

## Chapter 17: Khadija and her Co-wives

Surprisingly, all the ladies in the household of Muhammad Mustafa, the messenger of Allah, were not altogether free from some of the weaknesses which are supposed to be characteristic of women. Some of his wives suffered from jealousy, and they were not very squeamish about showing it either. The incident of "honey" will make this point clear.

One of the wives of the Messenger of Allah was Zaynab bint Jahash. She knew that her husband was fond of honey. She, therefore, obtained the variety of honey which he liked very much. It so happened that Zaynab was the most beautiful of the wives of the Messenger of Allah. He thought very highly of her. This was a cause of some anxiety to Hadhrat Ayesha bint Abu Bakr, another of his wives. She feared lest he gave all his love to Zaynab, to the exclusion of his other wives. Therefore, she and Hafsa bint Umar, a third wife of the Prophet, worked out a scheme the purpose of which was to make him dislike honey.

The rest of the story is told by Hadhrat Ayesha herself. Imam Bukhari has quoted her in his Book of Talag (Divorce), and Book of Tafsir (of Sura Tahreem) as follows:

I and Hafsa made this plan that when the Messenger of Allah visits any one of us, she should tell him that his mouth reeks with "maghafeer." (maghafeer is something sweet to taste but has a pungent and unpleasant odor. Muhammad Mustafa was very sensitive on this point. He hated strong odors). It so happened that Hafsa was the wife he visited first. As soon as he entered her chamber, she said: "O Messenger of Allah! Your mouth has the odor of maghafeer." He said: "I did not eat maghafeer. But when I was with Zaynab, she gave me some honey to eat. It is possible that the honey had the odor of maghafeer. But in future, I shall not eat honey."

Here two wives of Muhammad Mustafa – Ayesha and Hafsa – are seen working against a third wife – Zaynab. Zaynab had not done any harm to Ayesha and Hafsa. She was a cousin of the Prophet; he was the son of her maternal uncle. She loved him and he loved her. She knew his likes and dislikes, and kept a certain variety of honey at home which she knew, was his favorite.

Muhammad's love for Zaynab kindled the flames of jealousy in the heart of Ayesha. To quell those

flames, she hatched a scheme with Hafsa against Zaynab and implemented it. Apparently, these two ladies did not trust their husband for fairplay. They thought that he was being partial to Zaynab – perhaps at their expense. If they had trusted him, they would not have hatched such a scheme.

Abul Kalam Azad says that jealousy is an instinct of women, and it can overcome all other instincts in them. Ayesha, he says, was led by this very human instinct to improvise an artifice to make her husband spend less time with Zaynab than he was doing.

Muhammad Mustafa told these two ladies that he would not eat honey again. This must have pleased both of them because they probably believed that their plot was successful. But at this point, Revelation intervened and clinched the matter with the following verse:

***O prophet! Why holdest thou to be forbidden that which Allah has made lawful to thee? Thou seekest to please thy consorts. But Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful. (Chapter 66; verse 1)***

Hadhrat Ayesha and Hadhrat Hafsa did not want their husband to eat honey, and he agreed not to, but then Allah Ta'ala Himself had to remind him that the consumption of honey was quite lawful, and that he ought not to deny himself the pleasure of eating it.

Muhammad Mustafa, of course, returned to Zaynab's apartment and enjoyed honey as he had done before.

### **Mary the Copt**

In the year 10 A.H., the governor of Egypt, sent a slave girl called Mary the Copt to Medina to wait on Muhammad Mustafa. Mary soon won a place for herself in his affections and his home. He loved her and she also loved him. From her, he had a son whom he called Ibrahim. Ibrahim was born late in the life of his father. The father, therefore, loved him immensely.

Ibrahim was a special gift which Allah bestowed upon His slaves, Muhammad Mustafa and Mary the Copt.

***To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. He creates what He wills (and plans). He bestows (children) male or female according to His will (and plan), or He bestows both males and females, and He leaves barren whom He will: for He is full of knowledge and power. (Chapter 42; verses 49, 50)***

Muhammad Mustafa and Mary the Copt were blessed by Allah with the birth of their son, Ibrahim. They thanked Him for the great blessing which filled their life and their home with happiness.

But the **birth** of Ibrahim did not bring happiness to some other wives of his father.

### **D. S. Margoliouth**

His (the Prophet's) last years were brightened for a time by the birth of a son to his Coptic concubine (sic) Mary whom he acknowledged as his own, and whom he called after the mythical (sic) founder of his religion, Ibrahim. This concubine (sic) having been the object of the extreme envy of his many childless wives, the auspicious event occasioned them the most painful heartburnings; which indeed were speedily allayed by the death of the child (who lived only 11 months).

(Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London)

One of the wives of the Prophet to whom the birth of Ibrahim occasioned heartburning, was Hadhrat Ayesha.

Hadhrat Ayesha was of course jealous of Mary – her new co-wife, and hated her. Unfortunately, her hatred of Mary was not confined to Mary alone; it went beyond her, and reached her infant son. Ayesha hated Ibrahim. It never occurred to her that she ought to love Ibrahim, not only because he was the darling of the Prophet, but also because he was an infant. But if Ayesha was unable to overcome jealousy and hatred, and was unable to show any love to the baby, she ought, at least, to have pretended to love him, if only to please his father. Ayesha could not do even this.

Ayesha could not show any love to Ibrahim, not even for the sake of appearance. But there is one thing she could have done, and that was to refrain from showing her hatred for him.

It is amazing that whereas Ayesha was so abundantly endowed with feelings of hatred, jealousy and resentment, she appears to have been singularly devoid of the tenderness which is a universal characteristic of women. She did not show any tenderness. In the matter of children, and especially the infants, even a cruel woman becomes tender. But not Ayesha. Far from being tender to the beloved son of her husband, she cursed **him and cast** many aspersions on him.

Alas, Ibrahim did not live long. He died in infancy.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

"When Mary gave birth to Ibrahim, the event brought to Muhammad, a man past sixty years of age, great joy. Because of the birth of the baby, the position of his mother – Mary –also improved. Muhammad now looked upon her as a free wife, indeed, as one enjoying a most favored position.

"It was inevitable that the birth of Ibrahim would kindle fires of jealousy in the hearts of the other wives of Muhammad who were all barren. It was also natural that the Prophet's love and affection for the newborn baby and his mother, fanned the flames of that jealousy. Muhammad had liberally rewarded Salma, the wife of Abu Rafi, and the midwife for Ibrahim. He also distributed grain to all the poor in Medina. He assigned the infant to the care of Umm Sayf, a wet nurse, who owned seven goats, and she was to give their milk to him. Every day Muhammad visited the house of Mary to see his son's bright face and to take him in his arms. All this incited fierce jealousy in the hearts of the barren wives. The question was how

long these wives would endure this agony.

"One day the proud new father, Muhammad Mustafa, walked into Ayesha's chamber, carrying his son in his arms, to show him to her. He called her attention to the great resemblance of the baby to himself. Ayesha looked at the baby, and said that she saw no resemblance at all. When the Prophet expressed delight how his son was growing, Ayesha responded tartly that any child given the amount of milk which Ibrahim was getting, would grow just as big and strong as he. Indeed, the birth of Ibrahim brought so much heart-burning to the wives of the prophet that they went beyond these and similar caustic answers. It reached such proportions that Revelation itself voiced a special condemnation. Without a doubt, the whole affair left an imprint on the life of the Prophet as well as on the history of Islam.

Since the Prophet granted to his wives special rights and privileges at a time when Arab women amounted to nothing at all in society, it was natural for them to abuse the liberty which none of their peers had ever enjoyed before. This liberty led some of them to criticize the Prophet himself so severely as to roil up his disposition for all day. He often ignored some of his wives, and avoided others in order to discourage them from abusing their privileges. Even so, one of them was so driven by her jealousy as to exceed all limits of decency. But when Mary gave birth to Ibrahim, they lost all composure and self-control. It was for this reason that Ayesha went as far as denying all resemblance between the Prophet and his son, a denial which amounted to an accusation of adultery on the part of the innocent Mary."

(The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935)

Allah saved His loving slave, Khadija, from the torment of being forced, by the customs of the country, to share the attentions and love of her husband with his other wives. But if she had a co-wife, how would she have treated her? Would she have been jealous of her? Never. Jealousy was as far from her as one pole is from the other. She would not have hurt her co-wife or co-wives. She never hurt a neighbor, a maid, or a slave. She never hurt even animals, much less any humans. She passed through life graced with angelic qualities.

After the death of Khadija, Muhammad Mustafa married many other women. But no one among them could ever approximate Khadija for excellence. Among them, there were women of different backgrounds, and they were of very different casts of character. Some of them, it appears, never realized that their husband was the chosen one of God Himself, and had a rank and a status beyond the reach of every other mortal.

#### **D. S. Margoliouth**

The residence of the wives in the Prophet's harem was short, owing to unsuitability of temper; in one or more cases the newcomers were taught by the jealous wives of the Prophet formularies which, uttered by them in ignorance of the meaning, made the Prophet discharge them on the spot. One was discharged for declaring on the death of the infant Ibrahim that had his father been a prophet, he would not have died – a remarkable exercise of the "reasoning power."

(Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London)

To Muhammad Mustafa the conduct of some of the women he married in Medina, must have seemed to be a strange counterpoint to the deportment of Khadija. The latter's deportment had been all sweetness and light. Her every word and every deed had comported with her aim to fill the house of her husband with bliss, and she was eminently successful in realizing it.

Muhammad Husayn Haykal of Egypt and Abul Kalam Azad of India, have quoted various collectors and commentators of Hadith as saying that Hadhrat Abu Bakr and Hadhrat Umar once sought permission of the Prophet to visit him. When they were admitted to his presence, they found him sitting silent, surrounded by his wives. (These ladies were demanding more money from their husband as they said, they could not live in poverty). Umar said: "O Prophet of Allah, if my daughter was ever seen or heard asking me for money, I would surely pull her hair." The Prophet laughed, and said: "Here are my wives surrounding me and asking me for money." Immediately, Abu Bakr rose and pulled the hair of his daughter, Ayesha; and so did Umar to his daughter, Hafsa. Both Abu Bakr and Umar said to their daughters: "Do you dare ask the Prophet of Allah what he cannot afford to give?" They answered: "No, by God, we do not ask him any such thing."

"It was in connection with this conversation between Abu Bakr and Umar and their daughters," says Muhammad Husayn Haykal, "that the following verses were revealed:"

***O prophet! Say to thy consorts: "If it be that ye desire the life of this world and its glitter, - then come! I will provide for your enjoyment and set you free in a handsome manner. But if ye seek Allah and his apostle, and the home of hereafter, verily Allah has prepared for the well-doers amongst you a great reward. (Chapter 33; verses 28, 29)***

Though perhaps all wives of the Prophet were united in demanding more money for food and other necessities from him, Ayesha and Hafsa were pressing the demand more vigorously. Abdullah ibn Abbas says that he once asked Umar bin al-Khattab who were the two wives of the Prophet who were most persistent in demanding money from him, and he said: "Ayesha and Hafsa."

The Prophet himself lived like an ascetic. He invariably put the needs of the poor and the hungry ahead of his own needs. His lifestyle was known to everyone in Medina and those who knew it better than anyone else, were his own wives. Therefore, when they told him that life for them was exceedingly austere, and that he ought to alleviate its asperity for them by granting them more money, he was surprised. He had perhaps assumed that his wives would also imitate him, and would live lives of strict self-denial as he did. He, therefore, found their joint "representation" most shocking; he perhaps thought that it was prompted by too much attachment to food and material comforts.

Abul Kalam Azad says that the wives of the Prophet, after all, were human, and they too had their human needs and desires. Their demarche, therefore, he adds, is quite understandable.

The Prophet, however, was so displeased with his wives that he separated himself from them for a whole month.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

Muhammad isolated himself from all his women for a full month and refused to talk about them to anyone. Nor did anyone else dare to talk to him concerning them. Abu Bakr, Umar, and his other in-laws as well, were deeply concerned over the sad fate that awaited the "Mothers of Believers" now that they had exposed themselves to the anger of the Prophet, and the consequent punishment of God. It was even said that Muhammad had divorced Hafsah, Umar's daughter, after she had divulged the secret she had promised to keep. The market-place of Medina was abuzz with rumors about the impending divorce of the Prophet's wives. The wives, for their part, were repentant and apprehensive. They regretted that their jealousy of one another had carried them away, and that they had abused and harmed their gentle husband. Muhammad spent most of his time in a store-house he owned, placing his servant Rabah at its doorstep as long as he was inside. Therein he used to sleep on a very hard bed of coarse date branches.

(The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935)

Some of the wives of the Prophet showed themselves extremely suspicious. Their suspiciousness could not have made him very happy in his conjugal life. Professor Margoliouth has quoted the Musnad of Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (Vol. iv, p. 221) in this regard, in his book Mohammed and the Rise of Islam as follows:

"At dead of night, it is said, the Prophet went out to the cemetery called Al-Baki, and asked forgiveness for the dead who were buried there. This indeed he had done before; Ayesha once followed him like a detective when he started out at night, supposing him to be bent on some amour: but his destination she found was the graveyard."

The 66th chapter of Quran Majid called Tahreem, deals exclusively with the subject of the conduct of the wives of the Prophet. One of its verses has been quoted above in connection with the incident of "honey." Its fourth and fifth verses read as follows:

***If you two turn in repentance to Him (to Allah), your hearts are indeed so inclined; but if you back up each other against him, truly Allah is his protector, and Gabriel, and (every) righteous one among those who believe, - and furthermore the angels - will back (him) up.***

***It may be, if he divorced you (all), that Allah will give him in exchange consorts better than you, -***

There is not a consensus of the commentators of Quran Majid and the historians upon the particular incident which is under reference in these two verses. Some of them say that the Prophet told something in confidence to Hadhrat Hafsa. She was, however, unable to keep the secret, and disclosed it to Hadhrat Ayesha. This breach of confidence drew the foregoing censure upon one of them for "betraying

a confidence, and upon the other for encouraging the betrayal," thus "abetting each other's wrong."

Explaining the verses of the 66th chapter of Quran Majid, A. Yusuf Ali, its translator and commentator, writes as follows:

The Prophet's household was not like other households. The Consorts of Purity were expected to hold a higher standard of behavior and reticence than ordinary women, as they had higher work to perform. But they were human beings after all, and were subject to the weaknesses of their sex, and they sometimes failed. The imprudence of Hadhrat Aisha once caused serious difficulties: the holy Prophet's mind was sore distressed, and he renounced the company of his wives for some time . ... Hadhrat Umar's daughter, Hafsa, was also sometimes apt to presume on her position, and when the two combined in secret counsel, and discussed matters and disclosed secrets to each other, they caused much sorrow to the holy Prophet, whose heart was tender and who treated all his family with exemplary patience and affection.

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