



The Age of Aisha (ra): Rejecting Historical Revisionism and Modernist Presumptions

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Abstract

There are a myriad of criticisms against Islam propagated by non-Muslims in today's age. One of these criticisms accuses the Prophet ﷺ of marrying a child because of the *ḥadīth* mentioned in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim* where 'Ā'isha mentions she married the Prophet at the age of six and consummated the marriage at the age of nine. This paper focuses on two questions. First, are the claims that she was actually in her teens when she married accurate and are they strong enough to make us discard 'Ā'isha's *ḥadīth*? Second, why did this become an issue in modern times when it was not an issue at the time the marriage took place? In conclusion, the claim that she was a teen when she married is more of a reaction to our own insecurities than an unbiased approach to finding the truth.

Introduction

Al-Bukhārī reports that Hishām [ibn 'Urwa] narrates from his father that 'Ā'isha, may God be pleased with her, [said]: “The Prophet ﷺ married her when she was six years old and he consummated the marriage when she was nine years old, and then she remained with him for nine years.”¹

Muslim reports that al-'Amash narrates from Ibrāhīm who narrates from al-'Aswad that 'Ā'isha said: “The Messenger of God ﷺ married her when she was six years old and consummated the marriage when she was nine [years old], and he passed away when she was eighteen [years old].”²

The two *ḥadīths* above state that 'Ā'isha³ was six when she married and nine when the marriage was consummated. These narrations come from the two most authentic books in the Islamic tradition following the Qur'ān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (*Ṣaḥīḥayn*), not to mention that they each place 'Ā'isha as the

¹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Nikāḥ*, viii. 52 no. 5133.

² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Nikāḥ*, ii. 1038 no. 1422.

³ 'Ā'isha Bint Abī Bakr, the third and favorite wife of the Prophet, was born in Mecca about 614 CE. Her mother, Umm Rūmān, came from the tribe of Qināna. Muḥammad gave 'Ā'isha the *kunya* Umm 'Abd Allāh, after the name of her nephew 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr. See W. Montgomery Watt, *Encyclopedia of Islam Edition 2nd edition*: 12 vols. ed. by P.J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2005), art. 'Ā'isha Bint Abī Bakr.' [EP²]

narrator. In addition, numerous other authentic *ḥadīths* outside the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* support these two ages.⁴ Thus, it would be reasonable even for one with primitive knowledge of Islam and the *ḥadīth* sciences to accept this *ḥadīth* as authentic and as a part of Islamic history. To further corroborate, there was not a single prominent medieval Islamic scholar who took issue with her age; on the contrary, some of them went as far to state that there was a consensus. Ibn Hazm⁵ says: “The age of ‘Ā’isha is recorded in the texts without a difference of opinion.”⁶ Ibn Kathīr⁷ says: “This is a matter in which there is no difference of opinion amongst people.”⁸ Ibn Abd al-Barr⁹ says: “I do not know of anyone differing on this.”¹⁰ Thus, it can be concluded that the ages of six and nine constitute the default understanding and any evidence that contradicts this will have to be equally or more authentic.

The marriage proposal from the Prophet ﷺ to ‘Ā’isha occurred after Khadīja, the first wife of the Prophet, passed away. Khawla bint Ḥakīm came and asked if the Prophet was interested in remarrying. After he said yes, she gave him two options: Sawda bint Zam‘a and ‘Ā’isha bint Abī Bakr, who were both Muslims at the time. She then went to Abū Bakr’s house asking for ‘Ā’isha’s hand in marriage on behalf of the Prophet ﷺ. However, Abū Bakr was concerned for two reasons. First, the Prophet had previously referred to him as his brother and he was therefore concerned whether the marriage would be permissible. She returned to

⁴ Abū Dawūd, *Sunan, Adab*, iv. 284 no. 4933; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan, Nikāḥ*, iii. 75 no. 1876; Nasā’ī, *Sunan, Nikāḥ*, vi. 82 no. 3255.

⁵ Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. Sa‘īd, born at Cordova in 384/994, died at Manta Līsham in 456/1064, was an Andalusian poet, historian, jurist, philosopher and theologian, one of the greatest thinkers of Arabo-Muslim civilization, who codified the Zāhirī doctrine and applied its method to all the Qur’ānic sciences. See R. Arnaldez, *EF*² art. ‘Ibn Ḥazm.’

⁶ Ibn Ḥazm, *Hujjat-l-Widā’*, 435.

⁷ ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, born in Boṣrā circa 700/1300 and died in Damascus in Sha‘bān 774/February 1373, was one of the best-known historians and traditionalists of Syria under the Baḥrī Mamlūk dynasty. Educated at Damascus, where he went to live with his elder brother in 706/1306, after the death of their father, he had as his main teacher, in *fiqh*, the Shāfi‘ī Burhān al-Dīn al-Fazārī (in 729), but next fell strongly, and very early, under the influence of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and his school. See H. Laoust, *EF*², art. ‘Ibn Kathīr.’

⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya*, ii. 141.

⁹ al-Namaṛī (al-Numayrī), appellative of a family of Cordovan scholars, the principal representative of which is Abū ‘Umar Yūsuf b. ‘Abd Allāh, born in 368/978. He studied in his native city under masters of repute, engaged in correspondence with scholars of the East and travelled all over Spain “in search of knowledge,” but never went to the East. Considered the best traditionalist of his time, he was equally distinguished in *fiqh* and in the science of genealogy. After displaying Zāhirī tendencies at first, in which he resembled his friend Ibn Ḥazm, he later followed the Malikī doctrine. See Ch. Pellat, *EF*², art. ‘Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr.’

¹⁰ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī‘āb*, iv. 1881.

the Prophet ﷺ and he told her to inform Abū Bakr that they were only brothers in Islam, making the marriage permissible. Second, ‘Ā’isha was already engaged to Mut‘im ibn ‘Adiyy, who was not Muslim. Thus, Abū Bakr went to ‘Adiyy’s house and found that the family feared that ‘Ā’isha would convert their son to Islam and therefore ended the engagement. As a result, the Prophet ﷺ married ‘Ā’isha.¹¹

Some have claimed that she was in her teens when she married and when the marriage was consummated. My hope is to analyze each claim to see if it holds up against the previous evidences mentioned. In order to fully understand these claims, a list of relevant dates is provided below.¹²

609 CE	Fāṭima’s birth
610 CE	Beginning of revelation
614/615 CE	‘Ā’isha’s birth
617 CE	Sūra al-Qamar is revealed
620/621 CE	‘Ā’isha is married
622 CE	<i>Hijra</i> (Migration to Medina)
1 AH/2 AH; 623/624 CE	Marriage is consummated
2 AH; 624 CE	Battle of Badr
3 AH; 625 CE	Battle of ‘Uḥud
73 AH; 692 CE	‘Asmā’ passes away

Claims that ‘Ā’isha was married in her teens

There are five main claims relevant to the contention that ‘Ā’isha married the Prophet in her teens and consummated the marriage in her late teens:

1. Hishām ibn ‘Urwa was the only one to narrate the *ḥadīth*,¹³ and he narrated it when he was in Iraq, a time when he was accused of having a bad memory.

¹¹ See Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*.

¹² Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba*; Bacharach, *Middle East Handbook*, 54; Mohiuddin, *Revelation*; Ghufaylī, *al-Sanā al-Wahhāj*; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*; Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, viii., 304; Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*; Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-Tanwīr*, xvii., 168; Nawawī, *Tahdhīb al-Asma’ wa-l-Lughāt*; Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd edition.

¹³ Al-Bukhārī reports that Hishām [ibn ‘Urwa] narrates from his father that ‘Ā’isha, may God be pleased with her, [said]: “The Prophet ﷺ married her when she was six years old and he consummated his marriage when she was nine years old, and then she remained with him for nine years.” Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Nikāḥ*, viii. 52 no. 5133.

2. Asma', the older sister of 'Ā'isha, was ten years older than 'Ā'isha. Since Asma' passed away in 73 AH/692 CE at the age of 100, this places 'Ā'isha at eighteen years old when the marriage was consummated.
3. Fāṭima was born at the time the Ka'ba was rebuilt, when the Prophet ﷺ was thirty-five years old, and she was five years older than 'Ā'isha, making 'Ā'isha around twelve years old when she married the Prophet.
4. 'Ā'isha participated in the Battle of 'Uḥud. Ibn 'Umar narrates that the Prophet did not permit him to participate in Uḥud because he was fourteen, but when he was fifteen the Prophet gave him permission to fight in the battle of the Trench (*Khandaq*). Thus, 'Ā'isha must have been at least fifteen at the time of 'Uḥud, meaning she consummated the marriage at thirteen or fourteen years old.
5. 'Ā'isha narrated in Bukhārī: "This revelation [in Sūra al-Qamar]: 'Nay, but the Hour is their appointed time (for their full recompense); and the Hour will be more grievous and most bitter'¹⁴ was revealed to Muḥammad in Makkah while I was a playful *jāriya*."¹⁵

Hishām ibn 'Urwa

Hishām ibn 'Urwa is the narrator most commonly mentioned in the *ḥadīth* placing her at six and nine. Some argue that Hishām was the only one to narrate this, weakening the strength of the *ḥadīth* since if this was common knowledge, then many more narrators would have mentioned the age of 'Ā'isha. However, this is a fallacy since there are other narrators who narrate this such as al-Aswad ibn Yazīd,¹⁶ Abī Salama ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān,¹⁷ and others.¹⁸

The second claim against Hishām, who spent most of his life in Medina before moving to Iraq, was that his memory weakened and he began to mix up narrations while in Iraq as Abū al-Hasan ibn al-Qaṭṭān mentions. Some use this as evidence to discard the *ḥadīth* found in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, giving more legitimacy to other evidences. However, Imām al-Dhahabī vehemently denies this saying: "[Hishām]

¹⁴ *al-Qamar*, 54:46.

¹⁵ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vii. 367 no. 4876.

¹⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Nikāḥ*, ii. 1039 no. 1422.

¹⁷ Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, *Nikāḥ*, vi. 131 no. 3379.

¹⁸ Ghufaylī, *al-Sanā al-Waḥḥāj*, 130.

is considered as an absolute authority. There is nothing to the claim that al-Qaṭṭān makes. He was a preserver [of *ḥadīth*]. It is possible that his [memory] changed as he aged, and that his mental sharpness decreased. Of course, he is not in his elder age as he was in his youth, and no one is infallible from forgetfulness. However, this change is not considered to be harmful nor to have led to mixing narrations. [Hishām] never mixed narrations. This *ḥadīth* is taken as proof in the *Muwaṭṭa*, the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, and the *Sunan*. So this statement by al-Qaṭṭān is to be rejected. [Hishām] was an imam from amongst the giants who was free from mistake.”¹⁹ Thus, it becomes clear that Hishām ibn ‘Urwa is a reliable narrator who *Bukhārī* trusted enough to put in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* and can be still referred to as a strong piece of evidence.

Asma’, the elder sister of ‘Ā’isha, was ten years older than ‘Ā’isha

‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī al-Zinād states that Asma’ was ten years older than ‘Ā’isha. In addition, it has been confirmed that she passed away in the year 73 AH/ 692 CE at the age of one hundred.²⁰ If this was the case, that would make her twenty-seven years old at the time of *hijra*, meaning ‘Ā’isha would have been seventeen at the time of *hijra*. We know that ‘Ā’isha was married two or three years before *hijra*, thus placing her at fourteen or fifteen years old at the time of marriage and seventeen or eighteen when the marriage was consummated.

The math in this scenario provides a strong argument that ‘Ā’isha was in her late teens when the marriage was consummated. However, a number of scholars consider ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī al-Zinād to be a weak narrator. Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘īn said: “None of the *ḥadīth* scholars took him as an authority.” ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Maymūnī said: “I asked Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal about Ibn Abī al-Zinād. He said: ‘He is considered to be weak in *ḥadīth*.’” Al-Nasā’ī also considered him weak and not to be taken as an authority. Abū Aḥmad al-Ḥākim said: “He is not from amongst those who preserve *ḥadīth*.” Abū Ḥātim said: “We

¹⁹ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, Hisham ibn ‘Urwa.

²⁰ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, Asma’ bint Abī Bakr.

write down his *ḥadīth*, but do not take them as an authority.”²¹ Many other scholars considered him to be weak as well.

Some use Ibn Kathīr as evidence to support this claim as he too mentions that Asma’ was ten years older than ‘Ā’isha.²² However, there seems to be some confusion as he also states there was no difference of opinion concerning the fact ‘Ā’isha married at the age of six.²³ In this case, it seems Ibn Kathīr was unaware of the implications of Asma’ being ten years older coupled with the fact that he provides no chain (*sanad*) to substantiate the claim that she was ten years older. It is clear then that this narration cannot be accepted because its narrator is considered to be weak and the explicit age of six in *Bukhārī* is given precedence over the implicit age of fourteen or fifteen based on the difference in age between Asma’ and ‘Ā’isha.

Fāṭima’s age in comparison to ‘Ā’isha

The claim here is that Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet ﷺ, was born when he was 35 years old. If Fāṭima was five years older than ‘Ā’isha, as reported, that would mean ‘Ā’isha was born when the Prophet was 40 years old. In other words, she was born during the year of prophethood, 610 CE. Since we know she married in 620/621 CE, that would place her at the age of ten or eleven when she married the Prophet ﷺ.

The issue stems from two separate narrations from Ibn Ḥajar’s *al-Iṣāba fī Tamayīz al-Ṣaḥāba*.²⁴ The first narration is on the authority of Abū Ja‘far al-Bāqir that al-Abbās said: “Fāṭima was born the year the Ka‘ba was rebuilt when the Prophet was 35 years old.” The second narration is on the authority of ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Ja‘far al-Hāshimī who said that: “Fāṭima was born when the Prophet was 41 years old, and she was born a year or so before prophethood. She is also older than ‘Ā’isha by five years.”²⁵

²¹ Ghufaylī, *al-Sanā al-Wahhāj*, 188-189.

²² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, viii., 91.

²³ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, iii., 131.

²⁴ Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1448). *al-Iṣāba fī Tamayīz al-Ṣaḥāba*, ed. ‘Ādil ‘Aḥmad ‘abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alā Muḥammad Mu‘awwad, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1415/[1994]).

²⁵ Ibn Ḥajar. *al-Iṣāba*, viii. 263.

It seems that there was a confusion (*iḍṭirāb*) between the two narrations. The second narration where Fāṭima is listed to be five years older is with the condition that Fāṭima was born when the Prophet ﷺ was 41. The confusion arises when Fāṭima's seniority is detached from the second narration and inserted within the first one, changing the age of the Prophet ﷺ from 41 to 35, thus causing issues with 'Ā'isha's age and birth. For this reason, the argument does not stand.

'Ā'isha's participation in the Battle of 'Uḥud

Anas said: "On the day of [the battle of] Uḥud when [some] people retreated and left the Prophet, I saw 'Ā'isha bint Abī Bakr and Umm Sulaym, with their robes tucked up so that the bangles around their ankles were visible hurrying with their water skins. Then they would pour the water in the mouths of the people, and return to fill the water skins again and came back again to pour water in the mouths of the people."²⁶

Ibn 'Umar said: "The Messenger of God inspected me on the battlefield on the Day of 'Uḥud, and I was fourteen years old. He did not allow me [to take part in the fight.] He inspected me on the Day of Khandaq, and I was fifteen years old, and he permitted me [to fight]."²⁷

Ibn 'Umar did not receive permission to participate in the Battle of Uḥud because he was fourteen years old. When the Battle of the Trench occurred, the Prophet ﷺ reevaluated him and permitted him to fight because he had reached the minimum age of fifteen. The claim is that if Ibn 'Umar was not allowed to participate in the Battle of Uḥud at the age of fourteen and 'Ā'isha was seen participating in the battle, that must mean she was at least fifteen years old at the Battle of Uḥud. Since the Battle of Uḥud occurred one to two years after consummation, she must have consummated the marriage at the age of thirteen or fourteen.

This type of analogy (*qiyās*) is a deficient one (*qiyās ma'a al-fāriq*). The purpose of an analogy in Islamic jurisprudence is to transfer a ruling over from one event to

²⁶ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Jihād wa Siyar*, v. 83 no. 2880.

²⁷ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Bayan Sinn al-Bulūgh*, iii. 1490 no. 1868.

another which has no direct clear ruling within a text (*naṣṣ*). In order for this to occur, they must share the same reasoning (*‘illa*). When the Prophet ﷺ prohibited Ibn ‘Umar from going to battle the first time, the reasoning was that he was not old enough to participate as a combatant. The following year the Prophet ﷺ gave him permission because he had reached the minimum age of a combatant. In the case of ‘Ā’isha, the *ḥadīth* clearly demonstrates that she was acting as a nurse, not as a combatant; thus, the age restriction that was placed on Ibn ‘Umar does not apply to ‘Ā’isha since they do not have the same reasoning (*‘illa*), and the conclusion that she was at least fifteen cannot be made.

‘Ā’isha and Sūra al-Qamar

‘Ā’isha narrated in Bukhārī: “This revelation [in Sūra al-Qamar]: ‘Nay, but the Hour is their appointed time (for their full recompense), and the Hour will be more grievous and most bitter’²⁸ was revealed to Muḥammad in Makkah while I was a playful *jāriya*.”²⁹

There are a few points to take into consideration: whether Sūra al-Qamar is in its entirety a Makkan Sūra, the date when Sūra al-Qamar was revealed, and what the implications of ‘Ā’isha calling herself a *jāriya* are.

Some claim that the verse mentioned in the *ḥadīth* of Sūra al-Qamar is Medinan revealed in 4 AH, 5 AH, 6 AH, 7 AH, 9 AH, or 10 AH, thus pushing the age of ‘Ā’isha to be older. However, Ibn Ḥajar and Ibn ‘Āshūr deny these claims. More specifically, Ibn Ḥajar states that ‘Ā’isha was born eight years before *hijra* and was three years old when this verse was revealed, which would place its date of revelation at 617 CE.³⁰

The most indirect method of arriving at the conclusion that she was older involves understanding what ‘Ā’isha meant by *jāriya*. There is no specific age for a *jāriya* as the term is generally understood to refer to a youthful (*fatiyya*) girl.³¹ Thus, the best way to understand the word is to see how ‘Ā’isha used it in other statements.

²⁸ *al-Qamar*, 54:46.

²⁹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vii. 367 no. 4876.

³⁰ Ghufaylī, *al-Sanā al-Waḥḥāj*, 227-229.

³¹ *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, xxxvii., 347; *Lisān al-‘Arab*, xiv., 143.

‘Ā’isha said: “If a girl (*jāriya*) were to reach puberty at the age of nine, then she is a woman.”³² We learn two things from this statement. First, it was not uncommon for girls to reach puberty at the age of nine. Second, the maximum age of a *jāriya* would be eight if puberty was reached at nine according to ‘Ā’isha. The question is, what is the minimum age of a *jāriya*? Al-Mālikī clarifies Ibn Ḥajar’s statement saying: “Ibn Ḥajar mentions that ‘Ā’isha, may God be pleased with her, was born eight years before *hijra*. She would be three years old at the splitting of the moon, and it is permissible to call a three-year-old a *jāriya*.”³³ From these statements we can estimate that the age of a *jāriya* can range from three to eight years old.

According to the *ḥadīth* mentioned above, the latest date we can attribute to the revelation of Sūra al-Qamar is 10 AH and the minimum age of a *jāriya* is three years old. This would place ‘Ā’isha at three years of age when she got married in 10 AH. The earliest date we can attribute to Sūra al-Qamar is 4 AH and the maximum age of a *jāriya* is eight years. This would place ‘Ā’isha at fourteen years of age when she married the Prophet ﷺ. Based on all the evidence from Sūra al-Qamar and the *ḥadīth* mentioned above the age when ‘Ā’isha married the Prophet ranges from three to fourteen. The question remains: which age do we pick from this range?

Due to the ambiguous nature of these dates and ages, Muḥammad al-Ghufaylī concludes: “It is not correct to weaken an established narration that is agreed upon because of what historians mention, especially when there is a difference of opinion concerning when Sūra al-Qamar was revealed.”³⁴ In conclusion, the ages of six and nine fall within this range and the established narration in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim* is confirmed. Speculation about her being older based upon ambiguity cannot take precedence over an established narration that explicitly mentions the specific ages of six and nine.

³² Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, ii., 409.

³³ Ghufaylī, *al-Sanā al-Wahhāj*, 228.

³⁴ Ibid.

Today's society

The question remains: why is her age a topic of debate amongst modern scholars when for centuries scholars did not give the historiography of these *ḥadīths*, outside of their authenticity, any importance?

At a certain point in history, a feeling of revulsion and apprehension developed for child marriages. During this shift, modern and secular scholars began to view *ḥadīth* and other historical Islamic events through this lens of revulsion, especially the age of 'Ā'isha.³⁵ This lens colonizing the past leads to one of two conclusions: either the Prophet's historiography was, as what some like Simon Ockley described, of perfidious character, or the historical recordings found in the *ḥadīth* books were erroneous because they do not fit with our current worldview. Those espousing the latter contend that the Prophet ﷺ was still respected and incapable of committing sins, but they resort to the historical nature of *ḥadīth* to support their claim. While some from amongst the Sunni tradition have pushed for a culture of sacralizing *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, others have created a culture of degrading *ḥadīth* solely as historical facts. Both have consequences. The former equates the narrations to the Qur'an and the latter attempts to use other historical data to dispute even authentic narrations. However, the balanced and mainstream approach as Ignaz Goldziher said: "was not a claim of infallibility, but rather the

³⁵ Brown, *The Canonization of Al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 11. Jonathan Brown hints that it began with Simon Ockley (d. 1720), a Cambridge scholar, who says:

Ayesha was but seven years old, and therefore this marriage was not consummated till two years after; when she was nine years old, at which age, we are told, women in that country are ripe for marriage. An Arabian author cited by Maracci, says that Abubeker was very averse to the [sic] giving him his daughter so young, but that Mohammed pretended a divine command for it; whereupon he sent her to him with a basket of dates, and when the girl was alone with him, he stretched out his blessed hand (these are the author's words) [sic], and rudely took hold of her clothes, upon which she looked fiercely at him, and said: "People call you the faithful man, but your behaviour to me shows you are a perfidious one."

Jonathan Brown responds after providing evidences:

Marracci is chiefly interested in depicting Muhammad as a lecher and a hypocrite, who gropes women who are not his wives and uses his claims of prophecy for carnal ends. His exaggeration of Abu Bakr's hesitance merely provides dramatic effect, suggesting that he also wanted to keep his daughter out of lecherous hands. Ockley adopts this and adds his own layer of interpretation. Perhaps because he is skeptical about the claims that women mature so early in warmer climes, Abu Bakr's original response turns into him being 'very averse' to marrying his daughter off at such a young age.

Brown posits that Ockley superimposes his worldview and prejudices upon early Arabian culture. According to Ockley, Abū Bakr's hesitance in response to the Prophet's request via Khawla was not because of a previous request by Mut'im ibn 'Adiyy or because of brotherhood, but rather because of the shame attributed to child marriages in the 18th century.

community's demand that these two works be recognized as legally compelling indicators of 'religious praxis' on the basis of the community's consensus on their authenticity."³⁶ In other words, when certain *ḥadīth* do not fit our modern worldview, do we first question the authenticity of the *ḥadīth* or our worldview? The danger in continuously questioning *ḥadīth* at every juncture of our own desires and limits, despite their historical authenticity, is that it eventually leads to the systematic approach of rejecting *ḥadīth* entirely. If subjective matters are able to deny *ḥadīth*, then *ḥadīth* lose their standing in society and become but a tool to legitimize our desires, not a tool to help guide communities.

This is why the scholars discuss the difference between explicit (*qat'ī*) and implicit (*ẓannī*) narrations. An implicit *ḥadīth*, such as those *ḥadīths* that help calculate 'Ā'isha's age through other evidences, is not taken over an explicit *ḥadīth* that clearly and specifically details her age, as clearly explained in the claims above.³⁷

Once this is realized, then we can begin to question our worldview. Were child marriages during the time of the Prophet ﷺ something common? Were they looked down upon by society?

Child Marriage: Is there such a thing?

Those who dispute the age of 'Ā'isha at the time of her marriage have a difficult time comprehending that women during the time of the Prophet ﷺ reached puberty so young. Marrying a girl of that age would be considered a crime now, so how could one fathom them reaching puberty? Concerning child marriage, there are a few issues that need to be discussed.

The first question is whether women in the Arabian Peninsula reached puberty at the age of nine. As mentioned earlier, 'Ā'isha said: "If a girl (*jāriya*) were to reach puberty at the age of nine, then she is a woman."³⁸ In addition, Imām Shāfi'ī³⁹ said:

³⁶ Brown, *The Canonization of Al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 11.

³⁷ Zuhaylī, *al-Wajīz*, 21.

³⁸ Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, ii., 409.

³⁹ al-Imām Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs b. al-'Abbās b. 'Uthmān b. Shāfi' b. al-Sā'ib b. 'Ubayd b. 'Abd Yazīd b. Hāshim b. al-Muṭṭalib b. 'Abd Manāf b. Qusayy al-Qurashī, the eponym, rather than the founder, of the Shāfi'ī school (*madhhab*). See E. Chaumont, *EF*², art. 'al-Shāfi'ī'.

“I saw many women in Yemen at the age of nine reaching the age of puberty.”⁴⁰ He also said: “I saw in Ṣan‘ā’ a grandmother who was a girl the age of twenty-one years. Her daughter reached puberty at the age of nine and gave birth at the age of ten. The daughter of that girl also reached puberty at the age of nine and gave birth at the age of ten.”⁴¹ Al-Ḥasan ibn Ṣaliḥ said: “I met with a slave girl that belonged to us who became a grandmother at the age of twenty-one.”⁴² It becomes clear that there are many instances of girls reaching puberty at the age of nine, with some even giving birth at the age of ten in the Arabian Peninsula.

The second question is, how do we define what a child is? Neil Postman, a former professor at New York University, wrote the book *The Disappearance of Childhood*. In it, he argues that childhood was one of the great inventions of the Renaissance, just like any other social structure. Its development was closely correlated with the written tradition and the development of primary schools as opposed to the oral tradition in the Middle Ages. He states:

In an oral world there is not much of a concept of an adult and, therefore, even less of a child. And that is why, in all the sources, one finds that in the Middle Ages childhood ended at age seven. Why seven? Because that is the age at which children have command over speech. They can say and understand what adults can say and understand. They are able to know all the secrets of the tongue, which are the only secrets they need to know. And this helps us to explain why the Catholic Church designated age seven as the age at which one was assumed to know the difference between right and wrong, the age of reason. It also helps us to explain why, until the seventeenth century, the words used to denote young males could refer to men of thirty, forty, or fifty, for there was no word—in French, German, or English—for a young male between the ages of seven and sixteen. The word child expressed kinship, not an age. But most of all, the oralism of the Middle Ages helps us to explain why there were no primary schools. For where biology determines communication competence, there is no need for such schools...The medieval way of learning is the way of the oralist; it

⁴⁰ Dhahabī, *Siyar*, x., 91.

⁴¹ Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, ii., 1513.

⁴² Ibid.

*occurs essentially through apprenticeship and service—what we would call “on-the-job training.” Such schools as existed were characterized by a “lack of gradation in the curricula according to the difficulty of the subject matter, the simultaneity with which subjects were taught, the mixing of the ages, and the liberty of the pupils.” If a medieval child got to school, he would have begun as late as age ten, probably later. He would have lived on his own in lodgings in the town, far from his family. It would have been common for him to find in his class adults of all ages, and he would not have perceived himself as different from them. He certainly would not have found any correspondence between the ages of students and what they studied.*⁴³

The Islamic tradition is known for its attention to detail in oral transmissions, the ability to memorize thousands of lines of poetry and Qur’ān, and the mentorship each student of knowledge received from a long chain of scholars. This oral tradition emphasizing memorization could have advanced the age when a child would have command over speech and reason. In addition, the household jobs of women at the time exposed them to the life of adults more than those around their age. Thus, age was not a measure of one’s ability or status within society, but to establish lineage. In other words, it is impossible for someone younger than oneself to be one’s parent. Beyond this, age provided no concrete difference between one’s physical or mental capabilities. Thus, when scrutinizing the *ḥadīth* where Khawla offers both Sawda and ‘Ā’isha in marriage, the response of the Prophet ﷺ was identical for both, even though Khawla clearly differentiated the age to the Prophet. That is because society saw them no different, and that is why the Classical Medieval Islamic scholars made no mention of the age of ‘Ā’isha in marriage. It was only after the development of childhood did we attempt to impose that social structure onto a society that did not recognize it.

In addition, if a claim is made that the Middle Ages were a time of moral corruption and their distorted perception is what led them to child marriages then we need look no further than the past century in the United States of America. In 1930, thousands of boys and girls married before the age of fourteen. It was

⁴³ Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, 18-21.

reported that 1,311 girls in the East South Central area of the country married below the age of fourteen.⁴⁴

These evidences do not suggest that we as a society should promote child marriages and ignore current social norms. However, they do suggest that we are not at liberty to question the authenticity of every religious text that does not fit our current worldview.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the assumption that the *ḥadīth* of ‘Ā’isha’s age can be disputed based on the indecency of child marriage is invalid because the concept of childhood did not exist during their time, the age of puberty for some girls was the age of nine, and their culture was simply different. The claims that she was in her teens when she got married do not provide enough strong evidence to discard two explicit *ḥadīth* in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, but rather represent attempts to legitimize our own insecurities.

⁴⁴ Syrett, *American Child Bride*, 219.