



Aisha (ra): The Case for an Older Age in Sunni Hadith Scholarship

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Abstract

A famous *ḥadīth* states that 'Āisha was 9 years old when her marriage with the Prophet ﷺ was consummated. However, in the science of *ḥadīth* verification (*muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*), there are several conditions for the veracity of a *ḥadīth*, the last two of which are the absence of *'ilal* (hidden defects) and *shudhudh* (discrepancy). Criticism of the 'Āisha-age *ḥadīth* has been mounted on this basis by the traditionalist Syrian scholar of *ḥadīth*, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī. He determines the content of the 'Āisha-age *ḥadīth* to be discrepant (*shādhah*) and defective (*ma'lūl*) on the basis of numerous evidences which collectively suggest that 'Āisha was born four years prior to the start of the Prophetic mission, betrothed to the Prophet ﷺ in the tenth year of prophethood at age fourteen, and married to him one year after the migration at the age of almost 18. Discrepancy is established by many arguments including that it contradicts other *aḥadīth* even in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, for instance, where 'Āisha explains that by the time she attained the age of awareness, her parents were already following Islam—which logically necessitates that she was born prior to their conversion. In addition to demonstrating discrepancy with *ḥadīth* sources, he draws upon many biographical sources including Ibn Sa'd, Ibn Ishāq, Al-Ṭabarī, Ibn 'Asākir, Abū Nu'aym, Ibn al-Athīr, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, and others. The collective weight of these evidences is what he mobilizes to assert that the 'Āisha-age *ḥadīth* can be attributed to a mistaken statement in the transmitted report (*at-tawahhum qawl al-murawī*).

Introduction

Non-Muslim criticism of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ generally focuses on one or more of these aspects of his life:

- * he ordered and participated in wars against the religious Other;
- * he was both a religious and political ruler and applied harsh penal law;

* he married a minor.¹

These criticisms are used to portray Islam as a backward and violent religion but also to portray contemporary Muslims as naïve, backwards ('medieval') and suspect for adhering to the teachings of such a man.² Much has been written on Muḥammad's teachings on war and political rule, in which many researchers have pointed out their ethical framework and overlapping elements with modern international law.³ So, although the first two critiques can be answered in a satisfactory manner without regressing into false apologetics, the third is more difficult to address. And this has to do both with unambiguous nature of the sources describing this aspect of the Prophet's life, and their credibility: Muḥammad's marriage contract to 'Āisha bint Abī Bakr (d. 58 AH/678 CE) when she was six years old, and her joining his household and the consummation of the marriage when she was nine. The Qur'an itself does not specify a lower age limit for marriage but rather mental and physical criteria,⁴ and is therefore a difficult

¹ This is a different, but overlapping list of liberal concerns with modern *Sharī'a* governance in Muslim majority countries: (i) Supremacy of *sharī'a*, (ii) Legal status of women, (iii) Cruel corporal punishments, (iv) Violations of human rights. See: Jan Michiel Otto, *Sharia Incorporated: A Comparative Overview Of The Legal Systems Of Twelve Muslim Countries In Past And Present* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2010), 29.

² These two issues are frequent in both liberal public discourse and Islamophobic discourse. One of the better known Islamophobic lobbyists, Robert Spencer, also uses these two main subjects as proof that Islam is the opposite of liberal modernity: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2006/11/finding-out-the-truth-about-muhammad>. For a discussion of the term Islamophobia, see: <http://crg.berkeley.edu/content/islamophobia/defining-islamophobia>.

³ On war, see for example: Ahmed al-Dawoody's *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). On politics and law, see for example: Mashood A. Baderin, *International Law And Islamic Law* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008). M. H. Kamali, *Citizenship And Accountability Of Government: An Islamic Perspective* (United Kingdom: The Islamic Texts Society, 2011). Ahmed Akgündüz, *Islamic Public Law (Documents On Practice From The Ottoman Archives)* (Istanbul: IUR Press, 2011). Ahmad S. Moussalli, *The Islamic Quest For Democracy, Pluralism, And Human Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

⁴ Verse 4:6 says marriageable age (*balaghū al-nikāh*) is determined by mental maturity (*rushd*) and verse 6:152 adds bodily maturity (*shudd*), most *fiqh* scholars accept these criteria as referring to a recommended age of 15 or 18 years, and some mention that founding imams as Imam Malik and Imam Abū Hanifa mentioned the ages of 21 and 25. See: Mullājīyūn al-Ḥanafī, *Tafsīrāt al-Aḥmadiyya fī Bayān al-Ayāt al-Shar'iyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyyah, 2010), 211-212. al-Māturīdī, *Tā'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunna* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyyah, 2005), 4:316. Qāḍī Ibn al-'Arabī, *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'ilmiyyah, 1996), 1:418. Although their preferred ages are very similar to ours today, the majority didn't see these as minimal ages and thus didn't forbid child marriage as they viewed that arranged underage marriages could serve the well-being of the child (*maṣlaḥa al-walad*) as long as compatibility (*kafa'*) between the two prospective spouses was upheld. But their emphasis on both preferred ages and the match serving well-being does show an awareness of the possible problems surrounding underage marriage. Scholars also used verse 65:4 to scriptualize underage marriage whereby "divorced non-menstruating women" (*lam yaḥiḍna*) was understood as referring to women being too old (*kabīr*) or too young (*ṣaghīr*) for it. See Mullājīyūn, *ibid*, 700; al-Zuhaylī, *ibid*, 7:184. Classically the scholars distinguished between

arbiter to use in discussions on maturity. There are also some traditions discussing underage marriage among the companions of Muḥammad, which indicate the possibility of its accepted practice. When we look at prophetic traditions there are several *ḥadīth* reports (which I label the 'Āisha-age traditions) which go back to 'Āisha with almost the same wording:

تزوجني رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم لست سنين وبنى بي وأنا بنت تسع سنين

*The Messenger of Allah ﷺ married me when I was six years old and consummated the marriage with me when I was nine years old.*⁵

Therefore, the historical truth of her being a minor at the time of the marriage is rarely challenged and has generated several apologetic responses⁶ which can be categorized as voluntarism, contextualism/universalism, or modern projectionism-revisionism.

Voluntarism

What the Qur'ān says, and the Prophet ﷺ says or does (his *Sunnah*) is always exemplary and can not be deemed sinful or unethical, even if we experience it as such, as God's command and will are not bound by human concepts of right or wrong. This position is called theological voluntarism or divine command theory.⁷ Contracting marriages of minors is therefore approved by God and by His law, but the majority of voluntarist adherents do state that consummation of the marriage is

contracting the marriage and consummating it; they focused on the former while the latter was mostly linked to when the female was deemed physically mature enough for it. al-Zuḥaylī emphasizes that there are no texts that forbid setting a legal minimum age for contracting the marriage; it is rather the opposite, the Qur'an links marriage to mental and physical maturity and the majority of scholars preferred a marriageable age of 15+, compatibility, and the attainment of well-being (*maslaḥa*), which in contemporary society incorporates an educational system which prefers a minimum age of 18 years. If anyone younger wants to marry, a judge can review the request as judges have inherited the guardianship of the fathers in this age. See Al-Zuḥaylī, *ibid*, 7:188-189.

⁵ These can be found in the *ḥadīth* collections of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Aḥmad, and al-Nisā'ī. See: Muḥammad al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-Awtār* (Egypt: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1993), 6:224-225. Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1379 AH), 7:224-225.

⁶ Apologetics concern theological responses to criticism from within or outside the faith tradition.

⁷ Also known as ethical or moral subjectivism, on this see: Mark C. Murphy, *God And Moral Law: On The Theistic Explanation Of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 100–132; Philip L. Quinn, *Divine Commands And Moral Requirements* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 66–88; Mariam al-Attar, *Islamic Ethics: Divine Command Theory In Arabo-Islamic Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 75.

only lawful after attaining puberty as it otherwise causes harm.⁸ This approach in principle rejects the idea that the Qur'ān or Prophetic *Sunnah* are confined to specific historical-cultural contexts, but does take into account several ethical-hermeneutical norms in interpreting the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* such as the objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*).⁹

Contextualism/Universalism

Marrying minors was normal in 7th-century Arabia, the context of the Prophet ﷺ. It was therefore not viewed as unethical. Ideas of puberty, maturity, and family law are influenced by culture and are therefore not universal. Many proponents of this approach point out that 'Āisha's age was never an issue before the 20th-century, as prior to this time pre-or early pubescent marriages were common in most societies around the world.¹⁰ This approach separates certain elements of the *Sunnah* (and also certain Qur'ānic commands) into either being historical-cultural or ahistorical-universal, implying different ethical norms and applicability. Classically, there have always been elements of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* that were determined, by the majority of scholars, to be historically and culturally confined. These elements were viewed as either being abrogated or specific to the Prophet ﷺ and/or his Companions as the well-being (*maṣlaḥa*) pursued by the divine commands is determined both by contextual and universal factors, and was replaced by new commands, or non-transferable and therefore specific, when new contexts and situations arose. This, seemingly, was also the reason why the Ḥanafī and Mālikī jurists did not include the 'Āisha-age traditions

⁸ For an overview of pre-modern opinions among the Sunni schools, see: Wahba al-Zuhaylī, *al-Fiqh al-islāmīyyu wa adillatuhu* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2008), 7:62-65, 183-189. For examples of different voluntaristic discussions, see: <http://islamqa.info/en/178318>; http://www.askimam.org/public/question_detail/21031.

⁹ Anver Emon labels this semi-moral realism *soft natural law*. See: Anver Emon, *Islamic Natural Law Theories* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2010), 123–183; Al-Attar, *ibid*, 135–140; Mariam al-Attar, “Meta-Ethics: A Quest For An Epistemological Basis Of Morality In Classical Islamic Thought,” *Journal Of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. 1-2 (2017), 39–47; Ibn Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt fī uṣūl al-sharī'a* (Mansoura: Dār al-Ghadd al-Jadīd, 2011), 1:63–65; Aḥmad al-Raysūnī, *Imam Al-Shatibi's Theory Of The Higher Objectives And Intents Of Islamic Law* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005), 232–250.

¹⁰ See an interesting discussion on this by Jonathan Brown: <http://www.lamppostproductions.com/dr-johnathon-brown-on-the-age-of-aisha/>, and: <http://muslimmatters.org/2010/10/13/understanding-the-problematic-age-of-aisha/>.

in their discussions of minor marriage.¹¹ Both the historical and ahistorical elements of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* were deemed to be in line with universal ethical norms, as God only commands the good.¹² These scholars also applied ethical-hermeneutical norms in interpreting the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, but also viewed these universal norms as discernable apart from revelation.¹³ Several modern scholars, on the other hand, define this historical-ahistorical dichotomy based on modern, mainly Western, ethical norms, and viewing the classical-Islamic ethical norms mainly as 'outdated.'¹⁴ Classically, the contents of the 'Āisha-age-traditions were viewed as specific to the Prophet ﷺ and, at the same time, not seen as conflicting with universal ethical norms. This was because the consummation of the marriage apparently took place only when 'Āisha was physically ready, thereby not causing harm to her, which was the main ethical criterion in classical thought. But according to several modern scholars, this consummation, even if it was physically possible without harm, is not acceptable by modern notions of maturity. They therefore view it through the lens of cultural relativism or evolutionary ethics. What is specific to the Prophet ﷺ and his times is also ethically contextual or outdated and has no universal import.

Modern Projectionism-Revisionism

This approach is similar to the voluntarist position but with the major difference that it takes modern, mainly Western, ethics as the universal norms that are projected (truthfully or falsely) on the Prophet ﷺ and the Qur'an. It therefore

¹¹ See Carolyn Baugh, "An Exploration of the Juristic Consensus (*ijmā'*) on Compulsion in the Marriages of Minors," *Comparative Islamic Studies* I, no. 1 (1999), 33-93.

¹² That is, ethical objectivism, also known as natural law theory or moral realism; on this, see: Murphy, *ibid*, 69-99; Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves, *Natural Law: An Introduction To Legal Philosophy*, (UK: Hutchinson & Co, 1972), 37-50; Emon, *ibid*, 7-11; Al-Attar, *ibid*, 12.

¹³ Anver Emon labels this type of ethical objectivism *hard natural law*. Cf. Emon, *ibid*, 45-89; A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries Of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 43-56, 79-86; Wahba al-Zuhaylī, *Uṣūl al-fiqh al-islāmī* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2013), 1:123-124, 127-134; Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (2008, IIIT).

¹⁴ Nasr Abū Zayd (d. 2010) and Abdullah Saeed's works are modern examples of such a dichotomy between historical-cultural and ahistorical-universal elements of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*. See: Nasr Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-Naṣṣ: dirasah fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (1994, al-Markaz al-Thaqafī al-'Arabī). Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (2005, Routledge).

reinterprets classical interpretations deemed problematic,¹⁵ and rejects historical sources as unauthentic when they contradict modern norms. The modern projectionist approach accepts and applies hermeneutical elements of contextualism/universalism, using modern ethics as its default position,¹⁶ but in general rejects the concept that revelation can become outdated.¹⁷ Thus sources and interpretations presenting underage marriage as acceptable are rejected as they are seen as misogynistic, patriarchal, and abusive.

As Kecia Ali remarks:

*Muslim discussions of the Prophet's personal conduct in general, and his marriage to Aishah in particular, provide a lens through which to view changed attitudes toward sex and marriage, and unresolved concerns about the appropriateness of applying medieval standards in modern life. There are dangers in both historical anachronism and unchecked moral relativism, and in analyzing Muslim reflections on Muhammad's marriage to Aishah, several questions emerge about both the accuracy and relevance of historical information.*¹⁸

Apologetic discussions about the age of 'Āisha first occurred in Arabic in response to early 20th century Orientalist discourse,¹⁹ and, in the last two decades, mainly

¹⁵ Edip Yüksel's *Qur'ān: A Reformist Translation* (Brainbow Press, 2007) is a radical example of this as he has a Qur'ānist-structuralist approach to the text, whereby traditional interpretations are generally deemed to be false and barbaric. See especially his introduction where he provides a long list of classical interpretations which he views as problematic.

¹⁶ In general, modern human rights discourse is embraced, especially when it comes to human equality which revolves around gender equality and inclusivist or universalist approaches to non-Muslims, but on LGBT-identities a mostly conservative stance is taken.

¹⁷ The majority of Islamic modernist-reformist thought falls under this category and have a Soft or Hard Natural Law approach. To understand how this relates to interpretation and acceptance or rejection of sources, see: Arnold Yasin Mol, "The denial of supernatural sorcery in classical and modern Sunni *tafsīr* of Sūrah al-Falaq (113:4): A reflection on underlying constructions," *al-Bayan Journal of Qur'ān and Hadith Studies* 11, no. 1 (June 2013), 15-32. For similar typological modernistic approaches, see: J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: 1999, Cambridge University Press). Taji-Farouki and Cornell, *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004).

¹⁸ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 136-137.

¹⁹ See a discussion on this in Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014), 145-148. Early 20th century Orientalist writing caused some discussions on this among higher classes and some intellectuals in Egypt, but it is the post-1990 era

occurred in English.²⁰ The majority of these were written by Muslims who, in general, had no special training in classical Islamic sciences or modern academic Islamic studies,²¹ and who applied similar arguments whereby it has become difficult to trace who copied from whom.²² The two oldest apologetics in English are by Maulana Muhammad Ali (d. 1951) published in 1948,²³ and by T.O. Shanavas in 1999, who both made use of Arabic sources²⁴ and laid the ground for later articles.²⁵ Ali used source comparison to point out textual contradictions in the 'Āisha-age traditions (*matn* criticism), to which Shanavas added criticism on the chain of transmission (*isnād* criticism). The source comparison uses sources mostly from general history works without *isnād* or lesser *ḥadīth* collections to discredit the contents of *aḥadīth* belonging to the most authentic collections (*ṣaḥīḥ*), and therefore only raises doubt about their content (*matn*). To question a narrator, on the other hand, attacks the *ṣaḥīḥ* status of the *isnād*, and every tradition sharing a similar *isnād*.²⁶ The arguments found in these articles can be summarized as follows:

- A. Was 'Āisha born before or after Muḥammad started his prophetic mission?
- B. Can her age before and around her betrothal and marriage to Muḥammad be determined by events she remembered or how she is described by others?
- C. Can her age be determined by comparing it to the ages of her siblings?

when this discussion seemed to have returned in Arabic, in far more Arab countries among the larger population, and by scholars trained in Islamic sciences.

²⁰ For example: <http://fountainmagazine.com/Issue/detail/At-What-Age-Did-Aisha-Marry-the-Prophet>; <http://www.hasaan.com/2012/04/hazrat-aishas-real-age-at-marriage-time.html>; <http://www.dawn.com/news/696084/of-aishas-age-at-marriage>; <https://truthhazratayesha.wordpress.com/>; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/17/muhammad-aisha-truth>; http://www.discoveringislam.org/aisha_age.htm.

²¹ Kecia Ali, *ibid*, 138-143.

²² *Ibid*, 144.

²³ <http://www.muslim.org/islam/aisha-age.htm>.

²⁴ <http://www.ilaam.net/articles/ayesha.html>.

²⁵ http://www.islamawareness.net/FAQ/what_was_ayesha.html and <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Polemics/aishah.html>.

²⁶ Kecia Ali, *ibid*, 139-140. This argument has been refuted as insufficient as there are other traditions mentioning the same age for 'Āisha in which Hishām ibn 'Urwah was not part of the *isnād*; see: http://www.askimam.org/public/question_detail/21031. Also al-Idlibī's analysis states that this idea is incorrect; see the translation below.

- D. Did the Arabs use a different understanding of numbers in relation to age—e.g., counting not from birth but from her first menstruation—or was there a misunderstanding between the pre-Islamic and *Hijra* calendar?
- E. Do the differences between historical sources and the 'Āisha-age traditions themselves discredit the textual reliability of the latter?
- F. Are the narrators of these traditions reliable?

One contemporary article we will discuss here is by a Syrian *ḥadīth* scholar, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ibn Aḥmad al-Idlibī (b. 1948),²⁷ who applies both a universalist and modernist form of apologetics and uses all of the above arguments except D. His essay deserves analysis because al-Idlibī is better grounded in the *ḥadīth* sciences than the other apologetic writers, and can therefore be taken more seriously. One of his first publications consisted of detailed research into how textual (*matn*) criticism of prophetic *ḥadīth* has been part of Islam since its beginnings.²⁸ In it, he shows why traditions are determined by contents, and not just by *isnād*. Although scholars of *fiqh* have always applied textual criticism, over the centuries the authenticity level of the *isnād* became more and more decisive in accepting a tradition and increased reluctance to reject it.²⁹

Al-Idlibī, on the other hand, points out that to declare an *isnād* authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*), it needs to satisfy five conditions, while there are numerous reasons for a text (*matn*) to contain a mistake (*asbāb al-wahm kathīra*). Only a tradition that is deemed both *ṣaḥīḥ* in *isnād* and in *matn* has overcome doubt about its authenticity (*ghalab 'alā al-ẓann*). But even then, if it is not multiple-transmitted (*lā yatawātar*), it can not attain the certainty (*maquṭū'a*) of a multiple-transmitted tradition (*mutawātir*).³⁰

²⁷ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ibn Aḥmad al-Idlibī was born in 1948 in the Syrian city of Idlib. He is Shāfi'ī in lineage and obtained a PhD in Islamic sciences with a specialty in *ḥadīth* from the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ḥassāniyah in Morocco in 1980. He has taught *ḥadīth* sciences at several Arab universities, including the Kulliyah al-Darāssāt al-Islāmiyah wa al-'Arabiyah in Abū Dhabi and the Kulliyat al-Sharī'ah in the United Arab Emirates. His websites are: www.salahsafa.blogspot.com and <http://idlbi.net>.

²⁸ Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī, *Minhaj Naqd al-Matn 'inda 'ulamā' al-Ḥadīth al-Nabuwī* (Beirut: Dār al-Afaq al-Jadīdah, 1983).

²⁹ Wael B. Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth: A Pseudo-Problem," *Studia Islamica*, No. 89 (1999), 75-90.

³⁰ A *mutawātir* is a *ḥadīth* or saying (*khbar*) which is transmitted in every stage of the *sanad* by multiple transmitters (general agreed upon requirement is 10 transmitters), whereby it can rationally be concluded that these

When a tradition has an authentic *isnād* but also deviant contents (*isnād ṣaḥīḥ wa matnahu shādhdh*), it should be classified as weak and deficient (*ḍa'īf*) and can be rejected.³¹ Al-Idlibī therefore applies an *usūlī* methodology in judging and classifying traditions.³² Jonathan Brown calls this approach 'Late Sunni Traditionalism,' which is a revival of the *Ahl al-Rā'y* juristic methodology whereby "jurists, not hadith scholars, [have] the ultimate authority in determining the authenticity and implication of a hadith," making jurists "responsible for content criticism."³³

Al-Idlibī was clearly influenced by, or follows a similar vision as, the late 'Aẓharī scholar Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996) who saw a *ḥadīth* only as truly *ṣaḥīḥ* if it did not contain a hidden flaw (*illā*) or contradict more reliable evidence.³⁴ It is this methodology which we find in his discussion on the 'Āisha-age traditions. In his essay, al-Idlibī points out that because the 'Āisha-age traditions are of *ṣaḥīḥ* status, there is no avoiding studying them. If we keep his *usūlī* methodology in mind, it means that the *ṣaḥīḥ* status of the *isnād* demands that the *matn* must also be checked for an error (*wahm*), so that its probability status (*ẓann*) can be determined. Secondly, he says he came across articles on this subject by some scholars, and he wanted to write about it to "[gather] some of the scholarly arguments while ignoring the points of weakness." By this he means that he wants to point out to people that they remain indifferent to possible weaknesses in historical sources that need to be further scrutinized. So, his stated objective is not to simply discredit the 'Āisha-age traditions because he rejects the possibility of the Prophet marrying an underaged girl, but to use them as an example of how

transmitters could not have agreed upon a fabrication (*ikhtilāq*). A *mutawātir ḥadīth* provides necessary knowledge (*al-ilm al-Darūriyya*). Any *ṣaḥīḥ* tradition that doesn't conform to these criteria, but has an authentic *isnād*, is of the status of *Aḥād* (singular transmission), only provides conditional knowledge (*al-ilm al-mutawaqqif*), which needs further investigation. Maḥmūd al-Taḥḥān, *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'ārif li-Nuṣhr wa al-Tawzī', 1425 AH), 23-25, 27.

³¹ al-Idlibī, *ibid*, 33.

³² For the difference between *usūlī* and 'athārī methodology, see: Hallaq, *ibid*, 79-85. For a classical 'usūlī exposition, see: Abū Ishāq al-Shāḥibī, *al-Muwāfiqāt fī uṣūl al-Sharī'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 4:3-21.

³³ Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 262.

³⁴ Brown, *ibid*, 263. See the first two chapters in al-Ghazālī's *The Sunna of the Prophet between the People of the Fiqh and the People of the Ḥadīth* (*al-Sunnah al-Nubuwiyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Ḥadīth*) (translated by Aisha Bewley, Istanbul: Dar al-Taqwa, 2009).

people easily overlook mistakes in generally accepted sources. Just as his book on *matn* criticism tries to prove the classical practice of such criticism, and thus its authenticity as an Islamic methodology, his essay tries to show the necessity and usefulness of such criticism.

In his analysis he tries to determine ʿĀisha's age by determining the following:

1. The age difference between ʿĀisha and her older sister Asmā.
2. The possibility of her experiencing and narrating events at a certain age.
3. The words used to describe her at the time when Surat al-Qamar, the 54th chapter of the Qur'an, was revealed.
4. When she converted to Islam.
5. When her parents married and whether she was born during the pre-Islamic period.
6. The way she was proposed as a possible spouse for the Prophet ﷺ.

He does this by using both graded and ungraded narrations (with and without *isnād*), therefore gathering as much evidence to prove there is a conflict between the gathered evidences and the original narration under question. Part of his argument is also based on the idea that it is unreasonable that she was four or younger at the time of certain events (2) and when she was proposed to the Prophet (6), which uses assumptions about a child's capability and the way seventh-century Arabian culture discussed possible spouses. It therefore is not simply an argument based on clear textual and linguistic comparison, but also involves the idea of what is historically probable and logically reasonable. All this taken together is enough proof for al-Idlibī to declare the ʿĀisha-age traditions as containing error (*wahm*), and thus being defective (*maʿlūl*).

Since the writing of my original research paper on al-Idlibī's essay, it has undergone several updates over the years, a sign that it is part of a dynamic conversation between al-Idlibī and others. The original essay which was posted

online on February 27th, 2013 included six arguments, and al-Idlibī later updated it to include an additional seventh argument on October 10, 2014.³⁵ By April 7th, 2015, al-Idlibī had appended three further arguments to reach a total of ten.³⁶ The four additional arguments include:

7. 'Āisha's description of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī and Anas ibn Mālīk as young boys (*ghulāmayn ṣaghīrayn*), thus implying her seniority relative to them.
8. A narration wherein she refers to Fāṭimah as "O my daughter," which would only be appropriate if she was older or at least close in age.
9. The story of how she was first proposed for marriage to Jubayr ibn Muṭ'im before the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ; given Abū Bakr's staunch commitment to Islam, it is unlikely he would have proposed his daughter to an idolater, unless it was prior to the advent of Islam.
10. The narration in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* about 'Āisha's participation as a nurse during the battle of Uhud, with wording that highlights strenuous activity that seems highly implausible for an eleven-year-old girl but plausible for a girl of nineteen years.

Al-Idlibī notes that while each individual narration from the biographical sources could be critiqued, it is on the basis of the collective weight of all these evidences and ten arguments that the historically accurate opinion must be that she was older. He also explains at length that this argumentation pertains solely to a matter of historical accuracy, as he does not feel there is anything to exonerate the Prophet from even if marriage did occur at the younger age conventionally stated.

Translation of al-Idlibī's essay³⁷

³⁵ http://salahsafa.blogspot.com/2013/02/blog-post_27.html

³⁶ Refer to the online article al-Idlibī, *Umr al-Sayyidat 'Āisha Yawm al-'Aqd wa Yawm al-Zawaj*, at: <http://idlibi.net/marriageage/>.

³⁷ Original translation of the 2013 essay by the author with subsequent revisions and additional translation of the updated essay by Yaqeen Institute. I want to thank the team of Yaqeen Institute for their help in editing and updating this research paper. Al-Idlibī refers to several sources without precise references (i.e., he doesn't use footnotes in this essay), so I have tried to trace the majority of citations, especially the ones from lesser known or accessible works, and added them in the footnotes. I have also added dates of death of the mentioned historians to indicate the period

The Age of 'Āisha on the Day of the Marriage Contract and Consummation of the Marriage.

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Ever Merciful.

Praise be to Allah, a praise that is abundant, pure, and blessed, as is beloved and pleasing to our Lord.

Praise be to Allah, the One by whose blessing all good is perfected. O my Lord, perfect us in virtue and bless us with a righteous ending with your favor, blessing, and generosity. O Most Honorable of all those who are honorable!

A *ḥadīth* has been transmitted about the Prophet, salutations of God upon him and peace,³⁸ that he contracted marriage with (*'aqada*)³⁹ honorable 'Āisha, God's pleasure upon her,⁴⁰ when she was six years old and he consummated the marriage with her when she was nine years old. Is this *ḥadīth* authentic in its transmission chain (*isnād*) and textual contents (*matn*)? We must research this.

I came across a researcher's article on this subject which weakened this *ḥadīth* because of its transmission chain and textual contents. I found it possible to benefit from it by gathering some of the scholarly arguments while ignoring the points of weakness in order to arrive at a result established by numerous evidences leading to the correct understanding.

Due to the importance of presenting the correct understanding of this issue from the prophetic biography and tradition, this research will be supported by evidence for the birthdate of 'Āisha, her age at the time of the marriage contract with the

they were working in (which was mostly centuries after the compilers of *ḥadīth*), and point out when a source has an ungraded *isnād* or lacks it.

³⁸ Translation of *ṣallā Allah 'alayhi wa salam*; in the rest of the translation abbreviated as صلى الله عليه وسلم.

³⁹ The contracting of a marriage refers to the agreement between the guardians and/or prospective spouses on the wish to get married and on the amount of dowry. The root word '*aqada*' literally means making a knot (thus the English expression on marriage as 'tying the knot' comes very close) and is used for contracts, agreements, etc. It can be used to refer to the contracting of the marriage and the existing marriage itself as a form of contract. In classical *Sharī'a* constructs, betrothal (*khitbah*), contracting the marriage (*'aqd*) and consummating it are separate acts whereby the first is an unofficial agreement between parties, the second an official agreement between parties with dowry; the third generally occurs when the female is deemed physically ready. See: Al-Zuhaylī, *ibid*, 7:23-26, 43-65. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, 143.

⁴⁰ Translation of *raḍī Allah 'anhā*; in the rest of the translation this is left out.

Messenger ﷺ, and her age at the time of the consummation of the marriage. There are two opinions regarding these details.

The dominant opinion is that he ﷺ contracted the marriage with her when she was six and consummated the marriage with her when she was nine. This is taken from the established statement of ‘Āisha narrated in *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and other books. This opinion necessitates that she was born four years after the advent of the prophetic mission.⁴¹

Abū Nu‘aym says in *Ma‘rifat aṣ-Ṣahābah*, “‘Āisha was six years old on that day [of the marriage contract].”

Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr says in *al-Istī‘āba*, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ performed the marriage [contract] with her in Makkah before the migration when she was six, though some say she was seven. He ﷺ consummated the marriage with her in Madīnah when she was nine and I don’t know of anyone who has disagreed with this. He ﷺ passed away when she was eighteen years old.”

Ibn Hajar says in *Fath al-Barī*, “She was born in Islam approximately eight years before the migration and the Prophet ﷺ passed away when she was approximately eighteen years old.”

This is all based on the narration of ‘Āisha.

The second opinion is that he ﷺ contracted the marriage with her when she was fourteen years old. And he consummated the marriage with her when she was seventeen years old and almost eighteen. This necessitates that she was born four years before the advent of the prophetic mission. The statements of Ibn Ishāq and aṭ-Ṭabarī allude to this. These statements will be mentioned in the fourth and fifth paragraphs of evidences for the second opinion.

⁴¹ Throughout most of the essay, al-Idlibī uses only *al-Ba‘ath*, the mission, to refer to the advent of the prophetic mission. It is generally accepted that the Prophet ﷺ received his first revelation in 610 CE, thirteen years before the *hijra*.

The evidences for the first opinion

Al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and others narrate through the chain of Hishām bin 'Urwah from his father from 'Āisha that the Prophet ﷺ contracted the marriage with her when she was six years old and consummated the marriage with her when she was nine years old. Muslim also narrates it through the chain of Ma'mar from az-Zuhrī from 'Urwah from 'Āisha. Ahmad bin Ḥanbal and Muslim also narrate it through the chain of al-Aswad bin Yazīd an-Nakha'ī from 'Āisha. There are other chains transmitted from 'Āisha.

The word *tazawwajahā* [in the *ḥadīth*] can mean contracting the marriage. That is the intended meaning here.

The transmission chain of the *ḥadīth* is authentic. Anyone who thinks that Ḥishām bin 'Urwah is alone in its transmission and made a mistake is incorrect.⁴²

Ibn Abī Shaybah narrates through the chain of al-Aswad from 'Āisha that the Prophet ﷺ married her [consummated the marriage] when she was nine years old and he ﷺ died when she was 18 years old.

Abū 'Awānah narrates in his *al-Mustakhraj* through the chain of 'Urwah from 'Āisha that the Prophet ﷺ contracted the marriage with her when she was six or seven years old, consummated the marriage when she was nine years old, and died when she was eighteen years old.

There are additional evidences in a *ḥadīth* of Ibn Mas'ūd that could support the *ḥadīth* of 'Āisha. However, the *ḥadīth* is weak.

At-Tirmidhī narrates in *al-Ilal al-Kabīr* from Yahyā bin Aktham from Yahyā bin Ādam from Isrā'īl bin Yūnus from his grandfather Ishāq from Abū 'Ubaydah from his father 'Abdullah bin Mas'ūd that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ contracted the marriage with 'Āisha when she was six years old, consummated the marriage when she was nine years old, and died when she was eighteen years old.

⁴² Here al-Idlibī dismisses the attempts by some apologists to try to find a weakness in the chains of transmission of the 'Āisha-age traditions to discredit them.

Al-'Uqaylī narrates the same text in *aḍ-Ḍu'afā al-Kabīr* from Muhammad bin Mūsā al-Balkhī from Mālīk bin Sulaymān al-Harawī from Isrā'īl from the same chain as above.

Aṭ-Ṭabarānī also narrates it in *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr* from Muhammad bin Mūsā from Ḥammād al-Barbarī from 'Abd al-Aḥmān bin Ṣāliḥ al-Azdī from Yaḥyā bin Ādam from Sharīk from Abū Ishāq from Abū 'Ubaydah from Ibn Mas'ūd.

The route of Isrā'īl from Abū Ishāq was considered to have a defect by Imam al-Bukhārī, as is mentioned in at-Tirmidhī's *al-'Ilal al-Kabīr*. Also, al-'Uqaylī states in *aḍ-Ḍu'afā al-Kabīr* that there is a gap in the chain.

Because the *ḥadīth* narrated from Ibn Mas'ūd has a weak chain of transmission, it is not suitable as support for 'Āisha's *ḥadīth*.

The evidences for the second opinion

[Argument based on comparison with the age of Asmā']

1 – 'Āisha is ten years younger than her sister Asmā. Asmā was born 27 years before the migration (i.e., 14 years before the prophetic mission). Therefore, 'Āisha was born four years before the prophetic mission.

Ibn 'Asākir narrates in *Tārīkh Dimashq* through his route to Ibn Abī az-Zinād that he said, "Asmā was ten years older than 'Āisha."⁴³

Abū Nu'aym says in *Ma'rifat aṣ-Ṣahābah* under the biography of Asmā', "She was born 27 years before the [start of the] calendar (i.e., before migration). She

⁴³Abū al-Qāsim b. al-'Asākir (d. 571 AH), *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* (Dār al-Fikr al-Ṭabā'ah wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawziya, 1995), 69:8. The *isnād* is not graded, thus its authenticity compared to the 'Āisha-age traditions is unknown.

passed away in the year 73 AH in Makkah a few days after the murder of her son, ʿAbdullah bin az-Zubayr. She was 100 years old [at the time of her death].”⁴⁴

Another piece of evidence that supports this narration regarding the birth year of Asmā is another narration of Abū Nuʿaym from Asmā in which she said, “I saw Zayd bin ʿAmr bin Nufayl leaning on the wall of the Kaʿbah saying, ‘O people of Quraysh! There is no one amongst you on the religion of Abrahām other than me.’”⁴⁵ Zayd passed away while the Quraysh were building the Kaʿbah before revelation came down to the Messenger ﷺ, as was narrated by Ibn Saʿd in his *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt*⁴⁶ through Saʿīd bin al-Musayyab (i.e., eighteen years before migration). Therefore, she was nine years old when she heard that, which is logical since someone under nine years of age would not usually precisely remember such a statement.

Ibn al-Athīr says in *Usd al-Ghābah*, “Abū Nuʿaym said, ‘She was born twenty-seven years before the [start of the] calendar.’”⁴⁷ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr said in *al-Istīʿāba*, “Asmā passed away in Makkah in the month of Jumādā al-ʿŪlā in the year 73 AH. She died having reached the age of 100.”⁴⁸

[Argument based on revelation of Sūrah al-Qamar]

2 – Al-Bukhārī narrates from ʿĀisha that she said, “The verse, {But the Hour is their appointment [for due punishment], and the Hour is more disastrous and more bitter}⁴⁹ was revealed to Muhammad ﷺ while I was young girl (*jāriyah*) playing. And Sūrat al-Baqarah and an-Nisā were only revealed while I was with him.”

⁴⁴ Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430 AH), *Maʿrifat aṣ-Ṣaḥābah* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭan li-ḌNushr, 1998), 6:3253. See also Ibn al-ʿAsākir, *ibid*, 69:9. Again the *isnād* is not graded, thus its authenticity compared to the ʿĀisha-age traditions is unknown.

⁴⁵ Al-Iṣbahānī, *ibid*, tradition 2843, 3:1134. Ungraded *isnād*.

⁴⁶ Ibn Saʿd (d. 230 AH), *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyyah, 1990), 3:291. Ungraded *isnād*.

⁴⁷ ʿIzz al-Dīn b. al-Athīr (d. 630 AH), *Usd al-Ghābah fī Maʿrifat aṣ-Ṣaḥābah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmiyyah, 1994), tradition 6705, 7:7. Ungraded *isnād*.

⁴⁸ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 463 AH), *al-Istīʿāba fī Maʿrifat al-Ṣaḥābah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), tradition 6705, 7:7. Ungraded *isnād*. See also in al-ʿAsākir, *ibid*, 69:8.

⁴⁹ Qurʾān 54:46. *Sahih International* translation.

Al-Qurṭubī says in his *tafsīr*, “Ibn ‘Abbās said, ‘There were seven years between the revelation of this *āyah* and [the battle of] Badr.’⁵⁰ If this is the case, then that means it was revealed five years before the migration and eight years after the prophetic mission.”

Ibn Sīdah and Ibn Manẓūr say in *al-Muḥkam*⁵¹ and *Lisān al-‘Arab*,⁵² “The word *jāriyah* means a young girl (*fatiyyah*).” The word *fatiyyah* means an adolescent girl (*shābbah*). It seems as though they would use the word *jāriyah* for a girl at the beginning of her adolescence because she is still running here and there [playing].⁵³

So how old was ‘Āisha during the revelation of the verse, {But the Hour is their appointment [for due punishment], and the Hour is more disastrous and more bitter},⁵⁴ which was revealed eight years after the prophetic mission?

Based on the first opinion, she would have been four years old. However, a four-year-old is not generally called a *jāriyah* (except in the context of contrasting a male and female). Therefore, it is apparent that the first opinion is a mistake. But based on the second opinion, she would have been twelve years old when the *āyah* was revealed, which fits with the meaning of *jāriyah* in Arabic.

[Argument based on ‘Āisha’s recollection of her parents]

3 – Al-Bukhārī narrates from ‘Āisha that she said, “I do not have any recollection of my parents except that they were following the religion of Islam. Not a day would pass except that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ would come to us, morning and evening. But when the Muslims were persecuted, Abū Bakr began migrating towards Ḥabashah⁵⁵ until he reached *bark al-ghimād* and met Ibn Daghinah...[till the end of the narration].”

⁵⁰ Shams al-Dīn al-Qurṭubī, *Jāma‘a al-Aḥkām al-Qur‘ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyah, 1964), 17:146. Ungraded *isnād*. The battle of Badr occurred in 2 AH (624 CE).

⁵¹ Bin Sīdah al-Mursī, *al-Muḥkam wa al-Muḥīt al-‘Aẓam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyyah, 2000), 7:625-626 (under the heading *al-Shīn wa al-Bā’*, the root of *al-Jāriyah* is *jarā*).

⁵² Ibn Manẓūr al-‘Anṣārī, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādr, 1414 AH), 7:81.

⁵³ The Arabic word for running is *tajrī* which comes from the same root letters as *jāriyah*.

⁵⁴ Qur‘ān 54:46.

⁵⁵ Arabic name of Ethiopia.

This narration supports the argument in two ways:

The first way is that, before the age of four, a child cannot usually comprehend the fact that his or her parents are practicing a religion contrary to the religion of the majority of those around them. And if 'Āisha was born four years after the prophetic mission and [we assume] her first awareness of her surroundings was in the eighth year of the prophetic mission then her statement “I was not aware of my parents except that they were practicing the religion” would have no benefit since it is already well known that Abū Bakr was one of the earliest converts to Islam and [his wife] Umm Rūmān accepted Islam early on in Makkah as stated by Ibn Sa'd.

However, if she was born four years before the prophetic mission, and [we assume] her first awareness of her surroundings was in the first year of the prophetic mission, then her statement would have benefit. [It would mean] that when she first became aware of her surroundings, she saw both of her parents practicing Islam, not just her father.

This is a proof that she was born approximately four years before the prophetic mission. This is also proven by the other supporting evidences.

The second way is that her statement “But when the Muslims were persecuted, Abū Bakr began migrating towards Ḥabashah” is connected to her awareness of her parents and their practice of the religion. This subtly alludes to the fact that she was aware at the time of that incident. The *Sahabah* only migrated from Makkah to Ḥabashah around the middle of the 5th year after the prophetic mission. And their second migration was around the end of the 5th year or beginning of the 6th.

If 'Āisha was born four years after the prophetic mission, then it wouldn't have been possible for her to comprehend what happened in the beginning of the sixth year after the prophetic mission. However, if she was born four years before the prophetic mission then that means she could have comprehended the incident completely.

[Argument based on ‘Āisha’s conversion to Islam]

4 – Muhammad bin Ishāq says in *as-Sīrah an-Nabawīyyah* under the section on the names of the early converts to Islam, “Then people from the Arab tribes accepted Islam. Amongst them were Sa‘īd bin Zayd bin ‘Amr bin Nufayl, his wife Fāṭimah bint al-Khaṭṭāb, Asmā bint Abī Bakr, and ‘Āisha bint Abī Bakr while she was a minor... Then Allah commanded his Messenger ﷺ to proclaim what he brought, announce his command to people, and call to Allah. Perhaps he had kept it hidden until he was commanded to reveal it. He waited years after the prophetic mission, then Allah said, {Then declare what you are commanded and turn away from the polytheists}.”⁵⁶

Ibn Kathīr paraphrases this text saying, “Ibn Ishāq said, ‘Then Allah commanded his Messenger ﷺ three years after the prophetic mission to proclaim what he was commanded and to be patient with the harm of the polytheists.’”⁵⁷

Ibn Ishāq’s statement means that ‘Āisha was from amongst those who accepted Islam during the initial period of secret calling to Islam and that she was a minor. If that period lasted three years then perhaps ‘Āisha attended some of those gatherings near the end. But this would not hold up based on the opinion that she was born four years after the prophetic mission as she would not have been born yet. However, based on the second opinion, she would have been six or seven years old at the time. And perhaps Ibn Ishāq mentioned her amongst the early Muslims despite her young age because of the status of her father Abū Bakr and to connect her to her sister Asmā who was ten years older than her.

[Argument based on ‘Āisha’s birth during the Pre-Islamic period]

5 – Aṭ-Ṭabarī says in his *Tārīkh*, “Abū Bakr married Qutaylah bint ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā and she gave birth to ‘Abdullah and Asmā. He also married Umm Rūmān bint ‘Āmir before Islam (*fī al-jāhiliyyah*) and she gave birth to ‘Abdurrahmān and

⁵⁶ Qur’ān 15:94. *Sahih International Translation*.

⁵⁷ Ibn Kathīr al-Dimashqī (d. 774 AH), *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah (min al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah li-ibn Kathīr)* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah li-l-Ṭabā‘h wa al-Nushr wa al-Tawzī‘, 1976), 1:454. Ungraded *isnād*.

‘Āisha. All four of his children were born from these two wives before Islam (*fī al-jāhiliyyah*).”⁵⁸

Ibn Ishāq’s words “before Islam” (*fī al-jāhiliyyah*) specify a time and are connected to “they were born” because it cannot be connected to [anything else]. This is a clear and explicit historical report stating that ‘Āisha was born before the prophetic mission.

Someone may object, saying that the meaning could be, “All four children were born from these two wives that he married before Islam” and that there is no indication of the time Abū Bakr’s children were born. The response is that this repeated emphasis is not proper since he explicitly stated for each wife that he married her before Islam. There is no benefit in mentioning again that he married them before Islam. This proves that this meaning is very unlikely and should not be considered.

[Argument based on the marriage proposal of ‘Āisha]

6 – Ibn Abī ‘Āṣim, aṭ-Ṭabarānī, and al-Ḥākim narrate in *al-Āhād Wal Mathānī*, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr*, and *al-Mustadrak* respectively from ‘Āisha that Khawlah bint Ḥakīm, the wife of ‘Uthmān bin Maz‘ūn, said to the Messenger ﷺ while in Makkah, “O Messenger of Allah ﷺ! Won’t you get married?” He ﷺ said, “To whom?” She said, “If you want then to a woman not previously married and if you want then to a woman previously married.” He ﷺ said, “Who is the woman not previously married?” She said, “[She is] the daughter of the most beloved of Allah’s creation to you, ‘Āisha bint Abī Bakr.” He ﷺ said, “Who is the woman previously married?” She said, “[She is] Sawdah bint Zam‘ah.” He ﷺ said, “Go and mention me to both of them.” This was after the death of Khadījah, as is made clear by other narrations.⁵⁹

The context points to the fact that Khawlah wanted to propose on behalf of the Prophet ﷺ after the death of Khadījah since he was now without a wife. It is

⁵⁸ Abū al-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabah ibn Taymiyah, 1994), 23:23. Nu‘īm bin al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘ilmiyah, 1999), tradition 2704, 2:181. *Isnād* graded *ṣaḥīḥ*.

⁵⁹ Al-Ṭabarānī, *ibid*, 23:23. Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *ibid*, tradition 2704, 2:181. *Isnād* graded *ṣaḥīḥ*.

far-fetched in this scenario that she would propose on his behalf to someone who was six years old [since that would not provide him any of the emotional support he had lost with the death of Khadījah]. However, if she was fourteen years old, then this is reasonable (*ma 'qūl*).⁶⁰

There is no doubt that together these proofs for the opinion that the Prophet ﷺ contracted marriage with 'Āisha when she was fourteen years old and consummated the marriage when she was almost eighteen years old give a strong indication that this is the correct opinion.

As for what has been established from 'Āisha stating that the Messenger ﷺ consummated the marriage with her when she was nine years old, it must be a mistake. She died at the age of 75 according to this preferred opinion. So perhaps she experienced some forgetfulness regarding the issue and made a mistake (*wahm*)⁶¹ in narrating it [which is not unlikely when recalling events that occurred prior to the establishment of a calendar].

It appears that we must consider this narration from 'Āisha to be a mistake (*tawahhīm al-qawl al-murawī*) due to the many evidences presented against it.

Summary of the research

The preferred opinion based on numerous evidences is that 'Āisha was born four years before the prophetic mission. And that the Messenger ﷺ contracted marriage with her in the tenth year of the prophetic mission when she was fourteen years old and three years before the migration. And he ﷺ consummated the marriage with her near the end of the first year after the migration when she was almost eighteen years old.

The *ḥadīth* that established the age of 'Āisha to be six years when the marriage was contracted and nine years when the marriage was consummated has an authentic

⁶⁰ What his criteria were for reasonableness, or rational acceptability, in this matter is unstated and has no precedence among classical commentaries on this tradition.

⁶¹ *Wahm* is a technical indication within the classical *ḥadīth* sciences: "When an error (*wahm*) is discovered through external indications (*al-qarā'īn*) and the gathered paths [of transmission], then it is defective (*mu'allal*)," al-'Asqalānī, *Nukhbat al-Fikar fī Muṣṭalaḥ Ahl al-Athār* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1997), 8.

chain of transmission. However, it contradicts established historical proofs and is, therefore, a discrepant (*shādh*) report and [should be] interpreted as a mistake.

Scholars have mentioned that when a *ḥadīth*'s text (*matn*) contradicts something more reliable from established history then it is rejected because that indicates a flaw due to a mistake by one of the narrators.

And Allah knows best.

And praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds.

[*The following are the additional arguments from the updated essay.*]

[Argument from 'Āisha implying her seniority to two other companions]

7 – At-Taḥāwī narrates in *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* from 'Ālī bin 'Abd ar-Raḥmān from al-Minjāb bin al-Ḥārith at-Tamīmī. He also narrates from Fahd bin Sulaymān from Muḥammad bin Sa'īd al-Iṣbahānī. [al-Minjāb bin al-Ḥārith at-Tamīmī and Sa'īd al-Iṣbahānī] both narrate from 'Ālī bin Mus-hir from Hishām bin 'Urwah from his father from 'Āisha that she said, “What do Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī and Anas bin Mālik know about the *ḥadīth* of the Messenger ﷺ? They were just young boys.”

Aṭ-Ṭabarī narrates the same *ḥadīth* in *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr* from Muḥammad bin 'Abdillāh al-Ḥaḍramī from al-Minjāb bin al-Ḥārith from 'Ālī bin Mus-hir from Hishām bin 'Urwah from 'Āisha. (Muḥammad bin 'Abdillāh al-Ḥaḍramī, [nicknamed] Muṭayyan, is from Kufa. He is a trustworthy and reliable narrator (*thiqah ḥāfidh*). He died 297 AH and lived for 95 years.) This narration has a gap between Hishām bin 'Urwah and 'Āisha.

Ibn 'Asākir narrates the same *ḥadīth* from Abī al-Ḥasan 'Alī bin al-Ḥasan al-Mawāzīnī from Abī al-Ḥusayn bin Abī Naṣr from Abī Bakr Yūsuf bin al-Qāsim from Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Sākin from 'Alī bin al-Haytham from al-Mu'allā bin Maṣṣūr from 'Ālī bin Mus-hir from Hishām bin 'Urwah from his father from 'Āisha.

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr quotes the same narration in *Jāmi' Bayān al-'Ilm* while omitting his chain (*'allaqahu*) from 'Ālī bin Mus-hir connecting all the way to 'Āisha. Therefore, it is likely that this is an established statement from 'Āisha.

If that is the case, then it is important to know the birthdates of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī and Anas bin Mālīk. Both of them were born approximately ten years before the migration. 'Āisha, according to the dominant opinion, was a year younger than these companions. But if she was younger than them, it wouldn't make sense for her to say, "They were just young boys."

However, according to the second opinion, she was seven years older than them. They were each eleven years old and she was eighteen years old when the marriage was consummated about a year after the migration. Therefore, she was more aware of the events and it would be logical for her to call them young boys.

All praise is for Allah for his granting of success.

[Argument from 'Āisha implying her seniority to Fāṭimah]

8 – Ibn Abī 'Āṣim, ad-Dūlābī, aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī, aṭ-Ṭabarānī, and al-Bayhaqī narrate in *al-Āḥād Wa al-Mathānī*, *adh-Dharī'ah aṭ-Ṭāhirah*, *Mushkil al-Āthār*, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*, and *Dalā'il an-Nubuwwah* respectively from the route of Muhammad bin 'Abdillāh bin 'Amr bin 'Uthmān that his mother Fāṭimah bint al-Ḥusayn narrated to him that 'Āisha, the wife of the Prophet, used to say, "Certainly the Messenger صلی الله علیه وسلم said to Fāṭimah while on his deathbed, 'O my daughter, come lean close to me.' She leaned close to him and he صلی الله علیه وسلم spoke to her privately for some time. Then she stood up and was crying. Then he صلی الله علیه وسلم said to her, 'O my daughter, come close to me.' She came close to him and he صلی الله علیه وسلم spoke to her privately for some time. Then she stood up and was smiling. 'Āisha said to her, 'O daughter (*bunayyah*) what did your father whisper to you?' After he صلی الله علیه وسلم passed away, Fāṭimah said, 'Now [I will tell you what he said]. First he told me that Jibrīl would review the Qur'ān with him once a year but reviewed it with him twice this year. That is why I cried. Then he told me that I would be the first of his family to join him and said, 'You are the leader (*sayyidah*) of the women of Paradise [as well as]

the chaste Maryam bint ‘Imrān.’ That is why I smiled.” The chain of transmission for this narration is weak.

The narration supports the argument because ‘Āisha calls Fāṭimah, “O daughter!” Fāṭimah, according to the most common opinion, was born five years before prophethood. Others say she was born a little bit before or after the prophetic mission.

If ‘Āisha was born four years after the prophetic mission, then that means that Fāṭimah was nine—or at least four—years older than her. It is far-fetched that a young woman would say something like “O daughter!” to someone who is older than her, even if she was her stepmother.

But if ‘Āisha was born four years before prophethood then this means Fāṭimah was either a year or several months older than ‘Āisha based on the most common opinion [for Fāṭimah’s age]. Such a small difference in age would not prevent a younger stepmother from saying “O daughter!” to someone older than her under her care.

There is clear supplemental evidence in this narration that ‘Āisha was born four years before the prophetic mission, not four years after the prophetic mission. Even though this narration has a weak chain, it is acceptable to use it as supplemental evidence since the criterion for supplemental evidence is more relaxed.

[Argument based on the unlikelihood of Abū Bakr accepting a proposal for his daughter to an idolater]

9 – Ibn Ābī ‘Āsim (in *al-Āhād Wa al-Mathānī*), Ibn Raḥwayh, Ibn Ḥanbal, aṭ-Ṭabarī (in *at-Tārīkh*), aṭ-Ṭabarānī (in *al-Mu‘jam al-Kabīr*), al-Ḥākim, and al-Bayhaqī narrate through the route of Muḥammad bin ‘Amr from Yahyā bin ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān bin Ḥāṭib from ‘Āisha that she said, “When Khadījah passed away, Khawlah bint Ḥakīm, the wife of ‘Uthmān bin Maz‘ūn, said, ‘O Messenger of Allah ﷺ! Won’t you get married?’ He ﷺ said, ‘To whom?’ She said, ‘If you want then to a woman not previously married and if you want then to a woman previously married.’ He ﷺ said, ‘Who is the woman not previously married?’

She said, '[She is] the daughter of the most beloved of Allah's creation to you, 'Āisha bint Abī Bakr.' He ﷺ said, 'Who is the woman previously married?' She said, '[She is] Sawdah bint Zam'ah.'"

In this *ḥadīth*, Khawlah later says to Abū Bakr, "The Messenger of Allah ﷺ has sent me to propose to 'Āisha on his behalf." He said to her, "Wait," and left. Umm Rūmān, the mother of 'Āisha, said to her, "Certainly al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī already proposed to her on behalf of his son and I swear by Allah, Abū Bakr has never broken a promise." Abū Bakr then went to al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī and his wife, Umm al-Fatā. She said to Abū Bakr, "O Ibn Abī Qaḥāfah! If our son marries into your family, you may make him leave his religion and enter into yours!" Abū Bakr then said to al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī, "Do you feel the same way?" He said, "That is what she says." Then Abū Bakr left and Allah had removed the burden of his previous commitment.

Some researchers believe that 'Āisha was engaged to Jubayr bin al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī before she was engaged to the Prophet ﷺ and that this is a supplemental evidence for the claim that she was a lot older than six when she was engaged to the Prophet ﷺ.

I believe that this idea is not nuanced because 'Āisha was not engaged to Jubayr bin al-Muṭ'im. Rather, al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī had simply suggested that they get engaged [at a later time] and asked Abū Bakr to promise to agree. This [kind of promise] often occurred even between two children that were only a year or two old.

I heard a brother a few years ago making this argument and claiming that 'Āisha was engaged to Jubayr bin al-Muṭ'im. However, I did not add it to the original arguments because I didn't find it convincing. Then I later realized how the narration supports the claim that 'Āisha was born before the prophetic mission.

The context of the story points to the fact that al-Muṭ'im bin 'Adī and his wife were both holding firm to polytheism and hated the idea of accepting Islam, just like they hated for their son to convert to Islam after marrying 'Āisha. We also know that Abū Bakr was very keen on calling people to Islam. Therefore it is extremely

far-fetched that al-Muṭ'im bin 'Ādī would mention this proposal and Abū Bakr would agree if 'Āisha was born four years after the prophetic mission.

The only explanation is that al-Muṭ'im bin 'Ādī mentioned 'Āisha being engaged to his son and took a promise from Abū Bakr before the prophetic mission. This means that 'Āisha was born before the prophetic mission, not after it.

[Argument based on 'Āisha's participation in Uḥud as a nurse]

10 – Al-Bukhārī narrates that Anas said, “On the day of [the battle of] Uḥud, I saw 'Āisha bint Abī Bakr and Umm Sulaym with their robes tucked up such that I could see their anklets. They were running with waterskins on their backs and then pouring them into people's mouths. Then they would refill them and pour them into people's mouths.” Al-Bukhārī also says, “Other narrators say ‘they were transporting water skins.’” That is the wording used in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Ibn Hajar says that wording is also used in the *Mustakhraj* of al-Ismā'īlī.

According to the most common opinion, 'Āisha was eleven years old at the time of Uḥud. According to the second opinion, she was nineteen years old.

Al-Khaṭṭābī says in his book *Ā'lām al-Ḥadīth*, “The word *tanquzāni* [in the *ḥadīth*] means to jump around. But I believe [what is intended is] *tazfīrāni* which means to carry heavy waterskins. The word *zifr* is used to refer to a waterskin.”

I believe that the wording *tanquzāni al-qirab* does not make sense here. Al-Khaṭṭābī was correct when he explained *zafir* to mean carrying heavy waterskins. The book *Lisān al-'Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr indicates that the root of the word supports this meaning.

If this is the case, then the story doesn't make sense based on the common opinion [of 'Āisha's age]. An eleven-year-old girl would usually not be able to carry such heavy water skins and pour them into the mouths of the wounded, then refill them, and go back again. However, a nineteen-year-old girl would be able to do that, and that shows that the second opinion is better.

Each of these previously mentioned evidences may not be individually strong enough to show a mistake (*wahm*) in the narration that claims the age of 'Āisha to be six when the marriage was contracted and nine when the marriage was consummated. And they may not be individually strong enough to give preference to the second opinion which claims the age of 'Āisha to be fourteen when the marriage was contracted and seventeen when the marriage was consummated. However, the collective weight of all ten evidences makes a strong argument for the second opinion.

A response to a discussion that has circulated regarding this issue

The Holy Qur'ān has explicitly mentioned the waiting period (*'iddah*) of [divorced] women who have never menstruated. Allah says, {And those who no longer expect menstruation among your women—if you doubt, then their period is three months, and [also for] those who have not menstruated}.⁶² The Qur'ānic text means that their marriage contract was completed before they became adults (*qabl al-bulūgh*) through menstruation. This meaning is clear and there is no doubt in it. There is also no doubt that it is allowed. However, it is not considered to be for everyone.

The question that may come up now is, “Is there a fault and disgrace in the marriage of the Prophet ﷺ to 'Āisha at a young age such that we want to exonerate him of this by preferring the second opinion?”

I argue that there is no fault or disgrace in the Prophet ﷺ marrying 'Āisha before adulthood if that is proven to have happened. If that is proven to be the case, then it is mandatory to completely submit and firmly believe that it was done for some reason, whether or not we understand that reason.

Whoever assumes that the purpose of establishing this historical point is to argue something that contradicts the meaning of the Qur'ān has certainly missed the point. This is not the purpose of researching the age of 'Āisha when she married. Rather, it pertains solely to matters of historical accuracy that may be correct or

⁶² Qur'ān 65:4. *Sahih International* translation.

incorrect. There is an enormous difference between the permissibility of something occurring and establishing that something actually occurred.

It is not befitting that the reason for researching this historical point be the fact that modern society no longer embraces such an age difference between husband and wife. Because whatever sayings and actions have been established from the Messenger ﷺ should be the basis by which we evaluate thoughts and opinions, not vice versa.

Allah says in the Qur'ān, {But no, by your Lord, they will not [truly] believe until they make you, [O Muhammad], judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in [full, willing] submission}.⁶³

The historical reports indicating that the age of 'Āisha was several years older than nine at the time of the consummation of the marriage are numerous. They are supplemental evidences that cannot be considered stand-alone evidences. However, the evidences collectively form a clear and strong proof that cannot be ignored. Similarly, we cannot prefer what has been established from 'Āisha over all of those evidences because when numerous evidences reach that level, they are stronger than the saying of one companion [of the Prophet ﷺ] who is not beyond confusion, error, or forgetfulness.

While it is not possible that 'Āisha would be negligent of such an important and special event in her life, it is not far-fetched that she could have experienced some forgetfulness due to her old age.

The books of *ḥadīth* are more authentic than the books of history. They are also more reliant on authentic chains of narrators and stronger in terms of knowing which narrations are confined to one narrator and which have multiple chains. This is something that is agreed upon. The issue here is not to compare the books of *ḥadīth* to the books of history. Rather it is to compare one specific *ḥadīth* established in the books of *ḥadīth* through one companion to ten evidences from

⁶³ Qur'ān 4:65. *Sahih International* translation.

the books of *ḥadīth* and the books of history. I have come to the conclusion that we must prefer the numerous evidences over the narration established from one companion in the books of *ḥadīth*.

Praise be to Allah, the One by Whose blessing all good is perfected.