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The Qur'ānic Ghilmān: Shifting Gendered Boundaries of Sexuality

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English abstract: The article argues that there is a discursive space within juridical texts and Qur'ānic commentaries that justifies the postulation of a third gender or gender ambiguity. It examines the legal treatment of alternative gender identities by analyzing the personal appearance of the ghilmān. Descriptions of the ghilmān focus on glorifying their personal appearance but rarely discuss the ghilmān's characteristics. They support the assumption that ghilmān had another hidden and unspoken role serving as sexual partners for male believers. The phenomenon of the ghilmān widens the division between the earthly world and heaven as the Qur'ānic spectrum of heavenly gender and sexuality expands known gendered boundaries.

I. Introduction

Personal appearance reflects social characteristics of religion, culture, fashion, gender, and socioeconomic status. Personal appearance reflects a desired or undesirable reality and reveals differentiation. It is important in determining society's roles and expectations, concealed or revealed messages, and linking ethical and aesthetical perfection (Rustomji, 2009, pp. 40–62). In Islam, conceptions of personal appearance are perceived as part of becoming a better believer by cultivating oneself as one of God's creations, a manifestation of the symbiosis between morals and aesthetic traditions. Ethics are values that guide people as to the goodness or badness of their actions, while aesthetics are values that guide assessments of beauty or ugliness. Aesthetics includes physical and mental differences which do not necessarily embrace harmony as a standard of beauty (Siebers, 2010, p. 17).

Islam comprehensively interweaves ethics and aesthetics in a way in which each influences the other in jointly promoting ethical values and aesthetic judgments (Chittick, 2014, 3–17; Sandıkçı and Güliz, 2005, 75–77). For example, the Prophet Muḥammad's personal appearance combined both aesthetical and ethical aspects in his praise of God, His creation and the role of His messenger. Another example of this combination can be seen in the frightening descriptions of the evil spirits in hell as clumsy and unaesthetic monsters (al-Qādī, 2001, p. 45); these descriptions seek to urge believers to choose the right path toward heavenly reward. The outcome of this interweaving of ethical

values and aesthetical judgments are legal directives with ethical significance and visual representations that foster in Muslims' personal appearance.

The Islamic afterlife is described as if it were a physical world, mirroring the best of earthly life in a way that relates the two worlds, with that afterlife becoming a space in which humans are transformed into purified versions of themselves (Rustomji, 2010, pp. 167–9). The Qur'ān portrays the wonders of the next life through ideal descriptions of place, objects, and feelings (Q 3:15, Q 5:119, Q 13: 23–24). It is a sensual and intimate world of pleasures evoked in concrete, worldly terms of food and drink (Q 2:25, Q 41:31–32, Q 69:24, Q 47:75). Over time, heaven has become filled with rewards, a proof that even afterworlds have a chronology of material culture and spiritual significance (Rustomji, 2008, p. 296).

Muslim eschatology, the foundations of which are in the Qur'ān, is didactic in character in motivating believers and vindicating God's justice and mercy (Taylor, 1968, p. 66). In this regard, many Qur'ānic verses indicate how those in heaven will wear silk and green clothing, pearls, and gold and silver jewelry (e.g., Q 31:18, Q 35:33, Q 44:53, Q 76:21, Q 22: 23) as a reward, illustrating the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Most of these verses belong to the Meccan period, when the Prophet Muḥammad preached to the mushrikūn (polytheists) guiding them toward the right path and ultimate heavenly rewards (see also al- Ghazālī, 1981, p. 527; Ibn Ḥazm, 1969, p. 12; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1982, p. 196; al-Qādī, 2001, p. 54; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, p. 347; al-Haythamī, 1968, p. 398, p. 410; al-Suyūtī, 1993, p. 65).

The symbolic world of this medieval eschatology is based on earthly human experiences and the values and conceptions that arise from them. In the medieval period, it was also influenced by earlier eschatological descriptions, particularly Persian and Judeo-Christian ones (Rippin, 1996, pp. 126, 134–35; Gardet, p. 448). Later juridical sources discuss in detail the behavior of the dead, their personal appearance, and other earthly aspects. This discussion is based on descriptions familiar to both writers and readers, although they change over time and place (Eklund, 1941, pp. 9–10). The human-gendered architecture of the Qur'ānic heaven, structured for the pleasures of the individual, standardizes personal appearance while retaining a distinguishable hegemonic male body (Reeser, 2010, p. 93). Butler claims that "all genders are a performance, culturally created categories" (2000, p. 203). Here, they reflect the cultural norms of the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam. Jahangir adds that the non-binary gendered nature of Islam manifests itself in many ways, including

personal appearance (Jahangir and Abdullatif, 2018, p. 160). Moreover, passing from this world enables exposure to a diversified non-binary system in heaven, proof that at least in heaven the Qur'ān accepts the existence of diverse sexuality and orientation.[1]

II. Goals and methodology

The ghilmān are unique heavenly creations, young boys of eternal youth. Lane states that they are young males prior to attaining manhood (Lane, 1980, pp. 2286–87). The main research aim in this paper is to describe the evolution of the descriptions of the ghilmān's personal appearance in medieval Qur'ānic commentaries and the jurisprudence on the construction of gender identities and sexual practices in medieval Muslim societies. In addition, it examines the development of the idea of the ghilmān into a third gender, challenging the accepted gendered boundaries. Research has been published on other genders and on homosexuality in Islam, but little has focused on the Qur'ānic ghilmān. Medieval descriptions of their personal appearance are the basic materials used in the paper for analyzing their social, religious, and cultural associations. This article expands on some already discussed aspects of these issues but also challenges certain presentations of them by offering a more complex picture of the ghilmān as a third gender created for men's sexual amusement in heaven. I adopted an interdisciplinary approach for the paper to leverage insights from various academic disciplines in combination. The methodology combines insights from history and Islamic Studies to analyze the historical and cultural context of the personal appearance of ghilmān in the Qur'ān as key to their portrayal as a third gender. The historical aspect of this study relates to its examination of the evolving meanings and interpretations of the ghilmān in medieval Muslim sources. The Islamic Studies concerns center on the role of the juridical texts and Qur'ānic commentaries in endorsing the existence of a third gender identity. This interdisciplinarity allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between religion, culture, and society and for a fuller analysis of the concept of ghilmān.

The geological term stratigraphy, the study of rock layering, can be applied to historical texts in relation to the layering of meaning and interpretation (Savant, 2013, p. 17) to describe the evolution of meanings and interpretations through time and to help portray wider contexts (Bauer, 2015, p. 12). Applying this approach by means of metaphor can

1 For more about discourse based on the Qur'ān that does not use natural or unnatural to describe sexualities, see Kugle, 2003, p. 197.

help us analyze and trace the evolution of Qur'ānic descriptions of ghilmān in classic medieval commentaries and eschatological works, showing how they have been adopted, adapted, rejected, replaced, redefined and/or repurposed over time. The traditions in this regard were modified in unexpected ways over time and place and due to external influences, local norms and wishes, and expectations. The ultimate picture formed constitutes a blending that attributes sexual roles to ghilmān.

This article argues that there is a discursive space within juridical texts and Qur'ānic commentaries that justifies the postulation of a third gender and/or gender ambiguity, although it is not easy to attribute the existence of another gender to premodern Muslim legal sources (Alipour, 2017, p. 165). The article aims to offer insights into the legal treatment of alternative gender identities by analyzing the personal appearance of the ghilmān. For convenience and fluidity, the term ghilmān that appears in Q 52: 24 is adopted for the purposes of this discussion, though it should be noted that the concept is also encompassed in the term wildān that appears in Q 56: 17–18 and Q 76: 19. Although Rustomji claims that these servant boys were not sex objects (2008, p. 305), I will argue, by focusing on the descriptions of their personal appearance, that they were created also as another gender variation for men's sexual amusement. Moreover, their descriptions are neither symbolic nor spiritual but physical and their beauty is not the product of spiritual perfection, but illustrates aspects of an ideal form of personal appearance.[2]

Ghilmān are an integral part of heaven and of Muslim eschatology. This article's goal is to demonstrate that the ghilmān are proof that the Qur'ān, its commentaries and eschatological primers provide a space for sexual diversity in medieval Islam (Günther, 2019, p. 309). By deciphering their personal appearance, we will learn about their identities and roles as well as about perceptions of aesthetics, young male beauty, and gender. By analyzing the ghilmān's personal appearance, we will discover more about their other, unspoken, sexual role in a context in which male believers were offered an array of sexual variations in heaven that include earthly wives, ḥūrīs, and ghilmān. By depicting the ghilmān as a sexual object, the Qur'ān appears to authorize sexual diversity, but only in heaven.

2 For more about beauty in Islam see: Abouseif, 1998 and Khuri, 2001. For more about beauty in heaven, see Rustomji, 2017, pp. 295–307.

III. The sources

The sources are presented in a brief, introductory way here for the purposes of analysis of descriptions of the ghilmān's personal appearance.

A. The Qur'ān and commentaries

According to Muslim belief and tradition, the Qur'ān represents God's revelations to the Prophet Muḥammad collected after the Prophet's death. This collection of what was preached through Muḥammad into a book then reshaped as prophecy gave him legitimacy as the recipient of divine revelations. Islam contends that the messages of the Qur'ān are universal, eternal, and not dependent on time or historical circumstances (Watt, 1988, p. 2). However, research has shown the historical basis of the Qur'ān as the socio-religious reality of the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula. While the Qur'ān's aim is to reshape the life of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, it is still based on and reflects the seventh-century socio-religious reality there. Moreover, research has shown that the Qur'ān reflects the Prophet Muḥammad's thoughts and ideas that were intended for proselytization to the idolaters of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula (Welch, Paret and Pearson, pp. 401–35).

Traditional Muslim commentary on the Qur'ān attempts to provide explanations and interpretations that foster a better understanding of it as God's words, while research considers them as historical texts. Some of the classical and leading medieval commentators that I have chosen as representative for this article are al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), al-Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286/1291) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373).

B. Jurisprudence

Jurisprudence (fiqh) is a religious and moral system of law consisting of theoretical, substantive, and practical aspects. Islam has developed a complicated ecology of jurisprudence that encompasses all aspects of the believer's life. Ḥadīth collections and medieval legal compendiums were composed in various places in the Muslim East throughout the medieval era as constituent elements of this jurisprudence. Because Muslim life depends on jurisprudence, this body of literature sought to tailor often abstract law to the community's needs and aspirations and to changes and developments. A basic methodological issue with these sources is deciding whether they represent theoretical and hypothetical

discussions or real-life situations and rituals.[3] My preliminary assumption is that these sources synthesize theory and practice in a way that defies any attempt to separate them. This synthesis consolidates moral boundaries, with a defined sphere for interpretations and variations of time and place (Maghen, 2011, pp. 232–34). Moreover, the information that comes from these sources reflects a mixture of aspirations, norms, fashions, foreign influences, and variables of time and place.

C. Eschatological literature

Concepts of eschatology and the hereafter are central to Islam and the history of faith in an afterlife extends from the seventh century to the present in an evolving chronology of conceptuality and interpretation (Günther and Lawson, 2016, pp. 1–28; Rustomji, 2010, pp. 166–75; Kinberg, pp. 12–20). Islamic views on eschatology appear in Qur'ānic commentaries, ḥadīth literature, fiqh and in a genre that was dedicated to it, eschatological literature. Classical Muslim scholars from various schools of theology and juridical backgrounds devoted chapters or even books to eschatological issues (Günther, 2019, pp. 308–9) and we will discuss notable examples of them in this article.

IV. Who are you, the ghilmān?

Heaven as described in the Qur'ān is an eternal, physical abode where believers are rewarded for their earthly good deeds. Several verses are devoted to describing its sensual pleasures in matters such as clothing, food and drink, furniture, and fulfilling sexual desire (Tourage, 2020, p. 55). As well as the ḥūrīs (ḥūr al-ʿayn),[4] male believers are served by young boys of eternal youth. These youths called wildān mukhalladūn (Q 56: 17; Q 76: 19) and ghilmān (Q 52: 24) are unique heavenly creations, part of the rich Qur'ānic scenes of joys waiting for the believers. According to Qur'ānic eschatology, male believers are served in heaven because they do not work, but rather have servants who ensure they have a blissful life. The function of ghilmān is to serve and they represent a nameless, faceless working class. They are living beings, but not human and have not lived on earth and faced heavenly judgment (Rus-

3 For more about Islamic jurisprudence and the challenges it presents for research, see Maghen, 1999, pp. 351–54; Maghen, 2005, pp. 281–83; Rispler, 2007, p. 15; al-Azmeh, 1988, p. 251; Schacht, pp. 886–91.

4 For more on ḥur al-ʿayn, see Rustomji, 2017, pp. 266–77; Wensinck, p. 581; Haddad and Smith, 1975, pp. 47–48; Wadud-Muhsin, 1992, p. 55.

tomji, 2008, p. 91). They function as objects, not beings, but they are not slaves in the conventional sense because they cannot be freed or become believers themselves. There are various accounts as to how many of them there are, ranging from 70 to a few thousand and, according to Ibn Abi Dunyā, each is unique (1997, p. 160). The high estimate of their number is well exemplified in the description of two lines of ghilmān that wait to welcome believers, who are unable to see the ends of the lines because of their length (Ibn Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 60).

The descriptions of the ghilmān do not clarify why their labor is needed, but some explanations of this have been suggested. Al-Zamakhsharī and al-Ṭabarī, in their exegesis of Q 52: 24, explain that these precious servants promised to male believers are a pointer to the unique qualities of the believers, and their role is demonstrating the believers' prestige and the precious rewards available to them for the faith. For example, these servants' personal appearance is so magnificent, one can only imagine the believers' personal appearance (al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, pp. 411–12; al-Ṭabarī, 1978, pp. 40–41). Al-Zamakhsharī adds that they are the children of earthly believers who did not do any good deeds for which they should be rewarded, nor any sins for which they must be punished or, alternatively, that they are the children of sinners (al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, p. 412). Al-Bayḍāwī states that some claim they are the believers' own or as-yet unborn children (1996, p. 248). Ibn Abi Dunyā claims that they are either Muslim or non-Muslim children (1997, p. 60), while Ibn Kathīr claims that they are servants (1997, pp. 259–60). Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya states that, because there is no birth in heaven, the ghilmān are the Muslims' children who died having committed neither sins nor good deeds. Others claim that they are children of the polytheists whom God made servants to the believers in heaven, or that they are God's special heavenly creations, like ḥūr al-ʿayn, as part of the final reward to believers (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, pp. 465–66).

According to Rustomji, the ghilmān are purified beings in substance and in purpose, objects furnished for believers' pleasure (2019, p. 299). Abdel Haleem asserts that the physical pleasures of paradise have been exaggerated and there is no mention of eating, drinking, or sexual activity, indicating that the material rewards are symbolic (1999, p. 97). Al-Azmeh claims that paradisiacal pleasures are not anomalies and that, therefore, the ghilmān are part of the actual sensual and sexual landscape of paradise, and not allegorical (1995, pp. 215–16). Bin Salama goes further by claiming that the ghilmān al-janna are a third gender between men and women and beyond the binary gender system and an object of desire for men despite the clear prohibition on homosexuality. She adds that the Qur'ānic prohibition on liwāṭ (sodomy) relates to prac-

tices that did not vanish and the ghilmān became permitted only in heaven, analogous to wine consumption being prohibited on earth becoming permitted in heaven (Bin Salama, 2005, pp. 15–17). The focus on the ghilmān's appearance reflects the relationship between personal performance and sexuality and suggests a transcendence of earthly binary-gendered patriarchy. El-Rouayheb states that a minority of scholars of jurisprudence have speculated that there is sex between males in heaven, whether with ghilmān or other believers, based on the argument that sodomy and wine were forbidden only in earthly life (El-Rouayheb, 2005, pp. 128–37).

V. The ghilmān's status and role

It seems that, according to heavenly hierarchy, male believers come first, then their wives, then ḥūr al-ʿayn, and, lastly, the ghilmān (Q 52: 20; Q 44: 54; Q 38: 52; Q 37: 47–49; Q 55: 56, 58, 70, 72, 74; Q 56: 22–23, 35–36). It is not clear whether this is a reflection of the earthly reality or suggestive of the role of the Qur'ān in guiding the believers toward preferred sexual practices. ḥūr al-ʿayn provide companionship and sexual pleasure, while the ghilmān are servants, creatures of the working class. These are some of their major roles:

1. Manifestations of God's power: As al-Bayhaqī states, thousands of servants await the believers and each one of them has a different role. (al-Bayhaqī, 1988, p. 199). In his commentary on Q 76: 19, al-Ṭabarī adds that a thousand youth will run to each one of the believers in heaven to serve him (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 272). Ibn Kathīr says that the ghilmān amass to serve their masters, one will be astonished by their number, their beautiful colors, their clothing, and their jewelry. All these ornate descriptions glorify God and His unlimited power to create and reward His believers with precious, heavenly creations.

2. Private servers: The ghilmān are silent servants of food and wine to the believers and run their households.

3. Welcomers: The ghilmān welcome the believers into heaven and gather around them as children do with intimate friends (al-Andalūsī, 2002, p. 39; Ibn Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 48).

4. Informants and identifiers: The ghilmān inform ḥūr al-ʿayn of the believers' earthly names (al-ʾAndalūsī, 2002, p. 40; Ibn Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 48).

5. Intermediary exemplars: The ghilmān are described in ways partly familiar from earth (youthful) and partly unfamiliar (eternal). Their in-

termediary nature emphasizes the division between the earthly and heavenly worlds and help believers understand heaven's benefits.

6. Models of beauty: The ghilmān manifest beauty and ease in their youth and purity and the highest spiritual and aesthetic state (Rustomji, 2008, pp. 90–91).

VI. Do the ghilmān have a sexual shadow role?

The Qur'ān establishes a normative framework for Muslims on questions of gender and sexuality (Vaid, 2017, p. 54). The Qur'ānic heaven is imbued with an erotic atmosphere of creative possibilities for sexual pleasures, but the nature of these rewards is not completely clear. Are they fantasy or reality or is there a dialectic between the two? (Tourage, 2020, p. 64). The Qur'ānic heaven is sensual and sexual and believers are immersed in earthly sensual pleasures as a reward. Bodies in heaven are gendered and sexualized, have desires, and are desired in ways that are not disciplined and controlled by worldly forces. This is part of a methodology to increase the attractiveness of heaven to believers, where every desire of the body and wish of the mind will be fulfilled (Günther, 2020, p. 482). The uniqueness of heavenly pleasures present contrasts with those of the earthly world and serves as an incentive for believers to choose the right path. There is a built-in tension between the earthly and the heavenly, permitted and forbidden, accepted norms and silent desires.

According to Lange, the inhabitants of heaven have a different capacity for pleasure; food and sex, for example, are in endless supply, unlike on earth (2016, p. 151). The sexual imaginary of heaven constitutes a liminal zone more open to interpretations and its margins are defined by constructed social, cultural, bodily, and theological borders. Sexuality in heaven is completely overt but also reflects an earthly patriarchal worldview, since only male believers can engage in sex with their earthly wives, ḥūr al-ʿayn and, probably, the ghilmān.

The discussion of the ḥūrīs' and the ghilmāns' beauty illustrates a class hierarchy of beings that serve male believers' desires (Rustomji, 2008, p. 299). Although there is similarity in the focus of the descriptions on the personal performance of ḥūr al-ʿayn and ghilmān and their ideal beauty, the ḥūrī's sexual role is explained explicitly, while the sexual role of the ghilmān remains unclear and shadowy (al-Suyūtī, 1993, p. 72). The similarity prompts questions as to the ghilmān's sexual role, however. Does the expression of these sexual preferences and fantasies to be expected in the afterworld reflect hidden human desires or are

they a reflection of earthly reality that is expected to be continued in heaven? In other words, if the ghilmān have a sexual role in heaven, does it mean that homosexuality is permitted there, as opposed to in earthly life?[5] Is it possible that more sexual variations are offered for men as part of their heavenly rewards? What are the expectations from the ghilmān and why is their personal appearance so important?

To answer these challenging questions, I will analyze the descriptions of the ghilmān's personal appearance in the medieval sources already mentioned above to shed light on it as a major parameter of their existence. This will suggest a wider spectrum of their services than one might initially image, including sexual ones, and present a sexual spectrum beyond a gendered binary. The ghilmān's personal appearance raises many open questions about their identity. For example, there is no mention as to whether they are Muslims or if they have any personal histories, except that they were created by God to serve male believers. Furthermore, none of their traits are described other than their beautiful and youthful appearance, a fact that strengthens the hypothesis that they had a sexual role uniquely for male believers.

VII. The ghilmān's personal appearance

In examining the role of the ghilmān, it is useful to adopt the lens of "flat" and "round" characters – concepts from the field of literature. Nothing is known about the ghilmān except their personal appearance and that they serve food and drink. As opposed to "round" characters who are complex, multifaceted, and lifelike, in the sources, the ghilmān are discussed as two-dimensional flat characters, without complex emotions, thoughts, motivations, or personalities; not do they undergo any kind of change or development (Forster, 1927, pp. 48–55). They conform to a typecast image of good-looking servants, their external characteristics possibly hinting at their concealed sexual role. The ghilmān represents physical beauty uppermost in the manifestation of standards of beauty and harmony. They are not defined by their personality, morals, or other such characteristics, but by their beauty as based on earthly experience. We can analyze the descriptions of the ghilmān in relation to three main categories: age, adornment with jewelry, and the significant employment of pearls in idiomatic descriptions of them.

5 For more recent examples of research on homosexuality in Islam, see Maḥmūd, 2000; Adang, 2003, pp. 5–31; Rowson, 2003, pp. 45–72; Rusmir, 2003; Ze'evi, 2006; Habib 2010; Kugle, 2012; Ragab, 2015, pp. 428–54; Brown, 2017, pp. 1–44.

A. Age

Human aging is a complex and irreversible process influenced by biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors (Rather, Khan Khattak, and Yusof, 2019, p. 66). In Islam, as in certain other religions and cultures, the human fear of this last worldly station and its physical and mental consequences are reflected in the admiration of youth. The young and middle-aged may find physical and mental degeneration to be repellent because its visual performance and symbolic representations evoke anxiety for the future. Even in the Qur'ān, the elderly are mentioned far less often than the young (O'Shaughnessy, 2001, 177–95). According to one commentary on Q 9: 4, old age reveals and conceals certain aspects: Al-Zamakhsharī gives the examples of white hair as a revealed aspect and weakness of the bones as a concealed aspect (1987, p. 4).

Qur'ānic descriptions of the elderly also point to mental weakness and fragile emotional states. According to Q 22: 5, memory is lost in old age and some will be left to live on to such an age that they forget all they once knew, a gloomy description of old people invoked in the expression arthal al-ʿumr (feeble old age) (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, pp. 156–57). Another word that is used for such disheartening description is harīm (aged, senile), a return to early childhood characterized by limited understanding (al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, p. 144). Q 16: 70 portrays another description of mental weakness (arthal al-ʿumr) and al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī explain that loss of memory resembles the ignorance of childhood and youth (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 187; al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, p. 619).

Knowing what the years will bring, the fear of physical and mental deterioration give rise to aversion towards and rejection of the old body. The old body symbolizes the temporariness of this world, part of the punishment for ancient sin, but the reward for devotion is eternal youth in heaven. Human admiration of youth is also reflected in the descriptions of the ghilmān's eternal youth as central to their character. The immortality of heaven's inhabitants, part of their final reward, is extended to the ghilmān, whose beauty is based on eternal youth. Although aging may manifest itself by graying hair, decaying teeth and senility, the ghilmān are not exposed to any of this (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, pp. 463–64; al-Andalūsī, 2002, p. 26). In his commentary on Q 76: 19, al-Ṭabarī explains that the adjective mukhalladūn to them means that they are young forever and adds that the Arabs used to say of men who grew older but their hair remained black and they did not lose their teeth that they were mukhalladūn, permanently young. Other commentaries on Q 56: 17–18 strengthen the view that the

ghilmān will stay young and fresh forever (al-Bayḍāwī, 1996, p. 286; al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 223; al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, pp. 457–60; Ibn Kathīr, 1997, p. 98). According to al-Andalūsī's simile, their youth is like a hidden pearl or one kept bright, clear, and white away from rain and sun (2002, p. 79). Rustomji claims that the commentators focusing on what makes youth beautiful conclude that it is due to their effervescence "which is ephemeral on earth and extended indefinitely and always accessible in the garden" (Rustomji, 2008, p. 301).

B. Adornments with jewelry

In their commentaries on Q 56: 17-18 and Q 76: 19, al-Ṭabarī and others claim that the ghilmān's eternal youth means that they could adorn themselves with earrings and bracelets perceived appropriate for boys but not men (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 223, p. 272; al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, pp. 273–74, pp. 457–60; Ibn Kathīr, 1997, p. 98, pp. 486–90). Ibn Kathīr also states that when ghilmān serve their masters, everyone is astonished at their beautiful clothing and jewelry. The ghilmān's use of adornments emphasizes their youth and beauty because male adults should not be so adorned with jewelry, certainly not with gold and earrings. At the eve of Islam, men wore gold jewelry, but scholars of jurisprudence declared a gender differentiation whereby only women were permitted to adorn themselves with gold jewelry in the earthly world (see al-Nasā'ī, 1988, pp. 165–68, p. 195; al- Bukhārī, 1985, pp. 501–3).

To understand this argument, we turn to the legal discussions of adorning male and female children with jewelry and ear piercing. Parents apparently used to adorn their children with jewelry and scholars of jurisprudence discussed whether to allow such appearance. There are varying opinions on this matter and age and gender are important parameters in deciding on it. According to al-Nawawī (d.1277), some say adorning boys with jewelry is entirely prohibited, while others say it should be allowed until the age of seven, which is called ḥaqq al-tamyīz, the age at which children begin to develop the ability to understand abstract ideas, to judge, and to distinguish between good and evil (Giladi 1995, 822). And still others contend that it is allowed if male children are ṣibyān (boys, youths) without specifying an age limit (1966, p. 44). Proponents of different schools of law agree that there is no religious or other need to pierce boys' ears and that it represents mutilation with no religious or medical justification, though some say the piercing of girls' ears is acceptable (al-Asrūshanī, 1997, p. 146; Ibn al-Jawzī, 1984, p. 15; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1961, p. 18).

C. The metaphor of pearls

Pearls feature in the Qur'ān as both an adornment for the believers in heaven, part of their material reward, and as a metaphor for describing the ghilmān. In Q 22: 23 and Q 35: 33, we learn that God will abundantly bestow his grace upon the believers by adorning them with pearls, while in Q 52: 24 and Q 76: 19 the ghilmān are described as pearls. Pearls are valued for their beauty, rarity, and economic value in addition to symbolizing purity. (Dietrich, p. 821). To decipher the multiple meanings of pearls in this discussion, I have divided the physical, visible traits of pearls from their metaphorical usage.

With regard to physical traits, pearls are admired for their beauty, symmetry, luster, smoothness, elegance, and cleanness, with their whiteness symbolizing purity and innocence; all of these qualities are also attributed to ghilmān (al-Bayḍāwī, 1996, p. 248, p. 286; Ibn Kathīr, 1997, p. 98, pp. 259–60). All the physical characteristics of pearls that are also used to describe the ghilmān are connected to personal appearance. According to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, the effect of scattering pearls issues from their quality and quantity like the groups of ghilmān who constantly scatter to fulfill the believers' needs and wishes. The effect of scattering pearls is no less impressive than gold or silk; it is a much more beautiful sight than pearls collected in one place (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, p. 465; Ibn Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 160). I argue that another interesting aspect, although it is not mentioned in the sources, is that ghilmān are compared to pearls as created from a living, not vegetal or inanimate object, to emphasize their unique human nature.

From the metaphorical perspective, pearls are rare, fine, well-guarded, admirable, valuable, and everlasting. Because they are delicate, they are formed inside a shell that acts as a defense from potential threats, as are the ghilmān, who are created only in heaven, a protected environment. Like pearls, the ghilmān are highly valued and unique because creating them is a delicate process, a grace from God and a manifestation of His unlimited powers. Some add that a ghilmān's beauty arises from their spiritual purity which is everlasting like pearls.

VIII. Conclusions

The stratigraphical method adopted in this study offers a lens for illuminating the layering of meanings and interpretations in the sources about the ghilmān and the evolution of the ghilmān's personal appearance, and thus implications for their role. Over time, these descriptions have been

adapted, rejected, replaced, or modified according to time, place, foreign influence, wishes and expectations in a way that expanded of the role of the ghilmān. Through a careful analysis of the ghilmān's personal appearance, we have added to the traditional accepted roles another variation related to sexual pleasures offered to men as part of their heavenly rewards. The article has supported the view that ghilmān do not offer believers only food and drink, but also sexual services. In a paradigm borrowed from literature, ghilmān were defined as flat characters, implying that the information about them is limited and their characteristics undeveloped. All the descriptions of ghilmān focus on glorifying their personal appearance in contrast to the lack of discussion that exists as to their characteristics. These descriptions support the view that ghilmān have another, although hidden and largely unspoken role as sexual partners for male believers.

The Qur'ānic taxonomy of heavenly gender and sexuality established an independent conceptual and normative framework that exists only in heaven, as part of the incentive for believers to follow the right path. The case of the ghilmān exemplifies the disparity between the earthly world and heaven because the Qur'ānic heavenly spectrum of gender and sexuality is broader, shifting the known gendered boundaries. The detailed descriptions of the ghilmān, including praise of their physical beauty, is connected to bodily pleasures with more options for sexual practice. There is a connection between personal appearance, gender differentiation, sexual roles and sexual variations. The social, gendered and sexual stratification in heaven starts with male believers, then female believers, ḥūr al-ʿayn, and, at the bottom, the ghilmān that supply services, likely including sex, exclusively to male believers. The conclusion is that unequal pleasures are offered for the believers and that heavenly rewards are gendered. Women, unlike men, are not rewarded sexually with special heavenly creatures for their amusement like the ḥūrīs and the ghilmān. While the sexual role of the ḥūrīs is revealed, the sexual role of ghilmān is concealed and the detailed discussion of their personal appearance establishes their sexual role as another variation offered tor male believers.

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