

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

MARRYING FOUR WIVES IN ISLAM

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It is widely accepted in Muslim thought that the Quran allows men to marry up to a maximum of four wives (polygny and not polygamy or polyandry). On the other hand, there are minority groups of Muslims that disagree with this interpretation and assert that such an allowance was time dependant or that such an act of polygny is only allowable in specific circumstances.

It is clear from the Quran that the Prophet had married more than one wife. No numbers are given, other than the indication of plurality.

033.32-33 (Part)

"O wives of the Prophet! you are not like any other of the women..."

033.059 (Part)

"O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women..."

Traditions however expound confusing numbers which usually range from 9 to 13.

THE APOSTLE'S WIVES

The were nine: 'Aisha d. Abu Bakr; Hafsa d. 'Umar; Umm Habiba d. Abu Sufyan; Umm Salama d. Abu Umayya b. al-Mughira; Sauda d. Zama'a b. Qays; Zaynab d. Jahsh b. Ri'ab; Maymuna d. al-Harith b. Hazn; Juwayriya d. al-Harith b. Abu Dirar; and Safiya d. Huyay b. Akhtab according to what more than one traditionist has told me.

He married thirteen women: Khadija d. Khuwaylid, his first wife whom her father Khuwaylid b. Asad, or according to others her brother 'Amr, married to him. The apostle gave her as dowry twenty she-camels. She bare all the apostle's children except Ibrahim. She had been previously married to Abu Hala b. Malik, one of B. Usayyid b. 'Amr b. Tamim, an ally of B. 'Abdu'l-Dar to whom she bore Hind b. 'Abid b. 'Abdullah b. 'Umar b. Makhzum to whom she bore 'Abdullah and Jariya. [1]

Despite the fluidity of early traditions and their inherent weaknesses including the number of wives the Prophet possibly married, they are widely accepted by the majority of Muslims. It is not uncommon to note therefore, elaborate explanations for the reasons of these marriages. Much literature has been written on this which can be easily accessed at Islamic bookstores.

Furthermore, many Muslim preachers attempt to prove that in keeping with their understanding of the Quranic injunction to limit the number of wives to four, the Prophet's marriages were never at one time in breach of this injunction. If they were, many offer reasons as to why this injunction was not applicable to the Prophet even though such a Prophetic allowance causes tension with the notion that the 'Prophet remained an example for the believers'

Either way, the Quran neither names the wives nor does it give the number. It simply addresses a plurality.

It is interesting to note that the verse that is usually read to acknowledge polygny up to a maximum of four wives isn't really sanctioning a number nor is it encouraging multiple marriages. Legitimate enquiries do arise, why 'four', why not 'five' 'six' or 'three'? Why not leave it open to the individual to assess their means and ability to make a decision? Why the use of a seemingly arbitrary number of 4? These are quite pertinent questions.

Let us note the verse closely.

004:003

And if ye fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, (by/in) twos and threes and fours (**Arabic: mathna wathulatha waruba'a**) but if you fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), **then only one**, or that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.



Illustration - Joseph Islam

It can clearly be read, that the main focus of the verse is to prohibit any form of injustice occurring by compromising the 'orphans'. Verse 4:127 seems to elaborate further by indicating that this was possibly due to men not giving the orphans prescribed portions due to desire of marriage. The main 'draw' of verse 4:3 is not necessarily to stipulate a number of wives but rather, to keep men away from compromising the orphans.

We note the Arabic term "mathna wathulatha waruba'a" (Literally: (by/in) twos and threes and fours) which seems to simply denote a multiplicity. The exact same phrase is used in 35.1 when describing the wings of angels and its multiplicity.

035:001

"Praise be to God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, Who makes the angels, messengers with wings, (by/in) twos, and threes and fours (Arabic: mathna wathulatha waruba'a). He adds to Creation as He pleases: for God has power over all things"



Hardly anyone would argue that verse 35.1 is stipulating an exact combination of the number of wings of angels, 2, 3 and 4. Quite apart from an angel having 3 wings or any number of wings for that matter, the phrase clearly seems to be denoting a multiplicity.

Therefore, if the phrase "mathna wathulatha waruba'a" ((by/in) twos and threes and fours) is examined with the phrase read in 35.1, one concludes that verse 4:3 is not advancing a 'limiting allowance' to marry up to 4 wives. Rather, its purport seems to be focused in to drawing away from

any potential injustice to the orphans by asking the believers to marry other believing women in whatever numbers.

However, there is clear guidance given in 4:3 with regards multiple marriages:

- (1) One should strive to remain just between them.
- (2) One should marry only one if it is felt that such justice may not be upheld.

It is also recognised by the Quran that perfect justice is usually impossible (Perfection being an attribute of the Creator). However, one is not deterred from endeavouring to strive to maintain justice.

004:129

"And you will not be able to deal equally between (your) wives, even if it is your ardent desire, but be not disinclined (from one) with total disinclination, so that you leave her as it were in suspense; and if you effect a reconciliation and guard (against evil), then surely God is Forgiving, Merciful"

Equally significant is that the only restriction on marriages seems to be placed on the Prophet himself. Here one gets the impression that the Prophet was not acting in excess of the limitations imposed on the believers by special Prophetic preference, but rather quite the opposite. If anything, only the Prophet's marriages seem to have been curtailed by scripture, which is quite a different impression one gets from traditions.

033:052 (Part)

"It is **not** lawful for you to marry women after this ..."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Verse 4:3 does not appear to focus on stipulating an allowance of the number of wives. Rather, the focus seems to be concentrated on curtailing any potential injustice to an orphan with regards her wealth (4:129). The Arabic term 'mathna wathulatha waruba'a' ((by/in) twos and threes and fours) seems to simply denote a multiplicity which can be affirmed against verse 35:1 which uses the same phrase to describe certain attributes of the angels.

The Quran seems not to either encourage or discourage polygyny or stipulate any particular numbers. This seems to be much in tandem with the previous scriptures. The Quran seems to recognise individual capacity and guidance is offered with respect to it.

Moreover, the impression one gets from a study of the scripture is that there seems to be little evidence of special 'Prophetic allowance' in earthly matters over and above what was given to the believers.

REFERENCES

[1] **GUILLAUME. A, The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah, Oxford University Press, Page 792**
Highlights in black text are my own insertions and are for clarification and emphasis only.

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