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# An Inquiry on Muslim-Christian Relations in the Qur'ân\*

Hadiye Ünsal\*\*

**Abstract:** In the Qur'ân, Christians are generally referred as the “People of the Book” in the meaning of those who believe in a divine book, and as “Nasārā” in particular. In the verses referring to Christianity, the good news about the birth of Jesus, his coming into the world and his miracles are mentioned. Another view in the Qur'ân with respect to Christianity is the rejection of Jesus' divinity. As such, in many verses, Christian belief of trinity is criticized; it is stated that God will not have children, that Jesus is human and he is the servant and messenger of God. On the other hand, there are also Qur'anic verses which praise some amongst the Christians. In this paper, the process analysis in the Qur'anic verses related to Christianity will be made within the framework of Meccan and Madinan periods that are crucial in terms of tracking the developments in the revelation process of the Qur'ân. Besides that, the question of whether the Qur'ân sees Christians as the “other” during its 23-year revelation period will be discussed. In addition to this, this study will give information about Christianity in the context of the Qur'anic revelation. It will also look into the question of which Christian sect/school corresponds to the Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the nature of miracles attributed to Jesus will not be mentioned.

**Keywords:** Exegesis, People of the Book, Christians, Meccan, Madinan

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\* This article is the revised version of the previously unpublished paper and presentation at the colloquium for LOEWE research hub “Religious Positioning” at the Goethe University Frankfurt and also based on previously published book chapter in Turkish: Hadiye Ünsal, “Mekkî-Medenî Ayrımı Çerçevesinde Ehl-i Kitap'la İlgili Ayetlerdeki Dil ve Üslup Farklılığı”. İslam ve Yorum II. ed. Fikret Karaman. Ankara: İnönü Üniversitesi Yayınevi, 2018 / Bu makale daha evvel Goethe University Frankfurt'ta düzenlenen “Dini Konumlanma” LOEWE kolokyumunda sunulan ve yayımlanmayan tebliğimiz ile yayımlanmış bir kitap bölümümüzden (Hadiye Ünsal, “Mekkî-Medenî Ayrımı Çerçevesinde Ehl-i Kitap'la İlgili Ayetlerdeki Dil ve Üslup Farklılığı”. İslam ve Yorum II. ed. Fikret Karaman. Ankara: İnönü Üniversitesi Yayınevi, 2018) istifade ile hazırlanmıştır.

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### Kur'an'da Müslüman-Hıristiyan İlişisine Dair Süreç Analizi

**Öz:** Kur'an'da Hıristiyanlar, genelde ilâhî bir kitaba inananlar anlamında "Ehl-i Kitap", özelde ise "Nasârâ" olarak ifade edilir. Hıristiyanlığa atıfta bulunan ayetlerde Hz. İsa'nın doğumunun müjdelenişi, dünyaya gelişi ve mucizeleri gibi muhtelif hususlardan bahsedilir. Kur'an'da Hıristiyanlık bağlamında zikredilen bir başka husus Hz. İsa'ya yönelik ulûhiyet inancının nefyidir. Bu çerçevede birçok ayette Hıristiyanların teslis inancı tenkit edilir; Allah'ın çocuk edinmeyeceği ifade edilir, Hz. İsa'nın beşer olduğu vurgulanır ve Allah'ın kulu ve elçisi olduğu belirtilir. Bütün bunların yanında Kur'an'da Hıristiyanlar içindeki bazı kimselerden övgüyle bahseden ayetler de mevcuttur. Bu çalışmada Kur'an'da Hıristiyanlıkla ilgili ayetlerdeki süreç analizi Kur'an'ın nüzul sürecindeki gelişmeleri takip açısından önemli iki dönem (Mekkî ve Medenî dönem) çerçevesinde ele alınacaktır. Buna paralel olarak Kur'an'ın 23 yıllık nüzul sürecinin tüm evrelerinde Hıristiyanları "öteki" kategorisinde değerlendirip değerlendirmedeği meselesi incelenecektir. Bunun yanında nüzul ortamındaki Hıristiyanlığa dair bilgiler verilecek, Arap yarımadasındaki Hıristiyanların Hıristiyanlık içindeki hangi mezhebe/ekole karşılık geldiğinden bahsedilecek ve fakat Hz. İsa'ya nispet edilen mucizelerin mahiyetine değinilmeyecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tefsir, Ehl-i Kitap, Hıristiyanlar, Mekkî, Medenî.

## Introduction

The Qur'ân, which was revealed in a period of approximately twenty three years, contains many passages related to past events and stories including those about the *Ahl al-Kitâb*/People of the Book (Jews and Christians). These passages indicate that there was contact with Jews and Christians in the period of revelation. There are some examples also in the sîrah and Islamic history literature showing that there was contact with Christians during the Makkah period.

There are some examples indicate that there had been a contact with Christians during Meccan period. One of these examples is that the Prophet shared his first experience of revelation with his wife Khadijah and she took him to her Christian cousin Waraka ibn Nawfal. The fact that Waraka ibn Nawfal calmed the Prophet after the first revelation and also the Prophet's praise of the Abyssinian king who was a Christian as well constitute evidence for the positive relations with the Christians in Mecca.<sup>1</sup>

1 Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa wa-ma'rifat al-aḥwāl Şāhib al-Sharī'a*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'tī Qal'ajī (Beirut: Dār al-Qutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988), 2/158.

Muslims who were subjected to distress by Meccan polytheists immigrated to Abyssinia. According to the narrations, among Muslims who migrated, Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib read the Qur'ān in the presence of the Abyssinian king, Najashi; thereupon he and his people wept.<sup>2</sup> This incident testifies to the fact that there was not any problem between Christians and Muslims in Meccan period.

The contacts with the Christians took place mostly in the Madinan period. There are verses in the Madinan surahs which state that Christians have love, affection and compassion and are closer to Muslims than Jews.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Christians were criticized in the Madinan surahs such as al-Baqarah, Āl 'Imrān and al-Mā'idah in relation to their belief in the trinity and attributing divinity to Jesus. In this paper, the process analysis in the Qur'anic verses related to Christianity will be made within the framework of Meccan and Madinan periods. In this context, the possible reasons why Christians were called more friendly to Muslims will be addressed and the question whether the verses about Christians must be regarded as conjunctural and sociological or theological and ontological will be discussed. In addition to these, it will be mentioned that which denomination of Christians in the Arabian peninsula was corresponded to Christianity.

## 1. Meccan Period

The issue of how Christianity emerged in the Arabian peninsula is controversial. It is stated that the groups considered heretical by the mainstream Christianity had an important effect on the Christianization of the Arabian

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2 Abū Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā-ibrāhīm al-Abyārī-'Abd al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Shalabī, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Khayr, 2004), I. 266. According to some authors, it is not correct to conclude that this verse had been revealed before the emigration to Abyssinia considering Ḍja'far b. Abī Ṭālib's recitation of the surah Maryam before Najashi because according to some traditions this event took place approximately 12 years after the emigration to Abyssinia and 7 years after the emigration to Madina, shortly before the return of Ḍja'far and his companions to Madina. It is mentioned in the historical sources that the Prophet sent a letter to Najashi through 'Amr b. Umayya in the 7th (628) year of the emigration. When 'Amr b. Umayya arrived at Najashi, he read the letter of the Prophet and told Ḍja'far to recite surah Maryam. As Ḍja'far recited it, the priests filled with tears and upon this incident, surah al-Mā'idah verses 82-83 were revealed. See. Mehmet Apaydın, *Siyer Kronolojisi*, (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2018), 360, 660-661.

3 See. al-Hadīd 57/27; al-Mā'idah 5/82.



Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> One of these groups is the Arians. Arianism is the teaching of Arius, a priest from Alexandria who lived in the 4th century. Arius did not reject the doctrine of trinity, but denied that three divine personalities came from the same substance. According to him, God is one and uncreated. The Son and the Holy Spirit were later created by the Father. Therefore, they are subordinate to Him. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, Arianism was rejected.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Monophysite theology and Arianism found an opportunity to spread to Abyssinia and South Arabia.<sup>6</sup> According to Al-Jābirī (d. 2010), Arianism, which defends the human nature of Jesus, spread to regions such as Palestine, Iraq and Iran. In addition, propagandists of this sect traveled all over the Peninsula. It can be said that the views of this sect reached Mecca through the Qurayshi merchants, who were in constant contact with the Damascus and Yemen region.<sup>7</sup>

According to some reviews, the Arianism in the Arabian Peninsula must have been seen as a belief that viewed Jesus as a human. In this regard, Arianism seemed to evolve towards monotheism and other philosophical/theological teachings of Arianism lost importance among the Arabs over time.<sup>8</sup> According to Al-Jābirī, in the fourth century AD, Arius and his supporters adopted the views of the group “Nasārā” and spread the belief of monotheism in a vast part of Byzantium. Therefore Arius was welcomed in the Islamic literature as he embraced and defended monotheism and he was mentioned even as “Abdullah b. Arius.”<sup>9</sup>

The sources mention the presence of Jews and Christians in Mecca and its vicinity although they were small in numbers.<sup>10</sup> In Mecca, there were mawālī and slave Christians who did different kinds of works.<sup>11</sup> The sources

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4 Mahmut Aydın-Asim Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar: Kur'an'ın Geliş Ortamında Hıristiyanların İnançları, İbadetleri ve Kutsal Metinleri*, (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2019), 54-57.

5 Mircea Eliade, *Dinsel İnançlar ve Düşünceler Tarihi: Gotama Budha'dan Hıristiyanlığın Doğuşuna*, trs. Ali Berktaş, (İstanbul: Kabalıcı, 2003), 2/462-463.

6 Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 86-87.

7 Muhammed Âbid el-Câbirî, *Kur'an'a Giriş*, trs. Muhammed Coşkun, (İstanbul: Mana Yayınları, 2010), 80.

8 Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 102.

9 Câbirî, *Kur'an'a Giriş*, 103, 57.

10 Mustafa Öztürk, “Kur'an'da Müslümanlar ve Ötekilerle Birlikte Yaşamının Referansları”, *Hz. Peygamber ve Birlikte Yaşama Hukuku*, (İstanbul: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2016), 45.

11 Jawad Ali, *al-Mufasssal fî Tārīkh al-`Arab qabla al-Islam*, (Baghdad, 1993), 6/589-606.

also mention that the paintings of Jesus and Mary were drawn on the walls of the Ka'ba.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it can be said that there was a relationship between polytheists and Christians.

In the Qur'ān, Christians are referred as “Nasārā.” “Nasārā” is viewed as a heterodox group by the official (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) Christianity and is not taken seriously. According to the Islamic scholars, Nasārā, -as mentioned in the surah al-Saff/61/14- are the followers of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> In Meccan surahs -except for verses Maryam 19/16-36 and al-Zukhruf 43/57-65- there are hardly any details and discussions about Christians.<sup>14</sup> Again in Meccan period -except the verse Hajj 22/17- there is not any mention of the word Nasārā (Christians), nor any reference to such words as ahl Injil or priest that are found in the Madinan surahs.<sup>15</sup>

The story of Mary and Jesus is explained in the surah Maryam. The verses 30-36 of this surah negate the belief in trinity in the Christian tradition.<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that the surah has a warm, soft and compassionate language and style considering that it was revealed in the fifth or sixth year of the prophethood before the emigration (hijrah) to Abyssinia and that there was a Christian ruler named Najashi Ashama in Abyssinia. It is undoubtedly significant that Allah is described as ‘Rahman’ (Merciful)<sup>17</sup> in sixteen different verses of this surah.<sup>18</sup>

12 Jawad Ali, *al-Mufasssal*, VI. 607; Muhammed Hamidullah, *İslām Peygamberi*, trs. Salih Tuğ, (İstanbul: İrfan Yayıncılık, 1993), 1/70.

13 Câbirî, *Kur'an'a Giriş*, 49.

14 Muhammed İzzet Derveze, *Kur'an'a Göre Hz. Muhammed'in Hayatı*, trs. Mehmet Yolcu, (İstanbul: Yöneliş Yayınları, 1989), 3/143. *The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary*, (Ohio: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 2002) by Maulana Muhammad Ali and *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1996) by 'Abdullah Yusuf Ali were mostly used for the translation of the related verses.

15 Sami Kiliçli, *Mekki Surelerde Mü'min Kimliğinin Oluşumu ve Gayrimüslimlerle İlişkileri*, (Ankara: Araştırma Yayınları, 2013), 364.

16 Meryem 19/30-36:” He said: “I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed unto me revelation and made me a prophet, and made me blessed wherever I may be; and He has enjoined on me prayer and charity so long as I live, and to be kind to my mother; and He has not made me haughty or bereft of grace. And peace me on the day when I was born, and [will be upon me] on the day of my death, and on the day when I am raised to life. Such is Jesus son of Mary, about whose nature they so deeply disagree. It is not conceivable that God should have taken unto Himself a son: limitless is He in His glory! When He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, Be and it is! And surely God is my Lord and your Lord, so serve Him. This is the straight way.”

17 Meryem 19/26, 44, 45, 58, 61, 69, 75, 78, 85, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93, 96.

18 See. Mustafa Öztürk, *Kur'an Kıssalarının Mahiyeti*, (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2016), 249-250.

Another surah referring to the Christians during the Meccan period is the surah al-Rum. When it was heard that the Persians defeated the Rums (Byzantines/East Romans), the believers were sad, and the idolaters were happy. Thereupon, the idolaters oppressed and insulted the believers. The verses al-Rum 30/1-7<sup>19</sup> were revealed following that the polytheists said “Both you and the Byzantines are the People of the Book, our brothers defeated your brothers and we will defeat you.”<sup>20</sup>

It is narrated that a mixed Christian group accepted the prophethood of the prophet shortly after Khaybar, and the verses al-Qasas 28/52-54 were revealed on this occasion. These verses might belong to an earlier period and refer to some Jews who entered Islam.<sup>21</sup> It is also worth mentioning that the Christian ‘Addās became a Muslim thanks to Khadija.<sup>22</sup> Prophet Muhammad was accused by the polytheists with learning the Qurʾān from Christian and Jewish slaves such as ‘Addās, Yāsir and Jabr”<sup>23</sup> because he contacted the slaves in Mecca who were the People of the Book. The Qurʾān responded to these accusations: “And, indeed, We know well that they say about you: ‘It is but a human being that imparts [all] this to him!’ [Notwithstanding that] the tongue of him to whom they so maliciously point is wholly outlandish, whereas this is Arabic speech, clear [in itself] and clearly showing the truth [of its source.]”<sup>24</sup>

Some polytheists put pressure on the Prophet by discussing topics like the deity of Jesus Christ in Meccan period. The Qurʾān, in the verses Zukhruf  
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19 The translation of the subject verses is as follows: Alif. Lam. Mim. The Romans are vanquished. In the lands close-by; yet it is they who, notwithstanding this their defeat, shall be victorious within a few years: [for with God rests all power of decision, first and last. And on that day will the believers [too, have cause to] rejoice in God’s succour. He gives succour to whomever He wills, since He alone is almighty, a dispenser of grace. [It is] God’s promise. God will not fail in His promise- but most people know. They know the outward of this world’s life, but one of the Hereafter they are heedless.

20 Abū al-Ḥasan Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shahḥāta (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2002), 3/406-407; Abū Bakr Abdurrezzak b. Hemmām, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, ed. Mustafa Muslim Muhammad, (Riyadh: Mektebetu al-Rushd, 1989), 2/101.

21 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 317.

22 Hamidullah, *Islām Peygamberi*, 1/169.

23 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 2/487. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ‘an tāwīl al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Dār Hicr, 2001), 14/364-368.

24 See. al-Nahl 16/103; al-Furkan 25/4.

43/57-60 defended Jesus against the polytheists who made him part of their polemics:<sup>25</sup> “Now whenever [the nature of] the son of Mary is mentioned as an example, [O Muhammad,] lo! thy people raise an outcry on this score and say, “Which is better- our deities or he?” [But] it is only in the spirit of dispute that they put this comparison before thee: yea, they are contentious folk! [As for Jesus,] he was nothing but [a human being-] a servant [of Ours] whom We had graced [with prophethood], and whom We made an example for the children of Israel. And had We so willed, [O you who worship angels,] We could indeed have made you into angels succeeding one another on earth!”

## 2. Madinan Period

Some verses revealed in Madina period imply Christians' presence before the revelation although there is not much information about whether there were any Christians lived in Madina before Islam. However, these Christians were mostly migrant settlers who engaged in commercial life. It is hard to find any historical evidence about the presence of a steady Christian community in Madina.<sup>26</sup>

The verses related to the beliefs and attitudes of Christians during the Madinan period are more voluminous and clear than the verses revealed in Mecca.<sup>27</sup> In the Qur'ān, the verses of criticism against the Christians are related to the belief in trinity. The Qur'ān's responses to trinity and incarnation are sometimes moderate and sometimes severe. The verses al-Nisā' 4/171-172 and al-Mā'idah 5/77 see Christian belief only as an excessiveness in faith. The Qur'ān uses very harsh statements for Christians that evoke the expressions used for the idolaters as in the verses al-Mā'idah 5/17, 72-75.<sup>28</sup>

The story of Jesus in the verses Āl 'Imrān 3/35-64 has a message that Jesus in no way possesses divine attributes, rather he is a servant created by Allah like other humanbeings. Eighty or so verses in the surah Al Imran were

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25 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 3/798-799; Kilinçli, *Mekki Surelerde Mü'min Kimliğinin Oluşumu*, 382.

26 Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 86.

27 Derveze, *Kur'an'a Göre Hz. Muhammed'in Hayatı*, 3/143.

28 Fazlur Rahman, *Ana Konularıyla Kur'an*, trs. Alparslan Açıkgenç, (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2017), 116.

revealed upon a group of Najran Christians' disputes with the Prophet about Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

The concept of approval/validation in the verses that imposed the Qurʾān the role of confirming the previous scriptures of the Jews and Christians in the Madinan period has a political and strategic content. More precisely, Torah and/or the Bible are not theologically criticized in the Qurʾān, but rather as it can be seen in the verses al-Māʾidah 5/43-47, an ethical warning is given to the religious groups who claim that they are the people of Torah and the Bible about being obedient to their own scriptures.<sup>30</sup>

Some of the verses in Madinan surahs which consist of criticisms of Christianity are as follows:

“O People of the Book, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, “Three”; desist - it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son.”<sup>31</sup>

“They have certainly disbelieved who say that Allah is Christ, the son of Mary. Say, “Then who could prevent Allah at all if He had intended to destroy Christ, the son of Mary, or his mother or everyone on the earth?” And to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them. He creates what He wills, and Allah is over all things competent.”<sup>32</sup>

“They have certainly disbelieved who say, “Allah is the Messiah, the son of Mary” while the Messiah has said, “O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.” Indeed, he who associates others with Allah- Allah has forbidden him Paradise, and his refuge is the Fire. And there are not for the wrongdoers any helpers. They have certainly disbelieved who say, “Allah is the third of three.” And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among .....

29 Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-nuzūl*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Qutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1991), 53; Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 1/261.

30 Öztürk, “Kurʾanʼda Müslümanlar ve Ötekilerle Birlikte Yaşamının Referansları”, 35.

31 al-Nisā 4/171. See also al-Tawba 9/30.

32 al-Māʾidah 5/17.

them a painful punishment. So will they not repent to Allah and seek His forgiveness? And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. The Messiah, son of Mary, was not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. And his mother was a supporter of truth. They both used to eat food. Look how We make clear to them the signs; then look how they are deluded.”<sup>33</sup> According to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767) al-Nisā 4/171 and al-Mā'idah 5/17, 72-75 were revealed about Najran Christians.<sup>34</sup>

The arguments of the Qur'ān against Christian dogmas such as trinity, incarnation and redemption are in fact about the doctrines of mainstream Christianity rather than those of the heretical sects. The Qur'anic views of the nature of Jesus and its statements about the alteration of the gospels are related to the doctrines of mainstream Christianity as well as heretical denominations. In this sense, the main issues about Christianity mentioned in the Qur'ān concern general group of people who define themselves as Christian. The Qur'ān may have addressed some specific Christian groups in the region regarding particular subjects. Although mainstream Christianity viewed these groups as heretical, they somehow had important functions in Arabian Christianity, and the Arabs knew about the Christian faith mostly through these sects. Therefore, some of the Qur'anic verses about Christians were not unfamiliar to especially literate Arabs and the Christians in the region. The Christians in the region knew exactly what was meant when the Qur'ān mentioned about basic doctrines of the Christian faith.<sup>35</sup>

Christians are criticized in the surahs such as al-Baqarah, Āl 'Imrān (3/35-64) and al-Mā'idah (5/110-120) because of their belief in trinity and incarnation. The verse al-Mā'idah 5/116 goes as follows: And [beware the Day] when Allah will say, “O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?’” He will say, ‘Exalted are You!’ It is concluded from the first statement in these verses that the Christians consider Mary as part of the trinity, and that they believe that she is god like

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33 al-Mā'idah 5/72-75.

34 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr*, 1/424, 464, 494. See also, Zekiye Sönmez, *İslām'ın Ortaya Çıktığı Dönemde Arap Yarımadası'nda Hıristiyanlık*, (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2012), 257-311.

35 Şaban Kuzgun, “Kur'ân-ı Kerim'e Göre Hıristiyanlık ve Hıristiyanlar”, *Asrımızda Hıristiyan-Müslüman Münasebetleri*, ed. İsmail Kurt, (İstanbul: İlmi Neşriyat, 1993), 66-67; Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 91.

her son. However, in the prevailing doctrine in the Christian tradition, Mary is not considered as a person of trinity. It is possible that the Christians of Abyssinia and Najran region who defined Mary as ‘Mother of God’ (Theotokos) had a belief ascribing divinity to her.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the belief of Mary’s divinity mentioned in the Qur’ān may be associated with some Christian groups in the Arabian region, limiting this belief to only some small heretical groups would not help to explain the issue. For example, in the 4th century Arabian peninsula, a women’s cult called the Collyridians viewed Mary as goddess and worshiped her by offering bread in their rituals. Epiphanius objected to the doctrines of this heretical movement in his treatise stating that Mary was not a goddess and should not be worshipped and he defended the doctrine of trinity. According to him, the body of Mary is sacred, but she is not God. Also, the fact that she gave birth to Jesus as a virgin does not necessarily mean that she must be worshiped.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand in some of the Madina verses the People of the Book are praised: In the verse Āl ‘Imrān 3/199, it is stated that among the People of the Book are those who believe in Allah and what was revealed to them and the Qur’ān as well. In the same verse they are praised as being humbly submissive to Allah, not exchanging the verses of Allah for a small price. Therefore they are said to have their reward with their Lord. It can be seen from the verses pointing to the Christians that some passages make a distinction between a small group of Christians and other Christians as the mentioned group is praised. However, the Qur’ān does not give any cue about whether they are a sect or an organized community, but rather highlights their differences from the mainstream Christians. Their similar beliefs with the message of the Qur’ān and the Prophet are emphasized and they are included in the definition of Islam and accepted as part of the Abrahamic tradition. Nevertheless, the Qur’ān does not hesitate to use the term “Christian” (Nasārā) for them in some verses. For this reason, McAuliffe stated that it would be appropriate to call these people as “The Christians of the Qur’ān.” According to him, the Christians of the Qur’ān, are true Christians who did not attribute divinity to Jesus of the Gospels, believed he is a prophet and accepted the last

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36 Bkz. Öztürk, *Kur’an Kıssalarının Mahiyeti*, 358-359.

37 Aydın-Duran, *Kur’an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 141-142.

prophet whose good news were told in the revelations sent to Jesus. They were promised with double reward in the Qur'an. According to an emotional expression in the Qur'an, they are Nasrānis. Or according to the definition of the tafsir (exegetical) tradition, they are believers before the Qur'an.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the criticism of the belief in trinity, the verses al-Mā'idah 5/82 categorize the polytheists and the Jews of Madina as the most intense of the people in animosity towards the believers whereas Christians as the nearest in affection. It can be said that different approaches towards Jews and Christians are more practical-pragmatic or politico-strategic in the context of positive-negative relations between these groups and Muslims during revelation rather than being ontological and theological. Besides it is a well-known fact that two different attitudes such as hostility and friendship towards Jews and Christians mentioned in the verse al-Mā'idah 5/82, varied in historical experience, and that both religious groups showed hostility towards Islam and Muslims. Therefore, it is more appropriate to read the Qur'an's definition of friend-enemy not as a fixed and timeless attitude but a conjunctural situation in the revelation period.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, al-Mā'idah 5/82 refers to the king of Abyssinia, as stated in the references.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly it is stated that the verse Āl 'Imrān 3/199 has revealed about al-Nad̲jāshī Abyssinian king Ashame. Ashame died on 9 AH (630 AD), and the Prophet himself announced his death to the people of Madinah. According to a narration by Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh and Qātada, the Prophet said, "Your brother al-Nad̲jāshī passed away, so perform a funeral prayer." He led the funeral prayer in Jannah al-bakī' in absentia. The hypocrites then said, "Muhammad is performing a funeral prayer for a Christian he has never seen." In response to this, verse Āl 'Imrān 3/199 was revealed.<sup>41</sup>

As mentioned before, there are verses that show that the Qur'an uses a compassionate and gentle language towards Jesus and those who believe in

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38 Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hristiyanlar*, 148-149.

39 Öztürk, "Kur'an'da Müslümanlar ve Ötekilerle Birlikte Yaşamının Referansları", 35.

40 Abū Muḥammad 'Abdurrahman Ibn Ebī Hātim, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, ed. 'Es'ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, (Mecca: Mektebetu Nizār Mustafa el-Bāz, 1997), 1183.

41 al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, VI. 329; Abū al-Fidā' Ismā'il bin 'Umar al-Dimashqī Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, (Cairo: Muessese al-Qurṭuba 2000), 3/311-312. Levent Öztürk, "Necâşî Ashame", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2006), 32/476-477.



him.<sup>42</sup> In this context, the following verses in Surah al-Hadid 57/27 should be mentioned: “Then We sent following their footsteps Our messengers and followed [them] with Jesus, the son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We placed in the hearts of those who followed him compassion and mercy.” This attitude of the Qur’ān towards Christians is different from its attitude towards any other religious community. Due to the Qur’ān’s sometimes moderate and essentially compassionate attitude, some Orientalists allege that the Prophet had fundamentally the same ideas with Christians and that he was almost a Christian. They argued that because of his political desires he did not openly introduce himself as a Christian. In fact, they stated his increasing hostility towards the Byzantines as a reason for the Qur’ān’s severe criticism of Christianity. Again some of the orientalists claimed that the Prophet did not understand well the Christian view of Jesus Christ because according to them, Christians of that period misrepresented the Christian beliefs to him. But it is rather hard to imagine how this theory of Christ can be misunderstood. The problem with the first claim is the impossibility of proving that the verses that heavily criticized the Christians were revealed after the others. For example, the verse Hadid 57/27 was revealed in the final stages of the Madinan period. Then the Prophet encountered various Christians at different times and the Qur’ān addressed these different Christian groups in different styles.<sup>43</sup>

According to a noteworthy opinion, the usual view expressed in the Qur’ān in the first few years after the Hijrah is that Christianity is a distinct religion parallel to Judaism and Islam. The growth of hostility, however, between Muslims and Jews did not involve a deterioration of relations between Muslims and Christians. On the contrary, we find that stories of Jesus the Messiah are used in the Qur’ān as part of the intellectual attack on the Jews. It is significant that the twelve apostles are called the *ansar* or ‘helpers’ of Jesus the name applied to the Arabs of Medina who supported Muhammad and opposed the Jews; speakers of Arabic probably felt a connexion between this word and the Qur’anic word for ‘Christians’, *Nasārā*. Moreover a careful reading of the passage about the crucifixion of Jesus shows that it is not

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42 Compare Hadiye Ünsal, “Mekkî-Medenî Ayrımı Çerçevesinde Ehl-i Kitap’la İlgili Ayetlerdeki Dil ve Üslup Farklılığı”, *İslam ve Yorum II*, ed. Fikret Karaman, (Ankara: İnönü Üniversitesi Yayınevi, 2018), 265.

43 Fazlur Rahman, *Ana Konularıyla Kur’an*, 247-248.

intended as a denial of Christian doctrine, but as a denial of a Jewish claim to have triumphed over the Christians, and it goes on to assert the superiority of the Christian hope. In a sense, indeed, it is true that the doctrines refuted by the Qur'ān, namely those of tritheism and of the physical sonship of Jesus, are aberrations and not Christian orthodoxy. Thus even if the passages criticizing these Christian views are early, they cannot be taken as evidence of a generally hostile attitude towards Christians. On the contrary, the presumption is that Muhammad maintained friendly relations with the Negus of Abyssinia, at least until the return of the Muslims at the time of the expedition to Khaybar. After the conquest of Mecca and battle of Hunayn the situation changed. Muhammad began to have dealings with political groups which were wholly or mainly Christian. al-Tawba 9/29-35 as a whole marks the transition to a policy of hostility to the Christians. This policy found its expression in the great expedition to Tabuk in 630/9, and was continued not merely for the rest of Muhammad's lifetime but also afterwards, at least until Syria had been completely subjugated.<sup>44</sup>

Despite all the criticism of the belief in trinity in the Meccan and Madinan surahs, Allah says to Jesus on the Day of Resurrection, "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you tell people, 'Take me and my mother for God besides Allah?' Jesus' answer to this question should be read as an indication of his vast mercy. Namely:

"He will answer: Glory to You! It was not for me to say what I had no right to. Had I said so, You would surely have known it. You know all what is within my mind whereas I do not know what is within Yours. You, indeed You, know fully all that is beyond the reach of human perception. I said to them nothing except what You commanded me, that is: "Serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord." I watched over them as long as I remained among them; and when You did recall me, then You Yourself became the Watcher over them. Indeed, You are Witness over everything. If You chastise them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are the All-Mighty, the All-Wise."<sup>45</sup>

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44 Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 317-320. According to Watt, one of the remarkable features of the relationship between Muslims and Christians is that neither Muhammad nor any of the companions seems to have been aware of some of the fundamental Christian doctrines.

45 al-Mā'idah 5/116-118.

It should be mentioned that the following verses in the surah al-Baqarah 2/62, and also al-Mā'idah 5/69, revealed in the Madinan period refer to a common ground: 'Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabeans [before Prophet Muhammad] - those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness - will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve.' In this process, the Qur'ān emphasized the common grounds and the essence of religion and stated that the members of the divine religions could live together in peace.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

1. As can be seen from the knowledges and opinions we have presented so far, Christians consisted of different groups in the Arabian Peninsula during the revelation period. Therefore, it would be misleading to think that each passage about Christians in the Qur'an refers to all Christians living in those times. Thus, it is necessary to read such passages together with their context (historical information and *sirah*).<sup>47</sup>

2. One of the main aims in the stories of Maryam and Jesus in both the Meccan and the Madinan surahs is to reject the belief of trinity. Therefore, the criticism of the Qur'ān against Christians is rather theological. However, thanks to the Tabuk expedition, which took place in 630, and the revelation of the Surah al-Tawba in that period and especially the *jizya* ayah revealed in the same period,<sup>48</sup> the Prophet did not discriminate against Jews and Christians in his relations with the People of the Book, and probably extended the rule of *jizya* to both religious groups for the purpose of establishing the political and administrative authority.<sup>49</sup>

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46 Nuh Arslantaş, *Hız. Muhammed Döneminde Yahudiler*, (İstanbul: Kuramer, 2016), 147.

47 See, Ömer Özsoy-İlhami Güler, *Konularına Göre Kur'an: Sistematik Kur'an Fihristi*, (Ankara: Fecr Yayınevi, 2015), 149.

48 Translation of the related verse is as follows: "Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture- [fight] until they give the *jizya* willingly while they are humbled."

49 Compare Ünsal, "Mekkî-Medenî Ayrımı Çerçevesinde Ehl-i Kitap'la İlgili Ayetlerdeki Dil ve Üslup Farklılığı", 267.

3. Christians are not addressed in a harsh way as the Jews are. The fact that Christians lived in more distant lands may be the reason for this. Relations with Christians seem to have been relatively stable. Because of this distance, the power conflicts between Muslims and Christians were not as intense as with the Jews. The Qur'ân has not identified a certain form of relationship as normative for a particular community in relation with non-Muslim communities. It can be said that in such relations, the interests of Muslims and the attitudes of other communities towards Muslims are decisive and the politics about them are determined by these variables.<sup>50</sup>

4. Some of the verses which seem to be about Jesus and Christianity are in fact about Judaism. Even the verses about Mary, Jesus and the crucifixion are about the struggle between the Jews and the Prophet. The verses 4/153-158 are a striking example in this regard. In these verses although mention of Jesus may seem like a theological issue at first glance, the expressions used are in fact a refusal to the threats by the Jews against Muhammad over the issue of Jesus. According to a similar commentary of the Surah Nisa, verses 153-156, the Jews were probably threatening the Prophet saying that "Watch your step! We killed Jesus and we will kill you, too." The Qur'ân, however, in these verses tells the Prophet not to worry because the enemies of Jesus were not allowed to kill him and God will never allow anybody to kill Muhammad either.<sup>51</sup>

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50 See, Mehmet Paçacı, "Kur'an'da Ehl-i Kitap Anlayışı," *Dinler Tarihi Araştırmaları IV: Müslümanlar ve Diğer Din Mensupları*, (Ankara: Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği Yayınları, 2004), 62-63.

51 Ünsal, "Mekkî-Medenî Ayrımı Çerçevesinde Ehl-i Kitap'la İlgili Ayetlerdeki Dil ve Üslup Farklılığı", 267; Aydın-Duran, *Kur'an ve Hıristiyanlar*, 137-138.

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