



Marriage: A Sublime Institution, Not Mere Social Contract

QUR'ANIC VERSES ON MARRIAGE

The many beautiful verses in the Qur'an about the nature and intended relationship between the male and the female, which were cited at length in Part II, are certainly the bedrock of the Qur'anic view of marriage. But rather than repeat them all, I will re-mention just a couple after first introducing other verses that highlight marriage as a sacred institution and a sublime human experience.

The Cow, 2:102

And they followed what the devils recounted against Solomon's kingdom. Solomon did not disbelieve but the devils disbelieved, teaching people sorcery...And they would learn from them how to come between a man and his wife...

In the first mention of Solomon in the Qur'an, it is interesting that a denunciation of his satanic enemies references the fact that they would not hesitate to use magic to separate a man from his wife. The very fact that this is the example of evil given in this verse underscores the sanctity of the relationship between a husband and his wife in the Qur'anic worldview.

The Cow, 2:187

It is made lawful for you (pl.), on the nights of the fast, to go unto your wives; they are clothing for you, and you are clothing for them. God is aware

that you defraud yourselves in this respect, so He turned to you in mercy and pardoned you. So now lie with them and seek what God has ordained for you, and eat and drink until you can discern the white streak from the black streak of dawn, then complete [i.e. resume] the fast till nightfall...

For me, this is a most tender portrayal of marriage in the Qur'an. The "clothing" metaphor conjures up intimate closeness as well as enveloping comfort between husbands and wives. Before this verse was revealed, people thought they had to abstain from sexual relations throughout the fasting month of Ramadan and not only during the daylight fasting hours as such, which resulted in making those who did indulge in sex after sunset feel guilty because they thought they had cheated.

The Cattle, 6:98

And it is He who produced you (pl.) from a single soul, thus a dwelling-place and a repository [i.e. for you in one another]. We have spelt out the verses/signs clearly for those who understand.

The Byzantines, 30:21

And among His signs is that He created mates for you (pl.) from your own souls so that you may find tranquillity in them, and established between you love and compassion. In this there are signs for people who reflect.

Finally, a brief word on the contractual aspect of the Qur'anic marriage. From the start in the seventh century, legal marriage was executed as a social contract, unsurprising given the rights and protections that the Qur'an established for women, including and especially with regard to divorce (more on this later in Chap. 15, entitled Divorce). It is interesting to note that marriage did not become contractual meanwhile in Europe till the fourteenth century, and the inclusion of divorce terms did not occur there till the nineteenth century.¹ Yet **today, with Muslims mostly using their marriage contract to the *minimum* of its capacity either wilfully (patriarchally) or bashfully (due to social pressure/custom), it is usually in European and generally Western marriage contracts that Muslim women are able to protect themselves.**

¹Barlas, Asma. 2015. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 230.

HOW MONOGAMY IS THE NORM IN THE QUR'AN (AS IN REALITY)

As with the male-female relationship overall, many of the verses that underscore the centrality of mates—literally “two”, as in two souls forming a human unit (not three or four or five souls), have been covered in Part II. So I will only re-mention a couple of them here, after introducing some very interesting and again, overlooked verses.

Women, 4:20

And if you wish to exchange one wife for another and you had given one of the two a significant treasure, do not take a thing from it...

The allusion to having to divorce one’s wife in order to marry another woman is a clear indication that monogamy is the norm in the Qur’anic worldview² despite the allowance it makes for polygyny in certain cases, as will be shortly discussed.

Light, 24:32

And marry the single (*ayāma*) among you, and the righteous among your male and female slaves and handmaids [i.e. domestic servants]. If they be poor, God will enrich them from His bounty. For God is all-Embracing, all-Knowing.

In this doubly emancipatory yet conspicuously overlooked verse, which is partially reminiscent of 4:25 in the earlier Chap. 13, entitled Nuptials, in its encouragement of marriage to slaves, there are two additional gems regarding women as spouses.

First, the Qur’an here explicitly instructs marriage to unmarried men and not only to unmarried women, which unquestionably establishes monogamous marriage as the norm in its worldview.

Second, the Qur’an also instructs marriage to *male* as well as female slaves and servants (not just freepersons) who are virtuous, which indicates that women were also being encouraged and empowered to marry a bondman and not only the other way round as was the case in 4:25. In addition, in 4:25 what the freeman and bondmaid had in common was “belief”, whereas here what unites the freeperson and

²Asad, Muhammad. 2003. *The Message of the Qur’an*. Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 123.

bondperson whom the Qur'an is encouraging to marry is the broader concept of "righteousness", or virtue.

Lastly, the Qur'anic reference to slaves and bondservants possibly being poor no doubt sounds strange to us today. Most of us think of slavery exclusively through the lens of the African American experience (or white European practice), and therefore expect slavery anytime anywhere to have been a) racist and b) systematically brutal, whereas this was not always the case. For example, we would expect that slaves at that time would not have been allowed to own anything to begin with and so would have been poor by definition. But like its approach to women in general, the Qur'anic verses on slavery reflect a process of regulation and limitation of unjust customs that had until then been unrestricted. Thus **the Qur'anic revelation comes along and proceeds to deal with the already existing institution of slavery by introducing incentives to mitigate its inherent injustice and eventually mandating, after Muhammad and his followers had triumphed over their enemies, a mechanism for its elimination altogether:**

- By encouraging mixed (free-bonded) marriage, as we have seen (4:25, 24:32)
- By equating the free and the enslaved in God's eyes, judged solely by the quality of their souls (4:25) even as *God halved the punishment for a slave for the same crime committed by a freeperson* (second part of 4:25)
- By requiring the same kindness towards slaves as that required towards parents, relatives, neighbours and strangers (4:36)
- By instituting the freeing of a slave as an act of atonement, an even more desirable act of charity (*zakat*) than feeding 60 needy persons (58:3)
- By accepting the freeing of a slave as atonement for breaking a sincere oath (5:89)
- By stipulating the freeing of a slave as atonement for inadvertently killing a fellow believer (4:92)
- By defining the freeing of a slave as an act of "belief, perseverance and compassion" and equating it with providing food amid famine to an orphan, relative, the needy and the wretched, all of which are acts carried out by the "righteous" who choose the "steeper" or higher path (90:8-18)

- By mandating that prisoners of war be released either through a voluntary act of grace or through ransom *until peace is restored*—which means that once peace is restored all remaining prisoners must be released unconditionally (47:4)
- By banning the acquisition of slaves by distinguishing it from those who are naturally captured in the course of battle as prisoners of war (8:67)
- By ordering the allocation of community funds to purchase the freedom of slaves after the new religion was victorious and became the law of the land³ (9:60)

It is interesting to note that **Muhammad’s earliest followers tended to be slaves and freed slaves, and young men and women with little influence.**⁴ Thus it is particularly disappointing despite this and all of the above—the last two verses cited in particular (8:67 and 9:60)—that Muslim societies would not so easily relinquish slavery in the 13 centuries following the Qur’anic revelation, with formal abolition only beginning to take place in the nineteenth century.⁵ That said, it is quite true that slaves within those systems were not drawn from a particular race and that they could hold different positions within these societies—mostly within the military, as civil servants (including as Grand Vizier), and as domestic workers—and for the most part could intermarry and produce offspring who were not slaves.⁶

He Frowned, 80:33–7

So when the piercing trumpet sounds [for the resurrection]
 On a day when a man will flee his brother,
 And his mother and father,

³Lang, Jeffrey. 1995. *Struggling to Surrender: Some Impressions from an American Convert to Islam*. Maryland: Amana Publications, 89 and Lings, Martin. 1988. *Muhammad: His Life based on the Earliest Sources*. London: Unwin Hyman Limited, 310–314.

⁴Lings, Martin. *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵For example, see Dar al-Iftaa Al-Missriyyah. 2013. Fatwa No. 4607. www.dar-alifta.org/eg/AR/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=14761&LangID=1&MuftiType=0 (*in Arabic*). June 11.

⁶See The BBC. 2009. *Slavery in Islam*. www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml. September 7; Brown, Jonathan, and Ali, Abdullah Hamid. 2017. *Slavery and Islam: What is Slavery?* www.yaqeeninstitute.org/jonathan-brown/slavery-and-islam-what-is-slavery/#ftnt1. February 7; and Sherwood, Marika. Britain, slavery and the trade in enslaved Africans. <https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-focus/Slavery/articles/sherwood.html#5>.

And his wife and children:

Every one of them that day will have enough concern of their own.

In the above verse depicting people's state of mind on the Day of Judgment, where the Qur'an takes the example of a typical man with typical relatives, it is notable that the normative reference is to a man having a single "wife", not "wives".

Creator, 35:11

And God created you (pl.) from dust, then from a drop, then He made you into pairs...

Consultation, 42:11

Creator of the heavens and the earth, He has made for you (pl.) mates from your own souls...

The Tiding, 78:8

And we created you (pl.) in pairs.

THE PUSHBACK OF MYTH: BUT ANY MAN CAN HAVE FOUR WIVES!

The institutions of polygyny—where a man can have multiple wives—and slavery have two things in common.

First, they were both widely practised in seventh-century Arabia (as in many parts of the world) *before* Muhammad's prophethood and preaching began.

Second, the Qur'an proceeded to deal with both these already-existing institutions by introducing rules to limit them alongside incentives to do away with them, with a final instruction on how to use state funds to eliminate slavery altogether.

Qur'anic scholars actually agree that polygyny was a solution to a particular problem at a particular time, namely the shortage of men as spouses, due to war.⁷ They point out that before the Qur'an men in Arabia could in fact marry any number of women, and that the Qur'anic

⁷Lang, Jeffrey. *Op. Cit.*, 163.

revelation restricted it to four wives at most *and* made fairness a condition henceforth to polygyny *and* proclaimed that it would be impossible for a man to be fair if he had multiple wives. But until recently, scholars stopped there and did not point out another condition for polygyny besides fairness, which we will now discuss.

The view that argues that a man can have up to four wives at a time, period, without conditions is one that results from considering one part of verse 4:3 while ignoring the rest, and ignoring verse 4:129 of the Qur'an altogether. See what follows below, where I also show both of these verses' neighbouring verses to give context. Once again, we see a Qur'anic concern for orphans—whether children or women lacking a provider—and in fact verse 4:3 is one of the verses in the impassioned defence of orphans (4:2–4:12) already cited in Chap. 12, entitled Inheritance:

Women, 4:2–4

Give (pl.) orphans their wealth, and do not substitute the corrupt [i.e. what is yours] for the good [i.e. what is theirs]; and do not absorb their wealth into your own wealth, for that is a great crime.

✓ And if you (pl.) fear being unfair to the orphans, then marry those women who are lawful for you—two, three or four; but if you fear being unjust then (only) one, or whom you rightfully possess [i.e. are already married to]—this way it is more likely that you will not be unjust. (4:3)

And give the women their bridal gifts without conditions. But if they voluntarily offer you any part of it, then you are welcome to consume and enjoy it.

Thus while verse 4:2 speaks generally of not wronging orphans by withholding or manipulating what is their rightful property, the next verse 4:3 speaks of orphaned women, i.e. who have lost their husbands and are now dependent on others: the Qur'an exhorts believing men to marry those women who are lawful for them, i.e. those not inappropriately related to them by blood or marriage or foster-nursing and who are not sisters to one another (per 4:22–23), even as it emphasises that marriage to more than one, as was common, is unlikely to result in fairness, which it makes clear is important. The subsequent verse 4:4 then makes it crystal clear that though some of these men may be caretakers of the properties of these women, they must still offer them upon marriage the obligatory bridal gift from their own means, which is not to be merged back into the men's own wealth after the marriage is consummated. **This is an extraordinary example of the detail God was prepared to go into in the**

Qur'an to protect women's property both from their (male) wealth managers as well as any prospective husbands.

Unfortunately, verse 4:3 is usually translated (and interpreted) to flat out contradict two of the verse's own injunctions at once: first, that polygyny is a pragmatic solution to a social problem (not a mechanism through which men could indulge themselves) and second, that the fair practice is to have only one wife:

× Women, 4:3

And if you (pl.) fear being unfair to the orphans, then marry those women who (seem) good to you—two, three or four; but if you fear being unjust then (only) one, or whom you rightfully possess (from your slaves and prisoners of war)—this way it is more likely that you will not be unjust.

Nor are the pre-conditions for polygyny or its unfairness to women issues of fleeting concern in the Qur'an, which comes back to the subject later in the same chapter: in this second iteration **we are sternly reminded of the pre-conditions for polygyny (and the centrality of the bridal gift) and told bluntly that God's view is that polygyny is inherently unfair**, even as He offers possible solutions for those who find themselves in polygynous marriages:

Women, 4:127, 4:129, 4:130

They consult you about women. Say: God instructs you about them, and what is recited to you in the Book regarding the orphaned women—whom you do not give what has been decreed as their rightful due yet whom you desire to marry—and the helpless among the children: that you should uphold justice for the orphans...

You will not be able to deal justly between women, however much you wish to. But do not turn away from one altogether so as to leave her suspended [i.e. in limbo, neither happily married nor free to move on]; and if you come to an agreement and are reverent, God is Forgiving, Merciful. (4:129)

But if they separate, God will compensate each of them from His abundance. For God is all-Embracing, Wise.

What is striking in the above iteration of multiple marriages to orphaned, i.e. widowed, women is not only the renewed emphasis on equal treatment for all wives but also God's encouragement of a man, together with whichever wife he is not close to, to come to some sort of arrangement

that both can live with, in which case God promises to look more favourably on the situation. Even more striking, **the Qur'an goes on to say that if the two decide to separate, then God will enrich both of them, which to me sounds like a reward to the man for choosing to separate rather than be unfair, and a reassurance to the woman that God will provide for her** and she will not become destitute—the two key issues God seems concerned about here.

Many subscribe to a view on polygyny that is somewhere between the Qur'anic whole, which is values-driven and conditional as we have seen, and the heavily patriarchal “no-conditions” position. This quite common view argues that a man can have up to four wives at a time as long as he can provide equally for all and spend an equal amount of time with all. Yet even this view is unsupported by the Qur'an as it completely overlooks the three explicit divine pronouncements in the above verses regarding polygyny:

- that polygyny be considered specifically in the case of widowed women (4:3, 4:127),
- that it is more just in God's eyes to have only one wife (4:3),
- that God states that a man will never be able to treat multiple wives equally however ardently he tries (4:129),

and indeed in a later chapter, in a verse unrelated to polygyny but which touches upon a number of personal relationships, the Qur'an begins by first stating a fundamental, universal fact that is nonetheless relevant here:

- “God has not given any man two hearts within his breast...” (33:4)

MUHAMMAD'S MARRIAGES⁸

Mention must be made of the Prophet's own marriages and how all the above marriage guidelines actually played out in his case.

Muhammad received a marriage proposal from his employer in Mecca, via a female friend of hers, when he was 25 years old and she was 40.

⁸Unless otherwise indicated, all the information, descriptions, and quotations cited here regarding Muhammad's wives and other women are from Lings, Martin. *Op. Cit.*, 34–39, 96, 105–106, 132–133, 164–165, 201, 206, 211–214, 233, 241–242, 259–260, 268–272, 277, 280–286, 317, 326–327, 342–344, 347. The analysis and opinions, on the other hand, are the author's.

Already twice-married, Khadija was a beautiful and rich merchant who had hired The Trustworthy One (*al-amin*), as Muhammad was then known, to take her merchandise from Arabia to Syria following the death of her second husband. This was 15 years before Muhammad received the first verses of the Qur'an from the archangel Gabriel that would launch his mission, which occurred when he himself was 40 years old.

Though Khadija was rich while Muhammad was of very modest means, it was agreed that his bridal gift to her (an already existing custom which the Qur'an would later make mandatory) would be 20 she-camels. On the day of his marriage the Prophet set free an enslaved woman named Baraka, later also known as Umm Ayman, whom he had inherited from his father. She would remain very close to the Prophet till the end of his life. At the same time he received from his bride a fifteen-year-old male slave named Zayd, who would soon choose to remain with the Prophet as a slave rather than return to his noble people and the loving family that had finally found him after he had been snatched from them years earlier and sold into slavery. Moved by Zayd's decision, the Prophet set him free and formally adopted him. Muhammad and Khadija had six children together: the first and last were sons who died in infancy (Qassem and Abdallah), and the four who survived into adulthood were all daughters, namely Zaynab, the exceptionally beautiful Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum, and Fatima, who would go on to marry the Prophet's cousin, Ali.

In the year AD 619,...the Prophet suffered a great loss in the death of his wife Khadijah. She was about sixty-five years old and he was nearing fifty. They had lived together in profound harmony for twenty-five years, and she had been not only his wife but also his intimate friend, his wise counsellor, and mother to his whole household including 'Ali [his cousin, whom he had taken in to ease his uncle's financial hardship] and Zayd [his adopted son]. His four daughters were overcome with grief, but he was able to comfort them by telling them that Gabriel had once come to him and told him to give Khadijah greetings of Peace from her Lord and to tell her that He had prepared for her an abode in Paradise.⁹

So Muhammad remained in a monogamous marriage with Khadija for 25 years until she died when she was 65 and he was 50, even though polygyny was a common practice then. He would certainly have been able to afford more than one wife during his long marriage to

⁹ See previous footnote.

Khadija: the Qur'an had not yet come along to separate a woman's property from her husband's for it was only the last 10 years of their marriage that overlapped with the gradual unfolding of the Qur'anic revelation, which would continue for another 13 years or so after her death. I am not sure at what point during the 23 years that the Qur'an established the separate economic identity of women, but it is unlikely to have been in the first 10 years while the Prophet was still in Mecca and married to Khadija, which were more focused on spiritual rather than social issues.

The era of polygyny technically began for Muhammad in the year that followed Khadija's death, while he was still in Mecca and before the migration to Medina to escape persecution. A woman named Khawla who had taken it upon herself to look after the Prophet's household after Khadija's death suggested he consider re-marrying, and when he asked her whom he should marry, she had two ideas: a 30-year-old widow named Sawda (whose name means "she who is black", and who was said to be dark-skinned and had five or six children¹⁰), or the daughter of his closest friend Abu Bakr, named Aisha. The Prophet had earlier had two strange dreams where first a man, then an angel had indicated to him that Aisha, though still a small child then, would be his wife, so Khawla's suggestion now seemed like a third sign and he instructed her to proceed with arranging both marriages. Sawda accepted the Prophet's proposal and they were soon married. As for Aisha, she was already betrothed to someone else but her father would easily undo that arrangement and contractually marry her to the Prophet himself (without Aisha being present) some months later, though she would remain in her parents' house for a few more years due to her young age. Some months after Aisha's betrothal to Muhammad, Abu Bakr and others fled to Medina leaving behind their families. Two years after that the Prophet sent for Sawda while Abu Bakr sent for his family, and it was then that a simple wedding (a bowl of milk rather than the customary feast) took place when Aisha is said to have been nine (or 10 in other early accounts). However, it is hard to know exactly how old Aisha was when her marriage was actually consummated, for several reasons:

- **The *hadith* reports from three centuries later indicate that several years passed after Aisha's marriage before it was**

¹⁰ www.islamweb.net/ar/fatwa/115147 and www.dar-alifta.org/ar/Viewstatement.aspx?sec=new&ID=5144 (both in Arabic).

consummated. The conventional wisdom has taken this to mean a few years after the betrothal effected by Aisha’s father in Mecca and soon after the wedding in Medina at age nine (or 10). However, this may well have meant a few years after the wedding in Medina, which would make her closer to or in her teens.

- ***Hadith* reports also say that at her marriage, Aisha had “good knowledge of Ancient Arabic poetry and genealogy” and “pronounced the fundamental rules of Arabic Islamic ethics”.**¹¹ This is highly unlikely of a nine-year-old girl. In fact prominent and widely recognised religious leaders today have made the argument that Aisha must have been at least 13 and possibly a few years older at consummation—an opinion which gels with these reports—based on their review of other (non-*hadith*) early documents that provide detail of the Prophet’s life, the migration to Medina, and her sister Asma’s age.¹²
- **My own view is that Aisha must have been close to or in her early teens when her marriage was consummated, for a combination of reasons:**
 - **First**, because there is no evidence from Aisha’s sometimes surprisingly explicit accounts of her personal life with the Prophet to suggest any difficulty or trauma in their early years together—quite the opposite, in fact.
 - **Second**, because the records imply that Aisha had been around in Medina long enough to have made friends there *before* moving to the apartment built for her by the Prophet (see quotation below), which indicates that she may have been older than nine even at the time of the wedding itself.
 - **Third**, because what we know of the early part of their cohabitation, including from Aisha herself, tells us that the marriage was not consummated for some time after the wedding:

For the last three years scarcely a day had passed without one or more of ‘Aishah’s friends coming to play with her in the courtyard adjoining her father’s house. Her removal to the Prophet’s house changed nothing in this

¹¹ Barlas, Asma. *Op. Cit.*, 126.

¹² *Ibid.*, and see also Brown, Jonathan. 2015. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy*. London: Oneworld Publications, 147.

respect. Friends now came every day to visit her in her own apartment—new friends made since her arrival in Medina and also some of the old ones whose parents, like hers, had emigrated. ‘I would be playing...with the girls who were my friends, and the Prophet would come in and they would steal out of the house and he would go out after them and bring them back, for he was pleased for my sake to have them there.’ Sometimes he would say ‘Stay where ye are’ before they had time to move. He would also join in the games sometimes... ‘One day,’ said ‘Aishah, ‘the Prophet came in...and he said: ‘Oh ‘Aishah, whatever game is this?’ I said: ‘It is Solomon’s horses’, and he laughed. But sometimes as he came in he would simply screen himself with his cloak so as not to disturb them.¹³

Aisha would go on to become the Prophet’s other great love, after Khadija, and we have already heard about her pivotal role as one of the greatest religious scholars and teachers after his death, and as a political leader. The two women were, on the face of it, very different: the one significantly older than Muhammad, twice-married already, mature and wise; the other significantly younger, inexperienced in every way, independent-minded, and quick to “perceive and react”. But both were exceptionally close to Muhammad. Aisha would later recount how she was most jealous of Khadija’s memory on account of what she had observed of her enduring effect on the Prophet, often feistily telling him, “It is as if there had never been any other woman in the world, save only Khadijah.”

The Prophet would nonetheless go on to marry several other women while married to Sawda and Aisha during his time in Medina, where he now became a head of state and political leader.

He would marry the 18-year-old and recently widowed Hafsa, daughter of Omar. Sawda, Aisha and Hafsa had their own, separate yet adjacent apartments but formed part of one household, with Aisha reportedly pleased to have a companion closer to her age and with Sawda, then 38, extending her maternal kindness to the new member of the family. The Prophet would later marry another widow named Zaynab, aged around 30,¹⁴ a year after her husband died in a key battle, though she herself would die just eight months later. Soon after Zaynab’s death one of the Prophet’s cousins died of a battle-wound and some months later he would marry his widow and mother of his now-orphaned children, the 29-year old and beautiful Umm Salama, who is said to have initially resisted the

¹³ See footnote 8.

¹⁴ www.islamqa.info/ar/answers/311718 (in Arabic).

proposal as she confessed to having a jealous nature unsuited to being one of several wives, and because she was concerned for the welfare of her now-orphaned children, though the Prophet's assurances on both counts comforted her and she would soon settle into Zaynab's vacated apartment. The Prophet had no room of his own and would move every evening into the apartment of the wife whose turn it was to give him a home for the next 24 hours.

Thus Muhammad's polygynous phase, which began technically in the year after Khadija's death but practically some years later, took shape when he was in his 50s. He married the widow and mother of five or six children Sawda, Aisha, the widow Hafsa, and the widow Zaynab "mother of the poor", with the widow and mother of several children, Umm Salama, becoming the fourth wife after Zaynab's premature death.

The verses on marrying up to four "orphaned" women (widows) had already been revealed at that time and with these four wives in total, of which three were widows, Muhammad had no reason to believe he would be marrying anyone else.

But prophets are not ordinary men even as they are ultimately human, and the Qur'an would go on to make this point in a number of ways, including with regard to marital issues. A verse would soon sanction the marriage of Muhammad to a fifth woman, his 40-year-old and extremely pious and beautiful cousin Zaynab, a widow whose marriage he had arranged years earlier to his adopted son Zayd, but which had been an unhappy one from the start and which had recently ended in divorce. The Qur'an would even say "... *We have married her to you...*" (33:37), so no formal wedding would take place. There had been a mutual attraction some months ago but marriage to Zaynab had been out of the question not just because Muhammad already had four wives but also because Zaynab was the ex-wife of his adopted son: the Qur'an had earlier made clear that marriage to the former spouse of a son "*sprung from the loins*" was unlawful, and among the Arabs "it was a strong social principle not to distinguish between sons by birth and sons by adoption". But the verses would make a distinction between the two types of sons for marital purposes (only) and effectively instruct that in future, adopted persons' surnames—the "son/daughter of" (*bin/bint*) configuration—not be changed so that their lineage can be known, and so Zayd bin Muhammad would revert to being known as Zayd bin Haritha 35 years after his adoption by the Prophet (33:5, 33:37, 33:40).

But this change did not annul his adoption as such, nor did it affect in any way the love and the intimacy between the adopter and the adopted, who were now nearing their sixtieth and fiftieth years. It was merely a reminder that there was no blood relationship; and in this sense the Revelation continued: *‘Muhammad is not the father of any man amongst you, but he is the Messenger of God and the Seal (last) of the Prophets’*.

At the same time other Revelations [verses] stressed the great difference between the Prophet and his followers. The permission which God had given him, in virtue of his new marriage, to have more than four wives, was for him alone, and not for the rest of the community. Moreover his wives were given the title of “the mothers of the faithful”, and their status was such that it would be an enormity in the eyes of God if, having been married to the Prophet, they should ever be given in marriage to another man.¹⁵ (33:50, 33:6, 33:53)

The two verses immediately following the one on the heavenly and unconventional marriage of Zaynab to the Prophet then pull us back from the trees to give a glimpse of the forest, by making clear that God’s prophets are not to be regarded like other men:

The Confederates, 33:38–39

There should be no discomfort for the Prophet in what God has ordained for him. That was God’s way with those who passed before—and God’s command is an assured destiny—

those (prophets) who deliver God’s messages and fear Him, and fear none but God. And God suffices as a reckoner.

These verses reassure the Prophet that he should not be concerned with what people think but solely with what God almighty has ordained, and tell us that God had bestowed privileges on previous prophets, too. But they also serve to remind us that we err when we measure prophets by the same yardstick as other human beings: **prophets are human, yes, but ones tasked with a divine mission that *a priori* renders their very souls, and lives and responsibilities, anything but normal.** As I read these verses I cannot but think of other prophets, like Abraham and Solomon. Without knowing enough about what would have been customary in their time and place versus what was divine privilege in their

¹⁵ See footnote 8.

case, I think of Abraham having had a son with his wife's bondmaid Hagar, his eldest son Ishmael from whom Muhammad is descended (Moses and Jesus being descendants of his second son Isaac, born of his wife Sarah); and I wonder about the Bible's claim that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 consorts, about how many of those may have been a reflection of his human nature, a question of custom, or even policy instruments, i.e. a bid to form certain bonds or alliances, as opposed to divine privilege. I do not know the answers to these questions, but it seems to me that the lives of God's prophets have never been ordinary.

A few verses later, the Qur'an makes clear that what is ordained for the Prophet is different from what is allowed other men:

The Confederates, 33:50

Oh Prophet: We have made lawful for you your wives whom you have given their dues [bridal gift] and those whom you rightfully possess that God has given you [i.e. if you marry one of your own prisoners of war or slaves then the bridal gift is not due]¹⁶...and any believing woman if she offers herself to the Prophet and if the Prophet wishes to marry her—for you only, not for the (rest of the) believers. We know well what we have instructed them regarding their wives and those they rightfully possess, so that there be no discomfort upon thee. And God is ever-Forgiving, Merciful.

The story of a sixth wife, the 20-year-old¹⁷ widow Juwayriya, is one I find particularly interesting. It was standard practice at the time for prisoners of war to be divided up between the victors, who would offer to free them in return for a ransom¹⁸ or otherwise become responsible for their upkeep as de facto servant-slaves. Following the Prophet's victory in one battle, the daughter of the defeated clan's chief became a prisoner of war of one of his men, who placed a high price for her ransom. Juwayriya the captive visited the Prophet that day while he was at Aisha's apartment, introducing herself as "the daughter of Harith, the lord of his people", and asked him for help in the matter of her ransom. The Prophet offered to pay her ransom and to marry her, which she readily accepted, although

¹⁶Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 727. In this verse 33:50, where the privileges bestowed on the Prophet that do not apply to other men are listed, the Qur'an appears to waive the bridal gift requirement for Muhammad if he marries one of his own prisoners of war and slaves.

¹⁷Abdul Rahman, Aisha (aka Bint al-Shate'). 1979. *The Wives of the Prophet* (in Arabic). Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 175.

¹⁸The practice of freeing prisoners of war in return for a ransom was so common in pre-Qur'anic Arabia that people often expressed their devotion to someone by declaring to them, "May my mother and father be your ransom!"

her father arrived before any marriage had taken place to ransom her himself (with some camels), and the Prophet thus restored her to her family. However during the exchange, a certain conversation led the father, along with two of his sons, to embrace Islam, and soon Juwayriya herself would do the same. The Prophet then asked the father for his daughter's hand in marriage, which was granted, and an apartment was soon built for her, as with the other wives.

When it became known that the Bani Mustaliq [the defeated clan] were now the Prophet's kinsmen by marriage, the Emigrants [Meccans] and Helpers [Medinans] set free their captives who had not yet been ransomed. About a hundred families were released. 'I know of no woman,' said 'Aishah, referring to Juwayriyah, 'who was a greater blessing to her people than she.'¹⁹

Juwayriya's story, and the Prophet's decision to propose to her, is one that reminds me of something that many of us have heard growing up, which is that **several of the Prophet's marriages were strategic or political in nature, intended to build bridges, forge alliances or promote stability**. Indeed it cannot be coincidental that Muhammad also married the daughters of two of his four closest Companions while arranging the marriage of two of his own daughters to the other two Companions: he married the daughter of Abu Bakr, Aisha; and the daughter of Omar, Hafsa; while his own daughters Ruqayya and Fatima were married to Othman and Ali, respectively. Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman and Ali would become the four so-called "rightly guided" caliphs after Muhammad's death, in that order.

A little while later, the Prophet heard that his cousin and brother-in-law (Zaynab's brother) had died in Abyssinia, where he and a small group of Muslims had been instructed years earlier to emigrate from Mecca to escape local persecution and even torture of followers of the new religion. The Prophet had correctly predicted that the Christian ruler there, the Negus, would welcome his followers once he learned of the Qur'an's reverence for Jesus and Mary. Four months after the death of his cousin, Muhammad sent a message to the Negus asking if he would stand in proxy for him and ratify his marriage to his cousin's widow, Umm Habiba, if she would accept him, which she did. Not long afterwards the Prophet sent word inviting this small group of Muslims, whom he had sent away for

¹⁹ See footnote 8.

their safety 13 years earlier, to join him in a new life with the rest of the community in Medina, and so Umm Habiba, who was around 35 then and had a daughter,²⁰ soon joined the Prophet's household as a seventh wife, in her own apartment. In doing so, Umm Habiba was reunited with several of her old friends from Mecca but also from her early days in Abyssinia, such as fellow wives Sawda and Umm Salama.

The Prophet would take an eighth wife, a young widow and Jewess named Safiyya aged 17, after her father and husband, enemies of the Prophet, had been killed in battle. She originally fell to the lot of one of his men as war booty, in the custom described earlier where prisoners of war could be ransomed. However when she was brought before the Prophet and he saw a bruise (or wound) on her face and asked her about it, she recounted that her deceased husband had struck her after she had told him of a dream she had about the Prophet that was positive and which also implied that he would be victorious against them. On hearing this, the Prophet sent instruction to the man who had been promised Safiyya to take another prisoner of war as his share of booty instead, and offered to set Safiyya free. At the same time he offered her a choice of either returning to her people as a free Jewess, or embracing Islam and becoming his wife. She replied, "I choose God and His Messenger," and they were married at the first halt on their march back to Medina. By the time they arrived back home, the Abyssinian friends had already arrived and Umm Habiba was already there, and Safiyya would be temporarily lodged in the house of a hospitable and generous man named Haritha. Many consider Muhammad's marriage to Safiyya another one of his strategic moves, intended to forge bonds with her defeated Jewish tribe.

Then there was Mariya (age unknown), the beautiful, Coptic Christian enslaved woman who was a gift from the ruler of Egypt to the Prophet, along with her sister Sirine and much gold and fine cloth, among other things. The Prophet made a gift of Sirine to another but found first temporary then permanent lodging for Mariya, whom he would visit often, developing a strong affection for her. It would be Mariya who would bear Muhammad a child, the only other woman to do so besides his first wife, Khadija. The people of Medina had long wanted the Prophet to have a child born in their city, further cementing his ties to them, and they were delighted with the news of her pregnancy. Mariya would give birth to a son, whom the Prophet named Ibrahim (Abraham) after the name of his

²⁰ Abdul Rahman, Aisha. *Op. Cit.*, 128.

“father”, he told the people. But the much-loved child would die as a toddler when Muhammad was 60 and around two years or so before his own death, once again plunging him into the unique sorrow of losing a small child. It is sometimes assumed that since Mariya was a slave given to the Prophet as a gift, he would have had sexual relations with her outside of marriage,²¹ but that is out of the question: **it is unthinkable that Muhammad would have disregarded God’s command that bond-women/slaves not be treated as concubines, but be honoured through mutually agreed marriage before sexual relations took place.** Recall the following verses:

Women, 4:25

And those among you who cannot afford to marry chaste, believing (free) women then (let them marry) the believing maids whom you (pl.) rightfully possess. God knows best your faith. You are from one another, so marry them with permission of their folk and give them their wages [bridal gifts] with kindness (*bil-maarooif*), as married women and not as debauched women or illicit lovers...

Light, 24:32–33

And marry the single (*ayāma*) among you, and the righteous among your male and female slaves and handmaids [i.e. domestic servants]. If they be poor, God will enrich them from His bounty. For God is all-Embracing, all-Knowing.

promptly followed by:

And let those (men) who are unable to marry remain chaste until God enriches them from His bounty. And if those (men and women) whom you rightfully possess desire the (marriage) contract, then contract with them if you know them to be good and give them from the wealth God has given you, and do not force your slave-girls into fornication if they desire chastity (or marriage) as you seek enjoyment of the worldly life. And he who forces them (the slave-girls)—then surely God will be, for their having been forced, all-Forgiving, all-Merciful [i.e. towards the women].

It must be said however that the last verse above (24:33) is never interpreted, much less translated, as I understand and translate it, the

²¹ Differences of opinion as to whether Muhammad married Mariya or not abound, such as in the following commentary: <http://www.dar-alifta.org/ar/Viewstatement.aspx?sec=new&ID=5142> (in Arabic).

divergence in meaning stemming from the two words I have underlined as shown. I find this odd as 24:33 continues the theme of male and female chastity found in the three preceding verses i.e. 24:30–32 and indeed begun seven verses before that, so it seems obvious to me that the contract in question is the marriage contract and not that of emancipation, by which a slave could agree a price for his or her freedom with their owner and work their way towards meeting that sum with the owner's financial contribution as an act of charity. The conventional interpretation²² of this verse is that it warns slave owners against forcing their women slaves into prostitution to cover the cost of emancipation (rather than against forcing women slaves into fornication instead of marrying them honourably), which is undoubtedly a noble intervention except that once again, since the point here is to encourage marriage to slaves, surely the warning is against forcing them into fornication with the owners themselves. **The interpretation that relates this verse to an emancipatory rather than a marriage contract is unfortunate because here we have the most direct condemnation by God of the pre-Qur'anic treatment of enslaved women (and un-ransomed prisoners of war by extension) as concubines, even as He once again encourages believers to marry their righteous slaves.** But as with the institution of slavery overall, Muslim societies would not completely let go of the institution of concubinage either, with the most recent and perhaps most colourful example being the Ottoman empire's legendary imperial harem which included female slaves as concubines alongside the sultan's multiple wives, female relatives, and other female slaves and servants.

Many months later Muhammad and his followers made their first Lesser Pilgrimage²³ (*'umra*) to a vacated Mecca, in accordance with a treaty signed a year earlier with the Meccan enemy, spending three days there. His uncle Abbas, who had embraced Islam but remained in Mecca, came down from the hills and spent these days with him. It was then that Abbas offered the Prophet his widowed sister-in-law, Maymuna (age 26²⁴), in marriage, and the Prophet accepted and would now have a tenth wife.

²² See Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 602 and Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (editor-in-chief) et al. 2015. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 877.

²³ The Lesser Pilgrimage (*'umra*) is a shorter and simpler (voluntary) rite than the Greater Pilgrimage (*hajj*), the latter also being an at-least-once-in-a-lifetime *duty* for those who are able.

²⁴ Abdul Rahman, Aisha. *Op. Cit.*, 233.

This new alliance established another link with the Meccan enemy, as events would show.

Thus between the age of 25 and 50 the Prophet had only one wife, namely the twice-widowed Khadija, who fell ill and died when he was 50 and she was 65. She bore him four girls and two boys, but only the four daughters survived into adulthood.

After Khadija's death he went on to marry 11 more times (up to 10 wives at the same time), when he was between the ages of 50 and 59. He died in the year 632 when he was around 63.

In total, 10 of the 12 women Muhammad married were widows (their ages appear to have ranged from 17 to 40 at the time of their marriage to him), **one of whom was also a divorcee and three of whom had children from their previous marriages** (Sawda, Umm Salama and Umm Habiba). Only one wife, Aisha, was previously unmarried and was also the youngest (probably an early teen) at the time that the marriage was consummated, while little is known about another, Mariya the Copt, who was a gift from the ruler of Egypt. **Remarkably, only one of these post-Khadija 11 wives (Mariya) bore him any children, namely one son (Ibrahim).** Muhammad died in Aisha's arms at around 63, leaving 10 widows. He was buried right where he died, in a grave dug into the floor of Aisha's small rooms.

One other woman deserves mention in recounting Muhammad's private life.

The widow Rayhana (age unknown) was a battle captive from a Jewish tribe whose menfolk had been decimated and who became part of the Prophet's share of war booty. Muhammad placed her in the care of his aunt Salma, where she came under the influence of some young converts to the new religion and soon embraced Islam herself. When the Prophet heard the good news, he waited until enough months had passed to cover the mourning and pregnancy-check waiting periods (per Qur'anic guidelines), then offered to free her and to marry her. Her response was "Oh Messenger of God, leave me in thy power; that will be easier for me and for thee." As I reflect on this response, I can imagine how if Rayhana had not wanted to marry the Prophet for whatever reason yet had no one left from her tribe to provide for and protect her as a freewoman, this may have been her best option in the circumstances of the day. And perhaps she also understood, per her remark, that the Prophet did some things out of a sense of duty ("...easier for me *and for thee*"). Rayhana would thus remain the Prophet's slave until she died five years later.

It is usually assumed that the Prophet would have had intimate relations with Rayhana as a consort, but surely this account of their exchange points to the opposite conclusion. Besides, **those who maintain that sexual relations with one's prisoners of war and slaves was licit and normal are completely disregarding verses 4:25 and 24:32–33 as already explained above, where God insists that sexual relations with slaves be undertaken only after an honourable marriage has taken place. Moreover, if Muhammad had deemed it to be Qur'anically sanctioned to have sexual relations with a prisoner of war in his rightful possession, why would he have even bothered to propose marriage to Rayhana? This also again underlines the fact that the Prophet must have married Mariya, the Coptic enslaved woman who bore him Ibrahim, for why would he have proposed marriage to one slave he wished to have a relationship with (Rayhana) but not to the other (Mariya)?** Surely the verses just cited as well as this logic are sufficient to lay to rest the bizarre notion that sex with one's domestic servant-slave or prisoner of war was alright in God's eyes outside of (consensual) marriage.

And finally for the record and further clarity, the phrase **“those whom you rightfully possess”** which appears several times in the Qur'an does not always mean slaves or prisoners of war as some imagine but also means spouses you *are already rightfully married to*.²⁵

- Such as in verse 4:3—otherwise God would be telling men He prefers them to have only one wife but that they can have as many concubines they want from among the slaves and prisoners of war they own! (“...marry those women who are lawful for you—two, three or four; but if you fear being unjust then (only) one, or whom you rightfully possess—this way it is more likely that you will not be unjust.”)
- Such as in verse 4:24—otherwise God would be telling men to marry their female slaves and prisoners of war even if these women are already married²⁶ to other men! (“And married women (are forbidden to you) except for those you rightfully possess...)

²⁵ On “those you rightfully possess” often being a reference to legal spouses such as in verses 4:3, 4:24 and 23:6, see Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 123–124 on the similar views of leading classical commentators Razi and Tabari. See also verse 33:52 where it cannot mean anything else, per footnote 28.

²⁶ Stunningly, there are claims that verse 4:24 justified marriage to female prisoners of war even if these women were already married! See Nasr et al. *Op. Cit.*, 201.

- Such as 23:6—otherwise God would be telling *men and women* to save their chastity for their spouses, their slaves *and* their prisoners of war, which hardly leaves anyone out for either gender! It must also be recalled that “or” sometimes means “that is”:

The Believers, 23:5–6

And those [i.e. believers] who guard their chastity

Except from their spouses, or those they rightfully possess—then they are not blameworthy.

The incident with Rayhana took place before Muhammad’s marriage to his sixth wife, Juwayriya.

Long after verse 33:50 had been revealed regarding Zaynab as a fifth wife and after the Prophet had married the subsequent women just mentioned, **the Qur’an moved to limit the Prophet to the wives he had at that point, and to forbid him from marrying others in their place should he divorce any of them,**²⁷ in a verse that is also interesting in that it reminds us that women were not made to hide their beauty in the Prophet’s time, as many today believe:

The Confederates, 33:52

Women are not lawful for you (Muhammad) henceforth, nor to exchange them for other wives even if you admire their beauty, save those you (already²⁸) rightfully possess. And God watches all things.

In closing something must be said, however briefly, of Muhammad’s interactions with his wives. According to *hadith* and other reports about the Prophet and his wives—mostly relayed by the women themselves—**Muhammad was an exceptionally emancipated, egalitarian, and easy-going husband.** He would do housework and mend his own clothes. He consulted his wives and asked others to consult them in his absence. They were outspoken and anything but meek and subdued in their relationship with him, to the shock of many Meccans in particular, especially Omar.

²⁷The Prophet was also entitled to divorce, like other men, as made clear in verses 33:28–29.

²⁸Asad, Muhammad. *Op. Cit.*, 729. In fact this verse reinforces the argument already made that “those you rightfully possess” sometimes refers to existing wives.

The Prophet's wives felt so confident in their relationship with him that they once caused him not insignificant grief when they started demanding a less frugal life, now that victory was bringing in more war booty and everyone around them was living more comfortably; and when his affection for the young foreigner, Mariya the Copt, became apparent, they mounted a minor mutiny. They loved him deeply and were conscious of their unique status and privilege in being married to a prophet of God. Aisha appears to have been prone to jealousy over newcomers, but neither that nor her feisty nature derailed her special relationship with the Prophet, who appreciated her strong-mindedness and mischievous humour. My favourite anecdote is about how he apparently once told her that he always knew whether she was upset with him or pleased with him and when she asked him how, he replied that when she was pleased with him she would swear "by the Lord of Muhammad!" but when she was upset with him, she would swear "by the Lord of Abraham!"

"The believers who show the most perfect faith are those who have the best behaviour, and the best of you are those who are the best to their wives",²⁹ said the Prophet.

He also said **"The best of you is he who is best to his family, and I am the best among you to my family."³⁰**

INTERFAITH MARRIAGE—IF EVERYONE AGREES THAT MUSLIM MEN CAN, WHY CAN'T MUSLIM WOMEN?

Even our patriarchal religious authorities have always conceded that Muslim men can marry Jewish or Christian women, *i.e. without these women needing to become Muslim themselves*, because the Qur'an repeatedly identifies Jews and Christians, alongside Muslims, as being among the "People of the Book", and goes on to say the following:

The Banquet (i.e. The Last Supper), 5:5

On this day, all good things are permitted to you [i.e. followers of Muhammad]. And the food of those who have received the Book before

²⁹ al-Tirmidhi compilation, no. 1162 on <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/12/17>. See commentary on it also in www.nabulsi.com/web/article/10260 (in Arabic).

³⁰ al-Tirmidhi compilation, no. 4269: www.sunnah.com/urn/637830 and Ibn Majah compilation, no. 2053: www.sunnah.com/urn/1262960. See commentary also on www.dar-alifta.org/AR/Viewstatement.aspx?sec=&ID=5656 (in Arabic).

you is permitted to you, and your food is permitted to them. And so are the chaste women among the believers [Muhammad's followers] and the chaste women among those who have received the Book before you, when you give them their dues [bridal gifts] in wedlock—not as fornicators, nor as secret lovers...

But many cultures and families nevertheless resist the message of this Qur'anic verse and object to their sons marrying any non-Muslim woman unless she converts. Perhaps some are simply unaware of it.

Or perhaps they are also aware of another verse that forbade Muhammad's followers from marrying *polytheists*, a reference in the Qur'an to the Arab *idolaters* of Mecca from whom Muhammad was to wrench the *Kaaba* that Abraham and Ishmael had built and dedicated to the one true God, *and are somehow conflating polytheists/idolaters with all non-Muslims*. In that verse, 2:221, once again the Qur'an takes pains to articulate that what applies to men also applies to women, obvious as that should already be from dozens of other verses:

The Cow, 2:221

And do not marry polytheistic/idolatrous women until they believe; a believing bondwoman is better than a polytheistic (free) woman, even if you find her attractive. And do not marry your women to polytheistic men until they believe; a believing bondman is better than a polytheistic (free) man even if you find him attractive...

Lest some readers be thinking it, Christians can in no way be considered polytheists because of the doctrine of the Trinity, which was already fully developed at the time of the Prophet yet did not stop God from issuing verse 5:5 above encouraging marriage to our Christian cousins (among others). The Prophet even had occasion to enter into a theological debate with a Christian delegation once, which ended with some disagreements concerning the person of Jesus, yet **he still invited them—60 Christian delegates in all—to perform their (Trinitarian) rites in the mosque in Medina when their prayer time came, which they did.**³¹

However even the officially inclusive view of interfaith marriage based on verse 5:5 still falls short in two respects.

First, this open-mindedness towards mixed marriages is extended by the authorities to Muslim men only, not to Muslim women. The usual

³¹ Lings, Martin. *Op. Cit.*, 326.

argument is that the Qur'an here appears to be addressing men but is *silent* on whether women can marry from among the People of the Book too, so it must mean that they cannot.

This is a disappointing conclusion, to say the least, but quite in keeping with our societies' patriarchal approach to scripture on all matters. It is also in keeping with the tendency of far too many of us to zoom in on the letter of the holy book rather than on its spirit—one tree rather than the whole forest again.

Can it not be that God was simply seizing upon a reality on the ground as a **teachable moment to introduce the idea of interfaith coexistence within families to complement the Qur'anic theme of interfaith brotherhood between communities?** Besides talk of interfaith marriage, notice the reference to being able to consume each other's foods,³² which further underlines the intent of this verse to bring the interfaith experience into one's very home by giving it God's blessing. **Must God repeat every single utterance addressed to humankind in both gender forms for the message to sink in that He is always necessarily applying His divine wisdom and mercy to both men and women?**

Furthermore, since God encouraged Muslim women to marry their male slaves if they were "righteous", without insistence on them being "believers" as we saw under Marriage above in verse 24:32, why would He forbid them from marrying from among His other People of the Book, such as Christians and Jews? It would make no sense.

Second, it has long been understood that the Qur'an's many references to the People of the Book is a reference to Jews and Christians (alongside Muslims). After all, the Torah, Gospel and Psalms are mentioned in the Qur'an 18, 12 and 3 times, respectively—always favourably—and described as "a guidance and light" to humankind, while as previously mentioned Moses (*Moussa*) is mentioned no less than 136 times and Jesus (*'Issa*) is mentioned 24 times including by titles such the Messiah, Word of/from God, Spirit from God, and Son of Mary.³³

But the Qur'an hints at other religions too, and speaks of God having sent many more prophets than those we relate to the three Abrahamic religions. Indeed only 25 prophets are mentioned by name, the vast

³²This implies that Christians at that time in Arabia still followed Judaic law and did not consume pork, which is also explicitly forbidden to followers of the Qur'an (2:173, 5:3, 6:145, 16:115).

³³See Preface, footnote 2.

majority of whom were already known through Judaism and Christianity. But then the Qur'an goes so far as to say that while God has spoken to us of some prophets in this holy book, He has not spoken to us of others (40:78), and declares that every nation throughout history has necessarily been sent a messenger (16:36)—for how could a just God judge people if He has not sent them guidance first?

But we have always overlooked such verses as a community, to some extent understandably since it is only in recent times that access to information about other religions, and direct contact with almost anyone anywhere, have become so widespread. But we should never have overlooked how the Prophet's closest Companions themselves seem to have understood the phrase People of the Book so soon after his death, with no other than the famously strict Omar himself reportedly having included the Zoroastrians of Persia, for example, in the definition of People of the Book and regarded their scripture as divinely revealed when he was caliph³⁴ (though this did not ultimately soften his policies towards what he saw as a redundant religion at best, quite in keeping with what we know of his sometimes over-zealous nature even during the Prophet's days, which Muhammad often sought to temper). One cannot but wonder what other religious groups the Companions might have considered People of the Book, i.e. people whom God had sent their own messenger, had they but come across them.

THE PUSHBACK OF PATRIARCHAL VIEWS ON MUSLIM WOMEN MARRYING "OUT": BUT THE CHILDREN WOULDN'T BE MUSLIM THEN!

To oppose Muslim women's marriage to men from a different faith, religious authorities and our societies by extension have thrown, everything they can think of, at the idea. Besides the unconvincing argument that verse 5:5 does not mention women explicitly, they also argue that the children of any mixed marriage *must* be Muslim and that this is only possible if the *father* is Muslim, since the father is the "head" of the household.

There are two problems with this argument.

Firstly, if God tells us that the religions of the People of the Book were sent by Him, and that the followers of these religions are good

³⁴Khutab, Mahmoud. 1965. *Leaders of the Conquest of Persia* (in Arabic). Beirut: Dar al-Fath, 31.

enough for us to marry, why aren't these religions good enough for our children too?

Secondly, is it not more likely that the children of mixed marriages will be Muslim—truly Muslim, in their hearts and not just by name—if their mother and main caregiver is Muslim, rather than their father? Surely this line of argument would be more effective in opposing Muslim *men's* marriage to women from another faith, rather than the other way round!

I draw attention to the shortcomings of these two ubiquitous arguments simply to highlight that it is obvious that the decision to bar Muslim women from marrying, say, Christians or Jews, was taken by society first, and then arguments to support that decision were found to prop it up. When families have allowed it, it has usually been only if the man agrees to formally embrace Islam, which no longer makes it an interfaith marriage at all.

Of course, most Muslims everywhere prefer to keep things simple anyway and have both their sons and daughters marry only from within the faith. That is perfectly understandable, and most opportunities for marriage generally arise within a given community anyway in most of the world. In fact, I had initially decided not to include a section on interfaith marriage in this book, but ultimately realised that it would be a glaring omission. In this day and age as we increasingly come into contact with other faiths one way or another, when we can no longer hide behind dogmatic answers or quash the questions that arise in our God-given minds, it is important to begin to face these unconvincing man-made arguments and look deeper into our divinely transmitted heritage.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

