

request. But while they
y from his friends and
een warned by Gabriel
ne revelation would not
Nadir would still have
Ashraf and the Muslim
drop a boulder on to

his behalf to deliver an
er of the tribe of Aws,
z, duly told them, 'The
'By planning to slay me
' They could no longer
were astonished that a
e Qaynuqa the previous
ne old order had been
l them bluntly: 'Hearts
ces.'⁴⁶

hammad, to see if they
s an excellent chance to
. He told them that he
red to secede from the
m, the Jews of Nadir
surrounding them and
lieve them. But nothing
he strength of Muham-
ore damaged by Uhud
new that they could not
r to cut down their palm
e Jews and they surren-
re their lives. Muham-
mmediately, taking with
ay on their camels. The
down the lintels of their
, and left the oasis in a
a triumph. The women
bourines and singing to
ving their way through
to Syria. Some of them
ear and from there they
drumming up support

In the year after Uhud, Muhammad had managed to recoup some of the prestige he had lost, and the affair of the Bani Nadir was yet another defeat for Ibn Ubbay. The Prophet continued to put down any incipient raids and in April 626 he won a decisive moral victory. As he had left the field of Uhud, Abu Sufyan had challenged the Muslims to meet him once again at Badr, during the annual fair, so in April 626 Muhammad set out with 1,500 men and camped at Badr for a whole week. But Abu Sufyan never appeared. He had not expected Muhammad to keep the appointment and had set out with his army as a mere show, planning to turn back as soon as he heard that the Muslims had failed to leave Medina. It was a year of severe drought and there was not a blade of grass to feed the camels during the journey, so after a couple of days Abu Sufyan led his army home. He was bitterly reproached by his fellow citizens for failing to keep the tryst, particularly because the Bedouin had been full of admiration for the Muslims' courage and readiness to face a much larger Meccan army at Badr a second time. Not only was Muhammad's position improving in Medina, but the tide was just beginning to turn in his favour in the rest of Arabia.

Even though the Muslims knew that after the humiliation of Second Badr the Meccans had intensified their preparations for a new offensive against the *umma*, Muhammad still hoped for a final peaceful settlement. In January 626 his new wife Zaynab had died, just eight months after her wedding, and a few months later he approached Hind bint al-Mughira, the widow of his cousin Abu Salamah, and asked for her hand. Umm Salamah, as she is usually known, was also the sister of one of the leading members of the powerful Meccan clan of Makhzum, which could prove to be a useful connection. She was twenty-nine years old and still extremely beautiful; she also seems to have been an intelligent woman and a good companion to Muhammad. He often chose to take her along on major campaigns and on at least one occasion she was able to offer valuable advice. She was, however, reluctant to marry Muhammad at first. She was no longer young, she said, and had a jealous nature: she was not sure that she would be able to take life in the harem. Muhammad smilingly assured her that he was even older than she and that God would take care of her jealousy.

Umm Salamah had been correct to fear harem rivalry; Muhammad's marriage to her introduced a rift among his wives that reflected the various parties within the *umma* who were competing for political power. A Makhzumite, Umm Salamah represented the more aristocratic group of Emigrants, while Aisha and Hafsa, daughters of Muhammad's two closest companions, represented the more plebeian party in power. As new wives entered the harem they tended to join one of these two rival

groups. Umm Salamah frequently looked for support to a third minor party, the *ahl al-bait* or the people of the household, who were members of Muhammad's immediate family and looked to Fatimah, a rather shy and timid woman, as their chief hope. These factions among Muhammad's wives reflect crucial factions in the *umma* that would become extremely serious after the Prophet's death and which, to some extent, still divide Muslims today. The *ahl al-bait*, who wanted Fatimah and Ali and their descendants to lead the Muslim world, would become the Shiah. It was not very long after Umm Salamah's wedding that a new wife entered the harem who would swell this group and frequently ally herself with the aristocratic party. Zaynab bint Jahsh, the Prophet's cousin, had been divorced by Zayd and married to Muhammad himself. The circumstances of this affair raised a few eyebrows and have been used by critics of Islam to denigrate its Prophet.

People such as Voltaire and Prideaux have seen the incident as a demonstration of Muhammad's insatiable sexual appetite and of his crafty manipulations of the revelations to further his own desires. They give a rather more lurid version of events than do Muslims. One afternoon Muhammad had gone to visit Zayd, who happened to be out. His wife Zaynab opened the door and because she was not expecting visitors was very lightly clad. Zaynab was now in her late thirties but was still said to be extremely beautiful and on this occasion Muhammad succumbed to her charms. He turned away hastily, muttering something that sounded like, 'Praise be to God who changes men's hearts.'⁴⁷ Zaynab had never wanted to marry Zayd and now she seized on Muhammad's admiration as a way out. She told Zayd so frequently and vehemently about the electrifying impression she had made on the Prophet, that life became impossible. Zayd went to Muhammad and offered to divorce his wife if Muhammad wanted her himself, but the Prophet sent him away, telling him to fear God and keep his wife. But there was now no hope for the marriage: Zaynab's nagging made Zayd so miserable that he divorced her anyway and the Prophet eventually decided to marry her.

There was criticism of the proposed match: some said that it was illegal as Zaynab had been married to Muhammad's adopted son, but Muhammad received a revelation telling him that the marriage was certainly not incestuous.⁴⁸ Zayd had been Muhammad's foster son and the relationship between them was artificial: in marrying Zaynab the Prophet was not violating the proscribed degrees. Muhammad happened to be with Aisha when this revelation came down and she said, rather tartly: 'truly thy Lord makes haste to do thy bidding.' Western people have generally shared this view, but the fact that this apparently critical tradition has been preserved shows that in general Muhammad's contemporaries took a rather more

pragmatic view. They Llah chose to give his I criticise? Today Musli lust and, indeed, it sees living on the brink of m sun of Arabia would in let alone that of a cou: Muhammad had alwa Zaynab. He would, M had been divorced an women in the *umma*. I could have married he strated the fact that a blood and need be no

Shortly after Zayna with it, came the revel decreed that Muhamn *umma*. Muslim traditi usually translated as 'th who had aggressively c his wives from view b unpleasant incidents i wives as they went ou Muhammad became civilised countries, he of secluding women c dignity. All, however, during the pre-Islamic talk and innuendo an traditional society, a s strong emotions in a c that Ibn Ubbay and h Muslim cause by poin

It is said that at Zay long and made a nuis which put some distanc *umma*:

Believers, do for a meal w unless you a invited, ente disperse. Do

support to a third minor, who were members of the tribe of Imah, a rather shy and reserved among Muhammad's wives. It would become extremely difficult to some extent, still divide the tribe between Mah and Ali and their followers to become the Shiah. It is interesting that a new wife was frequently ally herself to the Prophet's cousin, had married himself. The circumstance has been used by critics of

seen the incident as a lack of appetite and of his crafty own desires. They give a different view of Muslims. One afternoon he was expected to be out. His wife was not expecting visitors was surprised but was still said to be surprised. Muhammad succumbed to her wishes, something that sounded like, Zaynab had never wanted Muhammad's admiration as a way of showing about the electrifying life became impossible. His wife if Muhammad was away, telling him to fear the hope for the marriage: he divorced her anyway.

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pragmatic view. They saw Muhammad as a man with passions and if Allah chose to give his Messenger a few extra privileges, who were they to criticise? Today Muslims deny that Muhammad married Zaynab out of lust and, indeed, it seems most unlikely that a woman of 39, who had been living on the brink of malnutrition all her life and exposed to the merciless sun of Arabia would inspire such a storm of emotion in anybody's breast, let alone that of a cousin who had known her since she was a child. But Muhammad had always been very close to the Jahsh family including Zaynab. He would, Muslims argue, have felt responsible for her after she had been divorced and was, as we know, concerned about unprotected women in the *umma*. If he had wanted Zaynab for her sexual charms, he could have married her himself years earlier. The incident also demonstrated the fact that a fostering or adoptive relationship was not a tie of blood and need be no bar to marriage.

Shortly after Zaynab's wedding celebrations and possibly connected with it, came the revelation known as the Verses of the Curtain, which decreed that Muhammad's wives must be secluded from the rest of the *umma*. Muslim traditions explain the introduction of the *hijab*, which is usually translated as 'the Veil', in various ways. Some say that it was Umar, who had aggressively chauvinist views, who urged Muhammad to seclude his wives from view by means of a curtain. There had recently been unpleasant incidents when the Hypocrites had insulted Muhammad's wives as they went out at night to relieve themselves. Others say that as Muhammad became more important and more aware of life in the civilised countries, he wanted to adopt the Persian and Byzantine custom of secluding women of the upper classes as a mark of his wives' new dignity. All, however, point out that sexual morality was lax in Arabia during the pre-Islamic period. There tended to be a great deal of indecent talk and innuendo and a great deal of flirting and propositioning. In traditional society, a sexual scandal can be extremely serious and arouse strong emotions in a community. Muhammad was probably well aware that Ibn Ubbay and his supporters would be delighted to damage the Muslim cause by pointing to a disgrace in his own family.

It is said that at Zaynab's wedding feast, some of the guests stayed too long and made a nuisance of themselves. This prompted a revelation which put some distance between Muhammad's family and the rest of the *umma*:

Believers, do not enter the houses of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless you are given leave. But if you are invited, enter; and when you have eaten, disperse. Do not engage in familiar talk,

for this would annoy the Prophet and he would be ashamed to bid you go; but of the truth, al-Llah is not ashamed. If you ask his wives for anything, Speak to them from behind a curtain [*hijab*]
This is more chaste for your hearts and their hearts.⁴⁹

Muhammad, it will be remembered, had no room of his own at the mosque; he simply slept in the apartments of his wives. But as he became more important in Medina his home inevitably became a public place, as more and more people came to consult him about their personal or religious problems or asked him to arbitrate in a dispute. Some Muslims liked to approach him through his wives, in the hope of getting his ear. Aisha, for example, was known to have had several friendly chats with a particular young man, which people remembered later when a scandal broke out that threatened to split the *umma* down the middle. The *hijab* or curtain was not intended to be an oppressive measure. It was designed to prevent a scandalous situation developing which Muhammad's enemies could use to discredit him.

We should pause to consider the question of the *hijab*, and the Muslim institution of the veil. It is often seen in the West as a symbol of male oppression, but in the Qu'ran it was simply a piece of protocol that applied only to the Prophet's wives. Muslim women are required, like men, to dress modestly, but women are not told to veil themselves from view, nor to seclude themselves from men in a separate part of the house. These were later developments and did not become widespread in the Islamic empire until three or four generations after the death of Muhammad. It appears that the custom of veiling and secluding women came into the Muslim world from Persia and Byzantium, where women had long been treated in this way.

In fact the veil or curtain was not designed to degrade Muhammad's wives but was a symbol of their superior status. After Muhammad's death, his wives became very powerful people: they were respected authorities on religious matters and were frequently consulted about Muhammad's practice (*sunnah*) or opinions. Aisha became extremely important politically and in 656 led a revolution against Ali, the Fourth Caliph. It seems that later other women became jealous of the status of Muhammad's wives and demanded that they should be allowed to wear the veil too. Islamic culture was strongly egalitarian and it seemed incongruous that the Prophet's wives should be distinguished and honoured in this way. Thus many of the Muslim women who first took the veil saw it as a symbol of power and influence, not as a badge of male oppression. Certainly when the wives of the Crusaders saw the respect in which Muslim women were held, they took to wearing the veil in the hope of teaching their own

menfolk to treat their symbols and practices realise that we have (ditional cultures in or Muslim women today, find it extremely offens as misogynist. Most r archal bias, but it is a r than any other traditio then the Muslims we treated their women denounced Islam for women. Today when s not always because the but because they fin profoundly satisfying attitude which claims themselves.

In January 627, sh Prophet's wives, a pair his family could und expedition against the l preparing to raid Me Muraysi on the Red S and made off with 2,00 women, including Juw Aisha had been allowe as soon as she saw Juw about her ransom – si scarcely seen her in th recalled later with disa her.⁵⁰ Sure enough, l verted to Islam, and th

The Muslims camp days. More of the Hyp because it promised ri the underlying tension of the local tribesmen, and each one called up Quraysh and the other responded to this trib others' throats – yet an

MUHAMMAD

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