

WHY WAS THE HOLY PROPHET ﷺ POLYGAMOUS?

The reasons for his multiple marriages vary. However, all of them were related to his role as leader of the Muslim community, and his responsibility to guide the new Muslims toward the norms and values of Islam.

When Muhammad ﷺ was 25, before he was called to announce his Prophethood, he married Khadija, his first wife. Given the surrounding cultural environment, not to mention the climate and such other considerations as his youth, it is remarkable that he enjoyed a reputation for perfect chastity, integrity, and trustworthiness. As soon as he was called to Prophethood, he acquired enemies who did not hesitate to raise false calumnies against him—but not once did any of them dare invent something unbelievable about him.

Khadija was 15 years his senior. This marriage was very high and exceptional in the eyes of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and God. For 23 years, their life was a period of uninterrupted contentment in perfect fidelity. In the eighth year of Prophethood, however, she passed away, leaving the Holy Prophet ﷺ as the sole parent of their children for 4 or 5 years. Even his enemies are forced to admit that, during these years, they can find no flaw in his moral character. The Holy Prophet ﷺ took no other wife during Khadija's lifetime, although public opinion would have allowed him to do so. When he began marrying other women, he was already past 55, when very little real interest and desire for marriage remains.

Polygamy did not originate with the Muslims. Furthermore, in the case of the Holy Prophet ﷺ this practice has far more significance than people generally realise. In a sense, the Holy Prophet ﷺ had to be polygamous to transmit his *Sunnah* (the statutes and norms of Islamic law). As Islam covers every part of one's life, private spousal relations cannot remain untouched. Therefore, there must be women who can guide other women in these matters. There is no room for the allusive language of hints and innuendoes. The chaste and virtuous women of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ household were responsible for explaining the norms and rules of such private spheres to other Muslims.

Some of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ marriages were contracted for specific reasons:

- Since his wives were young, middle-aged, and old, the requirements and norms of Islamic law could be exemplified in relation to their different life stages and experiences. These were learned and applied first within the Holy Prophet's ﷺ household, and then passed on to other Muslims by his wives.

- Each wife was from a different clan or tribe, which allowed the Holy Prophet ﷺ to establish bonds of kinship and affinity throughout the rapidly expanding Muslim community. This also enabled a profound attachment to him to spread among all Muslims, thereby creating and securing equality and brotherhood in a most practical way and on the basis of religion.
- Each wife, both during and after the Holy Prophet's ﷺ life, proved to be of great benefit and service to the cause of Islam. They conveyed his message and interpreted it to their clans: the outer and inward experience, and the qualities, manners and faith of the man whose life was the embodiment of the Qur'an—Islam in practice. In this way, all Muslims learned about the Qur'an, Hadith, Qur'anic interpretation and commentary, and Islamic jurisprudence, and so became fully aware of Islam's essence and spirit.
- Through his marriages, the Holy Prophet ﷺ established ties of kinship throughout Arabia. This gave him the freedom to move and be accepted as a member in each family. Since they regarded him as one of their own, they felt they could go to him in person and ask him directly about this life and the Hereafter. The tribes also benefited collectively from their proximity to him: they considered themselves fortunate and took pride in that relationship, such as the Umayyads (through Umm Habiba), the Hashimites (through Zaynab bint Jahsh), and the Bani Makhzum (through Umm Salama).

What we have said so far is general and could, in some respects, be true of all Prophets. However, now we will discuss the life sketches of *Ummahat al-Mu'minin* (the Mothers of the Believers), not in the order of the marriages but from a different perspective.

Khadija was the Holy Prophet's ﷺ first wife. As mentioned above, she married him before his call to Prophethood. Even though she was 15 years his senior, she bore all of his children, except for Ibrahim, who did not survive infancy. Khadija was also his friend, the sharer of his inclinations and ideals to a remarkable degree. Their marriage was wonderfully blessed, for they lived together in profound harmony for 23 years. Through every trial and persecution launched by the Meccan unbelievers, she was his dearest companion and helper. He loved her very deeply and married no other woman while she was alive.

This marriage is the ideal of intimacy, friendship, mutual respect, support, and consolation. Though faithful and loyal to all his wives, he never forgot Khadija and mentioned her virtues and merits extensively on many occasions. He married another woman only 4 or 5 years after Khadija's death. Until that time, he served as both a mother and a father to his children, providing their daily food and provisions as well as bearing their troubles and hardships.

‘A‘isha was the daughter of Abu Bakr, the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ closest friend and devoted follower. One of the earliest converts, Abu Bakr had long hoped to cement the deep attachment between himself and the Holy Prophet ﷺ through marriage. By marrying ‘A‘isha, the Holy Prophet ﷺ accorded the highest honour and courtesy to a man who had shared all the good and bad times with him. In this way, Abu Bakr and ‘A‘isha acquired the distinction of being spiritually and physically close to the Holy Prophet ﷺ.

‘A‘isha proved to be a remarkably intelligent and wise woman, for she had both the nature and temperament to carry forward the work of Prophetic mission. Her marriage prepared her to be a spiritual guide and teacher to all women. She became one of the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ major students and disciples. Through him, like so many Muslims of that blessed time, her skills and talents were matured and perfected so that she could join him in the abode of bliss both as wife and as student.

Her life and service to Islam prove that such an exceptional person was worthy to be the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ wife. She was one of the greatest authorities on Hadith, an excellent Qur’anic commentator, and a most distinguished and knowledgeable expert on Islamic law. She truly represented the inner and outer qualities and experiences of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. This is surely why the Holy Prophet ﷺ was told in a dream that he would marry ‘A‘isha. Thus, when she was still innocent and knew nothing of men and worldly affairs, she was prepared and entered the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ household.

Umm Salama of the Makhzum clan, was first married to her cousin. The couple had embraced Islam at the very beginning and emigrated to Abyssinia to avoid persecution. After their return, they and their four children migrated to Medina. Her husband participated in many battles and died after being severely wounded at the Battle of Uhud. Abu Bakr and ‘Umar proposed marriage to her, aware of her needs and suffering as a destitute widow with children to support. She refused, believing that no one could be better than her late husband.

Some time after that, the Holy Prophet ﷺ proposed marriage. This was quite right and natural, for this great woman had never shied from sacrifice and suffering for Islam. Now that she was alone after having lived many years in the noblest Arabian clan, she could not be neglected and left to beg her way in life. Considering her piety, sincerity, and what she had suffered, she certainly deserved to be helped. By marrying her, the Holy Prophet ﷺ was doing what he had always done: befriending those lacking in friends, supporting the unsupported, and protecting the unprotected. In her present circumstances, there was no kinder or more gracious way of helping her.

Umm Salama also was intelligent and quick to understand. She had all the capacities and gifts to become a spiritual guide and teacher. When the Holy Prophet ﷺ took her under his protection, a new student to whom all women would be grateful was accepted into the school of knowledge and guidance. As the Holy Prophet ﷺ was now almost 60, marrying a widow with many children and assuming the related expenses and responsibilities can only be understood as an act of compassion that deserves our admiration for his infinite reserves of humanity.

Umm Habiba was the daughter of Abu Sufyan, an early and most determined enemy of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and supporter of Mecca's polytheistic and idolatrous religion. Yet his daughter was one of the earliest Muslims. She emigrated to Abyssinia with her husband, where he eventually renounced his faith and embraced Christianity. Although separated from her husband, she remained a Muslim. Shortly after that, her husband died and she was left all alone and desperate in exile.

The Companions, at that time few in number and barely able to support themselves, could not offer much help. So, what were her options? She could convert to Christianity and get help that way (unthinkable). She could return to her father's home, now a headquarters of the war against Islam (unthinkable). She could wander from house to house as a beggar, but again it was an unthinkable option for a member of one of the richest and noblest Arab families to bring shame upon her family name by doing so.

God recompensed Umm Habiba for her lonely exile in an insecure environment among people of a different race and religion, and for her despair at her husband's apostasy and death, by arranging for the Holy Prophet ﷺ to marry her. Learning of her plight, the Holy Prophet ﷺ sent an offer of marriage through the king Negus. This noble and generous action was a practical proof of: "We have not sent you save as a mercy for all creatures"¹.

Thus Umm Habiba joined the Holy Prophet's ﷺ household as a wife and student, and contributed much to the moral and spiritual life of those who learned from her. This marriage linked Abu Sufyan's powerful family to the Holy Prophet's ﷺ person and household, which caused its members to re-evaluate their attitudes. It also is correct to trace the influence of this marriage, beyond the family of Abu Sufyan and to the Umayyads in general, who ruled the Muslims for almost a century.

This clan, whose members had been the most fanatical in their hatred of Islam, produced some of Islam's most renowned early warriors, administrators, and governors. Without doubt, it was this marriage that began this change, for the Holy Prophet's ﷺ depth of generosity and magnanimity of soul surely overwhelmed them.

Zaynab bint Jahsh was a lady of noble birth and a close relative of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. She was, moreover, a woman of great piety, who fasted much, kept long vigils, and gave generously to the poor. When the Holy Prophet ﷺ arranged for her to marry Zayd, an African ex-slave whom he had adopted as his son, Zaynab's family and Zaynab herself were at first unwilling. The family had hoped to marry their daughter to the Holy Prophet ﷺ. But when they realised that the Holy Prophet ﷺ had decided otherwise, they consented out of deference to their love for the Holy Prophet ﷺ and his authority.

Zayd had been enslaved as a child during a tribal war. Khadija, who had bought him, had given him to the Holy Prophet ﷺ as a present when she married him. The Holy Prophet ﷺ had freed him immediately and, shortly afterwards, adopted him as his son. He insisted on this marriage to establish and fortify equality between the Muslims, and to break down the Arab prejudice against a slave or even freedman marrying a free-born woman.

The marriage was an unhappy one. The noble-born Zaynab was a good Muslim of a most pious and exceptional quality. The freedman Zayd was among the first to embrace Islam, and he also was a good Muslim. Both loved and obeyed the Holy Prophet ﷺ, but they were not a compatible couple. Zayd asked the Holy Prophet ﷺ several times to allow them to divorce. However, he was told to persevere with patience and not separate from Zaynab.

But then one day the Archangel Gabriel came with a Divine Revelation that the Holy Prophet's ﷺ marriage to Zaynab was a bond already contracted: "We have married her to you."² This command was one of the severest trials the Holy Prophet ﷺ had to face, for he was being told to break a social taboo. Yet it had to be done for the sake of God, just as God commanded. 'A'isha later said: "Had the Messenger been inclined to suppress any part of the Revelation, surely he would have suppressed this Verse."³

Divine wisdom decreed that Zaynab join the Holy Prophet's ﷺ household, so that she could be prepared to guide and enlighten the Muslims. As his wife, she proved herself most worthy of her new position by always being aware of her responsibilities and the courtesies proper to her role, all of which she fulfilled to universal admiration.

Before Islam, an adopted son was considered a natural son. Therefore, an adopted son's wife was considered as a natural son's wife would be. According to the Qur'anic verse, former "wives of your sons proceeding from your loins"⁴ fall within the prohibited degrees of marriage. But this prohibition does not apply to adopted sons, for there is no real consanguinity. What now seems obvious was not so then. This deeply rooted tribal taboo was broken by this marriage, just as God had intended.

To have an unassailable authority for future generations of Muslims, the Holy Prophet ﷺ had to break this taboo himself. It is one more instance of his deep faith that he did as he was told, and freed his people from a legal fiction that obscured a biological, natural reality.

Juwayriya bint Harith the daughter of Harith, chief of the defeated Bani Mustaliq clan, was captured during a military campaign. She was held with other members of her proud family alongside her clan's "common" people. She was in great distress when she was taken to the Holy Prophet ﷺ, for her kinsmen had lost everything and she felt profound hate and enmity for the Muslims. The Holy Prophet ﷺ understood her wounded pride, dignity, and suffering; more important, he understood how to deal with these issues effectively. He agreed to pay her ransom, set her free, and offered to marry her.

When the Ansar and the Muhajirun realised that the Bani Mustaliq now were related to the Holy Prophet ﷺ by marriage, they freed about 100 families that had not yet been ransomed. A tribe so honoured could not be allowed to remain in slavery. In this way, the hearts of Juwayriya and her people were won. Those 100 families blessed the marriage. Through his compassionate wisdom and generosity, the Holy Prophet ﷺ turned a defeat for some into a victory for all, and what had been an occasion of enmity and distress became one of friendship and joy.

Safiyya bint Huyayy was the daughter of the chieftains of the Jewish tribe of Khaybar, who had persuaded the Bani Qurayza to break their treaty with the Holy Prophet ﷺ. From her earliest days, she had seen her family and relatives oppose the Holy Prophet ﷺ. She had lost her father, brother, and husband in battles against the Muslims, and eventually was captured by them.

The attitudes and actions of her family and relatives might have nurtured in her a deep desire for revenge. However, 3 days before the Holy Prophet ﷺ reached Khaybar, she dreamed of a brilliant moon coming out from Medina, moving toward Khaybar, and falling into her lap. When she was brought before the Holy Prophet ﷺ as a captive, he set her free and offered her the choice of remaining a Jewess and returning to her people, or entering Islam and becoming his wife. "I chose God and his Messenger"⁵ she said. Shortly after that, they were married.

Elevated to the Holy Prophet's ﷺ household, she witnessed at first hand the Muslims' refinement and true courtesy. Her attitude to her past experiences changed, and she came to appreciate the great honour of being the Holy Prophet's ﷺ wife. As a result of this marriage, the attitude of many Jews changed as they came to see and know the Holy Prophet ﷺ closely. It is worth noting that such close relations between Muslims and non-Muslims can help people to understand each other better and to establish mutual respect and tolerance as social norms.

Sawda bint Zam'ah ibn Qays was the widow of Sakran. Among the first to embrace Islam, they had emigrated to Abyssinia to escape the Meccans' persecution. Sakran died in exile, and left his wife utterly destitute. As the only means of assisting her, the Holy Prophet ﷺ, though himself having a hard time making ends meet, married her. This marriage took place some time after Khadija's death.

Hafsa was the daughter of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the future second caliph of Islam. This good lady had lost her husband, who emigrated to both Abyssinia and Medina, where he was fatally wounded during the Battle of 'Uhud. She remained without a husband for a while. 'Umar desired the honour and blessing of being close to the Holy Prophet ﷺ in this world and in the Hereafter. The Holy Prophet ﷺ honoured this desire by marrying Hafsa to protect and to help the daughter of his faithful disciple.

Given the above facts, it is clear that the Holy Prophet ﷺ married these women for a variety of reasons: to provide helpless or widowed women with dignified subsistence; to console and honour enraged or estranged tribes; to bring former enemies into some degree of relationship and harmony; to gain certain uniquely gifted men and women for Islam; to establish new norms of relationship between people within the unifying brotherhood of faith in God; and to honour with family bonds the two men who were to be the first leaders of the Muslim community after his death. These marriages had nothing to do with self-indulgence, personal desire, or lust. With the exception of 'A'isha, all of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ wives were widows, and all of his post-Khadija marriages were contracted when he was already an old man. Far from being acts of self-indulgence, these marriages were acts of self-discipline.

Part of that discipline was providing each wife with the most meticulously observed justice, dividing equally whatever slender resources he allowed for their subsistence, accommodation, and allowance. He also divided his time with them equally, and regarded and treated them with equal friendship and respect. The fact that all of his wives got on well with each other is no small tribute to his genius for creating peace and harmony. With each of them, he was not only a provider but also a friend and companion.

The number of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ wives was a dispensation unique to him. Some of the merits and wisdom of this dispensation, as we understand them, have been explained. All other Muslims are allowed a maximum of four wives at one time. When that Revelation⁶ restricting polygamy came, the Holy Prophet's ﷺ marriages had already been contracted. Thereafter, he married no other women.

1. Surah al-Anbiya' : Ayat 107 (21:107)
2. Surah al-Ahzab : Ayat 37 (33:37)
3. Bukhari and Muslim
4. Surah an-Nisa' : Ayat 23 (4:23)
5. Muhammad ﷺ: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources, Martin Lings
6. Surah an-Nisa' : Ayat 3 (4:3)