

HUMOUR OF THE PROPHET (ﷺ): IN SEARCH OF A LOST BOOK¹

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Had Mohammed (ﷺ), the Holy Prophet of Islam, ever cracked a joke? This question occurred to me in the 1990s, when collecting authentic Prophetic traditions² on women's political leadership. The Pakistani Judge, Justice A. Hussain (b. 1949)³, when writing about a certain *hadīth* about women's alleged "deficiencies" excluding them from political roles, noted "in fact one view voiced by some eminent scholars is that the *hadīth* in question may be a humor like the joke that the Prophet (ﷺ) said that old women shall not enter Paradise and when the old ladies felt perturbed the Prophet (ﷺ) explained that those who enter Paradise will become young."⁴ Justice Hussain meant, of course, that as jokes are generally based on *logical contradictions*⁵, according to the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence (*usūl al-fiqh*)⁶ no valid legal conclusion can be drawn from them, even if they come from an authentic collection of *aḥadīth*⁷. When in 1964 elections were held in Pakistan under Ayub Khan's Constitution of 1962, Field Marshal Ayub Khan (63.31%), the *Mādar-i-Millat* (Mother of the Nation) Ms. Fatima Jinnah (Jinnah's sister, 36.35%), Mr. K.M. Kamal (23%) and Mr. M.B. Ahmad (8%) were the candidates. Ayub Khan succeeded in obtaining a *fatwā* against the possible leadership of a woman from the 'ulama, except from Maulana Mawdūdī (1903-1979), who was brave enough to issue a *fatwā* giving priority to the best public interest (*istiḥsān*) over a weak *hadīth*, possibly based on a joke⁸. Are there any jokes in the Prophetic tradition? When 'Ā'ishah (R.A.), the Prophet's (ﷺ) wife, was asked if the Prophet (ﷺ) used to tell jokes, she always answered "yes", then narrated some witty remarks like that about the old ladies and the Paradise.⁹ He "also used to smile"

narrated ‘Ā’ishah (R.A.), but “she never saw the Prophet laughing”.¹⁰ The Prophet’s healthy, happy “smile” is described in a wonderful *ḥadīth*:

A man came to the Prophet (ﷺ) and said, ‘I have been ruined for I have had sexual relation with my wife in Ramadan’. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘Manumit a slave’. The man said, ‘I cannot afford that’. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘Then fast for two successive months’. The man said, ‘I cannot do that’. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘Then feed sixty poor persons’. The man said, ‘I have nothing’. Then a big basket full of dates was brought to the Prophet (ﷺ). The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘Go and give this away in charity’. The man said, ‘By Allah, there is no family in Medina who is poorer than us’. The Prophet (ﷺ) then smiled till his premolar teeth became visible, ‘then feed your family with it’.¹¹

The classical Arabic collections of anecdotes and other remarkable stories¹² contain many jokes attributed to the Prophet (ﷺ). Al-Zubayr ibn Bakkār, a scholar at al-Medina (d. 256AH/870 A.D.) wrote a whole monograph on the subject entitled *Mizāḥ al-nabīy* (Humour of the Prophet). Apparently, there is no extant manuscript of Zubayr’s book, all we know about it is that it had been used by al-Qaṣṭellānīy’s in his commentary to Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ*¹³. When I have found the references to Zubayr book in Sezgin and Rosenthal (see footnote 13), I decided to get a copy of al-Qaṣṭellānīy’s *Commentary*, look up the places where he quotes Zubayr, and try to reconstruct Zubayr’s original joke-book. (This was G.I. Newby’s method of reconstructing a chapter from the earliest biography of Mohammed (ﷺ) by Ibn Ishāq, which had been left out from standard epitomized editions of Ibn Hishām. For the reconstruction, Newby collected those portions from Ṭabarī’s *Qur’ān Commentary*, and from his *History*, which were narrated on the authority of Ibn Ishāq by his students¹⁴).

Apparently both Sezgin and Rosenthal got their information about Zubayr’s book from an odd footnote in the Hungarian orientalist I. Goldziher’s book, *Der Islam*. Here Goldziher also mentions Zubayr, refers to the same place (IX, 500, 8) in al-Qaṣṭellānīy’s, but does not specify the edition. As Goldziher had certainly been acquainted with the *Bulāq* edition of this work in 10 volumes (with al-Navavī’s *Commentary on Saḥīḥ Muslim* printed on the margins¹⁵), I tracked down the same edition in the *Oriental Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences*’

Library, Budapest. Needless to say, p. 500 of vol. 9 did *not* contain any reference to Zubayr's work, actually I could not find a single reference to Zubayr in the whole 9th volume! Still, I had not given up. I started to go through the whole corpus of authentic *aḥādīth*, and whenever I found anything sounding like a joke, I looked it up in the standard commentaries¹⁶ to see if there is any reference to Zubayr. What I did not know at that time, and then learned the hard way, had been how difficult it is to "spot" a joke. A few examples will suffice to make my point. Some *aḥādīth* which might look as figurative or even humorous at the first glance, are in reality seriously meant. For example, in book 10 (The Book of *Adhān*¹⁷) of the *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī* there are two similarly worded traditions (nos. 691 and 717) about the correct behaviour during prayer:

"The Prophet (ﷺ) said. "Isn't the one who raises his head before the Imām afraid that Allah may transform his head into that of a donkey or his face into that of a donkey?"; or "The Prophet (ﷺ) said. 'Straighten your rows or Allah will alter your faces [to that of an animal]' ". For the Believer, remembering from the Qur'ān (V:65) how a group of the Children of Israel "were transformed into apes and swines" these are not jokes, but serious warnings.

In the most frequently quoted *ḥadīth* against women's political leadership Mohammed (ﷺ), having just heard that a princess had been raised to the Persian throne, remarked, 'No people who place a woman over their affairs will [ever] prosper'.¹⁸ While this is certainly not a joke, an infrequently quoted, lesser known narration by Abu Bakarah relates the story in a humorous form, as follows¹⁹:

"I witnessed that a herald came to the Prophet with good news of victory [when he was sitting] and his head in 'Ā'ishah's lap. He jumped [up], then fell [back] sitting, then rose [again] to ask the herald. And when the herald told that the Persians delegated their affairs to a woman, the Prophet (ﷺ) repeated thrice, 'The men perish if they obey the women'."

In this version the utterance "the men perish ..." might very well be just a playful hint (that is, a self-ironical *joke*), that even He, commander of the Army, obeys the whims of a beautiful young wife. Some of the Prophet's (ﷺ) jokes have found their way to international folklore, as the story where he tells a woman that her husband "has a

whiteness in his eyes". She fears that her husband is ill, but the Prophet (ﷺ) reassures her "Is there any man who has not got whiteness in his eyes?"²⁰

I found a *ḥadīth*, reported in several collections²¹, a variant of which has even turned up unexpectedly among American tales and urban legends²². I quote the *ḥadīth* from the "Book of *ḥudūd*"²³ in *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī*²⁴:

"A beduin came to Allah's Apostle (ﷺ) and said, 'my wife has delivered a black child.' The Prophet (ﷺ) said to him, 'Have you camels?' He replied, 'Yes'. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, 'What color are they?'. He replied, 'They are red.' The Prophet (ﷺ) further asked, 'Are any of them grey in colour?'. He replied, 'Yes.' The Prophet (ﷺ) asked him. 'Whence that greyness came?'. He said, 'I think it descended from the camel's ancestors.' Then the Prophet (ﷺ) said [to him]. 'therefore this child of yours has most probably inherited the colour from his ancestors."

There exist modern parallels of the story in international folklore²⁵.

Notes and References

1. Originally, parts of this essay were meant to be included in my paper G. Korvin, "Women's Leadership through the History of Islam", *Hamdard Islamicus*, 22 (3)1999: pp. 17-51; in an abridged and popular form it appeared in the *ISAA Review* (Canberra) 1(2) 2000: pp. 28-31. Thanks are due to the *Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc.* (Canberra) for their kind permission to republish it in a slightly changed form.
2. In Arabic *ḥadīth*, pl. *ahādīth*
3. Justice A. Hussain *Status of Women in Islam* Karachi, Law Publ. Co., 1987, p. 226.
4. See also F. Rosenthal *Humor in Early Islam*, Philadelphia, U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1956; pp. 5-6; Gazzali's *Ihya Ulum-id-Din* (Engl. Transl.), Bangla Desh, 1972, Book III. p. 123; A. Ali "Humor literature: An Arab- Islamic Legacy" *Hamdard Islamicus*, 21 (1)1998: pp. 47-59.
5. Schopenhauer in 1818 wrote that [in humour] "two or more real objects are thought through one concept, then it becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view" (quoted in J.A. Paulos *Mathematics and Humor*, Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1980: p. 3).

6. Excellent modern treatment: M.H. Kamali *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Cambridge, Islamic Text Soc., 1991.
7. The “authentic six”, in decreasing order of merit, all stem from the Abassid period: the *Sahīḥ* of Imam Bukhārī (d. 256 AH); *Sahīḥ* of Imam Muslim (d. 261 AH); *Sunnan* of Abu Dawūd (d. 275 AH); *Sunnan* of Tirmidhi (d. 279 A.H.); *Sunnan* of Nasā’i (d. 303AH); *Sunnan* of Ibn Mājah (d. 275 A.H.), these are arranged according to topics. Imam Ahmed Hanbal’s (d. 241 AH) widely used *Musnad* arranges the *ahādīth* with respect to their first narrator.
8. Details in Korvin *op. cit.*: p. 35.
9. R. Qazhaya *Al-fakāha wa al-dahak fī al-tarāth al-‘arabiy al-mashraqīy*. Beirut, 1998: pp. 126-128.
10. *Sahīḥ* of Bukhari (M.M. Khan’s Arabic-English version), Medina, Islamic Univ., vol. VIII. *Hadīth* no. 114 on p. 74.
11. *Ibid.*, *Hadīth* no. 110 on p. 72.
12. Al-Nuwayri’s *Nihāyat al-‘arab*; Ibn ‘Abdrabbih’s *Iqd al-farīd*; etc., see also the 10th-century book catalogue, Al-Nadīm’s *Fihrist* (ed. & transl. by B. Dodge, Columbia U. Press, New York, 1970) and Rosenthal *op.cit.* pp. 4-7).
13. See a single sentence in Sezgin’s *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden, Brill, Bd. 1, 1967: p. 318 (“benutzte al-Qastellānīy IX, 500, 8). The book is also mentioned in Rosenthal *op.cit.* p. 5 footnote 3, but not listed in the *Fihrist*, or in the other standard reference, Brockelman’s *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, Leiden, Brill, 1943.
14. G.D. Newby *The Making of the Last Prophet. A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Mohammed*. Columbia, U. of South Carolina Press, 1989.
15. I. Goldziher *Report on the books brought from the Orient for the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences*, Budapest, 1874, 42 pp. (in Hungarian).
16. Al-Qastellānīy’s *Irshād al-sārī*, or Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī’s monumental *Fath al-bārī* for Bukhārī, al-Nawawī’s Commentary for Muslim, etc.
17. *Adhān* is the call to any of the daily five compulsory prayers in Islam.
18. Contained in *Bukhārī*, *Tirmidhī*, *Nasā’ī*, and *Ibn Ḥanbal*; detailed discussion in Korvin *op. cit.* For a Muslim feminist interpretation see N. Abbott’s *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohammed*, New York, Amo Press, 1973 (repr. of the 1942 edn.); and Fatima Mernissi’s *Woman and Islam. A Historical and Theological Enquiry*. Oxford, UK; Basil Blackwell, 1991; pp. 49-81.
19. In the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, vol. V, hadīth no. 20479.
20. Quoted in Gazzali’s *Ihya ulum-id-din* (Engl. Transl.) , Bangla Desh, 1972, Book III, p. 123; Rosenthal *op.cit.* p. 6, fn. 1, identified the motif with a Persian folkstale.
21. See A.J. Wensinck’s *Concordance et indices de la tradition Musulmane*, Leiden, Brill, 2nd ed., 1992, entry WLD.
22. Carl Lindahl *American Folktales from the Collections of the Library of Congress*, New York, Routledge, 2004: pp. 521-524.
23. Plural of *hadd*, that is penalties described in the Qur’an for certain serious crimes.
24. Characteristically, the chapter where the *hadīth* is listed, is called “*māj’a fī al-ta’rīd*” that is “concerning the round-about way of explaining something” (say, with an example, or a joke).

25. Antti Aarne's *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, Helsinki, Academia Scientarum Fennica, 1961, contains no parallels; S. Thompson's *Motif-index of folk-literature : a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends*. Revised and enlarged edition. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1955-1958 does give "white woman bears black child": Motif T562.