

Was Ayesha A Six-Year-Old Bride?

The Ancient Myth Exposed

by T.O. Shanavas

A Christian friend asked me once, “Will you marry your seven year old daughter to a fifty year old man?” I kept my silence. He continued, “If you would not, how can you approve the marriage of an innocent seven year old, Ayesha, with your Prophet?” I told him, “I don’t have an answer to your question at this time.” My friend smiled and left me with a thorn in the heart of my faith. Most Muslims answer that such marriages were accepted in those days. Otherwise, people would have objected to Prophet’s marriage with Ayesha.

However, such an explanation would be gullible only for those who are naive enough to believe it. But unfortunately, I was not satisfied with the answer.

The Prophet was an exemplary man. All his actions were most virtuous so that we, Muslims, can emulate them. However, most people in our Islamic Center of Toledo, including me, would not think of betrothing our seven years daughter to a fifty-two year-old man. If a parent agrees to such a wedding, most people, if not all, would look down upon the father and the old husband.

In 1923, registrars of marriage in Egypt were instructed not to register and issue official certificates of marriage for brides less than sixteen and grooms less than eighteen years of age. Eight years later, the Law of the Organization and Procedure of Sheriah courts of 1931 consolidated the above provision by not hearing the marriage disputes involving brides less than sixteen and grooms less than eighteen years old. (*Women in Muslim Family Law*, John Esposito, 1982). It shows that even in the Muslim majority country of Egypt the child marriages are unacceptable.

So, I believed, without solid evidence other than my reverence to my Prophet, that the stories of the marriage of seven-year-old Ayesha to 50-year-old Prophet are only myths. However, my long pursuit in search of the truth on this matter proved my intuition correct. My Prophet was a gentleman. And he did not marry an innocent seven or nine year old girl. The age of Ayesha has been erroneously reported in the hadith literature. Furthermore, I think that the narratives reporting this event are highly unreliable. Some of the hadith (traditions of the Prophet) regarding Ayesha’s age at the time of her wedding with prophet are problematic. I present the following evidences against the acceptance of the fictitious story by Hisham ibn ‘Urwah and to clear the name of my Prophet as an irresponsible old man preying on an innocent little girl.

EVIDENCE #1: Reliability of Source

Most of the narratives printed in the books of hadith are reported only by Hisham ibn `Urwah, who was reporting on the authority of his father. First of all, more people than just one, two or three should logically have reported. It is strange that no one from Medina, where Hisham ibn `Urwah lived the first 71 years of his life narrated the event, despite the fact that his Medinan pupils included the well-respected Malik ibn Anas. The origins of the report of the narratives of this event are people from Iraq, where Hisham is reported to have shifted after living in Medina for most of his life.

Tehzibu'l-Tehzib, one of the most well known books on the life and reliability of the narrators of the traditions of the Prophet, reports that according to Yaqub ibn Shaibah: "He [Hisham] is highly reliable, his narratives are acceptable, except what he narrated after moving over to Iraq" (*Tehzi'bu'l-tehzi'b*, Ibn Hajar Al-`asqala'ni, Dar Ihya al-turath al-Islami, 15th century. Vol 11, p. 50).

It further states that Malik ibn Anas objected on those narratives of Hisham which were reported through people in Iraq: "I have been told that Malik objected on those narratives of Hisham which were reported through people of Iraq" (*Tehzi'b u'l-tehzi'b*, Ibn Hajar Al-`asqala'ni, Dar Ihya al-turath al-Islami, Vol.11, p. 50).

Mizanu'l-ai`tidal, another book on the life sketches of the narrators of the traditions of the Prophet reports: "When he was old, Hisham's memory suffered quite badly" (*Mizanu'l-ai`tidal*, Al-Zahbi, Al-Maktabatu'l-athriyyah, Sheikhpura, Pakistan, Vol. 4, p. 301).

CONCLUSION: Based on these references, Hisham's memory was failing and his narratives while in Iraq were unreliable. So, his narrative of Ayesha's marriage and age are unreliable.

CHRONOLOGY: It is vital also to keep in mind some of the pertinent dates in the history of Islam:

- pre-610 CE: Jahiliya (pre-Islamic age) before revelation
- 610 CE: First revelation
- 610 CE: AbuBakr accepts Islam
- 613 CE: Prophet Muhammad begins preaching publicly.
- 615 CE: Emigration to Abyssinia
- 616 CE: Umar bin al Khattab accepts Islam
- 620 CE: Generally accepted betrothal of Ayesha to the Prophet
- 622 CE: Hijrah (emigration to Yathrib, later renamed Medina)
- 623/624 CE: Generally accepted year of Ayesha living with the Prophet

EVIDENCE #2: The Betrothal

According to Tabari (also according to Hisham ibn 'Urwah, Ibn Hunbal and Ibn Sad), Ayesha was betrothed at seven years of age and began to cohabit with the Prophet at the age of nine years.

However, in another work, Al-Tabari says: "All four of his [Abu Bakr's] children were born of his two wives during the pre-Islamic period" (*Tarikhul-umam wal-mamluk*, Al-Tabari (died 922), Vol. 4, p. 50, Arabic, Dara'l-fikr, Beirut, 1979).

If Ayesha was betrothed in 620 CE (at the age of seven) and started to live with the Prophet in 624 CE (at the age of nine), that would indicate that she was born in 613 CE and was nine when she began living with the Prophet. Therefore, based on one account of Al-Tabari, the numbers show that Ayesha must have born in 613 CE, three years after the beginning of revelation (610 CE). Tabari also states that Ayesha was born in the pre-Islamic era (in Jahiliya). If she was born before 610 CE, she would have been at least 14 years old when she began living with the Prophet. Essentially, Tabari contradicts himself.

CONCLUSION: Al-Tabari is unreliable in the matter of determining Ayesha's age.

EVIDENCE # 3: The Age of Ayesha in Relation to the Age of Fatima

According to Ibn Hajar, "Fatima was born at the time the Ka`bah was rebuilt, when the Prophet was 35 years old... she was five years older than Ayesha" (*Al-Isabah fi tamyizi'l-sahabah*, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, Vol. 4, p. 377, Maktabatu'l-Riyadh al-haditha, al-Riyadh, 1978).

If Ibn Hajar's statement is factual, Ayesha was born when the Prophet was 40 years old. If Ayesha was married to the Prophet when he was 52 years old, Ayesha's age at marriage would be 12 years.

CONCLUSION: Ibn Hajar, Tabari and Ibn Hisham and Ibn Humbal contradict each other. So, the marriage of Ayesha at seven years of age is a myth.

EVIDENCE #4: Ayesha's Age in relation to Asma's Age

According to Abda'l-Rahman ibn abi zanna'd: "Asma was 10 years older than Ayesha" (*Siyar A'la'ma'l-nubala'*, Al-Zahabi, Vol. 2, p. 289, Arabic, Mu'assasatu'l-risalah, Beirut, 1992).

According to Ibn Kathir: "She [Asma] was elder to her sister [Ayesha] by 10 years" (*Al-Bidayah wa'l-nihayah*, Ibn Kathir, Vol. 8, p. 371, Dar al-fikr al-'arabi, Al-jizah, 1933).

According to Ibn Kathir: "She [Asma] saw the killing of her son during that year [73 AH], as we have already mentioned, and five days later she herself died.

According to other narratives, she died not after five days but 10 or 20, or a few days over 20, or 100 days later. The most well known narrative is that of 100 days later. At the time of her death, she was 100 years old.” (*Al-Bidayah wa'l-nihayah*, Ibn Kathir, Vol. 8, p. 372, Dar al-fikr al-`arabi, Al-jizah, 1933)

According to Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani: “She [Asma] lived a hundred years and died in 73 or 74 AH.” (*Taqribu'l-tehzib*, Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani, p. 654, Arabic, Bab fi'l-nisa', al-harfu'l-alif, Lucknow).

According to almost all the historians, Asma, the elder sister of Ayesha was 10 years older than Ayesha. If Asma was 100 years old in 73 AH, she should have been 27 or 28 years old at the time of the hijrah.

If Asma was 27 or 28 years old at the time of hijrah, Ayesha should have been 17 or 18 years old. Thus, Ayesha, being 17 or 18 years of at the time of Hijra, she started to cohabit with the Prophet between at either 19 to 20 years of age.

Based on Hajar, Ibn Katir, and Abda'l-Rahman ibn abi zanna'd, Ayesha's age at the time she began living with the Prophet would be 19 or 20. In Evidence # 3, Ibn Hajar suggests that Ayesha was 12 years old and in Evidence #4 he contradicts himself with a 17 or 18-year-old Ayesha. What is the correct age, twelve or eighteen?

CONCLUSION: Ibn Hajar is an unreliable source for Ayesha's age.

EVIDENCE #5: The Battles of Badr and Uhud

A narrative regarding Ayesha's participation in Badr is given in the hadith of Muslim, (*Kitabu'l-jihad wa'l-siyar*, Bab karahiyati'l-isti`anah fi'l-ghazwi bikafir). Ayesha, while narrating the journey to Badr and one of the important events that took place in that journey, says: “when we reached Shajarah”. Obviously, Ayesha was with the group travelling towards Badr. A narrative regarding Ayesha's participation in the Battle of Uhud is given in Bukhari (*Kitabu'l-jihad wa'l-siyar*, Bab Ghazwi'l-nisa' wa qitalihinna ma`a'lrijal): “Anas reports that on the day of Uhud, people could not stand their ground around the Prophet. [On that day,] I saw Ayesha and Umm-i-Sulaim, they had pulled their dress up from their feet [to avoid any hindrance in their movement].” Again, this indicates that Ayesha was present in the Battles of Uhud and Badr.

It is narrated in Bukhari (*Kitabu'l-maghazi*, Bab Ghazwati'l-khandaq wa hiya'l-ahza'b): “Ibn `Umar states that the Prophet did not permit me to participate in Uhud, as at that time, I was 14 years old. But on the day of Khandaq, when I was 15 years old, the Prophet permitted my participation.”

Based on the above narratives, (a) the children below 15 years were sent back and were not allowed to participate in the Battle of Uhud, and (b) Ayesha participated in the Battles of Badr and Uhud

CONCLUSION: Ayesha's participation in the Battles of Badr and Uhud clearly indicates that she was not nine years old but at least 15 years old. After all, women used to accompany men to the battlefields to help them, not to be a burden on them. This account is another contradiction regarding Ayesha's age.

EVIDENCE #6: Surat al-Qamar (The Moon)

According to the generally accepted tradition, Ayesha was born about eight years before hijrah. But according to another narrative in Bukhari, Ayesha is reported to have said: "I was a young girl (*jariyah* in Arabic)" when Surah Al-Qamar was revealed (Sahih Bukhari, kitabu'l-tafsir, Bab Qaulihi Bal al-sa`atu Maw'iduhum wa'l-sa`atu adha' wa amarr).

Chapter 54 of the Quran was revealed eight years before hijrah (*The Bounteous Koran*, M.M. Khatib, 1985), indicating that it was revealed in 614 CE. If Ayesha started living with the Prophet at the age of nine in 623 CE or 624 CE, she was a newborn infant (*sibyah* in Arabic) at the time that Surah Al-Qamar (The Moon) was revealed. According to the above tradition, Ayesha was actually a young girl, not an infant in the year of revelation of Al-Qamar. *Jariyah* means young playful girl (Lane's *Arabic English Lexicon*). So, Ayesha, being a *jariyah* not a *sibyah* (infant), must be somewhere between 6-13 years old at the time of revelation of Al-Qamar, and therefore must have been 14-21 years at the time she married the Prophet.

CONCLUSION: This tradition also contradicts the marriage of Ayesha at the age of nine.

EVIDENCE #7: Arabic Terminology

According to a narrative reported by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, after the death of the Prophet's first wife Khadijah, when Khaulah came to the Prophet advising him to marry again, the Prophet asked her regarding the choices she had in mind. Khaulah said: "You can marry a virgin (*bikr*) or a woman who has already been married (*thayyib*)". When the Prophet asked the identity of the *bikr* (virgin), Khaulah mentioned Ayesha's name.

All those who know the Arabic language are aware that the word *bikr* in the Arabic language is not used for an immature nine-year-old girl. The correct word for a young playful girl, as stated earlier, is *jariyah*. *Bikr* on the other hand, is used for an unmarried lady without conjugal experience prior to marriage, as we understand the word "virgin" in English. Therefore, obviously a nine-year-old girl is not a "lady" (*bikr*) (Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Vol. 6, p. .210, Arabic, Dar Ihya al-turath al-`arabi, Beirut).

CONCLUSION: The literal meaning of the word, *bikr* (virgin), in the above hadith is “adult woman with no sexual experience prior to marriage.” Therefore, Ayesha was an adult woman at the time of her marriage.

EVIDENCE #8. The Qur’anic Text

All Muslims agree that the Quran is the book of guidance. So, we need to seek the guidance from the Quran to clear the smoke and confusion created by the eminent men of the classical period of Islam in the matter of Ayesha’s age at her marriage. Does the Quran allow or disallow marriage of an immature child of seven years of age?

There are no verses that explicitly allow such marriage. There is a verse, however, that guides Muslims in their duty to raise an orphaned child. The Quran’s guidance on the topic of raising orphans is also valid in the case of our own children. The verse states: “And make not over your property (property of the orphan), which Allah had made a (means of) support for you, to the weak of understanding, and maintain them out of it, clothe them and give them good education. And test them until they reach the age of marriage. Then if you find them maturity of intellect, make over them their property...” (Quran, 4:5-6).

In the matter of children who have lost a parent, a Muslim is ordered to (a) feed them, (b) clothe them, (c) educate them, and (d) test them for maturity “until the age of marriage” before entrusting them with management of finances.

Here the Quranic verse demands meticulous proof of their intellectual and physical maturity by objective test results before the age of marriage in order to entrust their property to them.

In light of the above verses, no responsible Muslim would hand over financial management to a seven- or nine-year-old immature girl. If we cannot trust a seven-year-old to manage financial matters, she cannot be intellectually or physically fit for marriage. Ibn Hambal (Musnad Ahmad ibn Hambal, vol.6, p. 33 and 99) claims that nine-year-old Ayesha was rather more interested in playing with toy-horses than taking up the responsible task of a wife. It is difficult to believe, therefore, that AbuBakr, a great believer among Muslims, would betroth his immature seven-year-old daughter to the 50-year-old Prophet. Equally difficult to imagine is that the Prophet would marry an immature seven-year-old girl.

Another important duty demanded from the guardian of a child is to educate them. Let us ask the question, “How many of us believe that we can educate our children satisfactorily before they reach the age of seven or nine years?” The answer is none. Logically, it is an impossible task to educate a child satisfactorily before the child attains the age of seven. Then, how can we believe that Ayesha was educated satisfactorily at the claimed age of seven at the time of her marriage?

AbuBakr was a more judicious man than all of us. So, he definitely would have judged that Ayesha was a child at heart and was not satisfactorily educated as demanded by the Quran. He would not have married her to anyone. If a proposal of marrying the immature and yet to be educated seven-year-old Ayesha came to the Prophet, he would have rejected it outright because neither the Prophet nor AbuBakr would violate any clause in the Quran.

CONCLUSION: The marriage of Ayesha at the age of seven years would violate the maturity clause or requirement of the Quran. Therefore, the story of the marriage of the seven-year-old immature Ayesha is a myth.

EVIDENCE #9: Consent in Marriage

A women must be consulted and must agree in order to make a marriage valid (*Mishakat al Masabiah*, translation by James Robson, Vol. I, p. 665). Islamically, credible permission from women is a prerequisite for a marriage to be valid.

By any stretch of the imagination, the permission given by an immature seven-year-old girl cannot be valid authorization for marriage.

It is inconceivable that AbuBakr, an intelligent man, would take seriously the permission of a seven-year-old girl to marry a 50-year-old man.

Similarly, the Prophet would not have accepted the permission given by a girl who, according to the hadith of Muslim, took her toys with her when she went live with Prophet.

CONCLUSION: The Prophet did not marry a seven-year-old Ayesha because it would have violated the requirement of the valid permission clause of the Islamic Marriage Decree. Therefore, the Prophet married an intellectually and physically mature lady Ayesha.

SUMMARY:

It was neither an Arab tradition to give away girls in marriage at an age as young as seven or nine years, nor did the Prophet marry Ayesha at such a young age. The people of Arabia did not object to this marriage because it never happened in the manner it has been narrated.

Obviously, the narrative of the marriage of nine-year-old Ayesha by Hisham ibn `Urwah cannot be held true when it is contradicted by many other reported narratives. Moreover, there is absolutely no reason to accept the narrative of Hisham ibn `Urwah as true when other scholars, including Malik ibn Anas, view his narrative while in Iraq, as unreliable. The quotations from Tabari, Bukhari and Muslim show they contradict each other regarding Ayesha's age. Furthermore, many of these scholars contradict themselves in their own records. Thus, the

narrative of Ayesha's age at the time of the marriage is not reliable due to the clear contradictions seen in the works of classical scholars of Islam.

Therefore, there is absolutely no reason to believe that the information on Ayesha's age is accepted as true when there are adequate grounds to reject it as myth. Moreover, the Quran rejects the marriage of immature girls and boys as well as entrusting them with responsibilities.

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Extracted 09/06/02 from [The Minaret](#)