



KARAMAH

MUSLIM WOMEN LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Ask Zahra

Welcome to the Ask Zahra advice column! Sister Zahra is ready and willing to answer your questions about Islam. Her answers are based on years of studying Islamic scholarship and culture throughout the Muslim world. Zahra welcomes your questions, and looks forward to providing balanced and credible access to information on the many issues that are important to Muslim women. If you have you have more questions about Islam or Islamic law, contact us [here](#).

Question: Could you please tell me whether I am “unclean” during menstruation?

Answer:

A menstruating woman is not unclean. What is unclean is her menstrual blood. This is an important distinction, as we shall see below.

To enlighten the questioner, we shall examine the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad as well as relevant verses from the Qur’an. The *sunnah* is very clear. For example, the Prophet rested his head on his wife Aisha’s lap and read the Qur’an while she was menstruating. (SM 3:211) Furthermore, when the Prophet was in seclusion, he asked Aisha to bring to him the prayer carpet from the mosque. Concerned, she informed him that she was menstruating. He replied: “Your menstruation is not in your hand.” (SM 3:209-10)

Because of this incident, some jurists have concluded that a menstruating woman may enter a mosque if there was no fear of her menstrual blood staining it. Indeed, Hanbalis permitted a menstruating woman to sit in the mosque, after performing *wudu’* (the washing ritual required before prayer from everyone), so long as she had stopped bleeding. The reason for this permission is that so long as there was no fear of staining of the mosque with menstrual blood, the menstruating woman can enter it. (al-Zuhaili,1:627)

According to Aisha, the Prophet allowed her to touch him and wash his hair while she was menstruating. (SM 2:209) In fact, they drank from the same glass and ate the same food. (SM 3:210-11)

The Companions of the Prophet asked him about the following verse in the Qur'an (2:222):

They ask you about menstruation,
Say: it is a harm,
So keep away from women
In their courses and do not
Approach them until
They are clean.

The famous jurist, Muhammad Rashid Ridha, notes that the verse starts by providing the '*illah*' (rationale) for the prohibition, namely potential harm (al-Manar 2:359). The prohibition of "keeping away from women" is explained by the Prophet himself as referring to intercourse only. Indeed, the Prophet emphasized that a husband and wife may continue all forms of intimacy during menstruation, except in the area between the belly button and the knee, or more explicitly, intercourse (SM 3:203, al-Zuhaili 1:627-8). Based on Prophetic precedent, jurists have concluded that the menstruating woman's body, perspiration, cooking and baking, even her leftovers are all clean, including any liquids she touches with her hands (SM 3:207, al-Zuhaili 1:633). Ridha further noted that the word "clean" at the end of the verse refers to the cessation of bleeding (al-Manar 2:360).

There is one more Prophetic precedent that would be helpful to examine. When Aisha joined the Prophet on his trip to perform hajj, she came crying to him one day because she began menstruating. He told her that she could perform all that a pilgrim performs of the Hajj rituals, except *tawaf* (circling the Ka'ba, and going between Safa and Marwah), which she could do after her menstruation was over (SM 8:153, 156,159). So she did.

This raises the question as to the rationale for this Hajj rule which segments the rituals. The answer is clear to menstruating women. Menstrual periods tend to be physically demanding and *tawaf* in particular is quite demanding. As the Prophet stated, "This [menstruation] is something God has ordained for the daughters of Adam" (SM 8:146). So, God the All-Merciful gave them some ease to accompany what he had ordained. For example, menstruating women are not required to pray, fast or perform *tawaf* during Hajj (al-Zuhaili, 1:625-6). Furthermore, a husband may not divorce his wife while she is menstruating (al-Zuhaili 1:631).

Additionally, while the menstruating woman is required to make up fasting days missed during menstruation, she is not required to make up missed prayers. The first requirement is much less demanding than the second because Ramadan occurs only once a year (al-Zuhaili 1:625). All of these examples list important breaks designed to protect menstruating women not only from physical burdens but also emotional ones. Similar breaks are extended to pregnant women and new mothers.

The breaks given by God to menstruating women have been interpreted by some men as indications that the menstruating woman is herself unclean during these periods. There is no support for this conclusion, which is contradicted by the *sunnah* mentioned above.

In conclusion, Islam did not treat menstruating women as “unclean.” Only the menstrual blood is unclean. Muslim communities, influenced by their own customs and prevalent patriarchal attitudes at that time, ignored this important distinction. Their view contradicts the Prophetic precedent and must be abandoned in favor of a more enlightened view consistent with that precedent.

This article relied on:

1. The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an: 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, (Amana Publications, Maryland 2004), with revisions by KARAMAH to make the translation more accurate and accessible.
2. Sahih Muslim bi Sharh al-Nawawi (SM), (Dar Ihya' al- Turath al-Arabi, Beirut, 9th century reprint with 13th century commentary, n.d.)
3. Al-Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuh, Wehbah al-Zuhaili (Dar al-Fikr: Damascus 1997)
4. Muhammad Rashid Ridha, Tafsir al- Qur'an al-Hakim, al-Shaheer bi al-Manar (Dar al-Ma'rifah, Beirut. Early 20th century reprint, 2nd printing n.d.)