

God certainly knows all this, but in His infinite wisdom He bestowed from on high the revelation outlining the rules when the need for it was keenly felt. Thus, the rules were received with eagerness, and people immediately recognized the wisdom behind the legislation and the divine grace it ensured. Hence, the verses outlining the procedure conclude with the statement: *“Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...”* (Verse 10)

Let us pause a little here to reflect on the Islamic method of moulding the new Muslim community and how the Prophet re-educated his Companions by means of the Qur’ān. We should remember here that he was dealing with Arabs who were characteristically and strongly impulsive, particularly in cases of personal honour. They would rarely pause to consider options before rushing into action. Thus, when legislation was established outlining the punishment for accusing chaste women of adultery without providing the required proof, people found it difficult. Sa’d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anṣār*, went as far as asking: “Is that how it has been revealed, Messenger of God?” He puts forward his question, knowing for certain that the verses were revealed in that way. His question, however, reflected the difficulty he felt in complying with that ruling in a particular situation he imagined. Hence, he explained: “Messenger of God! I know it to be true and that it comes from God. I only wondered that if I found a man on top of my wife, I could not disturb him until I had brought four witnesses. By the time I brought them, he would have finished his business.”

Yet the situation that Sa’d found hard to imagine soon took place in reality. A man came forward, having found his wife with a stranger, seeing them with his own eyes, and hearing them with his own ears. Yet the Qur’ānic rules did not permit any measure to be taken against them. Therefore, he had to overcome his own feelings, traditions and the social environment that called for immediate action. Even harder than that, he had to restrain himself and wait for a ruling from God. Such restraint is especially difficult, but Islam re-moulded the Arabs to patiently bear such hardship so that there could be no rule other than God’s. Only His rulings apply in all life situations.

How could this happen? Simply, those people felt that God was with them, and that He took care of them, without requiring them to put up with things they could not bear. They realized that God would never abandon them in a situation that went beyond their abilities and would never deal unjustly with them. They felt that they lived under God’s care. Hence, they looked for His grace in the same way as children look to their parents’ care.

Hilāl ibn Umayyah had come home to find his wife with a man, seeing and hearing them both. As he was alone, he could only complain of this to the Prophet who, in turn, felt that he must apply the ruling concerning an accusation not

supported by four witnesses. Hence, he said to Hilāl: “You either bring the proof or lay your back for punishment.” Hilāl, however, believed that God would not let him suffer a punishment when he only stated the truth. He knew that what he said about his wife was right. At this moment, God revealed new verses outlining an exception in the case of husbands accusing their wives. The Prophet gave the good news to Hilāl, who confidently said: “I certainly hoped that God would grant me that.” He trusted to God’s mercy, justice and care. Furthermore, he trusted that God was looking after that community of believers. It was faith that re-moulded the Arabs and made them submit fully to God’s rulings, whatever they happened to be.

A False Accusation Against the Prophet’s Wife

Having outlined the rules applicable in cases of accusing women of adultery, the *sūrah* mentions a case of false accusation that reflects the repugnance of this crime. This involved the Prophet’s own household with its noble and chaste inhabitants. It reflected on the honour of the Prophet, the most beloved person by God, and the honour of his friend, Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s closest Companion. It also involved the honour of a man, Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, who enjoyed the Prophet’s own testimony that he never saw anything but good from him. It was a case that preoccupied the entire Muslim community in Madīnah for a whole month.

The Qur’ān refers to this whole episode, calling it The Falsehood, in a ten-verse passage that runs as follows:

Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you. Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you. Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin; and awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them. When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: ‘This is a blatant falsehood.’ Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they are certainly liars. Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in. You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God’s sight it is grave indeed. If only when you heard it you said: ‘It is not right for us to speak of this! All glory belongs to You. This is a monstrous slander’ God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers. And God makes plain to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know. Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful...! (Verses 11-20)

This false story caused the purest soul in human history much suffering, and made the Muslim community go through one of the hardest experiences in its long history. It left the hearts of the Prophet, his wife `Ā'ishah, Abū Bakr and his wife, as well as Ṣafwān, for a whole month subject to doubt, worry and endless pain. Here are the details of the story as told by the pure and chaste lady at the centre of this painful episode.

Every time the Prophet went abroad he made a toss among his wives to decide which of them should accompany him. At the time of the al-Muṣṭalaq expedition, the toss favoured me and I travelled with him. At the time, women did not eat much, which meant that they were slim and light. When my transport was prepared for me, I would sit in my howdah which would then be lifted onto the camel's back. When they had secured it, the camel driver would march with it.

When the Prophet had completed his business on that expedition and was on his way back, he encamped one night at a spot not very far from Madīnah. He stayed there only part of the night before the call to march was again made. People started to get ready and in the meantime I went out to relieve myself. I was wearing a necklace, and I did not feel it drop off me before I returned. Back in the camp I felt for my necklace and, realizing that it was gone, I looked for it there, but could not find it. People were just about to move. I therefore went quickly back to that particular spot and searched for my necklace until I found it.

In the meantime, the people who prepared my camel finished their task and took up the howdah, thinking that I was inside, and lifted it onto the camel's back and secured it. It did not occur to them that I was not inside. They, therefore, led the camel away. When I came back to where we had encamped, there was no one to be seen. The army had marched. I, therefore, tied my dress round my body and lay down. I realized that when I was missed, someone would come back for me. I soon fell asleep.

Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal of the tribe of Sulaym was travelling behind the army. He was apparently delayed by some business and did not spend that night in the camp. When he noticed someone lying down, he came towards me. He recognized me since he used to see me before we were ordered to wear veils. He said: *Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji`ūn*, "We all belong to God and to Him we shall return." I woke up when I heard him. I did not answer him when he asked me why I had been left behind. However, he made his camel sit down and asked me to ride it, which I did. He led the camel seeking to catch up with the army. Nobody missed me before they had stopped to rest. When

everybody had sat down to relax, Ṣafwān appeared, leading his camel, on which I was riding. This prompted those people to invent the story of falsehood. The whole army was troubled with it, but I heard nothing.

It is worth noting here that when `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy saw `Ā'ishah approaching, he enquired who she was. When he was told that it was `Ā'ishah, he said: "Your Prophet's wife has spent the whole night with a man, and now she turns up with him leading her camel!" This statement gave rise to the falsehood that was spread about `Ā'ishah. `Ā'ishah's narrative continues:

Shortly after our arrival in Madīnah, I felt very ill. Nobody told me anything about what was going on. The Prophet and my parents heard the story, but they did not mention anything to me. However, I felt that the Prophet was not as kind to me during this illness of mine as he used to be. When he came in, he would ask my mother who was nursing me: "How is that woman of yours?" He said nothing else. I was distressed and requested his permission to be nursed in my parents' home. He agreed. I went there and heard nothing. I was ill for 20-odd nights before I began to get better.

Unlike other people, we, the Arabs, did not have toilets in our homes. To us, they were disgusting. What we used to do was to go out at night, somewhere outside Madinah where we would relieve ourselves. Women went only at night. One night I went out with Umm Miṣṭah [Abū Bakr's cousin]. While we were walking, she was tripped by her own dress and fell down. As she did so, she said: "Confound Miṣṭah" to her own son.

I said: "Improper indeed is what you have said about a man of the Muhājirīn who fought at Badr." She asked me: "Have you not heard the story then?" When I asked her what story, she recounted to me what the people of falsehood said about me. I swear I could not relieve myself that night. I went back and cried bitterly until I felt that crying would break me down. I said to my mother: "May God forgive you. People said what they said about me, and you mentioned nothing to me."

My mother said: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives."

I said: "Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!" I cried bitterly throughout that night till morning, without a moment's sleep.

The Prophet called `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Usāmah ibn Zayd to consult them about divorcing me. Usāmah, who felt that I was innocent, said: "Messenger of God, she is your wife and you have experienced nothing bad from her.

This story is a blatant lie.”

‘Alī said: “Messenger of God, God imposed no restriction on you in matrimonial matters. There are many women besides her. If you would see fit to ask her maid, she would tell you the truth.” The Prophet called in my maid, Barīrah, and asked her whether she had seen anything suspicious. Barīrah said: “By Him who sent you with the message of truth, there is nothing I take against her other than, being so young, she would doze off and let the hens eat the dough I had prepared for baking.”

The Prophet addressed the Muslims in the mosque when I was still unaware of the whole matter. He said: “I have seen nothing evil from my wife. Those people are also involving a man from whom I have seen no evil. He never entered my wives’ rooms except in my presence.

Sa`d ibn Mu`adh, the Aws leader, said: “Messenger of God, if these men belong to the Aws, our tribe, we will spare you their trouble. If, on the other hand, they belong to our brethren the Khazraj, you have only to give us your command.”

Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the leader of the Khazraj, who enjoyed a good reputation, allowed his tribal feelings to get the better of him this time and said to Sa`d ibn Mu`adh: “By God, you shall not kill them. You are saying this only because you know that they are of the Khazraj.”

Usayd ibn Hūdāyir, a cousin of Sa`d ibn Mu`adh, said to Sa`d ibn `Ubādah: “You are no more than a hypocrite defending other hypocrites.” People who belonged to both tribes were very angry and were about to fight. The Prophet was still on the pulpit and he tried hard to cool them down, until finally he succeeded.

I continued to cry for the rest of the day. I could not sleep. Next morning both my parents were with me – I had spent two nights and a day crying hard. My tears never stopped. Both of them felt that my crying would break my heart. While we were in that condition, a woman from the Anṣār came to me and started to cry with me.

Shortly afterwards the Prophet came and sat down. He had not sat in my room ever since the rumour started. For a whole month he received no revelations concerning me. When he sat down, he praised and glorified God before going on to say: ‘Ā’ishah. People have been talking, as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God’s forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her.”

When the Prophet finished, my tears dried up completely and I turned to my father and said: "Answer the Prophet." He said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I then said to my mother: "Answer the Prophet." She said: "I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I was still a young girl, and I did not read much of the Qur'ān. However, I said: 'I know that you all have heard this story repeated again and again until you now believe it. If I tell you that I am innocent, and God knows that I am, you will not believe me. If, on the other hand, I admit something when God knows that I am innocent of it, you will believe me. I know no comparable situation to yours except that of Joseph's father [I tried to remember Jacob's name but I could not] when he said: "*Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.*" (12: 18) I then turned round and lay on my bed. I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence. Before the Prophet left us, however, and before anyone left the house, God's revelations started. The Prophet was covered with his own robe, and a pillow was placed under his head. When I saw that, I felt no worry or fear. I was certain of my innocence, and I knew that God, limitless as He is in His glory, would not be unjust to me. As for my parents - well, by Him who holds `Ā'ishah's soul in His hand, while they waited for the Prophet to come back to himself, they could have died for fear that divine revelations might confirm what people said. Then it was all over. The Prophet sat up, with his sweat looking like pearls on a wet day. As he wiped his forehead, he said: "`Ā'ishah, I have good news for you. God has declared your innocence." I said: "Praise be to God."

My mother said to me: 'Rise and go to God's Messenger, (peace be upon him).' I said: 'No. I am not rising, and I am not praising anyone other than God who has declared my innocence.' God revealed the passage starting with, *Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you,* in ten verses. When God thus declared my innocence, Abū Bakr, who used to support Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah, considering that he was a poor relation of his, said: 'By God, I will never again give Miṣṭah any assistance, after what he has said about `Ā'ishah.' But God then revealed the verse that says: '*Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for*

the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (Verse 22) Abū Bakr said: 'Yes, indeed. I do hope that God will forgive me my sins.' He then resumed his support of Miṣṭah, saying: 'I will never stop my assistance to him.'

ʿĀ'ishah further mentions that the Prophet had asked another of his wives, Zaynab hint Jaḥsh, about her. She said: 'Messenger of God! I want to protect my hearing and sight. By God, I have seen from her nothing but good.' She was the one among the Prophet's wives who used to vie with me for a favourite position with the Prophet. God has thus protected her through her keen sense of piety. Her sister, Ḥamnah, however, continued to speak, as though to enhance her position. She was thus involved with those who circulated the false story. [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

As the Prophet Faces False Accusations

This account tells us how the Prophet and his household, Abu Bakr and his family, as well as Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, and the entire Muslim community lived in such a suffocating atmosphere, suffering much mental pain because of the false rumours circulating.

It is hard to imagine this particularly difficult period in the Prophet's life when his beloved wife, ʿĀ'ishah, young and sensitive as she was, endured such profound anguish. ʿĀ'ishah, pure, kind, innocent and entertaining only clear thoughts and with a clear conscience, faced an accusation about her most valued qualities. She, Abu Bakr's daughter who enjoyed the most noble and moral upbringing, was accused with regard to her honour; the wife of Muhammad ibn ʿAbdullāh, who belonged to the noble clan of Hāshim, faced an accusation concerning her honesty; the wife enjoying the great love of her husband was charged with being unfaithful; the girl brought up according to Islamic values from a very early age was accused of being false to her faith. And ʿĀ'ishah was none other than the wife of God's Messenger, (peace be upon him)!

Such accusations were levelled at her when she was innocent, unaware, taking no precaution as she expected no harm. Hence, she had nothing to prove her innocence except hope for help from God Almighty. Her dearest wish was that the Prophet should have a dream revealing her innocence. But revelations slackened for a whole month, and this is for a definite purpose known to God alone. Hence, she continued to suffer.

Can we imagine her, much weakened by illness, when she received the shocking news from Miṣṭah's mother? She suffered a recurrence of her fever. In her grief, she

said to her mother: 'Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!' A different version of the story quotes her saying to her mother: 'Does my father know of this?' Her mother told her that he did, and she went on: 'And God's Messenger?' Again her mother confirmed this.

Great indeed was her pain when she heard the Prophet in whom she believed saying to her: "People have been talking as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God's forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her." Hearing these words, she realized that he was uncertain of her innocence, and that he could not make a judgement about the accusation levelled at her. God had not yet told him the fact of which she herself was certain but had no means of proving, i.e. that she was absolutely innocent. She was aware that although she enjoyed a favourite position in his great heart, she now stood uncertain.

Consider the position of Abū Bakr, a man endowed with great sensitivity and a noble heart, feeling the painful sting of an accusation levelled at his daughter, married to his most intimate friend who was none other than the Prophet in whom he unhesitatingly believed. Strong and pain-enduring as he was, he let out an expression of the writhing thoughts troubling him: "We were never accused of such a thing in the days of ignorance! Are we to accept such a charge under Islam?" His sick and much tormented daughter said to him: "Answer the Prophet!" Dejected and forlorn, he said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

His wife, Umm Rawmān, tried to put a strong face on in front of her daughter who was rending her heart apart with crying. She said to her: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives." But her fortitude collapsed when her daughter said to her: "Answer the Prophet." Like her husband before her, she said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

And then, Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, a good believer who laid down his life to fight for God's cause, was accused of being unfaithful to the Prophet. Thus, the accusation touched his honour, honesty and faith. A God-fearing Companion of the Prophet was falsely accused of being untrue to everything the Prophet's Companions held dear. Yet he was certain of his innocence. When faced with this false accusation, he said: "All praise be to God! By God I have never taken a dress off a female's shoulder." When he heard that Hassān ibn Thābit was one of those who repeated the accusation, he hit him on the head with his sword, almost killing him. He knew that it was forbidden for him to hit a fellow Muslim, but the pain of this false accusation was unbearable.

Far worse, it was Muhammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the man at the pinnacle of the Hāshimite clan, the noblest in Arabia, who found himself subject to an accusation that involved none other than `Ā'ishah, the woman who occupied a special place in his heart as his most beloved wife. This accusation meant that the most private place in his home, which was a source of purity, was not pure. The Prophet, who was very keen to guard every sanctity in his community, was faced with an accusation that violated the sanctity of his own household. God's Messenger, who was protected against all harm, was shown through this accusation to have no protection from God!

With this accusation levelled at `Ā'ishah (may God be pleased with her), the Prophet encountered everything that ran against his personal honour and against everything that was held dear to an Arab, and to a Prophet. Yet the accusation had been made, and was the subject of conversation in Madīnah for a whole month, and he had no means to put an end to it. For a definite purpose of His own, God let this falsehood circulate for a whole month, revealing nothing to set the record straight and put the facts as they were. Meanwhile, Muhammad, the man, suffered all that a human being experiences in such a hard situation. Shame and heart-felt pain were part of what he endured. But he also suffered the absence of the light that always illuminated his way, i.e. revelation. Doubt crept into his heart, despite the numerous indications that confirmed his wife's innocence. Yet he lacked clear certainty as the rumours continued to circulate in Madīnah. His loving heart was tormented by doubt which he could not clear because he was, after all, a human being who experienced all human feelings. He was a man who could not entertain the thought that his bed could be stained. Once the seed of doubt creeps into a man's heart, it is difficult to remove without clear and decisive evidence.

Alone, he found this whole burden too heavy. Therefore, he sent for Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young man who held a position close to his heart [as Usāmah was the son of the man the Prophet had adopted as his own son in pre-Islamic days]. He also sent for `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his trusted cousin. He consulted them both about this very private matter. `Alī, the Prophet's close relative, was keenly aware of the difficulty of the situation and the pain, worry and doubt experienced by the Prophet, his cousin who had brought him up. Hence, he told him that God had not restricted him in matters of marriage. He also advised that the Prophet should ask the maid, so that he could get some reassurance. Usāmah, on the other hand, realized how compassionate the Prophet felt towards his wife, and how troubling to him was the thought of leaving her. He, therefore, stressed what he knew of her certain purity and the fact that those who circulated the rumour were indeed liars.

In his eagerness to establish the truth, and in his continued anxiety, Muhammad, the man, derived some support from Usāmah's statement and the maid's report. He

spoke to the people in the mosque, reproaching those who did not respect his honour, spoke ill of his wife and accused a man who was known to be virtuous and with no blemish on his character. This led to friction between the Aws and the Khazraj, culminating in mutual accusations and verbal abuse. All took place in the Prophet's presence, which gives us a picture of the atmosphere that prevailed in the Muslim community during that very strange period. It was a time when the sanctity of the Muslim leadership was breached. The Prophet was further hurt by the absence of the light which he always expected to illuminate his way. Therefore, he went to `Ā'ishah, telling her of people's talk and asking her for a clear statement that could bring him relief.

At this point when the Prophet's pain was at its most acute, his Lord turned to him with compassion. Revelations were bestowed from on high, making `Ā'ishah's innocence absolutely clear. Thus, the noble household of the Prophet was free of blame. The hypocrites who had circulated this falsehood were exposed. The proper way of dealing with such a serious matter was also outlined for the Muslim community.

Referring to this passage of the Qur'ān that was revealed to deal with her case, `Ā'ishah said: "I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence."

But the question was not merely that of `Ā'ishah and her personal status. It touched on the Prophet, his personality and his role in the Muslim community. It indeed touched on his relation with his Lord and his message. The falsehood story was not aimed at `Ā'ishah as a person. Rather, it aimed to undermine the entire faith of Islam, by casting doubts about the Prophet sent by God to deliver this message. For this reason, a whole passage of the Qur'ān was revealed to provide a final verdict about this invented falsehood. Thus, the Qur'ān directed the Muslim camp in the raging battle, revealing the divine wisdom behind all developments.

How the False Story Was Circulated

"Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you." (Verse 11) It was not merely one or a few individuals that circulated the story. On the contrary, they were a 'band' or a group working for a particular objective. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was not the only one who fabricated the story. Rather, he was the one who took the lead and played the larger part in the affair. He simply represented the band of Jews or hypocrites who felt unable to fight Islam in open engagement. Therefore, they sought