

"Ahl al-Bayt: The Houses of Prophets Ibrahim and Muhammad from a Qur'anic Perspective"  
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This lecture attempts to understand the Qur'anic use of the expression "*ahl al-bayt*," which occurs in the Qur'an once in reference to those in the household of the prophet Ibrahim (S) and once in reference to the household of the prophet Muhammad (S).

We begin by exploring different words for spouse in the Qur'an, outlining the Qur'anic idea of "pairing" at the cosmic level with the term "spouse" (*zawj*) and its plural "*azwāj*." The word *zawj* can refer to a mate, spouse, or a pair or variety of something. Of the eighty-one times the root *z-w-j* appears in the Qur'an, the term is used many times to refer to spouses, occasionally to refer to a wife specifically, and once to refer explicitly to a husband.

In addition to *zawj*, the word *imra'a* (lit. woman) can mean "wife," depending on context and interpretation. The word *nisā'* refers to women categorically and appears frequently in the Qur'an in verses related to legal matters in the family; it can also refer to the wives of a given figure or to female members of the extended family, including in verses 33:30 and 33:32 where it refers to the women of the Prophet Muḥammad's household. The word *ṣāḥiba* can also signify a wife.

In addition to the terms *zawj*, *imra'a/nisā'*, *ṣāḥiba*, the word *ahl* may also designate a wife specifically, or members of a household, or even people of a kinship group more generally. Given the term's wide semantic range, we must take context into consideration to determine to whom or about whom the term refers in any given instance. (Examples of this usage include Q 3:33, 11:73, 15:65, 15:67, 19:6, 33:33, and others; *ahl* is from the root *'h-l*, which occurs 127 times in the Qur'an.) Meanings of *ahl* range from "people" generally, to family or household, to a euphemism for wife, or as a designation of individuals or groups who possess some quality. We look at the reference in *Hūd* to the wife of Ibrahim as angels inform her of her pregnancy and her future status as a grandmother referring to her in this context as "*ahl al-bayt*" (Q 11:73).

A closely related word to *ahl* is *āl*, which is also used in multiple verses (twenty-six to be exact) to refer to the kin of a specific man's household, as in the surah titled *Āl 'Imrān* (Q 3). In fourteen of these instances, (just over half), the term is used in the context of "the household of Pharaoh" (*āl Fir'awn*). Some households are referred to using both *ahl* and *āl*. Notably, the term *āl* is always directly attached to the household of a specific man in the Qur'anic discourse, unlike the term *ahl*, which refers directly to a woman figure at times, or to the people of a particular city, for instance. Attempting to generalize the distinction between the two terms in the Qur'anic discourse, *ahl* suggests horizontal association by kinship, geography, or religious belonging, while *āl* is more of a vertical association with a particular patriarch. (For illustrative examples of the terms *ahl* and *āl* with reference to the same family or household, see Q 15:65–67 and 55:33–34, regarding the family/household of Lot.)

*Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* contains numerous verses on the women of the Prophet Muḥammad's family, and in this surah, verse 33 contains the axiomatic Qur'anic reference to the purity of the "family of the

house” using the expression *ahl al-bayt*: “God only desires to remove defilement from you, O family of the house, and to purify you completely” (Q 33:33). In *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (Q 3), verse 33 also contains an axiomatic reference to the womenfolk of earlier families of prophets, that is, the “household of Abraham” (*āl Ibrāhīm*) and the “household of ‘Imrān” (*āl ‘Imrān*), who were chosen by God: “Truly God chose Adam, Noah, the household of Abraham, and the household of ‘Imrān above the worlds” (Q 3:33). In the revelatory order of surahs, *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* (Q 33) is widely thought to have come directly after *Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān* (Q 3). *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*, the main surah that defines the nature and status of the Prophet Muḥammad and his family, also contains an explicit reference to this prophetic genealogy in its opening verses—this time explicitly including the Prophet Muḥammad, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary: “And [remember] when We made with the prophets their covenant, and with you, and with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus the son of Mary; We made with them a solemn covenant (Q 33:7). This genealogy reinforces that found in Q 3:33, which also discusses God’s special selection of certain individuals and households. The phrase “household” (*āl*) is specifically used in Q 3:33 in conjunction with Abraham and ‘Imrān, but not in conjunction with Noah and Adam. This is perhaps because among the households of Adam and Noah are delinquent women figures.

In *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*, God first addresses the Prophet’s spouses through the Prophet himself, “O Prophet! Say to your spouses...” (Q 33:28). The subsequent verses address the spouses directly. The same pattern is then repeated in *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*, which also pertains to the family of the Prophet. We can see the parallel structure of the addressee in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* and *Sūrat al-Taḥrīm*; the verses move from the Prophet Muḥammad, to his spouses, then to the believers more generally, therein reinforcing the status of his family and their role as exemplars for the wider community. The verses that address the Prophet and the believers in the abovementioned pattern are regularly interspersed with verses that declare the unique status of the Prophet and/or his spouses in relation to the rest of the believers. For instance, the Qur’an addresses the women of the Prophet (*nisā’ al-nabī*) and his wider household (*ahl al-bayt*) in a rhythmic structure of the alternating addressees. This pattern emphasizes the status of the Prophet and his family as exemplars for the believers.

English translations of the Qur’an often render the phrases *azwāj al-nabī* and *nisā’ al-nabī* both as “wives of the Prophet”; however, I question whether or not the Qur’anic addressees are so readily interchangeable. Arguably, the term *nisā’ al-nabī* should be seen as including the Prophet’s daughters, as the verse immediately following describes God’s desires to purify the “family of the house” (*ahl al-bayt*), and a verse later in the same surah explicitly instructs the Prophet to “tell your spouses (*azwājika*) and your daughters (*banātika*) and the women of the believers (*nisā’ al-mu’minīn*),” as noted above (Q 33:59). The phrase *nisā’ al-nabī* appears in verses that address general matters of household ethics. By contrast, the Qur’an uses the term *azwāj al-nabī* in the conversations between God and the Prophet that pertain specifically to his marital relations; “spouses of the Prophet” (*azwāj al-nabī*) has a more narrowly defined meaning than “women of the Prophet” (*nisā’ al-nabī*), which is arguably broader and includes his other women relatives.

Helpful further lexical notes:

*Imra’a*: The root *m-r-ʿ* occurs thirty-eight times in the Qur’an in five forms: once as an adjective (see Q 4:4), eleven times in gender-inclusive usages to mean “person” (*imru’/imra’/imri’* in different grammatical cases), twenty-four times to mean “woman” or “wife” depending on the context, and two times in the feminine dual.

*Nisā'*: The word is from the root *n-s-w*. It appears fifty-nine times in the Qur'an, including twice in 12:30 and 12:50 as a so-called "plural of paucity" (*niswa*) to refer to the women in the city who are consorts of the viceroy's wife. The word is also used as the title of the fourth surah of the Qur'an, *al-Nisā'* (The women).

For *ṣāhibā* see 70:12 and 80:36. See also Q 6:101 and 72:3 for the word *ṣāhibā* to negate the claim that Allah has a female companion.

*Āl*: Lexical works commonly theorize that the letter *hā'* in the root of the word *ahl* was contracted to become the letter *hamza*, and that the two *hamzas* of the new word *'-l* then contracted to an *alif* to form the word *āl*.