

An Overview of Islamic Teachings on Infertility

Muhammad Qasim Butt*
Muhammad Sultan Shah**

Introduction:

Family is a socially constructed unit that forms the foundational stone of a society. The membership of a family entails certain roles on individuals and they share a sense of family identity and are united with emotional bonds. Marriage is a key element in family relationships. It establishes gender roles of a male and a female. One of the most important roles assigned to the married couple is procreation while they are also supposed to progress the family name and add to their progeny. At this point, infertility comes to play its drastic effect. A childless couple is considered unproductive by the family, friends and society at large. The social pressure on them becomes intense which changes the internal dynamics of their marital relationship so much so that it may end up in divorce or second marriage of the husband. Infertility, obviously, means inability to achieve pregnancy. Before commencing the Qur'anic vision and Prophetic guidance about the institution of marriage and their teachings regarding infertility, it is essential to see what infertility is by definition?

a) Infertility:

Infertility is defined clinically as a disease of reproductive system characterized by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.¹

An infertile couple would present before the practitioner with the complaint of either never been able to conceive or carry the pregnancy to full term to deliver a live baby. This condition is called "*primary infertility*". In other cases, they had previous conception and gave birth to a live baby but now had complaints of being unable to conceive or miscarried or gave birth to a stillborn baby. This condition is called "*secondary infertility*".²

The major causes of infertility include ovulatory dysfunction (20-40%), tubal and peritoneal pathology (30-40%), and male factors (30-40%); uterine pathology is relatively uncommon, and the pathology of rest is unexplained.³ This should also be kept in mind that 4 out of 10 patients of unexplained infertility may conceive within 3 years without any treatment, and the relative subfertility of one partner may be counterbalanced by the higher fertility of the other.⁴

b) Islamic Concept of Infertility:

Islamic literature expounds the concept of infertility in a specific

* Lecturer, Dept. Arabic & Islamic Studies, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan.

**Chairperson, Dept. of Arabic & Islamic Studies, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan.

way. It is not seen as curse, but only a malady inflicted on some people as a decree of Allāh Almighty. There are some instances of infertile couples mentioned in the Qur’ān and some instructions on infertility in the *aḥādīth*.

A) Qur’ānic Teachings on Infertility:

As a comprehensive religion Islam regulates spiritual as well as civic lives and family as well as social lives. For establishing sound footings of a family, marriage is considered commendable and is recommended for those who can afford the expenses. It unites two human beings with cords of love and compassion and provides them spiritual tranquility and peace, physical solace and repose, and emotional or psychological companionship. This purpose of marriage is stated in the following verse:

﴿وَمِن آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾

“And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people who reflect.” (*Al-Rūm* 30:21)

Besides a union between two souls, it also serves a procreative function within the confines of marriage contract. It legalizes the conjugal relationship of man and woman and provides them a legitimate way of having children and progressing their generation. Allāh Almighty highlights this purpose in the following verse:

﴿وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ﴾

“And Allāh has made for you wives of your own kind, and has made for you, from your wives, sons and grandsons, and has bestowed on you good provision.” (*Al-Nahl* 16:72)

Procreation has anthropological value as well. It allows preservation of human species, formation of different societies and their division in various communities. Through this process Allāh Almighty spread men and women as the following verse says:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً﴾

“O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person, and from him He created his wife, and from them both He created many men and women.” (*Al-Nisā’* 4:1)

Procreation is also the process by which specific social and cultural identities are preserved in human races. Cultural values and norms are transmitted from generation to generation to sustain the continuity of cultural

experiences. The following Qur'ānic verse hints to the formation of nations and tribes from progeny of a male and female:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا﴾

“O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.” (*Al-Hujurat* 49:13)

Children carry a prominent position in the lives of men and women in the society. Men obtain social recognition through them, their family is established, and their functional role as a male is proven. On the other hand, women are seen as a productive unit of the society through them, their status rises in the family and they achieve emotional satisfaction and marriage's security. Hence, this is not unusual that couples entertain a desire of childbearing and childlessness is not seen as a welcoming thing.

The Divine Book of Islam mentions two couples of Prophets who remained childless for major part of their lives. Both prophets, Ibrāhīm and Zakariyyā (peace be upon them) despite being old and living with barren wives never despaired and kept praying to Allāh Almighty to furnish their houses with gift of child.

i) Glad Tidings of a Son to Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him):

Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) and his wife Sārah (Allah be pleased with her) the daughter of Harān remained childless for a few years after their marriage. During these years, he kept on invoking God for a child, and finally was blessed with a son, not from Sārah, but from his maid Hājar (Allah be pleased with her). Abiding by the command of Allāh Almighty, he sent his wife Hājar and son Ismā'īl (peace be upon him) to Makkah, whereas Ibrāhīm and Sārah remained in Kan'ān wishing to have a child. He used to invoke God with the following words:

﴿رَبِّ بَب لِي مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ﴾

“My Lord! Grant me (offspring) from the righteous.” (*Al-Sāfat* 37:100)

When the time of hearing of supplication came, three honoured guests came to visit Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him). He cordially offered them a roasted calf as a gesture of hospitality, but they refrained from eating it. Their act frightened him as he had anticipated that some unfavourable thing had happened. The guests consoled him by saying that they were angels sent by Allāh to punish the people of Lūṭ (peace be upon him) who were ungrateful to God. Meanwhile, they had come to give him glad tidings of a son. His wife Sārah (Allah be pleased with her) overheard their dialogue. In amazement, she smiled and remarked:

﴿قَالَتْ يُوَيْتِيءَ الْإِدُّ وَأَنَا عَجُوزٌ وَبَدَأَ بَعْلِي شَيْخًا إِنَّ بَدَأَ لَشَيْءٍ عَجِيبٌ﴾

“She said, Woe unto me! Shall I bear a child while I am an old woman, and here is my husband, an old man? Verily! This is a strange thing!” (*Al-Hūd* 11:72)

She was ninety nine and Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) has completed hundred years of his life. Ibn Ishāq says she was ninety and Ibrāhīm was one hundred and twenty years old.⁵ She was surprised at the news. How could a sterile old woman give birth to a child? She had not heard anything like this happening before. She came forward smiting her forehead in astonishment:

﴿فَأَقْبَلَتِ امْرَأَتُهُ فِي صَرَءٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ﴾

“Then his wife came forward with a loud voice, she smote her face, and said: A barren old woman!” (*Al-Dhāriyāt* 51:29)

The angels replied this would happen with the Decree of Allāh Almighty. His Mercy and Blessing would change her status from an infertile to a fertile woman. After one year, the same happened and she gave birth to Ishāq (peace be upon him).⁶

This is a classic example of an infertile couple of the most pious people on earth. In their case, the husband had a child with his other wife Hājar (Allāh be pleased with her) so the couple’s infertility was not due to some male factor. The problem was in the female who was barren for so many years.

Sārah (Allāh be pleased with her) has been called ‘*aqīm* in the above verse. *Al-‘aqm*, *al-‘uqm* or *al-‘aqam* are said of a womb: it was or became barren or incapable of receiving offspring in consequence of a stricture therein. ‘*Aqumat*, ‘*uqimat* and ‘*aqimat* are said of a woman: she was or became barren. *A‘qamahā* means God made her womb to be barren or incapable of receiving offspring.⁷

This single distinct event is enough to prove that female infertility is no curse, it’s a temptation and a trial from Allāh. A pious lady and wife of a prophet had gone through this trial for a major part of her life and lived through this hardship. Though she had come to accept it as a Will of Allāh, but her husband remained optimist. He never gave hope, and at last, his supplications were heard. Call it a miracle, but it shows that infertile couples should never forgo their desire. They should seek treatment and keep on praying till they get Allāh’s Mercy.

ii) Glad Tidings of a Son to Zakariyyā (peace be upon him):

Maryam (Allāh be pleased with her) was given under the care of Zakariyyā (peace be upon him) whose wife was her maternal aunt. Mother of Maryam was Ḥannah bint Fāqūdh (Allāh be pleased with her), and Zakariyyā’s wife was her sister al-Ishbā‘ bint Fāqūdh (Allāh be pleased with her). Whenever he visited her, he used to find fruits of winter in summer and

fruits of summer in winter.⁸ Engrossed with love of a child, he supplicated his Lord asking for pious offspring in the following words:

﴿رَبِّ هَبْ لِي مِنْ لَدُنْكَ ذُرِّيَّةً طَيِّبَةً إِنَّكَ سَمِيعُ الدُّعَاءِ﴾

“O my Lord! Grant me from You, a good offspring. You are indeed the All-Hearer of invocation.” (*Al ‘Imrān* 3:38)

Side by side, he was worried about his relatives’ behavior and wanted to have a righteous heir who could carry his prophetic legacy. He asked for an heir in the following words:

﴿رَبِّ لَا تَذَرْنِي فَرْدًا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْوَارِثِينَ﴾

“O My Lord! Leave me not single (childless), though You are the Best of the inheritors.” (*Al-Anbiyā’* 21:89)

Once he was offering prayer in his private place of worship when an angel came to him announcing the glad tidings of a son named Yahyā (peace be upon him). Although he had belief in the truth of the news given to him, he was surprised how that would happen because he was very old and his wife was barren. He was ninety or one hundred and twenty years old. His wife was of ninety eight years.⁹ He described his old age by saying:

﴿قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي وَبَنُ الْعَظْمِ مِنِّي وَاسْتَعَلَ الرَّأْسُ شَيْبًا وَلَمْ أَكُنْ بِدُعَائِكَ رَبِّ شَقِيًّا﴾

“My Lord! Indeed my bones have grown feeble, and grey hair has spread on my head, And I have never been unblest in my invocation to You, O my Lord!” (*Maryam* 19:4)

He presented his case of childlessness before God and received the verdict in his favour. Nevertheless, he was amazed at the news and asked:

﴿قَالَ رَبِّ أَنَّى يَكُونُ لِي غُلَامٌ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ وَامْرَأَتِي عَاقِرٌ﴾

“He said: O my Lord! How can I have a son when I am very old, and my wife is barren?” (*Al ‘Imrān* 3:40)

He was told it was easy for Allāh who had created him when he was nothing. The Will of Allāh would prevail, his wife would be cured and bore him a son. While the dialogue was going on, the Satan whispered in his heart that the voice was not coming from God. Therefore, he asked for a sign. He was made silent without any malady and could only utter prayers with his tongue.

This is another example of a righteous couple who were childless. In this case too, the male was old and his wife was barren. The cause of infertility was in the female who was cured by God. His wife has been called ‘*āqir*’ in the above verses. ‘*Aqurat al-mar’ah*’ or ‘*aqarat*’ or ‘*aqirat*’ means she was or became barren, or did not conceive or cease to conceive. ‘*Aqarahā*’ means (God) made her cease to conceive. ‘*Aqara Allāhu raḥimahā*’ means

God rendered her womb barren; or God affected her womb with a disease so that she did not conceive. 'Aqara or 'aqira is also used for male meaning by he was barren and did not generate.¹⁰

Like Sārah, Zakariyyā (peace be upon him) also wanted to know how a child would be born provided the infertile status of the female and old age of the male. The method by which this would happen has been told in the following verse:

﴿فَاسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ وَوَيْتْنَا لَهُ يَحْيَىٰ وَاصْلَخْنَا لَهُ زَوْجَهُ﴾

“So We answered his call, and We bestowed upon him Yahya, and cured his wife (to bear a child) for him.”(Al-Anbiyā’ 21:90)

“We cured his wife for him”: This part of the above verse encourages infertile women to seek treatment even if they had been childless for a long time. Allāh Almighty can cause her malady be cured and give her child as happened with the wife of Zakariyyā (peace be upon him).

Adoption of a Child by Childless Parents:

Maryam (Allah be pleased with her) was adopted by Zakariyyā (peace be upon him) when he was childless, but later he had his own son. Āsīyah (Allah be pleased with her) the daughter of Muẓāḥim is an example of a woman who adopted Mūsā (peace be upon him), but she never bore her own child. Some say that she belonged to the lineage of the Egyptian king al-Rayyān b. Walīd, who had accepted faith in the time of Yūsuf (peace be upon him). Others say that she was an Israelite woman.¹¹ Earlier she was married to the Pharaoh Qābūs b. Muṣ‘ab. After his death, his brother al-Walīd b. Muṣ‘ab took control over the kingdom and married her.¹² The couple al-Walīd and Āsīyah remained childless for some years. The infertility was found in her while he had a daughter afflicted with some skin disease.¹³ The girl was brought to the River Nile for washing her. She picked up the casket of Mūsā (peace be upon him) and brought it to Āsīyah (Allāh be pleased with her). Deprived of her own child, she felt love and affection for the baby and prevented him from the wrath of Pharaoh by saying:

﴿وَقَالَتِ امْرَأَتِ فِرْعَوْنَ قُرْتُ عَيْنٍ لِي وَلَكَ لَا تَقْتُلُوهُ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَنْفَعَنَا أَوْ نَتَّخِذَهُ وَلَدًا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ﴾

“And the wife of Pharaoh said: "A comfort of the eye for me and for you. Kill him not, perhaps he may be of benefit to us, or we may adopt him as a son." And they perceive not (the result of that).” (Al-Qaṣaṣ 28:9)

Āsīyah (Allah be pleased with her) nurtured the child in her arms of protection and care. She accepted faith and was killed brutally by Pharaoh. Allāh Almighty praised her and set her example before other believers.

A woman of such rank in piety who is celebrated as one of the best women of past people was infertile. Unlike Sārah and al-Ishbā‘ (Allah be

pleased with them), her problem was not cured and she could not become mother of her own child. Instead of losing hope and going against the Will of God, she adopted a child, raised him like her own son, protected him from all mishaps, remained faithful to God in odd circumstances and finally gave her life in His way. Undoubtedly, she bears a marvellous example for all believers, particularly for childless women to stay hopeful even if fertility treatments fail. They can adopt a child and receive the reward of motherhood.

Another example of an adopted child is that of Yūsuf (peace be upon him). At the age of thirteen, he was sold by his brothers and was bought up by a man named Qiṭfir or Aṭfir, known as al-‘Azīz who was treasurer of the Amalekite king al-Rayyān b. Walīd. Al-‘Azīz was infertile due to his incapability to conjugate with his spouse named Rā‘īl or Zulaykhā.¹⁴ He wanted to adopt him as his son as the following verse mentions:

﴿وَقَالَ الَّذِي اشْتَرَاهُ مِنْ مِصْرَ لِامْرَأَتِهِ أَكْرِمِي مَثْوَاهُ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَنْفَعَنَا أَوْ نَتَّخِذَهُ وَلَدًا



“And he (the man) from Egypt who bought him, said to his wife: Make his stay comfortable, maybe he will profit us or we shall adopt him as a son.” (Yūsuf 12:21)

According to al-Rāzī, Yūsuf (peace be upon him) remained with them for seventeen years.¹⁵ In this case, the couple was infertile due to male factor confirming that the cause of infertility can be present in anyone of the couple, so both of them should come for medical assistance if such problem arises. The burden of infertility should not be laid solely on women unless proven. This also indicates that it is not always necessary to adopt a baby as happened in Mūsā’s case; a teen can also be adopted by childless parents as Yūsuf (peace be upon him) was adopted.

iii) Standard Verse on Infertility:

Birth of a child is the bestowal of an angelic gift from God. He is the fruit of mother’s womb and crown of father’s head. Allāh Almighty confers His special favour on whoever He decides and in whatever way He likes. He has already told how He distributes this favour among mankind as revealed in the following verse:

﴿اللَّهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَ الْأَرْضِ طَيِّخُلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ يُهَبُّ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنَاثًا وَ يَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَ إِنَاثًا وَ يَجْعَلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿﴾

“To Allāh belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates what He wills. He bestows female (offspring) upon whom He wills, and bestows male (offspring) upon whom He wills. Or He bestows both males and females, and He renders barren whom He wills. Verily, He is the All-Knower and is Able to do all things.”(Al-Shūrā 42:49-50)

The verse tells about four ways in which Allāh bestows offspring: Only daughters, or only sons, or both sons and daughters, or the male or female remains childless. This verse sets examples of prophets before us: Lūṭ and Shu‘ayb (peace be upon them) had only daughters; Ibrāhīm and Zakariyyā (peace be upon them) had only sons; Muḥammad (peace be upon him) had sons and daughters; Yaḥyā and ‘Isā (peace be upon them) did not have any child. Exegetes agree that the revelation is specific but its command is general. Hence, to be childless is also decreed for some men without considering it some torment or an act of banishment.

B) Prophetic Teachings on Infertility:

A basic instinct of human beings is their attraction toward the opposite gender. From indulgence to abstinence, a diversity of views and philosophies exist in context of physical relation between man and woman. The divinely guided prophets (peace be upon them) had always held a moderate way between two extremes of relations. They recommended a married life and prohibited intimate relations outside the wedlock. The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), a married man himself, also recommended marriage and encouraged his young followers to marry as it ensures safeguard of eyes and genitals. He is reported to have said:

يَا مَعْشَرَ الشَّبَابِ، مَنْ اسْتَطَاعَ الْبَاءَةَ فَلْيَتَزَوَّجْ، فَإِنَّهُ أَغْضُ لِلْبَصَرِ وَأَحْصَنُ لِلْفَرْجِ،
وَمَنْ لَمْ يَسْتَطِعْ فَعَلَيْهِ بِالصَّوْمِ فَإِنَّهُ لَهُ وَجَاءٌ¹⁶

"O young people! Whoever among you can marry, should marry, because it helps him lower his gaze and guard his modesty, and whoever is not able to marry, should fast, as fasting diminishes his sexual power."

i) Marriage with Fertile Women:

A married couple might have had plethoric reasons behind their marriage. The crowned reason, however, is the desire of becoming parents. A child functions as a unifying knot between the father and mother. Their personal conflicts become irrelevant once they start giving importance to the child and his well-being. Child's love gives meaning to the life of a man and a woman and fuels their energies to be directed to live a happy successful life. Therefore, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) used to advise marriage, he disallowed abstinence and considered those women best who are loving and fecund as follows:

عَنْ أَنَسِ بْنِ مَالِكٍ، قَالَ: كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْبَاءَةِ، وَيَنْهَى عَنِ التَّبَتُّلِ نَهْيًا شَدِيدًا، وَيَقُولُ: تَزَوَّجُوا الْوُدُودَ الْوُلُودَ؛ فَإِنِّي مُكَاتِرٌ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ بِكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ¹⁷

"Anas b. Malik reported: The Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessing of Allāh be upon him) used to enjoin marriage and prevent strongly from abstinence from marriage. He used to say: Marry most loving and productive women for I shall outnumber the prophets by you."

Fertile women are more loving than other women because the child becomes a living image of his father and the woman's love reflects from her child to his father. Honesty and decency, tolerance and patience, and co-operation and corroboration are some of the few magnificent attributes a woman is endowed with once she becomes a mother.

ii) Denouncement of Voluntary Childlessness:

Voluntary childlessness is the negative outcome of celibacy. This is considered an aberrant behavior in marriage and is associated with much emotional pain, distress, sadness and loneliness. As one of the main motives behind marriage is having a child, abstinence from marriage has been denounced by the Prophet (peace be upon him) because this would eventually encourage a childfree life. Once a Companion of the Prophet, 'Uthmān b. Maz'un (Allāh be pleased with him), asked his permission for abstinence from marriage but the request was declined. Other Companions were of the view that if he had allowed him, they would have got themselves castrated.¹⁸

iii) Marriage with Barren Women:

Similarly, so much importance is given to procreation that marriage with a barren women is not seen as a happy thing. Marriage of a fertile man with a woman whose infertility is already known means denial of parenthood by him. The motive to receive a child from the marriage is lost, therefore, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions (Allāh be pleased with them) used to prevent people from marrying barren women. Abū Dā'ūd narrates a *ḥadīth* as follows:

عَنْ مَعْقِلِ بْنِ يَسَارٍ، قَالَ: جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ، فَقَالَ: إِنِّي أَصَبْتُ
امْرَأَةً ذَاتَ حَسَبٍ وَجَمَالٍ، وَإِنَّهَا لَا تَلِدُ، أَفَأَتَزَوَّجُهَا، قَالَ: لَا تَمَّ أَتَاهُ الثَّانِيَةَ فَنَهَاهُ، ثُمَّ أَتَاهُ
الثَّلَاثَةَ، فَقَالَ: تَزَوَّجُوا الْوُدُودَ الْوُلُودَ فَإِنِّي مُكَاتِرٌ بِكُمْ الْأُمَمَ¹⁹

Narrated Ma'qil b. Yasār:

“A man came to the Prophet and said: I have found a woman of rank and beauty, but she does not give birth to children. Should I marry her? He said: No. He came to him again, but he prohibited him. He came to him third time, and he (the Prophet) said: Marry women who are loving and very prolific, for I shall outnumber the peoples by you.”

'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (Allāh be pleased with him) also liked to marry fertile women and used to avoid barren women. It is reported that the daughter of Ḥafṣ b. al-Mughīrah was divorced by 'Abd Allāh b. Abī Rabī'ah. Then, 'Umar (Allāh be pleased with him) married her, but he was told that she was barren and could not become mother. He divorced her without consummating.²⁰ Nevertheless, the *ḥadīth* does not mean that a barren woman should not be married. *Allāmah* Munāwī has accentuated that the command of marrying a fertile woman is *mustahab* (favoured) and not *wājib*

(compulsory).²¹ And marriage with a barren is at the most *makrūh tanzīhi* (slightly disliked), of course not *ḥarām* (forbidden).²²

Imam Sarakhsī gives arguments in his *al-Mabsūt* in favour of permissibility of marriage with a slave-woman. He refutes the opponent's version in following words:

وَلَا مَعْنَى لِاعْتِبَارِ تَعْرِيزِ الْوَالِدِ لِلرِّقِّ أَيْضًا فَإِنَّ نِكَاحَ الْعَقِيمِ وَالْعَجُوزِ يَجُوزُ، وَفِيهِ تَضْيِيعُ النَّسْلِ أَصْلًا، فَلَنْ يَجُوزَ نِكَاحُ الْأَمَةِ، وَإِنْ كَانَ فِيهِ تَضْيِيعُ صِفَةِ الْحُرِّيَّةِ لِلنَّسْلِ
أُولَى²³

“There is also no point in considering the child being subjected to slavery (due to marriage with a slave-woman) because as marriage with barren and old women is allowed though there is loss of offspring in it, so marriage with a slave-woman would better be allowed despite loss of quality of freedom of offspring.”

His words “marriage with barren and old women is allowed” clearly indicate that a fertile man can marry an infertile woman if he is willing to do it. For instance, if he has a fertile woman in his household and has received child from her, then he can marry another woman whose infertility is known so that she can also enjoy her nuptial rights.

Similarly, if a male is infertile he also has right to marriage but is supposed to inform the woman about his condition and give her the choice to accept his offer or reject it. It's unlawful for him to hide his status and catch a fertile woman in his trap. Imām ‘Abd al-Razzāq quotes an incident as follows:

عَنْ ابْنِ سِيرِينَ قَالَ: بَعَثَ عُمَرُ بْنُ الْخَطَّابِ رَجُلًا عَلَى السَّعَايَةِ فَأَتَاهُ، فَقَالَ: تَزَوَّجْتُ امْرَأَةً، فَقَالَ: أَخْبَرْتَهَا أَنَّكَ عَقِيمٌ لَا يُوَلِّدُ لَكَ قَالَ: لَا قَالَ: فَأَخْبَرَهَا، وَخَيْرَهَا²⁴

“Ibn Sīrīn narrated: ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb sent a man on an expedition. When he came back he told that he has married a woman. He asked: Have you informed her that you are infertile and cannot become father. He said: No. Umar commanded: Inform her and give her choice (to marry or not).”

C) Example of Prophet's House:

The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) married older women, widows and divorcees except ‘Ā’ishah (Allāh be pleased with her). Some of his wives had fertility issues but they all remained with him.

In the tenth year of Prophethood, during the month of Ramḍān, Muḥammad (peace be upon him) married a widow Sawdah after the death of Khadijah (Allāh be pleased with them).²⁵ She remained with the Prophet (peace be upon him) but never bore a child to him till his death.²⁶ Most biographers tell that she did not have a child from her former husband, Sakrān b. ‘Amr (Allāh be pleased with him), but Ibn Sa‘d says that she had a son ‘Abd Allāh from him.²⁷ Because she was too old, she deliberately gave her turn to ‘Ā’ishah (Allāh be pleased with her) and chose to remain among

his wives.²⁸ In addition to advanced age, she was also suffering from menorrhagia as Abū Dā‘ūd has narrated about her.²⁹

Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) married ‘Ā’ishah (Allāh be pleased with her) in the month of Shawwal in the tenth year of the Prophethood when she was six years of age. The marriage was consummated in Madīnah in month of Shawwal 2 A.H. at her age of nine.³⁰ She remained with him for nine years and bore no child to him. Ibn Sa‘d mentions that she was called Umm ‘Abd Allāh, but it was her nickname referring to her nephew ‘Abd Allāh b. Zubayr (Allāh be pleased with him).³¹

Daughter of ‘Umar, Ḥafṣah (Allāh be pleased with her) was also a childless woman. Her former husband Khunays b. Ḥudhāfah (Allāh be pleased with him) was martyred in the Battle of Badr and did not leave offspring.³² Her marriage with the Prophet (peace be upon him) happened in the month of Sha‘ban 3 A.H. at the age of twenty one.³³ She did not conceive any child to him despite spending eight years with the Prophet (peace be upon him) in a happy married life.

Generous to the heart, Umm al-Masākīn Zaynab bint Khuzayma (Allāh be pleased with her) was first married to Ṭufayl b. al-Ḥārith (Allāh be pleased with him) who divorced her; then she married ‘Ubaydah b. al-Ḥārith (Allāh be pleased with him) who was martyred in the Battle of Badr. She was destitute and alone when the Prophet (peace be upon him) consoled her by accepting her in his house in the month of Ramaḍān 3 A.H. She could have the pleasure of only eight months with him and died in his lifetime at the age of thirty.³⁴ Despite being previously married twice, she was also a childless woman.

Umm Salmah (Allāh be pleased with her) was previously the wife of Abū Salmah (Allāh be pleased with him). She had four children: Salmah, ‘Umar, Zaynab and Durrah. In 4 A.H. after her husband’s death, the Prophet (peace be upon him) married her.³⁵ Her seven years went in the Prophet’s house but no further child was born. About her reproductive health, a *ḥadīth* of ‘Ā’ishah alludes to: “One of the wives of the Prophet (peace be upon him) did *I’tikāf* along with him and she was getting bleeding in between her periods.”³⁶ Some scholars say that wife was Sawdah, but ‘Ikrimah said that she was Umm Salmah (Allāh be pleased with her).³⁷ So, she was also menorrhagic.

Zaynab bint Jahsh (Allāh be pleased with her) was first married by the Prophet to Zayd b. al-Ḥārithah (Allāh be pleased with him) who was known as Zayd, son of Muḥammad. That marriage could not work and eventually Allāh Almighty commanded her marriage with Allāh’s Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) in 5 A.H when she was thirty five. Nevertheless, she did not conceive in any marriage. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr says that all daughters of Jahsh were menorrhagic: Zaynab, Ḥamnah, and Umm

Ḥabībah. Imām Bulqīnī further explains that Zaynab bint Jaḥsh had menorrhagia for some time but her sister Umm Ḥabībah had it perpetually.³⁸ This might have contributed to her childlessness.

Daughter of the chief of Banū Muṣṭaliq, Juwayriyah (Allāh be pleased with her) was married to Musāfi‘ b. Ṣafwān who died in the battle of this tribe with Muslims. She was taken into captivity and fell in the share of Thābit b. Qays (Allāh be pleased with him). She approached the Prophet and asked for her manumission. He paid for her and married her.³⁹ The marriage took place in Sha‘bān 5 A.H.⁴⁰ She was twenty at that time and was childless despite being with the Prophet (peace be upon him) for six years.

Umm Ḥabībah, daughter of Abū Sufyan (Allāh be pleased with her) was first in the hand of ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Jaḥsh. She went in his company to Abyssinia where her husband apostatized to Christianity and died but she remained a loyal believer. The Prophet (peace be upon him) sent his proposal to Negus to marry her with him and same was done. The marriage was solemnized in 6 A.H. in Abyssinia and consummated in 7 A.H. in Madīnah.⁴¹ From her first husband, she had a girl named Ḥabībah with whom she was pregnant when migrated to Abyssinia and delivered the baby there.⁴² She spent four years with the Prophet (peace be upon him) but did not reproduce a child while he fathered a son, Ibrāhīm, from Mārīyah, the Copt in 8 A.H. who died when he was only 18 months old.⁴³

The Jewish woman in the Prophet’s household, the daughter of Banū Naḍīr and wife of the chief of Khaybar, Ṣafīyyah (Allāh’s pleasure be with her) was first married to Salām b. Miksham who divorced her. Then, she married Kinānah b. Rabī‘, the chief of Khaybar who was killed in the battle of Khaybar. She came as a captive and the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) first manumitted and then married her.⁴⁴ She was seventeen when she came in the Prophet’s house in 7 A.H.⁴⁵ She did not bear child to any one of her husbands and at one instance was called ‘*aqra* and *ḥalqā* by the Prophet (peace be upon him).⁴⁶ In common use, ‘*aqra* and *ḥalqa* are epithets used of women of ill luck.⁴⁷ However, Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī tells that this epithet can also be used for barren women, therefore, ‘*aqra* may refer to her fertility status as she was childless.⁴⁸

Last woman with whom the Prophet (peace be upon him) married, Maymūnah (Allāh be pleased with her) was previously married with Mas‘ūd b. ‘Amr in the Period of Ignorance who divorced her. Then, she came under Abū Ruhm b. ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā. After his death, this widow became Mother of the Believers at Sarf, 10 miles away from Makkah, in 7 AH.⁴⁹ She also did not conceive any child to him.⁵⁰

D) Example of the Companions of the Prophet:

There were other men and women around the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) who had never had a child. Their example can be a source of

solace and comfort for all infertile couples to accept that there is nothing to be disappointed of their fertility status. Let's consider a few examples below:

Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's statement quoted above told that daughters of Jaḥsh were menorrhagic. One of them, Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, the Mother of Believers (Allāh be pleased with her), was childless. Her sister, Umm Ḥabībah (Allāh be pleased with her), who was in the hand of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Awf (Allāh be pleased with him) also did not bear any child. She had uterine bleeding problem for seven years.⁵¹ Their third sister, Ḥammah (Allāh be pleased with her) also used to have severe bleeding but she had children.⁵²

Daughter of the Pious Prophet (peace be upon him), Umm Kulthūm (Allāh be pleased with her) was married with 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (Allāh be pleased with him) in 3 A.H after her sister's death. She remained with him till her death in 9 A.H. and during these six years did not bear any child to him while her other sisters had children.⁵³

Umāmah bint Abī al-Āṣ (Allāh be pleased with her), the daughter of Zaynab bint Muḥammad was beloved of the Prophet (peace be upon him). 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (Allāh be pleased with him) married her after the death of Fāṭimah (Allāh be pleased with her) and after his death she was married to al-Mughīrah b. Nawfil (Allāh be pleased with him). Ibn Sa'd tells that she bore to him whereas it is also said that she did not born any child of 'Alī or al-Mughīrah.⁵⁴

Al-Wāqidi s that Mu'ādh b. Jabal (Allāh be pleased with him) never had a child. However, others say that he had a son named 'Abd al-Raḥmān who had fought with him in the Battle of Yarmūk.⁵⁵ 'Ikrimah b. Abī Jahl (Allāh be pleased with him) did not leave offspring according to Ibn Sa'd.⁵⁶ 'Abd Allāh b. Rawāhah also did not leave offspring behind him.⁵⁷ Qutham b. al-'Abbās was cousin of the Prophet (peace be upon him). He also did not leave offspring.⁵⁸

Conclusion:

Infertility is the failure to achieve pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse. In Islamic exposition, the infertility is only a malady inflicted on some people as a decree of Allāh Almighty. The Divine Book mentions two couples of Prophets Ibrāhīm and Zakariyyā (peace be upon them) who remained childless for major part of their lives. Despite being old and living with barren wives they never despaired and kept praying to Allāh Almighty and were finally given the gift of child. The Book also describes adoption of child by childless parents. Maryam was adopted by Zakariyyā (Allah be pleased with them) when he was childless, but later he had his own son. Āsiyah (Allah be pleased with her) the daughter of Muzāḥim is an example of a woman who adopted Mūsā (peace be upon him), but she never bore her own child. Another example of an adopted child is that

of Yūsuf (peace be upon him) who was adopted by an infertile man known as al-‘Azīz who was treasurer of the Amalekite king al-Rayyān b. Walīd.

The instructions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) regarding the issue of fertility are also obvious. He used to advise marriage and considered those women best who are loving and fecund. In marriage with barren women, the motive to receive a child from the marriage is lost, therefore, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and his Companions (Allah be pleased with them) used to avoid marrying barren women. However, it is not forbidden to marry them. According to *Allāmah* Munāwī, the command of marrying a fertile woman is *mustaḥab* (favoured) and marriage with a barren is at the most *makrūh tanzīhi* (slightly disliked). While Imam Sarakhsī holds in his *al-Mabsūṭ* that marriage with barren and old woman is allowed. Similarly, if a male is infertile he can also marry but is supposed to inform the woman about his condition and give her the choice to decide.

Infertility was never considered an impediment by the Prophet (peace be upon him) in his marriages after Khadījah (Allah be pleased with her). He married older women, widows and divorcees except ‘Ā’ishah (Allāh be pleased with her). Some of his wives had fertility issues but they all remained with him. Among his wives, only Umm Salmah and Umm Ḥabībah (Allāh be pleased with them) previously had children. Nevertheless, all of them never bore any child to him, whereas he had a son with Mariyah the Copt (Allāh be pleased with her).

There were also present some Companions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) who had never had a child. For example, Umm Ḥabībah bint Jahsh, Umm Kulthūm bint Muḥammad, ‘Abd Allāh b. Rawāhah, Qutham b. al-‘Abbās, (Allah be pleased with them) were childless. Mu‘ādh b. Jabal (Allāh be pleased with him) had no child according to al-Wāqidī and ‘Ikrimah b. Abī Jahl (Allāh be pleased with him) also did not leave offspring according to Ibn Sa‘d. Their example can be a source of solace and comfort for all infertile couples.

References

- 1 Zegers-Hochschild, F., et al., “The International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technology (ICMART) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Revised Glossary on ART Terminology, 2009” *Human Reproduction* 24,no.11 (2009): 2686
- 2 Mascarenhas MN et al., “National, Regional, and Global Trends in Infertility Prevalence Since 1990: A Systematic Analysis of 277 Health Surveys”, *PLoS Med* 9, no. 12 (2012): e1001356. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001356
- 3 Fritz, Marc A. and Speroff, Leon, *Clinical Gynecologic Endocrinology and Infertility* (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2012), 1156
- 4 Konar, Hiralaal, *DC Dutta’s Textbook of Gynecology* (New Delhi: Jaypee Brothers, 2013), 227
- 5 Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl āya al-Qur’ān* (Bayrūt: Mū’sasah al-Risālah, 1420 A.H.), 15:398.
- 6 Al-Qurṭubī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, *Al-Jāmi’ li Ahkām al-Qur’ān* (Al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, 1384 A.H.), 17:47
- 7 Lane, Edward William, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Willams & Norgate, 1863), I: 2116
- 8 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān*, 6: 352-353
- 9 Al-Baghawī, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Mas’ūd, *Ma’ālam al-Tanzīl fī Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1420 A.H), 1:437
- 10 Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, I:2108
- 11 Ibn al-Athīr, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Abī al-Karm, *Al-Kāmil fī ‘l Tārīkh* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al- ‘Arabī, 1417 A.H.), 1:150
- 12 Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān*, 1:386
- 13 Al-Rāzī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1420 A.H.), 24:580
- 14 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa ‘l Mulūk* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Turāth, 1387 A.H.), 1:336
- 15 Al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 18:435
- 16 Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b.Ismā‘īl, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najah, 1422 A.H.), Ḥadīth:5066
- 17 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Al-Musnad* (Bayrūt: Mu‘sisah al-Risālah, 1421 A.H.), Ḥadīth:12613
- 18 Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth: 5073
- 19 Abū Dā’ūd, Sulaymān b. Ash’ath, *Al-Sunan* (Bayrūt: Al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣariyyah, N.D.), Ḥadīth:2050
- 20 Al-Ṣan‘ānī, Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. al-Hummām, *Al- Muṣannaf* (Bayrūt: Al-Maktab al- Islāmī, 1403 A.H.), Ḥadīth: 11132
- 21 Al-Munāwī, ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf b. Tāj al-‘Ārifīn, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr* (Egypt: Al-Maktabah al-Tujāriyyah al-Kubrā, 1356 A.H.), 3:530
- 22 Ibid. 6:397
- 23 Al-Sarakhsī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, *Al-Mabsūṭ* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah,1414/1993), 5:109
- 24 Ibid., Ḥadīth: 10347

-
- 25 Ibn Sa‘d, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1410 AH/1990 AD), 8:42
- 26 Ibn al-Athīr, Abū al-Ḥassan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad, *Usd al-Ghābah fi Ma‘rifah al-Ṣaḥābah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1415 A.H.) 7:157
- 27 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 4:154
- 28 Ibid., 8:43
- 29 Abū Dā‘ūd, Sulaymān b. Ash‘ath, *Al-Sunan* (Bayrūt: Al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣariyyah, N.D.), Ḥadīth:281
- 30 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:46
- 31 Ibid., 8:51
- 32 Ibid., 3:300
- 33 Ibid., 8:175
- 34 Ibid., 8:91-92
- 35 Ibid., 8:74
- 36 Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth: 309
- 37 Ibn Ḥajar, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī, al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1379 A.H.), 1:412
- 38 Ibid.,1:411
- 39 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:92
- 40 Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, Abū ‘Umar Yūsuf b. ‘Abd Allāh, *Al-Isti‘āb fi Ma‘rifah al-Aṣḥāb* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Jīl, 1412 A.H./1992 A.D.), 4:1805
- 41 Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-Ghābah*, 1:40
- 42 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:77
- 43 Ibid., 3:5
- 44 Ibid., 8: 95-96
- 45 Ibid., 8:175
- 46 Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth: 6157
- 47 Al-Fayrūzābādī, Majd al-Dīn *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Egypt: Al-Maṭba‘ah al-Miṣriyyah, 1353A.H.), 1:443
- 48 Al-‘Aynī, Badar al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad, *‘Umdah al-Qārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al- ‘Arabī, N.D.) 9:197
- 49 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8:104
- 50 Ibn Mandah, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ishāq, *Ma‘rifah Ṣaḥābah* (Abū Dhabi: UAE University Press),1:968
- 51 Al-Bukhārī, *Al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Ḥadīth: 327
- 52 Al-Tirmidhī, Abū ‘Īsā Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-Sunan* (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1395 A.H.), Ḥadīth: 128
- 53 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 8: 31
- 54 Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Al-Isti‘āb* 4: 1789
- 55 Ibid., 3:1403
- 56 Ibn Sa‘d, *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, 7: 283-284
- 57 Ibid., 3: 398
- 58 Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-Ghābah*, 4: 373