

Interfaith Marriage in Islam: The *Ahl Al-Kitab* Perspective

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Abstract

*Islam encourages human beings to establish and maintain a family life, the foundation of which is a lawful marriage. The purpose of a lawful marriage is to build a well-ordered Muslim society and ensure the continuation of human progeny, while fostering mutual love, compassion, and tranquility between spouses, particularly when they are compatible in their spiritual and material circumstances. However, when significant differences exist between husband and wife regarding worldview, values, fundamental beliefs, and standards of life, an important question arises: can such a marriage truly fulfill the objectives for which it was instituted? Such differences may negatively affect the upbringing, education, and character development of children in the future. For this reason, Islam not only emphasizes religious compatibility between spouses but also gives importance to *kafā'ah* (compatibility or suitability) within the same faith. Although Islamic law permits Muslim men to marry women from among the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), contemporary jurists have attached certain conditions to such marriages. This article presents a comparative study of the relevant juristic rulings and examines the rationale behind the imposition of these conditions.*

Keywords: Interfaith Marriage, Islam, *Ahl Al-Kitab*

1. Introduction

The provisions relating to family law constitute an inseparable part of Islam's comprehensive social system. Based on the fundamental principle of promoting benefits and preventing harms, Islam accords this subject exceptional importance. From this perspective, one can appreciate the far-reaching and profound implications of the marital contract. In particular, the natural attraction between men and women is a deeply rooted aspect of human biological and psychological nature, which requires a safe and proper framework for its fulfillment without distortion or excess. Through marriage, individuals progress toward personal completion and learn to assume responsibility. It also represents a significant manifestation of human dignity and spiritual stability, which is one of the primary objectives behind the institution of marriage in Islam. Undoubtedly, the most ideal marriage is one in which mutual affection and harmony exist between the spouses, and where they share the same creed (*'aqidah*) and life goals. Such a union gives rise to genuine tranquility, love, and mercy within the family—the very objectives for which marriage has been legalized. Through this, life becomes more fulfilling, families become happier, and the Muslim Ummah remains united and cohesive. Indeed, the underlying rationale of social norms throughout history has been to establish harmony, balance, and strong bonds in various aspects of human life. However, due to

a lack of Islamic knowledge and awareness, as well as the influence and schemes of opposing forces, the strong fortress of the family institution is being weakened and corrupted both internally and externally. Against this backdrop, the present article examines the juristic opinions concerning the foundation of the family institution through Muslim marriage, with particular emphasis on the issue of marriage to women from among the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*).

1.1. Rationale of the Study

It is widely known that a Muslim is permitted to marry only those non-Muslims who belong to the category of *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book). Given this well-established ruling, one may question the necessity of conducting further research on the subject. In response, it can be argued that significant differences of opinion exist regarding who should be considered *Ahl al-Kitab* in the contemporary context. Moreover, Islamic scholars have emphasized that the permissibility of marrying members of *Ahl al-Kitab* is not absolute; rather, it is subjected to certain conditions and qualifications. Just as some individuals who identify themselves as Muslims may unknowingly engage in practices of *shirk* and thereby compromise their Islamic faith, questions have also been raised regarding whether present-day non-practicing Jews and Christians fall within the category of *Ahl al-Kitab* whose marriage to Muslims is considered lawful. Scholars have expressed differing views on this issue. This article seeks to clarify these debates and provide a comprehensive analysis of the relevant Islamic perspectives.

1.3. Research Questions

This study is built around a set of primary questions:

- Who exactly is the *Kitabiyah* (a woman from the People of the Book) whose marriage contract was evaluated by jurists, and what is the difference between her and a *Dhimmiyah* (a protected non-Muslim citizen) in terms of meaning and legal ruling?
- What is the jurisprudential ruling (*Fiqh* ruling) on marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman according to Sharia regulations?
- Does marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman affect the future upbringing of children and their development on correct Islamic foundations and standards?

1.4. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research paper are as follows:

- To shed light on the conceptual designation of the *Kitabiyah*, its reality, and how it differs from the *Dhimmiyah*.
- To clarify the opinions of jurists regarding the ruling on entering into a marriage contract with a *Kitabiyah*, along with their evidence and the most preponderant (*Rajih*) opinion among them.
- To understand the reasons and motives behind marrying *Kitabiyah* women today.
- To identify the impacts of marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman specifically on the Muslim family.

1.5. Research Methodology

This study has primarily been conducted following a comparative fiqh (Islamic jurisprudential) approach. Under this methodology, the various opinions of *fuqaha* concerning the relevant subject have been presented and compared. In addition, theoretical studies and scholarly research related to the topic have been collected and analyzed in light of contemporary realities and practical contexts. The MLA citation style has been employed for referencing sources throughout the study. While citing verses from the Holy Quran, the specific names of the *surahs* and verse numbers have been clearly indicated. Furthermore, the *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the *Athar* (reports and narrations) of the Companions have been verified and authenticated through consultation of the original hadith collections.

2. Definition of Marriage

In Arabic, marriage is referred to as *Nikah*, which signifies a contract (*'Aqd'*). However, it should not be understood as a simple or ordinary contract like those used in everyday transactions¹. This is because the Quran characterizes the marital bond as "*mithaqun ghalizun* (مِيثَاقًا غَلِيظًا)", meaning a firm and solemn covenant. Allah states in the Holy Quran-

وَأَخَذْنَ مِنْكُمْ مِيثَاقًا غَلِيظًا¹

"...and they have taken from you a strong and binding pledge."

The seriousness of this covenant is further highlighted in the Quran, where the same expression "*mithaqun ghalizun*" is used to describe the agreement between Allah and His Prophets prior to assigning them the duty of Prophethood. From a technical standpoint, one of the most detailed definitions of marriage is provided by Ibn Uthaimin. He explains marriage as "A bilateral agreement between a man and a woman, intended to allow lawful companionship and mutual enjoyment, to form a virtuous family, and to contribute to a healthy society."² Moreover, according to *Sahih Muslim*, marriage can be described as: "A union between a man and a woman that is acknowledged by social custom or legal framework, carrying specific rights and obligations for both partners as well as for the children born from this relationship."

2.1. Significance and Rulings of Marriage in Islam

Marriage in Islam serves multiple important purposes. It provides a lawful way to fulfill natural human desires, while also offering emotional comfort, love, and tranquility between husband and wife (الزوجين), as emphasized in the Quran. Beyond personal satisfaction, it plays a vital role in preserving the human race and ensuring the continuation of mankind. Allah has mentioned explicitly in the Holy Quran:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ³.

"One of His signs is that He created for you spouses of your own species, so that you might find comfort with them. And He put mutual love and affection in your hearts. Surely in this there are lessons for the thinking people."

Marriage also establishes a strong spiritual and legal foundation for family life. Within the family, each member has defined roles and responsibilities—the husband as the provider and guardian, the wife as a supportive and loyal partner, and the children as respectful and obedient individuals. When these roles are properly fulfilled, a harmonious and peaceful family environment is achieved. Moreover, marriage helps individuals and families grow closer to Allah by encouraging an Islamic way of life.⁴

Regarding its ruling, Islamic scholars have differing opinions. Some consider marriage permissible (*mubah*), others recommend it (*sunnah*), and a few views it as obligatory. However, all agree that the ruling can change depending on a person's situation. Marriage becomes obligatory when there is fear of falling into sin, recommended when one is capable but self-controlled, disliked when responsibilities cannot be fulfilled, forbidden when one is unable to meet essential obligations, and permissible when there is neither strong need nor hindrance.

3. Interfaith Marriage in Islam

Interfaith marriage refers to a marital union in which partners adhere to different religious traditions. While the term is often used interchangeably with “mixed marriage,” a distinction must be drawn. Interfaith marriage specifically denotes religious difference, whereas mixed marriage may involve differences in ethnicity or culture even within the same religion⁵. From an Islamic legal perspective, interfaith marriage is a complex issue governed by clear scriptural injunctions and juristic interpretations⁶. It can broadly be categorized into two types: marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, and marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man.

3.1. Marriage between a Muslim Man and a Non-Muslim Woman

This type of marriage may be valid or invalid, depending on the woman's religious background.

3.2. Marriage with women among unbelievers

Marriage with women who are atheists, idolaters, or polytheists is strictly prohibited in Islam. The Quran explicitly states that believers should not marry polytheist women until they accept faith. Allah states in the Holy Quran-

وَلَا تَنْكِحُوا الْمُشْرِكَاتِ حَتَّىٰ يُؤْمِنَ ۚ وَلَآئِمَةٌ مُّؤْمِنَةٌ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ مُّشْرِكَةٍ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَتْكُمْ ⁷

“Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe: A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures you.”

Marriage with polytheists or atheists poses a significant threat to the preservation of faith (*īmān*). The Quran warns against shirk (associating partners with Allah), stating that it is an unforgivable sin unless repented⁹. Furthermore, differences in belief systems and lifestyles may lead to marital discord and increase the likelihood of divorce.

3.3. Marriage with women from Ahl al-Kitāb

3.3.1. Definition of Kitabiyah (Identity of a Woman from the People of the Book)

In the terminology of the Quran and Sunnah, the "People of the Book" (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) primarily refers to Jews and Christians, distinguishing them from idol-worshippers. This

is because divine books such as the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel were revealed to them (even though these books were subsequently altered).⁸

- **According to Imam Ibn Qudamah (R.):** The People of the Book are those who follow the Torah and the Gospel. This includes Jews, Samaritans, and Christians, along with their coreligionists such as the Romans, Armenians, and others.⁹
- **According to the Shafi'i and Hanbali Schools of Thought:** It is only permissible to marry women whose ancestors entered these religions before the alteration of the books. However, it is not permissible to marry women from Arab Christian tribes (such as the Banu Taghlib) regarding whom there is doubt as to whether they converted to Christianity after the alteration of the scriptures.¹⁰
- **According to the Hanafi School of Thought:** Those who believe in the Psalms (*Zabur*) or the scriptures (*Suhoof*) of Prophet Abraham and Prophet Seth (peace be upon them) are also included among the People of the Book, and it is permissible to marry their women.¹¹

3.3.2. Contemporary Reasons for Marrying Kitabiyah

In the modern era, there are several practical and social reasons driving young Muslim men to marry non-Muslim or *Kitabiyah* women. For instance:

- **Blind Imitation of Western Culture:** Due to long periods of colonial rule and the influence of modern media, a form of inferiority complex regarding their own culture and religion has developed among a large segment of the youth. They view everything Western as a symbol of modernity and progress.¹²
- **Ease of Global Communication:** Furthermore, communicating with Western women has become extremely easy through the internet and various dating or matrimonial agencies.¹³

3.3.3. Jurisprudential Rulings on Marrying Kitabiyah Women

There are several major opinions among jurists (*Fuqaha*) regarding the lawfulness of marrying *Kitabiyah* women:

- **General Permissibility:** According to the Imams of the four Sunni schools of thought (*Madhahib*), marrying free and chaste *Kitabiyah* women is fundamentally permissible. The primary evidence for this is Verse 5 of Surah Al-Ma'idah in the Holy Quran:
 "This day [all] good foods have been made lawful for you. And the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them. And [lawful in marriage are] chaste women from among the believers and chaste women from among those who were given the Scripture before you..."¹⁴
- **The Opinion of Ibn Abbas (R.):** He considered it permissible to marry *Kitabiyah* women who were *Dhimmi* (those living in and paying taxes to an Islamic state), but deemed it forbidden (*Harām*) to marry *Kitabiyah* women who were *Harbi* (belonging to non-Muslim countries at war with Muslims).¹⁵
- **The Final Position of the Four Schools of Thought:** The Imams of the four schools of thought classified marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman as *Makruh Tanzahi*

(reprehensible/undesirable). However, the prominent Hanafi jurist Ibn Abidin clarified that marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman from a hostile non-Muslim country (*Dar al-Harb*) is *Makruh Tahrimi* (abominable to a degree close to prohibition).¹⁶

3.4. Marriage between a Muslim Woman and a Non-Muslim Man

In contrast, marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is categorically prohibited in Islam, regardless of whether the man belongs to the People of the Book or not. The Quran clearly instructs believers not to give Muslim women in marriage to non-Muslim men. Allah states in the Holy Quran-

وَلَا تَنْكِحُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَتَّىٰ يُؤْمِنُوا ۚ وَلَعَبْدٌ مُّؤْمِنٌ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ مُّشْرِكٍ وَلَوْ أَعْجَبَكُمْ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى النَّارِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَدْعُو إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ وَالْمَغْفِرَةِ بِإِذْنِهِ ۚ وَيُبَيِّنُ آيَاتِهِ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ.¹⁷

“Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: A man slave who believes is better than an unbeliever, even though he allures you. Unbelievers do (but) beckon you to the Fire. But Allah beckons by His Grace to the Garden (of bliss) and forgiveness, and makes His Signs clear to mankind: That they may celebrate His praise.”

Prominent contemporary scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi affirms that such marriages are entirely unlawful. This consensus reflects the importance Islam places on safeguarding religious identity and practice within the family structure.

4. Wisdom behind the prohibition

Islam permitted marriage to *Kitabiyah* women during an era when Muslims were victorious and powerful. In that period, Muslim men were able to maintain full authority (*Qawamah*) within the family, and children grew up following their father's ideals. However, in the modern era, the situation is completely reversed. The primary harmful aspects of these marriages today include¹⁸:

- **Destruction of the Children's Religious Future:** Under the legal systems of Western countries, children generally remain close to the mother. Since the mother is Christian or Jewish, the children often attend church, consume pork, or drink alcohol. Consequently, an anti-Islamic mindset develops in the child's mind without the father's knowledge.
- **Loss of Domestic Authority:** Modern Western society and laws grant women extensive power over men. As a result, Muslim men lose their religious guardianship and leadership within the family structure.
- **Legal Complications and Asset Forfeiture:** In the event of a divorce, *Kitabiyah* wives often refuse to recognize Sharia courts. They resort to Western courts to claim half of the husband's wealth and assets, subsequently fleeing to their home countries with the children.
- **Decline and Rising Celibacy Rates among Muslim Women:** If young Muslim men begin marrying *Kitabiyah* women in large numbers, it will create a severe marriage crisis for chaste and eligible Muslim women. This imbalance can lead to widespread immorality and social catastrophe within Muslim communities.

5. Arguments for Avoiding Marriage with Women from Ahl al-Kitab

A reasonable opinion is that marriage with women from Ahl al-Kitab in the present time should be restricted only to cases of necessity. This is because true love, sincere cooperation, and the proper safeguarding of children's religious upbringing are more effectively ensured when both spouses follow the same religion. In particular, in the present era—when women's influence over men has increased in many contexts—it is better for a Muslim to support and maintain a Muslim woman with his wealth than to support a non-Muslim woman.¹⁹ This view is supported by the following arguments and considerations:

First: The permission for marriage with women from Ahl al-Kitab was originally intended for those who lived under an Islamic state as *Ahl al-Dhimma* (protected non-Muslim subjects) or treaty-bound communities. However, in the present era, the People of the Book do not exist under such dhimmah or treaty conditions. They neither pay jizya nor abide by the legal and religious obligations that were required under the dhimmah contract. Therefore, the rights and responsibilities that applied in that context are no longer equally applicable to them.²⁰

Second: In the present era, most of the People of the Book are not actually descendants of the Children of Israel; rather, they later adopted altered forms of Judaism or Christianity. Moreover, many of them do not, in practice, adhere to the religious laws of Judaism or Christianity. In a public opinion survey published in the *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper, it was reported that a study conducted by the Smith Institute for Research and Consulting found that 52% of Israelis identify themselves as secular. According to the author, if this is the situation among Jews—who are considered one of the most religiously attached and tradition-bound peoples in the world—then a similar situation can be assumed among Christians as well.²¹

Third: Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him) instructed during the period of Islamic conquests that some Companions who had married women from Ahl al-Kitab should divorce their wives. In particular, regarding Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān (may Allah be pleased with him), who had married a Jewish woman, scholars have mentioned several reasons behind this instruction. Among the most notable reasons was the fear that Muslim men might be influenced by non-Arab women. Additionally, there was concern that people might say: “A Companion of the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) married a disbelieving woman,” and that others might use this as a pretext to exploit the divine concession and even proceed to marry polytheistic women, thereby opening the door to further religious laxity.²²

Fourth: After the conquests of al-Qādisiyyah and other battles, one of the important reasons why the Companions married women from Ahl al-Kitab was the scarcity of Muslim women. Malik ibn Anas reports that when Jabir ibn Abd Allah (may Allah be pleased with him) was asked about marrying Jewish and Christian women, he said: “We went with Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas (may Allah be pleased with him) during the conquest of Kufa. At that time, Muslim women were very few. So we married those (women of Ahl al-Kitab). Later, when we returned, we divorced them.”²³

Fifth: In the present era, it is often observed that some weak-minded Muslims marry European or other women from Ahl al-Kitab and become influenced by them. In many cases, the husband is unable to object to his wife's wrongful or religiously objectionable actions. Malik ibn Anas, in his *al-Mudawwanah*, mentions that such a woman may eat pork, drink alcohol, and go to church, while the husband may be unable to prevent it. Therefore, to block such harmful consequences, it is better to avoid such marriages as long as Muslim women are available. This is because marriage with women from Ahl al-Kitab is essentially a *rukhsah* (a concession), which Allah has permitted for Muslims only in cases of necessity.²⁴

Sixth: Such marriages may also lead to a decline in interest in Muslim women and reduce their opportunities for marriage. This can result in an increase in the number of unmarried women, the spread of adultery and immoral behavior, and a tendency among young men to prefer non-Muslim women over Muslim women. According to the author, this creates a dark picture of moral, social, and religious decline in society, and the family unit may turn from a means of social development into a cause of destruction.

Seventh: If a Muslim husband abandons his leadership and guardianship role and transfers control of the household to his wife from Ahl al-Kitab—so that the upbringing and moral development of the children take place according to her religious beliefs and cultural values—then this situation becomes close to that which Allah has prohibited, namely the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men. This is because, in the Islamic family system, *qawāmah* (male guardianship and responsibility) is originally assigned to the Muslim husband. For this reason, it is argued that Muslim states should, in order to protect family structure, national identity, and religious values, restrict or even prohibit such marriages if necessary.²⁵

Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, however, has suggested that this ruling should be particularly restricted in the context of Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim countries. According to him, while the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men is prohibited, the widespread practice of Muslim men marrying non-Muslim women may leave a significant number of Muslim women unmarried, causing real harm to Muslim society. Therefore, he argues that this permissible act (*mubāḥ*) may be restricted according to necessity to prevent such harm.²⁶

On the other hand, Said Hawwa opposed marriage with women from Ahl al-Kitab from a different perspective in the contemporary context. He stated: "According to the majority of jurists, it is not permissible to marry a promiscuous woman from Ahl al-Kitab. In modern Western societies, it is extremely rare to find a woman completely free from fornication. Therefore, the ruling regarding marriage with Western women should be considered in light of this reality. However, if a person faces severe hardship or fear of temptation (*fitnah*), then in such a case, another opinion may be adopted."²⁷

6. Research Summary

Following this exposition, we can summarize the opinions of scholars regarding marriage to *Kitabiyah* (women from the People of the Book) as follows:

- The majority of jurists (*Jumhur al-Fuqaha*) assert the fundamental permissibility of marrying a free *Kitabiyah* woman.
- The position of Ibn Abbas, who differentiated between two categories of women from the People of the Book; permitted marrying free *Kitabiyah* women who paid the *Jizyah* willingly while being subdued, but prohibited marrying free *Kitabiyah* women belonging to hostile nations (*Harbiyah*) who did not pay the *Jizyah*.
- The position held by the Imams of the four Sunni schools of thought who classified marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman as *Makruh* and contrary to what is preferable. They directed this disapproval toward *Tanzahi* rather than *Tahrimi* detestation, except for what the Hanafi jurist Ibn Abidin mentioned—clarifying that marrying a *Kitabiyah* woman from a hostile nation (*Harbiyah*) is *Makruh Tahrimi* abominable to a degree close to prohibition.

7. Conclusion & Recommendation

Considering the aforementioned juristic opinions as a whole, it may be concluded that, in the contemporary context, it is preferable for a Muslim man not to marry a woman from among the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*). This is because such marriages often give rise to far-reaching negative consequences and social harms. The first person to be affected by these consequences is the husband himself. Thereafter, the harmful effects extend to the children and ultimately to society as a whole.

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