

CHRISTIANS IN THE QUR'ĀN: SOME INSIGHTS DERIVED FROM THE CLASSICAL EXEGETIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The Qur'ān refers on several occasions to Christians. Its attitude toward them, however, has often been seen as an ambivalent one. At times the Qur'ān praises the Christians, while in other cases it condemns them. This article will attempt to analyze the Qur'ān's view of Christians by examining Islamic exegetical writings dating from the earliest period of Qur'ānic commentary up to the late Middle Ages.

INTRODUCTION

The first Muslims lived side by side with non-Muslims, and as a result, the issue of how to relate to non-Muslims appears as early as the Qur'ān itself. Most Qur'ānic references to non-Muslims refer to Jews and Christians, who are usually called "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*). The Qur'ān's attitude toward Christians is not entirely clear. Sometimes it accuses the Christians of polytheism (*shirk*; for example, Qur'ān [henceforth Q.] 5:17, 72, 73). According to Islam, this is the worst of all sins, punishable by death if the polytheist does not convert to Islam.¹ At other times, however, the Qur'ān describes Christians in a positive way (for example, Q. 5:82). To ascertain the Qur'ānic attitude toward Christians, it is essential to examine the traditional commentaries on the Qur'ānic verses that deal with the subject.

¹ We learn this from Q. 9:5: "So when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters, wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush. But if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free. Surely Allāh is Forgiving, Merciful." This verse is referred to in traditional Islamic sources as the "verse of the sword" (*āyat al-sayf*). Translations of the Qur'ān taken from Maulana 1998.

To the best of my knowledge, Jane Dammen McAuliffe (1991) is the only modern scholar who has researched the issue of Christians in the Islamic exegetical tradition.² In her book, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of classical and modern exegesis*, McAuliffe (1991: 2–9) has divided most of the verses that deal with Christians into seven separate groups.

As we shall see, the Qur'ānic commentators tended to refer to two separate Christian groups that interacted with the early Muslim community. The first group is the Abyssinian Christians and the second is the Christians of Najrān, a region in Southwest Arabia. McAuliffe deals extensively with the Abyssinian Christians and their ruler, but largely neglects the Najrānites. This is unfortunate because, as we shall show, the Najrānites played an important role in the traditional Qur'ānic commentaries and were seen, in a sense, as the antithesis of the Abyssinians.

In this article, I intend to examine the classical Qur'ānic exegetic approach of Christians in the commentaries of prominent and authoritative clerics, beginning with 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās (d. 688 CE), known as the father of Qur'ānic commentary, and continuing through the *tābi'ūn* (the second generation of Muslim authorities) and *tābi'ū tābi'īn* (the third generation of Muslim authorities), up until the major clerics of the mediaeval period such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī. In this way, I hope also to reconstruct the traditional Islamic narrative behind the Qur'ānic references to Christians.

My division of the verses that deal with Christians is different from McAuliffe's version. Furthermore, I will discuss several verses that she does not mention (in particular, the verses that are critical of Christians). In fact, McAuliffe does not mention most of the verses discussed in this article. I have chosen to divide the verses that deal with Christians into two categories: those that criticize the Christians and those that praise them.³

VERSES THAT CRITICIZE THE CHRISTIANS

The first reference to Christians in the Qur'ān is indirect. It appears in the seventh verse of the first chapter (Q. 1:7): “Not those for whom Allāh has felt wrath (*al-maghḍūb 'alayhim*) and not those who went astray (*al-dāllīn*).” There are several traditions (*ḥadīth*) in which Muḥammad's Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) ask him to explain the meaning of the words “those who went astray”. He answers:

2 Besides McAuliffe's book, there are two studies worthy of mention: Charfi 1980 and Ayoub 1997. Although they do not discuss precisely the same subject as McAuliffe, they come close to doing so.

3 McAuliffe devotes the seventh chapter of her book to the verses that praise Christians, but her discussion of them has a very different character than mine.

“These are the Christians (*hum al-naṣārā*).” Early Qur'ānic commentators such as Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid b. Jabr al-Makkī (d. 722 CE), and Rabī' b. Abī 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 753 CE) interpreted Q. 1:7 based on these traditions (al-Ṭabarī 1971 I: 194), and the later commentators did the same (see, for example, al-Māwardī 1982 I: 59; al-Zamakhsharī 1948 I: 3; al-Bayḍāwī 1968 I: 2; al-Maḥallī & al-Suyūṭī 2004: 10).

While the treatment of Christians in this verse is relatively mild, quite the opposite attitude is taken toward the Jews, who are referred to as “those for whom Allāh has felt wrath”. In his commentary on Q. 1:7, 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī (d. 1058 CE) wrote that this is because the Jews were more hostile (*li-annahum ashadd 'adāwa*) toward the Muslims. Al-Māwardī (1982 I: 60) based this interpretation on Q. 5:82: “Thou wilt certainly find the most violent of people in enmity against the believers to be the Jews and the idolaters”, a verse that will be discussed extensively in the next section of this article.

Q. 5:77 also mentions those “who went astray”. The verse reads:

Say: O People of the Book, exaggerate not in the matter of your religion unjustly, and follow not the low desires of people who went astray before and led many astray, and went astray from the right path.

The term “People of the Book” is generally used to refer to Jews and Christians; the “Book” in question being the Torah received by the Jews and the Gospel received by the Christians (Friedmann 2003: 59; McAuliffe 1991: 3). According to Ibn 'Abbās, however, Q. 5:77 refers specifically to the Christians of Najrān:

Say: O People of the Book [i.e. the people of Najrān], exaggerate not in the matter of your religion unjustly, and follow not the low desires of people who went astray before [these are their leaders] and led [they] many astray, and went astray from the right path. (Ibn Abī Ṭalḥa 1991: 105)

Who are the “people of Najrān”? According to the *Sīra* of 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām (d. 833 CE), a Najrānite delegation arrived at Medina in 632 CE in order to meet Muḥammad and investigate Islam. The delegation consisted of the fourteen most respected people of Najrān, as well as three units of honor guards. The delegation was led by al-'Āqib (called 'Abd al-Masīḥ; Ar. ‘the servant of the Messiah’) and their bishop (*usquf*), al-Ḥārith b. 'Alqama.

When the Najrānites came to Medina they wore mantles of silk and rings of gold. They entered Muḥammad's mosque and prayed towards the east. After they prayed, they greeted Muḥammad. When he refused to talk to them, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661 CE) told the Najrānites that Muḥammad had done so because of their decorated clothes and recommended that they change them. After they did this, the Najrānites came back to the mosque and met Muḥammad again. Muḥammad

told them: “By Allāh! When you came to me the first time, the devil was among you and he wore the same clothes as you wear and thus I did not look at you.”⁴

The question of Jesus’s nature was a controversial issue between Muslims and Christians. Muslims acknowledged Jesus as a prophet and the Messiah, but not as the son of God or God himself.⁵ The Najrānite leaders asked Muḥammad, “O Muḥammad! Who is the father (of Jesus) (*man abūhu yā Muḥammad*)?” According to Islamic tradition, Muḥammad then revealed the following verses (Ibn Hishām 1937 II: 204–207):

The likeness of Jesus with Allāh is truly as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him, “Be”, and he was. [This is] the truth from thy Lord, so be not of the disputers. (Q. 3:59–60)⁶

Muḥammad called on the Najrānites to convert to Islam but they refused and argued at length with him about his religion and its veracity. Because these arguments did not change their minds, Muḥammad revealed the following verse:

Whoever then disputes with thee in this matter after the knowledge that has come to thee, say: “Come! Let us call our sons and your sons and our women and your women and our people and your people, then let us be earnest in prayer, and invoke the curse of Allāh on the liars.” (Q. 3:61)

According to Islamic tradition, Allāh ordered Muḥammad to dare the Najrānites to undergo the ceremony of *mubāhala* (lit. ‘mutual imprecation’), in which two disagreeing parties take an oath in the name of God. The one on the side of justice stays alive and the other side is taken (i.e. killed) by God (Ibn Sa’d 1995 I: 692–693; on *mubāhala*, see also Massignon 1955; *EL2*, s.v. *Mubāhala* (W. Schmucker)). Each side must choose five people to participate in the ceremony. Muḥammad chose his daughter Fāṭima, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and their sons Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn.⁷ The Najrānites, however, became frightened and decided to compromise by accepting a protégé status (*dhimma*) and paying the poll tax (*jizya*) (al-Balādhurī 1957: 87).

4 In Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d’s version of the story in *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr*, the interlocutor was ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān (d. 656 CE) and the devil is not mentioned. See Ibn Sa’d 2001 I: 307.

5 The Islamic rejection of the Holy Trinity is clearly expressed in Chapter 112 in the Qur’ān: “Say: He, Allāh, is one. Allāh is He upon whom all depends. He begets not, nor is He begotten (*lam yalid wa-lam yūlad*); and none is like Him” (Q. 112:1–4).

6 The Qur’ān considers Jesus a human being and a prophet like Adam. Both had no human father, but were still human beings created from ashes. For various studies of the Qur’ānic depiction of Jesus and Mary, see McAuliffe 1991: 2, n. 2.

7 The Shī’ites argue that the fact that Muḥammad chose all the five people from *ahl al-bayt* is proof that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and his descendents are the rightful successors. They commemorate this occasion once a year on the 24th of *dhū al-ḥijja*.

One of the most common accusations against the Christians in the Qurʾān is that their belief in the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – constitutes polytheism (*shirk*). Q. 3:64, for example, states:

Say: O People of the Book, come to an equitable word between us and you, that we shall serve none but Allāh and that we shall not associate aught with Him (*wa-lā nushrika bihi shayʿim*), and that some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allāh.

However, according to Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. c.728 CE), Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suddī (d. 745 CE), and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam al-ʿAdawī al-Madanī (d. 798 CE), this verse does not refer to the Trinity but rather demands that the Najrānites stop venerating and worshipping their leaders like gods (al-Qurṭubī 1965 III: 81; al-Māwardī 1982 I: 328).

The Qurʾānic commentators Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) and Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144 CE) argued that this verse calls upon the Najrānites to abandon their belief in Jesus as the son of God (al-Ṭabarī 1971 VI: 484; al-Zamakhsharī 1948 I: 314). According to Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE), the verse was revealed because the Najrānites teased Muḥammad by asking him: “O Muḥammad! You want us to say what the Jews said about ʿUzayr (*yā Muḥammad mā turīdu illā an naqūla fika mā qālat al-Yahūd fī ʿUzayr*)”⁸ (al-Rāzī n.d. I: 57), that is, to acknowledge Muḥammad as the son of God, a status reserved for Jesus. According to the Qurʾān, the Jews venerated ʿUzayr as the son of God: “And the Jews say: ʿUzayr is the son of Allāh” (Q. 9:30).⁹

Q. 4:171 repeats the admonition against believing in the Holy Trinity and explicitly adds an assertion of God’s uniqueness:

O People of the Book, exceed not the limits in your religion (*lā taghlū fī dīnikūm*) nor speak anything about Allāh, but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is only a messenger of Allāh and His word which He communicated to Mary and a mercy from Him. So believe in Allāh and His messengers. And say not, “Three.” Desist, it is better for you. Allāh is only one God. Far be it from His glory to have a son.

8 ʿUzayr is identified by most scholars as Ezra the scribe. Moshe Sharon (2001), however, argues that since the Jews supposedly called ʿUzayr the son of Allāh, it is unlikely that they were Jews but rather a Christian group of some kind. For a summary of the classical attitude toward ʿUzayr, which reviews all the relevant literature, see Lazarus-Yafeh 1986: 359–379; 1992: 50–74.

9 According to Islamic tradition, the Jews considered Ezra as the son of God because, after Nebuchadnezzar (Bukhtanṣar) destroyed the Temple, he burned the Pentateuch, leaving no one to remember it. The Jews then asked Allāh to return it to them. Allāh heard their prayers and placed the Pentateuch in Ezra’s heart so he could recite and teach it to the Jews. See al-Māwardī 1982 II: 129.

The most common opinion among both early and late commentators is that the verse calls on the Christians of Najrān to stop worshipping Jesus as a god (al-Balkhī 2003 I: 273; al-Jawzī 1984 I: 248; al-Māwardī 1982 I: 436). According to Ibn ‘Abbās, however, this verse was directed toward four different Christian sects:

The words “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, is only a messenger of Allāh” turns to the Jacobites (*al-Ya‘qūbiyya*), who believed that Jesus is actually God himself (*‘Īsā huwa Allāh*). The meaning of the words “And say not three” is for the Marcusites (*al-Marqūsiyya*), who claimed that Allāh is one of three [divine entities] (*huwa thālith thalātha*). “Allāh is only one God” refers to the Melkites (*al-Malkāniyya*), who claimed that Jesus and Allāh are partners. “Far be it from His glory to have a son”, these are the Christians of Najrān, who were Nestorians (*al-Nasṭūriyya*). (al-Sulamī 1996 I: 326)¹⁰

Three verses in the fifth chapter of the Qur’ān (5:17, 72, 73) claim that Christians are disbelievers (*kuffār*; sg. *kāfir*; on the different meanings of *Kufr*, see Waldman 1968: 442–455) and indirectly accuse them of polytheism because of their belief that Jesus is God and Allāh is one of three: “Certainly they disbelieve those who say: ‘Allāh, He is the Messiah, son of Mary’ (*la-qad kafara alladhīna qālū inna Allāh huwa al-Masīh Ibn Maryam*, Q. 5:17, 72)” and “Certainly they disbelieve those who say: ‘Allāh is the third of the three’ (*la-qad kafara alladhīna qālū inna Allāh thālithu thalātha*”ⁱⁿ, Q. 5:73)” (Griffith 2007: 100–101).

According to Ibn ‘Abbās and Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767 CE), Q. 5:17 refers to the Christians of Najrān, who were Jacobites (Ibn Abī Ṭalḥa 1991: 173; al-Balkhī 2003: 289). Later commentators separated the two claims made by Ibn ‘Abbās and Muqātil b. Sulaymān, concluding that Q. 5:17 referred either to the Najrānite Christians *or* to the Jacobites, who were now considered separate Christian sects. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200 CE), for example, claimed that the verse refers to the Christians of Najrān, “who considered Jesus a god” (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984 I: 301). Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Maḥallī (d. 1459 CE) and Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abū Bakr al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE), on the other hand, argued that the verse refers to “the Jacobites, who are a Christian sect (*al-Ya‘qūbiyya: firqa min al-naṣārā*)” (al-Maḥallī & al-Suyūṭī 2004: 137), without mentioning the Najrānites as their predecessors did.

10 The following comment by Gabriel Said Reynolds (2003: 222) is noteworthy: “The tripartite division between the Byzantine (usually described as the Malikites), the Jacobites and the Nestorians is typical of Islamic writings on Christianity, and so should cause us no surprise. It is both a relatively accurate portrayal of Christianity in the Near East at the time and a way of emphasizing the Christians’ own confusion over Jesus’s message. To this effect, some other authors introduce a fourth group, one which preserved the true Islamic Message of Jesus.” Cf. Reynolds 1999: 45–66; Griffith 2007: 87–89.

In his commentary on Q. 5:73, Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE) wrote that the Christians may have adopted the Trinity because of a – possibly deliberate – mistake. Because they omitted the word “servant”, the Christians believed that Jesus was God:

The verse refers to some Christians sects such as the Melkites, the Jacobites, and the Nestorians that disrupt Jesus’s words: “I am Allāh’s servant” (*innī ʿAbd Allāh*). They omitted the word servant (*ʿabd*) and argued that Jesus said: “I am Allāh.” (Ibn Kathīr 1950 II: 81)

So far we have examined the commentaries on the Qurʾānic verses that criticize or condemn the Christians. This reveals that the Najrānites, who refused to accept Islam, provided the primary reason for the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*)¹¹ of these critical verses.

VERSES THAT PRAISE THE CHRISTIANS

Q. 5:82 expresses a very positive attitude toward Christians, in contrast to Jews and idolaters:

Thou wilt certainly find the most violent of people in enmity (*la-tajidanna ashadda al-nāsi adāwa^{tan}*) against the believers to be the Jews and the idolaters (*alladhīna ashrakū*); and thou wilt find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, “We are Christians (*wa-la-tajidanna aqrabahum mawadda^{tan} li-lladhīna āmanū alladhīna qālū innā naṣārā*)”. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not proud.

According to Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273 CE), this verse was revealed to Muḥammad in 615, when a group of Muslims sought asylum in Abyssinia because of persecution by the people of Mecca, who worshipped idols. Muslim sources refer to this event as “the first migration” (*al-hijra al-ūlā*). The Meccan idolaters sent ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ (d. 664 CE), considered the most cunning among the Arabs (*dāhiyat al-ʿArab*), to Abyssinia as the head of a delegation whose mission was to convince the Abyssinian ruler, Negus (Ar. al-Najāshī), not to allow the Muslim refugees to stay in his country. ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ brought gifts to the Negus and hoped he would persuade him to expel the Muslims from Abyssinia (al-Qurṭubī 1965 IV: 212).

In response, Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 629 CE) recited before the Negus passages from the Chapter of Mary (*sūrat Maryam*, chapter nineteen of the Qurʾān),

¹¹ For more on this subject, see Rippin 1985: 1–15.

which refers to Mary the mother of Jesus. When they heard the verses, some of the Abyssinian monks and priests who were present began to weep and the Negus let the Muslim refugees stay in his country. Al-Qurṭubī (1965 IV: 212) states that the phrase “and thou wilt find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, ‘We are Christians’” refers to those monks and priests.

Al-Qurṭubī (1965 IV: 212) writes that a delegation of twenty Abyssinian Christians travelled to Medina over a decade after this event. They met with Muḥammad and asked him about Islam. Afterward, Muḥammad called on them to convert and read some passages from the Qur’ān. The members of the delegation began to weep inconsolably, and they promptly accepted his invitation to convert and acknowledged him as a prophet.

According to Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Samarqandī (1993 I: 119–121) (d. 983 CE), the delegation came back to the Negus and told him about everything that happened. At that point, the Negus accepted Islam and decided to travel to Medina in order to meet Muḥammad; however, he died during the journey. When the news of the Negus’s death came to Muḥammad, he and his Companions prayed for the Negus in a manner reserved only for deceased Muslims.

Al-Samarqandī (1993 I: 121) further argued that the phrase “and thou wilt find the nearest in friendship to the believers to be those who say, ‘We are Christians’” refers to “those who were Christians in Muḥammad’s lifetime, because they did not protest against the Muslims and from them came the largest amount of people who agreed to accept Islam”. The commentary of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī’ (1996 I: 400) (d. 1262 CE) takes a similar position. He says that Q. 5:82 refers to Christians in general and “especially to the Negus and his people, because they converted to Islam”.

Al-Samarqandī and al-Sulamī’s commentaries present Q. 5:82 as less sympathetic to Christians than one might think from a literal reading of the verse. Al-Sulamī (1996 I: 400), for example, states that only those Christians who converted to Islam are praiseworthy, meaning that only those Christians who ceased to be Christian were seen in a positive light. In an even more generous interpretation, the Christians mentioned are not praised for being objectively “good” or because of some action they have undertaken, but because their attitude toward Islam during Muḥammad’s lifetime was considered less problematic than that of the Jews and the Meccan idolaters.¹²

12 The three large Jewish tribes of Medina were exiled or massacred. The Banū Qaynuqā’ and the Banū Naḍīr were exiled, while the Banū Qurayza were massacred and their wives and children given as spoils to the Muslim conquerors. In 628, the Muslim army raided the Jewish oasis of Khaybar. Many of the Jews were killed and their women and children taken as captives. On the exile of the Banū Qaynuqā’, see al-Wāqīdī 1966 I: 176–180. On the exile of the Banū Naḍīr,

Taken literally, Q. 5:85 refers to the future reward that Christians will receive as a result of their faith: “So Allāh rewarded them for what they said, with gardens wherein rivers flow to abide in them [i.e. wherein they abide]. And that is the reward of the doers of good.” There were commentators, however, who argued that this was not the case. Ibn ‘Abbās, for example, argued that the reward in question will be given to Muḥammad’s Companions. Ibn Zayd thought that the verse referred to Muḥammad himself. Muqātil b. Sulaymān held that it refers to the first people who accepted Islam (Ibn al-Jawzī 1984 I: 305).¹³ Similar to his commentary on Q. 2:62, which will be mentioned later, al-Qurṭubī (1965 IV: 212) believed that the reward mentioned in Q. 5:85 is only for those Christians with pure faith who believe in Muḥammad’s prophecy and his prophetic mission.

Q. 2:62 mentions four religious groups who will be rewarded for their faith in Allāh. The Christians are one of these groups. “Surely those who believe [i.e. the Muslims]”, the passage reads, “and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, [see Mazuz 2012: 233–254] whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does good, they have their reward with their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve”.

According to al-Sulamī (1996 I: 212), this verse was abrogated (*mansūkha*; on abrogation (*naskh*), see *EI2*, s.v. *Naskh* (J. Burton)) and superseded by Q. 3:85, according to which “whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers”. Q. 3:85 strongly implies that a person should not belong to a religion other than Islam; this would rule out *inter alia* being a Christian. Al-Qurṭubī (1965 II: 84), however, argued against this interpretation. He claimed that Q. 2:62 was not abrogated by Q. 3:85, because Q. 2:62 refers to those members of the three non-Muslim religions who acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet.

‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar al-Bayḏāwī’s (d. 1268 CE) commentary on Q. 2:62 returns to the story of the Negus and the Abyssinian monks and priests. While the verse

see al-Wāqidī 1966 I: 374–375. On the Banū Qurayza, see Kister 1986: 61–96. On the battle of Khaybar, see al-Wāqidī 1966 II: 542–566.

Muḥammad also had many conflicts with the Meccan idolaters; both sides clashed on the battlefield three times in 624, 625, and 627. These battles are described by al-Wāqidī and many other Muslim historiographers in great detail.

¹³ The first to accept Muḥammad as a prophet were his wife, Khadija, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, Abū Bakr, Bilāl, and Zayd b. Ḥāritha. While there is consensus regarding the first woman, Khadija, there is disagreement regarding the first man to acknowledge Muḥammad as a prophet. According to one *ḥadīth*, Muḥammad was asked who was following him and he answered that there were two men: one a free man and the other a slave, [referring to] Abū Bakr and Bilāl (*man tabi’aka ‘alā ḥādhā al-amr. qāla: ittaba’anī ‘alayhi rajulani, ḥurr^m wa-‘abd^m: Abū Bakr wa-Bilāl*). (al-Ṭabarī 1960 II: 315) In another *ḥadīth* it is said that the first believer was Zayd b. Ḥāritha (al-Ṭabarī 1960 II: 316).

states, “whoever believes in Allāh and the Last Day and does good” will receive a future reward, this commentary speaks only about Christians who acknowledge Muḥammad as a prophet:

This verse was revealed [by Allāh to Muḥammad] when the representative of the messenger of Allāh read in front of the Negus and his people the Chapter of Mary. When they heard the chapter, the Negus and his people became excited and cried. There is another opinion regarding the circumstances of this revelation, according to which this verse was revealed when thirty-seven – and some say they were seventy – of the Negus’s people came to the messenger of Allāh and heard him reading *sūrat yā’ sīn* [Chapter thirty-six of the Qur’ān, this chapter contains stories similar to various narratives in the New Testament]. In response, they cried and acknowledged him as a prophet. (al-Bayḏāwī 1968 I: 206)

An examination of the commentaries on the Qur’ānic verses that praise the Christians reveals that the Abyssinian Christians and the Negus were the primary factor in the revelation of these verses and there is a repeating motif in many of the commentaries: that these Christians acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of the polemic between the Muslims and Christians in the early stages of Islam was the nature of Jesus and the Christians’ refusal to acknowledge Muḥammad as a prophet.¹⁴ The Muslims acknowledged Jesus as a prophet and the Messiah, though not as the son of God. They also acknowledged many of the biblical characters as prophets and therefore had a great deal in common with Christians. Once a Christian acknowledges Muḥammad as a prophet, the differences in belief between him and a Muslim are minimalized and become blurred.¹⁵

An examination of the commentaries on the Qur’ānic verses that criticize the Christians shows that the commentators mostly refer to the Najrānite Christians,

14 For more on this subject, see Thomas 1992.

15 For more on this subject, see Gibb 1969: 2. In the 9th century, there was a growing polemic between the Christian clergy (from three denominations: Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians) and Muslim sages. The dialogue between them reveals that the Muslims tried to blur the differences between Islam and Christianity in order to bring Christians closer to Islam. According to Wadi Z. Haddad (1990: 34–36), the Christian clergy was afraid that “the lack of the believers’ knowledge of the sophisticated doctrines of the faith may lead to a blurring of the distinctiveness and subtlety of some of the issues”. He further argued that “this is true especially in the rural areas where adherents of the different religions may not be able to distinguish among them due to the similarity of their basic tenets. This makes the transition from Christianity to Islam easy and untraumatic, especially in the presence of incentives.”

who refused to accept Islam. The Najrānites are referred to as “those who went astray [from the right path]” and as disbelievers, as well as being accused of polytheism. By contrast, the commentaries on the Qur'ānic verses that praise the Christians praised only those Christians who accepted Islam or acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet. Particular emphasis is placed on the Abyssinian Christians and their ruler.

The findings of this article reveal a clear exegetic approach to Christians in the Qur'ān. According to the commentaries, there are two types of Qur'ānic Christians. Those who did not accept Muḥammad and Islam, thus remaining Christian, were condemned. However, those who acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet and accepted Islam were therefore not Christians, but Muslims, and were praised.

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