Islamic tradition presents ‘A’isha bint Abi Bakr, one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad, as one of the most influential figures in early Islam. As Muhammad’s favored wife and the daughter of the prophet’s companion Abu Bakr, who would later become the first Caliph, ‘A’isha was at the center of the decisions and actions that formed the original Islamic community. As the original narrator of a vast number of hadiths, she was given the epithet “Mother of the Islamic Community” (Umm al-Umma). She was also given a feminized version of the epithet given to her father, as well as to the Qur’anic figure of Yusuf (Joseph)—“the truthful,” as-Sidqīqa. After the death of Muhammad, she played an important role in opposing the followers of Muhammad’s cousin ‘Ali in the struggle that set the stage for the split between Sunni and Shi‘ite Islam.

In the “Hadith of the Slander” (hadith al-ifk), ‘A’isha is the narrator and the main protagonist of the story of her near downfall and the near dissolution of the early Muslim community. The versions of the hadith from the canonical collection Sahih al-Bukhārī offer a complex, embedded narration. Featuring ‘A’isha as narrator and as protagonist, the hadith presents a complex speech act that engages issues of gender, sexuality, danger, and religious authority.

1 See Muhammad ibn Sa’d, at-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā (Beirut: Dār Sādir 1957-58), vol. 8:64-66. For the epithet in the Qur’an, as applied to Yusuf, see Q 12:46. While Ibrahim (19:41) and Idris (19:56) are called siddiqa, only Yusuf was given the epithet (marked by the definite article) as-siddiqa.

The reading below makes no assumption about the authenticity of the words attributed to 'A'isha as narrator or the words attributed to her, as protagonist, in quotes embedded in the narration. Of concern here is 'A'isha as she is constructed in a text that is part of the canon of sound hadith. In referring to "'A'isha" in the context of the Hadith of the Slander (hereafter referred to simply as "the Hadith"), we will be referring to 'A'isha in literary terms—'A'isha as presented by and in the text. It is the interior literary workings of that text, its use of the Qur'anic Sura of Yusuf as a subtext, and its theological implications that are at the center of inquiry.

In our analysis below, 'A'isha's statements as narrator of the Hadith are phrased in terms of "'A'isha relates" or "'A'isha narrates," while her statements as protagonist within the Hadith will be prefaced with verbs of saying, replying, stating, or declaring.

In the Hadith, 'A'isha relates how Muhammad's army, on returning from an expedition, accidentally deserted her at a rest spot. 'A'isha waits there until a soldier, lagging behind the rest of the expedition, discovers her and leads her on his camel to rejoin the rest of the group. When 'A'isha is seen returning with her rescuer, rumors spread that she has committed adultery. 'A'isha's response to the accusations, as presented in the Hadith, is a linguistic performance based, in large part, on allusion to the Qur'anic story of Joseph and the manipulation of the intertextual associations that such an allusion makes possible. These associations cluster around the concepts of kayd (a term that can be translated as deceiving, plotting, or stratagem) and sabr (patience).

---

3 This statement concerns 'A'isha of the Hadith and of Islamic tradition. Whatever bearing that tradition has on the "historical 'A'isha" is no more relevant for our analysis here of the importance of 'A'isha as character in her own (reported) narrations than the historical Jesus would be to those evaluating the significance of the acts and speech reported of the Jesus of the Gospels on the history of the Christian tradition. While recognizing the validity of those who seek the historical personage behind the texts, the "'A'isha" we treat here is the 'A'isha defined and self-defined through the hadith and biographical tradition.

4 Our primary sources for the affair of the lie are the Sahih (Soundly Verified) hadith collection of al-Bukhari (d. 870 CE). Al-Bukhari arranged the hadiths circulating orally at his time that he believed to be from reliable sources into chapters according to the content and theme of the hadiths. Two of the major accounts appear in the sixth volume, 60th book of Bukhari—Bukhari 6.60.(213).274, and 6.60.(218).281—in which the Qur'anic discussion of adultery and false charges of adultery in Sura 24 is the occasion of revelation under consideration. The other major account, very close to the accounts in volume six, occurs in volume five, book 59—Bukhari 5.59.(32).462—in a discussion of the virtues of great men and women. See Muhammad Muhsin Khan, ed., Sahih al-Bukhari The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari Volumes V and VI (Chicago: Kazi, 1978). Translations from Bukhari and the Qur'an used below are by Michael Sells. All subsequent references will be by volume, book, and hadith number.

'A'isha figures prominently in the hadiths and the sira as both a source in the chains of transmission and as the subject of the narratives. Determining the gendered perspective of