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The Deadlocked Debate about the Role of the Jewish Christians at the Birth of Islam

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Abstract: The thesis concerning the Jewish-Christian origins of Islam has been continuously defended and developed by a good number of authors, even if the proponents of this line of thought have never constituted a school nor followed a unitary or homogeneous discourse. At the other end of the spectrum, many scholars strongly reject the ‘Jewish-Christian connection’ insofar as it introduces a speculative and unnecessary category in the study on the origins of Islam. The matter has aroused irreconcilable stances, studies that remain alien to each other, or simply seem to ignore the status quaestionis. From the traditional perspective, the debate seems to have reached a deadlock, however, and to explain a possible legal, cultural, and religious ‘Judaean-Christian’ continuum that could be shared by the early Islamic audience, it might be useful to look around the spectrum of mixed beliefs and practices between the Jewish and Christian orthodoxy that can be found at a time very close to the arrival of Islam.

Keywords: early Islam; Qur’ān; late antiquity; Judaism and Christianity



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When facts are few, speculations are most likely to represent individual psychology.

(Carl Gustav Jung)

1. Introduction

It is a commonly accepted fact that Islam was not a sudden innovation in the religious landscape of its time, but that it emerged gradually from a ‘primordial soup’ in which pre-existing monotheisms and Arab cultural forms coexisted (Wansbrough 1970, 1977; Costa 2020). The acceptance of this premise leads logically to the question of how this process developed, generating in turn two major theories that speculate on the religious milieu in which Islam emerged. In a nutshell, the first one, which we might call ‘the standard Orientalist position’, would assume that the new doctrine was influenced¹ by the main religions of the Middle Eastern environment in the forms in which we know them: Judaism, Christianity Monophysite and Nestorian, Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, and Arab polytheism. Another line of research, more in line with the so-called revisionist movement, argues that the situation was much murkier on the ground. According to this revisionist position, in order to remap the situation in which Islam was born, it would be necessary to consider the evidence pointing to the fact that Arabian, and also Mesopotamian Judaism, was not always rabbinically normative (Robin 2015, pp. 15–295)². In the same vein, Christianity that is reflected in the Qur’ān would be a kind of marginal and Nontrinitarianist movement that might be close to some “Jewish Christian” groups (De Blois 2010, pp. 622–23).

Nevertheless, this latter expression (“Jewish Christian” and its derivatives) is a contested category that is still awaiting an agreed definition (Mimouni 2013, pp. 266–74). It is used to name the disciples of the Jewish tradition who followed Jesus in the earliest church of Jerusalem. It also serves to group into a single category certain texts, figures, and human groups listed in some patristic and late-antique sources that shared the acceptance of a

prophetic, messianic, or even divine status of Jesus with a partial or full observance of the Torah (Paget 1999, p. 734).

The expression is first attested in an episode of Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis* (composed between 680 and 688) where some Iudæi Christiani of Jerusalem were involved. In an excerpt from this work, we find this notice:

Unde et Saracinorum rex nomine Mavias ab utrisque interpellatus partibus ad eos incredulos Iudæos qui sudarium Domini pertinaciter retinebant coram præscentibus Iudæis Christianis inter utrosque deiudicans dixit: "Sacrum quod habetis linteolum date in mea manu". [Upon this, the king of the Saracens, Mu'āwiyah by name, when invoked by both sides, in judgment between them said to the infidel Jews (who stubbornly held on to the Lord's shroud) in presence of the Jewish Christians: "Give into my hand the sacred cloth that you have".]³

Despite the clarity of the narrative, we must accept that it is not entirely possible to determine the exact meaning of the syntagma Iudæis Christianis in this context (even if that expression is equivalent to Iudæi credentes—fideles credulos against infidelibus Iudæis—infideles incredulos of the same excerpt). Consequently, we should assume that "Jewish Christianity" and its related terms are modern constructions which, as we interpret it, were never used by any patristic writer or author of the late antique or early-medieval period (Taylor 1990, pp. 313–34; Del Río 2018, pp. 73–86). Notwithstanding the current criticism against the use of this expression (Boyarín 2004a, 2009; Jackson-McCabe 2007, p. 29), which includes the attempt to set a complex typology of these groups to show the elusive character of such categorization (Segovia 2018, pp. 91–93; 2019, pp. 8–9; Dye 2018, pp. 12–16; Mimouni 1998), there is a tacit accord to accept that, *lacking another better formulation*, this composite term continues to be useful to refer to the common denominators of an extremely complex religious phenomenon.⁴ In this we should include the multiple 'Jewish' ways of belief and worship that continued to persist thanks to almost two different circumstances, that is, the evolution of the original Christianity of Jewish origin or the continuous mutual contact between Christians and Jews.

2. Irreconcilable Positions

A first reading of the Qur'ānic text reveals that the basic idea of Islamic foundational thought was a monotheistic faith of an apocalyptic nature,⁵ rooted in Jewish and Christian biblical and extrabiblical traditions, which was expressed in an allusive style that presupposed the knowledge of these traditions by the target audience (Shoemaker 2012, pp. 1085, 1090). These features are combined with the fact that a good number of Qur'ānic/proto-Islamic teachings and legal narratives seem to be very close to those found in the literature of the Patristic period related to the Jewish-Christian sects: For example, this is the case of the conception of Jesus and his similarity with Moses, the angelology, the idea of Prophecy, and some well-known practices (Cook and Crone 1977; Costa 2020, p. 73). The search for explanations to these coincidences has tabled different theories, ranging from the absolute rejection of the existence and affinity between Jewish Christianity and any other religious phenomenon of the late antiquity to the conviction of the survival of Jewish-Christian communities distinct from other Jewish and Christian groups.

Therefore, because of the above mentioned, it is not surprising that the thesis regarding the Jewish-Christian origins of Islam has been continuously defended and developed by many authors since the Irish freethinker John Toland (d. 1722), intimately motivated by an aesthetic feeling, understood as poetic justice that ancient Christianity would have survived in Islam. Indeed, besides the purely scientific interest, this kind of fascination has been present in the works of several authors (including, sporadically, an apologetic desire to remove any sense of originality from Islam (Shoemaker 2018) or, by contrast, fostering a climate of tolerance and mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims (Michaud 1960)). Nonetheless, it should always be kept in mind that the proponents of this line of thought have never constituted a school nor followed a unitary or homogeneous discourse.⁶

While some authors have limited themselves to accepting the basic claim of a Jewish-Christian influence on early Islam as a reasonable possibility (Al-Azme 2014, p. 273; Böwering 2008, pp. 76–77), others highlight eventual—and arguable—parallelisms between both beliefs and practices (Von Harnack 1909, chap. II, pp. 529–38; Schlatter 1918, pp. 251–64; Schoeps 1949, pp. 334–42; Andrae 1932; Roncaglia 1971, pp. 101–26)⁷, accept a real influence of Jewish-Christian doctrines on early Islam,⁸ or even speculate about the survival of Jewish-Christian communities in the lands of Arabia (Casanova 1911, pp. 23–30; Pines 1984, pp. 135–52; De Blois 2002; Gallez 2005; Amir-Moezzi 2016, pp. 31–33). This last, maximalist approach claims that embryonic Islam was only but a certain kind of local Jewish Christianity, possibly a peripheral religious movement, which developed into a differentiated religion.

Currently, Holger Zellentin prefers to use the historical perspective that considers the birth of Islam as a late-antique phenomenon (Hoyland 2012, pp. 1053–56, 1069–72), giving more attention to the study of affinities between the Qurʾān and the Christian literature which possibly originated in a Jewish-Christian milieu (i.e., the Pseudo-Clementine literature that took form in fourth-century Syria, the Didascalia Apostolorum, a late-antique church order that circulated widely in Syriac communities on the Arabian periphery, and the Enochic eschatological traditions that were preserved in Ethiopian Christianity). Zellentin has detected significant parallels in many formulae, topics, and structures of legal narratives, ritual norms, theological doctrines, and hermeneutical practices. His contributions lead us to venture that a legal, cultural, and religious Judaeo-Christian continuum persisted almost until the late-ancient and the early-medieval period and was shared even by the early Islamic audience. His findings should therefore be taken into consideration in any serious debate on the topic at hand (Zellentin 2013, pp. 17–32).⁹

Some scholars strongly reject the ‘Jewish-Christian connection’ insofar as it introduces a “speculative”, “unnecessary”, “hidden”, or “slippery” category into the study of the origins of Islam (Griffith 2013, 2015b, pp. 81–107¹⁰; Shoemaker 2018; Reynolds 2019, pp. 318–32).¹¹ The humorous image coined by Jack Tannous (researchers squeezing the sources to rummage through evidence of a doctrinal “Jurassic Park”)¹² might help us understand the attitudes of suspicion against a theory allegedly rooted in non-academic feelings. As Stephen Shoemaker suggests: “this older model derives at least in part from a sort of apologetic interest, which aimed to demonstrate Muhammad’s lack of originality by finding the source of his ideas in an Arabian ‘Jewish Christian’ sect” (Shoemaker 2018, p. 105). The proposal for a Jewish-Christian influence on nascent Islam has even been qualified as a “Zionist theory” (Van Koningsveld 2010, p. 19).¹³

The matter has aroused irreconcilable positions, resulting in studies that remain alien to each other or simply seem to ignore the status quaestionis (Gallez 2005; and probably Crone 2015, 2016). Some scholars have begun to be careful to mention those elusive “Jewish-Christians”, a concept that certainly does not enjoy good press in the context of Islamic studies. From this perspective, the debate seems to have reached a deadlock.

3. Seeking a Different Perspective

The most important criticism against a possible Jewish-Christian influence on early Islam derives from the fact that the precise mechanisms through which such ideas were transmitted into the Qurʾān are little known. Such objection is deeply rooted in the assumption that Jewish Christianity *disappeared probably* after the second century and *certainly* during the mentioned date, and therefore it is not viable to explain either the precise origin or the channels through which those ideas reached the seventh-century Hejaz. In addition, any speculation on the matter is based on too little evidence because the documentation on Jewish-Christian communities rarely goes beyond the fourth century. For this reason, and although it is possible to recognize in the Qurʾān some theologoumena that are like those attributed to “Judaeo-Christian” doctrines or practices, they would be little more than phenomenological coincidences (Stroumsa 2014, pp. 76, 90; Valkenberg 2018, pp. 49–51; Costa 2020, p. 53).

At first glance, the argument seems to be fully convincing. However, its main problem lies in its uncritical acceptance of the version of the facts provided by the historians and heresiologists of the fourth and fifth centuries—especially that of Eusebius (d. 339), our main source of information on this topic (Yoshiko Reed 2018, pp. 35–36). According to Eusebius’ (suspiciously) perfect account, the first Christians formed a community whose origin was Jewish, before they separated from the root at an early date because the “perfidious Jews” refused to accept the new message. This origin could explain the alleged Jewish nature of some Christian features, serving also to posit the existence of certain Christian groups whose orientation remained heretically Jewish in character and practice. Therefore, the true Church, that of the gentility, should be understood as an ἔθνος unrelated to that of the Jews (Yoshiko-Reed 2008; Ulrich 1999).¹⁴

Consequently, Eusebius’ model assumes that a small remnant of those who remained anchored in Judaism (our Jewish Christians) survived in a dim existence during the second and third centuries and vanished during the fourth century, without any further continuity.¹⁵ The argument becomes an ouroboros when checking the documentation on these communities rarely goes beyond this last date (Stroumsa 2014, p. 76; Zellentin 2013, pp. 25–26, note 33), a fact that cannot be overlooked and that contrasts sharply with the abundant information about them coming precisely from the alleged time of this disappearance. These premises have been undermined by another model that questions whether the distinction between Christians and Jews was widespread, if operative at all, before the fourth century in the territories of the Roman Empire (Yoshiko Reed and Becker 2003; Sizgorich 2009, p. 21).¹⁶ Daniel Boyarin has put on the table this daring proposal, maintaining that *everything* traditionally identified as Christianity existed also in some Jewish movements.

According to Boyarin, it was the conversion of Constantine and the Christianization of the Roman Empire that caused the formation of communal boundaries between Jews and Christians. He also suggests that we should use the more plausible metaphor of a *continuum* of practices, beliefs, and identities that ran between two poles (Boyarin 1999, 2003, 2019; Boyarin and Burrus 2005). If this is true, Eusebius’ discourse was a development at the service of the new imperial idea, a community of orthodox believers under an orthodox sovereign (Payne 2015, p. 22), a new narrative that brought with it the creation of clear boundaries and reached its peak precisely at the end of the fourth century, when the imperial Christian οἰκουμένη was organized in the form of an opposition between two extremes (Jacobs 2001, pp. 28–29). Within the framework of the official discourse, and to reinforce the binaries, around the year 400 there emerged an interest in cataloging and describing the “Jewish Christians”. The Jews used the same anathematizing hybrids to reaffirm their identity.¹⁷

The proposal of a spectrum of Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices between two poles, in blurred areas where identities were gradually diluted, could better explain the strange forms of social contact and worship that can be found beyond the fourth century in some areas of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia, Ethiopia, and Arabia at a time very close to the arrival of Islam. This was even more true in places where the influence of the imperial narrative was more tenuous. For example, in Mesopotamia, the presence of “Jewish” texts dating back to the fifth to seventh centuries containing Christian invocations with very archaic features, and which cannot easily be explained as a syncretic product, provokes interesting questions about what kind of “Judaism” they would reflect (Bohak 2006, pp. 253–65; Del Río 2021, pp. 43–63; Kiel 2019; Schäfer 2012, pp. 103–49). Indeed, it is possible that there were Jews who held a particular version of Logos theology or had developed a curious binitarianism shared by the Jewish-Babylonian tradition in late antiquity.

On the other hand, in the last days of the eastern Umayyads, the synagogue was by no means dead among some Syrian Christians in the region of Antioch and inland Syro-Mesopotamia. They appeared to be full members of the Church while observing Jewish customs and even exegetical traditions in the same terms as it is described in older sources

(Minov 2019, pp. 77–78; Del Río 2021, pp. 83–99). This kind of Christian proliferated in the region of Antioch during the eighth century and were admitted into Jewish places of worship, participating in some of their rites and festivals, a matter which is in line with several canonical interdictions. This would mean that the situation, which had been described and denounced by John Chrysostom and Isaac of Antioch some centuries before, was endemic in the region and persisted beyond the changes brought about by the Islamic conquest. Of course, this tendency of professing Christians to adopt Jewish usages arose in many Mediterranean regions, as it is the case for Cappadocia, North Africa, Gaul, or Visigothic Spain. However, the Syro-Mesopotamian case seems to have been exceptional in terms of its length, influence, and pervasiveness; in view of this permanent tendency, some French scholars have even proposed the concept of a “Jewish-Christian geographic area” (Simon and Benoît 1968, pp. 272–74; Soler 2006, p. 122).

There are many examples scattered throughout a broader textual corpus that deserves to be revisited, and that not only includes the Qur’ān and the early Islamic sources but also the Syriac canonical legislation in its two branches, the strange but extensive body of ‘marginal’ literature, and the information provided by Christian and Jewish writers, Muslim historians, and geographers of the formative and classical periods. The potential information that will emerge from these sources may perhaps be revealing or irrelevant. Doubtless, it will serve to reconstruct the picture of a religious and social phenomenon that still needs to be further elucidated.

4. Conclusions

It is practically indisputable that, apart from a few questionable cases, there is not a shred of probative evidence regarding the existence of differentiated and hidden Jewish-Christian communities in Arabia nor in other parts of the Middle East at the time of Muḥammad (and probably it will never exist). Therefore, I fully agree with the scholars who doubt or even deny the hidden existence of such groups at the birth of Islam. However, the textual corpus, and the information that emerges from it, provides traces of persons and even groups who certainly dwelt in those blurry boundaries situated between those extreme poles of orthodox Judaism and Christianity. In the absence of more precise details, probably the most relevant fact associated with them is that their different behaviors occasionally attracted attention from their more ‘orthodox’ co-religionists because they, using the expression of the Muṭazilī scholar Al-Nāṣī al-Akbar (d. 906), in some way, “differed from the community”, خالفوا الجماعة.¹⁸

With few exceptions, the general impression is that people who are described or reflected in these texts were located within the established Jewish or Christian communities as an integral part of them. For this reason, and above our subjectivity and the interests and expectations underlying our defended theories that lead us “to take absence of evidence as evidence of absence” it is worthwhile to wonder whether the preservation of categories such as “Judeo-Christianity” is useful, or whether it simply complicates the study of the origins of Islam. My answer is yes, insofar as it could serve to categorize all the mixed sensibilities, practices, and beliefs that, in some way, might be reflected in the foundational texts of this religion.

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Notes

¹ For some authors, the notion of “influence” is outmoded and anachronistic (Hughes 2020, p. 16).

² Against the line followed by many works from the nineteenth century until today (such as Geiger 1833, or, more recently, Mazuz 2014).

³ Latin text in Geyer (1898), I.9, pp. 235–38. More details in Del Río (2021), pp. 100–16.

⁴ Annette Yoshiko Reed (2018, pp. xxi, xxv) regularly uses the expression between quotation marks. She sets forth the reasons to retain the term. For his part, and despite his reservations, Holger Zellentin (2013, p. 25) accepts the term for lack of a better one.

- 5 Peter Von Sivers (2003, pp. 3–4) interprets Qur’ānic apocalypticism as a consequence of the political and social instability produced by the Roman–Persian wars of 603–629. Jean Daniélou (1964, p. 11), defended the argument that apocalypticism was a typical feature of Judaeo-Christian theology.
- 6 This kind of argumentation seems to be more “European”. It has its epicenter in France and Germany, but with followers in other countries (Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Israel, Lebanon, and United States). Of course, such statement should be taken with all the cautions.
- 7 Roncaglia developed Harnack’s theories and, based on the legend of Waraqa ibn Nawfal, postulated an Elchasaite origin for Islam identifying Ebionism with Elchasaism.
- 8 This is the case of the late Patricia Crone (2015, 2016), who concluded that Jewish Christians were “the most obvious candidates” for the role of transmitters of a number of Qur’ānic themes.
- 9 This kind of argument was also used by Carlos A. Segovia (2012, pp. 231–67). Regardless, some of the more recent of Segovia’s works tend to identify a pro-Nestorian Christianity in the Islamic origins. Zellentin’s proposals have been criticized by Stephen Shoemaker (2018, pp. 104–5) and Sydney Griffith (2015a, pp. 172–73). In any case, it seems difficult for the critics to give an alternative explanation for the more striking parallels: “The pertinent texts, such as the *Didascalia* and others, like the Pseudo-Clementine corpus, simply continued to be of interest and importance to the wider Christian communities of late antiquity” (Griffith 2015a, pp. 172–73).
- 10 Again, and with all the cautions, this line of thought would have its hub in the United States, with some followers in the European academy.
- 11 “New or old species dwelling in a doctrinal Jurassic Park populated with creatures from late antique heresiographies”. (Tannous 2010, p. 396; 2018, pp. 251–52).
- 12 As has already been noted by Robert Hoyland (2012, p. 1056), the situation had been made worse after September 2001, pushing scholars into being involuntarily anti-Muslim propagandists (in the case of revisionists) or apologists for it (in the case of traditionalists).
- 13 Οὕτω δὴ τῆς πόλεως εἰς ἐρημίαν τοῦ Ἰουδαίων ἔθνους παντελῆ τε φθορὰν τῶν πάλαι οἰκητόρων ἐλθούσης ἐξ ἀλλοφύλου τε γένους συνοικισθείσης [. . .] Καὶ δὴ τῆς αὐτόθι ἐκκλησίας ἐξ ἐθνῶν συγκροτηθείσης . . . “Thus, when the city came to be bereft of the nation of the ancient inhabitants has completely perished, it was colonized by foreigners [. . .] The church too, in it was composed of Gentiles...” *Ecclesiastical History* I, IV, vi.4, and also I, I. ix; III, v.3; IV, v.2, and vi.3. (Eusebius 1926).
- 14 See, for example, the significative title of Ray A. Pritz’s work (Pritz 1988).
- 15 Michel Butts and Gross (2020, pp. 9–11) offer a good explanation of these two models. Although the statements of these authors refer specifically to Syriac Christianity, the template is suitable for the topic at hand.
- 16 Even Julian’s reforms of 362 can be interpreted as a tentative move to impose a boundary between ‘Hellenism’ and Christianity (Boyarin 2004b, pp. 25, 31–32; Sizgorich 2009, pp. 24–42).
- 17 Guy Stroumsa (1992, pp. 43–63) has pointed out the similarities between Metatron and Jesus, highlighting the parallelism between the numeric amount of both names, and the shared figure of son and servant.
- 18 In his work *الرّد على النصارى*, edited and translated by David Thomas (2008, p. 42).

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