

Aishah's Age: A New Approach

Question and Answer Details

Name of Questioner : Zeid

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Question : At what age was Aishah when she married the Prophet?

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Answer

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Salam, Dear questioner,

Thank you for your question.

The report commonly known among Muslims is that Lady Aishah was nine years of age when she married the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

This report is highly suspect. It is questioned on several counts. I have written at length discussing this issue and concluded that Aishah was between 18 and 22 at the time of her marriage to the Prophet. I will give some of the evidence briefly:

1. Prior to the Prophet's proposal to Aishah, she was engaged to marry Jubayr ibn Mutim, who was an unbeliever at the time. The prohibition of marrying unbelievers was not issued yet.

The Prophet's eldest daughter, Zainab, was married to Abu Al-Aas who remained non-Muslim for many years. When the Prophet sent a word proposing to Aishah, her father, Abu Bakr, declared: "These people (meaning Jubayr's people) have proposed to her, but I will manage to extricate her from them."

This suggests that it was a serious arrangement that he needed to tactfully undo. Since the Prophet's proposal was made three years before the marriage actually took place, the report of her marriage at nine years of age makes her six at the time of the proposal, and already engaged to someone else. This is highly unlikely.

2. The idea to marry Aishah was suggested to the Prophet by one of his companions, Khawlah bint Hakim, who told him that he needed someone to give him comfort and take care of him after his wife, Lady Khadijah, had died.

When he asked Khawlah if she had anyone in mind, she asked him: "Would you prefer a virgin or a mature woman?" He asked her to name both, and she suggested Sawdah as the mature woman and Aishah as the virgin. He told her to carry his proposals to both. Indeed, both proposals were accepted.

The Prophet married Lady Sawdah shortly afterward, but delayed his marriage to Aishah until he had emigrated to Madinah some three years later.

We need to look at the Prophet's family situation to put this suggestion to marry someone like Aishah in proper perspective. The Prophet had four daughters; two of them were married and two still living with him. So, he was not without company at home. His youngest daughter was at least 13 years of age.

Can we imagine that the lady who realized that the Prophet needed the comfort only a wife provides, would suggest that he marries a child who was six years of age at the time she made this suggestion? Would she name a child who was several years younger than his youngest daughter? She would be suggesting that he takes a child who would need to be looked after. This is totally unreasonable.

3. In the earliest and most authentic biography of the Prophet, written by Ibn Ishaq, who died in 150 A.H. a list of the people who embraced Islam in its early days is given in a separate chapter. The list includes 51 men and women, but no children.

According to the general context of the biography, which remains the best for reliability, these people accepted Islam in the first four or five years of the start of its message.

We find Aishah's name among them, with the note that she was young at the time. She was certainly young, but old enough to choose her faith and declare herself Muslim.

If we say that she was only 10 at the time, and her acceptance of Islam was in year 5, then she would be 19 when her marriage to the Prophet took place, because he married her one year after his emigration to Madinah.

Further evidence can be cited to prove that Aishah was a woman in her prime when she married the Prophet. However, this requires greater space because it involves providing the setting when certain events took place and discussing attitudes and reactions to various incidents and statements.

What I can say, however, is that at the time of her marriage to the Prophet Aishah was 18 if she was a day, but more likely, she was over 20 years of age.

Aisha's Age at Time of Marriage

Assalam alaikum,

Often a disputed subject, this forwarded e-mail should remove the common concerns people raise. And Allah Almighty is the source of truth.

fi amanillah, assalam alaikum

Sheikh Waheed-ud-Deen, the author of 'Mishkat al-Masabeeh' observes: "At the time of the consummation of her marriage Sayedah 'Aishah's age was not less than 18-19 years."

From THE LEARNER:

To begin with, I think it is the responsibility of all those who believe that marrying a girl as young as nine years old was an accepted norm of the Arab culture, to provide at least a few examples to substantiate their point of view. I have not yet been able to find a single dependable instance in the books of Arab history where a girl as young as nine years old was given away in marriage. Unless such examples are given, we do not have any reasonable grounds to believe that it really was an accepted norm.

In my opinion, the age of Ayesha (ra) has been grossly mis-reported in the ahadith. Not only that, I think that the narratives reporting this event are not only highly unreliable but also that on the basis of other historical data, the event reported, is quite an unlikely happening. Let us look at the issue from an objective stand point. My reservations in accepting the narratives, on the basis of which, Ayeshas (ra) age at the time of her marriage with the Prophet (pbuh) is held to be nine years are:

Most of these narratives are reported only by Hisham ibn `urwah reporting on the authority of his father. An event as well known as the one being reported, should logically have been reported by more people than just one, two or three.

- It is quite strange that no one from Medinah, where Hisham ibn `urwah lived the first seventy one years of his life has narrated the event, even though in Medinah his pupils included people as well known as Malik ibn Anas. All the narratives of this event have been reported by narrators from Iraq, where Hisham is reported to have had shifted after living in Medinah for seventy one years.
- Tehzibu'l-tehzib, one of the most well known books on the life and reliability of the narrators of the traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) reports that according to Yaqub ibn Shaibah: "narratives reported by Hisham are reliable except those that are reported through the people of Iraq". It further states that Malik ibn Anas objected on those narratives of Hisham which were reported through people of Iraq. (vol 11, pg 48 - 51)
- Mizanu'l-ai`tidal, another book on the narrators of the traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) reports that when he was old, Hisham's memory suffered quite badly. (vol 4, pg 301 - 302)

- According to the generally accepted tradition, Ayesha (ra) was born about eight years before Hijrah. But according to another narrative in Bukhari (kitabul-tafseer) Ayesha (ra) is reported to have said that at the time Surah Al-Qamar, the 54th chapter of the Qur'an, was revealed, "I was a young girl". The 54th surah of the Qur'an was revealed nine years before Hijrah. According to this tradition, Ayesha (ra) had not only been born before the revelation of the referred surah, but was actually a young girl (jariyah), not an infant (sibyah) at that time. Obviously, if this narrative is held to be true, it is in clear contradiction with the narratives reported by Hisham ibn `urwah. I see absolutely no reason that after the comments of the experts on the narratives of Hisham ibn `urwah, why we should not accept this narrative to be more accurate.
- According to a number of narratives, Ayesha (ra) accompanied the Muslims in the battle of Badr and Uhud. Furthermore, it is also reported in books of hadith and history that no one under the age of 15 years was allowed to take part in the battle of Uhud. All the boys below 15 years of age were sent back. Ayesha's (ra) participation in the battle of Badr and Uhud clearly indicate that she was not nine or ten years old at that time. After all, women used to accompany men to the battle fields to help them, not to be a burden on them.
- According to almost all the historians Asma, the elder sister of Ayesha was ten years older than Ayesha. It is reported in Taqri'bu'l-tehzi'b as well as Al-bidayah wa'l-nihayah that Asma died in 73 hijrah when she was 100 years old. Now, obviously if Asma was 100 years old in 73 hijrah she should have been 27 or 28 years old at the time of hijrah. If Asma was 27 or 28 years old at the time of hijrah, Ayesha should have been 17 or 18 years old at that time. Thus, Ayesha, if she got married in 1 AH (after hijrah) or 2 AH, was between 18 to 20 years old at the time of her marriage.
- Tabari in his treatise on Islamic history, while mentioning Abu Bakr reports that Abu Bakr had four children and all four were born during the Jahiliyyah -- the pre Islamic period. Obviously, if Ayesha was born in the period of jahiliyyah, she could not have been less than 14 years in 1 AH -- the time she most likely got married.
- According to Ibn Hisham, the historian, Ayesha accepted Islam quite some time before Umar ibn Khattab. This shows that Ayesha accepted Islam during the first year of Islam. While, if the narrative of Ayesha's marriage at seven years of age is held to be true, Ayesha should not have been born during the first year of Islam.
- Tabari has also reported that at the time Abu Bakr planned on migrating to Habshah (8 years before Hijrah), he went to Mut`am -- with whose son Ayesha was engaged -- and asked him to take Ayesha in his house as his son's wife. Mut`am refused, because Abu Bakr had embraced Islam, and subsequently his son divorced Ayesha (ra). Now, if Ayesha was only seven years old at the time of her marriage, she could not have been born at the time Abu Bakr decided on migrating to Habshah. On the basis of this report it seems only reasonable to assume that Ayesha had not only been born 8 years before hijrah, but was also a young lady, quite prepared for marriage.

- According to a narrative reported by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, after the death of Khadijah, when Khaulah came to the Prophet advising him to marry again, the Prophet asked her regarding the choices she had in her mind. Khaulah said: "You can marry a virgin (bikr) or a woman who has already been married (thayyib)". When the Prophet asked about who the virgin was, Khaulah proposed 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, and obviously a nine year old is not a "lady".
- According to Ibn Hajar, Fatimah was five years older than Ayesha. Fatimah is reported to have been born when the Prophet was 35 years old. Thus, even if this information is taken to be correct, Ayesha could by no means be less than 14 years old at the time of hijrah, and 15 or 16 years old at the time of her marriage.

These are some of the major points that go against accepting the commonly known narrative regarding Ayesha's (ra) age at the time of her marriage.

In my opinion, neither was it an Arab tradition to give away girls in marriage at an age as young as nine or ten 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.

From the ISLAMIC REVIEW:

1. The well-known historian Ibn Jareer al-Tabari writes at page 50 of volume 4 of his 'Book of History': "Abu Bakr married two ladies in the days of ignorance (pre-Call era). Fateelah daughter of Abd al-Aza was the first, from whom Abdullah and Asma were born. Umm-i-Rooman was the second, from whom Abd al-Rahman and 'Aishah were born. All the four children of Abu Bakr were born in the days of ignorance (Jahiliyyah, i.e., pre-Islamic days) from the above-named two ladies.
2. It is a well-known fact of history that Abu Bakr's son Abd al-Rahman fought against the Muslims in the battle of Badr. His age at that time was 21-22 years, and although he was older than 'Aishah, there is no evidence to show that the difference between their ages was more than three or four years. This fact lends support to the view that Hazrat 'Aishah was born four or five years before the Call.
3. The well-known historian and scholar Ibn Katheer writes in his 'Al-Badayah' about Sayedah Asma' daughter of Abu Bakr, Asma' died in 73 A.H. at the age of 100 years. She was ten years older than her sister 'Aishah. Now according to this report 'Asma' would have been 27-28 years old at the time of Hijrah and since she was ten years older than Sayedah 'Aishah, therefore the age of Sayedah 'Aishah would have been 17 or 18 years at the time of Hijrah. Accordingly, her birth falls about four or five years before the Call, and her age at the time of the consummation of marriage in 2 A.H. will work out to 19-20 years.

4. The author of the well-known collection of Hadith 'Mishkat al-Masabeeh', Sheikh Waheed-ud-Deen, writes in his well-known book 'Ahmal fi Asma' al-Rijjal':

"At the time of the consummation of her marriage Sayedah 'Aishah's age was not less than 18-19 years."

All the above quotations give ample refutation to the common misconception that Aishah's age at the time of her Nikah was 6 years and at the time of consummation of marriage it was only 9 years. If Muslim scholars of the present era deem fit to make an objective research instead of beating the old track, they will find ample material in the pages of history to arrive at a correct age for Aishah.

And Allah the Almighty is the source of truth.