EXTRACTING THE HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY OF NUMBERS IN THE SĪRA: THE CASE OF KHADĪJAH’S MARRIAGE TO THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD

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Abstract: There have been numerous studies devoted to examining the historical content of the Sīra. These studies have varied from being cautious of minute and specific details, such as the specifics of conquests, to full-blown scepticism of the entire tradition. This article seeks to contribute to this discussion by examining one of the most ubiquitously held positions on age, that of Khadijah marrying the Prophet Muḥammad at the age of 40. Based on the earliest narratives and contextual information, we argue that this age is unlikely. Instead, this number serves more as a symbolic literary device because of the way it is used in contemporaneous Arabic literature. Aspects of her biography, such as the number of children she had with the Prophet, also make this older age less likely. However, this does not necessitate disregarding the Sīra tradition. On the contrary, we argue that by working closely with this tradition we are able to extract a far more likely age of 28.

Introduction

The early biographies of the Prophet (Sīra) are immense in their magnitude consisting of hundreds of reports and pages which put together purport to historically recount the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. On one hand, one approach uncritically accepts the contents of the Sīra seeing them as verbatim accurate accounts of the past. On the other hand, a mainstream trajectory dismisses the Sīra in their entirety, arguing that for the purpose of understanding the past they are useless. In this article, we argue for a middle position between the two, by examining one of the most ubiquitous positions in the Sīra narrative as a case study: that of Khadijah marrying the Prophet at the age of 40. We argue that the “40” position is untenable when we consider literary writing in the early period and other elements in the Sīra, showing that an uncritical adoption of the Sīra, does us a disservice in reconstructing the past. However, at the same time this does not merit dismissing the tradition in its entirety. By considering and making sure to include all the reports of the tradition, we are able to uncover conclusions and
historical details that inspire greater confidence. In doing so, we underscore the immense potential of the *Sīra* for reconstructing the past. Ultimately, this article seeks to underscore how one should approach the *Sīra*. Not uncritically, but cautiously and being sure to consider the bulk of the tradition. By working closely with the tradition in this way, the *Sīra* can become a powerful repository for history. Alongside this, this article also argues for caution to be adopted in the way numbers are used in the Arabic literary tradition. The adoption of a specific number should not be seen as automatically representing an exact numerical value. Rather the number could represent a kind of literary symbolism and hence adopting the number literally would be an inaccurate way of dealing with it.

**Approaches to the Early Historical Tradition**

Various approaches have been adopted when discussing the early historical tradition, from the sympathetic to outright dismissal. This is compounded when we speak about the very origins of Islam and the events in the seventh century surrounding the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. One of the primary reasons for this is that virtually not a single source exists from when the critical events of Islamic history occurred. The earliest extant sources we have were written approximately 200 years after the events they purport to describe. For example, the earliest complete chronicle we have is the *Sīra* of Ibn Isḥāq, which was only composed approximately 150 years after the death of the Prophet.

The more sympathetic historiographical approach to the early tradition holds that the accounts of the earliest Muslim community began as short, concise narratives, referred to as *khabar* (pl. *akhbār*). Such reports were then transmitted orally from the original eyewitness reporters to the next generation, who then passed it on to the next and so on. It was then in the late Ummayad period that such reports were dictated into writing. These various scattered reports were compiled together to write the very first historical chronicles. This compilation was undertaken by an emerging group of scholars and sometimes within families seeking to preserve the memory of their ancestors. There was also some impetus from the ruling elite, with the Caliph Muʿāwiyyah, for example, being reported to have ordered the collection of these various *akhbār*. Of particular importance during this time are the works of the two historians, who are accredited with giving structure to the *Sīra*, ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 94/712) and his student Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741). However, these particular works no longer exist. Nevertheless, we have good reason to believe that such works, and others like them, did indeed exist since they are referred to in later works. Moreover, large quotes from these early authorities are quoted in later works in a way that gives the impression that they are verbatim from these earlier works. It is after this, we have the era of historians whose works are primarily extant, such as the aforementioned Ibn Isḥāq.
(d. 761), Abū Mikhnaf (d. 774) and Sayf bin ‘Umar (d. 769). Later on, we have the figures of al-Wāqidī (d. 823), al-Madāʾinī (d. 830), and Ibn Saʿd (d. 845). Finally, we have more sustained longer works with figures such as al-Dīnawarī (d. 891), al-Balādhurī (d. 892), al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 900), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923).

What is striking about the retelling of history in these early works is their level of detail. They are immensely full and rich in detail. In fact, Hugh Kennedy notes that we have more details about the formative period of Islam, than of any subsequent period before the appearance of documentary sources in the late Mamluk period and the Ottoman empire. These early works contain eyewitness reports, detailed explanations of treaties, the exact occurrences of military conquests, dates for crucial events and the ages of individuals. How accurately these early historians preserved what happened from the years they purport to report is highly contested. Albrecht Noth called into question the accuracy of the early historiographical tradition. Instead of reading such works as accurate portrayals of history, he argued they should be read as literary pieces and as a model of writing about the past. One of his main contentions is how various discrete events from different contexts are all cast in the same way. An example of this are descriptions of the early conquest narratives and sieges. Conquest accounts in some of the most far-off places, such as Damascus, Alexandria, Tustar, and Cordoba, are described with details that have an uncanny sense of unity. The exact same details emerge in each of these accounts, such as a traitor from the opposing faction who points out a weak spot in the enemy’s defences; a celebration in the city which diverts the opposing army’s attention; the Muslim army assaulting and scaling the walls to cries of “Allāhu Akbar”; the insider opening the gate, after which the Muslim army is able to enter the city. Such details are consistently present in each of the different conquest narratives. Such details Noth argues should be seen as literary topoi or schema – stock themes that have been put together to form narratives as opposed to factual details. Such formulae shape the way chroniclers wrote about the past as opposed to these details being a realistic portrayal of the past.

Similarly, Tayeb el-Hibri adopts a critical literary approach to these early sources to demonstrate how these ‘Abbasid historical narratives were not intended to relay facts but provide commentary on certain political, social and religious issues, which were in turn derived from real events. Such includes identifying themes in Greek tragedy and placing them in these early historical accounts. Of particular importance is the case of symbolism and the use of specific motifs in the narrative to provide a deeper, more literary shade of meaning. He shows how details in the historical narratives are not historical facts but rather literary devices. For example, he demonstrates this in the way historians wrote about the Rashidūn Caliphs. They did so in a way that was replete with symbolic parallels with the Prophet Muḥammad and other previous prophets.
The result of such scepticism has led to the dismissal in some quarters of the historical tradition in its entirety. Crone and Cook argued this case the most forcefully. They argued that the early historical tradition was constructed to give validity to the emerging Islamic polity. In other words, these historical accounts are based on an imagined idea of the past. Therefore, for the purpose of extracting information about the past, these sources are useless. It is this extreme scepticism that this article seeks to address. We concur through our analysis of Khadijah’s age that an uncritical surface-level reading of the Sīra can lead to conclusions that are implausible. The dominant position that Khadijah married the Prophet at the age of 40, becomes increasingly untenable when we read the Sīra in its entirety and are aware of early literary practices. However, we argue at the same time, that to dismiss the whole tradition and to view it as useless for extracting historical material is also unwarranted. Rather we argue that by dealing with the entirety of the Sīra and making sure to include and consider the various reports, we are able to arrive at positions that inspire greater confidence in their historical veracity.

Origins of the “40”-Year Position

The contours of Khadijah’s life are relatively uniform in the early historical tradition. She is described as an esteemed, wealthy businesswoman who would hire men to conduct trade on her behalf to distant lands. In one particular expedition, she hires the Prophet Muhammad and sends him to Boṣra in al-Shām. She also sends one of her servant boys Maysara to accompany him. During the expedition, the Sīra works recount certain miraculous events that occurred that convinced Khadijah to offer herself in marriage to the Prophet. At one point in the expedition, the Prophet seeks shelter underneath a tree. A nearby monk by the name of Baḥīra informs Maysara that only a Prophet would shelter under that particular tree. In another instance, while the Prophet and Maysara are riding their camels amid the midday sun, Maysara observes two angels sheltering the Prophet with their wings. These events convince Khadijah to marry the Prophet. Khadijah’s marriage to the Prophet in many ways occupies a lofty status. She is described as his greatest source of comfort, and it is Khadijah who comforts the Prophet at the very onset of prophecy. Khadijah is also the only wife of the Prophet that bears him children that survive to adulthood. So great is the impact of Khadijah’s life on the Prophet that the year of her passing (alongside his uncle Abū Ṭālib) is described as the “year of sorrow”, and in the years after her passing the Prophet would fondly remember her.

What concerns us specifically is the portrayal of Khadijah’s age when she married the Prophet. What strikes the reader when reading any contemporary biographical is the pervasive nature of Khadijah’s age. She is consistently referred to
as being 40 years of age while the Prophet was 25. This is not surprising since this is a commonly stated age in the early historical works. In fact, one of the earliest historians, al-Balādhūrī (d. 279/892) in his Ansāb al-Ashrāf, which records the genealogical history of the Arabs, states there to be a consensus on this issue, “the Messenger of Allah married Khadija when he was 25 years old and she was 40 years old. This is established with the scholars”.

It is not surprising that various scholars have invoked a consensus on this issue due to the ubiquitous nature of “40” being ascribed to Khadījah. However, the earliest extant biography of the Prophet’s life, the Sīra of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767), of which its most famous recension is that of Ibn Hishām, curiously does not state the age of Khadijāt at the time of her marriage. Rather Ibn Ishāq merely depicts the familiar story of the events surrounding the Prophet’s marriage with Khadījah. He does, however, state that the Prophet was 25 at the time. For the earliest explicit and most copious portrayals of Khadijāt’s age, we must look at the Ṭabaqāt of Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845). His compendium of the biographies of the most important early Muslim figures also details many aspects of Khadijāt’s life. Due to Ibn Sa’d work, we have the establishment of 40 as Khadijāt’s age. There is a total of four narratives in his Ṭabaqāt, which explicitly narrate Khadijāt to have been 40. Three of these narratives are found in his final volume, which is specifically dedicated to female figures (fī al-nisā), and one is also found in the first volume, which details the Prophet’s life in general. The four narratives are:

1. Muḥammad bin ‘Umar [al-Wāqidī] said: We, and the people of knowledge among us say, that Khadijāt was born before the event of the elephant by 15 years. The day she married the Messenger of God she was 40 years old (‘arba‘īn sana).

2. Muḥammad bin ‘Umar [al-Wāqidī] informed us from Muḥammad bin ‘Abdullah from al-Zuhrī from Kathīr bin Zayd that al-Muṭṭalib bin ‘Abd Allāh bin Ḥanṭab said: The first woman to marry the Prophet before the prophethood was Khadījah bint Khwaylid bin ‘Asad bin ‘Abd al-‘Uzza bin Quṣā … he was on that day 25 years old (khamsin wa ‘ishrīn) and Khadījah was 40 years old (arba‘īn sana).

3. Muḥammad bin ‘Umar bin Wāqidī al-‘Aslamā reported, that Mūsā bin Shayba reported from ‘Umayra bint ‘Ubaydullah bin Ka‘b bin Mālik from ‘Umm Sa’d bint Sa’d bin al-Rabī’ that Naṣīfa bint Munīa said … The Messenger of God married Khadijāt when he was 25 years old (khamsa wa ‘ishrīn sana), and Khadijāt was on that day 40 years old (yawma ‘idhin bint ‘arba‘īn sana). She was born before the event of the elephant by 15 years.

4. Muhammad bin ‘Umar [al-Wāqidī] reported that al-Mundhir bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥizāmī reported from Mūsā bin ‘Uqba from ‘Abī Ḥabība the free slave of
al-Zubayr who said: I heard Ḥakīm bin Ḥizām say: the Messenger of God married Khadījah when she was 40 years old (’arba’īn sana) and the Messenger of God was 25 years old. Khadījah was two years older than me and was born 15 years before the event of the elephant. I was born before the event of the elephant by 13 years.¹⁸

There are a few critical points that we can extract from these four narrations. The first and most important is that every single narration that explicitly underscores the age of Khadījah as being 40 when she married the Prophet is narrated by Ibn Sa’d through Muḥammad bin ‘Umar, more commonly known as al-Wāqīdī. This is not surprising since Ibn Sa’d was popularly known as the scribe of al-Wāqīdī.¹⁹ These narrations also provide other numerical evidences that can also be used to deduce the age of Khadījah with the Prophet. The first is that her age is calculated in relation to Abraha’s expedition to Mecca. This is found in narrations one, two, and three. All of them state that when the event of the elephant took place, Khadījah was 15 years old.

The second is with the narrator of the second narration, Ḥakīm bin Ḥizām, who states that Khadījah was two years older than him. In light of this fact, we can also cite another similar narration found in Ibn Sa’d’s al-Ṭabaqāt, also narrated by Ḥakīm bin Ḥizām, which states the age of Khadījah in relation to the Prophet: “Muḥammad bin ‘Umar reported that Mughīra bin ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Asdā from his family said, we asked Ḥakīm bin Ḥizām, who was older, the Messenger of God or Khadījah. He said that Khadījah was older than the messenger by 15 years”.²⁰ Therefore, it can be seen how the age of Khadījah is explicitly placed at 40 and implicitly by situating her age in relation to Abraha’s conquest of Mecca and the age of one of the narrators. However, what is interesting to note is the fact that none of the other early historiographical works explicitly state Khadījah’s age to be 40. If we look at the most direct contemporary of Ibn Sa’d, al-Ya’qūbī (d. 284/898), we do not see any mention of Khadījah’s age. He merely states the age of the Prophet as being 25 when he married Khadījah.²¹ To find the next explicit reference to Khadījah’s age after Ibn Sa’d, we have to turn to the historian and exegete Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). However, even here in his mammoth work of history, there is a sole solitary narration which states: “The Messenger of God married Khadījah when he was 25 years old. At the time, Khadījah was 40 years of age”.²²

Before examining the nature of the number “40”, what is significant is that all of the narrations of “40” stem from al-Wāqīdī. This is significant since even among the traditionalists, al-Wāqīdī as a transmitter was seen as unreliable. Modern historians of early Islam have also drawn attention to the spuriousness of materials found with al-Wāqīdī.²³ Furthermore, the mathematical juggling of Ḥakīm bin
Ḥizām also brings its own set of problems. When speaking about his own life, we have, for example, corresponding narrations of when he passed away. Al-Ṭabarī reports his date of death to be 54 years (673/4) after the migration. This would place Ḥakīm bin Ḥizām at the age of 120, a remarkable feature considering that the oldest recorded male to have lived was 116.

Symbolism in the Number “40”

Even though “40” is the most dominant number in the early Arabic historical tradition, we would argue against seeing this number as authentically conveying a historical fact, such that this was Khadijah’s age when she married the Prophet. Rather, we should see this number as conveying a symbolism to bolster the suitability and esteem of Khadijah. First, there is the issue of the actual recording of dates in key moments in a person’s life, such as births and marriages. Lawrence Conrad underscores how the ages of individuals before the advent of Islam were ambiguous, as birth dates were only known in a generic sense:

birth dates in particular were almost never fixed with any accuracy, largely because so little attention was paid to them. One’s date of birth was an insignificant and difficult to determine item of information and was so lacking in social relevance that most individuals had only a vague idea of when they had been born.

This was even the case after the establishment of the Hijrī calendar, where the date of birth of even the most prominent individuals was unknown. In this climate, there is a great likelihood that the exact age of Khadijah during her marriage to the Prophet was not accurately recorded and then transmitted.

In such an environment, it is not unlikely that the number “40” was adopted and then dispersed and gained traction among historians. The reason for this is precisely because it is the number “40”. The narrations report her to be exactly 40, not 39 or 41. The fact that it is the number “40” merits caution since this is a number that was understood to represent symbolic meaning and found consistently in various contemporaneous literature. Previous scholars, and most notably Conrad, have previously alluded to this. It was a number in general usage, much like the contemporary usage of a hundred or a thousand. For example, a modern speaker’s usage of a thousand books does literally denote a thousand books, but rather a multitude. This is the same way early historians used the use of the number “40”.

It is clear from the literature of this milieu that the number “4” and its derivatives, such as “40”, “400”, and “4,000”, were used for symbolic purposes and do not necessarily reflect mathematical reality. This can be found in the narratives
associated with pre-Islamic Arabia. There is a common tendency to disregard chronology in these narratives. However, what is common is for these narratives to describe the time between two events. Here the number “40” is commonly used, such as in the construction that 40 years existed between this time and this time. Conrad underscores how it would be more accurate to interpret the usage of 40 years not as a specific measurement of time between the two events but rather as a “long time”.

We can see the symbolism in the number “4” and its derivatives in Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam’s Futūḥ al-Miṣr. When ‘Amr bin al-‘Āṣ is said to have conquered Alexandria, he wrote to the Caliph ‘Umar saying, “I have conquered a city in the description of which I will only say that in it I seized 4,000 villas, 4,000 baths, 40,000 Jews liable to pay the jizya, and 400 palaces”. The uniformity of the use of the number “4” and its derivatives in this narration underscores the symbolic nature of this number. In another example from al-Balādhūrī’s Ansāb al-Ashrāf, when the Caliph ‘Abd al-Mālik is requested to send a governor to Iṣbahān, through a spate of letters, he exclaims, “What is this Iṣbahān? Does it grow gold and silver? Forty letters have been written to me about it!” Here again, we can see from the context of the number “40” that it does not literally represent the number of letters being sent to the Caliph, but rather the Caliph’s exasperation of the sheer number of letters being sent. It can be seen from these two contexts how “40” does not literally convey numerical information but rather imports symbolic meaning.

The symbolism of the number “4” and its derivatives is prominent in the most famous and famed Arabic text, the Qur’ān itself. There is no doubt that our early historians were intimately familiar with the Qur’ān. Ibn Isḥāq, for example, intersperses many of the accounts of the Prophet’s biography with verses from the Qur’ān. In one curious section of his Sīra, we even have the complete commentary of Şūrat al-Duha. Even more stark is Al-Ṭabarī, who, alongside his work on history, was equally famed for his equally proportioned exegesis of the Qur’ān, Jāmi’ al-Bayān. It would be reasonable to assume that a man of Ibn Sa’d’s stature and erudition would also have had an intimate understanding and familiarity with the Qur’ān. There are numerous places the number “4” and its derivatives exist in the Qur’ān. In one of the passages Prophet Abraham asks God for a sign. In response, God commands him to kill four birds, which are subsequently brought back to life. In another chapter, the disbelievers are commanded to disperse from the land after the breaking of a treaty of four months. Four witnesses are required for the acting of the hudūd punishment for fornication. Aspects of the creation narrative also use the number “4”.

More specifically, the number “40” is explicitly used in the Qur’ān, containing a special significance. There is a sense of completion in the use of “40” when Moses is commanded to stay in Mount Sinai: “We appointed thirty nights for Moses, then added ten more: the term set by his Lord was completed in forty
nights”. In this verse, the number “40” is a divinely stated duration, such that “40” is directly specified and calculated exactly by God. This symbolism of “40” continues when the children of Israel disobey God’s command and are made to wander the desert for “40” days.

The significance of the number “40” is even explicitly alluded to in certain hadith narrations. In the Musnad of Imām Aḥmad, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar predicts that the Anti-Christ will appear in the world and remain for “40”. When asked if this were “40” years, months or days, he replies by saying that he did not know. What is significant in this narration is the number itself as opposed to it providing any factual information. It is not surprising that the number “40” importing some special significance was taken on by religious scholars in general. We see this most clearly in the narration of hadith, where transmitters would seek to group different themes of hadith in groups of “40”. We can see this from the most well-known introductory hadith collection, the al-’Arba’ūn (the forty) of al-Nawawī. Although entitled “the forty”, it does not actually contain exactly 40 ḥadīth, but rather 42. However, the significance of the number was not lost on al-Nawawī, hence the use of the number in the title.

So far, it is clear how the number “40” is imbued with a sense of symbolism, most notably to demonstrate magnitude. Yet, how does this number’s symbolism relate to the ages of individuals? Was the age of 40 understood as representing something deeper? We would be inclined to argue so, that 40 was understood as the age that represented the peak of one’s maturity and strength. Take, for example, Q. 46:15:

We have commanded people to honour their parents. Their mothers bore them in hardship and delivered them in hardship. Their period of bearing and weaning is thirty months. In time, when the child reaches their prime at the age of 40 (ḥattā idha balagha ashuddahu wa balagha ‘arba ‘īna sana), they pray, “My Lord! Inspire me to always be thankful for Your favours which You blessed me and my parents with, and to do good deeds that please You. And instil righteousness in my offspring. I truly repent to You, and I truly submit to Your Will”. This passage details the lifecycle of human beings and the duties to one’s parents. What is significant is that the verses underscore “40” as an age at which one reaches the peak of one’s maturity and strength. Here, human beings are no longer in a state of dependency like in their childhood, as contrasted with the earlier part of the verse, but rather physically and mentally prepared to return the obligation of care back to one’s parents. At this age, the Qur’ān states that one has reached their prime (ḥattā idha balagha ashuddahu). Having reached one’s prime, one is now able to fully show gratitude for the favours of God and one’s parents and
engage in good deeds. By looking at another verse, it is possible to see the Qur’ān as viewing human beings as moving into a state of decline, deteriorating from strength to weakness: “it is God who creates you weak, then gives you strength, then weakness after strength…”

Therefore, it is not surprising that “40”, representing the peak of one’s life, was adopted and emphasised by exegetes in their explanation of this verse. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Kathīr, for example, both state that “40” is the age in which one has fully acquired intellectual and spiritual maturity, and one is fully able to focus on the worship and obedience to God. Al-Rāzī further adds that it is for this reason that prophethood is given to all the prophets at this age.

There are further examples of this notion of “40” being the peak of one’s age in relation to the timeframe of the Prophet’s life prior to the migration. For instance, al-Jāḥîẓ mentions in his *Rasā’il* that no one was allowed to enter Dār al-Nadwa (the place when the Quraysh would gather to make important decisions), unless they had reached the age of 40. Al-Madā’īnī reports that the turbans that tribal leaders wore during the time of the Prophet were restricted to mature adults, and this was restricted to those who were over the age of 40. These kinds of reports about the Prophet’s time may have been reported later, much like the early Arabic historical works under discussion, and hence historically inaccurate. Yet, crucially, they indicate the ideas circulating around this time concerning the symbolism of the number “40” and what it represents.

This notion of “40” is a consistent motif in other forms of Arabic literature. In the *Tārīkh* of al-Dimashqī, we again have this concept emphasising how the age of 40 is the ideal age for maturity and intellect. In one narration, Abū ‘Amr al-Shaybānī reports about himself that on the day of al-Qādisīya, “I reached the end of my youth, being 40 years of age”. One of the great early commentators of the Qur’ān, Qatāda (d. 118/736), states that 40 is the age when the wicked mischief of youth ceases. In another place, al-Ṭabarī sees 40 as the age when man loses the last of his childhood ignorance. Equally telling is al-Maqdisī’s geographical work, where he feels the need to assure the reader in the introduction that he did not write his work until he had travelled across every land and served men of science and religion and crucially until he had reached the age of 40. In the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the Ummayad poet ‘Umar ibn Abī Rabī’a (d. 93/712) is said to have wasted his life in debauchery, and it was only at the age of 40 that he changed his ways. Looking at these various examples, it is clear that the number “40” was understood symbolically as a motif of one’s age that represents maturity and the peak of one’s adulthood. Hence, the use of the age of 40 in relation to describing Khāḍījah’s age behoves us to look deeper to ascertain its veracity. The fact that we know that “40” was used and understood symbolically opens the possibility for this to be the case with Khāḍījah also.
Depiction of Khādījah

It would be hasty to dismiss the age of 40 for Khādījah purely on the basis that this number was commonly used symbolically. Khādījah could indeed have been 40. The existence of the number’s symbolism does not negate this possibility. However, we would argue there are three good reasons to suppose otherwise, and when we consider these three reasons in unison, a different age would seem to be more likely. The first reason is related to the additional accompanying information provided in the accounts of Khādījah’s marriage to the Prophet. For the symbolism of the number “40” to apply, denoting the peak of one’s strength and maturity, we would expect these sources to emphasise such traits in their works. Looking at the sections that describe the marriage of Khādījah with the Prophet, we can certainly see this to be the case.

When we examine the depiction of Khādījah in the narratives, it is possible to see these early historians underscoring the suitability of Khādījah in marrying the Prophet. The image that is given of Khādījah was that she was no ordinary woman, and hence the appropriateness of her marriage to a Prophet. We can see this seeping through the auxiliary descriptions that accompany the descriptions of Khādījah during the proposal and her eventual marriage to the Prophet. The descriptions do not merely describe her wealth and status as a businesswoman, but the image that is painted is that she was the most mature and wisest woman of her time. Her designation of being 40 years of age potentially further subliminally solidifies this message. We see this in virtually all the early works of Sīra, from Ibn Ishāq to Ibn Sa’d to al-Ṭabarī.

Starting with Ibn Ishāq, he narrates that when Khādījah hired the Prophet to work on her behalf, she was a “wealthy and esteemed woman (dhū māl wa sharaf)”. He then goes on to say that Khādījah was from “the best lineages of the Quraysh, and the greatest in respect and the richest, and every man would strive to marry her if they had the ability to do so”. This depiction underscores the superiority of Khādījah over other women. In a society that prized one’s ancestors, she is naturally from the very best lineages. Furthermore, not only is she a wealthy woman, but her character is also superior. She is a woman who is held in high esteem (sharaf). This esteem is again emphasised such that she was the most desired woman, who any man would seek out in marriage if they could.

These traits and the superiority of Khādījah are again emphasised, but with greater potency in the narrative of Ibn Sa’d, where we see the first occurrence of her age being 40. Ibn Sa’d states that Khādījah was

a woman of resolve (hāzima), strength (jaldata), honour (sharīfa) ... she was the loftiest among the Quraysh in lineage, the greatest of them in honour, and the
greatest of them in wealth and every man from her people strove to marry her, if they were able to. They would ask for her [hand] and exert their wealth for her.49

This motif of every man that was able to seek out her hand in marriage if they were able to, is carried on by Ibn Sa’d. He also repeats similar claims to Ibn Ishâq that she was from the best lineages and the most honoured. However, Ibn Sa’d states more of her traits, showing her to be a superior woman with regard to her character. He describes her with qualities that underscore maturity and would be ascribed to a person at their intellectual and physical peak. She is mentally strong by being a woman of resolve (ḥāzima). At the same time, she is also physically strong by being a woman of strength (jaldata).

If we then move on to al-Ṭabarî, we again have this same message being reinforced:

Khadijah was then the most distinguished of the women of Quraysh in lineage, the most highly honoured, and the wealthiest, and all the men of her tribe would have been eager to accept this proposal had it been made to them.50

It can therefore be seen how there is a common thread that is ubiquitous in all of these early sources that detail the marriage of the Prophet with Khadījah. She is the most superior woman from among her people, such that she is highly desired by other men and the most honoured. Her superiority is not only material and from the heritage of her lineage, but from traits that she herself has, associated with maturity and dignity. These accompanying descriptions link firmly with what is symbolised by a person being 40 years of age in that cultural milieu. Associating the age of 40 with Khadījah would potentially further implicitly emphasise these traits and thereby underscore the suitability of her marriage with the Prophet.

Khadijah’s Children

There is another factor to consider when dealing with 40 as the age of Khadijah’s marriage to the Prophet. This has to do with the number of children she is said to have borne with him. First, we should note that the sources do not state that she only had children with the Prophet. Certain narrations give the impression that she bore children prior to her marriage to the Prophet from previous marriages. She is depicted as having a daughter with her first husband, ‘Atīq bin ‘Abid al-Makhhzūmī, called Hind. After ‘Atīq, she is said to have married ‘Abū Hāla bin al-Nabbāsh, where she gave birth to a son.51

Our early historical sources recount Khadijah and the Prophet to have had, at the very least, six children. Certain sources extend this to seven. What is
unanimously uncontested is their four daughters: Ruqayyah, Zaynab, Umm Kulthūm, and Fāṭimah. The area of contention occurs with the number of sons they are said to have had. Regardless of the exact number, what is unchallenged is that all of their sons died in their infancy, an allusion to which is found in Q. 108, the very shortest chapter of the Qur’ān.52 What is challenged is the exact number. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, seems to be of the opinion that the couple had three sons, Qāsim, al-Ṭāhir and al-Tayyib. Qāsim also being the son, through which the Prophet received his kunya, Abū al-Qāsim.53 However, divergent opinions hold that al-Ṭāhir and al-Tayyib may not be the actual names of two different sons but rather the nicknames of a single son, by the name of ‘Abdullāh. The more common opinion found in the sources is this latter view. Ibn Sa’d provides various narrations that gravitate towards this latter stance, and provides a detailed account of the serial of the children’s birth:

Hishām bin Muḥammad bin al-Sā‘īb al-Kalbī informed us from his father from Abī Şāleḥ from Ibn ‘Abbās who said: The first to be born to the Messenger of God was before prophethood was Al-Qāsim, as he was called. Then Zaynab was born, then Ruqqayya, then Fāṭima, then Umm Kulthūm, then during the period of Islam [after the prophethood], ‘Abd Allāh was born, who was also called al-Tayyib and al-Ṭāhir. And the mother of all of them was Khadījah bint Khuwaylid.54

Regardless of if the exact number of children was six or seven, what is undisputed is that the sources maintain Khadījah to have given birth to such an extraordinary number of children at an older age. This would not be so extraordinary if Khadījah were younger, but for her to begin giving birth after the age of 40 makes this more unexpected. In one narration, Ibn Sa’d maintains that the children were born one after another. This would mean that at the very least, Khadījah would have had to be 48 for the birth of her final child. This is, of course, not impossible, but highly unlikely. First of all, it is by no means unanimous that the children were born one after another. In fact, certain later sources also date the birth of her youngest son to have been after the proclamation. Ibn al-Qayyim in his Sīra work acknowledges that there is a difference of opinion in the earlier sources with regard to when ‘Abdullāh was born, with some holding him to be born before the proclamation of Islam and others holding it to be after. However, it is the summation of Ibn al-Qayyim that ‘Abdullāh was in fact born after the proclamation by a year. This would place the Prophet at 41 years of age and Khadījah at 56.55 This, therefore, raises the possibility that there were gaps between the births of each child. This would mean that Khadījah gave birth to children at an even greater age. If we adopt the position of al-Ṭabarī that they had seven children, we would need to push this age higher. Furthermore, all these contentions do not take into consideration issues
surrounding contraception, which was known at the time and can be traced back all the way to the time of the Prophet Muḥammad.\footnote{56}

A point that links to the issue of Khadījah’s children has to do with not what is articulated in the early historical works, but also what is unarticulated. There is no mention of anything extraordinary in the births of such a large number of children at a relatively old age. This point was alluded to by Montgomery Watt. Concerning the number of children she bore, he writes,

\begin{quote}
this is by no means impossible, but one would have thought it sufficiently unusual to merit comment; it is even the sort of thing that might well have been treated as miraculous. Yet no single word of comment occurs in the pages of Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa’d, or at-Tabari.\footnote{57}
\end{quote}

Leading on from this, the association of the miraculous with giving birth to children at an older age was a commonly used motif in the Islamic cultural milieu. The Qur’ān itself recounts the birth of Yayha after a prayer from his father Zakariyya, who implores God for a child despite old age, \textit{“my bones have weakened and my hair in ashen grey”}.\footnote{58}

The way the sources date Khadījah’s death can also be used to inform our understanding of the likelihood of a later date for her marriage in light of the number of children she bore. Naturally, adopting a later age for marriage would push this age further forward, while adopting a younger age would push this more backward. Going back to Ibn Sa’d, we find him recording an opinion from Muḥammad bin ‘Umar al-Wāqidī that \textit{“she passed away on the tenth of the month of Ramadan in the tenth year of the prophethood three years before the migration and she was 65”}.\footnote{59} This narration, although starting with al-Wāqidī, is found in two different pathways. The first is from Muḥammad Ibn ‘Umar from Ma’mar bin Rāshid from al-Zuhrī from ‘Urwa from ‘Ā’isha.\footnote{60} The second is Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar from al-Mundhir bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥizāmī from Mūsā bin ‘Uqb from Abī Ḥabība the free slave of al-Zubayr from Ḥakīm bin Hizām.\footnote{61} A similar sentiment is also given, in another narration without al-Wāqidī: \textit{“Muḥammad Ibn Sāleḥ and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz both said: Khadījah passed away on the tenth of Ramadān, and this was before the migration by three years. She was on that day, 65 years old”}.\footnote{62} Adopting this age would give Khadījah approximately 15 years to give birth to six (or seven) children. However, the age of her death is disputed. Al-Bayhaqī, for example, after listing the number of children that Khadījah gave birth to, and the deaths of her two sons, states how certain narrations speak of Khadījah dying at the age of 65. However, he then goes on to contradict this age by subsequently stating, \textit{“and it is said that she was 50 and this is more correct”}.\footnote{63} This earlier age for her death is also quoted in Ibn Kathīr, who adopts this same
opinion by quoting al-Bayhaqī of 50 being the more correct age. It can be seen therefore how there is a definite current that holds Khadījah to have passed away at a younger age. This would further restrict the number of years of giving birth to her children to merely ten years.

**Variant Narrations**

The two factors mentioned so far, although compelling, do not on their own justify dismissing this age. Number “40” may well have been used as a symbolic number, but Khadījah could have very well have been 40 as well. Having a significant number of children at a later age, although unlikely, is still possible. However, when we consider these two factors with a third, that variant opinions exist even in the very earlier sources, a different age becomes significantly more compelling.

There are various other ages that are also postulated by medieval historians. Al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), for example, underscores there to be three opinions for her ages 45, 40, and 28. In a later work, Muḥammad al-Zurqānī (d. 1710) records the ages as possibly being 45, 30, and 28. Interestingly enough, in one of the most popular medieval works, that of Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), he does not even mention “40” at all. Rather, he adopts the stance that Khadījah was considerably younger. The two possibilities, which he quotes as coming from al-Bayhaqī from al-Ḥākim, is that she was either 35 or 25. Of these variant ages, the one that is most prominent in the very early works is 28. On the other hand, it is difficult to trace the ages of 30, 35, and 45 to any of the earliest historical works prior to these medieval historians.

So where does this age of 28 stem from? We can see one of the earliest traces of this number in no other than in Ibn Saʿd’s Ṭabaqāt, the earliest source for the 40-year opinion. We have already quoted earlier four narrations that state this age. However, alongside this, Ibn Saʿd also quotes one other variant opinion: “Hishām bin Muḥammad ibn al-Sāʿīb reported (akhbarnā) from his father from Abī Ṣāleh from Ibn ʿAbbās, who said: The day Khadījah married the Messenger of God she was 28 (thamānin wa ‘ishrīn sana). Her dowry was twelve camels, as was the dowry of women”. Such a report blatantly contradicts the four other reports. Based on pure frequency, one may gravitate to the 40-year opinion. However, there is one crucial difference. All four narrations for the age-40 opinion stem from al-Wāqidī, and as we mentioned previously, this brings with it its own set of issues due to the nature of al-Wāqidī as a narrator. On the other hand, the age-28 opinion is the only narration that does not come from al-Wāqidī, rather it comes from Hishām bin Muḥammad.

However, it is possible to suppose that the 28-year opinion predates Ibn Saʿd and argue that the 28-year opinion is in fact found in the very earliest work of
Sīra, that of Ibn Isḥāq. However, how can this be the case if we have already stated that the extant work of Ibn Isḥāq we possess is silent on this issue? This is because later sources seem to ascribe the 28-year position to Ibn Isḥāq. For example, Al-Ḥākim’s in his Mustadrak narrates:

Abū Bakr Ḩāmid bin Ṭālib informed me, through Ṣa’d bin Ṭālib, that Ṭabāqāt bin Ṭālib, from the authority of Al-Wāqidī, a figure whose authenticity has been widely dubbed as spurious. The fact that it is precisely the number “40” also merits suspicion. This number is used in the literature of this milieu to symbolise the multitude or the prime of one’s age. When looking at the auxiliary depictions
of Khadijah, this same motif is also portrayed. Furthermore, this greater age of 40 makes other biographical information about Khadijah unlikely. She is said to have borne at least six children. When we consider such factors: a greater number of children, no reference to the miraculous and an earlier date of death, an older age becomes increasingly unlikely.

These two factors by themselves do not force us to dismiss the “40” position. However, what further strengthens this is the existence of variant narrations, the most likely being 28. Such a narration is also found in Ibn Sa’d’s work, although crucially without the transmission of al-Wāqidī. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that the narration actually predates Ibn Sa’d and is found in the very earliest historical work, the Sīra of Ibn Isḥāq. Although the recension of Ibn Hishām does not mention any age at all, later sources ascribe the “28” positions to Ibn Isḥāq. It is possible that Ibn Isḥāq did indeed hold this position, which was later redacted by Ibn Hishām, as he himself acknowledges of doing in other parts. By considering all these points in unison, Khadijah marrying the Prophet at 40 becomes a difficult position to adopt. Adopting “28” bypasses the concerns of the symbolic usage of “40” as well as the unlikelihood of bearing a large number of children at an older age.

Through all of this, we have sought to underscore how we should view the Sīra literature for its historical value. We argue that a cautious balanced position to the Sīra should be adopted. This is a stance that does not uncritically accept all its specifics, but at the same time does not view the Sīra as worthless in reconstructing historical information. Rather, by casting our net widely and being judicious in examining the various narrations and accounts on a single topic, we are able to extract details that are more plausible, hence underscoring the value of the Sīra as a source for reconstructing early Islamic history. Furthermore, we also underscore how one should approach the use of numbers in the Arabic literary tradition. Instead of automatically assuming that a specific number represents a literal numerical value, it should be recognised that the number could in fact be being used as a form of literary symbolism and hence interpreted as such.

Notes

1 Reports more specifically relating to the Prophet’s sayings, actions and approvals were more specifically referred to as hadīth.
3 A topography of the earliest historians can be found in Chase F. Robinson, Islamic Historiography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiv–xv. Such compilers and their works are often divided into certain schools, such as the “Medinan School” and the “Iraqi School”, of which preponderance is often given to transmitters from the former, see Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study, trans. Michael David Bonner (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1994), 4.
Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, 299.


Noth and Conrad, 19. It should be noted how there should be a degree of caution towards ascribing everything as literary *topoi*. For example, Syriac sources seem to depict the shouting of “Allāhu Akbar” as a distinctive battle cry of the early Muslim armies, thereby bolstering the view that such did occur in various contexts, see Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 12.

A *topoi* may have been an historical event at one point, but is then transferred to different contexts to become a literary device. When it shifts from one context to another and appears in a recurring manner it becomes a *topoi*. A schema on the other hand has to do with form, in connecting and organising content in a certain way. It is a paradigm of writing history, Noth and Conrad, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*, 109–110.

Noth and Conrad, 19. Certain works have carried this tradition further, see for example, Lawrence I. Conrad, “The Conquest of Arwad: A Source-Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East”, in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material*, ed. Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1992), 317–401. More recent works have adapted Noth’s conclusions on *topoi*. Nicola Clarke, for example, argues that even though there is formulaic similarity in events, this cannot necessarily be extrapolated to every period, such as the Iberian Peninsula. She argues how chronicles may have followed a common formula, but by examining areas that they emphasised, as well as what they did not we can extrapolate what these writers held as important in these narratives, Nicola Clarke, *The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).


Ibn Saʿd, 10:205.


Although al-Waqīdī was himself a chronicler and his work Kitāb al-Maghāzī is extant, we do not find any mention of reference to the events of the Prophet’s marriage with Khadījah and subsequently her age since the work only deals with the events of the Prophet’s life after the migration, see Muhammad ibn ʿUmar al-Waqīdī, *Kitāb Al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).


Jiroemon Kimura from Japan was born on 19 April 1897 and died on 12 June 2013 aged 116 years 54 days, see Guinness World Records, *Guinness World Records 2019*, 2018, 88.


Q. 7:142. See also Q. 2:51.

Q. 5:26. The notion of “40” as a symbolic device is not unique to the Qur’ān. It also exists in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rain in the flood of Noah occurs “forty days and forty nights”. (Genesis 7:12). Moses spends forty days and forty nights without substance, while writing down the ten commandments (Exodus 34:28) and The Children of Israel are made to wonder for forty years (Ezekiel 29:13).
37 Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, vol. 2 (Cairo, 1894), 166.
38 Q. 46:15. Translation from Mustafa Khattāb.
39 Q. 30:54.
40 Al-Rāzī does however, state Jesus to be an exception to this since he was the only prophet to be given prophethood as a baby. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Maḥfūth Al-Ghayb, vol. 28 (Beirut: Der Ilyā’ turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), 18–19; Abul Fidā’ Ismail Ibn Kathīr, Taṣfir Ibn Kathīr (Abridged), vol. 9 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003), 60.
41 al-Jāḥiẓ, Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ, vol. 1 (Cairo: Maktabah al-Khānijī, 1964), 300. I am indebted to Lawrence Conrad for many of the upcoming references.
44 Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Ja’rīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ Al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān, vol. 24 (Cairo, 1912), 12.
45 Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Ja’rīr al-Ṭabarī, Jāmiʿ Al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān, vol. 4 (Cairo, 1912), 51.
51 “We have truly given abundance (kawthar) to you [Prophet], so pray to your Lord and make your sacrifice to Him alone. It is the one who hates you who has been cut off (abtar)”. The chapter states how the Prophet had been granted a river by the name of kawthar as a response to the ridicule that the Prophet faced in losing his sons at a young age. In particular, sources maintain it is a reference to the death of his youngest son, ‘Abdullāh. The chapter, however, turns this around and proclaims that it is rather his enemies who will be “cut off (abtar)”. The use of the word abtar referring to the usage of this word by the Arabs to describe someone who has only daughters and no sons.
52 He bases this on some of the earliest ḥadīths on this issue, which underscore that the Prophet knew about the practice of birth control through coitus interruptus and did not forbid it as well as in other narrations actually permit the practice, see Basem Musallam, Sex and Society in Islam: Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15–16.
58 Q. 19:4. Furthermore, 40 can perhaps be seen as even older than the contemporary notions of giving birth since it was common for women at the time to marry at a significantly younger age. Another of the Prophet’s wife, ‘Aisha for example, is said to have married him at the age of 6, with consummation occurring at 9, see Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī no. 5133, Nabia Abbot, *Aishah The Beloved of Mohammed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1942).
60 This second one specifies further specifies that this was in the month of Ramadan and was the tenth year of the prophethood, Ibn Sa’d, 10:19.
67 We know this since the latter historian, al-Mas‘ūdī makes it clear that Ibn Ḩishāq’s work attempted to write on the “expeditions of the Prophet as well as the stories of the beginning of creation”. Prior Ibn Ḩishāq, al-Mas‘ūdī states that such anecdotes were scattered and unorganised, see Abū Hasan al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murij Al-Dhahab Wa-Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar*, vol. 5 (l’Universite Libanasise, 1965), 211. For a discussion on the debates around the history of Ibn Ḩishāq’s composition and its different recensions, see Sean Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith: The Making of the Prophet of Islam* (California: University of California Press, 2020), 158–171.

References


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