

‘Ā’ishah: Mother of the Believers

‘Ā’ishah, younger daughter of the prominent Qurashite Abū Bakr (who became the first caliph) and wife of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace upon him) is central to the ‘enterprise’ that is Islam. Her teachings among the first generation of Muslims and her hadith testimony is crucial for understanding lived Islam, especially as it relates to the intimate and private realms. For this reason, she was also surrounded by controversy. Even her biographical details are highly disputed. Did she marry at nine years old, as explicit hadith evidence has it? Or was she nineteen years old when she joined her husband’s household? If her older sister Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr was one hundred years old when she died in A.H. 73, and “she was older than her sister ‘Ā’ishah by ten years,”¹ then ‘Ā’ishah married at the age of nineteen. Other statements and reconstructions put her age at various years in between.

In the huge collection of Hadith called *Musnad Aḥmad*, there is a section devoted to the sayings transmitted from ‘Ā’ishah (technically known as *musnad ‘Ā’ishah*, since it is the collection of hadith whose chain of transmission or *isnād* reaches back to her). In this remarkable section, spanning hadith Nos. 23892–26292, that is, two thousand four hundred hadith (including some repetitions), we hear the voice of a woman of Arabia almost a millenium and a half in the past. We know that the female voice is muted in patriarchal societies, which dominate the globe geographically and historically. But to read this section is to hear more than two thousand times “ ‘Ā’ishah said...”²

From the most general historical perspective, this record is a treasure for giving voice to a woman; but it possesses another feature which makes it even more valuable. The statements reveal both the inner life of the Prophetic family and the inner life of ‘Ā’ishah. An insight from Gender studies is that since in most societies the public

¹ *Al-Bidāyah wa ‘l-Nihāyah* of Ibn Kathīr [d. 774 A.H.], Eighth *juz*, page 329 (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2005/1426 A.H.): وهي أكبر من أختها عائشة بعشر سنين

² *Al-Musnad* of Imām Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Ḥanbal [164–241 A.H.] (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995/1416 A.H.).

activities are performed by men, we have only very little information about women and their private lives in the past.

Perhaps the most often transmitted and well-known statement from ‘Ā’ishah is that Messenger was an exemplar, the *uṣwatah ḥasanah* described in the Qur’an, and someone of tremendous character, *khuluq ‘azīm*. We see how she absorbed the wisdom that he modeled, in the following record wherein she gives a teaching in a way that encourages, not discourages, the two people who came to her for information.

Aḥmad bin Sulaymān said: Ḥusayn from Zā’idah from al-A’mash from ‘Umarah from Abū ‘Atīyah who said: I came, myself and Masrūq, to ‘Ā’ishah, and Masrūq asked her: “There are two men from the companions of Messenger, peace be upon him, both of whom strive for the good. One of them delays the prayer and the *fitr* (breaking the fast. The other hastens the prayer and the *fitr* [that is, hastens to eat the *iftār* just after sunset and then quickly starts the *maghrib* prayer].” ‘Ā’ishah asked: “Who is the one who hastens the prayer and the *fitr*?” Masrūq replied, “It is ‘AbdAllāh bin Mas’ūd.” She said, “That is the way Messenger of God, peace be upon him, used to do.”³

Instead of singling out the wrong way, she focused upon the right way.

She spent most of her life as a teacher, transmitting the Sunnah of Messenger. As might be expected, there was much to pull the early community away from the heart of the Message. In this record, she corrects one of the cultural (male) assumptions about women that Messenger had sought to dispel.

Abū Mu‘āwiyah, al-‘Amash, Ibrāhīm, al-Aswad, from ‘Ā’ishah: that it reached her that people were saying that the prayer was broken by the dog, the donkey, and the woman. She said, “Do they not see that they have equated us

³ *Sunan al-Nasā’ī* #2157, chapter 23 of *K. al-ṣawm*, page 362 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2005/1426 A.H.).

(women) to dogs and donkeys? Sometimes I saw Messenger, peace be upon him, praying at night while I was on the bed between him and the *qiblah*. I had to go, so I slipped down in front of the legs of the bed, disliking that I should face him in front of his *qiblah*.”⁴

She was certainly outspoken. In fact, she ‘talked back’ to anyone, including her husband and her father. When she learned that a verse had been revealed that vindicated her in the affair of the necklace (see Q 24th chapter, *al-Nūr*), she turned away from “parents, husband, from the Prophet himself,” as Mohammad Akram Nadwi has it, showing us “the moment when her faith is perfected, when she realizes that any obedience that is not, first, obedience to God is a burden to the self, an indignity; and every obedience that is for only God is full liberty.”⁵

‘Ā’ishah said, When my vindication came down from heaven, the Prophet, peace be upon him, came to me and announced that to me. I said, We praise God, but we do not praise you.

She also was outspoken and strong in correcting wrong ideas about the prophetic sunnah. Here we see this happening.

Yazīd, Hammām ibn Yaḥyā, Qatādah, Abū Ḥassān, who said: Two men from Banū ‘Āmir came to ‘Ā’ishah and told her that Abū Hurayrah was repeating a hadith from Prophet, peace upon him, wherein he said that the (evil) omen may be in the house, the woman, and the horse. She got angry and threw a torn piece of her clothes up to the sky and a piece down to the ground, and she said, “By the One who sent the Criterion to Muhammad, the Messenger, peace be upon him, did not say that at all. Instead, he said that the people in the time of Ignorance considered those evil omens.” Then she

⁴ #24035, *Musnad Aḥmad* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995/1416 A.H.) vol. 17, page 244.

⁵ Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithāt: The women scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007) p. xvii

recited, *No bad comes to the Earth or to all of you except in a record-book [Ḥadīd 57:21].*⁶

The records also give a rare glimpse into her inner life. She was fiercely jealous, and freely admitted that she was never jealous of anyone more than the Prophet's first wife Khadījah. Among other wives of the Prophet who became the object of her jealousy was Marīyah (mother of the Prophet's son Ibrāhīm), and the beautiful Jewish captive Ṣafīyah. 'Ā'ishah relates stories which reveal domestic issues within the Prophet's household, several of which became public, most notably the prolonged time Messenger stayed away from his wives. This situation is considered to be an occasion of revelation of the first part of Qur'an chapter 66 *Taḥrīm*. She also tells of a footrace she lost, and one that she won later against her husband. She records that he said, "I know when you are angry at me and I know when you are happy with me". She said, "How do you know that, O Messenger?" He said, "When you are angry, you say, 'O Muḥammad', and when you are happy, you say, 'O Messenger'."

We are fortunate indeed to have extensive records of her teachings, thoughts, and experiences. 'Ā'ishah was perhaps the most notable and influential woman among the surviving wives of the Prophet who collectively were known as 'Mothers of the believers' (*ummuhāt al-mu'minīn*), and she became highly revered in Muslim memory. Perhaps the only other wife of the Prophet who might approach her in this 'activist' role was Umm Salamah, whose children were raised in the Prophet's household as his foster son and foster daughter. Moreover, 'Ā'ishah emerged to play a highly visible role in the political life of the early community during the caliphate of the third 'Rightly-Guided' caliph 'Uthmān, and during the divisive events surrounding the succession of the fourth caliph 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib. Her authority based on her proximity to the Messenger was also challenged, and she was criticized for inciting opposition to caliph 'Alī leading up to the Battle of

⁶ #25966, *Musnad Aḥmad* vol. 17, page 132.

the Camel at Basrah. She herself characterized the conflict as one that may occur in extended families, and although it was undoubtedly traumatic for the Muslims, the sincerity of her regret and penance was universally recognized.

Efforts to de-legitimize her by those allied with ‘Alī may have extended to tampering with hadith evidence. The controversy that arose recently a decade ago over whether a woman may legitimately suckle a man by sharing her milk with him (thus making them *maḥram* or non-marriable to each other), so they could work together privately, might be such an example. One must look at all the evidence within the proper context. For example, we have many hadith on her authority where she was told that suckling-relations were for infants, *al-riḍāt min al-majā’ah*, where *majā’ah* is described in the *Lisān al-‘Arab* as follows: “In the hadith of suckling-relations, the suckling-relation is from *al-majā’ah*, wherein this word is a verbal noun from ‘hunger’—that is, the one who is non-marriable because of suckling-relation is the person who was suckled from hunger, namely the infant.”⁷ The hadith asserting that the other wives did not accept adult suckling to establish such a relation may be an attack on ‘Ā’ishah. In any case, a complete examination of the evidence would be more welcome than regurgitation of a controversial *fatwā*.

Throughout the significant records we have from ‘Ā’ishah, we see her interpreting the Qur’ān as she understood the Messenger. From al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī: “I asked ‘Ā’ishah about the character of Messenger, solace and peace on him, and she replied, “His character was the Qur’ān.”⁸ The companion ‘Urwah bin Zubayr (who was ‘Ā’ishah’s nephew), reported that it had come to ‘Ā’ishah’s attention that “Abū Hurayrah was saying that Messenger, solace and peace on him, said, ‘The offspring of adulterers is the worst of the three, and that the dead person is tormented by the crying of the living.’” In response, he says, ‘Ā’ishah said, “God bless Abū Hurayrah, but he heard wrong and he

⁷ *Lisān al-‘Arab* of Ibn Manẓūr [d. 711 A.H.] (Beirut: Dār *Ihyā’* al-Turāth al-‘Arabīyah, 1988) vol. 2 p. 421 – s.v. *jū’*.

⁸ #25689, *Musnad Aḥmad*, vol. 18, page 60.

was wrong about the response.” She explained that there was a hypocrite (*munāfiq*) who was bothering Messenger, solace and peace on him, and taunting him, saying that he was an illegitimate offspring. ‘Ā’ishah says, “Messenger said, He is the worst of the three!” and then she cited the Qur’ān: “God says, *The bearer of a load does not bear the load of another* [*al-An’ām* 6:164].” She continued by stating, “As for Abū Hurayrah’s statement that the dead are tormented by the crying of the living, the hadith is not like that. Messenger, solace and peace on him, passed by the house of a Jewish man who had died and his family was crying for him. He said, ‘They may cry for him and God may punish him. God says, “*God does not demand of any soul but what it is able to bear* [*al-baqara* 2:286].”⁹ These examples teach us to understand the Qur’ān in light of the Prophet’s life or *sīrah*.

Much of ‘Ā’ishah’s legal reportage forms a valuable resource at the basis of Islamic law, with her contribution being highly valued from an early period. Her life and teaching represent an important contribution by Muslim woman of the earliest community, and provide valued insights into the character and conduct of her husband, the Prophet Muhammad. The signal mark of her unique position is that the Prophet died and was buried inside her chamber, which today lies in the vicinity of the column before the *Qiblah* in the Mosque of Madinah. Her passionate convictions, distinctive personality, and strong willed presence left a definite imprint upon the unfolding of Islam itself. This ‘Mother of the believers’ reminds us that without the sincere and informed participation of women, our community will not conform to the revered model of pristine Islam.



⁹ From *Al-Ijābah li-irād mā istadrakat-hu ‘Ā’ishah ‘alā l-ṣaḥābah*, Muḥammad ibn Bahadūr al-Zarkashī; available through < <http://shamela.ws/index.php/book/12703> >.