

Article

The Prophet Muhammad's Covenant with Yūḥannah Ibn Ru'bah and the Christians of Aylah

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Abstract: This article examines the Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with Yūḥannah, Prince of Aylah, and illustrates the role it plays in understanding religious pluralism and civil rights as envisioned in Prophet Muḥammad's dream of a "Muslim Nation". The article also briefly makes use of other covenants contracted between the Prophet and other Arab Christian tribes. The covenants reveal Prophet Muḥammad's desire for religious pluralism and the granting of rights to all people, regardless of religion, creed, or personal practices. Although Prophet Muḥammad's covenants with the Christians of his time are used as a framework of analysis in this article, these documents have not received as much attention as they deserve, as few researchers in our time have shown interest in them. Early manuscripts and historical sources, both Arab and Western, are referenced in order to explore the circumstances and consequences of these early correspondences between Islam's final Prophet and contemporary Arab Christians. The findings of this investigation are significant in that the covenants serve as critical milestones and reminders in light of current discussions about relations between Muslims and Christians. The contents of the covenants can also be used as models for improving relations between Muslims and Christians in religiously diverse communities the world over.



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1. Introduction

Examples of religious pluralism and peaceful international diplomacy are rare in world history, and they are much scarcer in the history of the Middle East. This article explores Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with the Christian community under the leadership of Yūḥannah ibn Ru'bah, Prince and Bishop of Aylah, and uses it as a framework of analysis to examine the Prophet's vision of a "Muslim Nation": how he conceptualized what is presently understood as religious pluralism and civil rights. I demonstrated this previously using the Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with the Christians of Najrān (Morrow 2017, p. 104). Drawing from the original covenant between Prophet Muḥammad and his contemporary, Yūḥannah, this article posits that there has been a stronger, more symbiotic partnership between Muslims and Christians of the past than previously thought, and that there is potential for such a partnership to exist today. I agree with Morrow in that the greatest potential for establishing religious tolerance in society lies in recognizing the Prophet Muḥammad's covenants as prime examples of religious tolerance in action (Morrow 2013). These covenants practically implemented Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic Ḥadīth in relations between communities with differing belief systems, and thus they provide us with an understanding of what Islamic religious tolerance looks like.

Political, religious, and cultural developments ("Islamic Jihad" and the "Christian Crusade", to name a few) throughout history have shaped how Muslims and Christians view one another today. A prolonged period of western colonization also produced major geopolitical consequences in the Middle East, which in turn stressed relations between Muslims and Christians, often pitting the two groups against one another despite their similar monotheistic belief systems. After World War I, the British, in particular, saw an

opportunity to carve spheres of political influence for themselves in the Middle East, and they imposed new monarchies on unexpecting territories. As long as the kings of those monarchies remained loyal to the British Empire's interests, they were allowed to rule, and indeed, this is how a female leader of nations, known as the "Queen of the Desert", came to power (Howell 2008, p. xvii).

In light of global political and religious turmoil, now, more than ever, historians and theologians are dutybound to cite and identify the roots and presence of religious pluralism in regions that have been religiously diverse for centuries. In the Islamic community, Prophet Muḥammad's covenants are a potential source that can be drawn on to encourage Muslims to be tolerant of people that subscribe to other faiths. The strength in these covenants lies in their being authoritative Islamic texts that align themselves with a holistic interpretation of the corpus of Islamic texts, namely the Qur'ān and Prophetic Ḥadīth. To be clear, although the sentiments of the covenants may seem at odds with other Qur'ānic verses or Ḥadīth related to Jihad taken out of context, the covenants are well in line with the greater framework of Islamic principles related to civility and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Despite the fact that these covenants have been known to Islamic scholars for centuries and that all Muslims implicitly adhered to them as law, most Western scholars have largely neglected them while some have treated them as spurious.

Islam affirms the authenticity of Judaism and Christianity as divinely inspired faiths and accepts their messages and scriptures as being sent from the same God. Muslims consider this belief a matter of doctrine, and as such, Islam is the only major world-religion that recognizes and testifies to the truth of all prophets, as illustrated in the following Qur'ānic verse: "The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and so do the believers. They believe in God, His angels, His Books, and His messengers. They proclaim, 'We make no distinction between any of His messengers'. And they say, 'We hear and obey. We seek Your forgiveness, our Lord! And to You is the final return'" (2:285, Saheeh International 2004, p. 43).

No one denies that issues related to the covenants' validity are one of the possible reasons behind these texts being largely ignored. It is imperative that Prophet Muḥammad's covenants with Christians be the subject of great debate and discussion among academic and religious scholars. It is incumbent upon us to examine their authenticity to ensure the integrity of the documents and the veracity of their messages. As a framework for analyzing relations between Muslims and Christians from the beginning of their formation, we use Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with Christians of Aylah in order to explore the concepts of religious pluralism and civil rights in the "Muslim Nation". Donner explained that the term "Ummah (Nation)" included the Jews as part of the newly united society of Medina in the nation's constitution, and he focused on Muḥammad's role as a political leader (Donner 2012, p. 76).

This study sheds light on a covenant that many researchers have not explored, the Covenant of the Prophet Muḥammad with Yūḥannah (meaning "John" in Arabic), the Prince and Bishop of Aylah, near present-day 'Aqabah in Jordan. While scholars have focused on the *Covenant of Medina* and the six major covenants of the Prophet, few have touched upon the *Covenant of Aylah*, a treaty that is important as it possibly predates the Covenant of Najrān and provides further evidence of his direct and official contact with Christians. This study demonstrates that the *Covenant of Aylah* represents a unique model of religious pluralism in its finest form.

2. Results

The covenant with Yūḥannah ibn Ru'bah tells us that from the inception of his contact with Christians, the Prophet Muḥammad affirmed the congruity of Islam and religious pluralism and that he supported such notions. As illustrated in the covenant's text, the Prophet did not force Christians to convert to Islam, as per the Qur'ānic maxim that there is no compulsion in religion, and he acknowledged the validity of their beliefs and did not belittle or deride their religion. He assured the people of Aylah that he would commit

himself to their safety and security, on land and even at sea, and he treated Yūḥannah with kindness and compassion, so much so that Yūḥannah felt the need to strongly uphold his covenant, choosing crucifixion over voiding the covenant. The covenant in its entirety, both its contents and the historical background surrounding it, provides us with a historical account of the religious tolerance rooted in the teachings of Islam, and the Abrahamic faiths in general (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. This is a scan of Prophet Muḥammad's proposed covenant as sent to "al-Muqawqis", the Christian sovereign of Egypt at the time, according to Islamic sources. The original covenant is displayed on the right. On the left, there is an appendage of what the text says, written in clearer handwriting.

“بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ، هَذِهِ أَمْنَةٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ، وَمُحَمَّدٍ النَّبِيِّ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ لِيُخَوِّتَ بَيْنَ رُؤْيَاةٍ وَأَهْلِ أَيْلَةٍ، سَفُنُهُمْ وَسَيَارِئُهُمْ فِي الْبَحْرِ وَالْبَرِّ لَهُمْ ذِمَّةُ اللَّهِ وَذِمَّةُ مُحَمَّدٍ النَّبِيِّ، وَمَنْ كَانَ مَعَهُمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ السَّلَامِ، وَأَهْلِ الْيَمَنِ، وَأَهْلِ الْبَحْرِ، فَمَنْ أَخَذَتْ مِنْهُمْ حَدَثًا فَإِنَّهُ لَا يَحُولُ مَالُهُ دُونَ نَفْسِهِ.. وَإِنَّهُ طَيِّبٌ لِمَنْ أَخَذَهُ مِنَ النَّاسِ.. وَإِنَّهُ لَا يَحِلُّ أَنْ يُمْنَعُوا مَاءَ يَرِدُونَهُ، وَلَا طَرِيقًا يَرِدُونَهُ مِنْ بَرٍّ أَوْ بَحْرٍ...”

Figure 2. This is a scan of Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with Yūḥanna. It reads as above.

Figures, Tables and Schemes

“In the name of God, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful. This is a promise of peace from God and Muḥammad, the Prophet and Messenger of God, to Yūḥannah ibn Ru'bah and the people of Aylah, their ships, their carriages, on land and at sea. God's protection and that of Prophet Muḥammad is given to them and those who are with them from the people of the Levant, Yemen, and those across the sea. Should any one of them breach the law, then his wealth will not protect him . . . and it will belong to whoever takes it . . . It is forbidden to prevent them from obtaining water they wish to have access to, just as it is forbidden to bar them from any road or path they wish to take either on land or at sea . . . ” (Ibn Hishām 1990, vol. 2, pp. 525–26)

3. Discussion

3.1. Analysis of the Covenant's Text

The covenant is not lengthy, as one would expect of a religiously or lawfully binding contract. This could have been due in part to the nature of written documents at the time (there was a scarcity of writing materials and of those who could write) and the mostly oral tradition of the Arabs. Despite its apparent simplicity, we find a weighty promise: the protection of God and God's Messenger on land and at sea. Here, the self-same protection that a Muslim would hope to receive by believing in and obeying God and His Prophet is accorded to Christians for a small yearly tax. As other covenants with Christians indicate,

the yearly tax that was usually prescribed was far from being exorbitant or burdensome, and it was usually commensurate with the size of the community: it would amount to something like one dinar per person, or one bushel of wheat per household, for example.

The following text is from Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with the Christians of Maqna: "They are under the protection of God and Muḥammad. They must give a quarter of their textiles and a quarter of their fruit" (*Al-Wāqidī* 2004, vol. 3, p. 1032). Here is another excerpt from a covenant of his with the Christians of Adruh: "This is a peace treaty from the Prophet Muḥammad with the people of Adruh. They are under the protection of God and Muḥammad. They must pay one-hundred dinars, a fair sum, every Rajab. They guarantee in the name of God that they will be loyal and kind to the Muslims", as well as to Muslims who turn to them for shelter (*Ibn Kathīr* 1990, vol. 4, p. 30).

It should be noted that the translations provided above are my own, and I felt it necessary to translate them myself, as opposed to using an established translation, such as Guillaume's, because of certain phrases I felt were mistranslated. For comparison, the following is Guillaume's translation of the main covenant in question:

"In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful. This is a guarantee from God and Muḥammad the prophet, the apostle of God, to Yuḥanna b. Rū'bah and the people of Aylah, for their ships and their caravans by land and sea. They and all that are with them, men of Syria, and the Yaman, and seamen, all have the protection of God and the protection of Muḥammad the prophet. Should any one of them break the treaty by introducing some new factor then his wealth shall not save him; it is the fair prize of him who takes it. It is not permitted that they shall be restrained from going down to their wells or using their roads by land or sea" (*Ishāq and Guillaume* 1955, p. 607)

Much of the translation is similar, with minor differences present: "guarantee" instead of "promise of peace", "caravans" instead of "carriages", for example. The greatest point of comparison, however, and the reason why I decided to translate the covenant myself, can be seen in the last line of the treaty. Guillaume translates "water they wish to have access to" as "going down to their wells", which, in the context of a covenant, is entirely significant. Why would the covenant need to mention that the Christians not be barred from taking water from their own wells? The phrasing dictates that these would be wells they already possess and have control over. If Guillaume's translation is correct, that would mean the covenant says something along the lines of, "they should not be prevented from entering their own homes". Similarly, Guillaume translates "from any road . . . they wish to take" as "using their roads". Again, this is an inaccurate translation, for the same reason cited above, and it blatantly distorts or ignores the original Arabic phrasing, which uses the verb "yurīdūn", or "they wish". Perhaps Guillaume meant the antecedent for "their" to be the Muslims, but this is unlikely.

Although the covenant does not explicitly mention anything about integrating Yūḥannah's community into the Islamic community, or "Ummah", it implicitly does so by categorizing the residents of Aylah as those who fall under God's protection. Therein lies the central axis upon which the entire Islamic understanding of religious pluralism rotates: a promise is made to God to protect His people, and a breaching of the covenant's contract is understood as nothing less than transgressing divine statutes. Two communities that live by religious precepts sent by the same higher power should, in theory, have no reason to be in conflict with each other: this understanding is perhaps what led Pope Shenouda III, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, to say, "The Copts will be happier and safer under the rule of Islamic Shariah" (*Al-Ahram* 2016). (Note: this is not a misquote, nor is this an attempt to mislead the reader. Rather, the interpretation of the venerable Pope's words is that if Muslims were to act in accordance with Islamic Shariah, the Copts would be safer, as Islam does not condone, nor tolerate, terrorist acts of aggression towards religious groups of any kind. The meaning here is not that the Copts would be better off were they themselves to live by the Islamic Shariah). Christians

in particular are held in high regard in Islam and this is due in part to their relation to Jesus, the prophet that Muslims believe came to mankind just before Muḥammad.

3.2. *Passages from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth in Regards to Relations between Muslims and Christians*

Below are a few excerpts from Islamic texts that serve to further demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with modern ideas of religious pluralism, and to bolster the claim that Islam respects Christian beliefs, which is perhaps why the covenant was drawn up the way it was.

Islam teaches that there is no compulsion in religion, as per the Qur'ānic verse: "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] religion. The right course has become distinct from the wrong" (2:256 Saheeh International, p. 38). The Qur'ān commends the People of Scripture in general, and warns against arguing with them: "Do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God is one; we are Muslims [in submission] to Him'" (29:46 Saheeh International, p. 390). The Qur'ān permits eating the same food as them, the same way it permits marrying their women: "The food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them. And [lawful in marriage are] chaste women from among the believers and chaste women from among those who were given the Scripture before you" (5:5 Saheeh International, p. 96).

As for Christians, they have a special status accorded to them, near and dear to Muslims: "You will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, 'We are Christians'. That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant" (5:82 Saheeh International, pp. 107–8).

The greater significance and ultimate intention behind a covenant is a promise of safety. Therefore, the People of Scripture have God's promise, His Messenger's promise, and the promise of all Muslims, that they may live under Islamic rule in peace and tranquility. The Prophet Muḥammad stressed the importance of caring for the "People of the Covenant" and promised that those who violated these commands would meet with God's wrath and punishment, such as has been related in the following narration of his: Abū Dawūd mentioned: "On the Day of Judgement, I will come against anyone who wrongs someone he has entered into a treaty with (*mu'ahhid*), or fails to give him his due rights, or overburdens him, or takes something from him without his consent" (Abū Dāwūd 2009, vol. 4, p. 78).

In his *Furūq*, Al-Qarāfi relates a quote from Ibn Hazm's *Marātib al-Ijmā'*: "Indeed, it is obligatory on us to go out and fight to the death, with arms and weapons, anyone who comes to our country in pursuit of those who are under our care, in order to protect those who are under God Almighty's protection and the Messenger's protection, peace and blessings be upon him. Handing them over to their pursuers is nothing short of breaking the promise of peace" (Al-Qarāfi 1997, vol. 3, p. 14).

3.3. *Prophet Muḥammad's Meeting with Yūḥannah*

As related in Ibn al-Athīr's biography of the Prophet, Jābir says: "I saw Yūḥannah the day he came to the Prophet Muḥammad. He donned a cross of gold that swung freely (from his neck). When he saw the Prophet Muḥammad, he bowed his head and placed his hand on his chest. The Prophet Muḥammad welcomed him and gifted him a Yemeni dress. He presented the religion of Islam to him, but he did not accept Islam as his religion. He preferred to pay the jizyah. The Prophet Muḥammad guaranteed their safety, and the sum of their jizyah was three hundred dinars." After the covenant was ratified, Yūḥannah presented the Prophet Muḥammad with a white mule. The delegation that had accompanied Yūḥannah invited the Prophet Muḥammad to dine with them. They wished to amaze him with a meal he had never had before: taro (*Colocasia*). We do not know, however, if the taro was boiled, roasted, or sliced thin and fried, as the narrations do not mention how it was prepared. The Prophet enjoyed the taro and asked, "What is this?" They told him it was the "fat of the earth". The Prophet remarked, "It is good" (Al-Ṣāliḥī

1997, p. 7/212). When Yūḥannah requested the Prophet return with them to Aylah, the Prophet Muḥammad replied, “I am the closest person to the son of Maryam (i.e., Jesus). The prophets are paternal brothers. There is no prophet between me and him” (*Aleasqalānī* 2009, vol. 6, p. 563). Yūḥannah did not comment; instead, he continued to smile in silence. Then he went on his way.

Neither in this historical account, nor in the accounting of the event itself as related by Jābir, do we find any display of animosity or ill-will between both parties. Rather, the entire affair was more of an exhibition of mutual respect and an exchanging of gifts and well-wishes.

3.4. Historical Background

Finally, the following historical background is relevant to understanding the circumstances surrounding the covenants:

3.4.1. 7th Century Arabia

In the Levant of the 7th century C.E., there were many great Arab kingdoms and numerous emirates in present-day Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The influence of the Byzantine Empire was strong, to the extent that most Arabs in the region’s north not only paid allegiance to the Byzantine Empire, but also left their pagan religion after being convinced that the Byzantine Empire derived its power from Christianity. They followed the Byzantine Empire ideologically, culturally, and even imitated it in some of its social customs. The Byzantine Empire was at the height of glory and power, and it is not surprising that Christian Arab kingdoms and many emirates allied themselves with the Romans with the same enthusiasm and partook in the Byzantine Empire’s wars against the Sasanian Empire—even against their Arab brothers and the Prophet Muḥammad.

The year 629 C.E. was a defining year in that severity of circumstances and the increasing activities of key players led to situations the Levant had never seen before, which hastened impossible changes that made the covenants possible. The Byzantine Empire was not at all pleased with these changes, especially since it had been only one year since the empire’s victory over the Persian Empire. According to Arab sources, the Byzantines were preparing their army to conquer Medina. It should be noted that, at times, it is difficult to cross-reference historical accounts from Arab sources with Byzantine sources because the Byzantine tradition, as posited by Kaegi, “contains bias and cannot serve as an objective standard against which all Muslim accounts may be confidently checked” (Kaegi 1992, p. 3).

The killing of the Prophet Muḥammad’s letter bearer in 629 C.E. was also a major tipping point. Shurahbīl ibn ‘Amr al-Ghassanī—a subordinate to the Byzantine governor in Balqa—triggered the Battle of Mu’tah between the Muslims and the Byzantines after he killed al-Ḥārith ibn Umayr al-Azdī, whom the Prophet Muḥammad had sent with a letter to the King of Busra. Shurahbīl intercepted al-Ḥārith ibn Umayr al-Azdī and killed him.

The Prophet Muḥammad came to know of al-Harith’s death and was deeply grieved. He was forced to quickly equip an army of three thousand fighters that soon advanced and penetrated into the territories of the Byzantine Empire.

The battle took place in the town of Mu’tah between the Muslims on one side and the Byzantines and some Arab tribes loyal to the Byzantines on the other side. At the time, the Byzantine army was a global superpower comprised of more than a hundred thousand fighters. It is estimated (Treadgold 1997, pp. 374, 412) that the size of the Byzantine Empire’s field army in the seventh century was about 109,000 strong. We are not sure how many Byzantine soldiers were dispatched to combat the Muslims, but we can assume it was a substantial sum that was unable to defeat the Muslim army.

3.4.2. Tabūk

The Prophet Muḥammad and his army waited a long while to face Heraclius and his great imperial army. Ultimately, they would never meet. The situation spurred the local

princes to act and abandon Byzantine fealty. Heraclius' apparent cowardice succeeded in saving the Byzantine army from battling the Prophet Muḥammad's army, and Heraclius also succeeded in depriving the Prophet Muḥammad of possibly achieving a decisive victory that would crown his conquests. Heraclius failed, however, to address the belief that spawned among the Arab Christians—who were loyal to the Byzantine Empire—that Muslim power would soon dominate the region. As a result, some of them were convinced of the true divine nature of Islam, and most of them agreed to pay the *jizyah* (a yearly per-capita tax paid by non-Muslim subjects of an Islamic state). The first examples of such Arabs were Farwah ibn 'Amr al-Judhami, the governor of Ma'an and a believer in the Prophet Muḥammad, and Tamim al-Dari, a Christian who hailed from Palestine. The final examples of such Arabs were: Ru'bah, governor and military commander of Aylah; Ishāq, King of Dawma; the ruler of Jarba; and the ruler of Adhruh. They all transferred their allegiance from Heraclius to the Prophet Muḥammad.

3.4.3. Aylah

Aylah (Aylah, or Alyana al-'Aqabah) was an ancient city that used to be called Elath (written in Latin as "Aela" and in Arabic as "Aylah" ([Ibn Ishāq 2004](#), vol. 4, pp. 180–81), and it is now known as the city of 'Aqabah in Jordan. Its strategic location and proximity to copper mines made it a regional center for the production and trade of copper since ancient times. From a religious standpoint, the city had a bishop appointed to it. An indication of the city's religious significance is that its bishop witnessed the renowned Council of Nicaea, which was first organized by Emperor Constantine I in 325 C.E. in order for Christians to convene and discuss important issues related to Christianity.

3.4.4. Yūḥannah Ibn Ru'bah

Leaders of the region were observing the situation closely, calculating on a daily basis the amount of time it should have taken for Heraclius and his army to arrive. When they were certain that Heraclius and his great imperial army would not come, they abandoned ties of loyalty to Heraclius. The first to call for peace and proclaim a severance of ties to the Byzantine Empire and its tremendous army, which was the greatest global power at the time, was Yūḥannah, prince and military commander of Aylah. Prince Yūḥannah was a Christian Arab and a military commander who was thoroughly convinced that there would be no fighting. He went to the Prophet Muḥammad in Tabūk and asked that a peace treaty be written out. Yūḥannah did not wait long to confirm Heraclius' hesitance. Yūḥannah's intuition was correct in seeking peace, and it seems that he was further encouraged by the good impression the Prophet Muḥammad gave him. When Yūḥannah came to Tabūk, he brought gifts for the Prophet and entered his encampment with a large gold cross hanging from his chest and a staff in his hand. The Prophet Muḥammad did not punish him, nor did he order the removal or confiscation of the cross. Rather, he welcomed and honored him and ordered his muezzin, Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, to remain stationed at his service throughout his stay. Bilāl had been a Christian before converting to Islam, and he hailed from Abyssinia, a Christian region of the Byzantine Empire at the time.

3.4.5. When did Yūḥannah Arrive?

Arab historians disagree as to when exactly Yūḥannah arrived. Some of them say that he came before Akīdar, King of Dawmah, and there are some that say no sooner had Prophet Muḥammad arrived in Tabūk than Yūḥannah had come. Some historians say he arrived after Akīdar ([Al-Maqrīzī 1997](#), vol. 2, p. 65), but none of them say he arrived alongside Akīdar. Ibn Ishāq favored the former stance, Ibn Hishām affirmed it, and Ibn Kathīr followed suit. Akīdar, King of Dawmah, was the mightiest, most influential, and most powerful of the local rulers. He was also the farthest of them from Tabūk. Reasonable conjecture would dictate that he was not exposed to the Prophet Muḥammad, for had he been exposed, it would have opened the way for a bloody massacre. There is no way of telling what might have happened as a consequence of this. Taking their impregnable

fortress into consideration, the Prophet wished to astonish the local rulers with his brigades and his actions, so he sent a battalion of soldiers to the most influential, most prestigious, and most distant of the rulers, not to fight and defeat him, but to bring him to the Prophet in order to prove his capacity for compassion and mercy.

The Prophet Muḥammad was prudent in sending Khālīd ibn al-Walīd (his lead strategist) as head of a squadron of soldiers bound for Dawmat al-Jandal. Khālīd succeeded in capturing King Akīdar while he was out hunting wildebeests, and the squadron returned to Prophet Muḥammad with the king in hand.

After close examination of the evidence, and after studying and weighing the various factors and rationales, one can assume that Yūḥannah arrived before Akīdar, seeing as how a strong conviction arose in him regarding the supremacy of Prophet Muḥammad's influence and the imminence of his taking hold of the region. When Heraclius asked him to sever allegiance to the Prophet, Yūḥannah refused, even when Heraclius insisted that he would be crucified. Yūḥannah continued to uphold Prophet Muḥammad's covenant, thus setting the most remarkable example of true Christianity in adhering to covenants and oaths. Had the means of communication at the time been faster, the Muslims would have heard of Heraclius' decision to crucify him before the order had been carried out.

By comparison, had Yūḥannah come after Akīdar was brought, it would be understood that he had come out of fear of being brought the same way Akīdar, King of Dawmah, had been brought. Had he done that, he would have also done the same as Akīdar, and he would have broken the covenant. However, because he refused to reinstate allegiance to Heraclius, preferring crucifixion over nullifying the Prophet's covenant, the belief he had in the Prophet's righteousness and imminent regional supremacy is further proved. This belief, in turn, is what pushed him to take proactive steps to enter into a covenant with Prophet Muḥammad, which he upheld indefinitely.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Sources of the Covenant

This covenant has been mentioned in most of the Prophet's biographies, beginning with the oldest narrations recorded by Ibn Ishāq, as well as in the biography written by Ibn Hishām, who refined the biography compiled by Ibn Ishāq and removed deviations from it, such as apocryphal poems and other such divergences. The covenant is also mentioned in Ibn Kathīr's *al-Bidāyah*. Ibn Kathīr was a scholar well versed in the sciences of Ḥadīth, and although he was Ash'ari in creed (which would deem him lenient in accepting Ḥadīth), he would only accept the most authentic of narrations. The covenant is also mentioned in *Zād al-Ma'ād*, which was compiled by Ibn al-Qayyim, a student of Ibn Taymiyyah. Many other scholars and historians also mentioned it, and thus, the authenticity of the covenant has been thoroughly confirmed. There seems to be no surviving manuscript of the original covenant.

4.2. Similarities and Differences between Versions of the Covenant's Text

Taking into consideration the fact that Ibn Ishāq's version of the text is closest in time to the historical text, and that the version of the text reviewed by Ibn Hishām is the ideal sample, we find that the bulk of those who came after him examined his version of the text and subsequently transmitted the Prophet Muḥammad's covenant with Yūḥannah from him, quoting it with the text he presents. By examining the covenant's text in Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet, and that of Ibn Hishām, as well as Ibn Kathīr's *al-Bidāyah*, Ibn al-Qayyim's *Zād* and Al-Qaṣṭalānī using these texts as a litmus test for the authenticity of the text's original phrasing, we find the covenant as is in each of these works, without any addition or subtraction, as each author was satisfied with its authenticity, and thus they transmitted the text verbatim.

As for the differences that may be found, it is worth mentioning Ibn Kathīr, who was the first scholar to compare the covenant's text as related in various narrations. He left no need to make any additions to the text in the wake of his efforts. Afterwards, Yūnus ibn

Bakir, on the authority of Ibn Ishāq, added: “Written by Juhīm ibn ās-Salatand Shurhabil ibn Hasana, with the permission of God’s Messenger” (Ibn Kathīr [1976] 1990). After close examination, it is clear that the covenant’s text is as we have presented it here, and as for any variation in the text, it is merely in Yūnus ibn Bakir’s addition, in regards to which Ibn Kathīr kept silent. Some scholars include the addition, while most ignore it. Ibn Kathīr himself did not include it in his biography of the Prophet, nor did he include it in his *Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*.

4.3. The Version of the Text Closest to the Historical Sources

The text Ibn Ishāq transmitted from al-Baqā’ī is closest in time to the historical sources, and all who came after him were dependent on him when transmitting the covenant’s text. There is no doubt that his version is indeed the closest to the original historical sources, and there are other clues and inferences that confirm its validity.

When weighing the reasons for affirming or doubting the validity of this covenant, the following positive assurances confirm its authenticity: Had Heraclius met with the Prophet in Tabūk, allegiances would not have shifted, and it is plausible that the Arab Christians in the region would have rushed to aid him in the fight. Heraclius’ absence encouraged them to sever their allegiance to him and turn in fealty to the newcomer. Additionally, most Arab historians agree on the covenant’s validity and transcribe the text as it is presented here, which further confirms its authenticity.

Brockelmann suggests that the Prophet Muḥammad accepted the oath of allegiance of the Christian Prince of Aylah (now ‘Aqabah) at the northeastern tip of the eastern arm of the Red Sea; the Christians there were also granted freedom of worship in return for an obligation to pay tribute (Brockelmann 1960, p. 35).

5. Conclusions

Our research indicates that Prophet Muḥammad’s covenant with Yūhannah the Christians of Aylah is not only authentic, but that it also serves as historical proof that the Prophet Muḥammad championed religious pluralism and civil rights for all and that this is what he envisioned for the “Muslim Nation”. The covenant reveals the Prophet’s true desire for religious tolerance and the granting of fundamental human rights to all people, regardless of religion, creed, or personal practices. Covenants between Prophet Muḥammad and the Christians of his day, such as those that were presented here, deserve closer inspection and greater discussion among present-day scholars, and we hope that this article encourages others to look into this area of political and religious history.

The vast majority of practicing Muslims today try their best to imitate the Prophet Muḥammad in word and deed, and they take his words to be on par with divine revelation. This is why the contents of the covenant can also be used as a theologically binding model of religious pluralism to improve relations between Muslims and Christians in various communities around the world. The covenant proves that relations between Muslims and Christians were peaceful and diplomatic in the Prophet’s time and that such a peaceful coexistence is possible, even today. Even if skepticism and doubts of the covenant’s validity prevail, the existence of the covenant begs further investigation as to the stance of the Qur’an in regards to religious tolerance. Therein we find that the Qur’an has permitted Muslims to break bread with Christians and marry their women. Christians have a special rank accorded to them in the Qur’an: they are recognized for their soft-heartedness and their piety. They have the promise of God and the promise of His Messenger that they will not be harmed by Muslims. Sentiments like these, such as are expressed in the covenant, moved Christian rulers to transfer their allegiances from Heraclius to the Prophet Muhammad.

In accordance with the Qur’anic admonition that there is to be no coercion in matters of faith, the Prophet Muḥammad did not force the Christians he encountered to convert to Islam, nor did the Prophet belittle or ridicule their religion. Rather, he likened all the prophets to a family of brothers and professed unmatched nearness to Jesus Christ in

their prophetic fraternity. In turn, the Christians that met with the Prophet accorded him the respect that would be given to a divinely sent messenger of their own. Perhaps they understood the significance of the Prophet's message and sensed the sincerity in his claims. Perhaps they saw the virtue in the religion Muḥammad called the people to: the only religion that calls for the worship of the same God that sent Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, and secures, and forbids the violating of, fundamental human rights.

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