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The Prophet's (pbuh) Encounters with Christians in the Context of Orientalists' Arguments of Cultural Borrowing

Oryantalistlerin Kültürel Ödünç Alma İddiaları Bağlamında Hz. Peygamber'in Hıristiyanlarla Karşılaşmaları

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Abstract

This article explores the perspectives and assertions of academic Orientalism concerning the Prophet Muhammad's interactions with Christians. The purpose here is not to exhaustively catalog all such views, but rather to delineate the predominant trends within academic Orientalism on this topic, as exemplified by the most recurrently cited opinions. It does not aim to enumerate every scholar who has articulated a perspective shared widely among Orientalists. Instead, the focus is on evaluating the fundamental tendencies of the Orientalist paradigm, preferring an analytical overview to a critique of individual opinions. Given that the stance of academic Orientalism, especially that of its early exponents, on the Prophet's engagements with Christians was shaped under the influence of medieval assertions, a concise overview of these medieval claims is provided initially.

Keywords: Prophet, Christians, Pre-Islamic Arabia, Cultural Borrowing, *qiṣṣa* of Baḥīra.

Öz

Bu makalede, akademik oryantalizmin Hz. Peygamber'in (s.a.v.) Hıristiyanlar ile karşılaşmaları ve irtibatları hakkındaki görüş ve iddiaları ele alınmıştır. Bu görüş ve iddialarının tamamı aktarılmamış, daha ziyade sık tekrar edenler üzerinden akademik oryantalizmin meseleyle ilgili temel eğilimini tavsif etmek amaçlanmıştır. Birçok oryantalist tarafından dile getirilmiş bir görüşü öne süren her bir isme atıfta bulunmak hedeflenmemiştir. Ayrıca, her bir görüşün tenkidinden ziyade oryantalist paradigmanın konuyla ilgili temel eğiliminin bir değerlendirilmesini yapmak tercih edilmiştir. Akademik oryantalizmin bilhassa ilk isimlerinin Hz. Peygamber'in (s.a.v.) Hıristiyanlar ile irtibatlarına yaklaşımı Orta Çağ'daki iddiaların gölgesinde geliştiği için makalenin Giriş bölümünde öncelikle Orta Çağ'daki iddiaların kısa bir özeti verilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hz. Peygamber, Hıristiyanlar, İslam Öncesi Arabistan, Kültürel Ödünç Alma, Bahîrâ Kıssası.

THE IMAGE OF THE PROPHET IN THE MEDIEVAL WESTERN DISCOURSE

Medieval Christian and Jewish claims about the Prophet prominently featured characterizations such as "false prophet," "heretical Christian," "antichrist," and "epileptic."[1] Additionally, a significant assertion within the Christian encounter was the depiction of Islam as a variant of Arianism, with Muhammad portrayed as a heretical priest of this sect. This claim traces back to early polemics by figures such as John of Damascus (d. circa 754). A millennium after John of Damascus, the term "imposter" still appeared in book titles concerning the Prophet. For example, Humphrey Prideaux (d. 1724), in his *The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet* (London 1697), claimed that the Qur'ān was authored by two heretical Christians in Medina.[2] The *qiṣṣa* of Baḥīrā (Sergius) was similarly employed to suggest that the Prophet was a heretical priest. This *qiṣṣa* continued to be referenced by many orientalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[3]

Academic Islamic studies in the West, which can be approximately dated to the late eighteenth century, or even more precisely to the 1800-1830s,[4] did not immediately break its organic connection with the medieval perception of Islam. For example, William Muir's (b. 1905) translation of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī's (b. III/9th century) *Risāla* into English,[5] along with Reinhart Dozy's (d. 1883) and Aloys Sprenger's (d. 1893) interpretations of revelations as epileptic fits, illustrate this continuity. Consequently, while academic studies evolved beyond medieval frameworks in language, methodology, and institutional settings, certain medieval perceptions of Islam persisted, especially in the early phases. Understanding these perceptions is essential for comprehending scholarly works from the first half of the nineteenth century." The insights of John Tolan are crucial for understanding the nature of early Western academic studies:

> The portrait of Muḥammad the impostor remained the dominant image of the Prophet in European discourse, even in learned works such as Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville's *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697), or in the *Encyclopédie*. We find it in nineteenth-century apologists of empire and mission, such as William Muir (1819-1905), who wrote a massive, erudite four-volume study on Muḥammad: "Britain must not faint," he wrote, "until her millions in the East abandon both the false prophet and the idol shrines and rally around that eternal truth which has been brought to light in the Gospel."

1. THE PRESENCE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA PRE-ISLAM AND AT THE DAWN OF ISLAM: A REVIEW OF ORIENTALIST LITERATURE

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1 Hartmut Bobzin, *Hz. Muhammed: Hayatı ve Batı Algısındaki Dönüşümü*, trans. Cengiz Altunaydın (İstanbul: Runik Kitap, 2021), 11-19.

2 Frederick Quinn, *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70.

3 Robert, *Orientalists and Their Enemies*, trans. Bahar Tırnakcı (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yay.), 2008, 26.

4 Susannah Heschel, "Orientalist Triangulations: Jewish Scholarship on Islam as a Response to Christian Europe", in *The Muslim Reception of European Orientalism: Reversing the Gaze*, ed. Susannah Heschel and Umar Ryad (London: Routledge, 2019), 155.

5 The attribution of the treatise to al-Kindī is controversial (Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, "al-Kindī, 'Abd al-Masīh b. Isḥāq", *DIA*, 26/39). However, it is generally dated to the reign of al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833). John Tolan characterizes al-Kindī's *Risāla* as the most influential work of Oriental Christian polemicists before the nineteenth century (cf. John V. Tolan, "European Accounts," *The Cambridge Companion to Muḥammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp, 232).

Academic Orientalist discourse primarily emphasizes that, in the context of Islam's initial contact with Christianity and the Prophet Muḥammad's (pbuh) interactions with Christians, the Arabian Peninsula was a part of the broader Near Eastern culture rather than an isolated region in the V. and VI. centuries.[6] This discourse particularly highlights the spread of Christianity across the Arabian Peninsula. Discussions often focus on the Christianization of Arab groups such as the Lakhmids in Hira, the Ghassanids in southern Syria, the followers of the Church of Mary in Yathrib, the Christian communities in Yemen, particularly in Najran, and their relationships with the Kingdom of Aksum in Abyssinia.[7] While contemporary Muslim scholars agree that the Arabian Peninsula was not isolated from adjacent civilizations and hosted diverse religions, Orientalist literature has documented this interconnectedness from an early period.

Reviewing perspectives on the Arabian Peninsula's integration with Near Eastern civilizations reveals that it was not as undeveloped as previously perceived. Sidney Smith, in his 1954 article, highlighted the presence of developed urban centers in Arabia, comparable to those in Syria and Iraq, though not as advanced as Antioch and Madāin. He also noted that the Jewish and Christian communities in the region included not only foreigners but also Arabs who adhered to these faiths.[8]

Another issue that is emphasized in the West in terms of the Arabian peninsula's contact with the civilizations of the Near East is the encounters with Christians through trade routes. The robust trade activity in Arabia, facilitating the flow of goods from India through Mecca to Western and Northern regions, fostered extensive interactions.[9] As a result of Meccans traveling beyond the Hijāz for trade and Christians visiting Mecca for various reasons, particularly during fairs, there emerged a discernible knowledge of Christianity within Mecca. For instance, Jonathan P. Berkey, in his book on the formative period of Islam, points out that the Qur'an, in narrating parables, refers to the existing knowledge of the interlocutors and assumes a certain degree of familiarity with these reports. He suggests that this familiarity was likely gained through interactions with Jews or Christians in Mecca or via commercial travels beyond the Hijāz.[10]

A further aspect of the Arabian Peninsula's engagement with Near Eastern cultures involves the presence of Christian and Jewish communities in the pre-Islamic era, indicative of the region's early monotheistic beliefs. Theodor Nöldeke, a pioneer of Western academic Qur'anic studies, observed

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[6] "A period of intensive enquiry has provided us with a more complex view of the Arabian past, one that connects the history of the region and its inhabitants to the history of the Near East and the Roman and Persian empires." (cf. Greg Fisher - Philip Wood, "Arabia and the Late Antique East", *Early Islam: The Sectarian Milieu of Late Antiquity?*, 31).

[7] R. Y. Ebied, "Syriac Impact on Arabic Literature", *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of Umayyad Period*, ed. A.E.L. Beeston *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 499.

[8] Sidney Smith, "Events in Arabia in the 6th Century A. D.", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 16/3 (1954), 467.

[9] See for example. L. E. Goodman, "The Greek Impact on Arabic Literature", *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature to the End of Umayyad Period*, 460. On the other hand, Abdullah Saeed argues that Mecca was not in a very important position: "In the early seventh century, Mecca was rather marginal. Apart from the importance some Arab pagans gave to the Kaaba in Mecca and the caravan trade in which the Meccans were engaged, the town appears to have been insignificant." (Abdullah Saeed, "Contextualizing", *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin, 37).

[10] Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 63.

that Christianity had permeated various Arab tribes, notably the tribes of Kalb, Tayy, Tenûh, Taghlib, and Baqr b. Wāil along the Byzantine-Sasanian frontier,[11] and further inland in the tribe of al-Tamīm and Yemen.[12] On the other hand, Nöldeke also states that the number of Christians was not very large and their beliefs could not be considered deep-rooted.[13] Chase Robinson, a contemporary Orientalist, claims that the concept of *jāhiliyya*, as understood today, was formulated during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras, suggesting that monotheism was more prevalent in the peninsula than earlier assumed. Supporting this perspective, he references Najrān, which emerged as a hub of Christianity in South Arabia from the fifth century, and the usage of the term "er-*rahmān*" in pre-Islamic inscriptions from the region.[14] Actually, Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī (d. 310/923) notes that the term "*rahmān*" was employed to denote the creator during the *jāhiliyyah* period, providing examples from poetry that feature this term.[15] In fact, such overlaps between the inscriptions and the information provided by Islamic sources constitute significant evidence for the reliability of these sources.[16] Likewise, Robert Hoyland maintains that monotheistic terminology was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia.[17]

Irfan Shahīd[18] (d. 2016) also endeavored to trace the pathways through which the Meccans, and specifically the Prophet Muḥammad, became acquainted with Christianity. Al-Shahīd contends that the massacre of Najrān's Christians circa 520 transformed the region into a spiritual hub for Christian pilgrims. He suggests, based on Arabic religious inscriptions at the Hind Monastery (Dayr al-Hind) in Hīrah, that Christian religious texts, including the Gospel, existed in Arabic.[19] Shahīd's assessment of the existence of Arabic Christian religious texts is particularly important in terms of cultural borrowing. Shahīd also highlights the links between Christians in South Arabia and Najrān with Mecca, noting their missionary activities at the Ukaz fair and the references in Sūrah Quraysh

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[11] Rodinson states that these two tribes were generally Monophysite (cf. Maxime Rodinson, *Mohammed*, trans. Anne Carter [London: Penguin Books], 272). He also notes that there were many Christians among the members of the tribe of Banū Ḥanīfa in Central Arabia, i.e. in Yamāma (p. 271).

[12] Adam Apak also states that "Christianity spread among many Arab tribes such as Tanūh, Bahrā, Iyād, Āmile, Lahm, Juzam, Taghlib and Bakr" (Adem Apak, *Anahatlarıyla İslâm Öncesi Arap Tarihi ve Kültürü*, 246). See also See also, Zekiye Sönmez, *İslâm'ın Ortaya Çıktığı Dönemde Arap Yarımadası'nda Hıristiyanlık* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2012), 96.

[13] For Nöldeke's views, see. Theodor Nöldeke *et al*., *The History of the Qur'ān*, trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003), 5-7.

[14] See Chase F. Robinson, "Rise of Islam 600 705", *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, 1/177-180.

[15] Tabarī, *Jāmiʿal-bayān* (Mecca: Dār al-Tarbiya wa al-Turāth, n.d.), 1/131.

[16] For a similar approach, see. Wadad Qādī, "In The Footsteps Of Arabic Biographical Literature: A Journey, Unfinıshed, In The Company Of Knowledge", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 68/4 (2009), 241-252.

[17] Robert Hoyland, "The Jewish and/or Christian audience of the Qur'ān and the Arabic Bible," *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam*, ed. in Francisco del Río Sánchez (Brepols: s.n., 2018), 31-40.

[18] Since Shahīd was educated within the orientalist paradigm and characterizes himself as a continuation of Western scholars, he is included here.

[19] Irfān Shahīd, "Islam and *Oriens Christianus*: Makka 610-622 AD", in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, ed. Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2016), 10-11. The existence of an Arabic Bible in the pre-Islamic period was previously claimed by Anton Baumstark (d. 1948). Robert Turnbull has shown that Baumstark relied on "a single defective mansucript" (see Robert Turnbull, "Can Manuscript Headings Prove that There Were Arabic Gospels Before The Qurʾān?", in *Scribal Habits in Near Eastern Manuscript Traditions*, ed. George Anton Kiraz - Sabine Schmidtke, 289-306).

concerning winter travels. At this point he particularly cites the example of Qus b. Sāʿida (d. 600) to illustrate these connections.[20]

Shahīd notably underscores the significance of Christian Abyssinians residing in Western Arabia in the context of Islam and Christianity. He particularly highlights the Abyssinian king's deployment of an army around 520 AD to retaliate against the massacre of Christians by the Himyarite king Dhūnuvās, leaidng to the subsequent annexation of the region to Abyssinia. This action initiated a half-century of Christian governance in parts of Arabia. Shahīd asserts that Western Arabia underwent significant Christianization in the sixth century, a development that also impacted Mecca. He mentions that following the cessation of their southern rule in 570, the Abyssinians expanded into Western Arabia and Mecca. He points to Christian cemeteries in Mecca and depictions of Mary and Jesus in the Kaaba. From this perspective, he explores the potential existence of Christian religious texts in Mecca. Echoing his earlier assertion that the Gospel was translated into Arabic before Islam, he contends that the Abyssinians possessed the Bible in their own language. As previously stated, Shahīd endeavors to delineate the pathways through which the Prophet Muhammad became acquainted with Christianity.

In conclusion, the prevailing orientalist perspective posits that Christians occupied a significant role within the religious and cultural milieu of the Arabian Peninsula both prior to and at the inception of Islam. Accordingly, the peninsula engaged with Near Eastern cultures through trade and political interactions among various Christian sects with Byzantium and the Sassanian Empire, conditions that facilitated the spread of monotheism and the emergence of Islam. The orientalists' interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad's interactions with Christians should be assessed within this broader context. In the subsequent section, the orientalists' recurrent observations, opinions, and assertions regarding the Prophet Muhammad's relations with Christians will be addressed.

2. THE PROPHET'S ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRISTIANS AS DEPICTED IN ORIENTALIST LITERATURE

The main issues highlighted by orientalists in the context of the Prophet's encounters with Christians are his contacts with Christians in his pre-prophetic and commercial travels and his acquisition of knowledge from them or the existence of 'mentors/teachers', his relations with the Abyssinian Christians in the context of his travels and migration to Abyssinia, and finally his reception of the Christian delegation from Najrān.

Western scholars, especially in the nineteenth century, emphasize the Prophet's travels outside Mecca to Syria prior to his prophethood. The primary focus is not merely on his encounters with Christians but significantly on his acquisition of knowledge from these interactions. In the context of pre-prophetic travels, the *qiṣṣa* of Baḥīrā (Sergius) holds a distinctive place, particularly in the narratives of Christian authors. Appears in numerous Eastern Christian manuscripts, and there is even a widespread version among Jews.[21] Recently, Charles Tieszen has analyzed the versions of the

[20] For Shahīd's views, see. "Islam and *Oriens*", 12-14, 20-21.

[21] Charles Tieszsen, *The Christian Encounter with Muhammad: How Theologians Have Interpreted the Prophet* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) 20, 155 fn. 4.

qiṣṣa of Bahīrā as found in Christian sources. Tieszen identifies four versions of the *qiṣṣa*, two in Syriac -an East Syrian version and a West Syrian version- and two in Arabic -a short and a long version- which narrate that Bahīrā handed the Qurʾān to the Prophet but that it was later tampered with by a Jew named Kaʿb. Additionally, there are also Latin and Armenian translations. Tieszen delineates the discrepancies among these versions, attributing the variations to redactors and scribes who modified the narrative to bolster their communities' positions in polemics against Muslims. [22]

Hartwig Hirschfeld (d. 1934) identifies numerous similarities between the Jewish widespread version of the Bahīrā story and Islamic historical sources. According to him, a hybrid legend was constructed by combining different fragments of the Isrāʿīlite source, and 'Abdullah b. Salām (d. 43/663-64) was responsible for the first version of this hybrid text. Hirschfeld, rejecting the historicity of the Baḥīrā story, maintains that the account of the Prophet's pre-prophetic meeting with a monk named Nestūrā in Busrā, Syria, holds historical validity. According to him, this Nestorian Christian tried to convince the Prophet by explaining his religious views to him. Hirschfeld further contends that, as a result of this encounter, the Prophet's later attitudes toward Nestorianism became less antagonistic.[23]

Gustave Weil (d. 1889) and Aloys Sprenger (d. 1893) assert that the Prophet was guided by a Christian mentor, particularly during periods of despair. Sprenger specifies that this mentor was Bahīrā, a monk possessing various scriptures and serving as a missionary in Hijāz. Hirschfeld, on the other hand, rejects this claim, arguing that the presence of a Christian teacher for the Prophet could not have remained a secret in Mecca.[24] It is important to note that Hirschfeld does not deny the Prophet's influence by the People of the Book; his objection is specifically to the notion of guidance by a singular, identified teacher. According to Nöldeke, who supports the concept of a mentor or teacher for the Prophet, the Prophet's knowledge was derived not from written texts but from oral transmissions he received from Jews and Christians.He points to reports that two men named Jabr and Yasār (Yaīsh)[25] read the Torah and the Gospel and that the Prophet listened to them. Similarly, Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) states that Jewish and Christian clergymen provided direct information to the Prophet, while Tor Andrae (d. 1947) argues that Islam is most similar to Nestorianism and that this similarity is due to the information that reached the Prophet through the bishop of Najrān[26] Qus b. Sāʿida, who came from Yemen, the center of the Nestorians.[27]

To summarize, the disagreement among orientalists on this issue lies in details such as which sect the Christians in question belonged to and whether the Prophet[28] gained knowledge about

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[22] Tieszsen, *Christian Encounter*, 23.

[23] Hartwing Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran*, 22-24.

[24] Hirschfeld, *New Research*, 25.

[25] Claude Gilliot lists the names of individuals, usually of the slave class, who are said to have encountered the Prophet (see Claude Gilliot, "Informants", 513).

[26] For the view of why Qus b. Sāʿida could not have been the bishop of Najrān, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qurʾān and the Many Aspects of Qurʾānic Rhetoric", *al-Bayān* (2014), 46.

[27] Ignaz Goldziher, "Influence of Parsism on Islam", *Religion of Iranian Peoples*, 164, 179.

[28] Those who assert that the Prophet was educated in Christianity by a (heretical) Christian preacher have not reached consensus on the specific Christian sect to which this preacher belonged. Notably, Protestant and

Christianity through reading the sacred texts or via oral transmission. Within the discourse concerning the Prophet's Christian 'teachers', references are often made to verses 103-105 of Sūrah al-Naḥl and verses 4-6 of Sūrah al-Furqān are referred to:[29]

> *We know indeed that they say, "It is a man that teaches him." The tongue of him they wickedly point to is notably foreign, while this is Arabic, pure and clear. Those who believe not in the Signs of Allah, - Allah will not guide them, and theirs will be a grievous Penalty. It is those who believe not in the Signs of Allah, that forge falsehood: it is they who lie! (al-Naḥl, 16/103-105).*
>
> *But the misbelievers say: "Naught is this but a lie which he has forged, and others have helped him at it." In truth it is they who have put forward an iniquity and a falsehood. And they say: "Tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written: and they are dictated before him morning and evening Say: "The (Qur'ān) was sent down by Him who knows the mystery (that is) in the heavens and the earth: verily He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (al-Furqān, 25/4-6).*

At this juncture, the statements of Julian J. Obermann (d. 1956), quoted below, encapsulate the orientalists' perspective on the issue:[30]

> The situation becomes clear once we recognize that Muhammad had acquired his entire store of knowledge about Scripture, and about Judaism and Christianity in general, through oral channels and personal observation during a long period of association with the People of the Book. His was the case of a pagan converted to monotheism, who absorbed its theory and practice by attending services and pious assemblies of worshipers, by listening at the feet of popular preachers and missionaries, but who never read a line of Scripture, or a breviary, or even of a hymnbook. [31]

The Prophet Muhammad's interactions with Abyssinian Christians are a significant topic of discussion in Western scholarship. Decision to migrate to Abyssinia to escape the oppression in Mecca was taken as evidence of the acquaintance with Abyssinian Christians in Mecca.[32] Irfān Shahīd is notably insistent on the significance of contact with Abyssinian Christians. He deduces that the Meccans and the Prophet traveled to Abyssinia, drawing on Qur'anic references to the sea and ships, and asserts that the Prophet learned Ge'ez, the Abyssinian language, for trade purposes.

Shahīd maintains that a Bible translated from Greek into Ge'ez existed in Mecca, read by the Abyssinians, thereby making its content known to the Meccans and the Prophet. In this vein, he notes that the Qur'an employs Abyssinian versions of Christian religious terms and names of certain prophets.[33] Although reports exist of the Prophet using some Abyssinian words, it seems

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Catholic orientalists, particularly those who served as clergymen or missionaries, argued that the Prophet did not convert to Christianity due to his interactions with heretical Eastern Christians, suggesting that he might have embraced Christianity had he encountered what they considered "true" Christianity (W. Tisdall, *Sources of Islam*, 46; Mårtensson, "Ibn Isḥāq's and al-Ṭabarī's Historical Contexts for the Quran: Implications for Contemporary Research", in *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam*, ed. Sebastian Günther, 318; Reynolds, "Presentation", 44-45).

[29] See for example. Martensson, "Ibn Isḥāq's and al-Ṭabarī's Historical Contexts for the Quran, 334. Translation of the verses are from Yūsuf ʿAlī's rendititon.

[30] An exception is F. E. Peters (d. 2020), who claims that the Prophet had no *direct* encounters with Christians until late in his life and that his pre-prophetic travels did not extend beyond Hijāz to Syria and Iraq (F. E. Peters, *Jesus and Muhammad*, 10-11, 172).

[31] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 5, note. 10 cited in.

[32] David Robinson, "Africa, Islam in", *Encyclopedia of Islam and Muslim World*, 14.

[33] Irfan Shahīd, "Islam and *Oriens*", 14 -17.

unreasonable to conclude from the scant number of such words in Islamic sources that he actually knew the language. If, as Shahīd claims, there was close contact with the Abyssinians, there was close contact with the Abyssinians, it is plausible that the Prophet might have acquired some words from the language. Shahīd's exploration of loanwords primarily seeks to identify instances of cultural borrowing. Shahīd diverges from the widely held orientalist view, initiated by Abraham Geiger, that the Prophet knew the Bible through Jewish intermediaries, emphasizing instead Christian influences stemming from the Ethiopian translation of the Bible into Ge'ez and their presence in Mecca. Indeed, the topic of "Ethiopic influence on the Qur'ān" is increasingly being explored in Western academic studies.[34]

Finally, the Prophet's reception of the Najrān delegation is presented as an example of interfaith dialogue by figures such as John L. Esposito. A contemporary Western hypothesis posits that Islam initially emerged as a Judeo-Christian[35] movement or sect before evolving into a distinct religion. Although this claim, which was voiced in the 70s, lost its influence later on, it has recently been revived by scholars such as Fred Donner, Ilka Lindstedt and Stephen Shoemaker.

FINAL REMARKS

It can be said that orientalist discourse on the relationships between the Prophet and Christians—aside from the topic of interfaith dialogue concerning the Najrān delegation—was predominantly framed within the context of cultural borrowing. In this regard, nineteenth-century Christian orientalists, some of whom were missionaries, typically highlighted Christian influences, whereas Jewish orientalists, beginning with Abraham Geiger, underscored Jewish influences. For instance, Bernard Lewis (d. 2018) argued that the Prophet's interactions with Christians were not as significant as his relationships with Jews.[36]

From a secular perspective, it can be said that the similarities between Islam and previous religions are inevitable to be explained by cultural borrowing. The best alternative offered by orientalists trying to navigate the complexities of cultural borrowing is "interaction", which raises the question of how much of the Prophet's sources stemmed from the historical and cultural milieu of his region versus those derived from divine revelation. Even when the issue is approached from a perspective that takes revelation into account, the extent to which the Qur'ān reflects the culture of its initial recipients remains a pertinent question. Responses to this question are overshadowed by the positions adopted on the eternity of *kalām*. Consequently, interpretations vary widely, shaped

[34] See Manfred Kropp, "Beyond Single Words: *Mā'ida - Shayṭān - jibt* and *ṭāghūt*. Mechanisms of transmission into the Ethiopic (Gə'əz) Bible and the Qur'anic text", in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds*, 204.

[35] Christians who follow the Jewish sharīʿa and observe the prohibition of Saturday. These are considered heretical by other Christians (cf. Blois, "Nasrani", 2).

[36] Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 11. Reuven Firestone attributes the more favorable characterization of Christians than Jews in the Qur'an to the fact that Christians did not live in Medina. According to him, had the Prophet migrated to Najrān instead of Medina, the situation might have been different (see Firestone, "Problematic", 4).

by ideological preferences and doctrinal principles, whether they originate from Orientalist or Islamic paradigm.

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