

'A'ishah

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'A'ishah, beloved wife of Muhammad, was the daughter of Abú Bakr (one of Muhammad's earliest and most important companions) and Umm Ruman. The Muslim tradition has generally held that she was born in Mecca around 613–614 C.E. and that she was married to Muhammad at the age of six after the death of his first wife Khadija in 619 C.E., though the marriage was not consummated till three years later at Medina. However, this tradition has been strongly challenged in a book in Urdu entitled *Tehqiq 'umar-e 'A'isha Siddiqah* (Research on the age of 'A'ishah, the Truthful) by Hakim Niaz Ahmad, published in Pakistan. Through painstaking critique of the sources of the traditional view regarding 'A'ishah's age as well as of related historical circumstances, this scholar endeavors to establish that 'A'ishah was not a child-bride but a mature woman when Muhammad married her.

'A'ishah is very important in Muslim history not only because she became Muhammad's favorite wife after the death of Khadija, but also because she is one of the major transmitters of the oral sayings (hadith) ascribed to him. According to one well-known hadith, Muhammad had said, "Learn half of the 'Din' (Principles of Faith) from me and the other half from 'A'ishah." That 'A'ishah was regarded as a learned woman during Muhammad's lifetime supports the contention that she was more than eighteen years old—as is generally believed—at the time of his death in A.H. 10 (632 C.E.).

There were some serious personal and political crises in the life of 'A'ishah, whose role in the politics of the Prophet's household as well as in the early Muslim community is regarded by some as controversial. In the Shiite tradition in particular, 'A'ishah is represented negatively due to the long-standing hostility that existed between her and Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, and Fatima's husband 'Ali, whom 'A'ishah confronted in "the Battle of the Camel" in A.H. 35 (656 C.E.). Defeated, 'A'ishah withdrew from active politics and retired to Medina. She continued, however, to be influential until her death in A.H. 58 (578 C.E.) and is still greatly venerated in Sunni Islam.

A multifaceted, dynamic woman, 'A'ishah is also to be remembered for her strong feminist consciousness, which is reflected in a number of her sayings.

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'A'ishah, the Beloved of Mohammed is a full-scale biography of 'A'ishah by Nabia Abbott (1897, repr. 1942). A recent book on aspects of 'A'ishah's life is D. A. Spellberg's *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (1994). Another biographical book on 'A'ishah is *Umm al-Mu'minin 'A'isha Siddiqah: Life and Work* by Mumtaz Moin (1979, repr. 1995).

Useful biographical information is also contained in W. Montgomery Watt, " 'A'ishah Bint Abi Bakr," in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (new ed., 1960), edited by H. A. R. Gibb, J. H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provencal, and J. Schacht, vol. 1, pp. 308–309; and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, " 'A'isha Bint Abi Bakr," in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (1987), vol. 1, pp. 162–163.

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