

**PROPHET MUHAMMAD (PBUH) AND HIS FAMILY: SOME OBSERVATIONS
ABOUT THE PROPHET'S MARRIAGES**

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Abstract

This paper explores the family life of Prophet Muhammad (*peace be unto him* [pbuh]), concentrating on three main areas of historical scrutiny: his multiple marriages, his marriage to Aisha (*Raḍiya Allāhu anḥā* [ra]) at a young age, and his marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh (ra), the divorced wife of his adopted son Zayd (*Raḍiya Allāhu anhu* [ra]). Through a thorough analysis of historical sources and scholarly viewpoints, this study presents both critical arguments and academic defences concerning these facets of the Prophet's personal life. The analysis considers the socio-cultural context of 7th-century Arabia and examines these marriages within their historical framework rather than through modern moral standards. The research methodology utilises a comparative and historical-critical approach, drawing from classical Islamic biographical literature (*sira*), hadith collections, and contemporary scholarly works to offer a balanced view of these contentious topics. Each marriage is analysed within its specific historical circumstances, taking into account factors such as tribal alliances, social customs, economic conditions, and the needs of the emerging Muslim community. The study addresses common misconceptions and anachronistic interpretations, while recognising legitimate scholarly concerns. The paper explores the role of marriages in Arabian society, where polygamy was widespread and served diplomatic and social functions. It also considers Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) role as a religious leader and his personal decisions, and their implications for Islamic law and practice. Using this historical-critical approach, the study aims to foster a more nuanced understanding of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) family life, moving beyond polemics to engage with the complex realities of 7th-century Arabian society and early Islamic history.

Keywords: Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), Islamic history, polygamy, Arabian culture, historical criticism

Introduction

The personal life and marital practices of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) have been subjects of extensive scholarly examination, theological debate, and historical inquiry for over 1,400 years. As the seal of the messengers of Allah and a figure revered by over 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, Muhammad's (pbuh) domestic arrangements and family relationships have attracted both devotional study and critical analysis from diverse academic perspectives (Abraham, 2019; Shittu, 2019; Spellberg, 1994). The Prophet's marriages, in particular, have generated substantial discourse within Western orientalist studies and contemporary interfaith

dialogue, reflecting broader questions about religious authority, cultural practices, and historical interpretation.

The examination of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marital life covers multiple aspects, including theological, historical, anthropological, and sociological viewpoints. Islamic traditional sources, mainly the Quran, Hadith literature, and early biographical works such as Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, offer the foundational accounts that have shaped Muslim understanding of the Prophet's family life (Abraham, 2019; Barlas, 2002; Guillaume, 1955). However, these sources must be viewed with careful consideration of their historical context, transmission methods, and the cultural environment of seventh-century Arabian society (Donner, 1998; Shittu, 2019).

This analysis examines three primary areas of scholarly and popular contention regarding prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages: his practice of polygamy within the specific context of Arabian tribal society, his marriage to Aisha bint Abu Bakr (ra) and the associated questions of age and consent, and his marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh (ra) and its implications for Islamic law and social customs. Each of these topics reflects broader themes in Islamic studies, including the relationship between revelation and social practice, the role of prophetic example (*sunnah*) in Islamic jurisprudence, and the challenges of cross-cultural interpretation (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002; Shittu, 2019).

The scholarly approach to these questions has evolved significantly over time, moving from apologetic and polemical treatments toward more nuanced historical and anthropological analyses. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises the importance of understanding Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages within their original social, economic, and political contexts while acknowledging the ongoing significance of these narratives in modern Muslim communities (Barlas, 2002). This study seeks to present both critical perspectives and scholarly defences while maintaining historical objectivity and cultural contextualisation, drawing upon established academic sources to illuminate the complexity of these historical questions.

Background and Early Family Life

In one historical account, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), ibn Abdullah was born in Mecca around 570 CE into the noble Quraysh tribe, specifically the Bani Hashim clan. His lineage traces back to Prophet Abraham through Ishmael (Aleem, 2008). Orphaned at an early age, his father died before his birth and his mother died when he was approximately six years old. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was raised first by his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, and later by his uncle Abu Talib. Despite being an only child, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) grew up in an extended family environment that emphasised caring and sharing, values that would later become central to his message to humanity (Aleem, 2008; Shittu, 2019). This early exposure to family dynamics in a tribal society would significantly influence his understanding of social relationships and responsibilities.

In another storyline, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was the son of Abdullah, who was the son of Abdul-Muttalib (his father), who was the son of Hashim, whose ancestry traces back to the Prophet Ishmael, son of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), peace be upon them. His mother was known as Aminah bint Wahb. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was born in the city of Makkah, in Arabia, on a Friday, the 17th day of the lunar month of Rabi'-I, in the year 570CE, into a noble

family whose fathers and ancestors were amongst the chiefs of the Quraysh tribe, and the Bani-Hashim clan. He later became the propagator of Islam (Amari, 2018).

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was described by Islamic scholar Shamim Aleem (2008) as a man who attached great importance to the concept of family, despite being the only child of his parents and being deprived of the company of brothers and sisters. His father died before his birth, and he lived with his mother for hardly two to three years, followed by his stay at the extended family of his grandfather. Abdul Muttalib is said to have had more than ten sons and five daughters. After the death of his grandfather, he lived with his uncle Abu Talib, who also had ten children. In this extended family, he learnt caring and sharing, which was his message to humanity throughout his lifetime (Abraham, 2019; Shittu, 2019).

The Prophet's Character before Marriage

Historical accounts describe Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a person of exceptional character and integrity. According to Islamic tradition, he was known as "Al-Amin" (the trustworthy) even before his prophetic mission began (Esposito, 2020). The Qur'an really supports his exceptional and perfect character: "And indeed, you (Prophet Muhammad) are of a great moral character" (Qur'an 68:4). The Prophet (pbuh) emphasised moral excellence throughout his mission. Among the authentically reported statements is his saying: "The most beloved of you to me and the closest of you to me on the Day of Resurrection are those with the best character" (Sahih al-Bukhari 3559; Sahih Muslim 2321).

Abraham (2019) notes that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was considered "the greatest of all the Prophets, indeed Allah's universal messenger to all mankind, and an example of human conduct and behaviour without reproach." His universality is confirmed in the Holy Qur'an "And We have not sent you except to all of mankind as a bringer of glad tiding and a warner, but most people do not know" (Qur'an, 34:28), in his prophetic Hadith where he said "Every prophet used to be sent to his own people only, but I have been sent to all of mankind" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 335). The focus on Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) personal life, particularly his marriages, appears to have emerged as critics found it difficult to find fault with his religious message and therefore sought other grounds for criticism (Aleem, 2008).

According to Aleem (2008), "Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was adored and loved by thousands of people and was considered to be the most influential man in world history. It was difficult to find any flaw in his message; hence, his critics had to search for some other grounds for attack." They therefore focused their attention on his personal life, particularly his marriages.

Timothy Abraham, in his article: *Answering Islam*, said "Muhammad (pbuh) was the greatest of all the Prophets, indeed Allah's universal messenger to all mankind, and an example of human conduct and behaviour without reproach. He was sinless, though not without human failings, but irreproachable in his role as His choice representative on earth." Yet, the enemies of the Prophet overlooked his integrity and tried as hard as they could to cook trouble for him.

Some Observations about the Prophet's Marriages

His Multiple Marriages

One of the popular historical criticisms of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the West has been his polygynous marriages. According to American historian John Esposito (1998), the Semitic

cultures in general permitted polygamy (for example, the practice could be found in biblical and post-biblical Judaism); it was particularly a common practice among Arabs, especially among their nobles and leaders.

Some scholars, based on historical records, indicated that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) married between eleven and thirteen women during his lifetime. Muslims refer to them as *Mothers of the Believers* (Ummahat al-Mu'minin), a title derived from Quranic verse 33:6 (Ernst, 2019). Muslims use the term prominently before or after referring to them as a sign of respect. The term is derived from *Qur'an 33:6*. Below is the list of the wives of the Prophet in the order in which Aleem (2008, p. 99) arranged them:

1. **Khadija bint Khuwailid (ra):** At age 25, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) married his wealthy employer, the 40-year-old merchant Khadija, as his first wife. They had two sons, Qasim and Abd-Allah: both died young, and four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqaiya, Umm Kulthum and Fatimah. Shia scholars dispute the paternity of Khadija's daughters, as they view the first three of them as the daughters of previous marriages and only Fatimah as the only biological daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
2. **Sawda bint Zama (ra):** They got married when she was 50 years old, and the Prophet was 51 years of age.
3. **Aisha bint Abu Bakr (ra):** She was only 6 or 7 years old as the Prophet was 51 or 53 years of age. Aisha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, the Prophet's bosom friend.
4. **Hafsah bint Umar bin al-Khattab (ra):** She was 20 years old when the Prophet was 54.
5. **Zaynab bint Khuzayma (ra):** This woman was 30 years old when she got married to the Prophet, who at that time was 55 years old.
6. **Umm Salama bint Umayyah (also known as Hind bint Abi Umayya) (ra):** She was 29 as the Prophet was 56.
7. **Zaynab bint Jahsh (ra):** This woman got married to the Prophet at the age of 34 when the Prophet was 57. She was the divorced wife of Zayd (ra), the adopted son of the Prophet.
8. **Juwayriah bint Harith (ra):** She was 20 years old as the Prophet was 57 years old.
9. **Umm Habiba(ra):** She was 36 years old, and the Prophet was 57 years old.
10. **Safiyah bint Huyayy (ra):** Safiyyah was born in the tenth year before the Hijrah, making her forty-three years younger than the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him). She was first married to Salām ibn Mishkam ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but they later separated. She was then married to Kinānah ibn al-Rabī' ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq. When the Muslims conquered the fortresses of the al-Shaqq region in Khaybar, captives were taken, among whom was Ṣafīyyah bint Ḥuyayy ibn Akḥṭab. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him) took her, set her free, and gave her the choice between Islam and Judaism. She chose Islam, and her manumission was made her dowry, as an act of honour toward her family, in the hope that they might embrace Islam (al-Shakir, 2004).
11. **Maymunah bint al-Harith (ra):** Her age at the time of marriage is not known; however, the Prophet was 59 years old then.

Other Wives of the Prophet (Not Generally Accepted)

12. **Maria bint Sham'un (Maria al-Qibtiyya) (ra):** The Egyptian Coptic Christian (a slave) who was given to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) by Al-Mukawkas, the ruler of the

Coptics in Egypt. Maria al-Qibtiyyah embraced Islam on her way to Madina through the exhortation of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2024). She bore Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) son Ibrahim, who died before he was two years old.

13. Rayhana bint Zayd or Ramla bint Abi Sufyan (ra)

History has to be understood in the relevant perspective. To judge the past by the present-day norms leads one to incorrect conclusions. It is a fact that the Prophet had several wives. When he died, he left nine widows, while two had already died in his lifetime. Even among the Prophets of old, some had many wives. Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) (peace be unto him) had two official wives and one concubine according to the Qur'an and the Bible. Prophet Yaqub (Jacob) peace be unto him had four wives, Prophet Dawud (David) peace be unto him had numerous wives, and his son Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) peace be unto him had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (**1 Samuel 11: 3-4**). Even the Prophet's grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, had at least three wives; Abu Bakr and Umar (ra) had two or more wives.

In Arabian culture at that time, marriage was contracted in accordance with the larger needs of the tribe and was based on the need to form alliances within the tribe and with other tribes. Again, in ancient times, polygamy had become a necessity since frequent wars were resulting in a large number of widows and orphans. In the absence of any institutional arrangement, their responsibilities had to be shared by society. The Qur'an in Surah An-Nisa has indicated a preference for marrying widows to take care of the orphans.

Virginity at the time of marriage was emphasised as a tribal honour. Watt states that all of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages had a political aspect of strengthening friendly relationships and were based on Arabian custom. Esposito (1998) points out that some of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages aimed at providing a livelihood for widows. He noted that remarriage was difficult for widows in a society that emphasised virgin marriages. Peters (2003) says that it is hard to make generalisations about Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages: many of them were political, some compassionate, and some perhaps affairs of the heart. Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) first marriage lasted 25 years and was an affair of his heart and choice. According to Al-Sabuni (1996), "Muhammad, peace be upon him, married multiple wives on political, social, religious, economic and cultural reasons".

In the pre-Islamic society of Arabs, polygamy was the order of the day. Sexual relations were not always governed by the institution of marriage. It was in this background that Surah Nisa was revealed: *"If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice."* (**An-Nisa: 4:3, Yusuf Ali's translation**).

The above quotation leads to the question, why did the Prophet marry several wives? The answer to this question is partly found in the verse revealed by almighty Allah, partly in the socio-political conditions of the time. According to Islamic belief, the main objectives of

Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages can be divided into four (Shittu, 2019; Zafrulla, 1980), as listed below:

1. Helping out the widows of his companions.
2. Creating family bonds between him and his companions (Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) married the daughters of Abu Bakr and Umar (ra), whereas Uthman and Ali (ra) married his daughters. He therefore had family bonds with all the first four Caliphs).
3. Spreading the message by uniting different clans through marriage.
4. Increasing credibility and sources for conveying his private family life. If he only had one wife, then it would have been a tremendous responsibility on her to convey the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) private acts of worship and family life, and people would try to discredit her to destroy the credibility of these practices. However, with multiple wives, there were a lot more sources to the knowledge, making it more difficult to discredit. Therefore, his marriages gave more women the opportunity to learn and teach the matters of his private life.

Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) first marriage was at the age of 25 to the 40-year-old Khadijah (ra). He was married to one woman until the age of 50, after which he is believed to have had multiple wives for the four reasons explained above. Except for Aisha (ra), Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) only married widows, divorced women or captives (Brown, 2014).

The allegation from his critics that he was a lover of women and had overriding sexual desires appears to be baseless. Right from his youth, he was a different person and never indulged in sexual aberrations that normally attract a young person. If he were to have such desires, he would have married young and beautiful girls and not a 40-year-old woman.

Again, some of his critics alleged that he married Khadijah (ra) so he could have access to her wealth. This line of argument appears to be bogus; the Prophet did not marry Khadijah (ra) because of her wealth. It was rather Khadijah (ra) who proposed to him because of his good character and integrity. Further, the wealth of Khadijah was used to spread the newfound faith of monotheism (Islam). Khadijah bint Khuwaylid (ra) admired Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) for his exceptional honesty and noble character. Owing to social conventions, she did not propose directly but sent her friend Nafisah bint Munyah to convey her interest. After initial hesitation, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) consulted his guardian Abū Tālib, who granted permission and conducted the marriage arrangements. According to Shamim Aleem, when the effort of his opponents who tried to stop him from preaching Islam failed, they tempted him with wealth and beauty (Aleem, 2008). They offered him the most beautiful Arabian woman. Had he any sexual desire, as pointed out, he would have accepted this offer.

Another argument also arises from the fact that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) married so many wives in such a short span of time. In the first place, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers had to fight many wars in close succession, and some of his marriages were strategic to end all enmity and ill will between the two parties. Prophet Sulayman (King Solomon) (peace be unto him) in the Bible also married so many women, such as the daughter of the King of Egypt, to create a matrimonial alliance between them (**1 Kings 11:1ff**). Among the Arabians

and the people of the Near East, so much premium was placed on matrimonial alliance. Even so, the eleven wives of the Prophet belonged to eleven different tribes.

Another argument in support of the numerous marriages of the Prophet is the fact that God planned everything. His steps were therefore ordered by God, like an Old Testament prophet of the Bible by name Hosea, who was asked by God to marry a harlot just to use his marriage to convey a message to the people of Israel: “*The beginning of the word of the LORD by Hosea. And the LORD said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the LORD*” (**Hosea 1:2 KJV**). Though this was against the normal standard of the Mosaic Law, Prophet Hosea obeyed God. Similarly, the Qur’an clearly indicates that the hand of Allah was in the marriages of Muhammad (pbuh):

O Prophet, indeed We have made lawful to you your wives to whom you have given their due compensation and those your right hand possesses from what Allah has returned to you [of captives] and the daughters of your paternal uncles and the daughters of your paternal aunts and the daughters of your maternal uncles and the daughters of your maternal aunts who emigrated with you and a believing woman if she gives herself to the Prophet [and] if the Prophet wishes to marry her, [this is] only for you, excluding the [other] believers. We certainly know what We have made obligatory upon them concerning their wives and those their right hands possess, [but this is for you] in order that there will be upon you no discomfort. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.” (Surah Al-Ahzab: 33:50-52).

From the above facts mentioned, it is very obvious that the multiple marriages of the Prophet were not by choice or stemmed from evil motives, as some people may be tempted to think. His marriages were planned by Allah so that His message reached different segments of society.

His Marriage with Aisha (ra) at Six or Seven Years

Critics have also pointed to the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha (ra), who was only six or seven years old at the time of her marriage, as the Prophet was as much as fifty-one or fifty-three years old. At the time she came to live with the Prophet, she was barely nine or ten years old. Among these critics were: a Baptist Pastor in the **United States**, who cited the age of Aisha to denounce Prophet Muhammad for having had sex with a nine-year-old, referring to Prophet Muhammad as a paedophile. Knight (2025) seemed to disagree with the views of Pandit Chamupati (1927), in his book *Rangila Rasul (meaning Promiscuous Prophet)*. Chamupati indicated in this book that Aisha was about the same age as Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter, and a better way for Prophet Muhammad to make Abu Bakr (Aisha’s father) a relative would have been to adopt Aisha as his own daughter and marry her off. Knight (2025) further posited that “the controversy surrounding her age is a manufactured one.”

The renowned American historian Denise Spellberg, in his book *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders*, states that “these specific references to the bride’s age reinforce Aisha’s pre-menarcheal status and, implicitly, her virginity” (Spellberg, 2014). Muslim authors, who calculated Aisha’s age based on more detailed information available about her sister Asma,

estimated that she was over thirteen and perhaps between seventeen and nineteen years at the time of her marriage.

Colin Turner, a United Kingdom professor of Islamic studies, states that since such marriages between an older man and a young girl were customary among the Bedouins, Prophet Muhammad's marriage would not have been considered improper by his contemporaries (Turner, 2006). Shamim Aleem can also be quoted for saying that, "Abdul Muttalib married a young girl at the age of seventy. Abu Bakr and Umar both had asked for the hand of Fatima, the youngest daughter of the Prophet, even though both of them were married and were much older than her." Karen Armstrong, the British author on comparative religion, has affirmed that, "There was no impropriety in Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Aisha. Marriages conducted in absentia to seal an alliance were often contracted at this time between adults and minors who were even younger than Aisha. This practice continued in Europe well into the early modern period" (Armstrong, 2018; Brown, 2014).

In contrast, there were situations where men were married to women who were far older than they were. A typical example is the Prophet's marriage to Khadijah (ra), who was fifteen years older than him. Zayd also got married to Umm Ayman, who was at least twenty years older than him. This shows that in matrimonial alliance, some other factors were considered than age.

Lastly, another strong reason for Aisha's (ra) marriage to the Prophet was the two dreams he had about her. An angel of Allah came to him and brought Aisha (ra) wrapped in a silken cloth, and told him that this was his wife. However, the Prophet did not reveal this to anybody before his marriage.

His Marriage with Zaynab Jahsh (ra): Wife of His Adopted Son

Western criticism has focused especially on the marriage of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to Zaynab bint Jahsh (ra), the divorced wife of Zayd ibn Harithah (ra), an ex-slave whom Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had adopted as his son. The polytheists, the hypocrites and the Jews who were filled with jealousy against the Prophet had a good ground for criticism, as Zaynab (ra) was the fifth living wife of the Prophet, whereas God had permitted not more than four living wives (*Surah 4:3*).

According to Barlas (2019), Bodley (1946) and Ghamidi Center of Islamic Learning (2020), Prophet Muhammad (saw) married Sayyidah Zainab in the fifth year after the Hijrah, when she was thirty-six years old. This marriage between Sayyidah Zainab bint Jahsh and Prophet Muhammad (saw) was a matter that aroused a great deal of discussion among the enemies of Islam. Despite the repeated warnings from Prophet Muhammad (*Sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam* [saw]), Zayd bin Harithah divorced his wife without informing the Prophet (saw). Prophet Muhammad (saw) learned about this situation via a revelation, in which he was also ordered to marry Sayyidah Zainab bint Jahsh when her period of *iddet* or *iddah* was finished. Thus, this marriage was to be performed without a witness, guardian or dowry, as clearly proclaimed in the Qur'ān. Prophet Muhammad (saw) thought to keep this revelation, which had been sent to him, secret for a while, worried about the slander of the unbelievers. However, a second revelation not only made his marriage mandatory, but also completely abolished the practice of adoption in a cautionary verse:

Behold! Thou didst say to one who had received the grace of Allah and thy favour: "Retain thou (in wedlock) thy wife, and fear Allah." But thou didst hide in thy heart that which Allah was about to make manifest: thou didst fear the people, but it is more fitting that thou shouldst fear Allah. Then when Zayd had dissolved (his marriage) with her, with the necessary (formality), We joined her in marriage to thee: in order that (in future) there may be no difficulty to the Believers in (the matter of) marriage with the wives of their adopted sons, when the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality) (their marriage) with them. And Allah's command must be fulfilled. (al-Ahzab, 33:37).

As can be seen, this verse clearly states three matters: Firstly, Prophet Muhammad's (saw) insistence that Zayd continue his marriage with Zainab. Secondly, Prophet Muhammad (saw), even though Allah Almighty had informed him that he was to marry Sayyidah Zainab bint Jahsh, was worried about how people would react to this due to the matter of "adoption customs" and for this reason was "warned" not to delay any further. Finally, after Zayd had separated from the wife of his own free will, the intention of Prophet Muhammad (saw) to marry Sayyidah Zainab was not forbidden; that is, the wives of adopted sons are not mahram, while the wives of biological sons are.

An important detail of this verse is that Zayd bin Harithah (ra) is the only one of the Companions named in the Qur'ân. Due to this divine order, Prophet Muhammad (saw) offered marriage to Sayyidah Zainab bintu Jahsh. The fact that this marriage took place upon Allah's order and was commanded in a revelation that would be recited until the Day of Judgment caused Sayyidah Zainab to say: "*My marriage was performed by Allah Almighty*" and she thanked Allah for this blessing.

The First Reactions to this Marriage

When Prophet Muhammad (saw) married Sayyidah Zainab (ra) the gossip and slander began immediately. Things went so far that people were saying: "Muhammad, even though he knows that the wife of his son is forbidden for the father to marry, has married the wife of his own son." The answer to this is given in the Qur'ân: "*Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah (saw), and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things.*" (Surah al-Ahzâb, 33:40).

The strength of these first reactions indicates that Prophet Muhammad (saw) was correct in wanting to keep secret the revelation of this event. However, Allah Almighty provided Islam as a whole, and as He desired it to be without fault and complete in itself, He was not pleased when our beloved Prophet kept this matter secret, even though it was only for a short time. This is one of the most important pieces of evidence that the Qur'ân we hold in our hands today is still as it was revealed by Allah: if Prophet Muhammad (saw), a human being, had been able to change or interfere with the Qur'ân, then without a doubt he would have changed this particular verse and other cautionary ones that were revealed concerning him. Certainly, Allah Almighty has protected the Qur'ân from human hands. In fact, the Qur'ân says about this:

This is a Message sent down from the Lord of the Worlds. And if the messenger were to invent any sayings in Our name, We should certainly seize him by his right hand, and We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart: Nor could any of you withhold him (from Our wrath). But verily this is a Message for the Allah fearing." (Surah al-Haqqa, 69:43-48).

On the other hand, the matter that Prophet Muhammad (saw) kept secret was not a revelation that was to be declared to the people: it was only an inspiration about what would happen in the future; however, the dimension of the event caused Prophet Muhammad (saw) to hesitate about whether to immediately make an explanation about this matter or not. If this had been an inspiration that he had been ordered to declare to the people, Prophet Muhammad (saw) would not have hesitated, he would have had no doubts, and he would not have felt the need to keep it secret, whether the matter was in his favour or not.

In fact, Sayyidah Â'ishah (rah) speaks of the difficulties that Prophet Muhammad (saw) found himself in because of these events as follows: "If Allah's Prophet (saw) had hidden something from the revelation that came to him, it would have been the verse concerned with this marriage." (Bukhari, tawhid, 22. Muslim, Iman, 288. Ahmad, bin Hanbal,2/5). In conclusion, all of these events were desired by Allah Almighty, and thus the matter of adoption was abrogated by the hand of Prophet Muhammad (saw).

The orientalist and other enemies of Islam claimed that Prophet Muhammad (saw) had once seen Sayyidah Zainab bint Jahsh in the corner of a window or door and had fallen in love with her, thus wanting to marry her. However, this claim was totally groundless and untrue. Sayyidah Zainab was Prophet Muhammad's (saw) cousin. They had had many opportunities over the years to see one another and become acquainted. On the other hand, the verses about hijab were not revealed until after both Sayyidah Zainab's wedding to Zayd and her marriage to the Prophet (saw). Thus, Prophet Muhammad (saw) would have seen her many times without hijab.

In addition, if Prophet Muhammad (saw) had proposed marriage to Sayyidah Zainab before her marriage to Zayd, she would hardly have refused him. In fact, it is because both Sayyidah Zainab and her family were expecting such a proposal that Zayd dragged their feet.

Another matter is that if Allah's Prophet (saw) had wanted to marry Sayyidah Zainab rather than marry her to someone else, he could have married her while she was still a virgin. Prophet Muhammad (saw) was insistent that Zayd and Zainab's marriage continue, and he encouraged Zayd (ra), who had come to his house to complain about his wife, to work on the marriage. If he had intended to marry Sayyidah Zainab (ra), then why did he marry her to someone else, and why did he encourage them to stay married? For this and many similar reasons, it is indicated that the marriage between Prophet Muhammad (saw) and Sayyidah Zainab was not the result of human effort, but rather that of a divine order and direction. Allah Almighty gradually revealed the truths that were necessary for us to realise what is right and necessary for humanity. Although the realisation of these rights and truths sometimes caused Prophet Muhammad (saw) to have difficulties with them, Allah Almighty created many blessings and wisdom in this. Allah Almighty never refrains from announcing these truths and educating people about them using a number of means.

Historical Context and Justification

To understand Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages, one must consider the socio-political context of 7th-century Arabian society. Polygamy was not only accepted but was a common

practice, particularly among tribal leaders and nobles (Esposito, 2020). The practice served multiple functions in pre-Islamic Arabian society, including political alliances, economic security, and social welfare. Islamic scholars identify four primary objectives for the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages:

1. Social welfare: Providing support for the widows of his companions.
2. Political alliances: Creating family bonds with key tribal leaders.
3. Religious propagation: Uniting different clans through marriage.
4. Historical preservation: Ensuring multiple witnesses to his private life and religious practices.

Significantly, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) remained monogamously married to Khadijah for 25 years until her death, during which time he was at his physical prime (Brown, 2017). His multiple marriages occurred later in life, primarily after age 50, supporting the argument that these unions served purposes beyond personal desire.

Marriage to Aisha

The marriage of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to Aisha bint Abu Bakr (ra) has been particularly controversial due to her young age at the time of marriage (6-7 years) and consummation (9-10 years). This has led to accusations of pedophilia from some critics, notably Baptist Pastor Jerry Vines (Geissinger, 2011).

Scholarly Responses and Context

Several scholars have addressed this criticism through historical contextualization:

Age Calculation Disputes: Some Muslim scholars, using biographical information about Aisha's sister Asma, have calculated that Aisha (ra) may have been between 13 and 19 years old at the time of marriage, challenging the traditional age accounts (Barlas, 2019).

Cultural Context: Turner (2020) argues that such marriages between older men and young women were customary among Bedouins and would not have been considered improper by Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) contemporaries. Armstrong (2018) notes that "marriages conducted in absentia to seal an alliance were often contracted at this time between adults and minors who were even younger than Aisha."

Historical Precedent: The practice of early marriage was common throughout the ancient world and continued in Europe well into the early modern period (Spellberg, 2021). Within the same cultural context, Abdul Muttalib (Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) grandfather) married a young girl at age 70, and Abu Bakr and Umar (ra) had requested the hand of Fatima (ra), Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) daughter, despite their advanced ages (Aleem, 2008; Aleem, 2007).

Marriage to Zaynab bint Jahsh (ra)

The marriage of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to Zaynab bint Jahsh, the divorced wife of his adopted son Zayd ibn Harithah (ra), has been particularly criticised as violating social norms and being self-serving.

Background and Context

Zaynab (ra) was Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) cousin who had initially been reluctant to marry Zayd (ra), a former slave whom Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had adopted. According to historical accounts, the marriage was troubled from the beginning, with Zaynab (ra) reportedly working toward a marriage with Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) instead (Watt, 1974). Some traditional accounts suggest that the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) attraction to Zaynab (ra) occurred when he saw her unexpectedly at her home while looking for Zayd (ra) (Ashraf, 2025). However, Watt (1974) questions the reliability of this account, noting that it should be taken with "a grain of salt" and may have been altered in transmission.

Quranic Justification

The Quran specifically addresses this marriage in Surah Al-Ahzab (33:37), stating that the union was divinely ordained to abolish the pre-Islamic practice of considering adopted sons as biological sons for purposes of marriage restrictions. This marriage thus served to reform existing social practices.

Scholarly Analysis

Siddiqi (2018) argues that if Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had been attracted to Zaynab's physical beauty, he would have married her initially rather than insisting she marry Zayd (ra). The marriage, occurring when Zaynab (ra) was 35-38 years old, was likely motivated by divine command rather than personal desire.

Contemporary Scholarly Perspectives

Modern scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of historical contextualization when analysing the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages. Peters (2019) notes that "it is hard to make generalisations about Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marriages: many of them were political, some compassionate, and some perhaps affairs of the heart." This nuanced approach reflects a growing recognition among scholars that reducing these unions to simple categories fails to capture their complexity within 7th-century Arabian society.

Contemporary Islamic studies scholars have moved away from apologetic or purely theological interpretations toward more historically grounded analyses. Ahmed (2020) argues that understanding Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) marital practices requires examining the socio-political landscape of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia, where marriage served as a crucial mechanism for alliance-building, tribal diplomacy, and social cohesion. Similarly, Ahmad (1979) and Al-Shakir (2004) emphasise that several marriages functioned as acts of social welfare, providing protection and support to widows and orphans in a society lacking formal social safety nets.

The trend toward monogamy in contemporary Muslim societies should not be interpreted as a rejection of the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) example but rather as an adaptation to different social and economic conditions (Andrae, 1936; Aslan, 2005; Brown, 2017). The Prophet's practice of monogamy for 25 years, during his physical prime, suggests that monogamy was his personal preference when not constrained by social and political necessities.

Conclusion

The marriages of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) must be understood within their proper historical and cultural context rather than judged by contemporary standards. The evidence suggests that these unions served multiple purposes: providing social welfare, creating political alliances, preserving religious knowledge, and reforming existing social practices. As strongly pointed out by Khan Zafrulla, in his book, *Muhammad: Seal of the Prophets*, that “All the Prophets of the Old Testament, married more wives than one, which is proof that polygamy is not inconsistent with the highest standard of spirituality” (Zafrulla, 1980, p. 61).

Although monogamy has become the norm in many Muslim societies today, this trend is not to the credit of Islam without making any reference to what the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as a person stood for during the first twenty-five years of his marital life. Until he became fifty years of age, he practised pure and decent monogamy.

While critics have raised legitimate questions about these marriages, scholarly analysis indicates that they were consistent with the social norms of 7th-century Arabia and served important functions beyond personal gratification. The Prophet’s practice of monogamy for the first 25 years of his married life, combined with the strategic and compassionate nature of his later marriages, supports the conclusion that these unions were motivated by religious, social, and political considerations rather than purely personal desires.

The true followers of the Prophet today and those who objectively seek after the truth cannot blame him for taking to himself more than double the number of wives he allowed his followers to take. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) seemed to be a champion of monogamy rather than an advocate of polygamy. His tolerance of plural marriages, together with his strategic plan backed by divine convictions to get rid of his personal enemies, and his readiness to take care of widows and orphans, made him a true and obedient Prophet of Allah.

Finally, a modern-day assessment of his character without making reference to the Arabian and Near East culture of that time, as well as the divine instructions he received, would be a hasty conclusion of what he stood for as an individual and as a Prophet of Allah. As Zafrulla Khan concludes, all the Prophets of the Old Testament married more than one wife, which is proof that polygamy is not inconsistent with the highest standard of spirituality (Shittu, 2019). A fair assessment of Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) character and marriages requires consideration of the Arabian cultural context, divine religious instructions, and the social necessities of his time.

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