

## ‘Ā’isha’s Age at the Time of Her Marriage

by GF Haddad – Shawwāl 1426 / November 2005

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Our Mother ‘Ā’isha was between four and five years old the year both Abū Tālib and Khadīja died – three years before the Hijra – and the Prophet ﷺ remarried both with her and with Sawda between one and two years later, when she was six, cohabiting with her when she was nine as explicitly reported from her in the books of *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Sunan*, and *Musnads*.

Al-Bukhārī narrates from ‘Ā’isha in two places of his *Ṣaḥīḥ* – the book of *Tafsīr* and the one directly after it titled *Faḍā’il al-Qur’ān* – that verse 46 of Sūrat al-Qamar, **﴿Nay, but the Hour (of doom) is their appointed tryst, and the Hour will be more wretched and more bitter (than their earthly failure)﴾** (54:46), “descended upon Muḥammad ﷺ in Makka when I was still a mere little girl playing” (*wa’innī lajāriyatun al’abu*). Since the hadīth Masters, *Sīra* historians, and Qur’anic commentators agree that the splitting of the moon took place about five years before the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ Hijra to Madīna, it is confirmed that she was born between seven and eight years before the Hijra and the words that she was a *jāriya* five years before the Hijra match the fact that her age at the time Sūrat al-Qamar was revealed was around 2.<sup>1</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ recounted to ‘Ā’isha how he was first inspired to ask her in marriage:

You were shown to me in dream for three nights. The angel brought you wrapped in a silk cloth, saying, ‘This is your wife.’ I would lift the veil from your face and there you were! I would say, ‘If this [sign] is from Allāh then He shall make it take place.’<sup>2</sup>

### More Wisdoms to the Prophet’s ﷺ Marriage with ‘Ā’isha

The marriage of our Mother ‘Ā’isha with the Holy Prophet ﷺ at an early age, together with her exceptional intelligence, allowed her to be an eyewitness to the personal details of his life and carry them on to the succeeding generations with precision, clarity, detail, abundance, and acumen generally unsurpassed by anyone who ever related from a Prophet in the history of mankind. Imām Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī said: “If the knowledge of ‘Ā’isha were added to the knowledge of all women, the knowledge of ‘Ā’isha would still be better.”<sup>3</sup> No doubt, this everlasting benefit is the greatest wisdom to be deduced from this marriage.

A second, timely wisdom, is that just as the Prophet ﷺ, with his later marriage with Zaynab following her divorce from Zayd, abolished the pre-Islamic Arabian notion that a man could not marry the former wife of an adoptive son, similarly, he abolished once and for all the notion that a man could not marry the daughter of a man one had formally declared to be his brother. The Prophet ﷺ asked Abū Bakr for ‘Ā’isha’s hand in marriage. Abū Bakr said, “But I am your brother.” The Prophet ﷺ said: “You are my brother in the Religion of Allāh and His Book, but she is lawful for me to marry.”<sup>4</sup>

A third, timely wisdom is that the marriage did away with the pagan superstition that it was a bad omen to marry in the month of Shawwāl, but the Prophet ﷺ and ‘Ā’isha were married in Shawwāl and they began to cohabit in Shawwāl of the second year after the Hijra.<sup>5</sup>

### Various Misconceptions over Her Youthful Marriage

There is no dispute that ‘Ā’isha had reached puberty at the time of the consummation of her marriage. However, a claim was made by Maulana Muḥammad ‘Alī that she was a teenager at the time:

A great misconception prevails as to the age at which ‘Ā’isha was taken in marriage by the Prophet ﷺ. Ibn Sa’d has stated in the *Ṭabaqāt* that when Abū Bakr was approached on behalf of the Holy Prophet ﷺ, he replied that the girl had already been betrothed to Jubayr [ibn Muṭ’im ibn ‘Adī ibn Nawfal ibn ‘Abd Manāf], and that he would have to settle the matter first with him [actually with his father Muṭ’im]. This shows that ‘Ā’isha must have been approaching majority at the time [*sic*]. Again, the *Iṣāba*, speaking on the Prophet’s ﷺ daughter Fāṭima, says that she was born five years before the Call and was about five years older than ‘Ā’isha. This shows that

<sup>1</sup>The definition of *jāriya* in the *Qāmūs* is *fatiyyatu al-nisā’* i.e. “the little female girl.” This appellation applies to girls from birth to pre-pubescence.

<sup>2</sup>Narrated from ‘Ā’isha by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and Aḥmad, and by al-Tirmidhī and Aḥmad through a different chain.

<sup>3</sup>Narrated by al-Hākim (4:11).

<sup>4</sup>Narrated from ‘Urwa by al-Bukhārī.

<sup>5</sup>Narrated from ‘Ā’isha by Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā’ī, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad, and al-Dārimī.

‘Ā’isha must have been about ten years at the time of her betrothal to the prophet, and not six years as she is generally supposed to be. This is further borne out by the fact that ‘Ā’isha herself is reported to have stated that when the chapter entitled “The Moon” (54<sup>th</sup> chapter) was revealed, she was a girl playing about and remembered certain verses then revealed. Now the 54<sup>th</sup> chapter was undoubtedly revealed before the sixth year of the Call. All these considerations point to but one conclusion, viz., that ‘Ā’isha could not have been less than ten years of age at the time of her *nikāh*, which was virtually only a betrothal. And there is one report in the *Ṭabaqāt* that ‘Ā’isha was nine years of age at the time of *nikāh*. Again it is a fact admitted on all hands that the *nikāh* of ‘Ā’isha took place in the tenth year of the Call in the month of Shawwāl, while there is also preponderance of evidence as to the consummation of her marriage taking place in the second year of Hijra in the same month, which shows that full five years had elapsed between the *nikāh* and the consummation. Hence there is not the least doubt that ‘Ā’isha was at least nine or ten years of age at the time of betrothal, and 14 or 15 years at the time of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

The above conclusion is flawed due to the following facts:

- Ibn Sa’d’s report about the betrothal to Jubayr ibn Muṭ‘im has an extremely weak chain through Abū al-Mundhir Hishām ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Sā’ib, from his father Abū al-Naḍr al-Kūfī, from Abū Ṣāliḥ, from Ibn ‘Abbās. Hishām and his father are both “discarded” (*matrūk*) and considered liars while the latter actually admitted to Sufyān al-Thawrī, “All I have narrated to you from Abū Ṣāliḥ is a lie.”<sup>7</sup>
- The reasoning that a betrothal to Jubayr would suggest anything about age is also faulty and shows ignorance of the fact that betrothal could take place from the cradle or even before birth. Further, the word “majority” is probably being used in an unislamic sense by Maulana Muḥammad ‘Alī.
- The *Iṣṣāba* does not cite only one, but two possible dates for the birth of Fāṭima al-Zahrā’ رضي الله عنها: (i) The year the Ka‘ba was rebuilt, five years before Prophethood, when the Prophet ﷺ was 35. This is reported by al-Wāqidi alone who is, moreover, very weak or discarded as a ḥadīth narrator. (ii) The forty-first year of the Prophet ﷺ. This is reported by al-Hākim in *al-Mustadrak* through two chains (1990 ed. 3:176 and 3:178), Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr in *al-Istī‘āb* (4:1893), and al-Mizzī in *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl* (53:248). Both dates are cited in the *Iṣṣāba* (1992 ed. 8:54) which adds that Fāṭima was five years older than ‘Ā’isha. By the first date, therefore, the age of ‘Ā’isha the year the marriage was consummated (2H) would be 15; by the second date, 9 – the age confirmed by the totality of the reports in the *Ṣaḥīḥs* and *Sunan*.
- The *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Sa’d explicitly state (8:217) that ‘Ā’isha was six years of age at the time of *nikāh* and nine at the time of consummation.
- As for Sūra 54 being “undoubtedly revealed before the sixth year of the Call” and the claimed “fact admitted on all hands that the *nikāh* of ‘Ā’isha took place in the tenth year of the Call,” these are statements without basis.

Another, yet weaker claim was made that ‘Ā’isha “was not 9 but 19 at the time of her marriage” and that “the wrong age” was the “result of an error perpetuated by copying a mistake committed by Ibn Sa’d”! However, the precise age of nine at the time of consummation is reported with at least seventeen different chains in the Six Books, nine of them in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, plus three more chains in the *Musnad* of Imām Aḥmad and one more in al-Dārimī’s *Musnad*, all excluding Ibn Sa’d. The onset of menarche often took place at eight or nine in the Arabian peninsula at the time. Al-Shāfi‘ī said: “I saw in Yemen many nine-year old girls who had menses” (*ra’aytu bil-yaman banātī tis ‘in yaḥidna kathīran*).<sup>8</sup> Al-Tirmidhī said in the “Book of the *Nikāh* of the Prophet ﷺ” in his *Sunan*:

Aḥmad and Ishāq [ibn Rāhūyah] said: “When the orphan reaches nine years of age and is then married upon her approval, the marriage is permissible.” ‘Ā’isha said: “When the girl reaches nine years of age she is a woman.”

The weakest claim of all is probably the attempt to suggest weakness in the narration of Hishām ibn ‘Urwa in the following terms: “Most of the ḥadīths about a young age for ‘Ā’isha at her marriage were transmitted by Hishām ibn ‘Urwa on the authority of his father. All of those who narrated these ḥadīths from Hishām are Iraqis. This is

<sup>6</sup>Maulana Muhammad ‘Alī, *The Living Thoughts of the Prophet Muḥammad* (p. 30, note 40, “A Brief Sketch of the Prophet’s Life”) cf. another Subcontinent rehash: <http://www.pakistanlink.com/religion/97/re11-21-97.html>.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. al-Dhahabī’s *Mizān* and Ibn al-Jawzī’s *al-Du‘afā’ wal-Matrūkīn*.

<sup>8</sup>Cited by al-Dhahabī in his chapter on al-Shāfi‘ī in *Syar A‘lām al-Nubalā’* (Fikr ed. 8:418). “Those who live in cold regions attain puberty at a much later age as compared with those living in hot regions where both male and female attain it at a quite early age. ‘The average temperature of the country or province,’ say the well-known authors of the book *Woman* [Herman H. Ploss, Max Bartels and Paul Bartels], ‘is considered the chief factor here, not only with regard to menstruation but as regards the whole of sexual development at puberty.’ (*Woman*, Volume I, Lord & Bransby, 1988, page 563.) Raciborski, Jaubert, Routh and many others have collected and collated statistics on the subject to which readers are referred. Marie Espino has summarised some of these data as follows: (a) The limit of age for the first appearance of menstruation is between nine and twenty-four in the temperate-zone; (b) The average age varies widely and it may be accepted as established that the nearer the Equator, the earlier the average age for menstruation.” <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Polemics/aishah.html>.

important because there are reports in *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* to the effect that Hishām's reports are reliable except when narrated by Iraqis [!]. There is a report from Ya'qūb ibn Shayba to that effect, and one from Mālik ibn Anas." The reply is that none among the ḥadīth Masters endorsed these reservations, since they were based solely on the fact that Hishām in his last period (he was 71 at the time of his last trip to Iraq), for the sake of brevity, would say "My father, from 'Ā'isha" (*abī 'an 'Ā'isha*) and no longer pronounced, "narrated to me" (*ḥaddathani*). Hence Ibn Ḥajar rejects the objections as negligible in *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* (11:45), saying: "It was clear enough to the Iraqis that he did not narrate from his father other than what he had heard directly from him." In *Taqrīb al-Tahdhīb* (#7302), he states of Hishām, "*thiqa rubbamā dallasa* – trustworthy, may have occasionally left his narrator unnamed" but Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and 'Awwād Ma'rūf said in their *Tahrīr Taqrīb al-Tahdhīb* (4:41), a thorough review of Ibn Ḥajar's findings in *al-Taqrīb*:

It seems the words *rubbamā dallasa* are based on the sayings of Ya'qūb ibn Shayba and Mālik, although his [Hishām's] narration from his father is retained in the fundamental manuals of Islam, among them the two *Ṣaḥīḥs*, so this [criticism] is negligible.

Another ignorant claim states that this report comes from Hishām ibn 'Urwa only through the Iraqis and not through the Madinans. In reality, al-Zuhrī also reports it from 'Urwa, from 'Ā'isha; so does 'Abd Allāh ibn Dhakwān – both major Madanīs. So is the *Tābi* 'Yahyā al-Lakhmī who reports it from her in the *Musnad* and in Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqāt*. So is Abū Ishāq Sa'd ibn Ibrāhīm who reports it from Imām al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad – one of the Seven Imāms of Madina! – from 'Ā'isha. Also, Sufyān ibn 'Uyayna – from Khurāsān – and 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn Yahyā – from Ṭabarayya in Palestine – both report it from Hishām, from 'Urwa. Nor was this ḥadīth reported only by 'Urwa but also by 'Abd al-Malik ibn 'Umayr, al-Aswad, Ibn Abī Mulaikha, Abū Salama ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Awf, Yahyā ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Ḥātib, Abū 'Ubayda ('Āmir ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd) and others of the *Tābi* Imāms directly from 'Ā'isha. **This makes the report mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*) from 'Ā'isha by over eleven authorities among the *Tābi*'in, not counting the other major companions that reported the same, such as Ibn Mas'ūd nor other major Successors that reported it from other than 'Ā'isha, such as Qatāda!**

'Abd al-Rahmān Squires wrote:

Part of the wisdom behind the Prophet's ﷺ marriage to 'Ā'isha just after she reached puberty is to firmly establish this as a point of Islamic Law, even though it was already cultural norm in all Semitic societies (including the one Jesus ﷺ grew up in). The large majority of Islamic jurists say that the earliest time a marriage can be consummated is on the onset of sexual maturity (*bulūgh*), meaning puberty.<sup>9</sup> Since this was the norm of all Semitic cultures and it still is the norm of many cultures today: it is certainly not something that Islam invented. However, widespread opposition to such a Divinely revealed and accepted historical norm is certainly something that is relatively new.

The criticism of [the Prophet] Muḥammad's ﷺ marriage to 'Ā'isha is something relatively new in that it grew up out of the values of "Post-Enlightenment" Europe. This was a Europe that had abandoned (or at least modified) its religious morality for a new set of humanist values where people used their own opinions to determine what was right and wrong. It is interesting to note that Christians from a very early time criticized (again hypocritically) the Prophet's ﷺ practice of polygamy, but not the marriage to 'Ā'isha. Certainly, those from a Middle Eastern Semitic background would not have found anything to criticize, since nothing abnormal or immoral took place. It is "modern" Westernized Christians who began to criticize [the Prophet] Muḥammad ﷺ on this point, not earlier pre-Enlightenment ones.

It is upon reaching the age of puberty that a person, man or woman, becomes legally responsible under Islamic Law. At this point, they are allowed to make their own decisions and are held accountable for their actions. It should also be mentioned that in Islam, it is unlawful to force someone to marry someone that they do not want to marry. The evidence shows that 'Ā'isha's marriage to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ was one which both parties and their families agreed upon. Based on the culture at that time, no one saw anything wrong with it. On the contrary, they were all happy about it.

None of the Muslim sources report that anyone from the society at that time criticized this marriage due to 'Ā'isha's young age. On the contrary, the marriage of 'Ā'isha to the Prophet ﷺ was encouraged by 'Ā'isha's father, Abū Bakr, and was welcomed by the community at large. It is reported that women who wanted to help the Prophet ﷺ, such as Khawla bint [Ḥakīm], encouraged him to marry the young 'Ā'isha. Due to the Semitic culture in which they lived, they certainly saw nothing wrong with such a marriage.<sup>10</sup>

An American "women's 19<sup>th</sup>-century history" website states the following under the heading *The Campaign to Raise the Age of Consent, 1885-1914*:

<sup>9</sup>Actually, there is the additional pre-condition, before initiating cohabitation, that both spouses must be physically fit for coitus.

<sup>10</sup>See the URL cited in the next-to-previous note and also <http://www.muslim-answers.org/aishah.htm>

In the late nineteenth century, “Age of consent” referred to the legal age at which a girl could consent to sexual relations. Men who engaged in sexual relations with girls who had not reached the age of consent could be criminally prosecuted. American reformers were shocked to discover that the laws of most states set the age of consent at the age of ten or twelve, and in one state, Delaware, the age of consent was only seven. Women reformers and advocates of social purity initiated a campaign in 1885 to petition legislators to raise the legal age of consent to at least sixteen, although their ultimate goal was to raise the age to eighteen. The campaign was eventually quite successful; by 1920, almost all states had raised the age of consent to sixteen or eighteen.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup><http://womhist.binghamton.edu/teacher/aoc.htm>.