At the end of the sixth century, Christianity was the dominant religion around, and partly on, the Arabian Peninsula. Christianity had made great progress in Syria, Iraq and South Arabia, and traditional Arab Islamic histories record the existence of Christianity in the north-eastern parts of the peninsula, as well as in Yemen and its vicinity. In Najrān a number of inscriptions with inscribed crosses still testify to the one-time existence of a Christian community, but the central parts of the peninsula were outside the political sphere of Christianity, and the possible existence of Christian communities there is undocumented. It seems clear, however, that Christians on occasions would have been coming and going there, whether as slaves, merchants or local inhabitants who had become Christians.

Whereas the existence of Christianity in some parts of the peninsula is strongly documented by both literary and archaeological sources (Genequand 2015), the area of Mecca and Medina lacks any archaeological evidence for the existence of Christians, and contemporary sources are equally silent about them. While the documentation for the area in general is admittedly meagre, this does give credence to traditional Arabic historical sources, such as Ibn Hishām’s Sīra or al-Ṭabarī’s great historical work, according to which there was no permanent Christian population in, around or near Mecca or Medina.

As Yemenite communities used languages not readily understood by the Arabs of the Hijāz and as distances were long and populations to a large extent settled, the existence of Christian groups in the south-east does not allow us to take for granted that Christianity would have been generally known in any detail in the area where Islam was born. Nor does the existence of a Christian Arab population in Syria and Iraq allow us to do so.

Christians usually have a hagiographical role in traditional Islamic sources. They recognise the signs of prophecy, testify to Muḥammad’s prophethood and, usually in secret, convert to Islam. The main source for such hagiographical stories is Sīra literature, but they are also found in Qur’ānic commentaries (tafsīr), hadīth and historical works, all of which are interdependent. As there are usually no external sources either to confirm or invalidate the stories, we have to base our preliminary conclusions on Arab Islamic historical sources and their analysis. Let us then briefly discuss two such hagiographical narratives to see what we can say about Muḥammad’s Christian context, before turning to the Qurʾān itself.

The first example concerns the first hijāra. According to Ibn Hishām, Sīra I: 275–81 (Guillaume 1955: 146–55), Muḥammad sent some of his companions to Ethiopia to escape persecution in
Mecca. The Sīra only gives name lists and a highly improbable story of the immigrants reading the Sūra of Mary (19) to the Negus, who in secret converted to Islam. Nothing more is told about the event. Excluding hagiographical elements, the first hijra vanishes into thin air.

A similar narrative relates to the beginning of Muḥammad’s prophetic career. Ibn Hishām, Sīra I: 160–3 (Guillaume 1955: 79–81), tells how as a young man Muḥammad travelled to Syria in Abū Ṭalib’s caravan and was there recognised by the monk Baḥīrā as the prophet whose coming had been predicted in holy scripts. In Islamic literature, the story of Baḥīrā is narrated to show that a holy monk recognised Muhammad and, by implication, all true Christians should also recognise him. As bishops, monks, and saints were not easily transposed onto the Arabian Peninsula, Muhammad had to be taken out of this area in order to meet authoritative Christians.

Once the miraculous elements (the cloud shadowing the boy Muḥammad; the monk recognising him as the prophet; an ancient holy book giving testimony to Muḥammad’s prophethood) are set aside, few details remain to say what the Meccan caravan was actually doing in Syria.

The story of Baḥīrā falls into the same category as that of the first hijra. There is a difference, though. While Christian sources are silent about the first hijra, the story of Baḥīrā is well known from such sources. At first sight, this would seem to lend credence to the Islamic story, but unfortunately this is not so. The Christian versions are late and derive from Islamic sources. One would be hard put to explain how an independent Christian tradition could have been formed and transmitted: the only reason to transmit the story is that something miraculous happened during the visit, as a caravan stopping close to a monk’s cell could hardly have been of interest to anybody as such.

Once they got to know the story, Christians made full use of it. For Muslims, the focus of the story is on the legitimation of Muḥammad’s prophecy, but for Christian polemics it was a showpiece of how Muḥammad was a mere impostor who had learned Christian stories from informants, such as Baḥīrā, whose existence could not be denied by Muslims.

Hence, an unhistorical story was accepted by both Christians and Muslims for their own purposes. That this particular story, like most, if not all, other such stories, is unhistorical is clear for a number of reasons: it is improbable as such and, stripped of miraculous details, it tells nothing. It is as if the purpose of the story were merely to get Muḥammad into a situation where a Christian authority may recognise him, and such it obviously is. As Patricia Crone has convincingly shown in her Meccan trade (1987), Mecca at the end of the sixth century was no longer a centre of international trade (if it ever had been), and there is no reason why Muḥammad should have travelled so widely.

Thus, the information we have on Muḥammad’s real contacts with Christians is meagre. None of the stories about such contacts finds corroboration in contemporary non-Islamic sources, and the Islamic sources, with the exception of the Qurʾān, are late: they tell the story according to how things should have been, not how they really were.

Some of Muḥammad’s reported meetings with Christians may be historical, even though they cannot be proven. Waraqa ibn Nawfal, the cousin of Muḥammad’s first wife, Khadija, is introduced as an authority who recognised the divine origin of Muḥammad’s first vision (e.g. Ibn Hishām, Sīra I: 202 = Guillaume 1955: 107), but he is represented as an ordinary Christian or a hanīf. Waraqa represents the type of people Muḥammad may really have met: a local Arab with some knowledge of Christianity, whether a convert or not.

That Muḥammad had Christian connections is obvious. Much of the Qurʾān’s monotheistic material may equally be of Jewish or Christian origin – such as the stories of the Creation, the Flood, etc. – but there are cases that must come from Christian sources, such as the stories about Jesus and Mary. These passages show that whatever the source, Muḥammad did become acquainted with Christianity.
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Christian terminology in the Qurʾān, too, shows that Christianity was not unknown in and around Mecca and Medina. Thus, we find there a term for Christians, Naṣṣān (pl. Naṣṭān), probably deriving from Syriac Naṣṭāyē, and the word al-Masīḥ, ‘Messiah’, for Jesus. Other words of clearly Christian origin in the Qurʾān include al-Injīl, ‘the Gospel’, al-ḥawāriyyūn, ‘the disciples (of Jesus); the apostles’, and ruḥbān, ‘monks’, rahbāniyya, ‘monasticism’.

Whereas the Qurʾān shows familiarity with biblical material, including noncanonical Gospels, the later history of Christianity is sparingly represented. The story of the Seven Sleepers (Q 18:9–26) is a Christian tale, but its place in Sūra 18 implies that it should be taken as folklore. The story of ašhāb al-ṣukhūd (Q 85: 4) may refer to the martyrs of Najrān.

The exact type of Christianity with which Muḥammad came into contact has long been debated. Very often, as in the case of Q 5:17, the discussion has been rather high-flying, searching for nuances in a text that is not a learned theological document (e.g. Kropp 2011; Crone 2015 and 2016). Nothing implies that Muḥammad had detailed knowledge of Christian theology, and the sentence inna Allāha huwa l-Maṣīḥ, ‘God, he is the Messiah’ in Q 5:17 seems better understood as a simple syntactic topicalization of Allāh rather than a refined theological statement.

This is the image we get by combining traditional sources with modern mainstream studies. Yet there are theories according to which Christianity played a bigger role in the birth of Islam. Some scholars have detached themselves from the traditional picture and endeavoured, with more or less success, to create a wholly new picture of the Christian context of the Qurʾān. The first major attempt to redefine the birth of Islam and set it in a Christian context was Bell (1926). Following him, Wansbrough (1977, 1978) and Crone and Cook (1977) gave new impetus to revisionist studies of early Islam. Crone and Cook deconstructed the traditional image by setting Islamic sources aside and putting fragmentary non-Islamic historical and archaeological sources in their stead. Wansbrough applied methods of biblical criticism to the Qurʾān and claimed that it had developed over the centuries and contained many layers. His thesis was that the qurʾānic corpus slowly grew in a sectarian milieu of Christians (and Jews) and the process continued well into the ninth century. Though finally not accepted by the majority of scholars, Wansbrough’s and Crone and Cook’s ideas were seriously discussed and opened new paths for research.

Another early revisionist was Lüling (1974, 1977, 1981, 2003), who brought forward the idea that not only was the Qurʾān heavily influenced by Christianity, but it contained Christian texts as such. According to his argument, the Qurʾān is a palimpsest, where traces of pre-Islamic Christian hymns are still to be seen. As it now stands, the Qurʾān has four layers. The oldest consists of remnants of strophic Christian hymns, dated by Lüling to the sixth century. Overlying this, there are other such hymns that were edited and Islamicised in Muḥammad’s time. The third layer consists of new texts composed in Muḥammad’s time, and, finally, the whole has been edited so that the consonantal skeleton of the text has been kept, although diacritics and vocalisation have been added to give a new meaning to the text. According to Lüling, this last phase is post-Muḥammad.

In excavating the earlier layers, Lüling freely manipulated the text. He changed diacritical signs and vocalisations and used Arabic and other Semitic dictionaries to find meanings that suited his theories. By such measures, later also favoured by the pseudonymous author Luxenberg, Lüling was able to change the meaning of the text profoundly and arrived at what he aimed at, a collection of very Christian-looking texts, which was made easy by the overall similarity of the two religions. Even without such manoeuvres, the similarities between the Qurʾān and Christian texts are sometimes obvious.

At the same time, Lüling reinterpreted the context of the Qurʾān. Though he found no real evidence for this, he claimed that the Meccan community must have been Christian and
explained the lack of archaeological evidence by lack of excavations in the area. He also reinterpreted literary evidence to suit his theories, thus seeing, e.g. the three ‘daughters’ of Allāh in Q 53:19–21 as local manifestations of the Virgin Mary, for which he could not, however, produce any tangible evidence. Likewise, what is normally seen as polytheism in the Qurʾān he reinterpreted as references to Christian saints. The term mushrik, ‘associationist’, he took as referring to Trinitarians, criticised by Unitarians for associating others with God.20

Lüling’s theories have been received with little enthusiasm.21 Later Christianising theories, however, take elements from Lüling and develop them in various directions. In the early 2000s, the pseudonymous C. Luxenberg (2000, 2007, 2011) created a media sensation by claiming to offer a completely new reading of the holy book of the Muslims.

Luxenberg has himself explained the ‘method’ of his re-reading of the Qurʾānic text.22 He first consults the Qurʾānic commentary of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Manẓūr’s dictionary Lisān al-ʿarab to find suitable meanings for Qurʾānic words, when these in their normal sense go against his theories. If these do not produce suitable results, he resorts to Syriac dictionaries. If even this fails, he proceeds to change the diacritical marks of the word and again searches for a suitable meaning in both Arabic and Syriac dictionaries. Then he translates the Arabic ‘back’ into Syriac and studies further possible meanings in the light of Syriac dictionaries. If nothing else helps, he finally reads the passage as misread Karshūn, i.e. Arabic written in Syriac characters.

Though this might at first seem impressive, in fact it means that Luxenberg forces the material into the straitjacket of his own theory: if a reading fits his theory, he selects it; if not, he goes on using fanciful methods until he finds a meaning that does. Literally any tri-radical word has hundreds of possible meanings when it undergoes these procedures, and it is statistically unavoidable that one or other will fit Luxenberg’s theories. Despite its obvious weakness, his radical theory has found a small group of committed supporters.23

While Lüling’s theories have few followers and the reception of Luxenberg’s studies is limited to a small circle of enthusiasts, there are also some serious attempts at putting the Qurʾān into a Christian context based on sound philological methods, even though one might not agree with (all) the results.24 One is Gerald Hawting’s The idea of idolatry (1999).

Hawting situates the birth of the Qurʾān in Iraq, not the Hijāz, thus completely revising the history of early Islam. Like Lüling, he reinterprets the term širk, ‘associationism’, to refer not to polytheism but to an impure form of monotheism. The terms širk and mushrik he takes to have later been misunderstood as references to polytheism and polytheists. While I cannot find Hawting’s main theory convincing, his book is full of important observations and new ideas. Much like Hawting, Patricia Crone (2015 and 2016) sees the Qurʾān as emerging in a strongly Christian context and searches for theological nuances in the text.

A third line of research that endeavours to redefine the context of the Qurʾān in a (partly) Christian context is that of Y.D. Nevo, who worked together with J. Koren. Nevo relied on controversial archaeological evidence, and his interpretations have not met with general acceptance. Nevo and Koren place the birth of Islam into a Sinaitic context and see the Qurʾānic text as emerging in a situation where the bulk of the population was still pagan but the elite followed some form of Judaeo-Christian monotheism (Nevo and Koren 1991, 2003; Nevo 1994).

The most serious attempt at redefining the context of the Qurʾān in Christian terms is that by Angelika Neuwirth, who has risen to a very prominent position in Qurʾānic studies. She has published several studies where she compares Qurʾānic texts with Christian and Jewish ones. Neuwirth (2008, 2010b) finds echoes of Psalms 104 and 136 in Q 78 and Q 55 respectively. In Neuwirth (2010a), she resumes her position vis-à-vis the relation between the Qurʾān and some biblical texts.
In Neuwirth’s interpretation, Islam was born in a heavily monotheistic context, whether Christian or Jewish. She dates (Neuwirth 2010b: 737) the contacts at the latest to the end of the first Meccan Period. Partly opposed to this is Hämeen-Anttila (2000, 2016), where the beginning of Muhammad’s career is seen in the context of pre-Islamic Arabian prophecy. Hämeen-Anttila draws attention to the rarity of monotheistic and clearly biblical features in the earliest Sūras (the first Meccan Period) and considers biblical influence to have started flooding in only during the second Meccan Period. In both theories, the biblical and Christian influence dates back to the Meccan period.

Whatever the impact of Christianity on nascent Islam and however we might date its beginning, there can be no doubt that the Qur’ān does contain a certain amount of Christian material, which means that it did emerge in a context where Christianity was present in one way or another.

The basic possibilities for how the influence could have been received are five. The first two refer to (at least partly) literary modes of transmission:

1. the Scriptural texts from which the Qur’ānic knowledge of Christianity (and/or the Bible) derives existed in Arabic translation and were read either by or to Muhammad; or
2. the Scriptural texts were (presumably orally) translated to Muhammad, or more probably only summarised, probably from Syriac25 originals.

It is also possible that:

3. the sources were not strictly literary but hymns and sermons based on the scriptures but performed orally.

It is also possible that the mode of transmission was purely (or mainly) oral, in the form of stories and other bits of information circulating in the peninsula. In this case, there are two further possibilities:

4. the stories already circulated on the Arabian Peninsula before Muhammad and were common knowledge by the time he started preaching; or
5. they became known to him through his personal contacts with Christians,26 whether Arabs or others.27

The first option, 1, has little to commend it. All evidence in favour of the existence of even a partial pre-Islamic Bible translation into Arabic is speculative and goes against our general understanding of the state of literacy in the peninsula at that time.28 Recently, Griffith (2013: 106–26) has summed up the discussion about possible early Arabic translations of the Bible and found little that would support belief in any pre-Islamic translations.

The second option, 2, also suffers from our inability to provide any evidence for the existence of Syriac (or other) Christian texts in the Hijāz. It might also be expected that if there were, more (almost) exact quotations would be found, yet such are rare. One case, Q 21:105 (< Psalms 37:29), has long been known, but few others have been convincingly shown.29 In favour of such a theory, however, one might adduce Q 16:103, with its reference to a human ‘teacher’ of Muhammad (cf. Q 25:4), but the low number of even relatively exact correspondences would incline one to consider the role of such transmission marginal at most.

Option 3 is also problematic, as it would need a community whose chanting and preaching Muhammad could have listened to. Had such Christian communities existed in the Hijāz, they
would have left archaeological traces – Christians tend to build churches and communal buildings wherever they go and inscribe crosses on various surfaces – and even though excavations are highly problematic in present-day Saudi Arabia, such structures and concomitant inscriptions and rock drawings, with or without crosses, could be expected to have been found by scholars. The traditional picture of Muhammad travelling widely as a merchant could explain how he came to overhear such hymns and sermons, but again we come across the rather awkward fact that Mecca was definitely not a centre of long-distance trade at that time, if it ever had been.\(^30\)

This forces us back to a rather traditional and conservative stance in our discussion of the Christian context of the Qur’an. Earlier scholarship mainly set the Qur’an’s Christian context geographically in the Hijāz, and this we have to accept as probable. Whether Christian stories circulated widely in the area before Muhammad is difficult to say.\(^31\) The Qur’an tells stories in brief episodes which are only loosely attached to each other, but this is a feature of the Qur’anic narrative strategy and does not legitimate (or invalidate) a claim that the story must have been known to the audience beforehand. The Arabs of the time were familiar with abrupt changes in narration, as is amply evidenced by contemporary poetry, which leaves much space to the listener’s imagination.\(^32\) Hence, options 4 and 5 remain equally possible.

In all these cases, the language of the contact with Muhammad would presumably have been Arabic, as there is no tangible evidence that he would have known other languages.\(^33\)

There were several different contexts for the Qur’an. The first context is undoubtedly Arabic, as it was written in that language. Secondly, the strong biblical element shows that there was also a Christian or Jewish context. That it was Christian is proven by the Jesus narratives, but traditional history would imply that Judaism was not excluded from this context either, and there are passages in the Qur’an which imply Jewish provenance. It is also rather clear that there was a third context, that of traditional Arab religion. What exactly was the role of each still needs more elucidation.

Notes


2 For Christian presence in Najrân, see Robin et al. (2014), especially 1094–111 (inscriptions accompanied by crosses of various types). The Christians of Najrân and Yemen are also known from non-Islamic sources (Griffith 2001: 309).

3 The story about the picture (icon) of Jesus and Mary in the Ka’ba, mentioned first by al-Azraqī, is clearly a legend (Griffith 2001: 309) and relates to the need to prove that the pagan temple of the Ka’ba was of monotheistic origin.

4 The concepts ‘Arab’ and ‘Arabic’ are unclear, and we must not think of any uniform sense of ‘Arabness’ in the period before Islam. It was only the later development which led to Arabs being defined by their language. For the linguistic situation on the peninsula before Islam, see MacDonald (2000).

5 The majority of the inhabitants will have lived on agriculture rather than pastoralism, and only the limited number of camel herders would have regularly moved longer distances. The nomads, on the other hand, were known for their lack of interest in religion (cf. Q 9:97–101), and modern anthropological studies tend to support this. Agriculture was not as foreign to the Arabs as, e.g. Neuwirth (2010b: 737) thinks: Medina lived on agriculture, and a large percentage of the inhabitants of the Hijāz lived in oasis towns.

6 The stories of these persecutions are schematic, with few individualising details, as if all were cast from the same mould. They may be seen as equivalents to Christian martyr stories.

7 See, in general, Roggema (2008).

8 Later, in polemical literature, the Bible was culled for allusions to the coming of Muhammad, and such were found from both the Old and the New Testaments, but no such Christian tradition of interpretation existed before contacts with Muslims.
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9 Other religious authorities, such as kāhins, Rabbis, and ḥanīfs, also testify to Muḥammad’s prophethood in such hagiographical stories.

10 For the latter term, see Rubin (2002), Gilliot (1996) and de Blois (2002).

11 This, of course, does not mean that the stories in all their details are true reports of what happened.

12 For Jesus and Mary in the Qurʾān, see Parrinder (1965), Räisänen (1971), Robinson (1991), Hāmeen-Anttila (1998), Khalidi (2001) and Mourad (2008). See also McAuliffe (1991), and the first chapters of Goddard (2000), and also the articles of Valkenberg in this volume.

13 See also Griffith (2011).

14 In Islam, the (one) Gospel is a sacred scripture revealed to Jesus.


16 For the loanwords of the Qurʾān, see Jeffery (1938), Zannitt (2002) and Ambros (2004). See also Mingana (1927).

17 Most recently studied by Griffith (2008). For a similar study of Syriac legendary material in the Qurʾān, see van Bladel (2008).

18 The theories of Lüling, Luxenberg and Hawting are also discussed in Hāmeen-Anttila (2009: 26–8).

19 See Berg, ed. (1997).

20 Lüling fails to address the question of why the frequent invocations of these goddesses in pre-Islamic inscriptions are never accompanied by Christian symbolism. This unwillingness to discuss contrary evidence lessens the credibility of his studies.

21 For a mildly favourable evaluation, see Ibn Rawandi (2002). See also reviews of his books by Hawting (1982), Günther (1995) and Rodkinson (1977).


24 For J. Azzi’s rather fanciful theories, where Waraqa ibn Nawfal is the leader of a Meccan Ebionite community and Muḥammad his successor, see al-Ḥārīrī (= Azzi) (1990, 1991) and Azzi (2001). For (improbable) theories on Ebionites on the Arabian Peninsula, see also Bell (1926), Müller (1967), Roncaglia (1971) and Trimingham (1979). For a brief discussion of Azzi’s theories, see Hāmeen-Anttila (2009: 27–8).

25 Syriac seems to have been the major source for the Christian loanwords in the Qurʾān, as already noted by Mingana (1927).

26 On the peninsula or elsewhere, if we can prove, or at least show it probable, that he travelled outside the peninsula.

27 A further ramification of this explanation would cover non-Christians who might have been Muḥammad’s informants and based their knowledge of Christianity on their similar connections.

28 Literacy was not as rare as is often thought (see, e.g. Macdonald 2005), and short inscriptions abound in the area (though inscriptions in the form of what was to emerge as classical Arabic are much rarer than those written in a variety of ancient north Arabian languages), but we have no evidence of any longer texts in any language close to the Arabic of the Qurʾān. The story of the written forms of the muʾallaqāt, suspended from the curtains of the Kaʾba, has been shown to be a late legend; see Kister (1969).

29 The first part of the ṣabāḥa (already attested in the Qurʾān, usually in the form Allāhu lā ilāha illā huwa, e.g. Q 2:163) also closely resembles the Syriac translation of Psalm 18:32 (layt alāḥā l-bār men māryā, cf. also Sirach 36:4 and Peshitta 2 Samuel 22:32), as noted by Baumstark (1953: 14), but the formula is too short and the idea too general to provide much evidence in favour of a direct borrowing. The same goes for Q 5:45 (cf. Exodus 21:23–7), Q 7:40 (cf. Matthew 19:24) and Q 6:59 (cf. Matthew 10:29).

30 Neuwirth (2010a: 202), compares e.g. the famous Shema ‘Yisrael (Deuteronomy 6:4) with Q 112:1 (qul huwa lāhu aḥad), claiming even to hear echoes of the original Hebrew (ḥāḏ) in the last word of the verse. For similarities with biblical stories in general, see Speyer (1931).

31 The authenticity of the monotheistic poetry by Umayya ibn Abī l-Ṣalt and other pre-Islamic Christian poets is extremely doubtful.

32 The rather stereotypical nature of the prophet narratives in the Qurʾān actually makes it rather easy to grasp the storyline of even a sketchily narrated story.
33 The hagiographical literature does mention early Muslims who were able to read foreign languages, but these are usually dubious. We have no archaeological evidence of scriptures in any foreign languages from the Hijāz. Likewise, the books these authorities are depicted reading are usually given as evidence that the advent of the new Prophet was predicted in them and the passages quoted clearly derive at the earliest from late seventh– or early eighth-century polemical discussions.

References


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Further reading


