**[Why did Prophet Muhammad practice polygamy?](http://www.neicc.net/why-did-prophet-muhammad-practice-polygamy/)**



**21:107**. We have not sent you (O Muhammad) but as an unequalled mercy for all the worlds.27

27. This verse expounds the mission of our Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, in all clarity. This mission has two cardinal aspects: one for the creation and life of the whole universe, and the other for the people from his time until the Last Hour.

With respect to the former aspect of his mission, the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace and blessings, is both the seed of the Tree of Creation and its most illustrious and perfect fruit, one about whom God declares, "But for you, I would not have created the worlds" (al-‘Ajlūnī, 2: 232), and the mirror or means for God's manifestation of His being the All-Merciful or His favors of Mercy to reach the whole creation. In Sufi terminology, he is the first and foremost or greatest Universal Man. With respect to the second, religious aspect of his mission, he is the means for the individuals and communities following him to attain eternal happiness, and the owner of the most comprehensive rank of intercession in the Hereafter. In other words, he is the mirror or means for God's particular favors of His being the All-Compassionate to reach each creature. There is no other way than his which leads to eternal salvation.(1)



**33.37.** (Remember) when you (O Messenger) said to him whom God has favored (with guidance to Islam and close companionship with the Prophet), and whom you have favored (with kind treatment, special consideration, and emancipation): "Retain your wife in marriage and fear God (concerning your treatment of her). " You were hiding within yourself what God (had already decreed and) would certainly bring to light: you were feeling apprehensive of people (that they might react in a way harmful to their faith), while God has a greater right that you should fear Him (lest you err in the implementation of His commands). So, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her (and she had completed her period of waiting after the divorce), We united you with her in marriage, so that there should be no blame (or legal impediment) for the believers in respect of (their marrying) the wives of those whom they called their sons (though they really were not), when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. And God's command must be fulfilled.(2)



**33.50.** O (most illustrious) Prophet! We have made lawful for you your wives to whom you have already paid their bridal-due, as well as those whom your right hands possess from among the captives of war that God has granted you, and the daughters of your paternal uncles and paternal aunts, and the daughters of your maternal uncles and maternal aunts, who have emigrated (to Madīnah) for God's cause as you did; and any believing woman who offers herself to the Prophet (freely, without demanding any bridal-due), if the Prophet wants to marry her – a rule (of privilege) for you exclusively, not for the believers (in general) – We have (already decreed and) made known what We have enjoined on them with regard to their wives and those whom their right hands possess. (This exceptional privilege is) in order that there may not be any hindrance to you (in fulfilling your mission because of marriage relationships). God is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate.(3)

**Narrated 'Ali:**

I heard the Prophet saying, "Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, was the best among the women (of the world of her time) and Khadija is the best amongst the women. (of this nation)." (4)

**POLYGAMY**

**Q: In this time of sexual permissiveness and sexual scandals within certain religious and social circles, some people are claiming that polygamy is a social evil. Why, they ask, did Prophet Muhammad practice it?**

A: Some critics of Islam have reviled the Prophet as a self-indulgent libertine. They have accused him of character failings that are hardly compatible with being of average virtue, let alone with being a Prophet and God’s last Messenger, as well as the best model for humanity to follow. However, based on the easily available scores of biographies and well-authenticated accounts of his sayings and actions, it is quite clear that he lived the most strictly disciplined life, and that his marriages were part of the numerous burdens he bore as God’s last Messenger.

The reasons for his multiple marriages vary. However, all of them were related to his role as leader of the Muslim community, and his responsibility to guide the new Muslims toward the norms and values of Islam.

**Q:Can you be more specific?**

A: When Muhammad was 25, before he was called to his future mission, he married Khadija, his first wife. Given the surrounding cultural environment, not to mention the climate and such other considerations as his youth, it is remarkable that he enjoyed a reputation for perfect chastity, integrity, and trustworthiness. As soon as he was called to Prophethood, he acquired enemies who did not hesitate to raise false calumnies against him, but not once did any of them dare invent something unbelievable about him. Khadija was 15 years his senior.

This marriage was very high and exceptional in the eyes of the Prophet and God. For 23 years, their life was a period of uninterrupted contentment in perfect fidelity. In the eighth year of Prophethood, however, she passed away, leaving the Prophet as the sole parent of their children for 4 or 5 years. Even his enemies are forced to admit that, during these years, they can find no flaw in his moral character. The Prophet took no other wife during Khadija’s lifetime, although public opinion would have allowed him to do so. When he began marrying other women, he was already past 55, when very little real interest and desire for marriage remains.

**Q:How could a Prophet be polygamous?**

A: People often ask how a Prophet can have more than one wife. This question is usually asked by those people who know next to nothing about Islam; their question is based either on genuine ignorance or the desire to spread doubt among believers.

Many of those who reproach the Prophet’s polygamous family life are usually involved in casual relations and liaisons with numerous sexual partners. Considering themselves free, they engage in what most societies consider to be immoral behavior. One wonders why believers of other religions attack the Prophet for his multiple marriages. Have they forgotten that the great Hebrew patriarchs, considered Prophets in the Bible and in the Qur’an and revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as exemplars of moral excellence, all practiced polygamy? Moreover, as in the case of Prophet Solomon, they had far more wives than Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace. One wonders if they are moved more by their anti-Islam bias than genuine concern or interest.

Polygamy did not originate with the Muslims. Furthermore, in the case of the Prophet this practice has far more significance than people generally realize. In a sense, the Prophet had to be polygamous to transmit his Sunna (the statutes and norms of Islamic law). As Islam covers every part of one’s life, private spousal relations cannot remain untouched. Therefore, there must be women who can guide other women in these matters. There is no room for the allusive language of hints and innuendoes. The chaste and virtuous women of the Prophet’s household were responsible for explaining the norms and rules of such private spheres to other Muslims.

**Q: How did the Prophet select his wives?**

**Some of the Prophet’s marriages were contracted for specific reasons:**

Since his wives were young, middle-aged, and old, the requirements and norms of Islamic law could be exemplified in relation to their different life stages and experiences. These were learned and applied first within the Prophet’s household, and then passed on to other Muslims by his wives.

\* Each wife was from a different clan or tribe, which allowed the Prophet to establish bonds of kinship and affinity throughout the rapidly expanding Muslim community. This also enabled a profound attachment to him to spread among all Muslims, thereby creating and securing equality and brotherhood in a most practical way and on the basis of religion.

\* Each wife, both during and after the Prophet’s life, proved to be of great benefit and service to the cause of Islam. They conveyed his message and interpreted it to their clans: the outer and inward experience, and the qualities, manners, and faith of the man whose life was the embodiment of the Qur’an-Islam in practice. In this way, all Muslims learned about the Qur’an, hadith, Qur’anic interpretation and commentary, and Islamic jurisprudence, and so became fully aware of Islam’s essence and spirit.

\* Through his marriages, the Prophet established ties of kinship throughout Arabia. This gave him the freedom to move and be accepted as a member in each family. Since they regarded him as one of their own, they felt they could go to him in person and ask him directly about this life and the Hereafter. The tribes also benefited collectively from their proximity to him: they considered themselves fortunate and took pride in that relationship, such as the Umayyads (through Umm Habiba), the Hashimites (through Zaynab bint Jahsh), and the Bani Makhzum (through Umm Salama).

Part of that discipline was providing each wife with the most meticulously observed justice, dividing equally whatever slender resources he allowed for their subsistence, accommodation, and allowance. He also divided his time with them equally, and regarded and treated them with equal friendship and respect. The fact that all of his wives got on well with each other is no small tribute to his genius for creating peace and harmony. With each of them, he was not only a provider but also a friend and companion.

**Q: If a Muslim man is allowed only four wives, why did the Prophet have eleven?**

A: The number of the Prophet’s wives was a dispensation unique to him. Some of the merits and wisdom of this dispensation, as we understand them, have been explained. All other Muslims are allowed a maximum of four wives at one time. When that Revelation restricting polygamy came, the Prophet’s marriages had already been contracted. Thereafter, he married no other women.(5)

  **Why He Had More Than One Wife**

Some critics of Islam, either because they do not know the reasons for these marriages or because they want to portray him as a self-indulgent libertine, have accused the Messenger of character failings that are incompatible with having even average virtue, let alone with the virtue of God’s final Messenger and best example for humanity. The facts, all of which are easily available in scores of biographies and wellauthenticated accounts of his sayings and actions, refute all such allegations and show that these marriages were part of a strictly disciplined life and yet another burden he had to bear.

The reasons behind his several marriages, while differing from case to case, all have to do with his role as the leader of the new Muslim community, and his responsibility to guide his followers toward the norms and values of Islam.

Muhammad married his first wife when he was 25 years old, 15 years before his Prophethood began. Given the cultural and moral climate in which he lived, not to mention his youth and other factors, he nevertheless enjoyed a sound reputation for chastity, integrity, and trustworthiness. As soon as he was called to Prophethood, he acquired enemies who made all sorts of charges. However, not even his fiercest enemies attacked his reputation, for doing so would have caused them to be ridiculed and discredited immediately. It is important to realize that his life was founded upon chastity and self-discipline from the outset, and so remained.

When he was 25 and in the prime of life, Muhammad married Khadija, a widow 15 years his senior. This marriage was very high and exceptional in the eyes of the Prophet and God. For 23 years, this devoted couple lived together in complete contentment and fidelity. The Prophet took no other wives while Khadija was alive, although public opinion and social norms would have allowed this. Even his enemies admitted that, during these years, they could find no flaw in his moral character. When she died during the eighth year of Prophethood, the Prophet found himself single once again, but this time with children. He remained unmarried for 4 or 5 years. All of his other marriages began when he was 53 years old or older, a age when very little real interest and desire for marriage remains, especially in Arabia where people grow old relatively earlier. Thus, allegations of licentiousness or self-indulgence are groundless.

People often ask how a Prophet can have more than one wife. There are three points to be made in answering this question. But, let’s first see who is asking this question. Mostly, they are either Christians or Jews (People of the Book), or atheists. As such people usually know next to nothing about Islam, their question is based either on genuine ignorance or the desire to spread doubt among believers.

Those who neither believe in nor practice a religion have no right to reproach those who do. Such people are known for their casual relations and liaisons with numerous sexual partners and their refusal to follow any moral rules or ethics. Their disguised yet unrestrained self-indulgence, as well as their refusal to consider its consequences upon themselves and young people in general, not to mention their own children, has had serious social repercussions. Considering themselves free, they engage in what most societies consider to be immoral behavior: incest, homosexuality, polyandry (multiple husbands at the same time), and others. They never stop to consider what effect such practices have on the children of such unions. When we understand this, we can take their criticisms for what they are: a desire, whether conscious or otherwise, to drag believers into the mess of moral confusion and viciousness in which they themselves are trapped.

One wonders why Jews and Christians attack the Prophet for his multiple marriages. Have they forgotten that the great Hebrew patriarchs, considered Prophets in the Bible and in the Qur’an and revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as exemplars of moral excellence, all practiced polygamy? Moreover, as in the case of Prophet Solomon, they had far more wives than Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace. One wonders if they are moved more by their anti-Islam bias than genuine concern or interest.

Polygamy did not originate with the Muslims. Furthermore, in the case of the Prophet of Islam, it was an essential part of conveying the message of Islam and bringing unbelievers into its fold. For example, a religion that encompasses every sphere of life cannot be shy when it comes to intimate matters. Such things can only be known by one’s spouse. Therefore, there must be women who can give clear instruction and advice, as such matters cannot be left to the usual allusions, hints, and innuendoes. The Prophet’s wives functioned as teachers who conveyed and explained to other women, as well as men, Islamic norms and rules for correct domestic, marital, and other private concerns.

**Some marriages were contracted for specific reasons, such as:**

• Since his wives were young, middleaged, and elderly, the requirements and norms of Islamic law could be applied correctly to each stage of their lives and experiences. These provisions were learned and applied within the Prophet’s household and then conveyed to other Muslims through his wives.

• Each wife was from a different clan or tribe, which allowed him to establish bonds of kinship and affinity throughout Arabia. This caused a profound attachment to him to spread among the diverse peoples of the new Muslim community, and also created and secured equality, brotherhood, and sisterhood among both in practical matters and in terms of religion.

• Both before and after the Prophet’s death, each wife proved to be of great benefit and service. They conveyed and interpreted Islam to their people in all its inner and outer experiences, as well as the qualities, manners, and faith of the man who was living embodiment of the Qur’an in every aspect of his life. In this way, their people learned the Qur’an, the Traditions, tafsir (Qur’anic interpretation and commentary), and fiqh (understanding of the Islamic law), and so became fully aware of Islam’s essence and spirit.

• These marriages allowed Prophet Muhammad to establish kinship ties throughout Arabia, and thus to move freely wherever he wished and to be accepted as a member in each family. In addition, everyone so connected to him felt that they could approach him personally for guidance on any issue. The entire tribe also benefited from this connection; they considered themselves fortunate and took pride in their new relationship. For example, such relationships were established for the Umayyads (through Umm Habiba), the Hashimites (through Zaynab bint Jahsh), and the Banu Makhzum (through Umm Salama).

So far, what we have said is general and could, in some respects, be true of all Prophets. However, now we will give brief life sketches of these women, not in the order of marriage but from a different perspective.

**Khadija** was the Prophet’s first wife. When they married, she was 40; he was 25. She was the mother of all his children except for his son Ibrahim, who did not survive infancy. But she was more than just his wifes—she was his friend who shared his inclinations and ideals to a remarkable degree. Their marriage was wonderfully blessed, and they lived together in profound harmony for 23 years. Through every outrage and persecution heaped upon him by the Makkans, Khadija was his dearest companion and helper. He loved her deeply, and married no other woman while she was alive.

This marriage presents the ideal forms of intimacy, friendship, mutual respect, support, and consolation. Though faithful and loyal to all his wives, he never forgot Khadija; for the rest of his life, he often mentioned her virtues and merits. The Prophet did not remarry for 4 or 5 years after her death. Providing his children’s daily food and provisions, bearing their troubles and hardships, caused him to be both a father and a mother. To allege that such a man was a sensualist or lusted after women is beyond belief. If there were even the least grain of truth in it, he could not have lived as history records that he did.

**‘A’isha**, his second wife (though not in the order of marriage), was the daughter of Abu Bakr, his closest friend and devoted follower. One of the earliest converts to Islam, this man had long hoped to cement the deep attachment between himself and the Prophet by giving ‘A’isha to him in marriage. His acceptance of this arrangement conferred the highest honor and courtesy on a man who had shared all the good and bad times with him throughout his mission.

‘A’isha, who proved to be a remarkably intelligent and wise woman, had both the nature and temperament to carry forward the work of Prophetic mission. Her marriage prepared her to be a spiritual guide and teacher to all women. She became a major student and disciple of the Prophet and through him, like so many Muslims of that blessed time, she matured and perfected her skills and talents so that she could join him in the abode of bliss both as wife and as student. Her life and service to Islam after her marriage prove that such an exceptional person was worthy to be the Prophet’s wife.

Over time, she proved to be one of the greatest authorities on Hadith, an excellent Qur’anic commentator, and a most distinguished and knowledgeable expert (faqih) in Islamic law. She truly represented the inner and outer qualities and experiences of Prophet Muhammad through her unique understanding.

**Umm Salama**, of the Makhzum clan, was first married to her cousin. The couple had embraced Islam at the very beginning and emigrated to Abyssinia to avoid Qurayshi persecution. After their return, they migrated to Madina with their four children. Her husband participated in many battles and, severely wounded at Uhud, attained martyrdom shortly thereafter. Abu Bakr and ‘Umar proposed marriage, aware of her needs and suffering as a widow with children but without means to support them. She refused, believing that no one could be better than her late husband.

Some time after that, the Prophet offered to marry her. This was quite right and natural, for this great woman, who had never shied from sacrifice and suffering for Islam, was now alone after having passed many years among the noblest Arab clan. She could not be neglected and left to beg her way in life. Considering her piety, sincerity, and all that she had suffered, she deserved to be helped. By marrying her, the Prophet was doing what he had been doing since his youth, namely, befriending those lacking friends, supporting those without support, and protecting those without protection.

Umm Salama also was intelligent and quick in comprehension. She had all the capacities and gifts to become a spiritual guide and teacher. After her marriage to the Prophet, she became a new student in the school of knowledge and guidance, one to whom all women would be grateful. Let us recall that, at this time, the Prophet was approaching the age of sixty. His marriage to a widow with four children and acceptance of all related expenses and responsibilities can be understood only in terms of his infinite reserves of humanity and compassion.

**Umm Habiba** was the daughter of Abu Sufyan who, for a long time, was the Prophet’s bitterest foe and strongest supporter of unbelief. But despite this, his daughter was one of the earliest converts to Islam and emigrated to Abyssinia with her husband. Her husband died there, leaving her alone and desperate in exile.

At that time, the few Companions had problems supporting even themselves. She was faced with several options: conversion to Christianity in return for Abyssinian Christian support (unthinkable); return to her father’s home, now a headquarters of the war against Islam (unthinkable); or go begging from household to household. This last option was just as unthinkable as the other two, but had the added disadvantage that if she were forced to do so, she would bring shame upon her family name, as it was one of the richest and noblest Arab families.

God recompensed Umm Habiba for all that she lost or sacrificed in the way of Islam. She had been reduced to a lonely exile and a grieving widow in an insecure environment among people who were racially and religiously different from her. The Prophet, learning of her plight, sent an offer of marriage through the king Negus. This noble and generous action is a practical proof of: We have not sent you save as a mercy for all creatures (21:107).

Through this marriage, Abu Sufyan’s powerful family was linked with the person and household of the Prophet, a fact that caused them to rethink their opposition. It also is correct to trace this marriage’s influence beyond Abu Sufyan’s immediate family and to the Umayyads, who ruled the Muslims for almost a hundred years. This clan, whose members had been the most hostile to Islam, went on to produce some of Islam’s most renowned warriors, administrators, and governors in the early period. It was his marriage to Umm Habiba that began this change: the Prophet’s depth of generosity and magnanimity of soul surely overwhelmed them.

**Zaynab bint Jahsh** was a lady of noble birth and descent, as well as a close relative of the Prophet. She also was a woman of great piety, who fasted a great deal, kept long vigils, and gave generously to the poor. When the Prophet made known to her parents that he wished her to marry Zayd (at one time his adopted son), both she and her family were at first unwilling. The family had hoped to marry their daughter to the Prophet. Naturally, when they realized that it was the Prophet’s wish that she marry Zayd, they all consented out of their love for the Prophet and his authority.

As mentioned above, the Messenger made this marriage to abolish several pagan customs: a freed exslave could not marry a freeborn woman, racial prejudice (Zayd was black; Zaynab was not), an adoptive father could not marry his adopted son’s exwife or widow. The marriage did not bring happiness to either person. Both were devout Muslims and loved the Prophet, but they were not compatible. Zayd several times asked the Prophet to allow him to divorce Zaynab, but the Prophet told him to be patient and not divorce her. Then, once when the Prophet was in conversation, Gabriel came and a Divine Revelation was given to him. This verse announced the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab as a bond already contracted: We have married her to you (33:37). There was no lust involved here. Rather, it was such a severe trial that ‘A’isha later said: “Had the Messenger of God been inclined to suppress anything of what was revealed to him, he would surely have suppressed this verse.”

**Juwayriya bint Harith**, daughter of the defeated Banu Mustaliq clan’s chief, was captured during a military expedition. She was held, like other members of her proud family, alongside her clan’s “common” people. She was in considerable distress when taken to the Prophet, not least because her kinsmen had lost everything and she really hated the Muslims. The Prophet understood her wounded pride and dignity, and how to heal them. He agreed to pay her ransom, set her free, and offered to marry her. How gladly Juwayriya accepted this offer can easily be imagined. About 100 families were freed when the Ansar and the Muhajirun learned that the Bani Mustaliq were now related to the Prophet by marriage. A tribe so honored could not be allowed to remain in slavery. In this way, the hearts of Juwayriyah and all her people were won.

**Safiyya** was the daughter of Huyayy, a chieftain of the Jews of Khaybar, who had persuaded the Bani Qurayza to break their treaty with the Prophet. She had seen her family and relatives oppose the Prophet since her youth. In the Battle of Khaybar, she lost her father, brother, and husband, and herself was captured.

The attitudes and actions of her family and relatives might have caused her to nurture a deep hatred of and desire for revenge against the Muslims. But 3 days before the Prophet’s appearance in front of Khaybar’s citadel, Safiyya had dreamed of a brilliant moon coming from Madina, moving toward Khaybar, and falling into her lap. She later said: “When I was captured, I began to hope that my dream would come true.” When she was brought before the Prophet, he generously set her free and offered her the choice of remaining a Jewess and returning to her people or entering Islam and becoming his wife. “I chose God and his Messenger,” she said. They were married shortly thereafter.

Elevated to the Prophet’s household and now a “mother of the believers,” she experienced firsthand the Companions’ honorable and respectful treatment. She saw the refinement and true courtesy of those who had submitted their hearts and minds to God. Her attitude to her past experiences changed altogether, and she came to appreciate the great honor of being the Prophet’s wife. This marriage also changed the attitude of many Jews, as they came to see and know the Prophet closely.

**Sawda bint Zam’a** was Sakran’s widow. This couple had been among the first to embrace Islam and emigrate to Abyssinia. Sakran died in exile and left his wife utterly destitute. To relieve her distress, Prophet Muhammad married her, although he was facing great difficulties in meeting his own daily needs. This marriage took place some time after Khadija’s death.

**Hafsa** was the daughter of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, the future second caliph of Islam. Also an exile in Abyssinia and then an immigrant in Madina, she was widowed when her husband attained martyrdom in the path of God. She remained without a husband for a while. ‘Umar wished for the honor and blessing of being close to the Prophet in this world and the Hereafter, just as Abu Bakr had, and so the Prophet married her to protect and help his faithful disciple’s daughter.

Such were the circumstances and motives behind the Prophet’s several marriages. There was no lust involved. Rather, he married them to provide helpless or widowed women with a dignified subsistence; to console and honor enraged or estranged tribespeople by bringing former enemies into some degree of relationship and harmony; to gain certain uniquely gifted individuals, in particular some exceptionally talented women, for the cause of Islam; to establish new norms of relationship between different people within the unifying brotherhood of faith in God; and to honor with family bonds the men who were to be his immediate political successors. These marriages had nothing to do with self-indulgence, personal desire, or lust. With the exception of ‘A’isha, all of his wives were widows, and all of his marriages (except for that with Khadijah) were contracted when he was already an old man. Far from being acts of self-indulgence, these marriages were acts of self-discipline.

The Prophet was given a special Divine dispensation, one unique to his person, to have this number of wives. The Revelation restricting polygamy came after he had contracted all of these marriages. After that event, he also was forbidden to marry again.

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