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Book Review: Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam, Bilateral Descent and the Legacy of Fatima¹

Zahra Hashemiolya²

The story of bilateral descent in medieval and early modern Islam – that is, the recognition that lineage can be traced through daughters as well as sons – is a story that has influenced the lives of many women as well as men. As Alyssa Gabbay points out in *Gender and Succession in Medieval and Early Modern Islam, Bilateral Descent, and the Legacy of Fatima (Gender and Succession)*, questions of lineage and descent have an impact on matters ranging from politics to economics to psychology in all societies. Gabbay enumerates the many problems of patrilineality in the western world as well as in Islamic countries, which in turn contribute to problems that affect those societies, and not just the women within them. In *Gender and Succession*, Gabbay uses a collection of Qur'an commentaries, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and other notable figures, historical chronicles, poems, and other sources to examine episodes in pre-modern Islamic history in which individuals or societies recognized descent from both males and females. She focuses on three different, interrelated manifestations of bilateral descent – transmission of lineage, inheritance, and successorship – to answer the following questions: What circumstances gave rise to these episodes? How were they justified? What form did they take, and what impact did they have? Finally, what meaning might they have for us today? Gabbay carries out this examination primarily, but not exclusively, through the lens of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, as depicted in Sunni and Shia texts. It should be noted that Gabbay, like anthropologist Saba Mahmood, uses “agency” in its broader sense meaning “multiple ways that women inhabit norms – and, in so doing, effect change in themselves and in others” (8) to elicit more complex and nuanced portraits of women in pre-modern Islamic societies.

The book is divided into three main sections. Each section has two chapters. In the first chapter of each section, Gabby addresses how Shia (and some Sunni) texts acknowledged a particular manifestation of bilateral descent regarding Fatima, daughter of Prophet Muhammad, and in the second chapter of each section she tries to illustrate how those manifestations resonated in pre-modern Islamic societies. By providing a balance between quoting from Shia and Sunni sources, Gabbay tries to provide comprehensive and accurate information for the reader.

Part One, ‘Mothers’, looks at the most basic expression of bilateral descent: the concept that a female can transmit her lineage to her children and that her children belong to her natal family as well as to that of her husband. In Chapter One Gabbay concludes that scholars painted Fatima as a conduit for the prophetic bloodline. She proves this claim through the use of symbolism and imagery such as the Prophet’s cloak, evocative titles such as *umm abīhā* (mother of her father), interpretations of Qur’anic verses dealing with kinship, and comparisons to the Virgin Mary, whose own son was attributed to her lineage. In Chapter Two, Gabbay provides several historical instances from Sunni and Shia schools of thought and demonstrates how recognition of bilateral

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descent in the case of Fatima was echoed in acknowledgment of other less notable women in pre-modern Islamic societies. The chapter presents vivid examples of bilateral tendencies as evidenced in biographical dictionaries, hadith collections, historical chronicles, poems, and juridical texts.

Part Two, 'Heiresses', addresses another acutely important manifestation of bilateral descent: inheritance. Laws permitting daughters to inherit property or money from their natal families – and to pass it down to their offspring – confer a degree of economic autonomy upon females and acknowledge that they both belong to and carry on their lineages. In Chapter Three, Gabbay analyses how Fatima's claim to *Fadak*, an ancient oasis town she believed had been bequeathed to her by her father, led to Shia inheritance practices that acknowledged bilateral descent to a greater extent than did Sunni inheritance laws. It shows that just as Shi'ism redrew kinship lines to include daughters and their offspring, its inheritance laws recognized these dynamics by allocating money and property to daughters and their offspring in a more inclusive fashion than did Sunnis. Chapter Four looks at pre-modern societies – both Sunni and Shi'ism – in which daughters and their offspring inherited to a larger degree than might be predicted by the laws in place, or in which people deployed existing legal institutions to benefit daughters specifically. Drawing primarily on *waqfiyyāt*, or endowment deeds, as source material, it explores the conditions that allowed these practices to arise. Gabbay nevertheless shows that elite daughters received massive amounts of wealth and property from their parents, and many used existing legal institutions to benefit their descendants and create opportunities for power and prestige. The examples contained in this chapter furnish material evidence for the existence of bilateral practices in medieval and early modern Islamic societies. Gabbay tries to explain the differences between Shia and Sunni inheritance laws using mathematical examples and tables. She claims that "not only could women of the pre-Islamic times - jāhiliyya - not inherit, but they were also a property to be inherited" (96). This is a problematic claim because there are several instances of rich and powerful women who lived in the pre-Islamic Arab society such as Khadijah the wife of the Prophet. She was a wealthy businesswoman and married the Prophet Muhammad many years before Islam when he was her agent. Thus, it cannot be said that women's rights in Islam necessarily provided better conditions for all women.

Part Three, 'Successors', deals with the aspect of bilateral descent that possesses the most far-reaching consequences for the status of women: successorship, or the idea that a daughter may succeed her father to a position of authority. Chapter Five examines Shia portrayals of Fatima in which she appears not merely as a receptacle or transmitter of authority, but also as a woman who embodies her father's mission and is capable, at least in some degree, of leading his community. In these portrayals, appearing largely in hadith collections, she transcends the trappings of traditional femininity to emerge as a powerful, outspoken activist. Chapter Six draws on historical chronicles and poems from Iran, the Byzantine Empire, and pre-Islamic Arabia to investigate many pre-modern Islamic societies – both Sunni and Shia – that witnessed females succeeding their fathers and other male relatives to positions of public importance. This chapter throws light on the multiple solutions to the thorny problem of how women could combine the all-important virtue of chastity (which was often predicated upon hiddenness) with sovereignty (often associated with visibility). As an exemplar of both qualities, Fatima figures prominently in these narratives. Gabbay illustrates that some flexibility towards female sovereignty existed in medieval Islamic societies, especially for the daughters of the sultans who identified as men. Then she concludes that gender identity was far less stable in these societies than is often thought, and that gender could be constructed by means other than one's biological sex. Many of the examples provided for inheritance and successorship in Chapters Four and Six are royal women. Now the question is

whether wives and daughters of kings can be considered representatives of the women's community? Finally, the epilogue brings the discussion to the present by examining the recognition of the various aspects of bilateral descent in contemporary Muslim-majority societies.

Although *Gender and Succession* provides an overview of the individual and social rights of women in Islam, it also highlights the fact is that women in Islamic countries have always had more limited rights in comparison to other countries. In Iran, for example, women are challenged in all three parts of the book. First, an Iranian mother can't confer citizenship upon her child, if the mother is married to a foreigner. An example of this is Maryam Mirzakhani, mentioned by the author at the beginning of the book. She was the first woman to win the Fields medal in mathematician. Before her death, of cancer in 2017, her dream was to be able to transfer her Iranian nationality to her daughter, which is not possible under the current Islamic Republic of Iran's law. Second, there are problems with inheritance laws. As mentioned above, according to the verses of the Qur'an, sons inherit twice as much as daughters from their fathers. While, in modern society, most women engage in economic activities alongside men and contribute to family finances. Regarding the third part, successorship, it can be said that the share of women compared to men is insignificant in every aspect. They cannot reach positions such as the leadership of the country, the judiciary seat, the religious leadership, and even the leadership of congregational prayers.

In her research, Gabbay points to historical details that need further and deeper analysis in order to help clarify the book's main theme - the place of women in the early centuries of Islam. One critique of this approach is that Gabbay's evaluation could provide a more accurate picture of the position of women in Islam by examining verses of the Qur'an and hadiths related to women's rights in Islam. From a readership perspective, this book is useful for students and researchers who are studying on women and gender in Islam. The analysis of the roles of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet of Islam, in three aspects of successor, mother, and heir, gives the readers a clear picture of the position of women in the teachings of Islam.