Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God
By: Coeli Fitzpatrick and Adam Hani Walker, Editors

HUSBAND

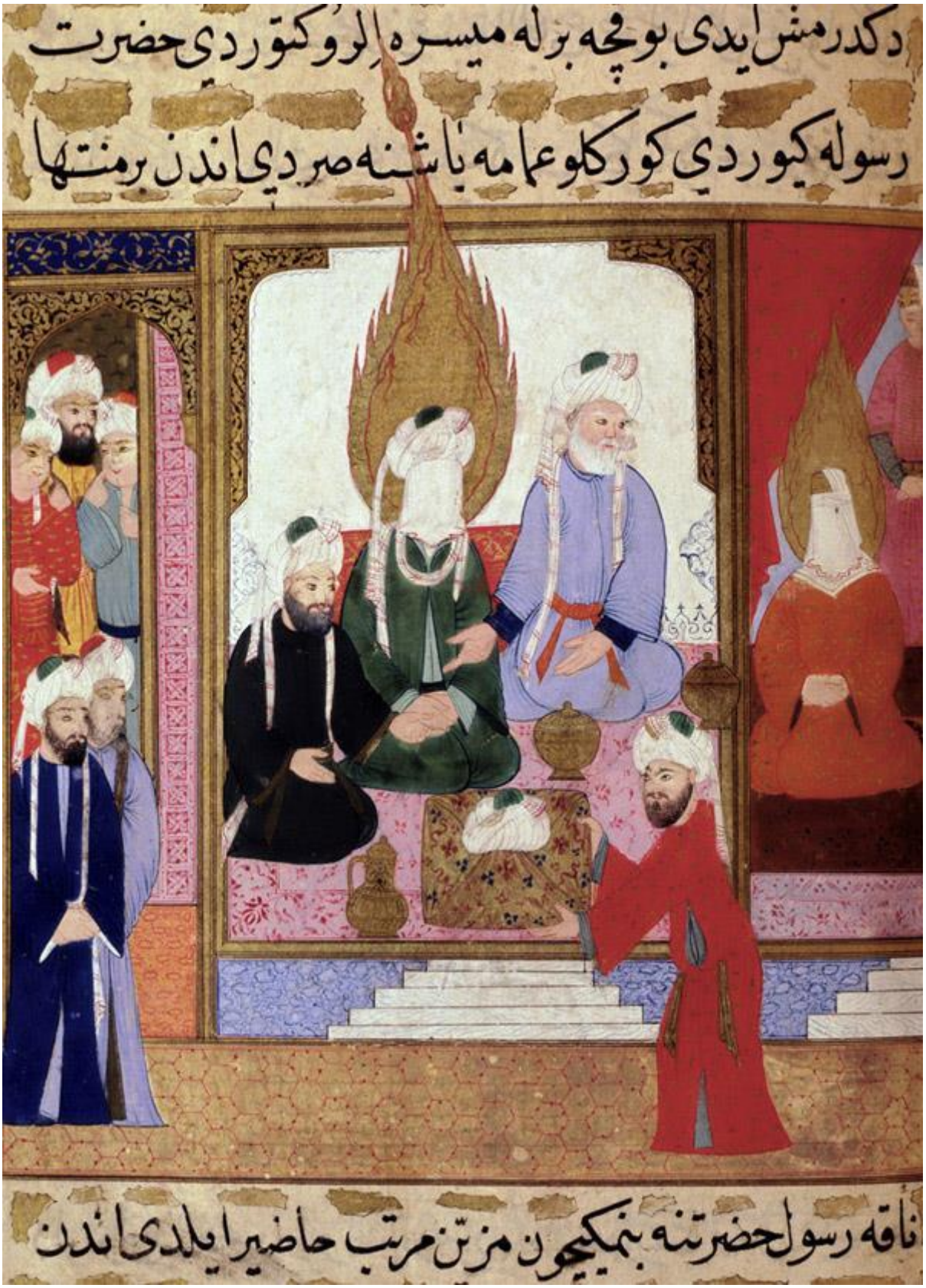
Pernilla Myrne

The 10th-century writer al-Khara'iti, in his book *I'tilal al-qulub* about love and its torments, writes that "the first love in Islam was the Prophet Muhammad's love for 'A'isha." With this statement, the author not only casts the Prophet Muhammad as lover but also promotes love between husband and wife. By the time al-Khara'iti wrote his book, literature on love was widespread, and hadiths about the Prophet's matrimonial life had been collected in several major compilations. The person of Muhammad as the Muslim role model had come to embrace not only the realm of leadership and exemplary behavior but also the realm of emotion.

The present entry discusses the representations of the Prophet as an ideal husband in Arabic literature on love and marriage from the 9th and 10th centuries, being the centuries when the first books on this topic were written. Although not the main subject of any book, the Prophet's way of supervising his marriages and socializing with his wives provided a model wherever such accounts appeared. The Prophet as the Muslim role model was taken for granted in all literature, even though it was treated in different ways by the various literary genres that emerged during these centuries. It was used as a legal model in Sunni jurisprudence and an ethical model in *adab*. In biographical literature, these two models were combined with a quest for truth.

Biographical Literature

When narrative history about the Prophet Muhammad was written, his marriages were only briefly mentioned. His biography tells us about his first marriage with Khadija, a milestone in Muhammad's path toward prophecy and leadership. The marriages that were concluded after Islam, however, are only referred to in passing.



Muhammad marrying his first wife, Khadija. Miniature from the *Siyer-i Nebi*, written by Mustafa, son of Yusuf of Erzurum, 16 century. Topkapi Sarayi Museum Library, Istanbul, Turkey. (Universal Images Group)

Whereas the principle of narrative selection in the biographical literature tends to exclude marriage, one of the Prophet's biographers, Muhammad ibn Sa'd, discusses issues related to his matrimonial life in the last volume of *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kubra*. This volume, devoted to the female companions, is one of the most widely used sources for the history of the first women in Islam. It is also one of the most informative early accounts about the Prophet's married life. Contrary to the Prophet's own biography, there are plenty of testimonies of his conjugal life in the biographies of his wives. In fact, marriage to the Prophet forms the main theme of their biographies. It is dealt with primarily from a formal point of view, with the obvious intention to set examples for later Muslims in issues such as the size of the dowry (money or property given to the bride upon marriage), the wedding meal, and the like. However, another major interest relates to the interactions between the Prophet Muhammad and his wives and the status of each wife in relation to the other wives.

The wives' positions are sometimes measured as to the degree of intimacy between them and the Prophet. As a consequence, the image of Muhammad as a husband is of a man who rejoices in the company of his wives and maintains a close relationship with them, both physically and spiritually. Both polite and considerate, he demands respect for his wives from his companions. He is also careful not to pressure or overburden them. For example, the Prophet placed no pressure on his wife Umm Salama to stop breast-feeding her daughter, despite this inhibiting the Prophet from consummating the marriage with her.

The reports about his behavior toward his youngest wife, 'A'isha, are also compelling. He allows her to stay a child and watches her tenderly as she is playing. He even hides himself when she plays with her friends so as not to restrain them. He is also remarkably forbearing when the older 'A'isha lies to him and he pardons her jealousy. Ibn Sa'd provides a section on wife battering, concluding that the Prophet himself never struck a woman. The Prophet has his authority from God and does not have to use violence to enforce it; his wives obey him willingly. He gives them a choice, the choice referred to in the Qur'an between "God and his Messenger" and "the present life and its adornment" (Q 33:28–33). They all choose God and his Messenger without hesitating, and so his authority ignited an inner and true obedience within his wives.

The Prophet Muhammad in Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat* is a man who loves women. Although Muhammad is concerned about his wives' piety, he also loves beauty. In a few cases we view conflicts between his wives that agitate him. These conflicts, however, are solved by his authority as a Prophet, which lasts even after his death. There are several accounts, for example, of how his wives endeavored to overcome their disputes toward the end of their lives.

The life described in the *Tabaqat* is one characterized by polygamy. There is an obvious conflict here between the aspirations for ranking the wives as to their position with the Prophet and the legislative interest in the managing of a polygamous household. On the one hand, the Prophet makes efforts to share his time and concerns fairly among his wives. He is reported to have visited each of them every evening, spending some time with them before ending up in the house of the wife whose turn it was to spend the night with him. Ibn Sa'd gives special attention to the

Prophet's extraordinary ability to not only meet the spiritual needs of his wives but also satisfy the physical needs of each of them. On the other hand, Muhammad is burdened by a jealousy that sometimes erupts among his wives. Despite his desire to create balance among his wives, he would side with the wife whom he felt was correct whenever a dispute arose. It was evident that his heart was especially inclined toward 'A'isha, which is amplified by the numerous accounts transmitted by her.

Hadith

From the 9th century onward, hadiths addressing questions of marriage were brought together in hadith compendiums that almost all contain chapters titled "Kitab al-nikah" (Chapter on Marriage). The hadiths about the Prophet's words and behavior constitute the sunna in Islam and as such portray the Prophet as a model for Muslims. However, these hadiths tend to give us a somewhat contradictory image of the Prophet as a husband, as their intention is to provide legal advice in specific situations, not to enhance our understanding of the Prophet as a person. The ideality of the Prophet in the hadith literature does not have to be proven by a coherent picture of his exemplary character, as in Ibn Sa'd's *sira* above. Moreover, many of the hadiths about marriage convey the Prophet's opinion and do not necessarily illustrate his own behavior. The hadiths that do depict his performance as a husband often deal with managing a polygamous household, as in Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat*, and accentuate the Prophet's efforts to distribute his time fairly among his wives. Other legal matters are also discussed based on specific incidents in his household.

The representation of the Prophet Muhammad as a husband is not limited to hadiths explicitly about matrimonial issues. His wife 'A'isha is the fourth most prolific transmitter of traditions from him in sunni tradition, and many of her accounts provide us with unexpected glimpses into his matrimonial life. The emphasis on ritual purity in Islamic law also gives us a unique insight into the intimate spheres of his marriages (Ze'ev 2005). Many hadiths about purification depict a tender intimacy between the Prophet and his wives, often with an exceptional openness.

Some decades after Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat* (and approximately at the same time as Muslim and al-Bukhari edited their canonical hadith collections), Ibn Qutayba composed a work on women and marriage, the fourth volume of his *'Uyun al-akhbar*. He relied to a certain extent on hadith, combined with proverbs, poetry, historical accounts, and anecdotes. Several of its subchapters are introduced by a saying of the Prophet about the subject matter. A noteworthy tendency in this work is that the Prophet's model is contrasted with that of other authorities, with the Prophet emerging as more affectionate and tolerant toward his wives. The chapter on supervision of women cites various misogynic sayings, poems, and anecdotes about the treatment of wives by notable Islamic authorities as well as anonymous Bedouins, who all advise men to treat their wives harshly. For example, they must not be generous toward their wives and must not talk to them more than

necessary. The Prophet, however, endorses playfulness and generosity. Cheerfulness in marriage is thus the Prophet's example. He laughs with his wives and kisses them. Although references to the Prophet Muhammad as a husband are rare in *adab* literature, they convey a rather coherent picture.

Another literary genre emerging during this period is that of erotic literature. The genre was preceded by some epistles by al-Jahiz, but the earliest extant full-text erotic manual is probably from the late 10th century. This work, by an obscure 'Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib, is translated into English as "Encyclopedia of Pleasure." In accordance with its subject matter, and following al-Jahiz, it refers to the Prophet's love of women. Both Ibn Nasr and al-Jahiz use this love as an argument for advocating heterosexuality against pederasty. In addition, Ibn Nasr makes use of the Prophet's saying about the inevitable sexual desire between men and women: "No man has a private meeting with a women but every hair of his calls for every hair of hers."

The same man who started off this article will also bring it to a close. Al-Khara'iti's *'Itilal al-qulub* belongs to the genre of love theory, and it is the first extant work on love relying on hadith. Compared with Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat*, this genre tends to depict love as monogamous. Therefore, the Prophet's love for 'A'isha places the other wives in the background, illustrating his close and warm relationship with one woman. Al-Khara'iti emphasizes a hadith implying that love cannot be distributed fairly, as can time and money. He is clearly motivated by the ambiguous attitudes toward profane love that was to become characteristic for this genre. On the one hand, the Prophet Muhammad remains an *'ashiq*, a passionate lover, who cannot even refrain from kissing his beloved 'A'isha when fasting. On the other hand, the Prophet

promotes the merits of chastity that conveys a very different message: "He who loves and remains chaste and conceals his secret and dies, dies a martyr."

To conclude, this survey of the image of the Prophet Muhammad as an ideal husband indicates some flexibility in terms of how his model was used in different literary genres. In hadith and biography, which drew on the same sources but used different selection criteria, one of the main themes is the Prophet's managing of a polygamous household. The tendency is to portray the Prophet as exemplary in his ability to distribute time and attention fairly among his wives, although it is noted that some are given more than others. In literature on love, on the other hand, his love is depicted as more monogamous, which probably conformed to the idea of romantic love of the time. We have also seen that his example could be used freely, as in the erotic literature, to support an author's argumentation.

See also: 'A'isha; Family; Ibn Sa'd; Wives

Further Reading

Khalidi, T. *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam across the Centuries*. New York: Doubleday, 2009.

Stern, G. *Marriage in Early Islam*. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1939.

Ze'ev, M. *Virtues of the Flesh: Passion and Purity in Early Islamic Jurisprudence*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

MLA

Myrne, Pernilla. "HUSBAND." *Muhammad in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God*. Ed. Adam Walker, Coeli Fitzpatrick. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014. *ABC-CLIO eBook Collection*. Web. 8 Sep 2014.

Copyright 2014 by ABC-CLIO, LLC.

All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission of ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, CA.