

| Understanding Aisha's Age: An Interdisciplinary Approach | |
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| Author | Asadullah Ali al-Andalusi - Bachelor's in Western Philosophy (Benedictine University), Masters in Islamic Philosophy (IIUM) |
| Hadith | <p>Narrated by 'Ā'ishah: The Prophet ﷺ married her when she was six years old and consummated the marriage when she was nine years old. Then she remained with him for nine years (i.e. until his death)</p> <p>عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ تَزَوَّجَهَا وَهِيَ بُنْتُ سِتٍّ سِنِينَ، وَأَنْجَلَتْ عَلَيْهِ وَهِيَ بُنْتُ تِسْعَ، وَمَكَنَتْ عِنْدَهُ تِسْعَ</p> |
| Doubt | How can someone declared a moral exemplar marry a child? |
| Common responses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dismissing the hadiths about 'Ā'ishah's age as being spurious or condemning Islamic morals altogether |
| Presentism | An anachronistic misinterpretation of history based on present-day circumstances that did not exist in the past |
| Judging history | <p>Moral judgments can be made about past people and events. But how we judge the past requires understanding the context</p> <p>It's one thing to read about how a historical figure killed another person, but it's another to know that they did so due to dire need or just cause</p> |
| Childhood | We mistakenly assume that children's circumstances and capabilities have remained static throughout history |
| Romans | <p>The average life expectancy for a working-class Roman citizen in late antiquity was roughly around 35 to 40 years. Given the high mortality rates among infants and mothers, it made sense to begin procreating as early as possible</p> <p>The average age of marriage for young girls in ancient Rome was around 14/15, with the legal minimum being 12</p> |
| Semitic cultures | Jewish girls in late antiquity were married young with the goal of maximizing fertility and thus by adolescence one was already expected to assume the full responsibilities of a mature woman |
| Anachronistic thinking | We tend to take our own advantages for granted. If you knew that you probably wouldn't live beyond your 30s, most of your children would die in infancy, and the only education you would receive would be for one of a handful of jobs consisting of hard labor, your life decisions would change dramatically |
| <i>The Bioarchaeology of Children</i> | "What is clear is that we cannot simply transpose our view of childhood directly onto the past" |

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| 'Aisha's marriage | Her marriage was contracted at the age of six and ultimately consummated by nine |
| Age of puberty | Recent studies have found that the onset of puberty has fluctuated dramatically throughout history |
| | Example It would have been normal for a young girl to start puberty at around fourteen years of age during the Western Industrial Revolution (18th–19th century); in the 21st century some girls start puberty as early as six |
| | Reason These fluctuations have been connected to variances in genetics, nutrition, stress, and even the over-sexualization of Western societies |
| Puberty and maturity | "For the first time in our evolutionary history, biological puberty in females significantly precedes, rather than being matched to, the age of successful functioning as an adult ... Our social structures have been developed in the expectation of longer childhood, prolonged education and training, and later reproductive competence" - While it is certainly true that the onset of puberty does not make someone an adult today, this same judgment does not apply to people of the past |
| Hadith of playing with dolls | Narrated 'Ā'ishah RA: I used to play with dolls in the presence of the Prophet ﷺ, and my girlfriends also used to play with me. [The playing with the dolls was allowed for 'Ā'ishah RA at that time, as she had not yet reached the age of puberty] |
| Islamophobes | This narration is quoted when arguing that 'Ā'ishah RA was not mature enough to be married |
| Response | The statement in brackets is actually an addition from <i>Fath al-Bārī</i> . Ibn Hajar's own commentary admits that 'Ā'ishah RA was at least 14 years of age at the time this narration takes place, putting her well above the average age of the onset of puberty in the Near East during late antiquity (and even by today's standards). This is most likely why Ibn Hajar felt his own conclusion was questionable. His suggestion that she must have not have reached puberty was because it helped him to reconcile an apparent contradiction in her behavior with the legal prohibition of adults playing with dolls |
| Reconciliation | Other scholars, such as Imam al-Bayhaqī, claimed that the prohibition was only declared after the events narrated in the hadith |
| Differing circumstances | Many moral choices and customs of the past were merely a function of the circumstances people faced e.g. higher mortality rates, shorter life spans It is not fair to consider ourselves morally superior to our ancestors when we aren't forced to make the decisions they had to make |

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| Uswatun hasanah | <p>The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is a perfect moral exemplar for all times, places, and cultures</p> <p>Every statement or action the Prophet ﷺ ever performed is considered to have been the most appropriate response to the dilemmas he faced during his time and a standard from which we can learn</p> |
| Marriage in Islam | <p>The Qur'an sets an age limit for marriage: "Test orphans until they reach marriageable age." Ibn Kathīr elaborated on the consensus surrounding the nature of 'marriageable age' as not referring to a specific number, but a physical development—the age of puberty</p> |
| Types of marriages | <p>1) A contractual marriage - can be legally entered at any point in a person's life and later be revoked through one's own volition regardless of whether they have obtained legal maturity or not * Such a marriage would prohibit any intimate contact between the betrothed and would be comparable today to an engagement</p> <p>2) A consummated marriage - requires both parties to be physically capable of sexual relations given the logical implication</p> |
| Maturity | <p>Jurists generally viewed physical signs of adulthood as just that—signs; not de facto evidence of reproductive functionality. When determining the physical maturity of an individual, jurists often relied on physical features, the most common being if the person in question actually looked like an adult. A girl could technically not have reached menarche but still be considered mature based on other physical features, such as her biological age</p> |
| Simple logic | <p>If Islam allowed for the abuse of children, then the Prophet ﷺ would not have needed to wait three full years before finalizing his marriage</p> |
| Western contradiction | <p>Western nations have focused entirely on superficial age limits as determinants of maturity—all the while considering it socially acceptable for their own minors to engage in sexual relations as long as they are within the same age range</p> |
| Age for intimate relations | <p>It is illogical to condemn the practice of child marriage, but at the same time think your own children are physically and emotionally mature enough to have intimate relationships</p> |
| Mixed messages | <p>Western culture sends mixed messages when it tells minors that they have the right to intimacy with those they are attracted to only as long as they refrain from potential partners legally recognized as adults</p> |
| Similar harms | <p>A minor would face the same consequences with their peers as they would with adults (e.g. pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence, exploitation, etc.)</p> |