

Muhammad and his wives

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When Islam is the subject, the topic „Women in Islam“ is also frequently discussed. This is not merely the result of controversial books on Islam (like Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*) or of the problems associated with a “parallel society”, or of the visible external differences between Muslim and non-Muslim women. The reports from human rights organizations on the situation of women in Islamic countries and the autobiographical accounts of Muslim women also fuel the debate about the acculturation of Muslim women in Western culture, under the rubric of “Women’s Rights in Islam“, for example.

Women played a fundamental role in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and this since his early childhood. The sources say that, as a newborn baby, he was nursed and cared for by the slave woman Zu’aiba and then by the nurse Halima. Afterwards, he was taken over by his mother Amina who, however, died when he was six years old. At the age of about 25 (ca. 595 A.D.), he married the wealthy, nearly 40 year-old Khadidja, through whom he acquired affluence and esteem in his tribe. Up to Khadidja’s death (ca. 619 A.D.), he entered into no other union. After her death, he married a large number of other women.

Muhammad dealt frequently with the affairs of the female sex. In the Koran and the tradition, numerous instructions for women are to be found.

Islam and Polygamy

While the Bible, at the very beginning, explains that the marriage relationship is limited to one man and one woman, Islam considers polygamy to be legal. The Bible declares the marriage bond to be a holy, eternal, and exclusive relationship: “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they (only these two) shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, see also Matthew 19:5) – even if, in biblical times, this commandment was violated. On the other hand, the Koran continues pre-Islamic polygamy and justifies it as legal. Polygamy is, though, a right belonging only to men. In pre-Islamic times, women, too, according to reports from the tradition, could live in different polygamous forms of marriage:

- A woman could have sexual relations with a series of men one after the other. In the case that she became pregnant, the man who, after the birth, resembled the child most closely was considered to be the father. He had to accept this decision in any case (Arabic: *nikah al-baghaya*).

- The man could send his wife, after the end of her period, to another man with whom she desired to conceive a child. If she became pregnant, her husband could resume sexual relations with her (Arabic: *nikah al-istibda’*).

- A group of fewer than ten men could have intercourse with one woman. In the case that the woman became pregnant, she chose one of the men as the father of her child. The man was required

to accept this decision (Arabic: nikah al-djam¹).

Islam did not permit these pre-Islamic forms of marriage, but retained, in the majority opinion, polygamy for men. The number of wives is limited in the Koran to four; the number of female slaves as additional concubines is, however, not limited: "So marry women as it befits you, two, three, or four; and if you fear that you are not just to all of them, then (marry) one or whatever is in your legal possession (female slaves)" (surah 4:3).

While the pre-Islamic form of polygamy also permitted women to have several husbands, this could have led only to a limited increase in the Bedouin population, since a woman normally can give birth only once a year regardless of the number of her husbands. Islamic sources report that the limitation of polygamy to the man served the purpose of bringing about a swift increase in the number of followers of, and warriors for, Muhammad. Muslim tradition describes it as follows:

"A man approached Muhammad and asked him: 'There is a lovely noble woman, but she suffers from infertility. Shall I get married to her?' Allah's prophet answered: 'No!' The man asked the same question again. Allah's prophet answered: 'No!'. The man asked the same question the third time. Allah's prophet answered: 'No! Get married to a lovely fertile woman. I want you to increase in numbers'". In the Koran, too, it is stated: "Property and sons are the ornament of life in this world" (18:46).

¹ So the tradition according to Sahih al-Bukhari 4732 and Abu Dawud 1934.

² Sunan Abu Dawud 1754. Similar texts can be found in Sunan Abu Maja 1836 and Musnad Ibn Hanbal 3628.

New Regulations for Women in the Islamic Period

Among several Bedouin tribes on the Arabian Peninsula that were neither Jewish nor Christian, it was possible, too, to marry one's own mother or daughter.³ It was also permitted to marry two sisters at the same time.⁴ The Koran reports that the pre-Islamic Arabs, out of fear of impoverishment, buried newborn girls alive. These practices, which already long before had been forbidden in the Bible (Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 5:17), were forbidden in Islam also, nearly 600 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. New rules for the behavior of women, and altered legal regulations, were issued:

- The inheritance received by a woman was reduced to half that received by a man: "Allah prescribes with regard to your children: To one of masculine sex falls (in the division of an estate) just as much as to two of the feminine sex" (4:11). In the pre-Islamic period, the woman inherited nothing at all.

- The testimony of a woman was fixed as half of that of a man: "And let two witnesses among your men testify to it. And if it cannot be two men, then it should be a man and two women, such ones as are agreeable to you – (two women) so that (in the case) that one of them errs, the one (the one who does not err) may remind the other (the one who errs) of the true state of affairs" (2:282).

- According to the majority of Muslim theologians the husband has the right, in the case of disobedience, to beat his wife and to lock her up at home: "The men take precedence over the women in responsibility, because Allah has honored

³ These marriages were forbidden in the Koran, in surah 4:22.

⁴ This form of marriage, too, was prohibited in the Koran in surah 81:8.

the one more the others and because they give (their wives) from their property. Thus, virtuous women are those who obey and those who, with Allah's help, keep the secrets (of their husbands). And those, whose rebelliousness (arrogance and indifference) you fear: admonish them, avoid them in the marriage bed, and beat them!" (4:34). And: "And if some of your women do something despicable, then summon four of yourselves as witnesses against them; if they give testimony to this, then shut them up in the houses until death overtakes them or Allah gives them an escape" (4:15).

Many theologians, to be sure, hold the opinion that the man may not cause any physical injury to his wife through his punishment of her, but the fact that a man has the right to punish his wife in the case of her "rebelliousness" is hardly questioned publicly. In the case of genuine maltreatment, many Islamic countries allow the woman recourse to the courts, but, on the one hand, she must provide unassailable proof and, on the other hand, divorce for many women does not represent a feasible alternative, because, for example, she must fear the shame connected with it or because she remains destitute after the divorce, loses her children, or does not know her rights.

- Women are characterized in the Koran as "pleasure" or "desire" for men: "The joy in their desire for women and children is given to men as a pleasure ..." (3:14). The Koran, as does the Islamic tradition, emphasizes the man's right to sexual intercourse at any time: "Your women are a fertile field for you; therefore, cultivate your field, whenever you wish" (2:223). The word "where" in this verse is rendered in many Koran translations as "when". The Arabic word in the original Koran text is "anna". It can mean both "where" and "when". The interpret-

ers are agreed that a woman is obliged to be sexually obedient to her husband whenever he wishes it (excepted are the period of menstruation, the lying-in period, the days of the fasting month, and the pilgrimage). Other interpreters are of the opinion that all types of intercourse thereby are allowed to the man.

- A woman who is repudiated irrevocably by her husband – that is, with the prescribed phrase repeated three times – is permitted to remarry him only after she has married another man, consummated the marriage with him, and again has been repudiated by him: "And when he (the husband) releases her (the wife), then she is no longer allowed to him as long as she has not married another man" (2:230). This koranic regulation has led in many Islamic countries to the practice that many men, in exchange for money, marry a woman in a purely formal manner and then immediately obtain a divorce so that the woman is permitted to remarry her previous husband. This marriage is called colloquially "tadjhish", the marriage with a "djahsh": an "ass" or "donkey". Islam forbids any sort of formal marriage and considers consummation with the husband to be a decisive condition for the provisional marriage.⁵

- Islam had a complex relationship to slavery. Although Muslims were not to be enslaved, it was especially Muslim merchants who operated the slave trade and slaves were considered to be commercial property. At the same time, the Koran instructs Muslims to ransom male and female slaves who, however, had to be converts to Islam: "Then he should pay blood money to his heirs and free a believing (Muslim) slave" (4:92).⁶

⁵ Sunan al-Nisa'i 3362, Sunan Abu Dawud, 1965, Sunan Ibn Maja 1923 etc.

⁶ In other Koran verses concerning slavery, the word „believing“ is not mentioned in this context.

● Muslims were permitted to marry married women when they came into their possession as spoils of war, even if the husbands of these women were still alive: “And the respectable women (are forbidden to you) except for those (wives as slaves) that you possess. (This is) prescribed to you by Allah” (4:24). This regulation is also confirmed in Muslim tradition.⁷

Muhammad – a Conditional Model for Muslims

The Koran instructs Muslims to consider Muhammad as a model. Indeed, it instructs Muslims to emulate his example: “Verily, you (Muslims) have in the messenger of Allah (Muhammad) a beautiful model for every one who hopes in Allah and the Last Day and who thinks often of Allah” (33:21). Thus, the deeds, teachings, and the biography of Muhammad is accounted as the “sunna” (the practice to be emulated), and his legal instructions are just as binding as those of the Koran.

Muhammad’s example, however, cannot always be emulated by Muslims because the Koran grants to Muhammad several special rights and exceptions that are allowed to no other Muslim, or are even forbidden to other Muslims. In the area of marriage, Muhammad enjoyed the following special rights and exceptions:

● The Koran forbids Muslims to have more than four wives (4:3); the Prophet, however, was allowed an unlimited number of wives: Oh, Prophet, we allow you your wives, those to whom you have

given your dowry and those who you possess by rights from (the number of) those who Allah has given you as spoils of war, and the daughters of your father’s brother and the daughters of your father’s sister and the daughters of your mother’s brother and the daughters of your mother’s sister, who emigrated with you and every single believing woman who gives herself as a gift to the Prophet, provided that the Prophet desires to marry her; (this applies) only to you and not to the believers” (31:50).

● The Koran forbids Muslims to covet other women: “Speak to the believing men that they should cast their eyes toward the earth and preserve their chastity. This is purer for them” (24:30). This is also one of the biblical Ten Commandments: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Deuteronomy 5:21). Jesus confirmed this rule: “But I say to you, that every one who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:28-29).

The Koran reports, however, that Muhammad felt a great desire for the beautiful, but married, Zainab, the wife of Muhammad’s adopted son Zaid⁸: “And there you (Muhammad) said to him, to whom Allah had shown grace and to whom you had shown grace: ‘Keep your wife (Zainab) for yourself and fear Allah.’ And you (Muhammad) concealed that (desire for Zainab), which you bore in yourself,

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of Islamic sources confirm that the male or female slave in this case must be a Muslim.

⁷ Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 11266, 11370 and Maute’ Malik ibn Anas 992.

⁸ Zaid was called „Muhammad’s son“ because Muhammad had bought and adopted him (see the reports in the tradition in: Sahih al-Bukhari 3699, 4698; Sunan al-Thirmidhi 3131, 3133; Sunan al-Nisa’i 3171, and Sunan Abu Dawud 1764).

that which Allah wanted to reveal, and you feared human beings, while Allah is the one who, in reality, you ought to fear” (33:37). Muhammad, thus, had not expressed openly his desire to take Zainab as his wife, for which he was rebuked by Allah (but not because of his lust for Zainab). When Zaid learned of Muhammad’s wish, he obtained a divorce from Zainab, and Muhammad married her. According to Arabic law (and also according to Islamic opinion), this actually was forbidden, for marriage with a daughter-in-law is considered as the same as marriage with one’s own daughter (33:38 and 33:50-51).

• The Koran forbids Muslims to marry wives without a marriage contract; excepted are common-law relationships (70:30). On the other hand, the Koran allows Muhammad to have wives without even a marriage contract: “Prophet! We have allowed you for marriage: your spouses ... and every believing woman when she gives herself as a gift to the Prophet (Muhammad) and he desires to marry her. This applies especially for you in contrast to the (other) Believers” (33:50).

Following this Koran verse, the Koran interpreter al-Qurtubi, with reference to the famous al-Zamahshari, lists the names of women with whom Muhammad had sexual relations without concluding a marriage contract: Maimuna, the daughter of al-Harith; Zainab, the daughter of Khuzaima Ibn al-Harith; Umm Sharik al-Azdiy’a, the daughter of Djaber Ibn Hakim⁹, and Khaula, the daughter of Hakim Ibn Umay’ia¹⁰. In his interpretation of

Sure 33:50, Ibn Kathir makes the following statements: “When a woman would like to unite with a Muslim man, then he is permitted to have intercourse with her only after he has presented her with something (herewith, the dowry is meant). Only Allah’s Prophet (Muhammad) was permitted to have intercourse with women without a dowry, surrogate, and witnesses” (the presence of a surrogate¹¹ and two witnesses are absolutely necessary for the conclusion of a marriage contract). Tradition considers marriage without dowry or surrogate as adultery.¹²

Several traditions name women with whom Muhammad had intercourse in this informal manner. It is reported about ‘Aisha, as Muhammad’s “favorite wife” the most important wife of Muhammad for Sunni Muslims, that she did not agree with these informal marriages and that she complained about Muhammad’s relationship with women such as Khaula, the daughter of Hakim Bin Umay’ia, with the words: “Is the woman not ashamed to give herself to a man!” When the Koran verse was revealed: You (Muhammad) may release those from them (the women) that you wish (to release), and you may keep those that you wish (to keep); and if you want to receive again one who you have released, then the reproach does not concern you (3:51), I (‘Aisha) said: ‘Oh, Allah’s Prophet! Your god amazes me. His instructions always correspond to your wishes.’”¹³

tradition by Sahih al-Bukhari, 4721; Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 24091, and Sunan Ibn Maja, 1990.

¹¹ Sunan al-Thirmidhi 1020 and Sunan Ibn Maja 1871.

¹² Sunan Ibn Maja 1872, Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 18169.

¹³ Sahih al-Bukhari 4721, Sahih Muslim 2659, Sunan Ibn Maja 1990, and Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 24091.

⁹ Muhammad’s relationship to Umm Sharik without a marriage contract is reported by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal in his book of tradition „Musnad“, under the number 26338.

¹⁰ Khaula’s life together with Muhammad without a marriage contract is reported in the collections of

● Islam allows widows to marry; several of Muhammad's wives also were widows as, for example, his first wife Khadija. On the other hand, Muhammad's widows were not permitted to marry after his death: "And it does not befit you (Muslims) to trouble Allah's messenger, nor (does it befit you) ever to marry his wives after him" (33:53). The tradition justifies this prohibition by proclaiming that his earthly wives will be in Muhammad's possession among his wives in Paradise. Whether this applies also to Muhammad's wives that he released (divorced) or married merely formally without consummating the marriage with them, is a controversial judgement among Muslim theologians.

The tradition mentions that additional noble women were promised only to Muhammad in Paradise as a reward. Among these are, for example, Asi'a, the wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh; Kulthum, the sister of Moses, and Mary, the biological mother of Jesus Christ.¹⁴

Muhammad's wives are instructed to speak with men not related to them only from behind a "curtain", or with a veiled body – face and hands included: "And if you (Muslims) have anything to ask of them (Muhammad's wives), then ask them behind a curtain (without being able to see them or their face)" (33:53). Since this instruction to veil the entire body, including the face and hands – so was it overwhelmingly understood – was formulated as a demand, a general obligation for all Muslim women to veil themselves was derived from this later by many Muslim theologians.¹⁵

¹⁴ The Koran interpreter Ibn Kathir, for example, mentions this view in regard to Sure 66.

¹⁵ So, for example, an article on the obligation to veil the face by the prominent Islamic cleric Sheikh Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Sheich: <http://www.kalamat.org/sections.php?so=va&aid=153> (18. June 2003).

Justice in Relations with Muhammad's Wives

The koranic permission to engage in polygamy is given under the condition that several wives are treated "justly". Justice is the decisive condition for the validity of these polygamous marriages: "and if you fear that you are not just to all of them, then (marry) one or whatever is in your legal possession" (4:3). The Koran, thus, admonishes justice, but, at the same time, observes that no man is able to be just: "And you cannot practice justice between your wives, however much you may wish to do so. But do not incline yourselves completely (to one) so that you leave the others hanging in the air, as it were. And when you make amends and fear God, then Allah is the Allforgiving and Compassionate" (4:129).

Islamic tradition declares that Muhammad treated his wives absolutely justly. Several reporters of the tradition remark that Muhammad had regular sexual relations with all his wives. The most important collection of tradition, Sahih al-Bukhari, reports: "The Prophet of Allah could have sexual relations with all of his wives – eleven wives – within an hour, by night or by day ... he had the virility of 30 men".¹⁶ At the same time, many passages speak of the fact that 'Aisha clearly was preferred before the other wives:

● She is said to have been Muhammad's "favorite wife".¹⁷

¹⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari 260; also the compilers Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 13156, al-Tirmidhi 1136, and al-Nisa'i 3147, who, however, mentions nine wives instead of eleven.

¹⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari 2392 and 2393, Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 1806, 25304, and 2366.

● The Archangel Gabriel is said to have visited him only in her presence,¹⁸ for the purpose of delivering a revelation to him.

● She received the day and night with Muhammad “entitled” to Sauda Bint Sam’a.¹⁹

● Muhammad is said to have spent twice as many nights with ‘Aisha as with his other wives.²⁰

● When he fell ill, he wanted to convalesce in her tent.²¹

● According to tradition, he died in her tent, in her lap.²²

The Number of Muhammad’s Wives

Muslim theologians are not agreed about the number of Muhammad’s wives. In the trustworthiest Islamic sources, one comes across contradictory figures that even, at times, differ in the work of one and the same author. So, for example, al-Bukhari, considered by Sunni Muslims as the trustworthiest collector of Muhammad’s sayings, gives the number of Muhammad’s wives in one place as nine,²³ and in another as eleven.²⁴ Al-Qurtubi is considered by many Islamic groupings to be one of the most competent interpreters of the Koran. In his interpretation of Sure 33:28, he divides Muhammad’s wives into four groups:

1. Women who Muhammad married and with whom he had sexual relations:

- Khadidja, daughter of Khuwalid ibn Asad

¹⁸ Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 25304, Sahih al-Bukhari 3491

¹⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari 4811 and Sunan al-Nisa’i 3146

²⁰ Sahih Muslim 2657

²¹ Sahih al-Bukhari 191, 2868, and 4088

²² Sahih al-Bukhari 4816

²³ Sahih al-Bukhari 275

²⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari 260

- Sauda, daughter of Zama’a
- ‘Aisha, daughter of Abu Bakr
- Hafsa, daughter of ‘Umar
- Umm Salma (Hind), daughter of Abi ‘Umaya
- Umm Habiba (Ramla), daughter of Abu Safyan
- Zainab, daughter of Dshahsh Bin R’ab
- Zainab, daughter of Khuzaima Bin al-Harith
- Dshuwairiya, daughter of Harith Nin Abi Dirar
- Safiya, daughter of Huiai bin Akhtab
- Rehana, daughter of Zaid Bin ‘Amr Bin Khunaka
- Maimuna, daughter of al-Harith

2. Women, to whom Muhammad was engaged, but with whom he did not marry or have intercourse:

- Fakhita (Umm Hane’), daughter of Ali Talib
- Daba’a, daughter of Amer
- Safiya, daughter of Bashama Bin Nadla
- Khaula, daughter of Hakim Bin Umay’ia
- Djamra, daughter of al-Harith Bin ‘Auf al-Marri
- Sauda al-Kurshiya
- a women whose name is unknown

3. Women with whom Muhammad concluded a marriage contract without having had intercourse with them:

- Al-Kilabiya, daughter of al-Dah’ak
- Asma’, daughter of al-Ni’man Bin al-Djon
- Katila, daughter of Kais
- Umm Sharik al-Azdiy’a, daughter of Djaber Bin Hakim
- Khaula, daughter of al-Hasil Bin Habira
- Sharaaf, daughter of Khalifa
- Laila, daughter of al-Khatim

- ‘Amra, daughter of Ma’awia
- Al-Djanda’yia, daughter of Djan-dab Bin Damra
- Al-Ghafar’yia

4. Concubines:

- Maria, the Coptic woman
- Rihana
- a beautiful woman who was taken as booty during a conquest
- a woman who was given to Muhammad as a gift by Zainab, daughter of Dshahsh

The Most Famous Wives of Muhammad

Several of Muhammad’s wives stand out prominently in the tradition:

- Khadidja, daughter of Khuwailid: Muhammad married her at the age of twenty-five, when she was nearly forty years old and had become a widow twice. She was a wealthy woman and Muhammad became a merchant in her employ. As long as the two were married, Muhammad married no other additional women.

- ‘Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr: She was the only woman who Muhammad married when she was still a child. His other marriages were primarily politically motivated, were the result of predatory attacks, or served as a means of providing for widows. The difference in age between them was nearly forty-five years; at the time of the marriage, ‘Aisha was about six years old and Muhammad about fifty-one. He consummated the marriage with her when she had become nine years old, he was about fifty-four.²⁵ ‘Aisha reported some incidents concerning her marriage with Muhammad: She was playing with a swing when her mother came to take her. ‘Aisha did not know what would happen,

when her mother and some other women were washing her face and her hair and brought her to Muhammad. She took her toys with her when she came to Muhammad. When Muhammad had consummated the marriage with her she was still playing with her toys

Several traditions originate with ‘Aisha. After Muhammad’s death, ‘Aisha took part in a war against Ali b. Abi Talib, Muhammad’s biological cousin and son-in-law. Ali has great significance especially for Shiites, for he is the caliph who was most closely related to Muhammad. Muhammad is said to have promised him a place in Paradise.²⁸

- Safiya, the daughter of Huai bin Akhtab, was a lovely Jewish woman of noble origin from the tribe of the Khairbar. Muhammad’s warriors killed many men from her tribe, including her fiancé.²⁹ Muhammad is said to have married her and spent his first night with her on the very day of the battle. At the time of the marriage, he was about sixty years old and she was seventeen.

Muhammad improved the position of the woman in the Islamic period, but he clearly put the woman at a legal disadvantage in comparison with the man. Through the definition of the Sharia as unchangeable divine law – a component of which is the legislation concerning women – the marriage legislation that was perhaps quite progressive in the seventh century A.D. borders on the limits of that which is in the West understood today as a basic component of human rights.

²⁶ Sahih Muslem 2549.

²⁷ Sinan al-Nisa’i 3325.

²⁸ Ahmad bin Hanbal 1551.

²⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari mentions the killing of her fiancé in tradition 2081.

²⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari 3488, 6571, 6072, and Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal 17610.