KHADĪJA AND ʻĀ’ISHA: 
A STUDY OF PREMODERN AND MODERN SCHOLARLY PORTRAYALS

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of the portrayals of two of the most influential women in Islamic history: Khadija bint Khuwaylid and ‘A’isha bint Abü Bakr. This paper will outline the descriptions of these women made by both premodern and modern scholars. The eighth volume of Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d’s Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā and Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī’s Al-Ijāba li-iṣrād mā istadrakathu ‘Ā’isha ‘ala al-ṣaḥāba make up the premodern scholarly works studied. The modern works included in the study are ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s The Wives of the Prophet and Fatima Mernissi’s The Veil and the Male Elite.
To Mummy and Abba
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction............................................................................................................................................1

Ibn Sa’d’s *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, the Eighth Volume.................................................................3

Al-Zarkashi’s *al-Ijāba li-īrād mā istadrakathu ʻĀ’isha `alá al-ṣaḥāba*.................................21

ʻAbd al-Raḥmān’s *The Wives of the Prophet* ...............................................................................38

Mernissi’s *The Veil and the Male Elite* .......................................................................................49

Conclusion............................................................................................................................................59

Works Cited.........................................................................................................................................62
Introduction

Numerous Muslim scholars have discussed Muḥammad’s wives throughout Islamic history. However, a special place is reserved for Khadija and ‘Ā’isha, on whom Muslims scholars write more extensively. In this thesis, I will analyze information given about these two women in works from two premodern and two modern writers. First, I will examine the portrayal of both Khadija and ‘Ā’isha in one of the earliest sources of Islamic history: biographical literature. This type of writing spread because of the growing importance of the chain of narrators, or isnād, in Ḥadīth literature. Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d’s (d. 230 AH/845 CE) volume on women in early Islam, in his series called Al-Ṭabaqāt al Kubrā, represents the earliest extant work that gives biographical information about early Muslim women. He dedicates the eighth volume of this work to the women of these early generations and includes entries on Khadija and ‘Ā’isha. Journeying to a later time in Islamic history, the next writer and scholar I will discuss is less widely known today. However, Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1391) wrote a book exclusively on the instances in which ‘Ā’isha corrected or advised the Companions of Muḥammad after his death. Al-Zarkashī also mentions Khadija, but the focus of his work is ‘Ā’isha. Many Islamicists note that Ibn Sa’d rarely gives his own comments on the information he presents (Stern 14). However, it would be wrong to suggest that he is a passive recorder and that he merely includes all the information he encountered on these women. Similarly, al-Zarkashī’s selective emphasis indicates his own point of view as well; al-Zarkashī focuses on some traditions about ‘Ā’isha and minimizes other traditions.

The second part of this thesis will examine the works of two modern authors. First, I will discuss the portrayal of ‘Ā’isha and Khadija in The Wives of the Prophet, by ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd
al-Raḥmān (1913-1998). She worked as a professor at Cairo University and her popular book about these women has been translated into English. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān represents a conservative Muslim woman’s perspective on these women, yet she is also an academician. The influence of her academic background can be observed in her decision not to reference traditional isnāds. Unlike the premodern scholars, she does not present a Hadīth-centric telling of these two women’s lives. The second author I will discuss is Fatima Mernissi (b. 1941), who currently teaches at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. She also takes an academic perspective, but is decidedly feminist. She refers to ‘Ā’isha and Khadija in her seminal work, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, or *La harem politique* in its original French.

In this way, I would like to examine the representation of these two women in the works of different Muslims in history and in modern times. I would like to showcase the differences in treatments of these two women and the fact that representation of them is colored by historical trends. The authors are influenced by their own time and place in history and their affiliation to certain ideologies. Also, information about ‘Ā’isha is more prevalent. This is mostly due to her life circumstances. She outlived Muḥammad and lived to see and participate in the struggles of the nascent Muslim community. However, as Denise Spellberg notes, there are more unequivocally positive portrayals of Khadija, regardless of the scant information about her (161). This reflects the idea that Khadija’s legacy was palatable for most Muslims, even of differing ideologies.
In the early formative period of Islam, after Muḥammad died, the traditions about his words and actions proliferated in an unregulated manner. The second caliph, ʿUmar ibn al-ʿKhaṭṭāb is said to have considered assembling the Ḥadīth. He decided against this because he feared Muslims would neglect the Qurʾan as a result (Siddiqi 6). Daniel Brown, a modern Islamicist, posits that, whether allowed or not, rudimentary written reports of prophetic sayings existed at an early stage (94). Muslim scholars, such as Muḥammad Zubayr Ṣiddīqī, state that the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz initiated the first systematic collection of Ḥadīth (Brown 94, Ṣiddīqī 6). Ibn Saʿd lived during this time. He was born in Basra in the year 168/784 and died in Baghdad in the year 230/845 (Horovitz 119). At this time, ḥadīths were not completely and systematically scrutinized or based on a set standard. The critical analysis of ḥadīths was nascent but growing. Modern scholars disagree about which fitna, civil conflict, caused the Muslims to require the documentation of the sources of transmitted reports. Scholars also dispute over the initiation of systematic isnād use. Brown states that the isnād was widespread by at least the second century of Islam, and this is reflected in the work of Ibn Saʿd (Brown 94). The Ḥadīth literature known to most Sunni Muslims today, which include Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, constitute the final stage of Ḥadīth literature. Ibn Saʿd lived during the transition period before this canonization. As Asma Sayeed suggests, his work is quite useful because it can provide information about this transition period. Sayeed uses Ibn Saʿd in order to analyze the different trends in women’s participation in Ḥadīth transmission and perceptions of women Ḥadīth transmitters before and after the canonization of Ḥadīth literature (88). In
this vein, Ibn Sa'd can be used to analyze how perceptions of 'Ā'ishah and Khadija changed throughout this formative period. This is especially true for 'Ā'ishah, since she had a role in Ḥadīth transmission and the subsequent solidification of Sunni “traditionism,” the reliance on and primacy of traditions of the Prophet for jurisprudence (Sayeed 3).

Ibn Sa'd lived during the early Abbasid caliphate. In fact, his grandfather and father were clients, or mawlās, of a descendant of the eponymous ancestor of the Abbasid caliphate (Horovitz 119). Ibn Sa’d was born thirty-six years after the Abbasid caliphate’s founding in 132/748. Ibn Sa’d studied and worked under al-Wāqidī (d. 207/823), who wrote a biographical dictionary as well. However, al-Wāqidī’s Kitāb al-Maghāzī is his only extant work (Horovitz 118). Maghāzī literature focused on the raids made by Muḥammad and the Muslim community. Since other works from al-Wāqidī have been lost, Ibn Sa’d is the earliest author, after Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/768 or 151/769), whose complete biography of the Prophet is extant. Ibn Sa’d gives more details than Ibn Isḥāq at some points, and vice versa at others (Horovitz 79, 120). However, Ibn Isḥāq does not give a biography of the women in the Prophet’s life, as Ibn Sa’d does. For this, Ibn Sa’d most probably borrowed from the Ṭabaqāt of al-Wāqidī and other earlier writings.

Khadija in Ibn Sa’d’s Ṭabaqāt

Ibn Sa’d presents traditions (ḥadīths from Muḥammad and akhbār, or reports, from his Companions) about each person in the biographical work. He begins his discussion of Khadija bint Khuwaylid with a tradition that explains many generations of her lineage. Ibn ‘Abbās, a narrator of one of the traditions, recalls that her father was well respected among his people, and that those in Mecca used to marry among their allies. After this, Ibn Sa’d records traditions regarding Khadija’s marriages. There were talks for a marriage between
her and her cousin Waraqa, but these plans did not come to fruition. This failed marriage attempt is not discussed in the modern Muslim works on Khadija. This may be because Waraqa becomes an important figure in legitimizing the early revelations of the Prophet.

Her first marriage was to Abū Hāla, whose name was Hind ibn Zurāra ibn al-Nabbāsh. Khadija bore two sons from this marriage, Hind and Hāla. Khadija then married ‘Atīq bin ‘Ā'idh, and they had two children as well (Ibn Sa’d 14, 15).

Another interesting tradition about Khadija’s life before she met Muḥammad deals with a pagan celebration. According to this tradition, the women of Mecca used to celebrate an Eid, or feast day, in the month of Rajab. During one year’s celebration, an idol in the shape of a man interrupted the women and yelled that a prophet named Aḥmad would come with a message from God. He also advised the women to marry this man if they could. The women replied harshly, throwing stones and cursing the idol. Khadija, however, took note and did not contest his words (Ibn Sa’d 15). Presumably, Ibn Sa’d includes this tradition because one could say that God animated the idol. However, it seemingly contradicts the concept of the false idol in the Qur’an. Idols do not speak, as Abraham explains to his father in a Qur’anic story (21:63-65). Perhaps this tradition is not repeated in the works of the modern authors of this study because of its peculiarity.

The tradition about Khadija’s premonitory encounter with the idol during the Rajab festival resembles other foreshadowing traditions. For instance, Ibn Isḥāq mentions that Muḥammad’s mother, Āmina, heard a voice proclaim that the child in her womb would be the “lord of his people” and that she should name him Muḥammad (Lings 21). Perhaps Khadija’s foreshadowing encounter is meant to elevate her stature among Muhammad’s other wives. Only Ṣafiyya, a Jewish noblewoman, experienced a similar event: she is said to
have had a dream that the moon landed in her room. She understood this to mean that she would marry the Prophet (Ibn Sa’d 121). On the other hand, as we shall see in the next section, Muḥammad is said to have had a foreshadowing experience of his marriage to ʿĀ’isha.

The next set of traditions deal with how Khadija and Muḥammad met. The longest tradition is related by Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar, but it originated with Khadija’s friend, Nafīsa bint Umayya. She recounts that Khadija was honorable and wealthy, and had a trading business. Khadija would pay men to take her trade caravans to Syria. When Muḥammad was twenty-five years old, the people of Mecca called him al-Amīn, the Trustworthy. The tradition in the Ṭabaqāt states that, on hearing this, Khadija hired Muḥammad to take her caravans on their trade route. When he returned, he delivered more profit to Khadija than anybody else ever had. After this, Khadija sent Nafīsa with a marriage proposal for Muḥammad; he said yes. The tradition then gives the names of the children of Khadija and Muḥammad: al-Qāsim, ʿAbd Allāh, Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm Kulthūm, and Fāṭima (16).

Ibn Sa’d mentions multiple traditions related to Khadija’s age. Early in the chapter, a tradition deals with the age difference between Khadija and Muḥammad (15). The tradition states that Khadija was fifteen years older than Muḥammad. However, Ibn Sa’d records a sole tradition that gives a different age disparity. This tradition states that when Khadija married the Prophet she was twenty-eight years old. Immediately after this narration, Ibn Sa’d includes a saying from Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar that knowledgeable people say that Khadija was born fifteen years before the Year of the Elephant. This was an important year in Meccan life because a Yemeni king led an attack against the Ka’ba. Muslims believe this to be Muḥammad’s birth year (Buhl et al.). This year serves as a marker for others to
calculate age as well. The next *hadith*, narrated from Abū Ḥabība, agrees with the previous age difference. Abū Ḥabība states that he was thirteen years old during the Year of the Elephant and that Khadija was two years older than he (Ibn Sa’d 17). Therefore, Khadija was fifteen when Muḥammad was born.

An interesting detail in Ibn Sa’d’s biographical entry about Khadija is that Khadija’s voice is not heard, even through the mediating presence of transmitters. However, ‘Ā’isha’s voice is heard through various transmitters relating information about Khadija. For instance, in a *hadith* that originates from ‘Ā’isha through Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar and other transmitters, she states that Khadija was called Umm Hind, mother of Hind, a son from a previous marriage (15). She also reports that Khadija was the first person to become a Muslim. There are multiple reports from other Companions of Muḥammad corroborating this information. There are also multiple reports of Khadija performing an early version of prayer with Muḥammad. Later in the entry, traditions make it clear that the obligation to pray was not instituted until after Khadija died. However, al-Zuhrī, an early *maghāzi* author and *Ḥadīth* transmitter who died in 124/732, relates that Khadija used to pray secretly with Muḥammad during the early days of Islam (Horovitz 55). He adds a laudatory “*mā shā’ Allāh,*” a phrase said in praise of someone or something (Ibn Sa’d 17). Ibn Sa’d includes another more detailed account about prayer in Khadija’s biographical entry. ‘Afiif al-Kindī relates that when he was still non-Muslim, literally “in the time of Ignorance,” he came to Mecca to buy clothes and perfume. He came upon ‘Abbās ibn ‘Abd al Muṭṭalib, Muḥammad’s uncle. Both men stood looking towards the Ka’ba, perhaps observing the pilgrims and worshipers. When the sun set, they saw a young man, a boy, and a woman standing, then bowing, and then kneeling. ‘Afiif was astonished by what he saw. ‘Abbās informed ‘Afiif of
the identities of these people: the young man was Muḥammad ibn ʻAbd Allāh, his nephew; the young boy was ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, also his nephew; and the woman was Khadija bint Khuwaylid, his nephew’s wife. ‘Afīf concludes the narration by stating that, after hearing about them and their religion, he strongly wished he were their fourth member (18). These ḥadīths serve not only to highlight that Khadija was a pious observer in the early days of the message, but that Khadija had a role in standing with Muḥammad to spread Islam. Later, Ḥadīth scholars would parlay these aspects of her life into an untouchable, ideal status.

There are also multiple traditions that revolve around Khadija’s passing. ‘Ā‘isha relates that Khadija died before the obligation of prayer, which was three years before the Hijra, the migration to Medina. A more detailed tradition, related again by Abū Ḥabība, reports that Khadija died in the tenth year of Muḥammad’s prophethood and was buried in Ḥujūn. He said that the Prophet descended into the grave with her, but they did not perform the traditional funeral prayer because this prayer had not been established yet. He concludes this tradition with presumably good words about the deceased. He states that she was the first woman to marry the Prophet and no one gave him children other than her, except for Māriya. And her nickname among the people was Umm Hind because of her son from Abū Hāla al-Tamīmī. This is how Ibn Sa’d concludes the section on Khadija. Even though Abū Ḥabība and Ibn Sa’d link Khadija to Muḥammad and comment on her fecundity, the last points seem like a listing of quick facts to the modern reader. The very last fact is a mundane one that takes away from her connection to Muḥammad. These observations remind the reader that this biography was not meant to focus on praising Khadija. Even though biographical dictionaries include praiseworthy aspects of her life, they do not
include the glowing honorifics that become attached to Khadija later (Spellberg 155). We shall see that the laudatory hadīths about Khadija’s life and character increase in the solidified and canonized Ḥadīth literature.

‘Ā’isha in Ibn Sa’d’s Ṭabaqāt

Ibn Sa’d writes considerably more about ‘Ā’isha than about Khadija, or any other of Muḥammad’s wives for that matter. Most probably, this is due to the fact that Khadija died before the Hijra. She died before the small Muslim community found a safe haven in Medina and became a political entity. Many of the legislative verses of the Qur’an were revealed during the Medinan period, indicating the formation of a full-fledged society. Also, ‘Ā’isha lived to take part in a post-Muḥammad Muslim community and eventually became a prime contributor of Ḥadīths from Muḥammad. These reasons can explain why the section on ‘Ā’isha, which exceeds twenty-two pages, is larger than each of the sections on the other wives (Ibn Sa’d 58-81). Another explanation involves the idea that ‘Ā’isha was favored among Muḥammad’s wives during her married life. Ibn Sa’d introduces this idea in the form of traditions in which ‘Ā’isha herself indicates her special position among the women of the Prophet.

According to the biographical entry, ‘Ā’isha discussed eighteen specific aspects of her life that none of the other wives shared. These aspects are separated into two traditions. The only attribute that overlaps discusses an angel showing Muḥammad an image of ‘Ā’isha. I have numbered the distinctions for clarity, but they are not numbered in the text. The first list includes:

1. He never married any other virgin.
2. He never married any other woman whose parents were both immigrants to Medina.
3. God, the Most High, revealed my innocence from heaven.
4. Gabriel brought him [Muḥammad] my image in silk from heaven and told him, “Marry her, for she is your wife.”
5. We used to wash from the same pitcher and he did not do that with any of his wives except me.
6. He used to pray while I was in his presence, and he did not do that with any of his wives except me.
7. The revelation used to come down to him while he was with me, and it did not come down when he was with any of his wives except me.
8. God took him when he was in my arms (lit. between my chest and neck).
9. He died on a night that was turned over to me. [This refers to Muḥammad’s custom of rotating his nights among his wives. Sawda gave her night to ‘Ā’isha.]
10. He was buried in my house.

(Ibn Sa’d 63-64, Spellberg 30-31)

The next list starts with, “I was given what no other woman was given” (Ibn Sa’d 65). ‘Ā’isha then iterates these nine distinctions:

11. The Prophet took me as a wife when I was seven.
12. The Angel came with my picture in his palm.
13. The Prophet consummated the marriage when I was nine years old.
14. I saw Gabriel and no other woman saw him but me.
15. I was the most beloved of his wives.
16. My father was the most beloved of his Companions.
17. The Messenger fell sick in my house.
18. I nursed him [when he was sick].
19. He passed away and no one saw it except for the angels and me.

(Ibn Sa’d 65, Spellberg 31)

These special characteristics of ‘Ā’isha are expanded upon throughout the rest of the biographical entry. Much of the information about ‘Ā’isha within this section can be divided into four different types of traditions. One type are traditions that are about her lineage or link her to her father. The second type deals with her marriage and is subdivided into traditions about the beginning, middle, and end of her marriage (i.e., Muḥammad’s last sickness). The third group consists of supernatural occurrences or traditions linking her to heaven. The fourth group includes traditions about ‘Ā’isha in the post-Muḥammad Muslim
community. Among this category are traditions about ‘Ā’isha’s own death. The list of ‘Ā’isha’s distinctions matches with these groupings as well.

Ibn Sa’d’s section about ‘Ā’isha begins with traditions describing her lineage. However, Ibn Sa’d records her lineage in a much more concise way compared to the information he gives about Khadija’s lineage. Perhaps this is because ‘Ā’isha’s lineage can be seen more fully under the section about her father, Abū Bakr. Also, within the list of distinctions by which ‘Ā’isha purportedly describes herself, there are merits she receives solely due to her family. The second distinction deals with her being the child of two people who had migrated to Medina with the Prophet. Perhaps this shows the growing importance that the distinction between Anṣār (natives of Medina) and Muhājirūn (immigrants to Medina) held after Muḥammad passed away. The nascent Muslim community had already been showing fault lines between the Anṣār and Muhajirun during Muḥammad’s life. After his death, these fault lines created tremors and upheavals in the new community around the succession. In this struggle, Abū Bakr emerged as the Caliph. There was open fighting and an Anṣārī man by the name of Sa’d ibn ‘Ubāda, was severely beaten (Madelung 31).

There are other examples of these types of lineage traditions that establish the primacy of the Muhājirūn and their choice of leader, Abū Bakr. Within the eighteen distinctions, number fifteen states that the most beloved person to the Prophet was ‘Ā’isha’s father, Abū Bakr (Ibn Sa’d 64). Another instance of this occurs in a tradition from ‘Amr ibn al ‘Āṣ. He asked Muḥammad: “Oh Messenger of God, whom do you love the most?” When Muḥammad said, “A’isha,” ‘Amr specified, “Among men?” Muḥammad replied: “Her Father” (Ibn Sa’d 67, 68). Also, another tradition that harkens back to Abū Bakr is the tradition in which the name al-Ṣiddīqa bint al-Ṣiddīq, the truthful daughter of the truthful, is used to describe
‘Ā’isha. Abū Bakr’s nickname was *al-Siddīq*, the truthful, so ‘Ā’isha’s nickname stems from her father’s nickname. In addition, the name must also refer to the famous Affair of the Lie, when ‘Ā’isha was accused of adultery. At this time, for Sunnis, God corroborated her truthfulness. Her exoneration came down in verses of the Qur’an, according to Sunni Muslims (24:11-19). This episode became one of the fault lines in the competing narratives of ‘Ā’isha’s life that Sunni and Shi’i scholars had already begun crafting and would continue to craft in the coming centuries.

Many of the traditions that Ibn Sa’d includes in this entry have to do with ‘Ā’isha’s married life with the Prophet. For instance, there are traditions relating to the beginning of ‘Ā’isha’s marriage. First, the fact that ‘Ā’isha was the only virgin Muḥammad married is reiterated explicitly in some of the traditions about her age. In many of these, the transmitters purportedly link to ‘Ā’isha herself. ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Ā’isha’s sister’s son, relates many of these traditions from and through her, in what are called family *isnāds*. In multiple traditions, ‘Ā’isha states that she was married at six and the marriage was consummated at nine. There are many other traditions like these about ‘Ā’isha’s age, some related by others and some by ‘Ā’isha herself (58-61). Most of these ten traditions reiterate the previous timeline of six and nine years old. One related by ‘Ā’isha through ‘Urwa and narrated by ‘Affān ibn Muslim states that she was married at seven and the marriage was consummated at nine years old. Immediately following, another tradition from ‘Ā’isha with the same *isnād* contradicts this and states that she was six and nine at these occasions (61). As with Khadija’s age, ‘Ā’isha’s age seems to be a preoccupation in the pages of the *Ṭabaqāt*. In addition, Ibn Sa’d includes multiple traditions about ‘Ā’isha playing with her friends on her wedding day. These traditions underscore her childhood innocence, a point that is
downplayed in the modern texts, due to modern sensibilities ('Abd al-Raḥmān 62). Modern
texts often reference the tradition in Ibn Sa'd about ‘Ā’isha’s previous engagement to justify
her marriage at an early age. Ibn ‘Abbās narrated that Muḥammad went to Abū Bakr with a
proposal for ‘Ā’isha. At this time, she was already engaged to Jubayr ibn Muṭ‘im and Abū
Bakr went to break that engagement before answering Muḥammad (Ibn Sa’d 59).

Another repeated tradition is about the month of ‘Ā’isha’s marriage. She states that
she was married in the month of Shawwāl and her marriage was consummated in the
month of Shawwāl three years later. Then ‘Ā’isha asks the rhetorical question: “Is there any
other wife of the Prophet who had more favor with him than me?” (59, 60). Abū ‘Āṣim
comments that the month of Shawwāl in pre-Islamic times used to be considered bad luck
for marriage (Ibn Sa’d 60). ‘Ā’isha was consciously trying to change this cultural norm. She
kept this preference within her household as well, favoring the month of Shawwāl for the
weddings of women in her family (Spellberg 40). In the narration recorded in Ibn Sa’d’s
Ṭabaqāt, she creates a distinction for herself through the month of her marriage.

There are also many traditions that highlight the favor Muḥammad showed ‘Ā’isha
during their marriage. For instance, distinctions five, six, seven, and nine show that
Muḥammad shared more experiences with ‘Ā’isha than with his other wives at the time. He
used to wash with her, pray while she was in the room, and verses used to be revealed to
him when they were together. These compare to the hadīths about Khadija praying secretly
and in public with Muḥammad. These scenes serve to bolster both women’s religious
credibility. With regard to ‘Ā’isha’s prayer, Ibn Sa’d states that ‘Ā’isha was in the same
space but not praying with Muḥammad. However, al-Zarkashī discusses a tradition in
which ‘Ā’isha joined her husband in prayer. In any case, prayer is in the list of distinctions
as proving the closeness between ‘Ā’isha and Muḥammad. These *ḥadīths* also build a sense of ‘Ā’isha’s spirituality. Also, the traditions about revelation show that the presence of ‘Ā’isha does not nullify the spiritual connection between the Prophet and God. Presumably, this indicates that her status has been raised in the eyes of God over other women.

In addition, there are many other traditions in Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt* that provide a glimpse into ‘Ā’isha’s married life. For instance, she says herself that she was the most beloved of his wives, which is her fourteenth distinction. In one tradition, Sawda, an older wife of Muḥammad, decides to give up her day with him to ‘Ā’isha because she knew he preferred ‘Ā’isha (65). Also, there are multiple narrations of a conversation between Muḥammad and ‘Ā’isha about a *kunya*, the Arabic designation that means “Mother of” or “Father of.” ‘Ā’isha asks the Prophet to give her one of these names since all the rest of his wives have them. He tells her that she can be called Umm ‘Abd Allāh. In this narration, he says, “after your son” (63). In two other narrations, Muḥammad refers to her sister Asmā’s son, ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (66). This shows that one of ‘Ā’isha’s preoccupations was the fact that she did not have any children. In another tradition, ‘Ā’isha reminds Muḥammad of the unique fact that she was a virgin when she married him and that this cannot be said of his other wives. The tradition notes that he “smiled at this comment” (Ibn Sa’d 80). In addition to traditions that show ‘Ā’isha and Muḥammad speaking in an easy manner with each other, there are multiple traditions narrated by ‘Ā’isha that Muḥammad played with her with dolls in the early part of her marriage (61, 62, 66). In one of these traditions, Muḥammad laughs when ‘Ā’isha tells him that the figure she is playing with was Suleiman’s horse (62). Another repetitive tradition within this category is one in which Muḥammad teases ‘Ā’isha that he knows when she is angry with him, even if she tries to hide it. She
asks how and he replies that instead of saying “Muḥammad’s Lord” she says “Ibrahim’s Lord” (69, 79). In this way, Ibn Sa’d includes traditions that showcase the lighthearted relationship between Muḥammad and ‘Ā’isha.

However, there were tough times in the marriage of the Prophet and ‘Ā’isha. Ibn Sa’d only references the Affair of the Lie through the acknowledgment that there was a verse of the Qu’ran that revealed ‘Ā’isha’s innocence. This is the seventh distinction in the above list (63). Also, people mention this to ‘Ā’isha on her deathbed in order to congratulate her on being able to claim that distinction (75). However, Ibn Sa’d does not discuss this incident further. Spellberg posits that this is because the Affair of the Lie was already becoming a contentious issue between Muslims (43). There is also another tradition in which ‘Ā’isha was given a choice between divorce and gaining “this world” or choosing the Prophet, God, and the hereafter. ‘Ā’isha chooses to remain married and refuses to seek the counsel of her father. The other wives follow suit and choose to remain married (68, 69). In this tradition, nothing is said about why this choice was given to ‘Ā’isha and all the other wives. Later scholars have theorized why, but in Ibn Sa’d, this is the first and only reference to a time when the Prophet separated himself from all his wives for a month.

There are also quite a few traditions that indicate ‘Ā’isha’s closeness to Muḥammad at his deathbed, at the close of their earthly life together. In the list of distinctions, the eighth states that the Prophet was lying with his head in ‘Ā’isha’s arms when he died. This corresponds to a later tradition that discusses Muḥammad’s preference to be at ‘Ā’isha’s house during his illness. ‘Ā’isha notes this as one of her distinctions: “He died on the night that was turned over to me” (64). She then notes that he was buried in her house, where he
died. The next set of distinctions gives a few more details about the same topic. ‘Ā’isha adds that she tended to him when he was sick and that only she and the angels noticed the moment of his passing. This underscores the special connection between ‘Ā’isha and Muḥammad and paves the way for even more ḥadīths that highlight an even greater supernatural connection between the husband and wife.

Other traditions link Muḥammad and ‘Ā’isha together with the figure of an angel, who is sometimes identified as Gabriel. According to Ibn Sa’d’s collection, these supernatural events occurred shortly after Khadija died. One of these traditions creates a connection between ‘Ā’isha and Khadija. This tradition aligns with one of the distinctions mentioned above. The fourth distinction states that Gabriel brought Muḥammad ‘Ā’isha’s picture on heavenly silk and told him to marry her, “for she is your wife” (63). Then, in the next list, a more succinct version of this distinction is repeated: “The angel came with my picture in his palm” (65). Ibn Sa’d includes more detailed accounts of this later in the entry. There are many iterations of the narration about the heavenly origin of Muḥammad’s marriage to ‘Ā’isha. Most of these narrations are from ‘Ā’isha through her family isnāds. They narrated that, after Khadija’s death, Muḥammad experienced extreme sadness. At this point, God sent Gabriel to Muḥammad to ease this sadness. According to the tradition, Gabriel then showed Muḥammad ‘Ā’isha’s image and said that she was Khadija’s successor (78). This ḥadīth links Khadija and ‘Ā’isha. The way it does this, through divine intervention, elevates ‘Ā’isha’s position as a wife chosen by God. Related to this, another tradition asserts that Muḥammad saw ‘Ā’isha twice in his dreams (68). Interestingly, Ibn Sa’d includes the traditions that speak of Muḥammad’s great sadness at the passing of Khadija in the section on ‘Ā’isha, not in Khadija’s own section. The emphasis is on the idea
that God sent ‘Ā‘isha as a successor of Khadija in order to ease the Prophet’s hardship and sorrow. This tradition creates a link between the narratives of ‘Ā‘isha and Khadija. Khadija’s narrative elevates ‘Ā‘isha’s importance to Muḥammad and therefore to the rest of the Muslim community.

Another supernatural tradition about ‘Ā‘isha is the thirteenth distinction, which states that, of the Prophet’s wives, only ‘Ā‘isha saw Gabriel. In the tradition that comes later in the text, this is explained further. According to the tradition, A‘isha saw Muḥammad talking to a man sitting on a horse outside. Later, ‘Ā‘isha questioned him about the identity of the man. He asked if she had actually seen a man and seemed surprised at this fact. He asked ‘Ā‘isha what the man looked like. ‘Ā‘isha replied that he looked like one of the Companions, Dihya al-Kalbi, and Muḥammad replied that it was none other than Gabriel (Ibn Sa‘d 67). The tradition ends with the Angel Gabriel greeting ‘Ā‘isha through Muḥammad and her returning the greeting (Ibn Sa‘d 68). Ibn Sa‘d includes another reference of an angelic greeting to ‘Ā‘isha through Muḥammad. This tradition is followed by ‘Ā‘isha noting that she did not see Gabriel at the time (79). Interestingly, in the biography of Ibn Hishām (d. 213/828 or 218/833), only Muḥammad saw Gabriel and Khadija performed a test to verify that Gabriel was really an angel, and not a devil. She discovers this by removing her khimār (probably a loose head covering at this time), which caused the angel to disappear. Presumably, the angel would not violate her privacy (Spellberg 46). In a later ḥadīth, Gabriel, unseen by Khadija, gives her greetings through Muḥammad from God himself. In this ḥadīth, Khadija is promised a house in Paradise (Bukhāri 9:93:588, 7:62:156).
According to Ibn Sa'd, ‘Ā’isha was also promised Paradise; the marriage between Muḥammad and ‘Ā’isha is not just an earthly one. In many hadīths, Muḥammad says that ‘Ā’isha would be his wife in heaven (65, 66, 79). In one narration, ‘Ā’isha asks the Prophet about his wives in heaven and he replies that she will be his wife there as well (65). In addition to hadīths from the Prophet that state that ‘Ā’isha will be with him in heaven, other Companions remind each other of this fact. According to one tradition, a man cursed ‘Ā’isha during the Battle of the Camel. Another man named ‘Ammār discovered this and ordered him to be quiet at once, because the person he was cursing was the Beloved of the Prophet and would be his wife in heaven (65). In Ibn Sa’d, this is one of the only traditions that references the Battle of the Camel or the first fitna (civil war) of the Muslim community. Again, Ibn Sa’d’s reticence to discuss ‘Ā’isha’s participation in this battle, like his silence about the Affair of the Lie, may indicate that these events of Aisha’s life continued to be politically charged and contentious issues one hundred ten years after these events.

After Muḥammad’s death, many of the traditions in Ibn Sa’d focus on ‘Ā’isha’s charity and piety. According to a tradition, when Ibn al-Zubayr gave her sacks of grain or flour, she divided them among the people and forgot to save some food to break her fast that day (67). Accordingly, Ibn Sa’d includes another tradition that ‘Ā’isha used to fast for long periods of time (68). Also, he includes two reports that she wore a pious thick black khimar (71, 73). He also includes a narration that ‘Ā’isha tore off a thin scarf from Ḥafṣa bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s head and replaced it with a thick scarf (71, 72).

Reports in the Ṭabaqāt state that ‘Ā’isha was sixty-six years old when she passed away on the seventeenth of Ramaḍān. She was buried after the last prayer of the night, the witr prayer. Crowds of people came to bury her and important Companions came to pay
In multiple reports, the narrator specifically states that Abū Hurayra also prayed over ‘Ā’isha. This is interesting, because ‘Ā’isha often corrected and contradicted Abū Hurayra (al-Zarkashi). Sayeed also points out that there was tension between them (28). Perhaps these traditions were meant to reconcile two major contributors to the Hadith canon.

The most important political action in which ‘Ā’isha partook, the Battle of the Camel, is not explained in detail in Ibn Sa’d. However, Ibn Sa’d does include references to it after the fact. For instance, ‘Ā’isha’s biographical entry ends with a tradition that states that ‘Ā’isha used to cry every time she read the verse “And stay in your houses...,” which was directed at the wives of the Prophet (33:33). Presumably, she felt this way because she did not stay in her house, but was on the front line in the Battle of the Camel. This tradition corresponds to many other traditions that Ibn Sa’d includes that supposedly indicate the way ‘Ā’isha felt about her actions at the end of her life. In these traditions ‘Ā’isha, on her deathbed, laments by stating with varying degrees of intensity the phrase “I wish that I were a thing forgotten” (74). In another version she wishes she were a leaf on a tree or other inanimate objects (74, 75). In a third version, she feels so strongly that she wishes she was not even created (74). She also does not want people to praise her at this time and complains when Ibn ‘Abbās does so. This tradition also ends with the same phrasing about wishing to be forgotten (74).

Ibn Sa’d also references ‘Ā’isha in the biographical entries of other wives and women. These references introduce an important motif that survives until modern iterations of ‘Ā’isha’s story: her jealousy. Stowasser proposes that the jealousy hadīths may reflect “a number of political, social, and legal developments” of the Muslim community.
For example, among the Qurayshi wives, Ibn Sa’d records a rivalry between Umm Salama and ‘Ā’isha. In this tradition, Umm Salama complains to Muḥammad that the community only gives him gifts when he is at ‘Ā’isha’s house. She explains that many of the other wives wanted her to speak out against ‘Ā’isha’s monopoly (Ibn Sa’d 163). Stowasser historicizes this hadīth by referencing that Umm Salama sided with ‘Alī and Fāṭima later in Islamic history (109). In the early days of succession politics, Umm Salama favored the right of Muḥammad’s blood relatives to lead the Muslim community. Also, Umm Salama chided ‘Ā’isha for her involvement in the Battle of the Camel (Abbott 1942a: 140). Other jealousy traditions include the Qurayshi women’s jealousy and derision of outsiders. Some of these document the Qurayshi women’s treatment of Ṣafiyya, the Jewish wife of the Prophet. ‘Ā’isha is said to have made disparaging comments after seeing her for the first time (Ibn Sa’d 126). The other wives also had similar disapproving comments about Ṣafiyya (Ibn Sa’d 127). In addition, ‘Ā’isha and other wives cooperated against other “strangers,” wives from Arab tribes not from Medina or Mecca. Ibn Sa’d records that when Muḥammad married Aṣmā’ bint al-Nu’mān, ‘Ā’isha lamented that the strangers would “turn his face away from us” (145). One tradition purportedly recalls the schemes of ‘Ā’isha and Ḥafṣa against one “stranger.” They visited the new bride before the wedding night and told her to say, “I take refuge in God” when Muḥammad entered the room. When she did, Muḥammad immediately left and sent her back to her tribe (141, 145). According to Ibn Sa’d, this occurred multiple times. In addition, all the wives, including ‘Ā’isha, are said to have felt great jealousy towards Māriya, the Coptic slave girl (Ibn Sa’d 186). Stowasser notes that these themes of jealousy of the wives also reflected “medieval scholarly opinion of women’s irrational/lower nature” (113). ‘Ā’isha plays the central role in many of these traditions.
Al-Zarkashi’s *Al-Ijaba li-irād mā istadrakathu ‘Ā’isha ‘alā al-Ṣaḥāba*

*Introduction to al-Zarkashi*

After Ibn Sa’d, many authors took up the mantle of scholarship and biographical writing. However, one author stands out in his writing and portrayal of ‘Ā’isha. Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi (d. 794/1391) was a Shāfi‘ī scholar who lived in Mamluk Cairo and wrote books on *tafsīr*, Ḥadīth, *fiqh*, *adab*, and *kalām*. His most famous work, *Al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur‘ān*, provides a succinct guide to previous scholarship on issues relating to the Qur’an. He was born in Cairo and travelled to Syria to study Ḥadīth and *fiqh*. He returned to Cairo and studied Shāfi‘ī *fiqh*. His achievements have largely fallen under the radar of modern scholarship (Rippin). However, one of his extant works proves to be very interesting to scholars of women in Islam. Al-Zarkashi wrote a book, *Al-Ijaba li-irād mā istadrakathu ‘Ā’isha ‘alá al-ṣaḥāba*, detailing the instances in which ‘Ā’isha corrected and advised the other companions of the Prophet. Denise Spellberg, Asma Sayeed, and Fatima Mernissi all discuss al-Zarkashi. For Spellberg, al-Zarkashi provides a synthesis of ‘Ā’isha’s favors and her contributions to the Muslim community after the Prophet’s death (55). Al-Zarkashi includes a list of forty attributes that prove God’s favor upon ‘Ā’isha. This is a deliberate increase from the base of eighteen attributes found in Ibn Sa’d and earlier scholars (Spellberg 171). Also, al-Zarkashi’s work can showcase intellectual and religious trends among Sunni Muslims. Al-Zarkashi includes traditions that his Shāfi‘ī school supported, and he also notes the differences between their opinion and Shi‘i opinion. This provides a window into the political debate that presumably had been going on not long after the Prophet’s death, the manifestations of which became more apparent and extensive after Ibn Sa’d. Montgomery Watt suggests that the end of the ninth century was the period in
which Imāmī Shi‘ism, with the development of its own specific law, first became clearly distinguishable (54). Ibn Sa‘d lived just before this time period. Al-Zarkashī, on the other hand, lived in a world with clearer sectarian boundaries.

Al-Zarkashī’s glorification of ‘Ā‘isha shows that her legacy was critical as she became a “component of Sunni communal identity” (Spellberg 55). Al-Zarkashī’s account includes more laudatory aspects of ‘Ā‘isha’s character than were discussed in Ibn Sa‘d. Al-Zarkashī highlights ‘Ā‘isha’s role in the transmission of Ḥadīth and her great knowledge of tafsīr and fiqh (2). These aspects of ‘Ā‘isha’s legacy weighed heavily for the scholarly community that depended upon her transmission and the transmission of many other women who came after her (Spellberg 56, 57). Asma Sayeed also discusses the way in which women’s participation in Ḥadīth transmission greatly decreased after the generation of the Companions (105). Women’s participation in Ḥadīth transmission decreased after the second/eighth century and then began to increase during the fourth/tenth century (Sayeed 63, 64). The compilation of the major Sunni Ḥadīth collections helped solidify a “book culture in classical Islam” (Konrad Hirschler, cited in Sayeed 110). Women and men were able to transmit works in their entirety to the next generations. Women, in particular, flourished in this environment because the evolution to written tradition decreased the need for “legal acumen” and travelling to collect individual reports (Sayeed 113). Since women were considered trustworthy and useful links in isnāds, their participation was validated through praise of the female companions. Sayeed argues that emphasizing early female companions and their activity in the arena of Ḥadīth helped legitimize the use of women in these arenas in the fourth/tenth century onward (111). She notes that this development becomes more pronounced in the works of al-Mizzī (d. 742/1341), al-
Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), and Ibn Hajar (d. 852/1449). I would argue that al-Zarkashī’s Al-
Ijāba, which was written in the eighth/fourteenth century, fits into this trend. Al-Zarkashī
wrote in a time in which women had been participating in Hadīth transmission for four
centuries. His work on ‘Ā’isha clearly elevates her to the role of not just wife, but scholar.
His work also showcases how different sects elevated different women in order to
substantiate and legitimate their own sect. Not only did praising ‘Ā’isha elevate the culture
of classical Hadīth transmission, it worked to bolster Sunni thought against Shi’i arguments.

‘Ā’isha in al-Zarkashī’s Al-Ijāba

In Al-Ijāba, al-Zarkashī gives an introduction to the subject of the book. In this
section, he praises ‘Ā’isha with some of the same traditions used in Ibn Sa’d. In some ways,
however, the laudatory aspect of these traditions is expanded in al-Zarkashī. This is the
case with traditions dealing with lineage, the first category of traditions I discussed in the
section on Ibn Sa’d. Here, ‘Ā’isha’s link to Abū Bakr gains even more importance. Al-
Zarkashī explains that ‘Ā’isha was raised by and learned greatly from Abū Bakr the
Truthful. He knew of all the inner features and genealogies of the different Arab tribes.
‘Ā’isha gained from this knowledge even before she moved into the “cradle of revelation,”
the Prophet’s home (2). Al-Zarkashī emphasizes ‘Ā’isha’s righteous and important
genealogy, along with her knowledge of Arab genealogy.

Al-Zarkashī then includes a chapter of eighteen pages entitled “Her Forty Special
Qualities” (13-31). These distinctions actually number forty-two, and al-Zarkashī includes
many found in Ibn Sa’d. Al-Zarkashī discusses some characteristics at length. Some
explanations can extend to two pages or more and provide the intricate details of isnāds or
different narrations of similar hadīths. Therefore, I will include translations of the main
verbatim. However, many of the distinctions require further explanation or a summary of al-Zarkashī’s lengthy discussion. I have given these explanations in brackets.

1. The Prophet, may peace and blessings be upon him, never married a virgin except for her.
2. She was chosen and chose God and his Messenger immediately. [This refers to the divine prompting of the marriage as well as her decision to stay married after all the wives were given the choice of divorce].
3. [When she chose God and his Messenger] her choice was firm and she did not hesitate.
4. The verses allowing tayammum [ablution without water] were revealed because of her.
5. Verses were revealed affirming her innocence in the Affair of the Lie.
6. [God] made the Qur’an to be recited until Judgment Day. [This is linked to the above distinction. Her innocence will be recited until Judgment Day.]
7. Because of her story, slander is a grave crime according to the Shari‘a and the slanderer is flogged.
8. No bad thing happened to her from which God did not provide a way out for her in which was a blessing for the Muslims.
9. Gabriel brought her to the Prophet [in a dream] and said, “This is your wife.” [In his discussion of this distinction, al-Zarkashī includes a tradition that after Khadija’s death Muḥammad was extremely bereaved. Gabriel then brought him a picture of ‘Ā’isha and said, “She will ease some of your sadness and will be Khadija’s successor”].
10. She was the most beloved among the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him). [Al-Zarkashī includes the tradition of ‘Amr ibn al-‘Aṣ questioning the Prophet about whom he loved most, which was seen in Ibn Sa’d’s work.]
11. Love of her is a duty on everyone. [Al-Zarkashī explains this injunction with the ḥadīth about Muḥammad asking Fāṭima if she loved what he loved. After Fāṭima replies in the affirmative, Muḥammad exhorts her to love ‘Ā’isha. This tradition, along with the next two, has clear implications for the Sunni–Shi’a split].
12. Whoever accuses her of adultery is an unbeliever. [This is clearly another Sunni–Shi’a sectarian-tinged distinction. Al-Zarkashī’s evidence for this claim is that her innocence is revealed in the Qur’an, in the Chapter of Light, verse sixteen.]
13. Whoever denies that her father, Abū Bakr the Truthful, was a Companion is an unbeliever. [Al-Zarkashī provides his evidence for this claim based on a Qur’anic verse about Muḥammad’s Companions.]
14. The people investigated what day the Prophet was with her and gave him gifts he would like in the house of the one he especially loved, [as] they wished to please him.
15. Sawda gifted her [assigned] day [with the Prophet] specifically to ‘Ā’isha.
16. He chose to be in her house when he was ill. [In the commentary, al-Zarkashi includes another sectarian tradition about a Companion, commenting that when Muḥammad was unwell he chose [to stay in] the daughter’s house and chose the father [to lead the] prayer. He comments, “This is not insignificant.” Clearly, al-Zarkashi and the commentators he follows are suggesting the Prophet’s inclination to choose Abū Bakr as first Caliph.]

17. He died as he lay between her chest and neck. She interlaced her fingers and held him to herself with her hands.

18. He died on a day that she was assigned to be with the Prophet.

19. [Perhaps al-Zarkashi or the modern publishers have made this mistake in numbering. The list skips from eighteen to twenty.]

20. His grave is in her house and it is the best spot on earth, by consensus of the community of believers.

21. She saw Gabriel, may peace and blessing be upon him, and he greeted her. [Al-Zarkashi includes the same hadith that is in Ibn Sa’d’s Ṭabaqāt, in which ‘Ā’isha describes Gabriel as resembling a Companion named Dīhya al-Kalbī. In addition, al-Zarkashi includes the second “list hadith” that Ibn Sa’d records.]

22. Her saliva and his saliva mixed in his last breath. [This refers to ‘Ā’isha softening the miswāk, a stick used to brush teeth, with her own mouth before giving it to Muḥammad to use.]

23. The revelation did not come down when he was under a blanket with any woman other than her.

24. She was more knowledgeable than the other women. [Al-Zarkashi includes al-Zuhri’s statement that ‘Ā’isha’s knowledge was superior to that of all other Muslim women. ‘Atā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ states she was more knowledgeable than any other person he knew. Urwa ibn al-Zubayr asked her how she knew so much about medicine, and she replied it was because she used to nurse Muḥammad when he fell sick.]

25. She was more eloquent than they.

26. If the important Companions found an issue difficult, they would find the answer with her.

27. Concerning her: “Take half your religion from the little red one.” [Analysis of this important distinction is below.]

28. The Prophet did not marry a woman whose parents were both immigrants to Medina, except for her.

29. Her father and her grandfather were both Companions. There are not many who share with her in that.

30. Her father was the man most beloved and dearest to [the Prophet].

31. Her father was the best of people after the Prophet. [Here al-Zarkashi includes a lengthy discussion in which the first four caliphs are ranked according to their quality. The rankings correspond chronologically to their time as caliph. Al-Zarkashi specifically says that those who say the Companions equivocated concerning the preference of Abū Bakr or ‘Alī are wrong.]
32. She had two days and two nights allotted to her with the Prophet, because Sawda gifted ‘Ā’isha her own day and night.
33. When she became angry, Muḥammad used to appease her. This has not been affirmed for any of his other wives.
34. No woman narrated from the Prophet more than she.
35. He used to seek to please her with games. He stood in front of her [to hide her from view] so she could watch the Abyssinians performing, and scholars derived many rulings from this. How great are her blessings!
36. She is the best woman who was alive when [the Prophet] died. [Here al-Zarkashī includes the debate on the preference of ‘Ā’isha over Khadija, which will be discussed below.]
37. ‘Umar favored her in his distribution of stipends to the Prophet’s wives.
38. The merits of her worship: Al-Qāsim said that ‘Ā’isha used to fast for long periods. [He also discusses her charitable giving and her asceticism.]
39. The intensity of her devotion. [Al-Zarkashī includes a tradition about ‘Ā’isha wearing a hijab in her room after ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was buried in it. He notes that her hijab was heavy and thick. Within the discussion of this distinction, he also includes a tradition about her jealousy.]
40. The Prophet raced with her. [Al-Zarkashī says that in this is another great benefit, the permissibility of racing or competition among women. However, he also cites an opposing opinion that competitions in racing or throwing are not permissible between women, because women are not warriors.]
41. He saw the white palm of ‘Ā’isha in Heaven. [The discussion following this explains that the Prophet will be married to ‘Ā’isha in heaven. It is interesting that in Ibn Sa’d it is Gabriel who has an image of ‘Ā’isha in his palm. This switch speaks to ‘Ā’isha’s elevated legacy in al-Zarkashī.]
42. God chose her for the Messenger. [This alludes to the direct divine arrangement of their marriage. Al-Zarkashī includes a tradition that relates that Zaynab bint Jaḥsh used to boast about her marriage being arranged by God. In this ḥadīth Muḥammad reminds Zaynab that his marriage to ‘Ā’isha was also divinely inspired.]

There are many similarities between the merits and ḥadīths in al-Zarkashī’s book and those in Ibn Sa’d’s. However, al-Zarkashī’s list of ‘Ā’isha’s merits is greatly expanded over that provided by Ibn Sa’d. In addition, al-Zarkashī uses a list format for this chapter and describes the merits in his own words, sometimes before providing further evidence from ḥadīths. There are also merits in Al-Ijāba that amplify what is given in the Ṭabaqāt. Lastly, there are many merits that Ibn Sa’d did not include, and these give us clues to the ways in which the legacy of ‘Ā’isha grew and shifted from Ibn Sa’d’s time to al-Zarkashī’s.
There are quite a few points that both al-Zarkashī and Ibn Sa’d discuss. Both works list ‘Ā’isha’s virginity at the time of her marriage as the first distinction. However, al-Zarkashī does not give as much space to this distinction as Ibn Sa’d does. Also, both cite that her parents were migrants to Medina. According to both works, Gabriel indicated to the Prophet that he should marry ‘Ā’isha. She became his favorite wife, and because of this ‘Umar also favored her in the allowance allotted to the wives. Both scholars include traditions about the Prophet’s last illness, death, and burial in her house and on her allotted day.

There are subtle differences regarding some of the ways these two scholars share the same ḥadīths. For instance, both scholars reference the tradition about ‘Ā’isha’s role in the allowance of dry ablution, *tayammum*. In Sunni tradition, ‘Ā’isha was traveling with the Prophet and the Muslims as they returned from a military expedition. Her necklace was lost and the Prophet stopped the expedition to look for it. They were unable to move on and had to stop for the night. The people and Abū Bakr were angered that they did not have any water left for the morning prayer. However, the next morning Muḥammad received a revelation allowing a concise version of ablution through the use of sand or dust if water is unavailable (Quran 5:6; Zarkash 14; Bukhārī 1:7:330). Al-Zarkashī lists this story as one of ‘Ā’isha’s distinctions. However, in Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt* the reference to ‘Ā’isha’s role in bringing about *tayyamum* occurs in another location altogether. According to this tradition, a visitor was trying to praise ‘Ā’isha’ as she lay on her deathbed and said, “Because of you the verse of ablution without water was revealed.” ‘Ā’isha, however, does not appreciate the praise and continues to say that she wishes she had not been born. In the *Ṭabaqāt*, ‘Ā’isha’s role in the *tayyamum* tradition seems to be effectively neutralized. This example
showcases the difference between these two scholars’ treatment of the same story about ‘Ā’isha.

Al-Zarkashī uses traditions also mentioned in the Ṭabaqāt to praise and elevate ‘Ā’isha. For instance, regarding the tradition about the divine intercession in the Affair of the Lie, al-Zarkashī emphasizes ‘Ā’isha’s merit by stating that the exonerating verses shall be recited until Judgment Day. The difference between some traditions Ibn Sa’d includes and those in al-Zarkashī’s Al-Ijāba is the influence of canonical Ḥadīth literature that came into being between their lifetimes. Ibn Sa’d mentions that ‘Ā’isha nursed the Prophet during his last illness. Al-Zarkashī builds upon this and takes it for granted that the reader knows the tradition about the softened miswāk recorded in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (Bukhārī 5:59:730). Therefore, al-Zarkashī states that the saliva of Muḥammad and ‘Ā’isha mixed at his last breath, not just that she nursed him when he was ill (20). This tradition emphasizes their connection, because they shared something so personal at a crucial moment, and elevates ‘Ā’isha in the process.

In addition to the above traditions, al-Zarkashī expounds upon the merits of ‘Ā’isha’s worship. Like Ibn Sa’d, he includes the tradition that she used to fast for long periods of time and practiced asceticism by giving away much of what she received. Al-Zarkashī also uses other traditions that indicate that ‘Ā’isha gave away 7,000 dirhams to charity and wore clothing with patches, highlighting her asceticism (29).

There are also distinctions that al-Zarkashī bestows upon ‘Ā’isha that Ibn Sa’d does not include and that showcase the fact that her importance had grown in the intervening time. Al-Zarkashī discusses the rulings that came out of the verses exonerating ‘Ā’isha of wrongdoing in the Affair of the Lie. He notes that, because of her, slanderers were given the
punishment of whipping and the punishment of slander became a point of law in the Sharī‘a. He counts this as a great benefit, saying, “No bad thing happened to her from which God did not provide a way out for her in which was a blessing for the Muslims” (17). He also goes further and says that anyone who accuses her of zinā is an unbeliever. This is directed towards the Shi‘i community, who rejected her exoneration. He also says that loving ʿĀ’isha is a duty upon every Muslim. He gives the ḥadīth about Muḥammad asking Fāṭima if she loves what he loves. He then exhorts her to love ʿĀ’isha. This is symbolic because Fāṭima became the ideal woman for the Shi‘i community. To complete these anti-Shi‘i distinctions, al-Zarkashī adds a creedal statement to the list of ʿĀ’isha's distinctions. He states that the denial of Abū Bakr's Companion status makes one an unbeliever (18). The polemical nature of these distinctions takes the focus away from ʿĀ’isha and highlights the fact that the political schism of Ibn Sa‘d’s time had morphed into a religious schism with creedal implications by al-Zarkashī's time. Al-Zarkashī was greatly influenced by these developments in his view of ʿĀ’isha's importance.

Al-Zarkashī introduces aspects of ʿĀ’isha’s legacy not raised in the Ṭabaqāt. He praises her superior intellectual qualities and her contribution to Islamic sciences. In his list, he includes that ʿĀ’isha was more knowledgeable than other women, presumably of her time. She was also more eloquent than they (21). In addition, he states that if very important Companions had problems understanding an issue, they would find the solution with ʿĀ’isha. He says that no woman transmitted more ḥadīth from Muḥammad than she (22). He also notes that issues that came up with her in her life with the Prophet are teachable moments for the Muslim community. He regards most events in her life as a blessing, including the Affair of the Lie and seemingly mundane incidents. For instance, he
mentions that her racing with the Prophet means that women can participate in racing and sports activities. He includes some debate on this subject, but he interprets the actual racing as a moment when ‘Ā’isha’s presence brought about something unique that enhanced understanding of the religion. For al-Zarkashi, this is only natural because he states that the Prophet said, “Take half your religion from Ḥumayrā’” (22). Ḥumayrā’, “ruddy little one”, is another nickname that the Prophet had for ‘Ā’isha (Spellberg 55).

Al-Zarkashi includes an interesting discussion after citing this hadith. He states that he asked a scholar from his own school of thought about this hadith. The shaykh told him of the opinion that all hadiths that reference the name Ḥumayrā’ for ‘Ā’isha are invalid. Al-Zarkashi disagrees with his teacher and provides another example of an authentic hadith in which Muḥammad uses the nickname. To bolster his defense of the authenticity of this hadith, al-Zarkashi quotes al-Ḥākim Abū ‘abd Allāh that “one-fourth of the Shari‘a rests on her” (23). Perhaps this exchange is representative of one of the reasons behind al-Zarkashi’s hagiographic praise of ‘Ā’isha. Traditions that were attributed to ‘Ā’isha helped solidify not only Sunni Hadith culture, but also a great deal of jurisprudence. Praising ‘Ā’isha helps to justify the use of and dependence on hadiths attributed to ‘Ā’isha. This in turn solidifies Sunni Hadith and law. In any case, this is the greatest praise that al-Zarkashi can give ‘Ā’isha. It fits well within the context of the book he wrote. It is interesting to note that al-Zarkashi embeds discussion of ‘Ā’isha’s jealousy within the thirty-ninth distinction, her devotional life. It seems that this was not an important aspect for al-Zarkashi to focus on. When he does focus on it, he subsumes it within “the intensity of her devotion” (29). He introduces her jealousy within a larger discussion of a positive aspect of her character in order to minimize the potential negative implications of these “jealousy hadiths.”
Discussing ‘Ā’isha’s jealousies, as most other medieval literature did, would not advance his project of praising ‘Ā’isha (Stowasser 113).

Al-Zarkashi records the instances in which ‘Ā’isha corrected or advised the Companions, beginning with her own father. The subjects of these corrections show the knowledge she held of the intricacies of the Prophet’s worship, life, and death. For instance, Abū Bakr asked her about how many cloths the Prophet was buried in and on what day he died (32). Also, she corrected ‘Umar when he said that dead believers are punished when their family cries for them. She corrected and advised the Companions about worship, conjugal matters, hygiene, and rules about ritual purity (34, 35). In addition, she corrected ‘Umar’s son Abd Allāh, who was adamant that women must soak each hair particle on their heads with water during ghusl, which made undoing their braids and combing out their hair mandatory. ‘Ā’isha forcefully and sarcastically replied, “I’m surprised at Ibn ‘Umar! Why doesn’t he order them to shave their heads?!” (57). She then says that she and the Prophet used to perform the ritual bath together, using one container, and she only poured water over her head three times, without undoing her braids.

‘Ā’isha corrected Abū Hurayra as well. Abū Hurayra transmitted hadīths with potential for a wide effect on social and gender relations in the Muslim community. Abū Hurayra said that the Prophet affirmed that there are three bad omens: a home, a horse, and a woman. According to al-Zarkashi, ‘Ā’isha rejected this and said that Abū Hurayra did not hear the full sentence, which rejected those who said the above sentence (59). In another hadīth, Abū Hurayra said that if a woman comes between a man and the prayer direction (qibla), his prayers are invalidated. ‘Ā’isha rejected this based on her own experience with Muhammad. She said he prayed in front of her while she was lying down
between him and the *qibla*. She said she did not move during his entire prayer (66). Al-Zarkashī does try to reconcile Abū Hurayra’s mistakes. For instance, he includes paragraphs explaining why Abū Hurayra might have narrated something that was later rejected by ‘Ā’isha (60). This shows that al-Zarkashī is also invested in saving the reputation of another great Ḥadīth transmitter, Abū Hurayra. In fact, Abū Hurayra transmitted more ḥadīths than ‘Ā’isha. Being part of the classical Ḥadīth culture, it was in al-Zarkashī’s best interest to uphold both ‘Ā’isha and Abū Hurayra’s veracity.

On the other hand, Spellberg, Sayeed, and Mernissi comment that al-Zarkashī’s work represents a unique stance for his time. Sayeed states that al-Zarkashī tries to reconcile ‘Ā’isha’s opinion and later Sunni consensus (34). Also, Spellberg notes that al-Zarkashī’s emphasis on ‘Ā’isha’s role in the transmission of traditions showcases the “devotion of the male Sunni scholarly community to the precedent” ‘Ā’isha set for them (56). However, both Spellberg and Sayeed note that *Al-Ijāba* is unique among scholarly works (Sayeed 28, Spellberg 56). The fact that al-Zarkashī even discusses ‘Ā’isha’s criticisms of important Companions and Ḥadīth transmitters can be seen as unconventional and undermining to mainstream Sunni scholarly culture. Mernissi also sees al-Zarkashī as exceptional. For Mernissi, al-Zarkashī’s scholarship prevents generalizations that all “imams were and are misogynistic” (77). Mernissi ponders why al-Zarkashī decided to write this book on ‘Ā’isha’s objections (78). There are no works like al-Zarkashī’s *Al-Ijāba* before it and only one later work by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) that summarized *Al-Ijāba*. Does al-Zarkashī’s work represent counterculture or does it fit within the framework of Sunni scholarly culture? There is no simple answer to this question. It certainly is a singular work and perhaps reflects al-Zarkashī’s unconventional scholarly perspective.
Khadija in al-Zarkashi’s Al-Ijāba

Al-Zarkashi mentions Khadija after he states that ʻĀ’isha was the most preferred wife of Muḥammad alive at his death. The legacy of Khadija keeps him from making an unqualified statement about the preference of ʻĀ’isha over all other wives of Muḥammad. Sectarian politics influence these debates. This was obviously a concern for medieval Muslims, since he describes the debate around this issue (26). Al-Zarkashi quotes a Shāfi‘ī scholar, Al-Āmidī, who summarizes the sectarian debate on Khadija and ʻĀ’isha. He states that Sunnis believe ʻĀ’isha was the best woman of the world and Shi‘is believe that Muḥammad’s best wife was Khadija (Al-Zarkashi 26). Al-Zarkashi then quotes al-Ṭabarî, who gives a list of Khadija’s merits, much like the traditions that enumerate ʻĀ’isha’s merits.

1. She was the first Muslim.
2. She influenced the beginning of Islam.
3. She gave the Prophet peace of mind.
4. She spent money on him.
5. She was alive during the prime of Islam.
6. She bore harm for the sake of God and his Messenger.
7. She helped the Prophet in his times of greatest need.

(al-Zarkashi 26)

Al-Zarkashi includes a statement from Abū Bakr ibn Dāwūd that both Khadija and ʻĀ’isha were sent greetings from Gabriel. However, he states that Khadija received greetings from God through Gabriel and Muḥammad, which is an even higher honor. At this point, al-Zarkashi must bring the account back to ʻĀ’isha. While Khadija influenced the early days of Islam, al-Zarkashi writes that ʻĀ’isha influenced the later days of Islam. In order to praise her, he includes the hadīth that ʻĀ’isha is preferable over other women in the same way that tharīd, a meat dish, is preferable over all other food (26). These types of “ideal woman”
ḥadīths proliferate in the Hadīth literature. However, in contrast to the ḥadīth mentioned above, they invariably favor Khadija over ‘Ā’isha.

Khadija and ‘Ā’isha as Ideal Women in Premodern Texts

In a way, the volume of work that has been written about ‘Ā’isha versus what has been written about Khadija shows that ‘Ā’isha commanded more attention from premodern biographers and later scholars. However, all sects of Muslims unequivocally supported Khadija’s legacy. First, Hadīth literature took cues from the Qur’anic examples of Āsiya and Maryam. They are seen as ideal women of their time. Āsiya was the proud Pharaoh’s pious wife and Maryam was the Virgin Mary. In both Sunni and Shi’i literature, Khadija was more readily associated with these ideal women. Ibn Sa’d does not include these kinds of comparisons in the Tabaqāt, but these comparisons are included in Ḥadīth texts (Spellberg 155). There are also traditions about the best women of the world. This alludes to the Qur’anic verse in which the angels tell Maryam that God has chosen her “above the women of the worlds” (3:42). Al-Ṭabarī includes Khadija and Fāṭima in this category (Spellberg 156). The Hadīth literature elevates Khadija and praises her as the best woman of her time, as Maryam was the best of hers (Bukhārī 4:55:642).

For the Shi’i movement, ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the Battle of the Camel opposite ‘Alī would not be so easily forgiven or forgotten. Shi’i scholars emphasize controversial episodes of ‘Ā’isha’s life, such as the Battle of the Camel and the Affair of the Lie, preventing universal acceptance of ‘Ā’isha as a female role model. Though most of the praise of women in specifically Shi’i writings focuses on Fāṭima, people who supported ‘Alī were “more inclined” to praise Khadija as the best wife of the Prophet and, obviously, as the mother of Fāṭima (Spellberg 156). Even in Sunni writings, ‘Ā’isha’s “idealness” is tacked onto the
previous hadīth about the best women of the world in what seems like an afterthought. For example, al-Ṭabarī does include ‘Ā’isha, but he does so as an addendum by mentioning the “tharīd” hadīth after the main part of the hadīth that discusses the peerlessness of Maryam, Āsiya, Khadija, and Fāṭima (Spellberg 156). In another iteration of the tharīd hadīth, ‘Ā’isha’s preference among women is like that of honey and dates among foods (Spellberg 162). This hadīth is not an explicit characterization of ‘Ā’isha as an ideal woman and role model to be followed. She is not in the same category as Khadija and Fāṭima. Rather, the simile gives ‘Ā’isha indirect praise by comparing her to the dishes that the Prophet enjoyed. Spellberg comments on how her praiseworthiness is connected to Muḥammad’s preference and appetite, underscoring the decidedly earthly aspect of praise directed at ‘Ā’isha (164).

Perhaps premodern Sunni scholars did not include ‘Ā’isha more explicitly in the category of “ideal women” because it was easier to praise Khadija than to defend ‘Ā’isha. Regarding ‘Ā’isha’s participation in politics with the Battle of the Camel, even Ibn Sa’d felt the need to include multiple narrations that ‘Ā’isha was sorry for her actions and wished she had stayed home. Some narrations found in the Ṭabaqāt extend ‘Ā’isha’s guilt even further by indicating that ‘Ā’isha wished she had never been born (74). Sunni authors also had to contend with Shi‘i polemics. Shi‘i scholars did the opposite of aligning ‘Ā’isha with Maryam and Āsiya. Rather, they associated her with negative female characters found in the Qur’an, such as the wives of Lot and Noah (Spellberg 177). Regarding the Affair of the Lie, Shi‘i exegesis denies that Qur’anic verses exonerate ‘Ā’isha (24:11-19). Thus, the debate over superior women in the Muslim community divided along sectarian lines. The legacies of ‘Ā’isha and Khadija were inextricably linked to these community politics.

Concluding Remarks on the Premodern Section
In this section I have covered two premodern texts that discuss ‘Ā’isha and Khadija. In Ibn Sa’d’s *Tabaqāt*, the biographical entries about both of these women include traditions told about them and, in ‘Ā’isha’s case, purportedly narrated by her. In between these two writers’ lives, the sectarian shifts in the Islamic community solidified. For example, in the Ḥanafi creed, Fiqh Akbar I, which probably dates from the eighth century, article five states that the matter of ‘Alī and ‘Uthmān should be left for God to decide (104). On the other hand, in Fiqh Akbar II, which most probably dates from the late tenth century, article ten mirrors the thirty-first point on al-Zarkashi’s list (192). It states that Abū Bakr is the most excellent after Muhammad, 'Umar is the most excellent after Abū Bakr, and ‘Uthman is the most excellent after ‘Umar. The Sunni-Shi’a split might have had early political beginnings that affected Ibn Sa’d, but the religious split which resulted in differing creeds had become quite substantial before al-Zarkashi’s time. Therefore, his portrayal of ‘Ā’isha was greatly affected by his denominational identity.

In addition, Sunni classical Ḥadīth culture also matured and came into full effect. Al-Zarkashi wrote about ‘Ā’isha and her contribution to this culture in order to substantiate Sunni reliance on her. Ibn Sa’d did not have these strong forces pulling him to write about ‘Ā’isha in this way. Therefore, he does not include any traditions about her contribution to Ḥadīth transmission. In fact, Sayeed argues that Ibn Sa’d does not care to include many laudatory comments for women’s contribution or women in general (122). She notes that Ibn Sa’d refrains from giving his own commentary. Nevertheless, she supposes that Ibn Sa’d was influenced by his time in his portrayal, or lack thereof, of ‘Ā’isha and other transmitters. Women’s participation in Ḥadīth transmission faltered after the initial participation of the women Companions. In addition, the milieu of the growing Muslim
empire was such that women’s participation in public life drastically decreased. The prevalent mode of Hadīth collection and transmission was through scholars and students traveling to collect and evaluate Hadīth transmissions. Hadīth collecting at this time was considered an activity for the tough and masculine. In addition, scholars such as Leila Ahmed and Nabia Abbott note that, socially and politically, the growing Abbasid caliphate imbibed the culture of bureaucracy as well as the misogyny of the long-standing Byzantine and Sassanian empires it conquered (Ahmed 67-68; Abbott 1942b: 123). Given his milieu, it did not occur to Ibn Sa’d to mention the contributions of ‘Ā’isha or other women transmitters.

These observations underscore the way in which the legacy of ‘Ā’isha was affected in the early centuries of Islam. Khadija’s legacy was also affected because, al-Zarkashi, owing to sectarian biases, curtails her primacy. Khadija does not represent a rallying figure for Sunni Hadīth culture, though she is still respected. ‘Ā’isha takes precedence in al-Zarkashi’s work. Though al-Zarkashi cannot be thought of as representative of all the Sunni scholars of his time, his work was widely read in the immediate generations after him (Rippin). Al-Suyūṭi summarized al-Zarkashi’s work in Al-Ijābah and wrote a book of his own on ‘Ā’isha’s Hadīth contributions (Spellberg 56). Clearly, others were interested in remembering and praising ‘Ā’isha in the same way as al-Zarkashi. Nevertheless, there was no flourishing of this type of literature on ‘Ā’isha after al-Zarkashi. Al-Ijābah itself was still in manuscript form until 1939, when it was discovered in the Library of Damascus (Mernissi 77). In this respect, al-Zarkashi and his work represent a unique scholarly perspective.
'Abd al-Raḥmān’s *The Wives of the Prophet*

*Introduction to the Modern Era*

I will be discussing two modern publications that examine the lives of ‘Ā’ishā and Khadija. The European colonial project caused a shift in discourse in the Muslim world. Muslim scholars were now engaging Orientalist scholarship, which leveled claims against Muḥammad. An aspect of his life that they criticized was his multiple marriages. Indeed, the status of Muslim women in general became a favorite subject of colonial discourse. For example, Lord Cromer, the British Consul General in occupied Egypt, decried how the “Oriental” treated his woman (Ahmed 153). Regarding Muhammad and his wives, Orientalists put forth their ideas. For example, Washington Irving (d. 1859) wrote a biography of Muḥammad in which he comments on Muḥammad’s “amourous susceptibility” (132). William Muir (d. 1905) discusses Muḥammad’s wives by referring to them as “inmates of his harem” (289). Others, such as Aloys Sprenger (d. 1893), speak of Khadija highly and emphasize her role in the early years of Islam. Sprenger goes so far as to state that without her faith in him, "Mohammed would never have been a prophet; and when death overtook her, Islam lost much of its purity and the Qur’an, much of its dignity" (Abbott 1942b: 123). Regarding ‘Ā’ishā, some Orientalist scholars found it hard to stomach the fact that a middle-aged man would marry a girl her age. Others, like R.V.C Bodley (d. 1970), did not find this aspect of Muḥammad’s biography particularly disturbing. In his biography, *The Messenger*, Bodley comments that ‘Ā’ishā would probably have matured rapidly and that his contemporaries view the marriage from a modern standpoint, not realizing that it is an “Asiatic custom” (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 62).
This reaction to their Islamic past spurred Muslim scholars and writers to engage in apologetics. For example, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal in his biography of the Prophet, published in 1935, responds to Orientalist critique of Muḥammad. ‘Ā’ishah ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, or Bint al-Shāṭi’ (1913-1998), responds to the Orientalists as well as to Haykal. Her general view is that Haykal does a disservice to the Prophet when he expands his stature into divinity. In her book, *The Wives of the Prophet*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān wishes to showcase the humanity of the Prophet. For her, Muḥammad’s humanity makes his life and mission all the more extraordinary.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān was born in Damietta, a city near Egypt’s Mediterranean coast, and memorized the Qur’an during her childhood. She was also a scholar and writer; her pen name was Bint al-Shāṭi’, which she used in order to hide her scholarly pursuits from her father. She earned her PhD at the University of Cairo, then called Fu’ad I University, by analyzing the poetry of Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 449/1058). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān held a generally conservative point of view (Hoffman). She did not analyze the lives of the Prophet’s wives in order to derive feminist interpretations of Islam for a new generation of Muslim women. In her book, she is more interested in what the lives of the wives tell us about the man, Muḥammad. She responds to the above-mentioned Oriental critique of Muḥammad’s marriages, and she seeks to bring a new perspective to Muḥammad’s life by examining his relationship with his wives. Therefore, these vignettes mostly cover the lives of the women during their marriage to the Prophet. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān forewarns readers of this in her introduction (xix, xxii). However, while her focus is on the wives within the Prophet’s household and their relationship with him, she does claim to “have presented certain aspects of their real character in their true light” (xxi). In addition, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān
informs the reader that, after thorough research, she let her pen flow with what she envisioned the life of the Prophet's wives to be (xviii). Ruth Roded comments that this is actually a feminist stylistic choice because it empowers the women by fleshing out their feelings and thoughts (52). She argues that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, whether consciously or not, wrote “a [more] feminist biography of the Prophet than most of her male contemporaries” (Roded 65). However, the feminist inclination Roded sees does not endure throughout ‘Abd al-Raḥmān's work.

*Khadija in 'Abd al-Raḥmān’s The Wives of the Prophet*

‘Abd al-Raḥmān formats her book in a manner similar to Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt*. Like Ibn Sa’d, she discusses the twelve commonly accepted wives in chronological order (Roded 62). However, the resemblance does not extend further than this. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān does not cite ḥadīths along with their isnāds. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān begins her exposition on the marriage of Muḥammad and Khadija with poetic flair, showcasing her background. She imagines Muḥammad, standing at the spot where his mother had died on his way back into Medina with Khadija's caravan. She imagines a sad and lonely Muḥammad, the memory of his mother clear in his mind (24). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān builds upon a known ḥadīth about the Prophet’s memory of his mother’s death. She does take the time to reference materials. However, this type of writing is another step further from what we have seen in the previous two works. This shows the distance from the early biographical, sparse writing. This is not to say that flowery language did not exist in the time of Ibn Sa’d. However, with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the storyteller and the scholar converge in a more direct and explicit way. This differs from al-Zarkashī as well. He interjected hadiths with his own opinions at times and emphasized ‘Ā’isha’s erudition. However, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān fills in the sparse early
traditions with her imaginings of the emotions and thoughts of Muḥammad, Khadija, and other characters. She admits in the introduction that she will first paint a narrative picture of the wife’s life in order to infuse the work with a human quality (xix). After the narrative, she then responds to and critiques previous Orientalist writings and Muslim apologists.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān writes about Khadija’s heart “throbbing so wildly” after she met Muḥammad as he came back from trading her wares (26). She weaves the story of Nafīsa sending Khadija’s proposal to Muḥammad based on sources like Ibn Hishām. She also favors Al-Simṭ al-Ṭhamīn, which the editors of the English translation mention depends upon al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh, but is not as authoritative (xii). In any case, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān fills in details of Khadija’s life. Khadija was worried about proposing to Muḥammad because of her forty years, compared to his twenty-five (26). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān does not mention the solitary tradition, recorded in Ibn Sa’d’s Tabaqāt, which purports that Khadija was twenty-eight at the time of her marriage to Muḥammad. In the narrative that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān relates, she focuses on the motherly nature of Khadija. In fact, she titles the chapter about Khadija “The Mother and Housewife.” By this title, not only is she is highlighting Khadija’s role as mother to the Prophet’s children, but she is also emphasizing her role in alleviating Muḥammad’s pain at losing a mother. “Muḥammad’s eyes were misting over with the memory of his mother when a tender hand reached out to heal his wound and he found in Khadija a wonderful compensation for all his long suffering” (29). Since there is scarce material on Khadija and Muḥammad’s marriage from day to day, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān merely states that it was “the happiest marriage that Mecca had seen for a long time” (30). After giving details of the six children that Khadija and Muḥammad had together, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān skips fifteen years to the year of the first revelation. She states that Khadija was not at all
troubled by “usual feminine curiosity” or annoyed when Muḥammad used to go on his retreats in the mountain cave of Ḥirā’. This was because of the “serenity of her years” and the “majesty of her motherhood” (32). She used to send someone to guard him from afar. When Muḥammad actually experienced the revelation and came running back to her house, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān says that Khadija felt “the deepest feeling of motherhood” at his condition (33). Khadija soothed and reminded Muḥammad that God would never harm a man who kept good relations with his relatives and who was willing to help those in need (al-Ṭabarī, cited in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān 33). She then “tuck[ed] him in as a mother does with her precious son” (33). Khadija went straight to her cousin Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who was now known as a wise old man. He told her that Muḥammad had received the same angel that had come to Moses and Jesus. When she returned, Muḥammad stood up and recited new verses from the Qur’an (34): “Oh you who are enwrapped, arise and give warning” (74:1-2). Khadija, who was the first to respond to his warning, said, “I will respond, Oh Muḥammad, so call me before all else! I will submit to you, believing your message and in your Lord” (35). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān then talks of the support Khadija lent the cause and the hardship she faced when the early Muslims were boycotted. She had to leave her home and live in the valley of Abū Ṭālib. These three years depleted her strength. When they returned home, she became bedridden and listless; she was now sixty-five years old (36). She died shortly after the return, debilitating Muḥammad and becoming, along with the death of his uncle and supporter, Abū Ṭālib, the reason that year was known as “The Year of Sorrow” (37). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān then relates how Khadija’s memory stayed with Muḥammad even after she died. He often thought about her and sent food to her friends. According to the narrations cited by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ‘Ā’isha would become jealous of Muḥammad’s enduring affection for
Khadija. One day she exclaimed at how the Prophet kept mentioning the “old lady” without noticing that God had given him better than her. He replied, “By God, the Lord has not given me any woman better than her. She had faith when others did not, she believed in me when others disbelieved” (39).

At this point in the biographical entry, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān responds to the Orientalist discourse and the response it drew in Muslim circles. She agrees with Emile Dermengham’s analysis in *Muḥammad and the Islamic Tradition* that Khadija gave Muḥammad motherly compassion. She says that he, unlike other Orientalists, understood that Muḥammad, as an orphan, needed a mother figure (41). She disagrees with D.S. Margoliouth, who said that Muḥammad married Khadija for her wealth. However, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān reserves her ire for William Muir, who apparently said Muḥammad’s awe of Khadija and fear of divorce caused his faithfulness. She responds by citing Muḥammad’s faithfulness when Khadija was dead. She responds with sarcasm, asking if Muḥammad was afraid of divorce from Khadija when he rebuked ‘Ā’isha for her unkind words against her (42). At the end of this chapter, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān asks a series of rhetorical questions in praise of Khadija and her role in Muḥammad’s life. She quotes Ibn Ishāq’s comment that Khadija used to restore Muḥammad’s faith in himself, when others rejected his message. In the end, she concludes that no other woman could have filled the role of the wife of a prophet, “the mother of the orphan, the inspiration of the Hero, the refuge of the fighter” (43).

It is evident that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān tries hard to humanize the Prophet in the section about Khadija. In the introduction, she announces that Muḥammad’s “heroic quality” was his ability to succeed despite being human like everyone else (xvii). Her point of view comes across in her novel-like writing style. She humanizes the Prophet when she talks
about his sorrow at the memory of his dead mother and his human need for a mother figure. Yet, in humanizing the Prophet, she idealizes Khadija as the perfect mother/wife figure. This is reminiscent of earlier idealizations of Khadija in the “Four Ideal Women” traditions. ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān juxtaposes the image of a perfect Khadija with a human Muḥammad in order to respond to the dialogue surrounding the Prophet in her time. She does this because she is partaking in a dialogue that began with the very first Orientalist writings that depreciated Muḥammad. Haykal’s response to the Orientalists was to insist that the Prophet was different, divine. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s response to Haykal is to showcase Muḥammad’s humanity. In fact, for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān his humanity is a sign of his true greatness.

‘Ā’isha in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s The Wives of the Prophet

‘Abd al-Raḥmān, like Ibn Sa’d, writes the longest entry about ‘Ā’isha. She again utilizes her poetic abilities to flesh out ‘Ā’isha’s inner thoughts and feelings. For example, she discusses at length the migration to Medina and how it affected ‘Ā’isha. In historical texts, ‘Ā’isha does not play a huge role in this event; instead, her sister and father actually assisted Muḥammad on his journey. Asmā’ brought provisions and Abū Bakr accompanied the Prophet (64). Nevertheless, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān describes ‘Ā’isha as breathlessly waiting on any news from the travelers through her sister. When Asmā’ finally arrived, ‘Ā’isha kissed her eyes, hands, and ears because they had seen, shaken hands with, and heard the voice of the Prophet and her father (67). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān makes an interesting choice in favoring this event over later events, like the Battle of the Camel. Ruth Roded suggests that ‘Abd al-Raḥmān would like to connect ‘Ā’isha to this great turning point in the Prophet’s life (62).
However, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s silence on the Battle of the Camel in this book indicates her desire to turn the focus of the reader away from the wife to the divinely inspired husband.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s purpose in writing this book is to augment the biographies of Muḥammad by discussing the human relationships he had with his wives. Just as ‘Abd al-Raḥmān focuses on Khadīja as the mother of Muḥammad’s children and his own mother-figure, ‘Ā’isha plays the role of beloved, beguiling, charming, feminine wife. However, ‘Ā’isha is not made to seem otherworldly and above human frailty, like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s description of Khadīja. This seems to be in line with traditional scholarship on these two women. Khadīja’s perfection is juxtaposed with ‘Ā’isha’s frailty; however, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān writes more about her compared to Khadīja. ‘Ā’isha brims with human faults in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s retelling. One of the central descriptors ‘Abd al-Raḥmān uses for ‘Ā’isha is “feminine.” However, she does not associate the word with positive characteristics. ‘Ā’isha uses her “feminine guile” and responds to her “sentimental and feminine worries” in dealing with the other wives (77). Indeed, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān rejects the efforts of other Muslim writers who seek to remit instances of ‘Ā’isha’s jealousy (93). ‘Ā’isha did not rise above “the bitterness of this competition” (76). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān goes into detail in covering the stories of factionalism between the wives of Muḥammad. For example, she details an incident concerning a honey drink and Zaynab, when ‘Ā’isha formed an alliance with Ḥafṣa against Zaynab bint Jaḥsh. ‘Ā’isha, Ḥafṣa, and Sawda kept complaining of a smell, until Muḥammad believed it came from the honey drink Zaynab gave him. This led him to stop having the drink with Zaynab (79). ‘Abd al-Raḥmān also includes the story about the wives preventing the Prophet from marrying a tribal woman by tricking her (80). Ibn Sa’d includes multiple instances of this as well. Finally, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān covers another jealousy
incident that ended in the Prophet distancing himself from his wives for one month. Sources differ about the reason for the separation (Stowasser 96). ‘Abd al-Rahmān states that it was because ‘Ā’isha and Ḥafṣa incited the other wives against Māriya (81).

Stowasser reads ‘Abd al-Rahmān’s portrayal of ‘Ā’isha’s jealous actions as a change from earlier medieval texts’ portrayal of her jealousy. ‘Abd al-Rahmān emphasizes that jealousy was naturally caused by great love, loyalty, and devotion (94). However, as noted above, ‘Abd al-Rahmān is not the first person to link ‘Ā’isha’s devotion with her jealousy. Al-Zarkashī discusses her jealousy in terms of her devotion as well. Even though ‘Abd al-Rahmān praises ‘Ā’isha’s devotion and desire to have Muḥammad all to herself, when speculating on Muḥammad’s point of view she belittles this devotion. ‘Abd al-Rahmān writes that Muḥammad “did not have time for this female foolishness” and “[these] petty intrigues” (82). The retelling of these stories in such a way indicates that ‘Abd al-Rahmān takes a conservative view of the Prophet’s wives and women in general. In addition, she includes a puzzling piece of advice from ‘Ā’isha that does not seem to be cited. According to her, ‘Ā’isha stated, “If you have a husband and you are able to take out your eyes and put them in a better place than where they are, do so” (73). This accords with ‘Abd al-Rahmān’s emphasis on ‘Ā’isha’s love and devotion to the Prophet as central to her legacy, but does not exemplify a feminist outlook.

Within ‘Ā’isha’s vignette, one can also notice the way ‘Abd al-Rahmān responds to the discourse sparked by Orientalist writings on Muḥammad. She specifically addresses the idea of polygamy and ‘Ā’isha’s age at marriage. First, she states that, although polygamy appears as if it were the “alleged enslavement” of the Arab woman, the reality is that it places heavy burdens on a man and actually saves the Arab woman from loss of social
respectability (14). She criticizes monogamy as “modern slavery, which recognizes only one wife and leaves other women to be carnally used and left without a place in society,” and goes on to state that “Arab society has never known” the problem of illegitimate children (14). She then, perhaps speaking from personal experience, since she was in a polygamous relationship with Amīn al-Khūlī, says that men are unequal; some women may prefer to share one man’s life with another woman, rather than have another’s life completely (Roded 56, Abd al-Raḥmān 14).

‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān defends ‘Ā’isha’s age at the time of her marriage under the heading “Normal Practice” (60). She argues that some Orientalists do not take into account differences in era and environment when they criticize the marriage between the “middle-aged man and the young virgin child” (61). She notes that early marriage is customary in the Arabian Peninsula. She then praises Bodley for being a “just Orientalist” who understood that ‘Ā’isha must have grown rapidly, like other Arab women, and that this custom still exists in some places in Europe (62).

‘Abd al-Raḥmān only briefly mentions ‘Ā’isha’s great knowledge at the end of the biographical entry. She does indicate that ‘Ā’isha became a great source of Ḥadīth and that she participated in Islamic history by leading a revolt against ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān and armies against ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (97). However, after noting her closeness to the Prophet at his death, her lyrical style depletes; a paragraph worth of information on ‘Ā’isha’s accomplishments after Muḥammad’s death seems like an afterthought (97). She quotes al-Zuhri’s praise of ‘Ā’isha’s knowledge that al-Zarkashī also includes. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān does not include information about the Battle of the Camel, nor does she include the tradition cited by Ibn Sa’d that ‘Ā’isha wished she would be completely forgotten. On the contrary,
'Abd al- Raḥmān remarks that the smallest minutiae of 'Ā’isha’s life would become the preoccupation of “history and the world” (98). This rings true but is also ironic, since ‘Abd al-Raḥmān skips certain parts of what is recorded about ‘Ā’isha. Certainly, the Battle of the Camel was more than “minutae,” and ‘Abd al Rahman does not discuss it.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s version of the lives of these women was very popular in the Arab world, and also in the Indian subcontinent. Roded remarks that ‘Abd al- Raḥmān’s descriptions of women unfortunately concord with conventional stereotypes of women in these societies; other Middle Eastern women would be left with the job of presenting a feminist version of Muḥammad’s wives (Roded 66). Fatima Mernissi takes up this cause wholeheartedly.
Mernissi’s *The Veil and the Male Elite*

*Introduction to Fatima Mernissi*

The two modern works I have chosen to discuss are not separated so much by time as by ideology. From the end of the 1970s, publications written by Muslim women about early Muslim women proliferated. This literature sought role models in the wives of the Prophet and other women of the time (Ascha 105). Fatima Mernissi (b. 1941), a Moroccan professor of sociology, plays a major role in this discourse. Mernissi has been called an Islamic feminist (Abdellah Labdaoui in Rhouni 5). She has also been described as “a new thinker in Islam” (Rachid Benzine in Rhouni 6). Fatima Mernissi’s *Le harem politique*, translated into English with the title *The Veil and the Male Elite*, was originally published in 1987, sixteen years after *The Wives of the Prophet*. Mernissi’s work reflects her feminism; the subtitle of the English translation is the *Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*. In the introduction, Mernissi declares that Muslims must “refresh their memories” to call to mind the egalitarian society the Prophet had built in his first years in Medina. She is convinced Muslim women need not look any further than their own history for examples of democracy, human rights, and women’s participation in political and public life (viii). *La harem politique* is regarded as the first widely cited Islamic feminist text and remains a touchstone of feminist writings in the Middle East (Rhouni 12). Mernissi herself does not identify the work as Islamically feminist, but her work falls within the definition that Miriam Cooke identifies as Islamic feminism in *Women Claim Islam*. Mernissi is a Muslim woman who critiques an aspect of Islamic history in order to promote full participation of women in the Islamic community (Cooke 61). Mernissi discusses Khadija and ‘Ā’isha throughout the book in order to legitimate this full participation. This book’s format differs
from that of Ṭāʾīsha ‘Abd al-Rahmān in that it is not solely a focused reading of the wives. Mernissi discusses the wives in order to augment her larger argument about women’s participation in early Islam. For instance, in the chapter entitled “The Prophet and Women,” Mernissi states that the imams throughout Muslim history took advantage of women’s ignorance. However, she exhorts women to “pore over the yellowed pages of our history” to revive the stories of Ṭāʾīsha and the other wives (115). She laments that the image of a slave of the “Golden Age” symbolizes the “Muslim eternal female” and is superimposed on the memories of Muslim women like Ṭāʾīsha, causing them to become “strangely distant and unreal” (195). She uses the lives of the wives in novel ways from what we have seen in the previous works and stresses specific aspects of their lives. The aspects of the lives of these women that each of the writers chooses to highlight gives clues as to their desired outcome and their own perspective.

*Khadija in Mernissi’s The Veil and the Male Elite*

Although Mernissi focuses on Ṭāʾīsha and Umm Salama as feminist role models, she does emphasize aspects of Khadija’s life as well. Mernissi mentions Khadija early in the introduction to *The Veil and the Male Elite*. She states that Khadija could not know of Muḥammad’s destiny when they married, but she was convinced he was not ordinary. She had complete confidence in him because of his moral rectitude (28). Mernissi describes Khadija as a member of the Qurayshi aristocracy. She had a “special ascendancy” over others because of their beauty and intelligence (116). She was “full of initiative” in all aspects of her life, public and private (104). She quickly gives biographical information about Khadija’s life, that she had been previously married and already had children.

Mernissi points out that Khadija augmented the large sum of money she inherited because
of her shrewd investments (116). She took the initiative to propose to Muḥammad because she appreciated the qualities he possessed. So far, Mernissi relates information we have seen previously, but Mernissi stresses the aspects of Khadija’s character that are unique to her, not part of her relationship with the Muḥammad. Mernissi’s treatment of Khadija’s life also differs from traditional retellings because she calls into question the large age gap between Khadija and Muḥammad. She questions whether Khadija was in fact forty years old upon marrying Muḥammad, since they had six children together (116). This is evocative of the sole tradition in Ibn Sa’d that provides a different age disparity. Like previous authors, when Mernissi describes the advent of Islam, the first revelation, she emphasizes Khadija’s role. She, like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, quotes the tradition found in Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh about the conversion of the first Muslim. However, she makes it a point to indicate a woman’s role in spurring the message: “This is the way Islam began, in the arms of a loving woman” (103). Even though her portrayal of Khadija is not in the same format as ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s, in that it is not a biographical entry, one can recognize Mernissi’s shift in emphasis from Khadija as mother to Khadija as businesswoman and partner.

‘Ā’isha in Mernissi’s The Veil and the Male Elite

There is, of course, much more information and interpretation of ‘Ā’isha’s life in The Veil and the Male Elite. She is the main figure that Mernissi wishes was the symbol of the “Muslim eternal female.” Mernissi mentions the usual basic information about ‘Ā’isha, such as her special place within Muḥammad’s household. However, she focuses on the implications of three major issues in ‘Ā’isha’s life: the Affair of the Lie, the Battle of the Camel, and the revelation of the veil verse. In the introduction and throughout the book, she presents ‘Ā’isha’s involvement in the Battle of the Camel. This is a far cry from Ibn
Sa’d’s treatment of the subject. Ibn Sa’d shies away from detailing the Battle of the Camel most probably due to political considerations. Instead, he focuses on traditions about ‘Ā’ishā’s regret, which would serve as discouragement for other Muslim women from engaging in political affairs. On the other hand, Mernissi embraces this aspect of ‘Ā’ishā’s legacy in all its details, in order to encourage other Muslim women to engage in public affairs. She would like to furnish current and future Muslim women with a political role model. Like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, Mernissi is engaged in a postcolonial dialogue. Her main interlocutors are conservative writers. For example, in the introduction she quotes Muḥammad ‘Arafa. He wrote that women in early Islam were never involved in public affairs or in making political decisions (4). ‘Arafa seeks to neutralize ‘Ā’ishā’s involvement in the Battle of the Camel, the biggest exception to this statement. He states that all the great Companions and other wives of the Prophet condemned ‘Ā’ishā’s participation in the battle (Mernissi 5). Mernissi also examines Sa‘īd al-Afghānī’s condemnation of ‘Ā’ishā’s political actions and, by extension, any Muslim woman’s political activities. Al-Afghānī places all blame on ‘Ā’ishā for the bloodshed of the Battle of the Camel and also for setting in motion the split between Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims (Mernissi 6). In response to this, Mernissi launches her own study of the classical texts. ‘Ā’ishā’s story is central to Mernissi’s project of lifting “the veil with which our contemporaries disguise the past in order to dim our present” (11).

Mernissi narrates that, on December 4, 656 AH, ‘Ā’ishā, at the age of forty-two, headed an army on the battlefield that challenged ‘Alī, the caliph at the time (5). In her fervor to present ‘Ā’ishā as a greatly decisive political figure, perhaps Mernissi elides some of the nuance of the politics of the situation. She simply states that ‘Ā’ishā’s goal was to
challenge ‘Alī’s appointment as caliph, and for this reason she led a rebellion, regardless of the politics surrounding ‘Uthmān’s assassination (54). She states that ‘Ā’isha had qualms about the “choice of ‘Alī” after she had heard about the death of ‘Uthmān (38). Wilferd Madelung, a contemporary Islamicist, relates that earlier, after the previous Caliph ‘Umar’s death, ‘Ā’isha preferred ‘Uthmān because of her personal dislike of ‘Alī. Some scholars have suggested this dislike stems from the Affair of the Lie, when ‘Alī advised Muḥammad that there were many women he could marry, so he should divorce ‘Ā’isha (Abbot 1942a: 33). However, during ‘Uthmān’s reign, ‘Ā’isha spoke out against his conduct and nepotism. This contributed to the rebellion against ‘Uthmān, which eventually resulted in his murder. The rebels supported ‘Alī as caliph and “she immediately turned against the latter, claiming revenge for the dead caliph” (Madelung 18). Madelung seems to emphasize ‘Ā’isha’s capriciousness in her political maneuvers. On the other hand, Mernissi chooses to view all of ‘Ā’isha’s political involvement as affirmations of her political prowess. She does state that ‘Ā’isha decided to leave ‘Uthmān in Medina for a pilgrimage to Mecca when he was besieged by those who would eventually kill him, but does so in order to extoll ‘Ā’isha’s political influence. This caliph, too, was affected by ‘Ā’isha. Mernissi celebrates ‘Ā’isha for being part of political life in the period of two caliphs. First, ‘Ā’isha’s refusal to help ‘Uthmān stabilize conditions by staying in Medina contributed to his downfall. Second, she challenged ‘Alī by commanding an army against him. She proposes that the Battle of the Camel is so named to allow historians to “avoid linking in the memory of little Muslim girls the name of a woman with the name of a battle” (5). For Mernissi, the important message she would like readers to take away is that ‘Ā’isha participated in this battle at all and that many men followed her without a second thought about her gender.
Mernissi details the military strategies that ‘Ā’isha employed. ‘Ā’isha learned the procedure for pre-battle negotiations since she had observed this from accompanying Muḥammad on his expeditons. According to Mernissi, ‘Ā’isha needed to justify her uprising, so she cited ‘Alī’s failure to bring ‘Uthmān’s murderers to justice (54). ‘Ā’isha strategically decided to set up her base in Basra (50). Many Basrans threw their own weight behind ‘Ā’isha, though many refrained. Mernissi points out that Abū Bakra, a Companion who had moved to Basra and had become a notable of the city, relates a hadīth that supposedly influenced his decision after ‘Ā’isha had already lost. “He is supposed to have said to her (according to the way he told it after the battle)” that he heard the Prophet saying people who give power to a woman will not prosper (56). Mernissi engages in criticism of this hadīth related by Abū Bakra in order to defend ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the Battle and the right of all Muslim women to participate in politics.

The ordeal ‘Ā’isha underwent in the Affair of the Lie also figures into Mernissi’s analysis of women in Muslim history. She relates the usual information about the event. She explains that ‘Ā’isha was bound to be the focus of such an attack since she was an intelligent, beautiful woman, secure in the love of a powerful man and thus was likely to possess pride and audaciousness. She also interprets the response of the Prophet as a rare instance in Muslim history when “a political man came to the defense of his wife instead of taking sides with her accusers” (178). Interestingly, Mernissi does not detail ‘Ā’isha’s month of sickness and separation from Muḥammad due to a certain “gloomy preoccupation” and “coolness” on his part (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 86). Mernissi focuses on the social implications of the slander. Mernissi states that these accusations were meant to defeat the Prophet’s plan of an open public and private sphere. For Mernissi, this plan was
the crux of female empowerment in early Medina. The Prophet insisted upon openness between his private life and public life, which meant that his wives could be involved in public affairs in the new Muslim community (Mernissi 172). Mernissi gives examples of this, such as how the Prophet insisted upon taking wives with him on military expeditions. This showed them that the “the household was not their sole domain” (163). However, this was distressing to some among the Companions, especially ‘Umar. Mernissi includes an anecdote to showcase this. ‘Umar, upon seeing ‘A’isha walking around a battlefront, exclaimed at her presence: “By my life, your boldness borders on insolence! What if a disaster befalls us? What if there is a defeat and people are taken captive?” (162). Also, the private rooms of Muḥammad’s wives opened onto the public sphere of the mosque. Muḥammad would go from ‘A’isha’s bed to prayer with fluidity, and people came to see the Prophet in ‘A’isha’s room (162). Mernissi relates a tradition that an Arab tribal chief named ‘Uyayna ibn Ḥiṣn came to see Muḥammad in ‘A’isha’s room. ‘A’isha was in the room and ‘Uyayna asked the identity of “that beautiful woman seated beside you” (al-Nisābūrī in Mernissi 171). ‘Uyayna showed interest in marrying ‘A’isha. Mernissi gives this as possibly the cause behind the revelation of the second part of the ḥijāb verse, which forbade Muḥammad’s wives from remarrying after his death.

Muḥammad’s “determination to live his relationship with women” became his Achilles’ heel on which his enemies focused their energies (163). In the Affair of the Lie, when ‘A’isha arrived with Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu‘aṭṭal, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy made a comment that she should be excused for her actions because Ṣafwān had youth and a more comely appearance than Muḥammad (178). Ibn Ubayy was the mastermind behind the quickly spreading rumors. Mernissi augments the basic information about the Affair of the Lie by
explaining the motives of the slanderers. Mernissi argues that the curtailing of women’s rights was due to the steady campaigning against women by those Medinans who came to be known as the Hypocrites. She states that the institution of the veil “represents the triumph of the Hypocrites” (187). She presents material on Ibn Ubayy, the leader of those Hypocrites who were slandering ‘Ā’isha. Ibn Ubayy made a living by “forcing his women slaves to become prostitutes” (178). He used his women slaves like a financial resource. His treatment of a slave woman named Musayka caused the revelation of a verse of the Qur’an ordering that slave girls not be forced into prostitution (24:33, Mernissi 181). Mernissi states that the demands of ‘Ā’isha and Umm Salama for the liberation and free movement of women threatened Ibn Ubayy’s abuse of women. He led the Hypocrites in attacking the Prophet’s wives in order to weaken their position (186). Therefore, he not only spread scandalous news about ‘Ā’isha, but he and other Hypocrites would also harass women on the streets at night. They defended their behavior by saying that they could not tell free women apart from slave women. Mernissi states that the veil was instituted in order to protect Muḥammad’s wives and other believing women from this treatment (180). Mernissi’s argument relies on the idea that ‘Ā’isha and Umm Salama were fighting for women’s liberation. She reads ‘Ā’isha’s outspokenness as activism. However, she does not mention that Umm Salama was one of the wives who tried to convince ‘Ā’isha to stay at home during the civil strife after ‘Uthman’s death (Abbot 1942a: 140). Nor does she dwell on those troublesome traditions about ‘Ā’isha’s regret at the end of her life.

In addition, Mernissi’s account of ‘Ā’isha’s political prowess on the battlefield does not take into account an old pre-Islamic practice, which Nabia Abbot calls “the cult of the Lady of Victory” (Abbott 1941: 263). In pre-Islamic Arabia, the noblest lady of the tribe
would ride in a litter on a camel at the frontlines in order to spur her side to victory (Abbott 1941: 262). If her camel was hamstrung and she was taken hostage, then her side would lose and suffer great dishonor (Abbott 1941: 263). When Mernissi discusses ‘Ā’isha’s part in the Battle of the Camel, she states that ‘Ā’isha “took up arms” against ‘Alī (34). Mernissi also states that ‘Ā’isha “took command” and “went forth to fight” (41). The diction Mernissi uses elides the influence of pre-Islamic custom on the events of the Battle of the Camel in order to place more emphasis on ‘Ā’isha’s agency in the actual battle. ‘Ā’isha did not take up arms; she was acting in a prescribed pre-Islamic role. Perhaps Mernissi does not investigate this further because it does not help her overall goal of providing examples of female agency in the Islamic past.

Leila Ahmed, another feminist scholar, provides a different perspective on ‘Ā’isha and Khadija than Mernissi. Ahmed’s theory about these two women in Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate can be used as a foil to Mernissi’s reading of these two women’s lives. Ahmed believes that the autonomy of Khadija’s life showcases the kind of life possible in pre-Islamic Arabia (42). She admits that there is a dearth of information regarding pre-Islamic Arabian customs. However, she posits that polyandrous and uxorilocal marriages existed at that time and these point towards the existence of matriliney in pre-Islamic Arabia (43). On the other hand, Ahmed states that the polygamy and lack of autonomy in ‘Ā’isha’s life showcase an increase in patriliney and patriarchy that Islam solidified. She sees ‘Ā’isha’s participation in the Battle of the Camel as a vestige of pre-Islamic customs (43).

Interestingly, Nabia Abbott includes examples of ‘Ā’isha’s family life that both Ahmed and Mernissi do not discuss in detail. Abbott discusses instances of ‘Ā’isha
challenging her full brother, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. After Abū Bakr died, ‘Ā’isha took an increasingly active role in her family’s affairs. For instance, she arranged the marriage of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s daughter while he was away on a trip. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān resented that ‘Ā’isha had taken action without his knowledge. However, he did not break up the marriage (Abbott 1942a: 208). Perhaps Ahmed would interpret ‘Ā’isha’s active role in family affairs as remnants of a pre-Islamic past. Also, perhaps Mernissi does not detail these actions because she wishes to endow ‘Ā’isha with public agency rather than private agency. Regardless, these issues reveal variations between two different feminist authors, Mernissi and Ahmed.
Conclusion

In conclusion, time and place affect the portrayals of these two women across four works spanning generations of Islamic intellectual history. The authors of these four works, even Ibn Sa’d, are all affected by their own positions in history as they portray these women. Ibn Sa’d was born more than one hundred seventy-one years after Khadija died, and there are one hundred ten years between ‘Ā’isha’s death and his birth. The beginnings of the Sunni–Shi’a division and the nascent Sunni Hadith methodology of the time promoted a masculine culture around Hadith collection. These factors influenced Ibn Sa’d’s decisions about which traditions to include about ‘Ā’isha. Al-Zarkashī was influenced by the fact that the divide between Sunni and Shi’a had already solidified and, by his time, was embedded in creeds. In addition, Sunni scholarly culture crystallized around reliance on the canonized Hadith literature for jurisprudence, which can be said to have influenced al-Zarkashī’s hagiographic portrayal of ‘Ā’isha.

The portrayal of Khadija and ‘Ā’isha in the works of modern writers like ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and Mernissi is also influenced by these writers’ places in postcolonial Muslim societies. These modern scholars face new pressures not known to Ibn Sa’d and al-Zarkashī. Thus, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and Mernissi’s impressions of these historical women are affected by the ideologies they use to understand the challenges of participating in postcolonial dialogue. Both are scholars based in Western-style universities in the Middle East, but they choose dramatically different philosophies to express their understanding of these two early women in Islam. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān chooses to portray Khadija as a mother first and foremost, and ‘Ā’isha as the supremely feminine, beloved wife. These portrayals square well with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s generally conservative interpretation of Islam. On the
other hand, Mernissi chooses to focus on Khadija as a businesswoman in whose arms Islam began. She portrays ‘A’isha as a stalwart political leader in the early Muslim community, interpreting her legacy to provide a feminist role model for future Muslim women. Essentially, each author creates Khadijas and ‘A’ishas that fit with his or her own understanding of what is historically important, and that is, in turn, influenced by the scholars’ own historical and cultural climate.

Though we cannot gain access to the historical Khadija and ‘A’isha, contemporary Muslim scholars, writers, and activists will continue to use their examples to further their ideas about the place of women in society. For example, a recent article in the *The Huffington Post* introduces Khadija as “Islam’s first feminist” (Blackburn). It seems that the list format has remained salient, since this article lists seven aspects of Khadija’s life that are meant to inspire readers. These types of articles resonate with many Muslim women today. However, they fail to historicize the premodern events of Khadija’s life. The writer of this article would surely be disappointed by Ahmed’s view that Khadija’s life does not reflect Islamic values but pre-Islamic ones. The *Huffington Post* article aligns modern concepts with premodern people, which can surely be academically challenged. However, the way the writer envelopes Khadija’s legacy into modern Muslim narratives is nothing new. As we have seen, Muslims have been discussing Khadija and ‘A’isha in this way since the first centuries of Islam. Therefore, interpreting Khadija’s business and ‘A’isha’s politics as precedents for modern Muslim women’s businesses and political campaigns is just an extension of the discussion within the tradition.

Muslim women can use the examples of the practices of these historical Muslim women to justify their actions. However, such usage should also be accompanied with the
realization that the comparison can only stretch so far. Modern women’s lives are completely different from the lives of these historical women. Also, one must accept the fact that the legacies of these women are malleable and can be used by those with opposing ideologies. Feminists will be able to find aspects of the lives of ‘Ā’isha and Khadija that fit with their vision for women in Islam, and so will conservatives. Indeed, differences of opinion on women’s roles existed even in the early years of Islam. Even among themselves, the wives of the Prophet interpreted the way Muslim women should live differently. In the lead-up to the Battle of the Camel, ‘Ā’isha wrote a response to Umm Salama’s advice to stay at home. She said, “What an honor, indeed, to receive your sermon! . . . If I go away, then it will be for something about which I need not expatiate any further. Goodbye” (Abbott 1942a: 140-141).

After an honest appraisal of the limitations of historical comparisons, modern Muslim women will be able to find gems while researching the lives of early Muslim women. For example, it seems very evident that ‘Ā’isha had a sharp wit. One can count on being amused by the spirited and sometimes cryptic messages she sent to her interlocutors, such as the missive quoted above. No one can deny that these women have had a lasting impact on the history of Islam. Any retelling of Islamic history must include the lives of ‘Ā’isha and Khadija.
Works Cited


