

A Short Biography of the “Mothers of the Faithful”

سيرة مختصرة عن أمهات المؤمنين رضى

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[English - إنجليزي]

www.islamreligion.com website

موقع دين الإسلام

2013 - 1434

IslamHouse.com

The wives of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, hold a special place in Islamic piety. The Quran calls them “**Mothers of the Faithful**” (**Quran 33:6**). They were his wives in this life and shall be in the life to come. They were young and old, widows and virgins, poor and wealthy, aristocrats and freed slaves. Each one played their specific role in forming the history of Islam.

Khadeejah

Prophet Muhammad married her when he was twenty-five, while she had reached the age of forty. She was a widow, twice married. He was at the peak of his youth. Impressed by Muhammad’s honesty and moral character, she send a relative to propose marriage. They were married for twenty five years until her death. Through every persecution, Khadeejah was his sole companion and helper. Khadeejah, along with Aisha, played a major contribution in the establishment and spread of the Islamic civilization. Khadeejah bore four daughters with the Prophet: Zainab, Umm Kulthoom, Ruqayya, and Fatima. All four grew to maturity and accepted Islam. They all died in the lifetime of their father, except Fatima who died six months after the Prophet. Khadeejah also bore two sons, Qasim and Abdullah, both of whom died at an early age.

Sawdah

Months after the death of Khadeejah, the Prophet had returned from an unsuccessful mission in Taif, helpless and persecuted. At this time he married Sawdah, another widow, who possessed neither beauty, nor social status, nor wealth. She had been forced to escape to Abyssinia with her husband from the persecution of pagan Meccans to find some security. Her husband died in exile, giving his life for the sake of his faith. He had migrated with his wife from his home for the cause of his religion, and he left her in

utter poverty. Driven by a sense of generosity, the Prophet of Mercy married her, raising her to the spiritual level of “Mother of the Faithful.” The Prophet did not marry another woman for the first three years of his Marriage to Sawdah. She died a few years after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

Aishah

Aishah was the daughter of one of the closest companions of Prophet Muhammad, Abu Bakr. An old friend of the Prophet, Abu Bakr was one of the earliest converts to the faith and was considered to be the most sincere, earnest, and devoted in faith. Seeing the loss of the Prophet, one of the woman companions proposed Abu Bakr’s daughter to him and approached Abu Bakr on behalf of the Prophet. But there were two problems. One, Aishah was already betrothed to Jubair bin Mut’im, a pagan Meccan. Jubair, it turned out, had lost interest because of the wide gulf between paganism and Islam. In addition, Aishah had not yet reached puberty, and this also contributed to Jubair’s disinterest in pursuing the betrothal. Thus, she was betrothed to the Prophet while still in Mecca, and three years later, when both were in Medina and she had reached puberty, he consummated his marriage. She was the only virgin he married, though they did not have any children. Aishah was a leading scholar of Islam and played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Islamic civilization. She taught for forty years after the death of the Prophet until her death at the age of sixty-seven.

Hafsah

Hafsah was the daughter of Umar, the man closest to Prophet Muhammad after Abu Bakr. She migrated with her husband to Medina, but was left a widow after the Battle of Badr. With a fiery temper like her father, she had remained without a husband ever since. Umar first asked Abu Bakr, and then Uthman, to marry her, but each refused in turn, much to his ire. This shows the unavailability of marriageable males at the time. At last, Umar

approached Prophet Muhammad. The marriage took place in the third year after migration. The Prophet divorced her once, but was commanded by God to take her back. She was charged with keeping the official copy of the Quran during the caliphate of Abu Bakr and Umar. She passed away four years after the Prophet.

Zainab

In the same year, the third year after migration, the Prophet married Zainab, made a widow after the Battle of Uhud. Her kindness to the poor had earned her the nickname of “mother of the destitute.” She was past the prime of her life and when she was wed by him, and she died a few months after their marriage. She is the only wife beside Khadeejah who passed away in the Prophet’s lifetime.

Umm Salama

A year later, the Prophet married another widow who had suffered persecution, at one time losing the custody of her children to her pagan in-laws. After the Battle of Uhud, she was left a widow with four children. Abu Bakr first proposed to her, but she refused because she did not think anyone could be patient with her children. Finally, the Prophet proposed, assuring her the children would be taken care of; Prophet Muhammad married Umm Salama because of this noble motivation. The faithful loved their Prophet all the more and honored him as the Prophet of God. They saw in him a father to the destitute, the deprived, the weak, and the poor as well as to everyone who had lost his father in the cause of God. Umm Salama was the last wife of the Prophet to die. She passed away forty nine years after his death at the age of eighty-four.

Umm Habeebah

Umm Habeebah was the Muslim daughter of Islam’s archenemy, Abu Sufyan. Umm Habeebah was one of the early converts to Islam in Mecca. She had migrated with her husband to Abyssinia who converted to Christianity over there. On his death,

the Prophet sent a proposal to her while she was still in Abyssinia. She returned to Medina three years before the death of the Prophet. She passed away thirty four years after the Prophet.

Zainab, the Divorced Wife of Zaid

Zainab was the cousin of the Prophet, who was married to Zaid, an orphan slave whom the Prophet liberated and then adopted. The Prophet proposed the marriage of Zainab with Zaid to her brother, but he refused to let his sister, a noble girl of Hashimite and Quraishite ancestry and the first cousin of the Prophet, become the wife of a former slave. Such a union was regarded by the Arabs as a thing of great shame. For the daughters of the aristocracy to marry their slaves, even freed slaves, was unthinkable. The Prophet sought to wipe out racial and class distinctions between men. He was to educate the world that no Arab is superior to any non-Arab unless it be in virtue and piety, as God had said,

“...Indeed, the most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most god-fearing...” (Quran 49:13)

The Prophet did not choose to force this principle on a woman outside his own tribe. It was his cousin Zainab who, in complying with the Prophet’s wishes for Zaid, willingly opposed the Arabian custom. And Zaid, a freed slave, was the person of too low a lineage for marriage into Meccan aristocracy in her family’s eyes. Thus, the Prophet encouraged Zainab to agree to marry Zaid, and, when Zainab agreed, insisted that her brother accept the adopted orphan as a brother-in-law.

However, after the marriage, Zaid found it hard to live with her. Zaid consulted the Prophet who advised him not to divorce her. Never-the less, once all attempts to work out the marriage had failed, divorce was the only alternative left. After the divorce, she and her relatives insisted that the Prophet marry her. Feeling bound to meet their wishes after a failed marriage that he had

arranged, the Prophet was hesitant. The pagan custom allowed marrying step-mothers and mothers-in-law, but looked upon the marriage of the divorced wife of an adopted son as unacceptable. To undo the custom and to set an example, God commanded the hesitant Prophet to marry Zainab. Their marriage took place in 5 A.H. She died ten years after the Prophet.

Juwairiyah

In the same year, a large number of prisoners fell into the hands of Muslims at the Battle of Bani Mustaliq. Among them was Juwairiyah, the daughter of an Arab chief, who approached the Prophet with a ransom for herself to which her captor readily agreed. The Prophet then proposed marrying her, and she, in turn, accepted. As soon as the Muslims heard the news of the marriage, they released their prisoners from the tribe of Banu Mustaliq. They felt they could not keep a tribe honored by the Prophet in captivity, so some one hundred families from the tribe of Banu Mustaliq were freed as a blessing of her marriage with the Prophet. Juwairiyah was one devoted to worship. Once, the Prophet passed by her after the dawn prayer and found her busy in worship in her place of prayer. The Prophet passed by her again during late morning and found her still in her place, whereupon he commented,

“You are still in your state (of worship)?”

She responded, “Yes.”

“Should I not teach you some words greater in reward! Say, ‘How perfect is God, I praise Him by the number of His creation and His pleasure, and by the weight of His Throne, and the ink of His Words.’”¹

She died some forty years after the Prophet.

¹ Musnad, Abu Daud

Safiyyah

Safiyyah, daughter of a Jewish chief of Banu Nadheer, was taken as a prisoner in the Battle of Khaibar in the year 7 A.H. The Prophet liberated and then married her. Upon marriage, the Prophet found marks of abuse on her cheek about which he was curious.

She explained, “I saw a dream in which the full moon rose over Medina and fell in my lap. I told the dream to my cousin who slapped me and said, ‘You want to marry the king of Medina!’ This mark is from his slap.”

When the Prophet was on his deathbed, she wept and said, ‘I wish I could be in your place, O Messenger of God,’ to which he replied, **“By God, she is telling the truth.”**

Maimoonah

Maimoomah, another widow, requested marriage to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, in Mecca in 7 A.H. She was from his tribe and was already over fifty. Prophet Muhammad married her in order to support her, a poor relative of his. Her nephew, Ibn Abbas, who later became the greatest scholar of the Quran, learned much from her knowledge.