This article explores the inner-qur’ānic development of the images of women in the Qur’ānic Paradise and explains the possible reasons for this development via a consideration of Qur’ānic images of women more broadly. Women appear in the Qur’ānic Paradise as “houris” (ḥūr ʿīn), “spouses” (azwāj), “spouses who acted righteously” (wa-man salaḥa min ... azwājihim), “pure spouses” (azwāj mutahharah), and “believing women” (muʾmināt). Such references to women in Paradise correspond to the inner-qur’ānic development of the female image. The “houris” are mentioned only in the Meccan period, while references to “pure spouses” and “believing women” occur exclusively in the Medinan period. Furthermore, after the believing men are rewarded with the houris in earlier Meccan verses, later Meccan verses discuss earthly spouses. In these later Meccan verses, as earthly women gradually rise in station as the spouses of believing men in Paradise, the houris seemingly disappear. In parallel with this development in the Qur’ānic account of women in Paradise, the early Meccan sūrahs do not explicitly describe women as “believing women,” thus putting forward no explicit rules of good conduct for earthly spouses. Finally, it is not until the Medinan verses that women are treated as moral agents.

Women scarcely appear in the Qur’ānic Paradise. Yet, in the few verses in which they are described as entering or inhabiting Paradise, women are imbued a variety of designations that shift throughout the course of the Qur’ānic revelation. Female dwellers of Paradise are first mentioned in the Meccan period. These women are described, as ḥūr ʿīn, usually anglicized as “houris.” Still, from some point in the Meccan period onwards, houris are no longer discussed (Q 44:54; 52:20; 55:72; 56:22). The Qur’ān instead begins to speak of the spouses (azwāj) of believing men, women who, at first glance, gain entrance to Paradise only by virtue of their husbands’ faith (Q 36:56; 43:70). Yet, by the later Meccan period, earthly spouses enter Paradise as a result of their own righteousness (Q 13:23; 40:8–9). In the Medinan period, the male believers in Paradise are promised “pure spouses” (azwāj mutahharah in Q 2:25; 3:15; 4:57), and the female inhabitants of Paradise are referred to as “believing women” (muʾmināt in e.g., Q 9:72; 48:5). Thus, while Medinan sūrahs initially portray earthly women in Paradise as mere spouses, later verses bestow these spouses the designation of believers and subjects with moral agency.

The development of the portrayal of women in the Qur’ānic Paradise described above prompts several questions: Why are women in Paradise depicted as ḥūr ʿīn, “spouses,” “spouses who acted righteously,” “pure spouses,” and “believing women”? Why are the ḥūr
ˈɪn not explicitly mentioned after the Meccan period and can we assume that the notion of the ḥūr ˈɪn continued to be current among the qurʿānic addressees after this period? Are the houris and/or earthly wives of the Meccan period influential on the concept of “pure spouses” in the Medinan period? The present study focuses on answering these questions, taking into account the broader development of the qurʿānic portrayal of women, with a special attention paid to the issue of women’s personal responsibility.

In order to track the inner-qurʿānic development of the representation of women in Paradise, the first part of this article reviews the qurʿānic narratives of Adam and his spouse, the first human beings, which are set in Paradise. The story of Adam and his spouse is told three times across the Meccan and Medinan periods (Q 2:35–39; 7:19–25; 20:117–124). Across these three retellings, two features of the depiction of Adam’s spouse remain constant: the Qurʾān never names her, and God never speaks to her individually. Yet her characterization does evolve: although initially passive, Adam’s wife is later (Q 7:19–25) endowed with greater agency – she receives both a direct address from God and is depicted as acting on her own volition. Crucially though, her action always comes in tandem with Adam, as part of the human couple. This evolution of the depiction of Adam’s wife from passivity to greater personal empowerment, coincides with the inner-qurʿānic development of the representation of women in Paradise, as between the Meccan and Medinan periods women are gradually portrayed explicitly as “the righteous” or “believers.” Yet, as is the case with Adam’s wife, this evolution of inner-qurʿānic descriptions of women does not occur independently of men. Women continue to be represented as the spouses of male believers or as believing women alongside believing male companions.

Previous research, such as Neal Robinson’s, has addressed various identities of the female companions of the believing men in the hereafter, against the background of a diachronic distinction between Meccan and Medinan sūrahs.1 However, Robinson does not explain the reasons for the development of these occurrences from the houris to pure spouses

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All translations of the Qurʾān are taken from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, The Qurʾān: A New Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) but are occasionally modified. All translations of Syriac passages are my own. My gratitude to Nicolai Sinai for sending me the draft entry for muṭahhar (state of research: February 2020) in Key Terms of the Qurʾān: A Critical Dictionary (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming) and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Karen Bauer, Nora K. Schmid, Holger Zellentin, and the peer-reviewers for their valuable comments on the article. Of course, they should not be held responsible for any errors remaining.

and believing women. Amina Wadud, too, mentions the Qurʾān’s shift from references to “white women with large eyes”\(^2\) to the “universal azwaj as companions described in the Madinan verses,”\(^3\) yet her observations are not completely accurate. The “pure spouses” (azwāj muṭahharah) in Q Āl ʿImrān 3:15, designates clearly only female spouses.\(^4\) Furthermore, the term zawj appears not only in the Medinan period but also in Meccan verses. In contrast to Wadud, I argue below that Qurʾānic references to “spouses” or azwāj can be equated with the houris.\(^5\) While I agree with Wadud that the depictions of the ḥūrʾīn reflect “the dreams and desires of those Arabs,”\(^6\) I will show that the image of beautiful heavenly women continues to be presupposed after the hijrah. Most recently, Celene Ibrahim has suggested that the ḥūrʾīn are not necessarily women and that they may rather be “the resurrected humans themselves in a newly created state.”\(^7\) In the present study, however, I cite pre-Islamic poetry to demonstrate that the ḥūrʾīn should, contrary to Ibrahim’s belief, be understood as beautiful females. For instance, the terms kawāʿib (“full-breasted,” Q 78:33) and abkār (“virgins,” Q 56:36), which are alternative descriptions for the male believers’ female companions in Paradise, have sexual connotations as well.

Seeking to explain how and why the identity of women in Paradise evolves over the course of the revelation and what this development means for the concept of the houris, this article in part combines a diachronic reading of the occurrences of females in Paradise with a synchronic analysis of the broader role of women in each period of revelation. The periodization scheme draws on the relative chronology proposed by Gustav Weil and Theodor Nöldeke. Yet, as the general structure of Weil and Nöldeke’s as well as Angelika Neuwirth’s chronologies is largely consistent with more recent refinements, modeling Nicolai Sinai, I will employ the terms “early Meccan,” “later Meccan,” and “Medinan.”\(^8\) I will also refer to mean

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\(^2\) Amina Wadud, Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55.

\(^3\) Ibid., 59.

\(^4\) As Amina Wadud writes, “after Madinah, it describes the companions of Paradise in generic terms: ‘For those who keep from evil, with their Lord are Gardens underneath which rivers flow, and pure azwaj, and contentment from Allah.’ (3:15). Keeping in mind my arguments about the generic use of certain terms, ‘believers’ here are either male or female, especially since azwaj is used for both in the Qurʾan” (ibid., 55, 57).

\(^5\) Ibid., 55, 57.

\(^6\) Ibid., 54.

\(^7\) Celene Ibrahim, Women and Gender in the Qurʾan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 41–43. Celene Ibrahim relates -huına (in Q 56:35), the feminine pronoun in the plural to the individual souls (nuṣūṣ or anfūṣ). She writes: “If the feminine pronoun used here is seen as referring to the souls, this would be consistent with the sentiments of the remainder of the verse, since ‘companions of the right’ is not a term that is generally restricted to men” (ibid., 60).

verse length in transcription letters while reconstructing the gradual change in the
designations of the female image in qurʾānic Paradise.

My study proceeds in two parts with the second part split into three sections. First, I
examine the relevant Qurʾānic passages concerning Adam’s unnamed spouse, the first woman
in Paradise. Next, I consider images of women in Paradise beyond Adam’s wife, analyzing (1)
ocurrences of the ḥūr ‘īn, (2) descriptions of earthly women in Paradise, and finally (3) the
concept of “pure spouses.” Given the central position of men in the Meccan Qurʾānic Paradise,
the early phases of the Qurʾānic proclamation describe the male believers as being rewarded
with the company of the ideally beautiful houris, whose attributes are familiar from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. I then turn to Q al-Ṭūr 52:21, which immediately follows a reference to
the ḥūr ‘īn in the Meccan verse Q 52:20 and has commonly been understood to be a later
addition to the early Meccan Sūrat al-Ṭūr. I argue that Q 52:21 was an insertion, probably
from the Medinan period, intended to reaffirm the presence of the houris in Paradise. Lastly, I
conclude by examining the Medinan phrase “pure spouses,” assessing to what extent these
pure spouses were understood to be identical with either the earthly spouses of male believers
or with the early Meccan houris. I also investigate how the concept of purity and the root ṭ-h-r
relates to earthly spouses and the houris.

Despite the inner-Qurʾānic development of the presentation of women in Paradise, the
original concept of the houris persists due to the central position of men among the Qurʾān’s
assumed audience. Yet, while there may be no diachronic development with respect to the
concept of the houris, the ḥūr ‘īn cease to be explicitly mentioned in the later Meccan period.
Moreover, the image of earthly women in the Qurʾān evolves; as the Qurʾān gradually endows
women greater responsibility for their actions, these women appear as “believing women” in
Paradise. Thus, my analysis of the references to women in the Qurʾānic Paradise prompts
similar conclusions to those offered by Karen Bauer on the question of gender egalitarianism
in the Qurʾān. I strengthen Bauer’s existing hypothesis noting the following: (1) the Qurʾān
treats women and men equally – obligating them, for example, to pray (Q 9:71; 74:36–48),
and (2) the Qurʾān assumes that women enter Paradise due to their earthly deeds throughout
all of its periods of genesis. However, I underscore that regarding eschatological rewards,
while men are recompensed with houris in Paradise, women receive no such reward.

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Part I: Adam’s Spouse, the First Woman, in Paradise

The first woman in the Qur’anic Paradise (al-jannah) is Adam’s unnamed spouse (zawj).\(^{10}\) The Qur’ān employs al-jannah in the singular to mean the dwelling place of the first woman and man as well as of the believers and their spouses in Q 43:70.\(^{11}\) Created in Paradise and allowed to live there before the fall of humanity, she and Adam are the primordial woman and man. The Qur’ānic accounts of the first woman undergo development, allowing her greater prominence in some versions of the expulsion story. Still, while God addresses Adam as an individual, God never speaks to the first woman alone.\(^{12}\) As she remains unnamed throughout the Qur’ān, she never possesses the same importance as her husband.

Three Qur’ānic passages recount the banishment of the first couple: Q 2:35–39 (137.19 transcription letters), 7:19–25 (104.27 transcription letters), and 20:117–124 (61.04 transcription letters). Based on average mean verse length (see also appendix 1), the chronologically earliest of these accounts is Q 20:117–123, a Meccan passage. In v. 117, the primordial female is passive. In this verse, God first addresses Adam, only indirectly including Adam’s wife later in Q 20:117. God says to Adam that Satan is an enemy of both Adam and his wife and that Satan may not remove the first humans from Paradise (fa-qulnā yā-ādamu inna hādhā ʿaduwwun laka wa-li-zawji ka fa-lā yukhrijannakumā mina ʿl-jannati). While in Genesis God makes the serpent, Eve, and the serpent’s and Eve’s offspring, enemies

\(^{10}\) Zawj in the singular can denote “kind” or “type,” but azwāj in the plural as well as in the dual can also mean “the second halves of pairs,” not only “kinds” or “types.” The meaning of “the second halves of pairs” is reflected in the early Meccan verses (Q 53:45; 75:39; 78:8), where the pairs (azwāj) or two mates or two kinds of humans (zawjayni) are defined in terms of male and female. The word mostly relates to the female second half of a pair up to the Medinan period. Zawj exclusively refers to male spouses only in three Medinan verses, Q 2:230, 232, and Q 58:1. The plural azwāj as spouses never relates to both men and women together, as the Qur’ān either speaks to men and their (female) spouses or women and their (male) spouses. On the usage of the term zawj throughout the Qur’ān, see also Ibrahim, *Women and Gender*, 20–25, 27–28 and Michael Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The Siṭra of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur’ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in James L. Kugel (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 95–96. I am indebted to Nora K. Schmid for the reference to Zwettler’s article.

\(^{11}\) The Arabic word al-jannah in the singular is used as a reference to the dwelling place of Adam and his wife before the fall of humankind in Q 2:35; 7:19, 22, and 27; 20:117, 121. In several verses al-jannah is the posthumous abode of the righteous (e.g., Q 19:60, 63; 26:90). The singular form of “the garden” seems interchangeable with “the garden of eternity” (Q 25:15), “the gardens” (jannāt) (Q 3:15; 4:57, and 25:10); “the gardens of Eden” (jannāt ādn) (Q 9:72; 38:50; 40:8); and “two gardens” (al-jannatātī) (Q 55:54). The singular designation “the Garden of Eden” does not occur in the Qur’ān at all. Moreover, while the next-worldly Paradise is depicted as a place where believers can eat and drink abundantly (e.g., Q 52:19, 22–23), Adam and his spouse also do not have to be hungry, thirsty, or unclothed in Paradise according to Q 2:35 and 20:118–119. Thus, the dwelling place of Adam and his spouse and the next-worldly Paradise seem to be very similar, if not the one and the same place.

to each other after the fall of humanity (Gen 3:15), Q 20:117 depicts Satan as an enemy both to Adam and his wife prior to the fall. Satan may cause Adam to be wretched (fa-tashqā; v. 117), but in Paradise Adam will not suffer hunger and thirst or be naked (lā ta'rā; v. 118). In Q 20:117–119, God directly speaks to Adam rather than to him and his spouse, and likewise Satan solely addresses Adam in Q 20:120.

In contrast to the biblical story of the serpent’s temptation of Eve (Gen 3:1–6), Satan does not tempt Adam’s wife in the Qurʾān, nor does Adam’s wife subsequently tempt Adam. It is only Adam to whom Satan speaks in Q 20:120: “But Satan whispered to Adam, saying, ‘Adam, shall I direct you the tree of eternity and dominion that never decays’” (fa-waswasā ilayhi 'l-shayyānu qāla yā-ādamu hal adulluka 'alā shajarati 'l-khuldi wa-mulkin lā yablā). Adam and his wife eat from the tree and jointly become aware of their nakedness. Adam disobeys his Lord (rabbahu) and goes astray (v. 121). But his Lord turns to him, forgives him, and guides him (v. 122; cf. the similar declaration in Q 2:37): thumma 'jtabāhu rabbuhu fa-tāba 'alayhi wa-hadā. Still, God banishes them both from Paradise (v. 123). Through this series of events, Adam is the narrative focus, and his wife plays only a subsidiary role.

In the subsequent Meccan Qurʾānic account of the first couple in Paradise, Q 7:19–24, Adam’s wife adopts a more active narrative role via the passage’s employment of the dual. In Q 7:19, God speaks to both Adam and his spouse: “Adam! Inhabit the garden, you and your wife, and eat …” (yā-ādamu 'skun anta wa-zawjuka 'l-jannata fa-kulā). God’s prohibition for Adam and his spouse is phrased in the dual in Q 7:19 as well: “… Do not approach this tree, lest you be among wrongdoers” (wa-lā taqrabā hādhihi 'l-shajarata fa-takūnā mina 'l-zālimīn). Later, in Q 7:20–21, Satan also addresses both Adam and his wife, convincing them to eat from the forbidden tree. Both are tempted, and as in Q 20:121, in Q 7:22 Adam and his wife become aware of their nakedness. In the latter version, The Lord of both of them (rabbuhumā) reminds the first couple that they had been warned not to eat from the tree. Hence, Adam and his spouse jointly ask God for forgiveness (v. 23). God proceeds to force Adam, his spouse, and Satan to descend from Paradise (v. 24). Notably, throughout Q 7’s account, Adam’s wife has greater prominence than in Q 20, as the use of the dual form ensures she is more explicitly involved with each element of the narrative.

13 The Qurʾānic account resembles the image of Adam found in 4 Ezra where Adam is the sole focus of the fall of humankind, “And You laid upon him one commandment of Yours; but he transgressed it, and immediately You appointed death for him and for his descendants” (4 Ezra 3:7; cf. 2 Baruch 17:2–3, 23:4; Apoc. Sedr. 4:5).
In Q 2:35–38, God once again commands Adam and his wife to dwell in Paradise. God prohibits them only from eating from the tree (wa-qulnā yā-'adamu 'skun anta wa-zawjuka 'l-jannata wa-kulā minhā raghadan ġaythu shi'tumā wa-lā taqrabā ġadhihī 'l-shajarata fa-takūnā mina 'l-zālimīn; v. 35). Subsequently, as in the version of the story described in Q 7:22, Satan tempts Adam and his wife, and they are expelled from Paradise. God makes them leave heaven and stresses that Adam, his wife, and Satan are enemies of each other (v. 36). Adam is spoken to by his Lord (min rabbīhi), and his Lord turns mercifully to him (fa-tāḥa ġalayhi, v. 37), even though He forces all of them descend from Paradise (v. 36 and 38). Both Adam and his wife are addressed in Q 2:35–38 and Q 7:19–24, still, in the Medinan verse, Q 2:37, God speaks and offers forgiveness solely to Adam. In Q 2:37, as in Q 20:122, God is framed explicitly as “Adam’s Lord,” and not the Lord of both Adam and his wife, as God was in Q 7:22. This distinction is presumably due to Adam’s status as God’s “chosen one” (Q 3:33, “God chose Adam,” inna 'llāḥa 'ṣṭaṭā 'ādama), so that, similar to the Meccan narrative Q 20:117–123, God turns mercifully only towards Adam, not Adam and his wife. Although Adam is the center of God’s attention in each of the Qur’ānic narratives described above, in each account, Adam simultaneously functions as a representative of his wife, because they transgress the commandment given to them as a couple, and there are no passages indicating that Adam’s spouse might not be forgiven.

Ultimately, whereas God never explicitly shows mercy to or guides Adam’s wife, as He does Adam in Q 20:122, she is responsible for her actions in all the Qur’ānic narratives of the fall. Hence, while the earliest account of the expulsion of the primordial humans from paradise (Q 20:117–123) barely mentions Adam’s spouse, the consequences of the transgression fall equally on both (v. 121). Moreover, Q 2:35–38 and 7:19–24 present Adam’s wife as playing an explicitly active role, as she receives commands by God and is tempted by Satan alongside Adam. As the next section will show, this development in the first woman’s agency reflects the broader development of the images of women in the Qur’ānic Paradise.

14 The focus on Adam in this Qur’ānic account of God’s forgiveness and mercy is quite close to the narration in the Cave of Treasures (Mʿarrat gazzā). In this early Christian text, composed immediately prior to the rise of Islam, God address and forgives only Adam and, strikingly, grants him forgiveness right after the Fall. “At the ninth hour their expulsion from Paradise took place. And as they were going forth sorrowfully, God spoke to Adam, heartened him, and said to him, ‘Do not be sorrowful, O Adam, for I will restore to you this inheritance. Behold, see how greatly I have loved you.’ … And when Adam and Eve had gone forth from Paradise, the door of Paradise was shut, and a cherub bearing a two-edged sword stood by it.” La Caverne des Trésors: Les Deux Recensions Syriques, ed. Su-Min Ri (Leuven: Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1987), 36–37. Sergey Minov, “Date and Provenance of the Syriac Cave of Treasures: A Reappraisal,” Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies 20.1 (2017): 129–229; idem, Memory and Identity in the Syriac Cave of Treasures: Rewriting the Bible in Sasanian Iran (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 37.
Part II: From the ḥūr āin to Pure Spouses and Believing Women

The ḥūr āin in the Qur’ānic Paradise

Per sūrah-chronology, hours are the first women to appear in Qur’ānic depictions of Paradise (see appendix 2). The role and nature of the hours in Paradise is defined entirely in terms of their relation to men. In Q al-Dukhān 44:54 (wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin āin) and 52:20 (wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin āin), believing men are paired with, or married to, the hours. The relationship between the hours and the inhabitants of Paradise is described by the verb zawwaja (“to pair, to marry, to give as spouses”), and the hours are, thus, azwāj of the righteous men. The significance of this will become clearer when we consider how the identity of the believing men’s azwāj evolves in the later period of revelation. Q al-Shu’arā’ 26:166 (36.71 transcription letters per verse), which is from approximately the same period as Q 44:54 (36.61 in transcription letters) and 52:20 (38.35 transcription letters excl. v. 21), mentions the spouses (azwāj) of Lot’s people. Q 26:166 provides additional justification for understanding zawwaja in Q 44:54 and 52:20 as “marry” or “give as spouses,” and for concluding that the hours are the spouses of believing men.

The ḥūr āin feature in the Qur’ānic conception of Paradise not only as azwāj but also as a “reward” for the male believer in Q al-Wāqi’ah 56:22–24 (“As reward for what they used to do,” v. 24). These hours are described as being perfectly beautiful in a way reflective of the ideals of beauty in pre-Islamic poetry. The hours are explicitly mentioned as ḥūr āin in Q 44:54, 52:20, and 56:22. Based on the evidence of pre-Islamic poetry and early Arabic dictionaries, ḥūr āin seem to mean white, large-eyed [women]. The hours are depicted as

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16 ‘Abd Allāh b. Mas‘ūd and Ibn Khuthaym, one of his students, recited amfadnāhum (“we provide/provided them”) instead of zawwajnāhum as a variant reading in Q 44:54 (there is no variant reading for zawwajnāhum in Q 52:20). Amdadnāhum also occurs in Q 52:22 (wa-amfadnāhum bi-fākhatin wa-lahmin mimmā yashtahān). Furthermore, in other Meccan verses (Q 17:6, 23:55, 26:132–134, 27:36, and 71:12), the believers are provided by God with sons, wealth, livestock, gardens, and rivers, where again the verb for provision is amadda. See al-Mushaf wa-qirā’atuhu (ed. Abu Mansūr al-Sha‘rawī, vols. 4, Rabat: Mu‘minūn bi-l-lah Ḥudūd, 2016), 3.517 ad Q 52:20 and 4.80 ad Q 44:54.

Almost all of these descriptors of female beauty occur in pre-Islamic poems, and are therefore consistent with ideals of female beauty in pre-Islamic poetry. For instance, the Bishr b. Abī Khāzim (from the second half of the sixth century) refers to full-breasted, white women in the palace of the king ʿAmr b. Ḥārith al-Kindī:

The one who gives [himself] to white full-breasted women like sculptures, white ones, playing tambourines in their hands.

Al-wāḥibu al-bīḍā ʿl-kawāʾ iba kaʾl-dumā
ḥūran bi-aydihā ʿl-mazāhiru taʿzifū

Kawāʾib and abkār appear together in a poem by ʿAbīd b. al-Abraṣ, who lived in the first half of the sixth century. The pre-Islamic poet boasts about his conquests of women, describing them as follows:

And riding on the light-colored camels are girls with swelling breasts, Slender of waist, virgins, friendly in their manners, white,

Yea, many the tent of maidens who toss the curtain to and fro have I entered, When within was a woman unwed and sick with love.

Wa-fawqa ʿl-jimālī ʿl-nāʾijātī kawāʾ ibu
makhāmiṣu abkārun awānisu bīḍu
wa-bayta ʿadhārā yartamīna bi-khidrihi
dakhaltu wa-fīhi ʿānisun wa-marīḍu

Color maintains its validity in the Medinan verses where the faces of the inhabitants of Paradise turn white at the Day of Judgement. The Qurʾān expresses this idea in Q 3:106–107: “On the Day some faces will turn white and some faces will turn black. As for those whose faces turn black, ‘Did you disbelieve after your belief?’ Then taste the punishment for what you used to reject.” But as for those whose faces will turn white (ibyaḍḍat), they will be within the mercy of God. They will abide therein eternally.” It seems that white color is of paramount importance in regard with the depictions of the dwellers of Paradise and is connotated positively. On the whiteness and blackness of faces see more Christian Lange, “On That Day When Faces Will Be White or Black” (Q3:106): Towards a Semiology of the Face in the Arabo-Islamic Tradition.” JAOS 127 (2007): 429–445.


21 Charles Lyall (ed. and trans.), The Diwans of ’Abīd ibn al-Abraṣ of Asad and ʿĀmir ibn ʿUṯfa of ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʾuḥ, (Leiden: Brill, 1913), 32 and 323.
Another attribute, *atrāb*, relates to women of equal age in `Abd Allāh b. al-ʿAjlān al-Nahdī’s (d. 574) poetry. The poet speaks to his former wife, Hind, who is married to another man from a rival tribe and her companions, other women of the same age:

I recalled there [at the abode] Hind and women equal of her age, where the slanderer lies and the chief [of the tribe] is disobeyed.

\[ dhakarti bihā Hindan wa-atrābahā 'l-ūlā \]

\[ bihā yakhdibi 'l-washiyu wa-yu’sā amīruhā \]

Further references to ḥūr, ḥūr al-ʿuyūn, 'īn, kawāʿīb, atrāb, ḥīṣān, 'arūb, bayḍah, and qāṣirāt al-ṭarf in pre-Islamic poetry clearly overlap with the Qur’ānic attributes of the ḥūr 'īn.23 Yet, the depictions of the houris begins to disappear in the later Meccan period. Q 38:52 (51.98 transcription letters) includes the final reference to the houris.

As Medinan sūrahs no longer mention the houris explicitly and, instead, turn their focus on earthly women whom they describe as believers and independent members of the community, one might argue that the concept of houris lost its significance over the course of the Medinan revelations. Contrary to this view, I will show that Q 52:21 is a Medinan insertion in an early Meccan sūrah, placed immediately after a verse which is clearly part of the early Meccan discourse in which houris are given as spouses to the believing men. This Medinan expansion indicates the continuing relevance of the concept of houris even in the Medinan period of revelation. Together, Q 52:20–21 reads:

They will be reclining on thrones lined up, and We will marry them to the houris (wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin 'īn).

And those who believed and whose descendants followed them in faith (wa'lladhīna āmanū wa'ttabaʿathum dhurriyyatuhum bi-īmānin) – We will join with them their descendants, and We will not deprive them of anything of their deeds. Every person/man is in pledge for his own deeds.

Although Q 52:21 is not overtly about the houris, and only refers to the reunion of believing men and their offspring who followed their fathers in faith, analyzing the diction and the content of the parallel verses strongly suggests the relevance of the houris to Q 52:21.

Because the believing men, the houris as spouses, and the offspring of the believing men appear together, Q 52:20–21 reminds one of Q 13:23 and 40:8, where believing men are

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mentioned along with their parents, earthly spouses, and offspring: *wa-man ẓalahā min abā iḥim wa-aẓwājiḥim wa-dhurriyyātiḥim* (“whoever were righteous among their fathers, their spouses, and their descendants”). Yet the occurrence of houris as spouses alone is not sufficient proof to support the reinterpretation of the houris as earthly spouses. If the reinterpretation had been the goal of the insertion, it would have evoked *man ẓalahā*, a phrase along the lines of *wa-man ẓalahā min dhurriyyatihim*, an unmistakable indication for the reinterpretation. By contrast, the subject of the insertion is the future fate of the progeny, the insertion is long and stresses the faith of the descendants alongside the faith of their fathers (*allādhīnā amanū waʾtabaʾ athum dhurriyyatuhum bi-īmān*). This emphasis is especially striking because the revelation of the Meccan verses, Q 13:23 and 40:8, clarified that offspring would only enter Paradise if they were believers themselves.

Moreover, the insertion uses two phrases *mā alatnāhum min ʿamalihim min shayʾ* (“We will not deprive them of anything of their deeds”) and *kullu ṣurriʾin bi-mā kasabat rahīn* (“every person is in pledge for his own deeds”) that throughout the entire Qurʾān solely appear in two other verses, the Medinan Q al-Ḥujurāt 49:14 (*lā yalitkum min aʿmālikum shayʾā*)24 and the early Meccan Q 74:38 (*kullu nafsīn bi-mā kasabat rahīnah*), respectively. These peculiarities in the wording, suggest that the similarities of Q 52:21 to other verses should be considered more closely. Thus, the phrases *kullu ṣurriʾin bi-mā kasabat rahīn* and *lā yalitkum min aʿmālikum shayʾā* serve as a starting point of the investigation.

The early Meccan verse, Q 74:38, “every soul is in pledge for its deeds” (*kullu nafsīn bi-mā kasabat rahīnah*),25 stresses personal responsibility and the issue of “preceding” or “staying behind” in the faith. Notably, only Q 52:21 and 74:38 use *rahīn* and *rahīnah*. In the final clause of Q 52:21, similar wording to that of the early Meccan verse Q 74:38 is employed, rather than similar wording to the late Meccan Q 40:17 (*al-yawma tujzā kullu nafsīn bi-mā kasabat*), an interesting distinction because Q 52:21 and 40:17 reflect the same ideas about personal responsibility. This may have been informed by the verse that precedes Q 74:38 and the statement in Q 52:21. Q 74:37 mentions those who want to “precede” or...

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24 Neuwirth (*Frühmekkanische Suren*, 698) has already mentioned that there is a similarity in wording between Q 49:14 and 52:21 given the use of *lā yalitkum min aʾmālikum shayʾ ā*. It is noteworthy that there are no further derivatives of *lā-yā*-*t* in the Qurʾān.

25 According to Neuwirth (*Frühmekkanische Suren*, 698, 708), the whole part of the verse before “every soul is in pledge for his own deeds” is a late-Meccan or Medinan adjustment. The fact that the *sūrah* was extended proves its continuing relevance in later times, too. Apparently, this qu’ānic passage was important enough to attract the insertion of Q 52:21. Yet, there was presumably a good reason why *sūrah* 52, and more specifically Q 52:20, was extended by the insertion of Q 52:21. There are other early Meccan passages that depict Paradise and its inhabitants, and those *sūrahs* presumably lost none of their importance in the later recitation of the Qurʾān, for instance *sūrah* 36 or *sūrah* 56, but, remarkably, the verse was not inserted in those passages.
“stay behind” (in the faith): li-man shā’ā minkum an yataqaddama aw yata’ akhkhar and Q 52:21 also explores the idea of personal responsibility as a means to “precede” in the faith or “stay behind.” In the case of Q 52:21, offspring can only gain admission to Paradise by adopting the faith of their believing fathers.

The notion of delayed arrival to faith also appears in Q 49:14. The verse criticizes the Bedouins for not being true believers (qul lam tu’ minū). According to these verses, while faith has not yet entered their hearts, if they obey God and His messenger, He will not deprive them of any rewards for their deeds: wa-lākin qūlū aslamnā wa-lammā yadkhulī ’l-imānu fī qulūbikum wa-in tuṭī ’u ’llāha wa-rasūlahu lā yalitkum min a’mālikum shay’an inna ’llāha ghafūrun raḥīm. Strikingly, the insertion, Q 52:21, repeats a phrase that occurs only in one other Medinan verse, Q 49:14, which states that God will not diminish any of their deeds (lā yalitkum min a’mālikum shay’ā). Q 52:21 is reminiscent of Q 49:14 despite the fact that other phrases with similar meaning such as “He will never waste their deeds” (Q Muḥammad 47:4: fa-lan yudīlā a’mālahum) or “God does not allow the reward of believers to be lost” (Q 3:171: wa-anna ’llāha lā yūḍī’u ajra ’l-mu’ minīn, also e.g., in Q 7:170 and Q Hūd 11:115) are frequently mentioned in the Qur’ān.

Comparing the statements of Q 49:14 and 74:37 with Q 52:21, Q 52:21 speaks about the still disbelieving offspring of the believing men and confirms that when the descendants become believers, God will not diminish any of their deeds, as evidenced by the case of the Bedouins. Both Q 49:14 and 52:21 mention “faith” multiple times, three times (āmannā, lam tu’ minū, wa-lammā yadkhulī ’l-imānu fī qulūbikum) and twice (āmanū, bi-īmānin) respectively. Furthermore, Q 49:15 offers a definition of who the real believers are and thus explains what is expected of the still disbelieving Bedouins: “The believers (al-mu’ minīn) are only the ones who have believed in God and His Messenger and then doubt not but strive with their properties and their lives in the cause of God (wa-jāhadū bi-amwālīhim wa-anfusīhim fī sabīlī ’llāh). It is those who are the truthful (ulā’ika humu ’l-ṣādiqūn).” This definition of true believers can be applied to the context of Q 52:21 and the understanding of wa’lladhīna āmanū wa’itta’āhum dhurriyyatuhum bi-īmānin as well.

The similarities of the wording of Q 52:21 to that of other Medinan verses support the understanding that the descendants of believers will enter Paradise as their believing fathers before them did, if they believe in God and His Messenger and strive with their properties and
their lives in the cause of God. The phrase *alḥagnā bihim*\textsuperscript{26} and its parallel phrase in Q 3:170, *yalḥaqū bihim min khalīfihim*, evokes the same idea of preceding and following in Paradise. Q 3:170 mentions those who have been killed in the cause of God (fī sabili 'llāh). They rejoice to see those who will follow and join them in Paradise (bi'lladhīna lam yalḥaqū bihim min khalīfihim). In the verses, Q 3:166–169, which come before Q 3:170, God might expose the believers (al-muʿminūn) and the hypocrites, who do not follow the believers and fight in the way of God (qātilū fī sabili 'llāh). While the hypocrites tell their brothers (li-ikhwānihim) that if they had stayed at home, they would not have been killed, God mocks them: “Then prevent death from yourselves, if you should be truthful (in kuntum sādiqīn). And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of God as dead (allādhīna kuntum qutilū fī sabili 'llāhi amwātan). Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision.”

The idea of preceding and following and the phrase near the beginning of verse Q 52:21, *waʾttabaʿ athum dhurriyyatuhum biʾiman*, has its parallel verses in the Medinan Q al-Tawbah 9:100, *ittabaʿ athum bi-iḥsān*, and Q al-Ḥashr 59:10 *sabaqūn biʾīman*. The contents of Q 9:100 and 59:10 are also connected to each other, creating a network of Medinan phraseology across the various verses. Q 9:100 mentions the forerunners (in the faith, *al-sābiqūn*\textsuperscript{27}) who are identified as the first *muhājirūn* and *ansār*, as well as those who will follow them with good conduct: “God will be well pleased with the first *muhājirūn* and *ansār* and those who followed them in good deeds, and they will be pleased with Him: He has prepared gardens …” (*waʾl-sābiqūnaʾ l-awwalūna minaʾ l-muhājirīn waʾl-ansārī waʾllaḍhīnaʾ ttabaʿ āhum bi-iḥsānin raḍīyaʾ llāhuʾ anhum wa-raḍīʾ anhu wa-aʾadda lahum jannātin …*).

In Q 59:10, the later *muhājirūn* speak about the brothers who preceded them in the faith: *waʾllaḍhīna jāʾū min baʾdihim yaqūlūna rabbanāʾ ghfir lanāʾ wa-li-ikhwānināʾ lladhīna

\textsuperscript{26} The wording is similar to that of the Medinan verses Q 3:170 and 62:3, as both use the derivatives of *l-b-q*, but in the Meccan Q Yūsuf 12:101 (late Meccan, 99.42 transcription letters per verse) and Q 26:83 (early Meccan), the verb *alḥaq* is also used to express the plea of Joseph and Abraham to be considered among the righteous after death (*wa-alḥaqni biʾīl-sālihin*). To better gauge the approximate period of insertion, the derivatives of *t-b*- and *l-j*- should be dealt with. The Qurʾān employs the derivatives of *t-b*- 172 times, and only Q 9:100 appears to be a parallel verse of Q 52:21 when one analyzes the context in which the verb *ittabaʿa* occur.

\textsuperscript{27} The word *al-sābiqūn* occurs from the early Meccan through to the Medinan period in the Qurʾān. The forerunners are described in the early Meccan Q 56:10 as those who are “brought near to God” and to whom a large company of the *awwālain* and a small company of *ākhīrin* belong. In the late Meccan verses, Q al-Muʿminūn 23:57–61 (56.86 transcription letters per verse) and Q Fāṭir 35:32 (108.96 transcription letters per verse), further details regarding the identity of the forerunners are mentioned: “Indeed, they who are apprehensive from fear of their Lord and they who believe in the signs of their Lord and they who do not associate anything with their Lord and who give what they give while their hearts are fearful because they will be returning to their Lord – it is those who hasten to good deeds, and they outstrip [others] therein (*wa-hum lahā sābiqūn*).” Eventually, in the Medinan verses Q 9:100 and 59:10, the first *muhājirūn* and *ansār* are identified as *al-sābiqūn*. 

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sabaqūnā biʾl-īmān. As is clear from Q 59:8–9, these brothers are the first muhājirūn and anṣār. The poor emigrants (muhājirūn) are those who are expelled from their homes (min diyārihim) and their properties (wa-amwālihim) while supporting God and His Messenger. As in Q 49:15, these individuals are depicted as “truthful” (ulāʾika humuʾ ʾl-ṣādiqūn). It is noteworthy that Q 9:88–89 also refers to those who believe and fight with their properties and their lives (wa ʾllādhīna ʾamanū maʾahu jāḥadū bi-amwālihim wa-anfusihim) and will live forever in Paradise. It seems that the definition of “real believers” in Q 49:15 unifies the attributes of those who fight in the way of God with their souls (wa-anfusihim) as discussed in Q 3:170, with the attributes of those who fight with their properties (wa-amwālihim) discussed in Q 59:8–9.

Ultimately, an analysis of the language of verse Q 52:21 reveals that the verse bears similarities almost exclusively with Medinan verses with the exception of one early Meccan verse, Q 74:38.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Meccan verse:</th>
<th>Parallel early Meccan verses:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q 52:20:</td>
<td>Q 44:54:</td>
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<tr>
<td>“They will be reclining on thrones lined up, and We will marry them to the houris.”</td>
<td>“Thus. And We will marry them to houris.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muttakiʾīna ʿalā sururin maṣfūfatin wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin ʿīn</td>
<td>ka-dhālika wa-zawwajnāhum bi-ḥūrin ʿīn</td>
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</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Insertion of Q 52:21:</th>
<th>One parallel early Meccan (Q 74:38) and several Medinan verses:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“And those who believed and whose descendants followed them in faith – We will join with them their descendants, and We will not deprive them of anything of their deeds. Every person is in pledge for his own deeds.”</td>
<td>Q 9:100: “followed them in good deeds”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waʾlladhīna ʾamanū waʾittabāʾathum</td>
<td>ittabāʾathum bi-iḥsān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 59:10: “preceded us in faith”</td>
<td>Q 59:10: “preceded us in faith”</td>
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The proposed insertion shares significant lexical overlaps with Medinan verses, which is evidence of contemporaneity and suggests that the insertion occurred in the Medinan period of revelation. More importantly, the content of the Medinan verses references contemporaries of the Prophet, possibly following the preceding believers in the faith, and develops a definition of faith that prescribes fighting in the cause of God with one’s souls and with one’s properties. This idea is reflected in the insertion of Q 52:21, where the still disbelieving offspring can and will become believers and join their believing fathers, and God will not diminish their deeds. The notion of fighting in the “way of God,” and the occurrence of the fathers along with the houris in Q 52:20, strongly indicate that dhurriyyah relates in Q 52:21 to male offspring, who will receive the same reward as their fathers if their descendants follow them in faith, as depicted in Q 49:15. Yet, in contrast to these Medinan verses which distinguish the fate of believers between early and late adopters of the faith, the inserted verse in Q 52 discusses the fate of the believers’ descendants, by stressing that the offspring of believing men must follow their fathers in faith in order to join their parents in Paradise and receive its rewards, including the houris. Even though similar “delights of Paradise” are depicted in several other sūrahs (e.g., Q al-Insān 76:5–22), and the houris are mentioned within some of these descriptions, viz. Q 37:41–51, 44:51–57, and 56:10–26, the insertion in Q 52 serves a meaningful purpose.

28 Regarding ‘mri’ and insān see Neuwirth, Frühmekkanische Suren, 464.
In contrast to Q 52:17–25, depictions of the delights of Paradise including the houris in verses such as Q 44:51–57 and 78:31–36 are brief. On the contrary, Q 37:41–51 and 56:10–26 portray Paradise in more detail. Still, these passages do not include the bestowal of houris as spouses (wa-zawwajnāhum). Moreover, it appears that the insertion, Q 52:21, was not intended to be connected to the conception of the awwalūn and ākhirūn, as extensively presented in Q 37, which can be understood as referring to earlier and later generations. Q 37 narrates several stories of the early prophets, although emphasis is placed on how the majority of earlier generations went astray, becoming cautionary tales for later generations: “Most of the former generations strayed before them” (wa-la-qad dalla qablhum āktharu 'l-awwalīn) (Q 37:71). The later generations are presented as having seen their forefathers astray, yet continuing to follow them nonetheless: “Indeed they found their forefathers astray, and rushed to follow in their footsteps” (innahum alfāw ābā'ahum dālīn fa-hum 'alā āthārihim yuhra 'ūn) (Q 37:69–70). Only a few chosen servants of God, e.g., the prophets of earlier generations, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron, and Elias, provide a morally positive example for the later generations (Q 37:78–79, 108–109, 119–120, 128–130): “And We left for him/them [favorable mention] among later generations” (wa-tarāknā 'alayhi/alayhimā fī 'l-ākhirīn).

Thus, the content of the insertion Q 52:21, which mentions the believing fathers and their offspring who will follow their fathers in the faith and will be reunited with them in Paradise, is not consistent with the sentiment of sūrah 37, where the majority of earlier and later generations forsake the path of God.

The insertion in Q 56:10–26 could also have prompted the identification of the believing men and their offspring with the forerunners (al-sābiqūn) or, more likely, with the earlier (awwalūn) and later (ākhirūn) individuals to come to faith. In Q 56, the forerunners are considered a group of believers who are on a higher level than the “people of the right” (aṣḥāb al-yamīn). There are more among the sābiqūn from the earlier than later peoples: “Many from the past and a few from later generations” (thullatun mina 'l-awwalīn wa-qalīlun mina 'l-ākhirīn) (Q 56:13–14). This identification with awwalūn and ākhirūn was not the goal of the insertion, as if this were the case, the insertion would have suggested that only a small number of the offspring would follow their believing fathers. As such, it is logical that Q 52

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29 Both groups, i.e., forerunners and people of the right, consist of the earlier and later human beings. To the people of the right belong many from the past (thullatun mina 'l-awwalīn) and many from later generations (thullatun mina 'l-ākhirīn) in Q 56:39–40. The delights of Paradise assigned to the forerunners are only slightly different from the delights for the people of the right (aṣḥāb al-yamīn, aṣḥāb al-maymanah) or, in general, from the delights for the God-fearing people. See and cf. Q 37:40–49, 43:68–73, 55:46–76. The term “the people of the right” is only used in early Mecca, in Q 56:8, 27, 38, and 90–1, Q 74:39, and Q al-Balad 90:18. In contrast to al-sābiqūn, the concept of aṣḥāb al-yamīn seems to have lost its importance.
describes Paradise very similarly to Q 37 and 56, but does not mention the *awwalūn* and *ākhirūn*. It is not only the forerunners and the chosen servants of God who may expect the delights of Paradise, but also the offspring of the believing men, who had followed their fathers in the faith.

**Earthly Women in the Qur’ānic Paradise**

This section examines mentions of earthly women in Paradise in the Meccan and Medinan periods (see appendix 2). The Meccan *sūrah*s which contain less than 61.78 transcription letters per verse depict earthly women as spouses (*azwāj*) of the believers. Where these verses employ the phrases “you and your spouses” and “they and their spouses,” I understand them as pertaining to male believers and their wives.30 The term “spouses” thus refer to earthly women in Paradise and is the first explicit reference to this category of women. This understanding of “spouses” is derived from various Qur’ānic verses which indicate that the primary addressees of these verses were male heads of household:31 several Meccan verses on the *houris* (e.g., Q 44:51–54; 56:35–38; and 78:31–33) mention “god-fearing persons” (*muttaqūn*) and “companions of the right-hand” (*ašḥāb al-yamīn*) as receiving houris. In these verses, these designations refer to men insofar God pairs them to feminine companions. Q 70:11–14 also describes the guilty man (*mujrim*) who wishes to be ransomed from the punishment by his children, his consort (*ṣāḥibatihi*), and his brother. Q 80:35–37 likewise focuses on the man (*al-marʾ*) who flees from his brother, mother, father, consort (*ṣāḥibatihi*), and children on the Day of Judgement.32 Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57 are Medinan verses that exhibit continuity with the Meccan verses just discussed. Verses Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57 speak of believing men as having “pure female spouses” (*azwāj muṭāḥharah*) and depict male believers as “those who believe and do good works” (*wa'lladhīna āmanū wa-'amilū 'l-shāliḥītī*) and “those who fear God” (*alladhīna 'ittaqaw*).

The earthly spouses of the believing men enter Paradise for the first time at approximately the same period of revelation, when paradisiacal spouses, houris, appear for the last time in Q 38 (51.98 transcription letters). Q 43:70 (61.78 transcription letters) explicitly refers to these earthly spouses, “Enter Paradise, you and your spouses (*udkhulū 'l-jannata*

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32 On Q 70:11–14 and Q 80:35–37, see Bauer and Hamza, *On Women*, 44 as well.
antum wa-azwājukum: you will be filled with joy.” Although in this verse “spouses” can be understood as “earthly wives,” because these women “enter” Paradise with the men, elsewhere the identity of the “spouses” is more ambiguous. For example, Q 36:56 (55.01 transcription letters) mentions, “They and their spouses (hum wa-azwājuhum) seated on couches in the shade,” but whether the verse is describing houris or earthly spouses is unclear. Yet, due to the similarity in wording between Q 36:56 and 43:70—hum wa-azwājuhum and antum wa-azwājukum, respectively—azwājuhum in Q 36:56 can be understood as earthly wives and not houris. Despite implying the presence of earthly women in Paradise, these two verses do not specify whether these women entered Paradise by their own merits. In contrast, men in these verses are portrayed as having reached Paradise as a result of their own actions, called “people of Paradise” (aḥāb al-jannah) in Q 36:55 and “those who believed in our signs and were in submission” (alladhīna āmanū bi-āyātinā wa-kānū muslimīn) in Q 43:69. Nevertheless, Q 36:54 subtly implies that the women enter Paradise on account of their own actions, as it notes that every soul (nafs), a statement which indicates inclusion of both men and women, will be recompensed for its deeds: fa’l-yawma lā tuţlanu nafsun shay’an wa-lā tuţzawna illā mā kuntum ta’malūn.

Though these Meccan verses never explicitly stress the righteousness of the female spouses in Paradise and do not single out women as pious, God-fearing, or believing, these Meccan verses do still imply that the female spouses are liable for their actions. Several early Meccan verses emphasize the personal responsibility of human beings (insān, bashar) or every soul (nafs) and thus, there are commandments and rules of conduct formulated in gender-neutral language that, if followed, ensure admission to Paradise. In Q 81:10, the actions of humanity are kept in records and, “When the scrolls are distributed” human beings (insān) or souls (nafs) will be informed on the Day of Judgment of what they “sent ahead” or “kept back” according to Q 75:13 and 82:4–5. They are also responsible for their actions, “Every soul is held in pledge for its deeds” (kullu nafsin bi-mā kasabat rahānah) (Q 74:38). Human beings are warned against coveting wealth (Q 92:3–11; 100:8) and are told to feed the poor and orphans (Q 90:4–16), to believe in the Day of Judgment (Q 82:6–9), and to pray (Q 74:36–48; 87:14–15). Such proscriptions are relevant to both men and woman as in Q 75:36–39, where the Qur’ān explicitly states that a woman is indeed a human being, “Does human being (insān) think he will be left alone? Was he not just a drop of spilt-out sperm, which became a clinging form, which God shaped in due proportion, fashioning from it the two sexes, male and female (fa-ja’ala minhu ’l-zawjayni ’l-dhakara wa ’l-unthā)?”. She is thus clearly responsible for her actions and faces consequences in the hereafter. As these early
Meccan verses show women to be responsible for their actions, the references to the believing men and their spouses in Q 36:56 and 43:70 might indicate that the female spouses were admitted into Paradise on the basis of their actions and decisions as well. That said, the fact that the women attain the same eschatological outcome as their spouses may also simply be a reflection of the social reality of the Prophet’s contemporaries, whereby a wife usually followed her husband’s religious views.

More explicit references to the faith of women in Paradise first appear in the later Meccan period. These sūrah$s$ depict righteous wives entering Paradise and being followed by the righteous fathers and offspring of the believing men. Q 13:23 (126.16 transcription letters) and 40:8–9 (89.20 transcription letters) emphasize the necessity of the moral righteousness of a male believer’s spouses, forebears, and offspring in order to enter Paradise. These verses are a doublet, both stating that the believers “will enter perpetual gardens, along with those who are righteous of their forefathers, spouses, and descendants” (wa-man ṣalāḥa min ābāʾihim wa-azwājīhim wa-dhurriyyāthīhim). Q 13:23 and 40:8–9 thus extend the circle of people who enter Paradise to include the believers’ parents and offspring, in addition to their wives, provided that they conform to certain ethico-religious expectations.33

These sūrah$s$ reflect larger changes in circumstances for the qur’ānic community at the time of revelation: first, a gradual increase in the number of Muḥammad’s followers and, second, the fact that not every wife of the men who followed the Prophet decided to become a follower of Muḥammad. The transition from a presumably small number of righteous men and their righteous wives in Q 36:56 and 43:70 to the larger number of righteous men and their spouses, who were not necessarily all equally receptive to the message of the Qurʾān, might have necessitated the qualification man ṣalāḥa, “those who are righteous,” in verses Q 13:23 and 40:8–9. Moreover, not only do the righteous spouses of the believing men enter Paradise in verses Q 13:23 and 40:8–9, but these verses also feature the entrance of the mothers and female descendants, as indicated by the use of the words “forefathers” (ābāʾ) and “offspring” (dhurriyyah). Chronologically, these are the earliest verses in which forefathers are mentioned in Paradise, despite this being a period of revelation in which the notion of “ancestors” carried negative connotations.34

33 The parents and descendants are already mentioned on the Day of Judgement in some early Meccan verses, Q 70:11–14 and Q 80:34–37, yet a man takes center stage in them as shown above. Thus, as the parents and descendants of a man, and his attitude towards them, are already mentioned at this early stage, the references to the parents and descendants in Paradise and their righteousness cannot be connected to the literary development of the verses gradually getting longer and more complex.
34 Q 43:26–28 and especially 26 express the very same idea: “And, when Abraham said to his father and his people
Remarkably, the ancestors of the pre-Islamic Arabs are not mentioned in the polemics against the unbelievers in Q 13 and 40. Given the evolving historical realities, the earliest converts’ parents may have become “righteous” and adopted the new, Islamic faith later in life. As such, it would have been necessary to include these “ancestors” among the dwellers of Paradise, while simultaneously omitting any criticism of pre-Islamic ancestral practice. The female and male offspring of believing men are also included for the first time in the list of dwellers in Paradise. The increasing number of believers meant that some had offspring who were righteous themselves. Meanwhile, the sisters and brothers of the believing men are not mentioned at all. A possible explanation for this is that every brother counted as an independent subject of agency and was therefore considered the same generation as other believing men. By contrast, every woman was a wife or a daughter of a believing man. The fathers might represent the older generation, while the believing men, their spouses, and their offspring represent the contemporary and future generations of believers.

As the righteousness of the women of Paradise with whom the male believers will be reunited, i.e., mothers, wives, and female offspring, is emphasized for the first time in Q 13:23 and 40:8–9, the gender-neutral concept of the personal moral responsibility of every human being is now reflected more directly in reference to women. The later Meccan Q 13:33 and 40:17 articulate once again that every soul is responsible for its actions: “Today each soul will be rewarded for whatever it has done (al-yawma tujzā kullu nafs bi-mā kasabat); today no injustice will be done. God is swift in reckoning.” Yet in Q 40:40 and another later Meccan verse, Q al-Nāḥl 16:97 (93.41 transcription letters per verse), the male or female gender of the believers is specifically discounted as contributing to their eschatological salvation: “whoever, male or female, does good deeds and has faith” (wa-man ‘amilā sālihan min dhakarin aw unthā wa-huwa muʾmin). The family ties of the women and men dwelling in Paradise are not specified in the Medinan verses Q 3:195 and Q 4:124. In Q 3:195 and Q 4:124, anyone, whether male or female (min dhakarin aw unthā), who performs righteous deeds and is a believer, gains admission to Paradise.

The Medinan period goes beyond these generalizations by explicitly discussing believing women in Paradise. Q 9:72 says, “God has promised the believers, both men and women (wa’ada ‘llāhu ‘l-mu’minīn wa’l-mu’minī), gardens graced with flowing streams (li-abīhi wa-qawmihī), ‘Indeed, I am disassociated from that which you worship.’” Cf. also further relevant verses about Abraham, Q 19:41–49 (62.42 transcription letters per verse), and Q 37:83–99.

Other Meccan verses never refer to sisters as well, though they differentiate among relatives and mention brothers, for instance in Q 70:11–14 and Q 80:34–37.
where they will remain; good, peaceful homes in gardens of lasting bliss; and—greatest of all—God’s good pleasure. That is the supreme triumph.” In Q 33:35, Q 48:5, and Q al-Ḥadīd 57:12–13, believing men and believing women again appear together entering Paradise. There are some instances in which believing women even contradict the views of their unbelieving husbands, although these women are still always positioned in relation to their spouses. For example, in Q al-Taḥrīm 66:11, the wife of Pharaoh is mentioned as a believer in contrast to her spouse: “God has also given examples of believers: Pharaoh’s wife (imraʾat firʿawn), who said, ‘Lord, build me a house near You in the garden. Save me from Pharaoh and his actions; save me from the evil-doers.’” These occurrences of believing women in Paradise correspond with other Qur’ānic verses from the Medinan period, which directly mention women and discuss the conditions that they must fulfill in order to gain admission to Paradise (e.g., Q 9:71, 24:31, and 33:32–33). The increasingly explicit references to women can be understood via the lens of changing historical circumstances, namely the establishment of the Muslim community in Medina. Yet, although these verses explicitly stress female piety, and portray women as the subjects of moral agency, they continue to depict women relationally to men.

**The Medinan “Pure Spouses” (azwāj muṭahharah) – The ḥūr ʾin and Earthly Spouses?**

In three Medinan verses, Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57, God grants “pure spouses” (azwāj muṭahharah) to male believers entering Paradise. Yet, the full identity of these “pure women” is obscure. The following investigation of the “pure spouses” in Paradise asks whether the women referenced are earthly wives, the houris, or both. I translate azwāj muṭahharah as “pure spouses” to indicate that the women are in a pure state, i.e., “pure in presence of God,” although muṭahhar can also mean “purified.” To determine the identity of “pure spouses,” I will further explore the meaning of muṭahharah. Combining the results of an analysis of the root ṭ-h-r in the Qurʾān with the portrayals of women in Paradise, I argue that the pure spouses in the Medinan verses refer to the houris as well as to believing, earthly wives.

Analyzing the concept of purity in the Qurʾān, I follow Holger Zellentin and classify impurity as either “prohibited” or “regulated.” “Prohibited” impurity largely corresponds to acts related to moral purity such as idolatry, bloodshed, and sexual transgression (e.g., Q 2:125; 22:26). “Regulated” impurity coincides with ritual, i.e., non-ethical, physical impurity

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36 There are variant readings in the feminine plural and in the fifth form, thus promoting the understanding of azwāj being women who purify or keep themselves pure. The variant reading azwāj muṭahharūt is attributed to Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 122/740). The reading azwāj muṭahhirah is narrated under the authority of the Meccan scholar and preacher ʿUbayd b. ʿUmayr al-Laythi (d. 73/692–693). See al-Muṣḥaf wa-qirāʾ ātuhu, 1.32 ad Q 2:25.
(e.g., Q 5:6). For example, after an act resulting in ritual impurity such as sexual intercourse, one can remove this kind of impurity by ritual washing. While exploring the occurrences of ṭ-h-r via an understanding of prohibited and regulated impurities, I will demonstrate that ṭ-h-r refers predominantly to the removal of prohibited impurity and sin, although there are occasions when the Qur’ānic usage of the ṭ-h-r root is ambiguous.

In these three Medinan verses (Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57), God rewards the male believers in Paradise with pure spouses, along with other delights. Q 2:25 addresses the Prophet:

Give those who believe and do good the news (wa-bashshiri ʿlladhīna āmanū wa-amīlū ʿl-ṣāliḥātī) that they will have gardens graced with flowing streams. Whenever they are given sustenance from the fruits of these gardens, they will say, ‘We have been given this before,’ because they were provided with something like it. They will have pure spouses and there they will stay (wa-lahum fīhā azwājun muṭahharatun wa-hum fīhā khālidūn).

In Q 3:15, God commands Muḥammad to speak to the believers:

Say, ‘Would you like me to tell you of things that are better than all of these? For those who are mindful (of God) are (liʾlladhīna ʿittaqaw), with their Lord (ʿinda rabbihim), gardens graced with flowing streams, where they will stay with pure spouses (wa-azwājun muṭahharatun) and God’s good pleasure (wa-ridwānum mina ʿllāhī) — God is fully aware of His servants.’

In Q 4:57, God says:

As for those who believe and do good deeds (waʾlladhīna āmanū waʾamīlū ʿl-ṣāliḥātī), We shall admit them into gardens (sa-nudkhiluhum jannāt) graced with flowing streams and there they will remain forever. They will have pure

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37 For more on these terms, see Holger Zellentin, Law beyond Israel: From the Bible to the Qurʾān (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 12–13.

38 The fruits in Q 2:25 seem to evoke early and later Meccan verses (e.g., Q 36:57, Q 43:73, Q 56:32, and Q al-Mursalāt 77:42): “And there is abundant fruit in it for you to eat” (lakum fīhā fākihatun kathiratun minhā taʿkalūn) (Q 43:73) and “any fruit they desire” (wa-fawākiha mimmā yashtahūn) (Q 77:42). The fruits of Paradise are complemented with the new information that the fruits have similarities with those previously given to the believers.

39 Riḍwān mina ʿllāh in Q 3:15 repeats Q 9:72, where rather than believing men and their pure spouses, the Qurʾān mentions believing men and women. Furthermore, Q 9:72 complements the verses pertaining to azwāj muṭahharah by means of “pleasant dwellings” (masākina tayyibah). Q 3:15 is probably connected to Q 9:72 and indicates that pure spouses refer to believing women.
spouses there (lahum fihā azwājun muṭahharatun), and We shall admit them into cool refreshing shade.⁴⁰

All these verses repeatedly emphasize that “they will have pure spouses,” or “they will stay with pure spouses.” The verses therefore strongly suggest that just as all believing men will receive gardens, pleasant dwellings, fruits, and shade in Paradise, all believing men in Paradise will also receive pure spouses.⁴¹ The “pure spouses,” may be the houris, who were already described in the early Meccan verses, and given to the believing men as spouses well before any mention of earthly spouses entering Paradise. Yet, as discussed above, the righteousness of earthly spouses features several times in the Meccan period, and believing women are explicitly referenced in the Medinan period. As earthly spouses are also azwāj, they might be included in the concept of azwāj muṭahharah.

To prove this possibility, I will examine the meaning of muṭahharah and the Qurʾānic usage of t-h-r. The derivatives of t-h-r are used thirty-one times altogether in the Qurʾān, but t-h-r occurs only 9 times in the Meccan period. In Q 74:4, a verse from the early Meccan period, God commands the Prophet to “purify his clothes” (wa-thiyābaka fa-tahhir). Although one cannot completely dismiss the literal meaning of cleansing the clothes here, in which case the t-h-r root would refer to regulated purity, it is more plausible to understand the purifying of clothes as a reference to the absence of sin, a concept seen in Syriac Christian and Jewish images.⁴² In other words, this verse is a command to behave righteously, an interpretation that fits within the context of the sūrah as a whole: the sūrah addresses the Prophet, the cloaked one (al-muddaththir), who should arise and warn, glorify God, “purify his clothing,” avoid prohibited impurity, and not confer favor to acquire more.

Further occurrences of t-h-r more unequivocally underscore the avoidance of prohibited impurity in the Meccan period. Lot and his family are described as morally pure, as they do not engage in same-sex sexual intercourse.⁴³ All three passages relating to Lot in

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⁴⁰Q 4:57 evokes the earlier verses (Q 13:15 [late Meccan], Q 36:56, Q 56:30, Q al-Insān 76:14, Q 77:41) by mentioning shade in Paradise and does not provide any new information: e.g., “But those who took heed of God will enjoy cool shade, springs, and any fruit they desire” (inna ′l-muttaqīna fī zilālin wa-ʿuyūn) (Q 77:41). Notably, both Medinan verses—Q 2:25 with azwāj and fruits and Q 4:57 with azwāj and shade—are reminiscent of Q 36:56–57, where all three words occur together: “They and their spouses – seated on couches in the shade. There they have fruit and whatever they ask for” (hum wa-azwājun fī zilālin ala′ l-arāʾ iki muttakiʾūn lahum fīhā fākhathum wa-lahum mā yaddaʾūn).


⁴²On the analysis of Q 74:4–5 and references to similar Jewish and Christian images see Zellentin, Law beyond Israel, 289–291.

which the derivatives of ṭ-h-r occur—Q 7:82 (yataṭḥaharūna), Q Hūd 11:78 (ḥunna ʾṭahrūn lakum), and Q 27:56 (yataṭḥaharūna)—relate to the attribute of moral “purity,” where Lot and his family (ahlu hu, āl lūṭ) stand in contrast to Lot’s people (qawmahu). In Q 27:53–58, Lot and his family are depicted as those who believe and fear God: Q 27:53, “but We saved those who believed and were mindful of God,” (wa-anjāynā ʾlladhīna ʾāmanū wa-kānū yattaqūn); and Q 27:57, “We saved him and his family – except for his wife: We made her stay behind,” (fa-anjāynāhu wa-ahlahu ālāʾ mraʾatu qaddarnāhā mina ʾl-ghābirīn). In contrast, the people of Lot—specifically, the male members of the community—are said to commit immoral acts (fāḥishah), because they choose to have sexual intercourse with men instead of women (Q 27:54), and despite receiving warnings (stressed in Q 27:58), do not fear God. Consequently, Lot’s people (perhaps sardonically) repudiate him and his family (here, āl lūṭ) by labeling them “people who keep themselves pure” (innahum unāsun yataṭḥaharūn).

In another passage, Q 11:77–83, Lot’s people are presented as those who did evil deeds (kānū ya’malūn ʾl-sayyīʿāti in Q 11:78) and who continue to disgrace Lot by refusing to fear God (faʾttaqū ʾllāha) and to accept the fact that Lot’s daughters are purer for them (banātī hunna aṭhāru lakum) than men. Eventually, Lot’s people are punished for being wrongdoers (mina ʾl-zālimīn), while Lot’s family is saved. Q 7:80–84 captures this narrative. The immorality of Lot’s people is referenced in Q 7:80 as well, and, in Q 7:84, even stronger language is used as Lot’s people are described as criminals (mujrimūn). In Q 7:82, Lot’s people once again mock Lot and his family as “people who keep themselves pure.” Here, references to purity via the root ṭ-h-r denote lack of intercourse with the same sex and is closely related to the belief and fear of God. Thus, according to these verses, homosexual intimate relations indicate immorality and makes people “wrongdoers” and “criminals.”

In the Medinan period, Mary and Jesus are also depicted as morally pure. The moral purity of Mary mentioned in Q 3:42 (“He [God] purified you,” wa-ṭahharakī), evidently a reference to her God-fearing and her chastity, is the reason God chooses her to give birth to Jesus. Jesus too is depicted in Q 3:55 as someone who is elevated (rāfiʿ uka) and purified (muṭahhiruka) by God. By purifying oneself, one becomes “agreeable and acceptable to God,” 44 a precondition to be brought into His proximity.

Outside of these episodes describing the purity of individuals, other verses from the Medinan period which use the root ṭ-h-r detail means for achieving moral purity. According

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44 Sinai, Key Terms, “azwāj muṭahharah,” s.v.
to these verses, believing men and women can become morally pure by purifying their hearts, believing in God and His Prophet, and following the rules of God. It is the combination of each of these acts that qualifies believers for entrance to Paradise. In Q 2:125 and Q al-Hajj 22:26, God commands Abraham and Ishmael to purify His house (ṭahhirah baytiya), i.e., the Ka’bah. The purification implies not associating anything with God (lā tushrik bī shay’ān) in Q 22:26, avoiding the uncleanliness of idols (fa’jtanibū ’l-rijsa mina ’l-awthānī) in Q 22:30, and ensuring they and their descendants submit to God (wa’ja’alnā muslimayni laka wa-min dhurriyyatinā ummatan muslimatan laka) in Q 2:128. Further rules of moral purity include giving alms (Q 9:103, Q al-Mujādilah 58:12), fearing God (Q 9:108), praying (Q al-‘Aḥzāb 33:32–33), and submitting to God and His Messenger (Q 33:33).46

Q 33:32–33 features rules which specifically apply to women. These verses instruct the wives of the Prophet (nisāʾ al-nabī) to stay in their houses, to not display themselves, and to not be “soft in speech” in a way which would invite the desires of men. In Q 33:53, God commands men that if they must ask the wives of the Prophet for anything, to do so from behind a screen, because it is purer for the hearts of the male believers and the spouses of the Prophet: dhālikum aṭharu li-qulūbikum wa-qulūbihinna. In another Medinan verse, Q 5:41, God threatens those who do not purify their hearts (yufahhira qulūbahum) with disgrace in this world and a great punishment in the hereafter. Q 24:28–31 gives commandments similar to those found in Q 33:32–33 and 33:53. Specifically, these verses direct believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts. In Q 24:28–31, derivatives of ṭ-h-r are eschewed in favor of a near synonym, and the verses say that compliance with the laws is azkā lahun (“purer for them”).47 Additionally, the verses dictate that believing men should not enter houses until permission is granted to them. Believing women are requested to not expose their “adornment” (zīnah) and to not stamp their feet “to draw attention to any hidden charms.” Notably, “staying in the houses” and “not to be soft in speech to men” in Q 24:30–31 and 33:32–33 evoke the descriptions of houris “reserved in pavilions” and “limiting their glances” (Q 37:48; 55:56; 55:72). These parallels in phrasing demonstrate continuity in

45 On the analysis of Q 2:125 and 22:26 as referring to prohibited impurity see also Zellentin, Law beyond Israel, 287 and Nicolai Sinai, Key Terms, “ṭahara/tahura,” s.v.
46 On these verses see more Holger Zellentin, Law beyond Israel, 298–299.
47 The Qur’ānic usage of the root z-k-w/y indicates moral purity: being mindful of God in Q 80:3–7 and Q 87:14–17; being God-fearing in Q 35:18, Q 53:32, Q 79:25, Q 87:14–17, and Q 91:7–10; studying and accepting “the Book and wisdom” in Q 2:129, Q 2:151, Q 2:174, Q 3:164, and Q 62:2; doing righteous deeds in Q 20:75–76; giving wealth in Q 92:18; giving alms; and praying in Q 35:18, Q 87:14–17, etc. “The best or purest of food” (azkā ṭaʿāmā) in Q 18:19 alludes to purity from religious deviation, according to Zellentin (Law beyond Israel, ch. 2). Z-k-w/y is used fifty-nine times in the Qurʾān. It refers to the obligatory giving of alms to the poor (zakāh) twenty-nine times. The root denotes “pure,” “purify,” or “purify oneself” almost as frequently as t-h-r.
imagery of pure women depicted by the Qurʾān. Q 24:30–31 and 33:32–33 apply some of the same attributes used earlier to characterize the houris to all believing women. As all the aforementioned verses refer to moral purity, it is reasonable to conclude that the “pure spouses” of Paradise are women who are morally pure and thus worthy of proximity to God.

Moreover, the root ṭ-h-r refers not only to moral purity, but also to “presence in heaven” or “heavenly origin.” In some Meccan verses, objects, angels, and even believers are described as pure based on their presence in heaven. The early Meccan verse Q 56:79 discusses angels or believers who are allowed to touch the well-protected script (kitāb makinūn): lā yamassu hum illā ‘l-muṭahharān. The heavenly codex is depicted in another early Meccan verse, Q 80:13–14, as being elevated and pure: fī ṣuḥufin mukarramatin marfūʿātīn muṭahharah. Q al-Bayyinah 98:249 confirms that the heavenly codex is indeed pure: rasūlun mina ‘llāhi yatlū suḥufan muṭahharah. The drinks in Paradise are later described as pure in the later Meccan verse Q 76:21: “Their Lord will give them a pure drink” (wa-saqāhum rabbuhum sharāban ṯahārū). This same attribute is also applied to rainwater from heaven: Q al-Anfāl 8:11 reads, “Remember when He gave you sleep as a reassurance from Him, and sent down water from the sky to purify you (yunazzilu ‘alaykum mina ‘l-samā‘i mā‘an li-yuṭahhirakum bihi), to remove Satan’s pollution from you, to make your hearts strong and your feet firm”; Q al-Furqān 25:48 says, “It is He who sends the winds as heralds of good news before His mercy. We send down pure water from the sky (anzalnā mina ‘l-samā‘i mā‘an ṯahārū), so that We can revive a dead land with it, and We give it as a drink to many.

48 Muṭahharānā is interpreted as “angels” or “angels and the prophets” in the tafsīr of al-Ṭabarī. See Abū Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, Lāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta‘wil āy al-Qur‘ān, ed. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (26 vols., Cairo: Dār Hajar, 2001), 22.364–366 ad Q 56:79. Other Qur’ānic verses do not confirm this interpretation. The angels are never explicitly described as pure or purified. Apparently, early exegetes logically concluded that it makes sense for angels and the prophets to touch the heavenly codex. Neuwirth does not comment on muṭahharānā. The relevant verses that mention angels or “noble scribes in heaven” can be summarized as follows: Q 56:78–79 (‘annahu la-qur‘ ānun karīm fī kitābin maknūn) seem to be connected with Q 80:13 (fī ṣuḥufin mukarramah) and 85:22 (fī lāwihin maḥfūz). If the verses Q 80:11–16 refer to the Qur’ānic revelations and not the register of deeds, the “noble scribes” (kirāman kātibīn) in Q 82:10–12 can be identified as keeping and recording angels who write down good and bad deeds of human beings. Consequently, muṭahharānā is better interpreted as keeper-angels or “heavenly policemen.” The keeper-angels seemingly have another duty that is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the Qur‘ān: to write down the revelations or keep them in their hand (bi-aydī saffarāh). Only at a later stage, in the later revelations Q 2:297, 16:102, and 26:193, the rūḥ al-qudus, Gabriel, and the rūḥ amīn are mentioned as those who have brought the Qur‘ān down upon the heart of the Prophet. It is only possible to conclude indirectly that the pure ones, i.e., Gabriel, the rūḥ amīn, and rūḥ al-qudus, touch the well-protected book in Q 56:79. By contrast, Q 56 describes solely the Day of Judgement, the life of ones who are brought near God in Paradise, and ones who dwell in hell. In this regard, it fits better with the context that muṭahharānā are muqarrabīn. Those who are brought near to God are mentioned in Q al-Muṭaffīfīn 83:20–21 (yashhaduhu ‘l-muqarrabīn) and allowed to look at an inscribed register (kitāb marṣūm). In Q 17:71 (later Meccan), the believers are given their record of deeds in their right hand. Ibn Mardawayh (d. 410/1020) also comments on muṭahharānā in the same way in Jalāl al-Dīn al-Stuṭīfī, al-Durr al-manthūr fī ‘l-tafsīr bi ’l-mā‘īthār, ed. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (15 vols., Cairo: Markaz Hajar, 2003), 14.222 ad Q 56:79.

49 On dating of Q 98 as Meccan or Medinan see Sinai, The Qurʾān, 130–132.
animals and people We have created.” In both verses, the rainwater is deemed pure due to its heavenly origin too. In summary, the pure spouses are pure based either on their presence in Paradise or heavenly origin, which could in turn be taken as supporting evidence for concluding that the houris, the earthly wives, or both should be considered azwāj mutahharah.

Besides referring to objects or persons in heaven or of heavenly origin, in two Medinan verses, the derivatives of ṭ-h-r also relate to ritual purity or the removal of regulated impurity. Q 2:222 and 5:6 are the only verses in which the root ṭ-h-r denotes ritual purity and by extension the absence of regulated impurity that the believers must cleanse themselves of. Q 5:6 refers to obtaining ritual purity as follows:

You who believe, when you are about to pray, wash your faces and your hands and arms up to the elbows, wipe your heads, wash your feet up to the ankles. If you are junub, purify yourselves (faʾṭtahharū). If any of you is sick or on a journey, or has just relieved himself, or had intimate contact with a woman, and can find no water, then take some clean soil and wipe your face and hands with it. God does not wish to place any burden on you; He only wishes to purify you (yurīdā li-yuṭahhirakum) and perfect His blessing on you, so that you may be thankful.

Q 2:222 deems menstruating women impure, and forbids men from having sexual intercourse with them during this period.50

They ask you [Prophet] about menstruation. Say, ‘Menstruation is a harm, so keep away from women during it. Do not approach them until they are purified (ḥattā yathurna); when they are purified (fa-idhā taṭahharna), you may approach them as

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God has directed you. God loves those who turn to Him, and He loves those who keep themselves pure (wa-yuḥībhu 'l-muṭṭahhirin).

Given the Qurʾān’s seeming presentation of human resurrection as bodily (e.g., Q 70:43; 81:7; 82:4), azwāj muṭahharah might also mean that the women will be purified of the bodily sources of impurity, i.e., menstruation, lochia, feces, urine, etc., as stressed by some early Muslim exegetes.51 Still, while menstruation is particular to women, defecation and urination are not. Therefore, if this discussion is intended to emphasize that women are purified of all bodily sources of impurity, the same depictions would apply to believing men. Strikingly, there are neither parallel verses in the Qurʾān nor early Qurʾānic commentaries (ritual purity is not stressed at all in Q 56:79 or anywhere else) that use the root ṭ-h-r to describe men in Paradise as being pure or purified of bodily impurities.

Women are exclusively described as such. Additionally, the women cannot be purified only of menstruation because, for instance, defecation explicitly causes ritual impurity in Q 5:6. It would be illogical to purify women of one impurity, “menstruation,” and not to purify them of others. Although it is plausible that all dwellers of Paradise—women and men—are purified of impure bodily fluids, the removal of such physical impurities is not the Qurʾān’s central focus when referring to muṭahharah. As shown above, the derivatives of ṭ-h-r rather underscore moral purity.

Thus, as muṭahharah predominantly denotes sinlessness and the absence of prohibited impurity in adhering to the commandments of God, and earthly spouses are already referred to as righteous in the Medinan period, these earthly spouses could be identified as the “pure spouses.” Yet, while all believing men appear to receive “pure spouses,” it is not that case that all earthly spouses will gain admission to Paradise together with their husbands. Furthermore, considering that purity indicates a heavenly origin and that the believing men are given the houris in the early Meccan surāhs, i.e., before we are told that their earthly spouses enter...

Paradise with them, the houris are likely included in the concept of “pure spouses.” In sum, the pure spouses of the male believers can be understood as both the houris and believing wives, thereby confirming that matrimony persists in the Medinan conception of Paradise and that the believing men will dwell there together with their spouses, similarly to Adam and his spouse (cf. Q 2:35, 7:19, and 20:117).

**Conclusion**

The images of women in the Qur’ānic Paradise shift from the houris—heavenly spouses—in the early Meccan period to pious women in the Medinan period. Female figures occur exclusively as spouses (azwāj), either houris or earthly spouses, in the Meccan period of revelation until the Qur’ānic proclamations reach 61.78 transcription letters per verse. At this stage of revelation, women in Paradise are passive figures and their righteousness is not explicitly mentioned. In the later Meccan period, after the occurrence of the first account of Adam’s spouse, women continue to be portrayed as the wives of believing men, however, for the first time they are also referred to as parents and the offspring of male believers entering Paradise. Simultaneously, in these verses, general statements regarding individuals gaining admission to Paradise, “male or female,” begin to occur. This development coincides with the second Meccan retelling of the story of the first couple in which Adam’s wife takes on a more significant role. The social status of women from the later Meccan period onwards is thus no longer confined to a role as the spouses of the believing men. In the Medinan period, women are characterized in terms of their own belief, alongside believing men.

Although the Meccan period first does not explicitly underscore the righteousness of women, at all stages of the inner-Qur’ānic development women enter Paradise and hell in accordance with their decisions and actions and appear to be liable for their deeds. Regarding the occurrences of women in Paradise in Q 36 and 43, women share the fate of their spouses because these Meccan references reflect the social circumstances of the believers, where a wife shared the worldview of her believing husband. However, although Muḥammad’s Meccan ministry was not as successful as his Medinan one, the number of believers most likely increased at least slightly over the years. Subsequently, not every female believer was married to another believer. This new social reality is stressed by the references to women’s righteousness in the later Meccan period.

52 The Qur’ān does not address explicitly the fate of the women without the social status of “wife,” in Paradise—i.e., unmarried women, concubines, and slaves—at any point. They might be included among muʾmināt (believing women) and the verses pertaining to them.
Gradually, in parallel with the shifting historical circumstances inherent to the Medinan period of revelation, the Qurʾān addresses women not only as pure spouses, but also as believing women. Yet, given the central role of believing men throughout the Qurʾān, men in the Medinan period are still rewarded with heavenly spouses in Paradise. Even though the Medinan period does not mention the houris explicitly, the concept the houris seems to have been assimilated into the concept of the *azwāj muṭharrah*. The insertion of Q 52:21 emphasizes the validity of the idea. In sum, the houris and earthly spouses dwell together in Paradise at all stages of qurʾānic revelation, while earthly women gradually play a more prominent role and are explicitly referred to in the later Meccan and Medinan periods as an active part of the qurʾānic community.


Scholars of the Qurʾān who have investigated the relative chronology of Q 2:35–39, 7:19–25, and 20:117–124 acknowledge that 2:35–39 is the chronologically latest revelation in the group, but they are not in agreement over whether 7:19–25 or 20:117–124 was revealed first. Neuwirth states that Q 20:117–124 is an earlier variant of the Adam story than 7:19–25. Recently, Joseph Witztum has analyzed the relevant passages and, following Edmund Beck, argues for a later dating of Q 20:117–124 relative to 7:19–25.

Witztum compares Q 7:20, “…Your Lord only forbade you this tree to prevent you becoming angels or immortals” (*mā* nahākuma *rabbukumā* *ʿan* hāḍhihi *l*-shajari *l*-takūnā malakaynī wa takūnā mina *l*-khālidīn), with Q 20:120, “…But Satan whispered to Adam, saying, ‘Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and dominion that never decays?’” He emphasizes in particular the words *mulk* (“kingship, dominion, sovereignty”) and *malakaynī* (“angels”) in the two passages. According to Witztum, while one can understand *malakaynī* via Gen 3:5 and postbiblical sources, one cannot explain the use of *mulk* via the Bible or later Jewish or Christian sources. Witztum thus proposes that the usage of *mulk* presupposes the usage of *malakaynī*. He suggests that *mulk* may have resulted from “a misreading of MLKYN as *malikaynī* for *malakaynī*. This type of mistake could indicate that whoever composed or redacted Q 20 was working with Q 7,”53 or, “one could also argue that Q

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53 Joseph Witztum, “Variant Traditions, Relative Chronology, and the Study of Intra-Quranic Parallels,” in Asad
20.120 is a playful adaptation of Q 7.20, using the same consonants to create a new meaning.⁵⁴

Yet the relevant passage in Q 20:117–124 is similar to the Syriac Cave of Treasures, where the idea of sovereignty already occurs, and thus there is no need to posit a development of the Q 20 account from the Q 7 account. In the Cave of Treasures, God creates Adam as a king (malkā)⁵⁵ and arrays him in the garment of sovereignty (in Syriac ibēsh hwā ibīšā d-malkūtā).⁵⁶ The Lord gives Adam dominion over all things and creatures, and the angels bow the knee and worship him.⁵⁷ Strikingly, the angels’ prostration before Adam is also a part of the qur’ānic narrative in Q 7:11 and 20:116. Given this imagery, mulk in Q 20:120 might indicate Adam’s kingship or dominion over all creatures. In other words, the angels’ prostration implies Adam’s superiority over the angels, a fact which the usage of mulk explicitly confirms.

But the Qur’ān amends the Syriac conception of Adam’s dominion,⁵⁸ as Adam is never referred to as malik. On the contrary, only God is called al-malik al-ḥaqq, “the true king,” in Q 20:114. Furthermore, the Syriac concept of sovereignty is later modified in Q 2:30, where God appoints Adam as His viceroy (khalifah) on earth, yet simultaneously underscores Adam’s superiority over the angels by describing Adam’s knowledge of names in Q 2:31–33. Ultimately though, in contrast to angels and God, Adam is mortal. In Q 20:120, Satan promises Adam not only sovereignty, but rather eternal dominion (mulk lā yablā). We see that Q 7:20 also stresses immortality, as the first couple can become angels (who are immortal)⁵⁹ or achieve immortal status in some other unspecified manner. Thus, the discourse of the Qur’ān argues a different point than the Cave of Treasures and underlines that while Adam might acquire immortality and possess dominion, God is the only true sovereign, and

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⁵⁴ Ibid., 26.
⁵⁵ Caverne des Trésors, 207, 19.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 18.
⁵⁷ Caverne des Trésors, 18–21.
⁵⁸ In this regard, it seems to be similar to the issue of Adam’s prophethood. Zellentin points out that the Qur’ān “by using the verb naba’ā in Q 2:31 and 33 – a cognate to Syriac nby – concurs with part of the Christian tradition in addition to offering its corrections to it.” Zellentin assumes that the Qur’ān partially agrees with the Cave of Treasures when it comes to prophethood, although he stresses that Adam is never explicitly mentioned as nabi, possibly due to his sin – eating from the forbidden tree. H. Zellentin, “Trialogical Anthropology: The Qur’ān on Adam and Iblīs in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse,” in Rüdiger Braun and Hüseyin Çiçek (eds.), New Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of Qur’ānic Anthropology: The Quest for Humanity (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 124–127.
Adam remains a subordinate. This being the case, Q 20:117–124 does not necessarily have to be later than 7:19–25, and *mulk* certainly does not derive from *malakayni*. 
APPENDIX 2: The Inner-qur’ānic Development of the Female Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Meccan period</th>
<th>Early Meccan period</th>
<th>Early Meccan period</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“full-breasted”</td>
<td>“white, large-eyed women”</td>
<td>“limiting their glances”</td>
<td>“and we married them to the white, large-eyed women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kawāʾib</td>
<td>ḥūr ʾīn</td>
<td>qāṣirāt al-ṭarf</td>
<td>wazawwajnāhu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“of equal age”</td>
<td>“well-protected pearls”</td>
<td>“untouched before by man or jinn”</td>
<td>m bi-ḥūrin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atrāb</td>
<td>lu’lu’ maknān</td>
<td>“well-eyed” ḍūn</td>
<td>ḍūn</td>
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<tr>
<td>(23.36 transcription letters)</td>
<td>“We have specially created”</td>
<td>lam yāmithhunn</td>
<td>(36.61 transcription letters)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>innā ansha’nāhunn</td>
<td>a insun qablahum</td>
<td>(38.35 transcription letters)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a inshāʾā</td>
<td>wa-lā jānn</td>
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<tr>
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<td>“virgins” abkār</td>
<td>“corundum and coral”</td>
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<td>“passionate lovers” urub</td>
<td>al-yāqūt wa’l-marjān</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“of equal age”</td>
<td>“good” khayrāt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>atrāb</td>
<td>“fair” hisān</td>
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<td>“white women”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q 55:56, 58, 70, 72, 74:</td>
<td>“limiting their glances”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>qāṣirāt al-ṭarf</td>
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<td>Q 52:20:</td>
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<td>“and we married them to white, large-eyed women”</td>
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<td>wazawwajnāhu</td>
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<td>ḍūn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Later Meccan period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q 38:52: “limiting their glances, of equal age” qāṣirāt al-ṭarf atrāb (51.98 transcription letters)</td>
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<td>Q 36:56: “they and their spouses” hum wa-azwājuhum (55.01 transcription letters)</td>
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<td>Q 40:40: “whoever, male or female, does good deeds and has faith” wa-man ṣāliḥan min dhakarin aw unthā wa-huwa mu‘min</td>
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<td>Q 43:70: “those who are righteous of their forefathers, spouses, and descendants” antum wa-azwājukum</td>
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<td>Q 40:8–9: “you and your spouses” hum wa-azwājuhum (zawj)</td>
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<td>Q 20:117–124: Adam and his spouse (zawj)</td>
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<td>Q 20:117–124: Adam and his spouse (zawj)</td>
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<td>Q 7:19–25: Adam and his spouse (zawj)</td>
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<td>Q 7:19–25: Adam and his spouse (zawj)</td>
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</table>
Medinan period without referring to transcription letters per verse

| Q 2:25, 3:15, and 4:57: *“pure spouses”* azwāj muṭahharah | Q 3:195: “I will not allow the deeds of any one of you to be lost, whether you are male or female” lā ʿudīʿuʿ ʿamalaʾ ʿāmilin minkum min dhakarin aw unthā | Q 2:35–39: Adam and his spouse (zawj) | Q 9:72: “the believers, both men and women” al-muʿminīna waʾl-muʿmināt and Q 33:35, 48:5, and 57:12–13 | Q 66:11: the wife of Pharaoh *imraʿat firʿawn* |