

A Saintly Woman for Our Times

KHADIIJA

bint Khuwaylid *by Zabra Ayubi*



“Give Khadija the
good tidings that
she will have a palace
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Paradise and there
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nor trouble in it”

(Sahih Bukhari 27:19).

Khadija bint Khuwaylid, may God be pleased with her, was a woman of the ages, from whom we can learn much. The first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, she is considered in popular thought on the historical roles of women in Islam, as a symbol of women’s piety, chastity and belief in God, as well as a model wife who unconditionally supported her husband. She embodied these attributes, and so much more, to which we can relate today.

If we understand Khadija’s life from a vantage point that respects her station, her relationship to the Prophet and her own relationship to God, we will make sense of her life as an empowered woman in a deeply patriarchal world in which Islam was just beginning to bring about the revolution of human equality.

While the Prophet remains for both women and men a model human being, the model believer in God, the stories of his life as a man who lived more than 1400 years ago, can at times be inaccessible to today’s women. If the Prophet is *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect, complete human being) then the figure of Khadija can function as the complete woman.

She is certainly not a parallel female prophetic figure; however, on the level of women’s expression of faith, when we read Khadija’s life story holistically we are presented with a uniquely female way of being Muslim. It is a way that is inspirational, not merely because of Khadija’s piety, wealth and role as a wife, but also because she faced and overcame numerous obstacles that are familiar to women in our own 21st century context.

Interpreting Khadija as a woman of faith, even before the arrival of Islam, helps us to understand more fully her role in the prophecy and to decipher the ways in which she is inspirational. In this essay I offer a rereading of her character

as it appears in the scant historical sources such as fragments in the Prophet's *sira* (biographical narrative); some hadith records, and Khadija's own biographical entry in Muhammad Ibn Sa'd's 9th century chapter on women in *Kitab at-Tabaqat al-Kabir*.

Khadija came from a noble, wealthy trade family within the tribe of the Quraysh. She inherited her father's vast wealth and business savvy, and continued to maintain her family's business. It is reported that her caravans exceeded the number of caravans owned by all the rest of the traders of the Quraysh tribe, combined. From her first marriage to a man of an allied tribe named Hind ibn an-Nabash bin Zurara al-Tamimi she had two sons, Hind and Hala. After being widowed at a young age she remarried and had a daughter from this second marriage, named Hindah.

Her second husband, 'Atiq ibn 'Abid Al-Makhzumi also died at a young age, leaving Khadija a twice-widowed, single mother of three orphan children. (The definition of *yatim* (orphan) in 6th century Arabia, and how the term is used in the Qur'an, is a child whose father is deceased.) Without having access to social history of Makkah from this time, we can surmise from the number of verses in the Qur'an that command justice for the orphans that they were certainly a vulnerable segment of the community, open to all kinds of abuses or exploitations. Although Khadija was wealthy, she probably had to be vigilant in protecting her children.

The sources are silent on how she faced the stigmas of being a single woman in a patriarchal world, how she managed to stave off the numerous marriage proposals she is reported to have received from opportunistic suitors greedy for access to her wealth, and what hardships she may have encountered in raising her three children while managing a large-scale trade business. We can only presume,

in a society that expected women to have male support, Khadija was exceptional in making the conscious decision not to remarry in order to protect her wealth, and likely her children, from untrustworthy men.

If women's experiences of hardship as single mothers in modernity are any indication of some of the challenges that women must have faced in late antiquity, then it is clear that Khadija must have had unwavering resolve in herself and faith in her Higher Power.

As the sole head of her household she was independent, holding the power of self-determination over her own affairs as much as was possible under the confines of pre-Islamic Makkan custom and possible tribal interference. If women's experiences of hardship as single mothers in modernity, even those who are financially secure, are any indication of some of the challenges that women must have faced in late antiquity, then it is clear that Khadija must have had unwavering resolve in herself and faith in her Higher Power.

Although not much is known about her religious beliefs before Islam, (we know from later in her biography that she had a Christian uncle and some say she was always a monotheist). One episode in particular discussed in Ibn Sa'd's biographical entry indicates that she was serious-minded about God, believing in God's presence in her life.

The legend narrated by Ibn 'Abbas is that before she knew the Prophet, Khadija was attending an important festival for women held in Makkah during the month of Rajab when, from behind an idol, something took the shape of a man who called out, predicting that a man named Ahmad would become the prophet of the people and any woman who could become his wife should do so.

The narrative recounts that, except for Khadija, all the women present, became angry, cursed and threw stones at the figure. Whether or not this actually happened, it is unlikely that she predicted her future employee's prophethood, or that she deliberately married him because of such an event, but her reaction to this experience indicates that she was open to perceiving the mystical and being touched by a miracle from God.

Although long before her association with the Prophet, she lived a complete life, with marriages, births of children and deaths in her family, we can recognize the pre-Islamic Khadija as a distinguished, strong woman of resolve – a woman who had all the character traits to recognize God's presence and the moment of truth when the Prophet would first receive revelation. That phenomenal event would confirm her understanding of the Godly presence in the mundane world.

Because she did not accompany her caravans to Syria and elsewhere on trade missions the success of her business, her livelihood and her children's, depended on her being able to find trustworthy employees. She then employed a man named Muhammad who was known as *al-amin*, (the trustworthy one). After knowing him for a considerable length of time and employing him on a few caravan trips to Syria on her behalf, she was so impressed with his conduct, honesty in business and kindness to servants that she proposed marriage

to him. She sent a woman named Nafisa bint Umayya to the proposal to Muhammad. He accepted and the two were married in the presence of their uncles, one of whom performed the marriage.

Some reports say that she was 15 years older than the Prophet, who was about 25, while others claim she was about 20 years his senior. Ages in hadith reports are generally considered to be estimates. It is likely their age difference was significant, but possibly she was not as old as 40 years (and thus near menopause), because she carried six pregnancies to full term during their marriage. The pregnancies were reported to have been two years apart.

Khadija's advanced age and instinct to protect her wealth and children make her proposal of marriage to a poor, young man of only 25 years, curious. Approaching 40, she had probably decided not to remarry, or at least decided not to settle for someone who could usurp her wealth and independence, or who would treat her children poorly. This is a challenge that can resonate with single women of today; Khadija handled her predicaments with great strength in not settling. In fact, she vetted Muhammad thoroughly. In addition to the respect or love they may have developed for one another, simply put, Khadija was able to trust him in matters of money and found him to be kind to others, which were to her, great indicators of his trustworthiness in all aspects of his life.

She proved to be right. The Prophet remained monogamous during their 25-year marriage, uncommon at the time, and was kind to his stepchildren who all grew up and got married. In her marriage to the Prophet, Khadija had a son named Qasim, followed by four daughters, Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm Khulthum and Fatima, and another son named Abdullah, who was born into Islam. Only the daughters survived beyond early childhood.

Additionally, Khadija and the Prophet took in his young cousin, Ali ibn Abu Talib whose father, an important elder in the tribe, was under financial stress. They also adopted an orphan boy named Zayd, whose mother had been captured and sold into slavery; the couple raised these two young males as their own. One imagines other good deeds that came of their partnership, although there is little discussion of their married life in the sources.

Prophet said to her about Khadija: "...she accepted me when people rejected me, she believed in me when people doubted me, she shared her wealth with me when people deprived me, and Allah granted me children only through her"
(Ibn Abd al-Barr, *Al-Isti'ab*).

The greatest indication of the tenderness in their relationship is related in the dramatic story of the Prophet's first received revelation. A hadith transmitted by several companions, relates that after his momentous encounter with the Divine, he came rushing down from the cave of Hera to his home. He flung himself, shivering, into Khadija's arms and exclaimed, "Cover me! Cover me!" (Sahih Bukhari 1:3). Ibn Ishaq's *sira* (biography of the Prophet) narrates this scene between husband and wife in intimate detail as told by Khadija herself; the story has been recently retold beautifully by scholar Omid Safi in *Memories of Muhammad*.

She asked her husband to recount the phenomenal moment to her so that she could help him decipher what

he had just experienced, an encounter with an angel or a demon. First she asked him to sit on her right thigh and asked him if he still saw the angel. The Prophet answered that he could. She then asked him to sit on her left thigh and repeated the question. He still could see him. Finally, she asked him to sit in her lap, removed her veil and opened her robe, revealing her form. In this close embrace when he finally stopped seeing him she said, "Rejoice and be of good heart; by God he is an angel and not a satan" (Ishaq, 107).

In addition to the Prophet's humanity in the face of God, this story demonstrates that Khadija's endorsement of her husband's prophethood was far more than just becoming his first follower or providing financial support, as is popularly discussed as her main role in Islamic history. Rather, she reaffirmed with her body and soul his experience of the Truth during his most vulnerable state.

In another version, also in Ibn Ishaq's biography, Khadija had sent out a search party to find her husband, who was uncharacteristically late in returning home. After he did return home, the Prophet confided in Khadija about his experience and that he feared a *jinn* (a spirit lower than the angels) had possessed him; she reassured him, "I take refuge in that, Father of Qasim. God would not treat you thus, since He knows your truthfulness, your great trustworthiness, your fine character, and your kindness. This cannot be, my dear. Perhaps you did see something," (Ibn Ishaq, 106-107).

Khadija believed he possessed all the characteristics of a prophet, the same traits for which she found him worthy of being her husband. Modern retellings of this version of the story often credit Khadija only for consulting her Christian uncle who recognized the Prophet's revelatory experience as similar to those of prophets before him. However, using

her own faculties of faith, she was the one who recognized the signs of God from the moment her husband came down from the cave of Hera. She further interpreted what he saw, "By the One in whose hand is Khadija's soul, I have hope that you will be the Prophet of this people" (Ibn Ishaq, 107). She had always trusted in God's plan for her and her family and this moment was the realization of that belief.

In a hadith narrated by Az-Zuhri, "The prophet and Khadija prayed in secret for as long as God wished" (Ibn Sa'd, 11). The two continued to witness the oneness of God within the privacy of their marriage, which must have drawn them closer together.

The narrative of Khadija's life drops off at this point. We know that Khadija spent the rest of her life in partnership with her husband, spreading God's messages to the largely hostile community in Makkah and beyond until she died at approximately 65 years of age. She is buried in a cemetery in Makkah called Jannat al-Maala; there is no marker for her grave but millions of pilgrims to Makkah visit to pay respects and recite salaam and prayers for her.

Her death is reported to have had a profound impact on the Prophet. More than losing her financial support, he suffered from the loss of his closest confidant and partner in life. Eventually, friends, followers and supporters largely made up the difference but he continued to remember her profusely throughout his new life in Medina, to the point that his next wife, Aisha, may God

be pleased with her, admitted that the Prophet's frequent praises of the late Khadija and mentions of their marriage made her feel jealous. The Prophet said to her about Khadija: "...she accepted me when people rejected me, she believed in me when people doubted me, she shared her wealth with me when people deprived me, and Allah granted me children only through her" (Ibn Abd al-Barr, Al-Isti'ab). He recognized the role she had played in his life and that she helped him to realize his prophethood in public and in private.

In a hadith reported by a number of narrators, the Prophet spoke of Khadija's fate in the hereafter. One version is from the time she was still living. Upon bringing him a plate of food he said to her, "Khadija, here is Jibril (angel Gabriel). He commanded me to say *salaam* to you and to give you the glad tidings of a home of jewels in paradise in which there will be no toil or hardship" (Ibn Kathir, *Wives of the Prophet Muhammad*). In another version, it was upon his return from *umrah*, (the small pilgrimage) that he said to the people, "Give Khadija the good tidings that she will have a palace made of pearls in Paradise and there will be neither noise nor trouble in it" (Sahih Bukhari 27:19).

The significance of this hadith is two-fold. The first is with regard to her proximity to the Prophet and that the promise of freedom from toil and hardship as the descriptions of her abode in heaven implies that her life, especially perhaps during the years when she was a single mother, was tough. The less commonly discussed

significance of either version of this hadith is that God addressed Khadija directly in regards to her destiny and sent blessings (peace or salaam) upon her, albeit through the envoy of the angel Jibril or the Prophet. This implies Khadija's high station as a believer in God in her own right, whose deeds, like those of everyone else, are believed to determine fate in the hereafter.

She is guaranteed heaven in this hadith because of her own merits throughout the course of her entire lifetime including her ability to persevere during the most difficult trials early in her life, her continuous belief in God, her recognition of the Prophet's encounter with God, and probably countless other moments when she demonstrated goodness that are not narrated in the biographies. In the hadith literature, we do not see such a clear confirmation as direct messages from God, for his other companions or wives.

Instead of viewing Khadija only as a chaste woman who supported her husband, we must view her as a complete woman who faced adversities of living in patriarchal 6th century Makkah and rose to confirming God's presence in her life.

In the 21st century we are not companions, relatives or wives of prophets, but we certainly are part of the real world where we face difficult decisions every day. Muslim women from all walks of life daily confront issues such as widowhood, having to maintain one's family, being the household head, deciding on a suitable marriage partner, maintaining a beautiful marriage and most importantly, trusting God's plan through the signs that God sends. Today, Muslim women are managing a wide variety of difficulties, all the while doing what they can to spread goodness, and who better as a role model for them than Khadija bint Khuwaylid. 

