7
MUḤAMMAD AND CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction

Islam’s polemical attitude towards Christianity was already dictated by the Qur’ān, where fundamental Christian doctrines are disputed. However, according to the sīra (biography) and Ḥadīths, Muhammad did not have extensive personal contact with either Christians or Christianity. What is noteworthy about this lack of contact is that it was the opposite of the experience of the Muslim community during most of its existence. For the most part, Islam’s relations with other religions have been overshadowed by the continuous conflict with Christianity. Therefore, the experience of Muhammad does not accord with the experience of Islam as a whole.

The sīra materials, of which the earliest surviving is Ibn Isḥāq’s (d. 768) Sīrat rasūl Allāh, extant in the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 833), are quite extensive. They range from standard discussions of Muhammad’s life in chronological order to portrayals of his life through the lives and interactions of his Companions (ṣaḥābā) to apologetic presentations of the ‘proofs of prophecy’ designed to demonstrate the veracity of Muhammad’s prophetic status and a number of other different themes. All of this material has been shaped by the exigencies of apologetics, by the various different groups and sects that comprise early Islam and by familial and tribal desires to extol the activities of their ancestors. While the initial sīras are not excessively lengthy, by the middle period of Islam (1000–1800) a number of them stretch to many volumes and are divided into detailed discussions of every aspect of Muhammad’s life. However, none of the sīras actually contains a specific section on relations with Christians or Christianity.

If possible, the Ḥadīth literature is even more varied. Its basis is the sayings and doings of Muhammad on the foundation of what are purported to be eyewitness accounts of him, passed on through his Companions to successive generations of Muslims, until these traditions were ultimately written down during the eighth and ninth centuries. The earliest surviving Ḥadīth collections are either fragments (ajzāʾ), sometimes devoted to a single subject, or the traditions narrated by a single figure. However, by the middle of the ninth century there are important collections, usually divided into thematic sections, that have become the core of the Sunnī legal structure (šarīʿa). The most important of these collections are the Six (by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāʾūd, al-Nasāʾī and Ibn Māja), whose authors were all from the eastern region of the Islamic world, that will form the basis for the Ḥadīth section of this chapter. However, it is important to realise that these six collections are merely the tip of the iceberg and that there is a
wide range of local, personal and thematic collections as well that sometimes serve to supplement the more canonical material and give the scholar a sense of the range from which it was selected.

**Muḥammad and Christians**

That there were a number of Christians around Muḥammad no one can deny. In general, Arab Christianity was centred in north-western and north-eastern Arabia, in addition to being a presence in south Arabia. But there was also a fairly common Christian servile presence, presumably of Ethiopian origin, and at all times individuals who were Christians, either travellers or those settling down in Mecca.

Christians in Muḥammad’s life can be grouped into a number of categories: older, pre-Islamic figures who never converted to Islam but somehow demonstrated foreknowledge of his prophetic ministry or encouraged the growth of Islam; servile converts to Islam who were presumably of Ethiopian origin; other travellers or wanderers who are said to have been Christian and converted to Islam; and foreign, distant figures, often stereotyped, who never converted to Islam but with whom Muḥammad had some dealings and serve to represent Christians (or Christianity) in the aggregate.

Probably the best example of the first category of Christians is the figure of Quss ibn Ṣāʿīda, the Bishop of Najrān, who is said to have preached at the market of ‘Ukāz when Muḥammad was young. A text of this speech has supposedly survived (al-Isfahānī 1994, vol. 15: 246–8; al-Jāḥiz: 163–4), but the contents are very generic monotheism and there is nothing discernibly Christian in it. Other examples of older sympathetic Christian figures include the monk Bahīrā, whose identification of the youthful Muḥammad in Syria while the latter was on a trading mission serves as one of the ‘proofs of prophecy’ (Roggema 2009: 37–8; for the sīna version, see Ibn Hishām: vol. 1, 164–7; trans. Guillaume 2004: 85–7). But the most influential of these older mentor–figures is Muḥammad’s first wife Khadija’s cousin, Wāraqa ibn Nawfal, whose role in confirming the prophecy received by Muḥammad at its initial stage is said to have been crucial, even preventing him from suicidal thoughts. The defining characteristic of these figures is that they serve to ease the transition into the new faith, and because of their age the fact of their not converting to Islam does not seem threatening.

Members of the second category – servile converts – were socially conspicuous inside the Meccan Muslim community. It cannot be certain in all cases that these people were indeed Christians, but of the list of the first seven people to proclaim Islam, including Muḥammad, Abū Bakr, Sumayya, ‘Ammār (her son), Miqdād, Ṣuhayb al-Rūmī and Bilāl, the last five are all servants (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr 2010: vol. 1, 259). Sumayya is said to have married Abū l-Azraq al-Rūmī, and there are at least a half a dozen other rūmī, qibṭ or ḥabashi (Roman, Egyptian or Ethiopian) converts within the early lists. Most likely, all of them were of a servile or an itinerant class. However, it is not easy to tell what precisely the origin of some of these figures is. The name ‘al-Rūmī’ might have been nothing more than an indication of origin close to the Byzantine Empire, or perhaps was given ironically or sarcastically to someone who aped Byzantine manners. However, there are linguistic indications that actual Greek or Ethiopic words were known by Muḥammad; even in the Hadith literature actual Ethiopian words are documented and glossed correctly (in stark opposition to the sometimes indifferent glosses that are given to foreign vocabulary in the Qur’an; al-Bukhārī 1991: vol. 7, no. 5993; for the word sanūh, correctly glossed as ‘good, beautiful’, see Lambdin 1978: 433, sanūyā).

Several paradigmatic first believers from different ethnicities are listed in the literature. It is interesting that at least two, Ṣuhayb and the more famous Salmān, are from Christian backgrounds (Bilāl might very well have been as well): ‘I [Muḥammad] am the first of the Arabs to
enter Paradise, Šuhayb the first of the Rūm to enter Paradise, Bilāl the first of the Ethiopians to enter Paradise and Salmān is the first of the Persians to enter Paradise’ (al-Ṭabarānī 1996: vol. 2, 11, no. 827; al-Ṭabarānī n.d.: vol. 8, 111, no. 7526). Of all of the figures in the tradition, the only enigmatic one is Šuhayb al-Rūmī. The other three were quickly surrounded with heavy layers of hagiographical holiness and were eventually to become heroes to their respective communities (Bilāl is revered among African Muslims). Only Šuhayb fell by the wayside and has never been lionised, even by those Greeks or Christians who converted to Islam. It is clear that this represents failure in the very earliest period of proto-Islam to attract Christians. It is also difficult to ascertain where exactly Šuhayb was from, or why he had the surname al-Rūmī (Ibn Sa’d 1990: vol. 3, 170–1).

The lengthy account of Salmān al-Fārisī’s conversion from Zoroastrianism, going to Syria, then northern Iraq, Anatolia and finally Medina, is designed to give a general confirmation of Christian predictions of Muḥammad by associating with so many monks and bishops, some of whom are said to have had secret knowledge of the coming of Muḥammad (Ibn Hishām: vol. 1, 236–40; trans. Guillaume 2004: 95–7). This type of conversion is also presented with regard to the delegation of the Christians of Najrān, which is said to have visited Muḥammad in Medina in 630–1. Most likely, this delegation visited Medina because of the rising political power of Islam, but the important element is that through their visit Muḥammad was given the opportunity to actually convert Christians. According to some accounts they converted, while others say that they did not and even said their own Christian prayers in the Medinan mosque (towards the east) (al-Šālīḥī 2013: vol. 6, 415–21).

Finally, there are those typological rulers of the Byzantine and Ethiopian empires to whom letters are addressed heralding the prophethood of Muḥammad and with whom arguments are exchanged. Chronologically the first is the Ethiopian al-Najāšī (negūs), who welcomes a group of Muslim refugees from Mecca (in about 619–21) and moderates a debate about the legitimacy of Islam and the status of Muḥammad between Ja’far ibn Abī Talīb on behalf of the Muslims and ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ on behalf of the pagans who have pursued them from Mecca. Again, as is so often the case, it is impossible to learn anything historical about this exchange, as the description given of ‘Islam’, put into the mouth of Ja’far, is highly anachronistic. What is important for the narrative is that the Najāšī is convinced not only to permit the Muslims to stay in Ethiopia but that he converts to Islam (Ibn Hishām: vol. 2, 359–63; trans. Guillaume 2004: 150–3).

Even more typological is the encounter between the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius and Abū Sufyān, the leading opponent of Muḥammad during the period 624–30. This conversation, which is highly unlikely to be historical, consists of a range of questions on the part of Heraclius concerning Muḥammad, about whom he has heard, answered by Abū Sufyān, who seems at this point not to be a Muslim. The answers lead Heraclius to declare that Muḥammad is a genuine prophet and to convert to Islam, although, like the Najāšī, he had to conceal this conversion from his nobility and clergy. The principal significant point from the conversation is the list, put into the mouth of Heraclius, of what Muslims considered to be the characteristics of a prophet and how Muḥammad’s actual conduct could be squared with them (al-Bukhārī 1991: vol. 1, no. 7; al-Wāqūḍī 1984: vol. 3, 1019).

The Christian ruler of al-Ayla (present-day ’Aqaba) is said to have interacted with Muḥammad personally and thereby established the basis for Muslim–Christian relations in a manner foreshadowing the Pact of ‘Umar (al-shurūṭ al-’umariyya) (al-Šālīḥī 2013: vol. 5, 460–1). The correspondence between them that is described in this encounter is cited occasionally in the legal literature.

Interactions between Muḥammad and Christians are for the most part positive and lack strong polemical themes. In the sīra and tābaqāt (biographies based upon successive generations) literature

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Muḥammad and Christianity
there is virtually none of the hostility towards Christianity that is evidenced towards Judaism in both the Qur'an and the life of Muḥammad. Most of the Christians are said to have converted to Islam, while those who do not (mainly from the earlier period of Muḥammad’s life) are treated respectfully, almost as honorary converts. There are no cases of Muḥammad inflicting violence or coercion upon Christians in this material, while the driving factors in their conversions are usually the arguments for Muḥammad’s prophethood or antipathy towards polytheism. Frequently Christians are believed to be possessed of special, secret knowledge of Muḥammad’s ministry, and unlike comparable Jewish cases the Christians usually want to accept Islam rather than conceal their knowledge. In no case do the theological arguments against the Trinity or rejection of the bodily crucifixion of Jesus seem to have been utilised, at least according to the sources.

Muḥammad and Christianity: the Ḥadīth literature

As it has come down to us, the Ḥadīth literature, whatever its historical basis, reflects the realities of Muḥammad’s exposure to Christianity. In contradistinction to the treatment accorded to the Jews, there are comparatively few allusions to Christians and Christianity (approximately a third of those for the Jews). Moreover, the Ḥadīth materials are mostly historical or pseudo-historical narratives rather than theological or polemical in nature. Longer narratives such as the encounter between Heraclius and Abū Sufyān are given prominence, even featured at the beginning of al-Bukhārī’s Sahīh.

It is not at all unusual for the traditions concerning Christians or the Byzantines to highlight the social differences between the pre-Islamic Arabs and the settled Christians of Syria-Palestine. But even more than this general type of resentment, no doubt intensified by the trade that went on between the Arabs of the Hijāz and the peoples of Syria-Palestine, was that this dynamic was about to change in favour of the former. The implausibility of such a change is demonstrated by the following tradition:

‘Abd Allāh ibn Ḥawwala said: We were with the Messenger of God, and we complained to him about poverty, nakedness and the general lack of things. The Messenger of God said: ‘Take heart, because I am more worried about the plethora of things for you. This matter [of Islam] will continue until you have conquered the lands of Persia and the Byzantines and Ḥimyar [Yemen] – you will have three army-districts (ajnād): one in Syria, one in Iraq and one in Yemen – and until a man will be given 100 dinars and be insulted by it [because of the general wealth].’ Ibn Ḥawwala said: ‘O Messenger of God, who could possibly take Syria when the many-horned Byzantines (al-nūm dhāt al-qurūn) are in it?’ He said: ‘God will conquer it for you and appoint you as successors in it, until a group of them [the Byzantines] become white-robed, with shaved necks, standing in service for a little black man (al-nuwayjil al-usayavid, apparently meaning Muslim Arabs) – whatever he tells them to do, they will do it. [This will happen] even though today there are men in it [Syria] who view you as more contemptible than the lice in the buttocks of camels (aḥqar fī a’yūnīhim min al-qīrdān fī a’jāz al-ibḥ).’


Although there is no theological discussion of Christianity in traditions such as this, there is a good sense of the relative power imbalance during Muḥammad’s time as opposed to later Islam.
Muḥammad and Christianity

Theologically, the material concerning Christianity is often in an apocalyptic mode. This is easy to understand, as the interaction with the Jews for the early Muslims was in the here and now (in Medina) while that with the Christians was mostly in the future. From early collections, we can find paraphrased one of Jesus’ parables – the Parable of the Workers from Matt. 20:1–16 – to illustrate their position in God’s plan vis-à-vis those other communities previous to them:

Your [length of] staying compared to that of the communities previous to you is like that between the afternoon prayers and the setting of the sun. The people of the Torah were given the Torah and worked with it until the middle of the day, then they could not [anymore], and were given qīrāṭs [as their wage]. The people of the Gospel were given the Gospel and worked with it until the mid-day prayer, and then they could not [anymore], and were given qīrāṭs [as their wage]. Then you were given the Qur’ān, and you worked with it until the sun went down and were given double the qīrāṭs. The people of the Torah and of the Gospel said: ‘Lord, these have less work and more wage!’ He said: ‘Have I cheated you in your payments in any way?’ They said: ‘No.’ He said: ‘This is My bounty, given to whomever I wish’.

(al-Ṭabarānī 1996: vol. 4, 224, no. 3142)

Although this is basically a fair translation of the New Testament parable, there are subtle differences. The version in Matthew lists a total of five groups hired throughout the day, not just three, nor, of course, are they given such blatant identifications as in this Hadīth. Also, the New Testament version is clearly designed to show the bounty of God towards his servants, to change their feelings from having been cheated by a hard task-master to generosity towards their fellow-workers. Although the New Testament original is eschatological – many of Jesus’ parables have this characteristic and none of the others were translated by the proto-Muslims – lacking the identifications given in the proto-Muslim version, it does not have any immediacy. The proto-Muslims clearly saw themselves as working just before the end of the world and as the rightful recipients of God’s bounty, worthy to stand with the other previous faiths on an equal footing. But, crucially, this story does not deny that God is planning to reward the Jews and the Christians, that this reward is both deserved because of their labours and will be given at the end of the world, as later Islamic doctrine would do – nor is this eventual reward predicated in any way upon their reception of the message of Muḥammad. Indeed, if there is an element of unworthiness among the three groups, it is on the part of the proto-Muslims themselves. Their sole reason for receiving the same wage as the earlier groups is the arbitrary and irrational decision of God, not the merit of their own actions.

Although precedence is clearly given to Muḥammad and the Muslims in these early traditions, there is no other difference between them and Jesus and the Christians. Both groups have their righteous (both called sāḥibūn) and libertines, the evil ones of both communities are punished – having apparently been previously judged – by God in exactly the same manner, and apparently the Christians do not have to believe in Muḥammad in order to enter the blessed realm. Muḥammad takes the right-hand chair for eternity, while Jesus takes the left-hand one, but this is the only apparent difference. A similar idea appears in the early collection of Hammam ibn Munabbih (d. 752):

We [the Muslims] are the last, the first on the Day of Resurrection, and this is because they [Jews and Christians] were given the Book before us, and we were given [it] after them. This was the day which was decreed for them but they disagreed [concerning
David Cook

it], while God guided us to it – and the people are followers to us, the Jews tomorrow
and the Christians afterwards.

(Hammām ibn Munabbih 1987: 20, no. 1; al-Ḥumaydī 1988:
vol. 2, 189, no. 984; al-Ṭabarānī 1996: vol. 1, 93–4, no. 136)

Although there is precedence in this tradition, it is clear that there is no real favouritism. There is
a certain type of ecumenism very similar to that of Paul in Romans 2:9–11: ‘There will be
trouble and distress for every human who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but
glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile.
For God does not show favouritism.’ The type of community being built up here is one of faith,
not of mere worldly deeds or accomplishments of ancestors.

However, there are in Muḥammad’s instructions to the early ascetic Muʿādh ibn Jabal (Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqālānī n.d.: vol. 3, pp. 426–7, no. 8037), sent to Syria, the beginnings of a more exclu-
sive Muslim attitude:

O Muʿādh, go to the ahl al-kitāb [People of the Book], and when they ask you about
the keys to paradise, tell them that the keys to paradise are ‘there is no god but God’
and that breaks everything until it comes to God; whoever comes with it purely on the
Day of Resurrection will not be prevented from Him, and it will overcome every sin.


Especially in the zuḥd (ascetic) literature, there was always the possibility of some non-Muslim
People of the Book, who presumably would have been following the original ‘Muslim’ versions
of their faiths, to enter paradise. A standard example of this tendency, which did not persist into
the mainstream canons of Ḥadīth is the following:

Whatever groups worship other than God will be lifted up on the Day of Resurrection.
. . . Then the Jews will be brought and it will be said to them: ‘What did you worship?’
They will say: ‘We worshipped God and ‘Uzayr [Q 9:30]’, other than a few of them. It
will be said to them: ‘Depart’. Then the Christians will be brought and it will be said
to them: ‘What did you worship?’ They will say: ‘We worshipped God and the Messiah
[Jesus]’, other than a few of them. It will be said to them: ‘Depart’.

(Asad ibn Mūsā 1986: 71)

Mainstream Ḥadīth literature with regard to Christianity falls into a couple of categories. One is
the legal, how precisely to treat Christians within the context of submission to the rule of Islam.
From the experience of Muhammad, this issue is most closely connected to the agreement with
the ‘bishop of Ayla’ (today ‘Aqaba). There is always special provision for the Christians of Arab
tribes, such as the Banū Taghlib, whose conversion to Islam was delayed for a century. Frequently
Muslims are urged to not imitate Christians in their manners, dress, customs or interpretation of
religious matters in general. Harsh apocalyptic warnings appear in which the Muslim commu-
nity is threatened that it will end up just like the Byzantines or the Christians if it does not hold
fast to the sunna of Muḥammad. There is no doubt that these traditions helped give the Muslim
community a cohesiveness and a self-identity that aided it considerably during its first centuries
when it was a minority.

The apocalyptic materials in the mainstream Ḥadīth literature are taken from the historical
experience of the early Syrian Muslims fighting the Byzantines in coastal and northern Syria-
Palestine. All of them, however, are narrated as visions from Muḥammad. These apocalypses
Muḥammad and Christianity

usually portray the Byzantines as having aggressive designs upon the region, and the Muslim community being unable to rely upon the local Christians, who are believed to be interested in betraying the Muslims to their co-religionists. This generalised warfare will be focused eventually upon an apocalyptic battle that will be fought in the region of Antioch, resulting in a Muslim victory, followed by the fall of Constantinople (Muslim n.d.: vol. 8, 175–6; Ibn Māja n.d.: vol. 2, Kitāb al-fitān, esp. bāb al-malāḥīm.). Eventually, according to these traditions, the Christians will be converted to Islam by seeing the return of Jesus as a Muslim, who will then break obvious Christian symbols such as the cross and slaughter the swine. The future of Christians according to mainstream traditions is conversion to Islam.

Jihād (God-sanctioned warfare) traditions associated with the end of Muḥammad’s life, especially the ‘expel the Jews and the Christians’ from the Arabian Peninsula strain, are sometimes quite aggressive (Muslim n.d.: vol. 5, 160, Kitāb al-jihād). But most jihād traditions associated with Muhammad stress not harming monks and priests, as genuinely religious figures to be protected.

Standard Muslim doctrine in the Ḥadīth literature, however, portrays the relationship between Muhammad and Jesus (and by extension, the teaching that Jesus is said to have brought to Christians) as one of completion. If Christianity is rejected as being an innovation and an exaggeration of the status of Jesus, and Christians are mostly said to be in hell, then Jesus is still considerably magnified.

I [Muḥammad] am the one who is most worthy of the son of Mary [Jesus]. The prophets are sons of different women, and there are no other prophets between him and me. A likeness of me and the other prophets is a structure (qaṣr) beautifully built, with one brick left out. Spectators would walk around it and marvel at the beauty of its construction – with the exception of that one brick, none could find any blemish in it. I filled the place of that one brick, completed the construction, and with me the messengers are sealed.


It seems clear that for many Christians who were willing to convert to Islam during the early period of Islam when the Ḥadīth literature was being composed the figure of Jesus was not as crucially important for purposes of salvation as Church teaching would give us to believe. If it were otherwise, then this appropriation of Jesus within the overall framework of Islamic salvation history would not have been effective or useful.

Conclusion

In general, the material concerning Muḥammad and the Christians or Christianity inside the sīra and the Ḥadīth literature is far from being overblown in its polemical nature. The primary purpose of this material appears to link Muḥammad to the established Christian ruling figures of Ethiopia and the Byzantine Empire, to demonstrate the will of God by causing the religion of Islam to triumph and to illustrate how many Christians viewed Muḥammad as a legitimate prophet and were willing to convert to Islam. Although there is obviously some socio-economic envy associated with these established Christian entities, and there is a general theological rejection of the Christian doctrines of the crucifixion and resurrection, salvation and the Trinity, there is little imputation of hatred or malevolence towards Christians as one finds with regard to the Jews (especially in the Qur’ān).
It is fairly clear that if the accounts in the Ḥadith literature have any basis in Muḥammad’s actual experience, encounters with Christians and Christianity were confined to two basic periods of his ministry: the very early one in which there were a number of ex-Christians or those presumably of Christian background who were early converts to Islam and the very late one when Muḥammad and the Muslims began to encounter Christian Arab tribes and delegations from both Syria and the Yemen, and the renewed presence of the Byzantine Empire in Syria-Palestine. Other than these two major groups of encounters, the type of Christian that was best known to Muḥammad would have been that of the desert anchorite. And there is no reasonable doubt that the religiosity of the anchorite influenced early Islam quite heavily, appearing as it does as an exemplar throughout the Ḥadith literature, and especially within the genre of zuhd (ascetic) literature.

One cannot say that the Muḥammad of the sīra or the Ḥadith literature has anything like a grasp of Christianity in all of its rich forms and traditions that were present in the seventh century. But one can say that the material presented concerning Christians and Christianity, sparse though it is by comparison with that concerning the Jews and Judaism, is fairly realistic and even in certain cases believable (with the exception of the encounters with the rulers, which clearly demonstrate no knowledge of what a Byzantine emperor was really like). However, in no case do any of the Christians who speak in this material ever present Christianity in a way that a mainstream Christian would, given the opportunity. The best that we can hope for out of classical Muslim tradition is a relative absence of extreme polemic and a relatively ecumenical tone, which is what exists.

References

Further reading
