THE PROPHET AND POLYGAMY (PART 1 OF 2)

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Description: An analysis of the major reasons Prophet Muhammad had multiple wives. Part 1: A model for humanity and the preservation of knowledge.

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Introduction

Most Westerners regard polygamy as intrinsically evil and its practice as immoral. In contradiction, they realize and purport that every age and society has its own standards, but then themselves judge this by the standards of their particular society and time.

For a Muslim, the standards of morality are set by divine revelation, the Quran and the Sunnah, and not by prevalent modern perspective. Furthermore, the great Hebrew patriarchs equally revered by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - Abraham, Moses, Jacob, David, and Solomon, to name a few – were undisputedly polygamous.[1] The example of Jesus, who never-the-less overlooked polygamy, is irrelevant, as he did not marry at all during his earthly ministry. It is unclear why the Hebrew prophets took multiple wives, for their life stories are mostly unknown. However, a careful study of the Prophet Muhammad's biography - preserved in minute detail - reveals the reasons for his plural marriages.

1.   A Perfect Model

Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, is the last prophet, a mercy to all humanity, and a perfect model for all times. He gave the world an ideal example of a chaste life up to the age of twenty-five, then a monogamous life with a noble widow, and a polygamous life after the age of fifty. He married the young and the old, the widow and the divorcee, the pleasant and the emotional, the daughters of tribal chiefs and freed slaves. He was an example of perfection in all the diversity life had to offer.

2.   Religious Education and Preservation of the Prophet's Private Life

The 'Mothers of the Faithful', a title given to honor the wives of the Prophet, were scholars of the religion and spiritual mentors who guided the faithful, especially women, during and after the Prophet's lifetime. Islam has many special regulations unique to women regarding cleanliness, menses, bathing, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, breastfeeding, and testimony to name a few. The laws specific to women had to be conveyed. Naturally, women felt more comfortable talking to the wives of the Prophet regarding these matters. In addition, the household of the Prophet instructed women in the etiquette of marital life, raising families, and issues of women's spirituality. After the death of the Prophet, men and women resorted to his wives to find out the prophetic ideal of family life.

By marrying from different tribes, the Prophet opened the door to the spread of Islamic knowledge among them. The wives of the Prophet spread the knowledge of Islam within their tribes. For example, the knowledge of Aisha was absorbed by her sister, Umm Kulthum, her foster brother, Auf ibn Harith, her nephews, Qasim and Abdullah, and her nieces, Hafsah and Asma, among others. The knowledge of Hafsah was transmitted by her brother Abdullah ibn Umar, his son Hamza and his wife Safiyah. Maimoonah's students included her nephews, the most famous of whom is Abdullah ibn Abbas, an authority in the interpretation of the Quran. Umm Habeeba taught her knowledge to her brothers, Mu'awiyah and Utbah, and her nephews and nieces. Therefore, we see that the 'Mothers of the Faithful' became conduits of knowledge to their tribes.

Footnotes:

[1]   According to the Bible:

Abraham had three wives according to the Bible (Genesis 16:1, 16:3, 25:1)

Moses had two wives (Exodus 2:21, 18:1-6; Numbers 12:1)

Jacob had four wives (Genesis 29:23, 29:28, 30:4, 30:9)

David had at least 18 wives (1 Samuel 18:27, 25:39-44; 2 Samuel 3:3, 3:4-5, 5:13, 12:7-8, 12:24, 16:21-23)

Solomon had 700 wives (1 Kings 11:3).

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