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To: <TARIKH-IST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU>
Subject: Islamist guide to wife beating
Date sent: Fri, 02 Mar 2007 20:12:00 +0100

...XX wrote:

> Let us also bear in mind that the Prophet Muhammad had more than
> four wives, one of whom He married when she was only nine years old
> (engaged to her when she was seven) while He was in His mid to late
> 50's and I'm not aware that any of His contemporaneous opponents
> ever criticized Him about it.

That's interesting. Perhaps his contemporaries understood something we're missing then ?

You should consider the possibility that the age of marriage might have been fabricated. There is one obvious motive for wanting to have Aisha with Muhammad from the earliest date possible. There are very many traditions attributed to Aisha, and those who possessed these traditions had a sort of 'stock' which gave them status in the community. They had an investment in the reliability of Aisha ahadith, so they would tend to favour an account which made her a reliable transmitter. If, according to this tradition (Sahih Bukhari 7.65) she was 9 years old when she went to live with Muhammad, and 18 when Muhammad died, then all the traditions attributed to Aisha relating to the last 9 years of Muhammad's life would be plausible. That would make her accounts of thing the Prophet said and did in private reliable, from about the battle of Badr onwards.

There is another hadith that shows Aisha remained with her parents until after puberty, and in fact that she was already past puberty when they left Mecca for Medina. This hadith is also in Sahih Bukhari:

Narrated 'Aisha: (the wife of the Prophet) I had seen my parents following Islam since I attained the age of puberty. Not a day passed but the Prophet visited us, both in the mornings and evenings. My father Abu Bakr thought of building a mosque in the courtyard of his house and he did so. He used to pray and recite the Qur'an in it. The pagan women and their children used to stand by him and look at

him with surprise. Abu Bakr was a Softhearted person and could not help weeping while reciting the Quran. The chiefs of the Quraish pagans < this implies: in Mecca] became afraid of that (i.e. that their children and women might be affected by the recitation of Quran)."

This would make Aisha say 11 years or more old in 622, the year of hijra, and she is supposed to have married Muhammad in the same year -- except that there is yet another hadith that says its was two years later:

Narrated Hisham's father: Khadija died three years before the Prophet departed to Medina. He stayed there for two years or so and then he married 'Aisha when she was a girl of six years of age, and he consumed that marriage when she was nine years old.

That would make her just 4 at the time of the hijra. So we have a roughly 10-year range: either she was at puberty before the Hijra and able to recount what her father and Muhammad did in Mecca, or she was only a baby.

Having said that, there is nothing inherently unlikely about an arranged marriage between a girl or even a baby of one family, and an important (and therefore old) man of another family or tribe. That is how alliances were made or cemented. It does not necessarily have to do with grand political alliances, as among the royal families of Europe. The technique was still being used in Iran in the 20th century, by the common people, but in Iran they use temporary marriages. For instance, suppose my brother marries a girl from outside the village. She is no blood relation of mine, so when I go to the house she has to veil, and she can't visit my house without a male relative. Damned inconvenient when she want to pop over for a cup of sugar. So I marry a girl a few months old, with a contract for say 1 week, and take her to my brother's wife to be breast-fed a few times (15 times if we are strictly following the law). My baby "wife" is now the foster-daughter of my brothers' wife, so my brothers' wife is now my mother-in-law, which means she doesn't have to veil in front of me. The infant baby is delivered back to its real mother, and everyone is happy. From the point of view of western suppositions about marriage, this is all quite bizarre and probably perverted -- it looks as if Iranian men are pedophiles en masse. But such a marriage is a contractual issue, not a sexual question. Its

purpose is simply to make two families relatives.

Likewise, we should ask what it was that happened at nine years old, supposing we prefer that account to the post-puberty account. The translator of Sahih Muslim tells it this way:

Book 008, Number 3309:

" 'A'isha (Allah be pleased with her) reported: Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) married me when I was six years old, and I was admitted to his house at the age of nine. She further said: We went to Medina and I had an attack of fever for a month, and my hair had come down to the earlobes. Umm Ruman (my mother) came to me and I was at that time on a swing along with my playmates. She called me loudly and I went to her and I did not know what she had wanted of me. She took hold of my hand and took me to the door, and I was saying: Ha, ha (as if I was gasping), until the agitation of my heart was over. She took me to a house, where had gathered the women of the Ansar. They all blessed me and wished me good luck and said: May you have share in good. She (my mother) entrusted me to them. They washed my head and embellished me and nothing frightened me. Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) came there in the morning, and I was entrusted to him."

The word "enter" in Arabic is used both for going to live with, and for sexual penetration -- so was it cohabitation or consummation, in western terms? In Muslim terms it doesn't matter, because the principle in Islamic law is that a man and woman who are alone in circumstances where they would not expect to be disturbed are considered to have had sexual intercourse, with all the legal consequences. In the case of a couple with a marriage contract, the legal consequence is that the marriage is valid, it has been 'consummated', whether or not they were actually intimate. This is not a presumption that all men and women are constantly wanting to jump into bed together, rather it is a legal practicality and also a matter of politeness. The alternative to making "being alone together" legally equivalent to physical consummation, is to try to ascertain the actual facts, as in Western law -- which means a lot of court cases revolving around he says / she says and nobody knows, and also a lot of snooping to try to get evidence. But I think the Arabic attitude is mainly a

sort of mental averting of the eyes -- the equivalence of "being alone" to copulation really says that it is none of our business what people do when they are alone together. After all, if you go the western way, and require evidence, what happens when the evidence says there was no intercourse -- the next question is obviously "was a matter, couldn't you get it up?" or "so she/he won't let you near her?" It is, to the Arabic mind, so vulgar.

However given that we are not Arabs, we *do* wonder whether the marriage with 'A'isha was literally consummated in the literal physical sense. We vulgar westerners want to peer behind the curtains. All I can say is that Muhammad was capable of having children, but only actually had children by his first wife, Khadija, and again towards the end of his life, with Miriam, the Egyptian Christian. I suspect that his reputed love of women was like his love for the poor and oppressed: he loved them enough to take them seriously as people, to accord them rights and importance that they did not have in the eyes of the tribal leaders

There are two traditions in the same source, giving different answers as to Aisha's age. It just so happens (?) that in western media and internet discussions, one is very prominent, and the other somehow overlooked. These discussions are not in fact about Muhammad -- they are about finding excuses for the hatred of a people and a religion.

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