed belong to the community of Paleo-Muslims whose membership is marked by their

(22) Later exegetes agree that *taḥaṣṣun* means the same thing as *iḥṣān* (loosely glossed here as chastity), but the pre-canonical Qur'ān provides little evidence to uphold this interpretation.
(23) Jennifer A Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 65.
(24) Ibid., 62.
(25) Ibid., 64.

sexual ethics—they may not belong *fully,* but they belong at least partially. Moreover, in the early Christian Roman context, slaves could not contract legal marriages, while the Qur'ān clearly allows both male and female slaves the ability to marry, and thus to fully embody their community's sexual ethics. Accordingly, it is clear that the Qur'ān takes up similar questions to those raised by early Christianity, and it exhibits many of the same polyvalences and uncertanties, yet it resolves the matter of the slave woman's sexual ethics slightly more concretely than does Paul. More work needs to be done comparing and contrasting this Biblical and Qur'ānic material, including their respective *Sitz am Leben*. More work also needs to be done situating Paleo-Islam within a wider network of Late Antique ideas about women, gender roles, and sexuality, as for instance Eleanor Doumato has done.[26]

If Qur'ān 24:33 provides evidence of debates and questions facing the earliest Paleo-Islamic community, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* may help flesh out the identities of the women seeking clarity. Al Azmeh speaks of *asbāb al-nuzūl* as an important genre of early Islamic historical writing, though he does not go into any specifics.[27] Here, I provide an example of how feminist historical analysis might potentially help scholars separate earlier, more historical *asbāb* material from later, more ideological material. This analysis also calls scholars to attend more carefully to genre differences between *asbāb al-nuzūl* material and other types of material (such as *sīra*, *ḥadīth,* and historical *akhbār*) when attempting to construct a history of Paleo-Islam, for the *asbāb al-nuzūl* material for Qur'ān 24:33 contains references to handful of slave women who find no mention in any other genre of Arabic-Islamic historical writing.

After analyzing and comparing multiple *tafsīr* reports, I argue that two different historical slave women from Paleo-Islamic Medina—one named Musayka and the other anonymous—each sought a different solution to the problem of forced prostitution raised in Qur'ān 24:33. These two women appear in early *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports that trace their chains of transmission back to Hijazi the scholars Jābir ibn ʿAbdallāh and Mujāhid ibn Jabr. Other *asbāb al-nuzūl* reports, predominantly those with Iraqi authors/transmissions, instead tell the story of a symbolic figure named Mu'adha, who is a "reformed harlot" character on the

(26) Eleanor Doumato, "Hearing Other Voices: Christian Women and the Coming of Islam," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23.2 (May, 1991): 177–199.

(27) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources,* 115–16; idem, *Emergence*, 451.

model of Mary Magdalene and familiar from Christian saints' lives.[28] By carefully unravelling the strands of *asbāb al-nuzūl* for Qur'ān 24:33, scholars can differentiate authentic Arabian "Paleo-Islamic" material from later Classical Islamic elaborations that draw upon Late Antique Christian symbology.

It is not that the Paleo-Islamic material has less emplotment than the Classical Islamic material—both narratives are emplotted—but that the emplotmnent is different in both cases and betrays different historical contexts. For example, Jābir ibn ʿAbdallāh's account (as transmitted by al-Ṭabarī), says regarding Q 24:33: "Musayka came to one of the Anṣār and said, 'My master forces me to fornicate.' So this verse was revealed."[29] Mujāhid ibn Jabr's account reads, "ʿAbdallāh b. Ubayy b. Salūl ordered his slave woman to fornicate. She fornicated, and she earned a garment and gave it to him. He said to her, 'Go back and continue fornicating.' She said, 'No I won't continue.' So God Almighty said [this verse.]" In both of these accounts, the narrative focuses on the woman and her actions, not on how the men treat her or how conversion to Islam saves her (which will become prominent themes in later traditions). Neither tradition identifies the women in question as a Muslim or "believer," indicating that their questions were more about external markers of belonging than piety *per se*. Moreover, neither narrative features the intervention of Muḥammad, though his presence is perhaps implied. This silence on Muḥammad seems to run counter to the later exegetical tendency to place Muḥammad at the center of every revelation, and it signals a generic difference here between *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *ḥadīth*. Here, *asbāb al-nuzūl* appears to be a vehicle for recording memories of the earliest Paleo-Muslim community, not necessarily involving the direct intervention of Muḥammad.

These traditions help us better contextualize the Qur'ān as a "polyvalent communicative act." The diverse experiences of these two women indicate that there was not yet a single, clear model of how a "good" or "bad" slave prostitute acted in Muḥammad's Medina. These women are not models or archetypes. They are simply women who sought two different solutions to the problem of forced prostitution, and who appear to have found answers in the revelation of 24:33. They shed light

(28) See Gary Leiser, *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), chapter 1.

(29) Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-qurʾān* (Riyadh: Dār ʿālam al-kutub, 2003), 17:290.

on this “time of crisis”—i.e. a Medinese community undergoing radical social change as a result of Muḥammad’s movement—for we witness how these slave women were actively participating in negotiating the boundaries of their new community. As al-Azmeh says, it is not books that constitute communities but communities that constitute books,[30] and we see here how the community (including women) contested the interpretation and application of the book.

Unlike these Hijazi transmissions about women negotiating the boundaries of the *umma,* Iraqi transmitters such as al-Suddī, Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, and al-Zuhrī instead usually tell the tale of a “reformed harlot” named Muʿādha. As al-Zuhrī says:

> A man from Quraysh was taken captive on the day of Badr, and he was held in captivity at ʿAbdallāh ibn Ubayy’s. ʿAbdallāh had a slave woman called Muʿādha, and the Qurashī captive wanted her for himself. However, she was a Muslim, and she held back from him because of her Islam. But Ibn Ubayy compelled her to do that, and he hit her, hoping that she would become pregnant by the Qurashī and he would pay the ransom money for his son. But God said: “Do not compel....” [Q 24:33]

Unlike the Jābir and Mujāhid traditions above, the woman at the heart of this story appears to be more of an archetype than a member of the Paleo-Muslim community seeking guidance on a matter of pressing importance to her. First, the woman’s name here is given as Muʿādha, “she who seeks refuge [in God],” which seems to allude to the final two Suras of the Qur’ān.[31] She is identified as a Muslim, and it is her Islam that causes this woman to “hold back” from extra-marital intercourse. Second, the narrative has been fleshed out by two villains from the Islamic tradition: the “head of the Hypocrites” ʿAbdallah ibn Ubayy, and an anonymous Qurashi polytheist. Both of these villains collude to mistreat a pious, but disenfranchised, Muslim slave woman. This tradition also contains an element of physical violence absent from the Jābir and Mujāhid traditions, which serves to further highlight the injustice of these *jāhiliyya* men. Finally, the narrative has now become

(30) Al Azmeh, *Emergence*, 431.

(31) Al Azmeh notes that the notion of seeking refuge or succor (using the root ʿ-w-dh) predates the rise of Islam and is found in Safaitic inscriptions. See *Emergence*, 293. However, other textual elements of this account imply that it is fully situated into a Classical Islamic, not Paleo-Islamic, context.

true exegesis, in that the story would be woefully incomplete without the revelation of the Qur'ān. In the first two accounts, the women actively stand up for themselves and demand an answer from Muḥammad, or God, or their wider community; in this story, the woman is impotent and abused, saved not by her own ineffectual actions but only by the miraculous revelation. Ultimately, I argue that this Muʿadha tradition does not tell us about the historical situation in early seventh-century Medina, but about the elaboration of Islamic exegetical strategies in eighth-century Iraq. While accounts by authors such as al-Zuhrī and Muqātil ibn Sulaymān may be historically valuable on the whole, as Al Azmeh seems to suggest,[32] careful textual analysis is still needed to determine which individual accounts are more historically reliable than others.

B. Prosopography

Al Azmeh has indicated that Arabic genealogical literature has been under-utilized in the study of Paleo-Islam.[33] Such literature contains a wealth of information, not only on tribal lineages and relationships in the male line, but also on marriage and child-bearing practices. Asad Q. Ahmed has used such literature to reconstruct early Islamic tribal politics, and has shown how important cognate (marriage) and motherhood links were throughout the Paleo-Islamic and Umayyad periods.[34] I similarly find that the genealogical literature can be enormously helpful in helping scholars understand group dynamics in Paleo-Islam, as well as the elaboration of an "aristocratic Arab ethnicity" in the Umayyad period. Forefronting the role of women in such an analysis challenges scholars to move beyond the essentializing assumption that "ethnicity" simply means patrilineage, and to instead view patrilineage as a specific conceptualization of ethnicity that emerged to fit the religious and political needs of the growing Umayyad Empire. Al Azmeh seems to dismiss scholars who belabor the definition of "Arab" overmuch,[35] but the fact remains that ethnicity is a highly contested concept that can involve shared lineage, shared language, shared lifeways, or a complex

(32) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources*, 122.
(33) *Ibid.*, 45, 50–51.
(34) Asad Q. Ahmed, *The Religious Elite of the Early Islamic Ḥijāz: Five Prosopographical Case Studies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).
(35) Al Azmeh, *Emergence*, p. 100 ff. He seems to take mutually intelligible language and a shared written corpus as the primary markers of ethnicity.

intersection of these things. Certainly, the development of a shared script and mutually intelligible koine are important tools for ethnogenesis, but they are not sufficient for understanding the entire complex notion of ethnicity, or the ways ethnicity intersects with gender in any given historical context.

A prosopographical analysis of Ibn Saʿd's Al-*Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* allows scholars to discern patterns in both marriage and concubinage throughout the first two centuries of Islamic history.[36] For instance, Ibn Saʿd's data allows us to see that the overall percentage of children men begat with slave concubines (*umm walad*s) steadily increased from about 16% in Muḥammad's generation to about 44% in Hishām ibn ʿAbd al-Malik's generation. After Hishām's generation, however, the percentage of concubine's children drops precipitously to 26%, lower than any previous generation other than Muḥammad's. Moreover, Ibn Saʿd's data allows us to see that marriage practices held relatively steady throughout the first two centuries of Islamic history, while concubinage rates spiked and dipped depending on specific historical circumstances; that is, marriage was a stable practice, while concubinage was an unstable one. Ibn Saʿd's data also allows us to see that, perhaps unsurprisingly, Quraysh was using significantly more concubines than the Ansar (the only two groups for whom Ibn Saʿd's data allows such analysis). Finally, Ibn Saʿd also allows us to discern childbearing practices from the female point of view: concubines always produce *fewer* children on average than do free wives. This finding suggests that concubines were used primarily for sexual pleasure rather than for reproduction, and that men were likely practicing *coitus interruptus* with their concubines, but not with their free wives.[37]

Overall, this prosopographical data helps scholars better contextualize the place of concubine-born men (*hujanā'*) in Paleo-Islamic society, and to better understand the elaboration of an imperial ideology of Arabness that included such men. The genealogical data does not indicate that Paleo-Islamic society operated with a strong notion of patrilineage, at least not on the level of everyday relationships. Ahmed has shown that cognate links appear and were incredibly important to

(36) Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1990). For the details of this prosopographical analysis, see chapter 5 of my forthcoming monograph, *Conquered Populations in Early Islam* (Edinburgh UP, date TBA).

(37) Free wives had a legal right to procreative sex; their husbands could only perform *coitus interruptus* or use other forms of birth control with their wives' permission. Men needed no such permission from their concubines, who had no right to procreative sex.

early Islamic society and politics, even if they did not get inscribed in texts as part of a man's name. The Proto-Islamic "mixed-breeds" *hujanā'* were missing such cognate ties, and thus their place in Paleo-Islamic society was contested. Other Arabic-Islamic sources reveal debates about the status of these concubine-born men. For example, an account in Nuʿaym ibn Ḥammād's *Kitāb al-Fitan* indicates that "mixed-breeds" and the children of concubines were considered just as liminal in the Umayyad period as non-Arabs (*ʿajam*), "red ones" (*ḥamrā'*) and *mawālī*.[38] In this account, the Arabs suspect all these groups of colluding with the Byzantines, until the liminal groups themselves prove their loyalty in battle (likely alluding to slave-born heroes such as Maslama ibn ʿAbd al-Malik and Marwān ibn Muḥammad). Similarly, Ibn ʿAsākir explains, "The people of Medina used to be reluctant to take *umm walad*s, until there grew up among them the Qur'ān-reciting gentlemen 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn, al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad, and Sālim ibn ʿAbdallāh, the jurisprudents. They surpassed the people of Medina in knowledge, godliness, worship, and piety. Thereafter, the people wanted concubines (*al-sarārī*)."[39] While these narrative accounts provide a "Great Man" model of historical change, Ibn Saʿd's data suggests instead that the appearance of concubine-born heroes like Maslama ibn ʿAbd al-Malik and these "Qur'ān-reciting gentlemen" was an *effect* of already-rising concubine rates, not a cause of the acceptance of concubinage.

In terms of politics, scholars have long noted that the earliest caliphs were born of freeborn aristocratic mothers and fathers, until the late Umayyad period; then, after a period of transition, most of the Abbasid caliphs were born of concubine mothers. Scholars have provided a number of explanations for this phenomenon, including the notion that the Umayyads were Arab chauvinists while the Abbasids were more cosmopolitan and open-minded. However, Robinson has successfully challenged this explanation for the late emergence of the slave-born

(38) Nuʿaym ibn Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1991). There are five variant versions of this battle, found on pages 262–63, 274–75, 281, 290–91, and 299.

(39) Ibn Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995–2000), 20:57. A similar account in ibid., 41:375, reads: "Quraysh began to prefer *umm walad*s and to make use of them, after having been abstinent from them, when 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 713) was born, and al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr (d. ca. 720), and Sālim b. 'Abdallāh b. 'Umar (d. ca. 725)." These three men are grandchildren of three "Rightly-Guided" caliphs of the Sunni tradition ('Alī, Abū Bakr, and 'Umar, respectively), who had been some of the Prophet Muḥammad's closest companions and supporters.

caliph.[40] Similarly, I suggest that the rise of the slave-born caliph likely pertains to the changing marital politics that often accompany empire building. Scholars working in other historical contexts have shown that petty regional kings tend to marry widely in order to cement their alliances and gain political support. As such royal families gain more power relative to the neighboring noble families, they begin to practice more endogamy—marrying their own relatives, especially cousins. Endogamy prevents competing clans from hijacking the royal family's power through claims based on marriage and motherhood. Finally, as royal families transition into truly centralized, absolutist empires, they sometimes transition away even from endogamy, and instead rely heavily on concubinage for their reproductive politics. This practice solidifies political power not just within one clan or extended family, but even more tightly within one imperial line of patrilineal descent.[41] This trend appears to hold true for the growing Islamic empire as well, for by the late Marwanid period the Umayyads had turned to a combination of endogamy and concubinage. That the final few Umayyad caliphs were born of concubines indicates that the family had reached a fully imperial stage of reproductive politics. It is also noteworthy that there is no clear break between Umayyad and Abbasid practice in this regard, which corroborates Al Azmeh's statement, "The common fixation upon dynastic succession [needs] to be overridden, with due consideration given to the continuities between the Abbasids and Umayyads."[42] It is facile to attribute a long-term historical trend of imperial marriage politics to a simple shift in dynasty.

Finally, it is worth noting how concubinage impelled the late Umayyads and early Abbasids to articulate a new notion of "Arab" identity that was based entirely on patrilineage. Essentially, the Islamic imperial family was able to retain their "aristocratic Arab ethnicity" despite tending to eschew aristocratic marriages. They did so by

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(40) Majied Robinson, "Statistical approaches to the rise of concubinage in Islam," in *Concubines and Courtesans:* Women and Slavery in Islamic History, ed. Matthew Gordon and Kathryn Hain (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 11–26. See this article also for a good review of previous scholarship on the issue of the concubine-born caliph.

(41) On the Spanish Umayyads' transition from exogamy to endogamy to concubinage, see Simon Barton, *Conquerors, Brides, and Concubines: Interfaith Relations and Social Power in Medieval Iberia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Ch. 1; on the same pattern in the Ottoman world, see *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), Ch. 2.

(42) Al Azmeh, *Emergence*, 499.

invoking slave mothers from the Islamic religious tradition: Hagar, and Mariya the Copt. Unlike the Qur'ān and *asbāb al-nuzūl* studied above, the invocation of these slave mothers teaches us little about Paleo-Islam *per se*. Rather, it helps us see how eighth-century leaders shaped religious ideology and elaborated a "classical" Islamic patriarchal tradition that served the needs of the empire. The first slave-born man to articulate such an ideology was Zayd ibn ʿAlī, who bolstered his own claim to the caliphate in 740 CE by saying: "By God, Isaac was the son of a free woman while Ishmael was the son of a slave woman, and God Almighty singled out the descendants of Ishmael and made the Arabs come from them, and that continued until the Messenger of God came from them."[43] That is, if God deemed Ishmael worthy of prophethood while his mother was the slave Hagar, Zayd is also worthy of the caliphate while his mother is a slave. A few decades later, Abū Jaʿfar al-Mansur responded similarly to the challenge of the Ḥasanid revolutionary al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, who claimed to be "noblest of both father and mother" with no non-Arab (*ʿajam*) heritage. Al-Mansur responded, "You are proud that the non-Arabs never bore you, meaning that you have no blood from *umm walad*s. But you have boasted over someone who is better than you in genealogy from beginning to end: Ibrahim, the son of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him), whose mother was Māriya the Copt."[44] Al-Mansur's invocation of Māriya explicitly expands the contested definition of "Arab" to include anyone who was descended through the male line from an Arab father, regardless of their mother's identity. Because of traditions such as these, I would argue that scholars should avoid positing some essentialized, timeless notion of "Arabness" based on lineage or linguistics alone. Ultimately, one cannot understand what it meant for the Umayyads to be an "aristocratic Arab ethnicity" without understanding how they dealt with concubinage and resolved the problem posed by the "mixed breed."

(43) Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 2:390. Ṭabarī's account is quite similar, though it emphasizes more strongly that God preferred the slave-born Ishmael to the free-born Isaac—and by implication, that God preferred Zayd to the Umayyad caliph Hishām. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk* (Leiden: Brill, 1964–1965), II:1676.

(44) Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* (Cairo: *Dār al-Maʿārif*, 1959), 422; Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, III:212–13.

III. Conclusions

Aziz Al Azmeh's work has been so influential precisely because it is so sweeping in scope: it is comparative, synoptic, and interdisciplinary. However, because of his focus on the "big picture," it can sometimes be difficult to know exactly what Al Azmeh thinks of individual textual passages, or exactly how he thinks scholars should best proceed with particular methodologies. For example, he sometimes appears to believe that analyzing narrative variants can be illuminating, while elsewhere he asserts that narrative embellishment is uninteresting and "of minor consequence."[45] It is true that a myopic focus on details can cause scholars to fail to see the forest for the trees. However, the big picture is always made up of smaller details; there is no forest without the individual trees. And for women in particular, often all we have are minutiae and brief references, always filtered through the lens of the male author/transmitter. Perhaps a difference between careful analysis and myopic navel-gazing is simply the underlying goal: trying to advance our knowledge of early Islamic history by entering into comparative conversations, versus provincializing and exoticizing Islamic history such that it becomes almost impossible to study. I hope that in these pages I have exhibited the former attitude, and I look forward to receiving Aziz Al Azmeh's response to the specific methodologies and textual passages I have used in this article. There is clearly more that can be done with this material to embed it even more deeply into its Late Antique context (for instance, to compare and contrast this material more specifically with Late Antique Roman, Christian, and Hellenistic ideas about women and gender), and I look forward to hearing suggestions about how such work could most fruitfully be done.

(45) Al Azmeh, *Arabic Sources*, 47.