



The Qur'an, Hadith, and the Debate on Marriageable Age: A Textual Analysis

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Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of Qur'anic verse 65:4 (Surah At-Talaq). This verse has often been cited in debates about the permissibility of child marriage in Islam. Traditional exegetical readings have interpreted the verse as legitimizing the divorce and remarriage of prepubescent girls (al-saghīrah), drawing on certain hadith reports that claim the Prophet's marriage to Ā'ishah at the age of six and consummated at nine. This study challenges such interpretations by conducting a close linguistic and contextual examination of the verse, alongside related Qur'anic passages such as 4:1–4, 4:6, 4:19, among others. The analysis demonstrates that the language of verse 65:4 does not support its application to prepubescent girls, and that interpretations to this effect reflect cultural and political overlays rather than the Qur'an's intended meaning. Instead, the Qur'an consistently frames marriage as a contractual union requiring maturity, consent, and accountability, thereby excluding the possibility of child marriage. Hadith reports that appear to endorse early marriage are considered only as part of the broader exegetical discourse but are shown to be secondary and methodologically less reliable when weighed against the Qur'an's primary guidance. The article concludes that Qur'an 65:4, properly understood, does not sanction child marriage. Rather, it reinforces the Qur'an's overarching vision of marriage as a bond between responsible individuals, while early marriage practices should be understood as remnants of pre-Islamic cultural traditions not Qur'anic prescriptions.

Keywords: *Qur'anic guidance, Hadith authenticity, Prepubescent marriage, Nisā' (adult women), Islamic jurisprudence, Tafsīr (Qur'anic exegesis), Ā'ishah's marriage, Reformist Islam*

Introduction

Non-Muslim polemicists frequently criticize Prophet Muhammad by alleging that he endorsed child marriage, citing hadith reports which claim that Ā'ishah was married at six and consummated at nine (3, 12, 13, 14, 15). These narratives are then invoked to portray both the Prophet and the Qur'an as condoning these practices. The traditionalist reliance on hadiths for historical context (4), however, overlooks their inconsistencies with the Qur'an's authoritative guidance, which provides the definitive framework for Islamic jurisprudence (1, 19).

Classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī often accepted these reports as historically reliable, thereby normalizing the notion of prepubescent marriage. By contrast, modern scholarship has demonstrated how cultural, political, and patriarchal contexts shaped these interpretations, frequently obscuring the Qur'an's ethical orientation (2, 7). In particular, scholars have shown how elevating contested hadith reports to near-canonical status distorted the Qur'an's



plain meaning and reflected sociocultural pressures more than divine intent (2, 5, 6). Unlike broader feminist frameworks that critique patriarchal structures in Islam more generally (8), this study builds on specific reinterpretations of the marriage verses to challenge hadith-based claims of child marriage and to highlight the Qur'an's self-sufficient authority.

The central question this article addresses is whether the Qur'an itself provides any textual or conceptual support for child marriage, or whether such claims arise solely from contested hadith reports and later exegetical traditions. This question carries particular significance today, as both polemicists and certain Muslim groups invoke these narrations in debates on Islam's ethical stance regarding marriage, gender, and children's rights.

To answer this, the article first examines the hadith literature, especially the narrations concerning 'Ā'ishah's age, and then presents the Qur'an's perspective, which demonstrates that marriage is intended exclusively for mature women (*nisā'*), not prepubescent girls (1). Through a holistic analysis of the Qur'an's verse 65:4, and interrelated verses, followed by a reassessment of classical exegetical works—including those of al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr—this study argues that claims of Qur'anic sanction for child marriage are interpretive impositions rather than textual realities, and that the Qur'an's framework is sufficient and authoritative in itself (1, 5, 10).

Let us now turn to the hadith literature that addresses the age of Aisha at the time of her marriage.

Hadiths Mentioning 'Ā'ishah's Age

Certain hadiths, cited by non-Muslim polemicists to criticize the Prophet and attack the divinity of the Qur'an, claim 'Ā'ishah was married at age six and the marriage consummated at nine, a narrative that stands in tension with the Qur'an's consistent emphasis on marriage involving adult women. These reports, found across canonical collections, include:

تَزَوَّجَ النَّبِيُّ ﷺ عَائِشَةَ وَهِيَ بِنْتُ سِتِّ سِنِينَ، وَبَنَى بِهَا وَهِيَ بِنْتُ تِسْعٍ، وَمَكَثَتْ عِنْدَهُ تِسْعًا

Sahīh al-Bukhārī — 5158: Narrated by 'Urwah, it states: "The Prophet (ﷺ) wrote the (marriage contract) with 'Ā'ishah while she was six years old and consummated his marriage with her while she was nine years old and she remained with him for nine years (i.e., till his death)" (3).

Sahīh al-Bukhārī — 5133-5134: Narrated 'Ā'ishah: that the Prophet (ﷺ) married her when she was six years old and he consummated his marriage when she was nine years old, and then she remained with him for nine years (i.e., till his death) (3).

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ، قَالَتْ: تَزَوَّجَهَا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ وَهِيَ بِنْتُ سِتٍّ، وَبَنَى بِهَا وَهِيَ بِنْتُ تِسْعٍ، وَمَاتَ عَنْهَا وَهِيَ بِنْتُ ثَمَانَ عَشْرَةَ

Sahīh Muslim — 1422: Narrated 'Ā'ishah: that the Prophet (ﷺ) married her when she was six years old and he consummated his marriage when she was nine years old, and then she remained with him for nine years (i.e., till his death) (12).

-تَزَوَّجَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ وَأَنَا بِنْتُ سِتٍّ، وَدَخَلَ عَلَيَّ وَأَنَا بِنْتُ تِسْعٍ سِنِينَ، وَكُنْتُ أَلْعَبُ بِالْبِنَاتِ

Sunan an-Nasa'ī — 3378: It was narrated that 'Aishah said: "The Messenger of Allah married me when I was six, and consummated the marriage with me when I was nine, and I used to play with dolls (13).

تَزَوَّجَنِي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ وَأَنَا بِنْتُ سِتِّ سِنِينَ فَقَدِمْنَا الْمَدِينَةَ فَنَزَلْنَا فِي بَيْتِ الْحَارِثِ بْنِ الْخَزْرَجِ فَوَعَيْكْتُ فْتَمَرَقَ شَعْرِي حَتَّى وَفَى لَهْ جُمَيْمَةٌ فَأَتَتْنِي أُمِّي أُمُّ رُومَانَ وَإِنِّي لَفِي أَرْجُوحَةٍ وَمَعِيَ صَوَابِحَاتٌ لِي فَصَرَخْتُ بِي فَأَتَيْتُهَا وَمَا أَدْرِي مَا تَرِيدُ فَأَخَذَتْ بِيَدِي فَأَوْقَفَتْنِي عَلَى بَابِ الدَّارِ وَإِنِّي لَأَنْهَجُ حَتَّى سَكَنَ بَعْضُ نَفْسِي ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُ شَيْئًا مِنْ مَاءٍ فَمَسَحَتْ بِهِ عَلَى وَجْهِهِ وَرَأْسِي



ثُمَّ أَدَخَلْتَنِي الدَّارَ فَإِذَا نِسْوَةٌ مِنَ الْأَنْصَارِ فِي بَيْتٍ فَقُلْنَ عَلَى الْخَيْرِ وَالْبَرَكََةِ وَعَلَى خَيْرِ طَائِفٍ فَأَسْلَمْتَنِي إِلَيْهِنَّ فَأَصْلَحْنَ مِنْ شَأْنِي
فَلَمْ يُرْعِنِي إِلَّا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ ضُحًى فَأَسْلَمْتَنِي إِلَيْهِ وَأَنَا يَوْمَئِذٍ بِنْتُ تِسْعِ سَنِينَ

Sunan Ibn Mājah — 1877: Includes a detailed account of ‘Ā’ishah’s age, illness, playing on an *urjuhah* (swing/seesaw) with friends, and the marriage consummation at nine (14).

هشام بن عروة عن أبيه قال قالت عائشة تزوجني رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وأنا ابنة ست سنين بمكة متوفى
خديجة ودخل بي وأنا ابنة تسع سنين بالمدينة

Musnad Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal — 24139, 24602, 24603, 25636: Reiterate the claim of ‘Ā’ishah’s marriage at six and consummation at nine (15).

A related hadith in **Sahih Muslim 1422c** also mentions Ā’ishah playing with dolls, stating: "I used to play with the dolls in the presence of the Prophet, and my girl friends also used to play with me." (12).

While these hadiths are classified as *sahih* (authentic), they rely heavily on narrators like Hisham ibn Urwah, whose reports from Iraq—where these narrations originate—have been questioned by classical scholars like Malik ibn Anas for potential memory issues or influence from local narrators (4, 11). Scholars note that such reports may reflect cultural practices or political motives from later periods, such as justifying early marriages for tribal alliances (7, 9), and modern critiques highlight how historical context influenced their authenticity (2).

While hadiths can offer historical context, their human-compiled nature makes them susceptible to errors, unlike the Qur'an’s divine precision (4, 5). The Quran’s textual and grammatical clarity, when examined across related verses, provides the authoritative guidance about marriage, reducing the need for reliance on such narrations (1, 5, 10). It will be shown below that these hadiths present a narrative that contrasts with the Qur'an’s clear use of *nisā’* and its focus on maturity (e.g., 4:6, 4:19) (1).

Quran 65:4: Linguistic and Contextual Reading

While the historical and methodological issues around the hadiths concerning Aisha’s age are substantive and warrant careful examination, ironically, verse 65:4 from *Surah At-Talaq* (The Divorce) is commonly cited by some traditional scholars, such as Ibn Kathir (discussed below) to support the notion of child marriage in the Qur’an. It is important to acknowledge that their interpretation is not independent of hadith influence. However, a close reading of the opening verse of this chapter explicitly establishes that the subject is a waiting period (*iddah*) for women in case of a divorce to establish paternity before potential remarriage. 65:1-4 expand upon the waiting period after divorce outlined in 2:228.

In particular, verse 65:4 provides further details about the waiting period for divorced women before remarriage (1):

وَاللَّائِي يَئْسَنَ مِنَ الْمُحِيضِ مِنْ نِسَائِكُمْ إِنْ ارْتَبْتُمْ فَعِدَّتُهُنَّ ثَلَاثَةُ أَشْهُرٍ وَاللَّائِي لَمْ يَحِضْنَ وَأُولَاتُ الْأَحْمَالِ أَجَلُهُنَّ أَنْ يَضَعْنَ
حَمْلَهُنَّ وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ يُسْرًا

"And as for those of your women who have despaired of menstruation, if you have a doubt, their prescribed time shall be three months; and [the same applies to] those who have not yet menstruated. As for those who are pregnant, their prescribed time is until they deliver their burdens. And for everyone who is conscious of God, He makes it easy to obey His commandment." (65:4)



This verse reveals important insights through a lexical, morphological, syntactic, and grammatical agreement analysis. The key term is *nisā'* (نِسَاء), the plural of *imra'a* (امْرَأَة), meaning “women” in Arabic. Its triliteral root *nūn sīn wāw* occurs roughly 59 times in the Qur'an as only the noun *nisā'* (نِسَاء) and consistently refers to adult females in legal contexts such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance (e.g., 4:3, 4:11, 4:127). The subject in the verse is *nisā'ikum* (“your women”), referring to adult female spouses. The feminine plural relative pronoun *wallā'ī* (وَاللَّائِي, “and those who”) refers back to *nisā'* in the preceding clause, and the third person plural verb *yahidna* (يَحْضُنَّ, “have not menstruated”) agrees syntactically and morphologically with *nisā'*, maintaining adult women as the subject throughout the verse. Consequently, based on the linguistic and grammatical examination, there is no basis for interpreting the bolded portion of the verse as referring to prepubescent girls; it clearly addresses adult women.

The phrase *wallā'ī lam yahidna* (“and those who have not yet menstruated”) can be understood as referring to two plausible categories of adult women who may not menstruate:

- Women past menopause, who have naturally ceased menstruating due to age.
- Women experiencing physiological conditions, such as amenorrhea caused by hormonal imbalances, stress, illness, or irregular cycles (1, 6).

Pregnant women are listed separately in the same verse, whose waiting period (*iddah*) concludes upon childbirth. Notably, the Quran does not use any of the Arabic terms like *sabiyyah* (young girl), *jāriyah* (maiden), or *tiflah* (child) when referring to marriageable females in this or any other context. The grammar and context of 65:4, when read alongside related verses, consistently employs *nisā'* (women), a term reserved for adult females. Claims that this verse permits child marriage have no textual or grammatical basis within the Qur'anic text. Yet, to understand how the controversial interpretations about the permissibility of child marriage took root, it is important to look at how classical exegetes interpreted this verse.

Exegetical Tradition on 65:4

Classical and post-classical exegetes offer insights into the scholarly traditions of their times. Their conclusions, however, stem from the principles that are tenuously linked to the Qur'anic text itself., Ibn Kathīr, for example, interpreted 65:4 to apply not only to post-menopausal women but also to girls who have not yet begun menstruating. In his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (vol. 10, p. 137), he writes:

لِلصَّغِيرَةِ الَّتِي لَمْ تَحْضُ

(*al-saghīrah allatī lam tahid* — “the young girl who has not menstruated”) (16).

He explicitly includes prepubescent girls in the scope of the verse, aligning with many earlier commentators such as al-Tabarī and al-Qurtubī (17, 18). To support this view, Ibn Kathīr draws upon narrations, including the widely cited hadith reports about 'Ā'ishah's marriage found in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* and *Sahīh Muslim*. Moreover, in his *tafsīr*, a narration attributed to Ubayy bin Ka'b is cited in the commentary on verse 65:4. According to this report, Ubayy asked the Prophet:

"O Allah's Messenger! When the Ayah in Surat Al-Baqarah was revealed prescribing the Iddah of divorce, some people in Al-Madinah said, 'There are still some women whose Iddah has not been mentioned in the Qur'an. There are the young, the old whose menstruation is discontinued, and the pregnant.' Later on, this Ayah was revealed (i.e 65:4)"



This report appears in Ibn Abī Hātim's *tafsīr* and is cited by later exegetes (16). However, like many *tafsīr* transmissions, it does not occur in the *Sahīh* hadith collections and is transmitted without a fully authenticated *isnād*. It is stated that the verse (65:4) was revealed to address categories with specific waiting periods. This *tafsīr* report suggests that Ubayy's comment prompted clarification in the Qur'an that the prescribed *'iddah* applies to women who have not menstruated (i.e., young girls), those who have ceased menstruation (menopausal), and those who are pregnant. Ibn Kathīr synthesized verse 65:4 with the hadith reports about 'Ā'ishah and the *tafsīr* narration attributed to Ubayy ibn Ka'b, treating them collectively as evidence that the Qur'an encompasses prepubescent girls within its ruling on *'iddah*.

Ibn Kathīr built on earlier exegetes, notably al-Tabarī and al-Qurtubī, who form the backbone of the mainstream *tafsīr* tradition on 65:4. Al-Tabarī in his *Jāmi' al-Bayān* writes:

"As for those who have not menstruated, their waiting period is three months. So said the scholars regarding this matter. Ibn Zayd said: If a man divorces a young girl who has not menstruated, then her waiting period is three months."

Al-Tabarī explicitly ties "those who have not menstruated" to *al-saghīrah* (the young girl) (17).

Al-Qurtubī in *al-Jāmi' li-Ahkām al-Qur'ān* likewise comments (18):

"As for the waiting period of the one who has not menstruated due to her young age, her waiting period is three months."

Ibn Kathīr largely reiterated these interpretations. Classical exegetes appear not to have considered alternative explanations for the phrase *wa-llā'ī lam yahidna* ("those who have not menstruated"), such as adult women who have not menstruated due to medical conditions (amenorrhea). Not only did they rely on received hadith and *tafsīr* reports, but they were also influenced by the prevailing social norms of their times. In his landmark book, *Truth and Method* (1989), Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that the interpreter's prejudices and historicity must be taken into consideration, for all interpretation is shaped by preconceptions (21).

The disjuncture between the exegetical readings and the Qur'anic language on the issue demands a recalibration of our understanding of the norms of marriage in the Quran.

Exegetical Impositions at Odds with Qur'anic Linguistic Integrity

The dominant exegetical reading stands at odds with the Qur'an's own linguistic and rhetorical patterns. The Qur'an never uses the term *al-saghīrah* ("the young girl") when legislating marriage or divorce, but instead consistently employs the term *nisā'* ("women"). Moreover, if one accepts the claim that 65:4 was revealed in response to Ubayy ibn Ka'b's query about the demographic to which *'iddah* applies, it is striking that the verse does not open with the formula "They ask you..." (*yas'alūnaka / yastaftūnaka*), as in other clarifying verses including those pertaining to women's issues (2:222, 4:127, 4:176). Yet this is not the case: 65:4 begins with *wa* ("and"), a resumption particle indicating continuation from 64:1, which itself starts with *yā ayyuhā al-nabiyu* ("O Prophet"), showing that the divine guidelines on the waiting period after divorce were communicated directly to Muhammad without any prompting from his companions.

Furthermore, Ka'b's *a priori* classification—allegedly made prior to the revelation of 65:4—assumes young girls as a category which later exegetes then treated as authoritative. This reasoning exemplifies a form of circular logic or a 'begging the question' fallacy: the interpretation assumes the conclusion (that young girls are included) rather than allowing the Qur'an's own text and grammar to define the verse's scope. Such an interpretive imposition introduces human constructs



into the reading of the divine speech, creating a tension between the Qur'an's diction and the dominant exegetical tradition.

Ibn Kathīr's commentary, produced in the 14th century under the Mamluk context, reflects reliance on inherited reports and cultural norms more than on independent linguistic analysis of the Qur'an. By treating hadith about 'Ā'ishah's marriage and the *tafsīr* report of Ubayy ibn Ka'b as decisive, he privileged tradition over a Qur'an-centered reading. His interpretation, in line with earlier exegetes, advanced views on child marriage that may owe more to prevailing historical culture than to the Qur'an's own linguistic framework (16, 17, 18). Modern scholarship further illuminates how early Islamic marriage practices, influenced by pre-Islamic norms, shaped such exegesis (7), while political and sectarian agendas may have motivated hadith fabrication (9). Contemporary critiques have emphasized the need to re-evaluate these interpretations in light of the Qur'an's linguistic and textual integrity (2).

Marriage in the Qur'an: Adulthood, Consent, and Maturity

The Qur'an 4:1 and 4:3-4, in *Surah An-Nisa* (The Women), further clarifies that marriage is for adult, mature women by using *nisā'* and emphasizing qualities tied to adulthood (1). The passage begins:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ()

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! (4:1)

Here, *nisā'* denotes adult women, counterparts to men (*rijāl*), in the context of creation and familial bonds. Verses 4:3-4 continue:

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَتًى وَثَلَاثَ وَرَبَاعَ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ذَلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعُولُوا () وَأَتُوا النِّسَاءَ صِدُقَاتِهِنَّ يَخْلَعُ فَإِنْ طِبْنَ لَكُمْ عَنْ شَيْءٍ مِنْهُنَّ فَكُلُوهُنَّ مَبِيتًا ()

"And if you have reason to fear that you might not act equitably towards orphans, then marry from among women such as are lawful to you – [even] two, or three, or four: but if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [only] one – or [from among] those whom you rightfully possess. This will make it more likely that you will not deviate from the right course. And give unto women their marriage portions in the spirit of a gift; but if they, of their own accord, give up unto you aught thereof, then enjoy it with pleasure and good cheer." (4:3-4)

These verses use *nisā'* to describe marriageable women, emphasizing justice, consent, and financial responsibilities like dowers, which point to adult partners capable of mutual agreement and marital duties. The reference to orphans in 4:3 is linked to 4:6 which states:

وَابْتَلُوا الْيَتَامَىٰ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغُوا النِّكَاحَ فَإِنْ آنَسْتُمْ مِنْهُمْ رُشْدًا فَادْفَعُوا إِلَيْهِمْ أَمْوَالَهُمْ وَلَا تَأْكُلُوهَا إِسْرَافًا وَبِدَارًا أَنْ يَكْبَرُوا وَمَنْ كَانَ غَنِيًّا فَلْيَسْتَغْفِفْ وَمَنْ كَانَ فَقِيرًا فَلْيَأْكُلْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ فَإِذَا دَفَعْتُمْ إِلَيْهِمْ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فَأَشْهِدُوا عَلَيْهِمْ وَكَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ حَسِيبًا

And test the orphans [in your charge] until they reach the age of marriage; then, if you find them to be mature of mind, hand over to them their possessions; and do



not consume them extravagantly or hastily in anticipation of their growing up. And let him who is rich abstain entirely [from his ward's property]; and let him who is poor partake thereof in a fair manner. And when you hand over to them their possessions, let there be witnesses on their behalf – although God is sufficient as a witness. (4:6)

The Qur'an requires waiting for orphans to reach "the age of marriage" (*balaghū an-nikāh*) before entrusting property and mental maturity (*rushd*), underscoring the principle that legal and social responsibility requires adulthood. Read holistically, 4:1–4 with 4:6 indicates that marriage is intended for adult women who have reached mental maturity, consistent with the Quran's text and grammar.

The Quran's marriage rulings consistently use *nisā'* to refer to marriageable females, as seen in verses like 2:221-223, 4:22–24, and 4:25, which address believing women capable of consent and responsibility. Verses 4:19 and 4:21 present marriage as a solemn covenant (*mīthāqan ghalīzan*) and emphasize mutual consent and kindness in marriage, indicating partners with the capacity for informed decision-making (6, 8). The Qur'an's silence on prepubescent marriage, combined with its emphasis on reaching the age of maturity (e.g., 4:6), confirms that marriage is between adult males and females. The discussion in 2:222 assumes women in marital relations are menstruating, and of reproductive age. In 65:4, "those who have not menstruated" is more plausibly understood as referring to adult women with physiological conditions, not children, as no Qur'anic term or context supports such an interpretation. Qur'an 24:58-59 establishes that children are subject to special privacy rules until they reach puberty (*hulm*)—an age of discernment and maturity—after which they are treated as adults responsible for observing household boundaries similar to those senior to them. Taken together, these verses reveal a consistent framework: marriage in the scripture is firmly grounded in adulthood, responsibility, and consent (1, 2, 5, 6, 8).

Some hadiths mention puberty or consent in marriage, partially aligning with the Qur'an's emphasis on maturity. However, those hadiths claiming 'Ā'ishah was a child bride and played with dolls or on a swing with friends conflict with the Quran's consistent use of *nisā'* and its focus on adult females (e.g., 4:6, 4:19). As human-compiled texts, hadiths are inherently fallible, whereas the Quran represents God's perfect, infallible word. Verses such as 2:221–223, 4:1-4, 4:6, 4:19, and 4:21 collectively emphasize that marriage is intended for older menstruating females capable of consent and responsibility, providing a clear and complete framework (1, 10). By relying solely on the Qur'an's text, grammar, and interconnected verses, one can discern God's guidance on marriage, without needing to depend on hadiths that introduce distortions or culturally influenced interpretations (5, 10, 11). This raises a broader methodological question, how should themes such as marriage guide our interpretation?

Text, Grammar, and Context: A Qur'an-Only Method of Interpretation

The Qur'an, as God's infallible word, claims that it is the sole and sufficient authority for divine guidance. It is a clarification and detailed explanation of everything (16:89, 6:114-115, 7:52, 12:111, 17:9). To understand its message accurately including the complete criteria on marriage, one must study the text, grammar, and related verses as a whole, ensuring interpretations remain faithful to its divine intent. Hadiths claiming that 'Ā'ishah was married at six and consummated at nine introduce a narrative of child marriage entirely absent from the Qur'an's framework, which emphasizes adult women (*nisā'*) and maturity (e.g., 4:6, 4:19, 4:21). The Qur'an consistently treats



women as legally competent adults—able to own property, take oaths, bear witness, and bear full accountability—roles that prepubescent girls cannot fulfill. These hadith reports and the later exegetical sources, shaped by post-prophetic cultural and political contexts, rely on narrators whose reliability has been debated (4, 6, 10, 11). Such hadith reports, often shaped by early Islamic marriage practices that included pre-Islamic customs (7), may reflect political or sectarian motivations for fabrication (9). Modern critiques further highlight their inconsistencies with the Qur'an's ethical framework (2).

The Qur'an's holistic guidance—seen in verses like 2:221–223, 4:1–4, 4:6, 4:19, and 65:4—frames marriage as a covenant between mature females and males, emphasizing consent, responsibility, and readiness (1, 8). Muhammad, the final messenger through whom the Qur'an was revealed, is understood to have been a good example for the believers (33:21) suggesting his actions aligned with divine principles, and the reports suggesting he married a prepubescent 'Ā'ishah are best read as later attributions which stand at odds with Qur'an's own linguistic and rhetorical patterns. Such inconsistencies underscore the importance of critically reevaluating hadith literature that conflicts with the divine guidance.

Typically, hadith are understood as the sayings of the Prophet meant to “explain” the divine scripture. Yet in this case, narrators introduce an entirely new demographic—prepubescent girls—into the marriage context potentially assuming the conclusion *a priori* through circular reasoning or 'begging the question' fallacy without any linguistic basis in the Quran. In mainstream Islam, narrators of the major hadith collections are generally regarded as reliable and beyond reproach, even when the reports attributed to them do not stand up to scrutiny when they are critically evaluated and benchmarked against the Quran. Questioning such reports can provoke reprisal from devout followers who treat them as final authority, discouraging intellectual discourse. The Quran, however, grants no such immunity to human transmitters. It explicitly warns that even some of the Prophet's contemporaries were hypocrites whose words and actions were unreliable (63:1–3, 9:107, 33:12–13), underscoring the need to evaluate all reports carefully and independently (49:6), and reaching one's conclusions on the basis of critical examination and logical inference (39:18) with the word of God as the ultimate standard of truth.

The Qur'an precisely encodes divine guidance in its text, grammar, and interwoven verses, which can be decoded by examining it from within—without reliance on external sources—thereby preventing false assumptions, erroneous interpretations, and intellectual tampering. It must be engaged directly to ensure that the true meaning of the text is not distorted by political and cultural impositions. A close study of the Qur'an's text and grammar makes it clear that it elevates women's status by requiring adulthood and consent and does not reintroduce the hadith-based narrative of supporting pre-Islamic cultural practices of prepubescent marriage. The Qur'an consistently uses the term *nisā'* (women) in marriage rulings (2:221–223, 4:22–25), and emphasizes mutual consent (4:19), solemn covenant (*mīthāq ghalīz*, 4:21), and maturity (4:6), all of which presuppose adult partners with the capacity for responsibility. Verse 2:222 addresses menstruation in the context of marital relations, indicating that the Qur'an links marriage and sexual relations to women who have reached biological maturity. Even in 65:4—often misinterpreted—the phrase “those who have not menstruated” is better understood as referring to post-menopausal women or women with medical conditions such as amenorrhea, not children, since the Qur'an provides no language permitting child marriage. Many modern Muslim-majority countries, recognizing the Qur'an's



emphasis on maturity and responsibility, have set minimum age laws (e.g., 16 or 18), aligning with its principles of justice and protection (20). Through careful intellectual analysis, Muslims can recover God's guidance not only on marriage but also on other societal issues, grounded solely on the Qur'an's clear and infallible revelation (16:89, 6:114–115, 7:52). This Qur'an only method guards against external intrusions and socio-cultural assumptions, which, as is evident in the case of traditional exegetes, have shaped, and in the case of the age of marriage, distorted interpretation.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the Qur'an, Hadith, and exegetical traditions in relation to the debate on child marriage, with particular attention to Qur'an 65:4 and hadith reports concerning the age of 'Ā'ishah. The analysis demonstrates that the Qur'an consistently frames marriage as a contractual union requiring maturity, consent, and responsibility, offering no textual support for child marriage. Reports suggesting otherwise reflect cultural and historical contexts rather than the Qur'an's ethical directives. By prioritizing Qur'anic guidance, this article calls for a re-reading of the tradition that upholds human dignity, protects children, and aligns with Islam's higher objectives of justice and mercy. The study underscores the necessity of revisiting classical interpretations on the basis of comprehensive Qur'anic analysis, which in this case clearly converges with contemporary understandings of children's rights and welfare. Ultimately, it emphasizes that Islam envisions marriage as a responsible partnership rooted in moral accountability, not a cultural practice devoid of ethical grounding.

Recommendations

1. Re-evaluate classical exegetical interpretations through the lens of Qur'anic principles.
2. Prioritize Qur'anic guidance over contested hadith in legal and ethical debates.
3. Promote child protection policies rooted in Islamic values of dignity and justice.
4. Develop curricula that center a Qur'an-first approach and integrate critical approaches to hadith and tafsīr.
5. Foster dialogue between scholars, policymakers, and communities to dispel misconceptions about Islam and child marriage.

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