‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr and her Contributions to the Formation of the Islamic Tradition

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Abstract
‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr (d. 678 CE) is probably best known today as a wife of the Prophet Muhammad, whose life is particularly notable due to her involvement in several dramatic events which subsequently loomed large in inter-Muslim sectarian polemic. However, her portrayal in many Sunni medieval texts from a variety of literary genres as an authority on subjects ranging from law to variant readings of the Quran is beginning to receive more scholarly attention. This article brings together existing critical research on the presentation of ‘A’isha in classical Muslim works as a source of legal traditions and hadiths as well as a transmitter of the Quran, summarizes some of my own research, and points to ways that her image as an intellectual figure continues to be important to many Muslims today.

Introduction
In the section on ‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr in the chapter on the merits of the Prophet Muhammad’s Companions in his hadith compilation, the Mustadrak, al-Hakim al-Naysaburi (d. 1014) recounts the following anecdote: One day, the first Umayyad caliph, Mu’awiyah (r. 661–680) asked a man in his entourage, ‘Who is the most knowledgeable of all people?’ Presumably calculating that giving a forthright answer might not be the most advantageous course of action, the man replied, ‘Prince of the Believers, it is you!’ But when the caliph pressed him for a more honest response, he answered, ‘Well, if you insist — then, it’s ‘A’isha’.²

This interchange is an example of a key, yet under-researched aspect of ‘A’isha’s portrayal in a variety of medieval Muslim texts: her presentation as an intellectual figure. Medieval Sunni scholars refer to ‘A’isha as an authority in works ranging from legal texts to Quran commentaries. She appears in these works as a transmitter of hadiths,³ as well as a source of authoritative opinions on a wide variety of issues, and also, most importantly, as a transmitter of the Quran in both oral and written form. Typically, academic scholarship on ‘A’isha (as well as popular culture) focuses on several dramatic events in her life, how she has been idealized by Sunni Muslims, and also, how she is portrayed in polemical disputes.⁴ This article deliberately takes a different approach, in order to provide a better sense of ‘A’isha’s role in Muslim intellectual history. Here, I bring together existing critical research on the roles ‘A’isha is reported to have played in these developments in early Muslim intellectual history, present some of my own research, and also highlight aspects of this issue which are in need of further study.

Methodological Issues
The anecdote recounted above illustrates some of the methodological challenges involved in any attempt to research ‘A’isha’s reputed contributions to the formation of the Islamic
tradition: How can the historicity of this interchange in the Umayyad court, retold in the Mustadrak over three centuries after it is said to have taken place, be gauged? How literally is the audience/reader meant to understand such assertions about her superlative knowledge? And, what (if anything) can be known about ‘A’isha’s position in her community during her lifetime?

Most of the existing critical scholarship which addresses ‘A’isha’s image as an intellectual figure in medieval Muslim sources does so tangentially – either as one aspect of her biography, or while attempting to determine the historical reliability of the hadiths said to have been transmitted by her. Both approaches continue to be strongly affected by ongoing debate in the field of Islamic Studies about the authenticity of the Hadith literature as a whole, as well as about the origins and transmission-history of hadith compilations, legal and exegetical works traditionally dated to the formative period. Critical scholars’ positions on these questions range from emphatic scepticism to qualified optimism.

As hadiths constitute virtually the only material for a historical reconstruction of ‘A’isha’s life, any critical biographer has to adopt a coherent approach to this question. Nabia Abbott, the first western historian to author a biography of ‘A’isha, focuses mainly on hadiths which discuss the latter’s marriage, family relationships, and political involvement. Abbott raises questions about the historicity of many of the traditions which portray her as a source of religious knowledge, as a significant number of hadiths were fabricated by rival factions arguing particular legal or theological points.

Critical scholarship on early Muslim history has taken note of the many hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha, and detailed studies of several well-known examples have produced mixed results. Gregor Schoeler examines the transmission history of a tradition about the revelation of Q 96:1-5 (often said to be Muhammad’s first revelation), and ‘the hadith of the slander’, or the story of the revelation of Q 24:11-20 in response to the accusation of adultery against her. While Schoeler doubts that the first hadith goes back to her, he suggests that the second might. However, Uri Rubin, in his own study of the first hadith, finds no evidence that ‘A’isha’s name is a secondary addition to its chain of transmitters (isnad). Yet, he astutely observes that there is no way to verify if any hadith goes back to the person to whom it is attributed, even if it was put into circulation during his or her lifetime.

Given these historical challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that much recent scholarly attention has taken a more literary turn, with literary analyses of several of the hadiths ascribed to ‘A’isha, as well as Denise Spellberg’s meticulous study of how her life and legacy have been variously interpreted by medieval Sunni and Shi’i Muslims. Noting that all of the hadiths credited to ‘A’isha (as well as about her life-story) were written down by men several generations after her death, Spellberg maintains that what the sources actually allow us to reconstruct is some elite pre-modern men’s perceptions of her. ‘A’isha’s political involvement, particularly her leading an army against ‘Ali (r. 656-661) in the Battle of the Camel, had a decisive impact on her portrayal in medieval sources. Shi’i works generally do not present her as a positive contributor to the formation of Muslim intellectual traditions as a result. While medieval Sunni scholars affirmed her importance as a reliable source of hadiths, they also held that in leaving her home and becoming involved in political affairs, ‘A’isha had erred.

In view of such uncertainties – Rubin’s point is well taken – as well as evidence of authorial bias, to what extent is a critical historical study of ‘A’isha’s contributions to the formation of the Islamic tradition possible?
It can be noted that while the Quran famously admonishes the wives of Muhammad to be obedient, and directs that they be secluded (Q 33:28-33, 53-55; 66:1-5), it also imputes a degree of communal authority to them as a group, speaking of them as the ‘mothers’ of the believers (Q 33:6), and instructing them, ‘remember what is recited in your houses of God’s revelation and wisdom’ (Q 33:34). Interestingly, Muhammad’s wives are the only group among his followers to which such an injunction is specifically directed in the quranic text. It can be said that this lays the foundations for this group of women – the ‘Mothers of the Believers’ – to serve as communal guardians of its ‘correct’ recitation (and perhaps also of written quranic materials), as well as sources of Muhammad’s teachings. The Quran does not record whether or not the Prophet’s wives actually did play such roles, however.

Later sources, such as the Tabaqat of Ibn Sa’d (d. 844) and Sunni hadith compilations, do present people from Medina as well as those from elsewhere coming to ask questions about such matters to ‘A’isha in particular. They also portray Muhammad’s wives’ living circumstances as enabling these women to witness Muhammad’s ritual actions and to hear his teachings – and also as seemingly facilitating their passing on such information to others: Their apartments open individually onto the courtyard of Muhammad’s house-mosque, where his followers congregate for prayers and listen to his sermons, as well as for a wide range of other purposes. Moreover, as the most sacred site in the capital city of the empire during the rule of the first three Rashidun caliphs, Abu Bakr (r. 632-634), ‘Umar (r. 634-644) and ‘Uthman (r. 644-656), it continues to be a key venue for congregational prayers, pious visitation and community meetings for a couple of decades after Muhammad’s death.

Therefore, the notion that the Prophet’s wives should be familiar with Muhammad’s revelations and teachings evidently predates the eighth and ninth century compilation of the Hadith, and later sources do provide contextual credibility in a general sense to portrayals of these women discussing quranic recitation or transmitting Muhammad’s teachings. While in my view, these observations provide a serviceable starting point for further historical investigation, they do not in and of themselves enable us to gauge the authenticity of any specific portrayal, nor do they resolve all of the manifold historical problems associated with the traditions which depict or are attributed to any of Muhammad’s wives.

Yet, there is a sense in which such historical debates are beside the point. That ‘A’isha was an important contributor to Sunni Islam’s intellectual heritage is increasingly disseminated among lay Muslims as a historical ‘fact’ which is seen to have important ramifications for contemporary debates about identity, modernity and social order.

**Jurisprudence**

The late medieval writer, Ibn Hajar al-’Asqalani (d. 1448) famously states that ‘one-fourth of the laws of the Shari’ah are based on [traditions from] ‘A’isha’. Her marked pre-eminence in this regard developed over time, as a result of a number of complex factors.

Available evidence suggests that in the eighth century, a number of the female Companions of the Prophet, including several of his wives, were regarded as reliable sources of legal rulings, through their hadith-transmission and/or their own practice. This is apparent from the number of women’s biographical notices in Ibn Sa’d’s Tabaqat which include legal or customary precedents. Ibn Sa’d also recounts that both ‘A’isha and another wife of the Prophet, Umm Salama (d. 679) gave legal rulings during the reigns of ‘Umar and ‘Uthman.
Seven percent of the traditions in the *Muwatta’* of Imam Malik (d. 795), a well-known legally oriented compendium, are attributed to early Muslim women transmitters. ‘A’isha is the primary source of 83 traditions from or about Muhammad. These, as well as traditions which credit particular views or practices to her, deal with a wide range of legal topics.

By far the majority of traditions or opinions attributed to her in the *Muwatta’* address the correct performance of rituals, particularly ritual prayer (*salat*), pilgrimage, and fasting, and many of these are evidently intended to apply to male and female worshippers alike. By contrast, comparatively little is ascribed to her in this work regarding more stereotypically ‘female-oriented’ topics such as clothing and adornment, or marriage. To what extent this is typical of other legal works from the formative period is unclear. Although it is known that traditions attributed to ‘A’isha appear in at least some sources of this type, such as the *Musannaf* of the jurist Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 849), the research has yet to be done.

Likewise, little research has been done on the citation of traditions ascribed to ‘A’isha in medieval legal works, although Sunni jurists evidently continue to cite these. For example, in his discussion of Muhammad’s final pilgrimage, the Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) bases several points in his discussion on well-known traditions on the subject which are credited to her, as he also does when writing about his views as to how women should conduct themselves in public space.

This raises the question of the impact of traditions attributed to ‘A’isha on women’s legal status. There has been a tendency to either hail these as an important source of the Shari’ah (without closely examining their content or their history of interpretation), or conversely, to dismiss these *in toto* as just one of the means employed by medieval jurists to constrain women. While both detailed surveys of these traditions in legal works as well as critical studies of individual traditions and their interpretive history are necessary in order to enable us to move beyond generalizations, a more analytical approach to how gender operates in these traditions is also imperative.

The following illustrates some of the complexities involved: A well-known tradition recounts on the authority of ‘A’isha that a slave-woman, Barira, came to her and requested help in buying her freedom, saying that her owners had agreed to set her free if she paid a set amount yearly, over a period of 9 years. ‘A’isha offers to pay the entire amount as a lump sum, but on the condition that she will have the status of Barira’s patron. However, when Barira’s owners agree to allow ‘A’isha to make the payment but refuse to concede the role of patron to her, Muhammad objects, stating that a freed-person’s patron is the one who has freed her or him.

The Barira tradition presumes that free, elite women manage property, engage in financial transactions, and (like free elite men) act as publicly recognized patrons to their freed slaves. At the same time, it also assumes and reinscribes the normative nature of slavery – and the sexual use of slave women by their owners was taken for granted by the jurists as a rule. A number of rulings have been derived from the Barira tradition, and some of these ameliorate the status of newly freed slave women in limited ways. Yet, as Kecia Ali has shown, the existence of slavery and concubinage decisively shaped jurists’ theorizing about marriage, which they saw as an intrinsically asymmetrical contract in which the husband exercises authority over his wife. Clearly, the Barira tradition has different legal ramifications for free and slave women, as well as for elite and non-elite women. As such, it underlines some of the issues which need to be considered in any effort to assess the historical impact of legal traditions attributed to ‘A’isha.
The Barira tradition and many others credited to ‘A’isha address legal issues which are now moot. However, traditions of this type continue to attract interest from some contemporary Muslims as portrayals of a woman contributing to formative Islamic legal discourses.32

Hadith

For the most part, the proto-Sunni and Sunni compilations which have come down to us present ‘A’isha as a ‘prolific transmitter’ (i.e. as one of the small group of Companions who are said to have transmitted over 1000 hadiths). Traditions attributed to her are well represented in the two genres of hadith compilation which emerged during the formative period: the musnad and the musannaf.

As the traditions which are cited in musnads are grouped according to the name of the initial transmitter, this type of hadith compilation generally features a chapter containing a number of traditions credited to her on a variety of topics. For example, in the Musnad of al-Tayalisi (d. 818), the long chapter on hadiths transmitted by ‘A’isha contains traditions which variously recount anecdotes from Muhammad’s life, give a variant reading of a quranic verse (Q 56:89), and discuss when the legal punishment for theft is to be imposed.33 This is by far the longest of any of the chapters devoted to hadiths from female transmitters in the work. Similarly, the musnads of al-Humaydi (d. 834), Ibn Rahawayh (d. 852),34 Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), as well as Abu Ya’la (d. 919) all contain sections of this kind, but little detailed critical study has been carried out on any of these chapters.

By contrast, a musannaf is arranged according to topic. While musannafs also usually contain a number of hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha, these are scattered throughout. For example, in the musannaf of ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-San’ani (d. 826), such hadiths variously appear in chapters devoted to topics ranging from purification rituals to divorce. While the sheer size of this work makes studying the traditions in it which are attributed to women a rather daunting project, I have chosen here to examine one long chapter, the Kitab al-Jami’, which in Harald Motzki’s view likely goes back to Ma’mar b. Rashid (d. 770).35

Of the 1614 traditions in the K. al-Jami’, 65 of these (or 4%) are traced back to women.36 Fifty-two traditions are either attributed to ‘A’isha, or report practices or views credited to her. While these are on a variety of topics, over one-fourth of these traditions recount incidents from the life of Muhammad or his Companions. This is in line with her presentation as a preeminent source of such materials in some other hadith-based works; in the well-known biography of Muhammad, the Sirat Ibn Hisham, she is the source of some twenty details of his life-story.37 Other subjects addressed in the traditions ascribed to ‘A’isha in the K. al-Jami’ include: clothing and adornment, poetry, supplications (du’a), and ethical conduct.

When the traditionists al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim (d. 874) undertook to sift through the many traditions in circulation by their time – which included some 2,210 attributed to ‘A’isha – they sought to include in their compilations only those which they regarded as most likely to be reliable. As is well known, both men classified only 174 of the 1,210 of hadiths which are traced back through her to Muhammad as likely authentic (sahih)38; al-Bukhari also separately chose to include an additional 54 into his hadith compilation, while Muslim incorporated 68 more into his.39 Again, the hadiths attributed to her which appear in these two works discuss a wide variety of topics: legal and ritual issues, theological questions, incidents from the life of the early community, and also quranic exegesis.
While ‘A’isha is clearly presented as an important source in major Sunni hadith compilations, few detailed critical studies have been carried out on the historical development of this. ‘A’isha is cited as an authority on the performance of pilgrimage in both Malik’s Muwatta’ and the Sahih al-Bukhari. In the Muwatta’, she is portrayed as one of several early Muslim female authorities who embody ritually correct practice while performing the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca in groups; interestingly, some of these groups seem to have been composed of women only. However, while ‘A’isha is presented as the prominent female source of reliable traditions on Muhammad’s performance of Hajj in the Sahih al-Bukhari, the active and autonomous quality of her authority evident in the chapter on pilgrimage in the Muwatta’ is muted, and she is portrayed as a more exceptional figure.40

In part, these two texts’ differing portrayals of ‘A’isha as a ritual expert reflect divergent ideas of how Muhammad’s practice (sunna) can be known. In the Muwatta’, the sunna is depicted through the reported practice of the first several generations of Muslims in Medina, while in the Sahih al-Bukhari, the focus is on duly authenticated hadiths which recount what Muhammad himself did, said or permitted. This is one illustration of how compilers’/redactors’ methodological approaches could produce different textual images of her.

Although it is evident that a significant number of hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha appear in both canonical and sub-canonical hadith compilations of the ninth century, as well as in hadith compendia from the tenth century, little detailed critical research has been done on this development. Likewise, virtually nothing is known about the treatment of hadiths ascribed to her in the many commentaries written on the collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim in particular.

Some traditions credited to ‘A’isha have been (and continue to be) invoked in order to limit women’s sphere of action. A well-known example is her purported statement that if the Prophet had seen the innovations adopted by women after his death, he would have prevented them from going to the mosque.41 (This tradition is an apt illustration of how portrayals of ‘A’isha in classical texts can embody a paradoxical tension between the autonomy and communal authority that she apparently enjoys, and the restrictions which she endorses for other women.) Muslim scholars or activists past and present wishing to promote women’s access to mosques have often had to find ways to neutralize its effectiveness as a proof-text.42

Nonetheless, select traditions attributed to ‘A’isha which can be interpreted as opposing ideas or customs deemed unfavourable to women are often deployed in contemporary efforts to bring about social change. An example is a tradition which relates that when ‘A’isha was informed that the Companion Abu Sa’id al-Khudri was saying that the Prophet had forbidden any woman to travel unless accompanied by a mahram,43 she objected, rhetorically asking, ‘Does every woman have a mahram?’44

A noteworthy late medieval development is Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi’s (d. 1391) compilation of the treatise entitled al-Ijaba li-Irad ma istadrakat ‘A’isha ‘ala l-sahaba, which assembles traditions presenting ‘A’isha weighing in on a controversial issue, or ‘correcting’ an interpretation by one of the Companions (who is nearly always male). Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti’s (d. 1505) ‘Ayn al-Isaba is based on this work. Much of the content of these two texts has now been popularized for lay Muslim audiences who do not read classical Arabic; the impact of this on contemporary discourses is discussed below.

The Quran

Muslim tradition credits ‘A’isha with playing a role in the transmission and preservation of the written quranic text. Also, a number of variant readings of the Quran are attributed to
her. Arthur Jeffery’s pioneering study calls attention to traditions which recount that three of the wives of the prophet – ‘A’isha, Haṣa (d. 665) and Umm Salama – each had a codex transcribed for her, as well as a small number of variant readings of the Quran credited to her, which moreover were cited in several well-known medieval Quran commentaries.45

According to a tradition recounted by ‘Abd al-Razzaq, al-Bukhari and several others, a man came to ‘A’isha asking to see the order of the surahs46 in her codex, so that he could know their ‘correct’ arrangement.47 Jeffery does not understand this to mean that she played any noteworthy role in the oral or written transmission of the Quran, as in his view ‘A’isha was too young to have learned much of it during Muhammad’s life-time.48 Abbott is similarly sceptical about this possibility, and bases her reservations in part on a statement in the ‘hadith of the slander’ in which ‘A’isha says that she ‘was a young girl who had not read or recited much of the Quran’.49 However, Walker and Sells’ study shows that this tradition is a carefully crafted rhetorical construction which aims to establish the divine vindication of ‘A’isha while also preserving the theological belief that Muhammad had no control over the descent of revelation. Accordingly, as the putative narrator of the story, ‘A’isha’s disclaiming of any in-depth knowledge of the Quran (while nonetheless invoking a theologically significant quranic verse) is a rhetorical device.50

Whatever the case, it is evident from Jeffery’s study as well as from other primary sources that a number of eighth and ninth century authors found the notion that ‘A’isha had played a role in the transmission of the Quran credible. Traditions mentioning her codex appear in several early sources; these cohere with reports that she was not only able to read,51 but corresponded with several leading political figures of the day.52 Although the ultimate fate of ‘A’isha’s codex is not recorded,53 it (along with the codices of Haṣa and rarely, Umm Salama) continues to make an occasional appearance in a variety of formative and medieval works, most often when a variant reading which had allegedly been recorded in it is deemed to have legal or exegetical value.

A number of medieval Quran commentaries, particularly those which discuss variant readings at length, continue to cite ‘A’isha now and again as a source of information on these. The study of variant readings by ‘Abd al-‘Al Salim Makram and Ahmad Mükhtar ‘Umar, which goes verse by verse through the entire Quran and lists their reported variants, along with the names of the early authorities who are said to have attested to them, includes the names of one or more early Muslim women among these authorities for only 44 verses. Ten women altogether are credited with recitations; of these, ‘A’isha is by far the most prolific, with 26 different readings attributed to her. It should be noted that this is a very small number of readings in comparison to the numbers attributed to many of the early male figures listed. Makram and ‘Umar’s study is based on medieval compendia of variant readings, as well as on several Quran commentaries which are well known for their attention to these. It is unclear if other surviving sources might provide a somewhat different picture; our knowledge about the origins, circulation and impact on quranic exegesis of variant readings is still far from complete.

Quranic Exegesis (Tafsir)

By the eighth century, various materials ascribed to ‘A’isha apparently came to be cited in exegetical works. While the type and amount of such material included by a given exegete, as well as the overall image of her interpretive authority which is portrayed in a particular work appears to be closely linked to his methodological approach, much is still unknown about the origins, development and significance of such citations.
In what appears to have survived of the originally monumental *Tafsir Yahya b. Sallam* (d. 815), ‘A’isha is credited with having transmitted some hadiths from Muhammad on a variety of topics, as well as several anecdotes about events in the early community. Some legal opinions, plus one variant reading are attributed to her. Here, she is presented as primarily as a transmitter of traditions, as well as a legal authority. By contrast, the *Ma’ani al-Qur’an* of al-Farra’ (d. 822), which mainly discusses the Quran’s grammatical features, includes several variant readings which are ascribed to her, as well as a few traditions which address the meaning of particular words (and in one case, a grammatical issue). These two works present ‘A’isha as a source of significantly different types of exegetical materials, in light of their authors’ own divergent stances on what it means to interpret the Quran.

Al-Bukhari, Muslim and al-Tirmidhi (d. 892) each include a chapter on *tafsir* in their hadith compilations, which, moreover, contain significant percentages of traditions ascribed to women – for the most part, to ‘A’isha – which are noticeably greater than those found in early exegetical works of the types just discussed. In the case of al-Bukhari, for example, 12% of the traditions that he cites in his chapter on *tafsir* are attributed to women, and almost all of these to her.54 However, her prominence as a source of traditions is somewhat less pronounced in al-Tirmidhi’s chapter.55 ‘A’isha is also presented as a prolific female source of traditions in the *tafsir* chapter in al-Hakim al-Naysaburi’s *Mustadrak*.56

While the reasons for these traditionists’ promotion of her as a reliable source of traditions deemed relevant to exegesis are unclear, it seems likely that it both reflected and reinforced a growing trend among many exegetes to regard such traditions as worthy of inclusion in their commentaries in significant numbers. Traditions attributed to ‘A’isha appear in many surviving classical *tafsir* works, such as those by al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Maturidi (d. 944), and al-Tha’labi (d. 1035). As these three exegetes use divergent hermeneutic approaches, the fact that they all nonetheless cite her indicates the degree to which she had become an established part of the exegetical source universe.57

In a fascinating development, two collections of traditions attributed to ‘A’isha which their modern compilers regard as exegetical have been published. Both books are arranged as though they are traditional hadith-based Quran commentaries.58

**Knowledge and Gender**

By the eighth century, ‘A’isha was evidently regarded as a noteworthy source of several kinds of religious knowledge. Yet, as her prominence is this regard was being both affirmed and augmented in works such as al-Bukhari’s hadith compilation, it is important to note that meanwhile, highly gendered theories of knowledge were being constructed. As Sa’diyaa Shaikh shows in her analysis of the chapter on knowledge in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, for al-Bukhari, both the normative seeker and the teacher of knowledge are male. While several hadiths in that chapter are credited to ‘A’isha and present her as an exemplary teacher and learner, others link women with ignorance and sexual licentiousness, presenting them as perpetually in need of male guidance and admonition.59 A similar situation obtains in classical Quran commentaries, which, while treating traditions attributed to ‘A’isha and a few other women as authoritative, nonetheless pass dismissive judgments on the intellectual capabilities of females in general.

A tension is evident between the belief that each person is responsible before God for his/her actions and therefore has an obligation to acquire knowledge in order to discharge his/her obligations correctly – what could be called ‘the monotheistic imperative’ – and...
the construction of religious knowledge as the proper locus of religious authority, and hence, as an emblematically masculine pursuit. The religious authority imputed to ‘A’isha reflects both the relative social power wielded by some free, elite women in the formative period and their subordination within the gendered hierarchy. Due to its inherent contradictions, her position functions textually as both an effective vehicle for the affirmation of socio-religious hierarchies, and for unsettling them.

Today, ‘A’isha’s image as an intellectual figure is increasingly employed by Sunni Muslims in order to debate questions of social order. An early example is Sayyid Sulaiman Nadvi’s (d. 1953) Sirat-i Aisha, first published in Urdu in the early twentieth century, which popularized some of the contents of al-Suyuti’s ‘Ayn al-Isaba. Nadvi’s book has served as a basis for other popular, confessional biographical materials about ‘A’isha.60 It has been translated into English, and continues to be reprinted and sold in Sunni Muslim bookstores, and online. Also in the first half of the twentieth century, al-Zarkashi’s al-Ijaba li-‘Irād ma istadrakat ‘A’isha ‘alā l-sahabā was unearthed from a Damascus library, edited and published in 1939 by a conservative author.

Nadvi was part of a larger movement among South Asian traditional scholars to educate women and involve them in religious propagation without, however, abolishing purdah (seclusion). His book’s presentation of ‘A’isha as a learned, intelligent woman who debates legal matters with male Companions, yet never ceases to be an obedient and purdah-observing wife pointedly illustrates both the scope and the limitations of his vision of social reform. Rather than highlighting the tensions or even contradictions among such portrayals, in such conservative retellings, ‘A’isha’s story has an apologetic function; it ‘proves’ that women’s legal and domestic subordination is compatible with their intellectual attainment – or even activism.

Nonetheless, once popularized, medieval texts of this type can be appropriated and interpreted in divergent ways. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist sociologist and author, draws upon al-Zarkashi’s al-Ijaba (and other similar materials) in her presentation of ‘A’isha and other female Companions as independent figures who actively opposed misogyny, thus providing a venerable precedent for contemporary feminist reinterpretations.61

Today, even for many conservatives, ‘A’isha’s learning no longer functions primarily as an apologetic trope. At present, unprecedented numbers of conservative Muslim women, both in Muslim-majority countries and elsewhere, are studying subjects such as hadith, quranic exegesis, and fiqh at advanced levels. ‘A’isha’s example is not only invoked as evidence that women can and should undertake such study, but in some cases, also as a precedent for women seeking to play religious leadership roles.

Conclusion

The Quran imputes a level of religious authority to the wives of the Prophet as a group, directing them to remember Muhammad’s revelations. However, Muslim tradition singles out ‘A’isha as the pre-eminent female source of legal rulings, hadiths, and also quranic variant readings. As has been shown, the impact of traditions attributed to ‘A’isha, as well as medieval portraits of her as a religious authority on the formation of the Islamic tradition, is a yet-unfolding story.

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Short Biography

Aisha Geissinger’s research is located at the intersection of the study of the Quran and the history of its exegesis (tafsir), the Hadith literature, and gender. She has authored several papers on these areas, including one on exegetical hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha bt. Abi Bakr (d. 678 CE) in the Journal of Qur’anic Studies. In her doctoral dissertation (presently being revised for publication), she systematically surveys and critically examines the textual functions of traditions ascribed to early Muslim women (in the main, to ‘A’isha) which are cited in classical Quran commentaries, as well as the roles played by gender constructions in medieval Sunni exegetical discourses. Her current research involves literary representations of early female Quran reciters, and new literary approaches to the study of Hadith. Before coming to Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, where she presently teaches, Geissinger taught at Michigan State University. She holds a PhD in Religious Studies from the University of Toronto.

Notes

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1 A ‘Companion’ is a person who met Muhammad, believed in his message, and died a Muslim.
2 Al-Hakim, vol. 4, p. 15 (Kitab Ma’rifat al-sahaba).
3 A hadith is a statement or anecdote which purports to recount what the Prophet Muhammad said, did or approved of. As the hadiths were passed on orally before they were written down, most begin with a chain of transmitters, or isnad, which gives the names of the persons said to have transmitted them.
4 For an accessible retelling of ‘A’isha’s life by a historian, see Abbott (1985). For Sunni idealization of ‘A’isha, as well as her roles in inter-Muslim polemics, see Spellberg (1994). In anti-Muslim polemic, she often functions as a potent symbol of what is deemed to be wrong with Muhammad and/or Islam. For a contemporary example – the modern polemic regarding her age at marriage as well as Muslim counter-polemical rejoinders – see Ali (2008), pp. 135–150.
5 i.e. from the beginning of Muhammad’s career until 950 CE.
6 For an overview of the hadith debate, see Motzki (2005). Another pertinent debate concerns the original form of texts conventionally dated to the formative period such as Malik’s Muwatta’ and the Musannaf of ‘Abd al-Razzaq; for evidence that such works originated as lecture notes, and did not achieve fixed form until later, see Schoeler (2004). It should be emphasized that this article does not attempt to resolve any of the controversies about the origins and transmission of the Hadith literature as a whole, or of any individual hadiths or texts.
7 ‘While she [‘A’isha] may not have been above putting words into Mohammed’s mouth when something she deemed important was at stake, the greater probability is that later others, to suit their own purposes, put words into her mouth, as they did into the mouths of most of the other leading Companions. That the informed Moslem world was aware of this fruitful source of fabricated traditions is clearly indicated by the actions of the master-compilers of Islamic traditions – Bukhari and Muslim – who threw overboard a large proportion of the enormous body of traditions they found in circulation’ (Abbott 1985, pp. 201–202).
8 According to Sunni Muslim tradition, once when ‘A’isha accompanied Muhammad on a raid, she left her camel litter in search of a lost necklace. However, when she returned, the army had already departed without her. However, a man who had been sent by Muhammad to make sure that nothing had been left behind found her, and brought her back to Medina. Scandalous rumours circulated; finally, the Prophet received a revelation (Q 24:11–20) which vindicated her.
11 See for example Elias (1997); Walker and Sells (1999).
13 The Battle of the Camel, which occurred in 656 near Basra in southern Iraq, takes its name from the camel upon which ‘A’isha sat while exhorting her soldiers to fight. It was one of a series of battles between ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and various political factions which opposed his accession to the caliphate.
14 From a Shi’i perspective, anyone who opposes ‘Ali’s leadership is clearly misguided. Therefore, such a person would not be deemed a reliable source of religious knowledge. However, the question of how hadiths attributed to ‘A’isha have affected Shi’i religious traditions is complex, and unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.
15 For a detailed discussion of this, see Spellberg (1994), pp. 101–149.
The question of whether the Quran can be used by historians as a contemporaneous source for Muhammad’s career has been debated. For an overview of the discussion of the Quran’s age, see Motzki (2001). Fred Donner argues – convincingly, in my view – that the Quran presupposes a significantly different environment and audience than the Hadith; the Hadith reflect the establishment of an empire outside of Arabia, and speak about a number of issues which only became relevant after Muhammad’s death, while the Quran does not; see Donner (1998), pp. 43–61.

These particular qur'anic verses have traditionally received the lion’s share of exegetical attention. For a survey of medieval Sunni interpretations of all the verses which mention the Prophet’s wives, see Stowasser (1994), pp. 85–103.

For the pre-Islamic literary-historical background of these two verses, as well as classical exegetes’ interpretations of them, see Geissinger (2008), pp. 27–63.

For an overview of the ways that the wives of Muhammad are represented in this work which focuses on their images as saintly figures, as exemplars of secluded domesticity, see Stowasser (1994), pp. 104–118. The last volume of the *Tabaqat*, which contains the biographical notices for the women, has been translated into English; see Bewley (1995).

For a recent attempt to resolve a number of such historical questions, such as the impact of seclusion on the ability of Muhammad’s wives to transmit hadith, and possible reasons why far more hadiths are credited to ’A’isha than to any of her co-wives, see Sayeed (2005), pp. 29–63.


For a survey of such legal and customary precedents, see Roded (1994), pp. 30–32.


All discussion of this work here refers only to one version of it – the transmission of Yahya (d. 848-9). To my knowledge, no one has yet critically examined the gendered dynamics of the other transmissions.


See Adang (2005).

See Adang (2002).

Malik, pp. 573–574 (K. al-’Itaqa wa-l wala’).

Ameliorative rulings derived from the Barira tradition include: (i) that conditions made by a person selling a slave are not valid if they are not in accordance with the Quran, (ii) that once a married slave woman is set free, she has a narrow window of opportunity to exit the marriage if she so desires, and (iii) if she has a dower (*mahr*), it belongs to her, not to her former owner; see Roded (1994), p. 30.

See Ali (2008), pp. 43–44.

See for example the twentieth-century compilation of legal opinions attributed to ’A’isha by Dukhayyil (1989).


For a critical edition of this work, see Shaukat (1984).

The vast majority of the isnads in this chapter go back to Ma’mar, who was a teacher of ’Abd al-Razzaq; see Motzki (1991), p. 5.

This figure does not include traditions about women’s rulings, personal practices, etc. which were transmitted by men.


Hadith scholars often graded traditions according to their degree of reliability. Common categories (on a scale of most to least likely to be authentic) are: authentic (*sahih*), good (*hasan*), and weak (*da’if*). Some hadiths were classified by them as forged (*mawdu’*).


E.g.: Al-Bukhari, vol. 1, p. 458.

For example, in his detailed argument in favour of allowing women to participate in congregational prayers, Ibn Hazm asserts that this reported saying of ’A’isha’s does not in fact mean that she forbade women to go to the mosque; see Adang (2002), p. 85.

*A mahram* is a close relative that one is forbidden to marry, according to Islamic law. Examples of a woman’s *mahram* relatives would be her father, brother or son.


The Quran is divided into 114 surahs (‘chapters’) of widely varying length. The order in which they should appear in the written text was an issue of debate in the formative period.

E.g. Al-Bukhari, vol. 6, pp. 483–484 (K. *fida’il al-Qurani*).

Jeffery (1937), p. 231.


Walker and Sells (1999), esp. pp. 73–75.
Works Cited


