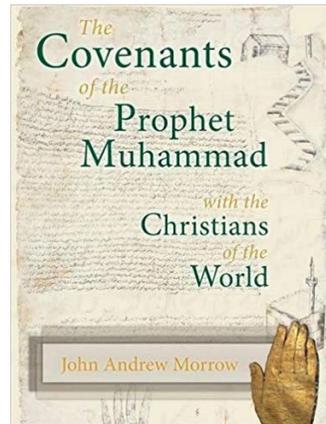


Book Reviews

John Andrew Morrow. *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*. Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2013. Pp. xxii+441. Paperback. ISBN: 9781597314657. Price: Not listed.

The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World authored by John Andrew Morrow is an important contribution to the study of the Abrahamic faiths (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The book contains four parts. The first part deals with following six covenants allegedly concluded by Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) with certain Christian communities: (1) The Prophet Muhammad and the Monks of Mount Sinai (pp. 65–98); (2) The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Persia (pp. 99–108); (3) The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of Najran (pp. 109–138); (4) The Prophet Muhammad and the Christians of the World (pp. 139–176); (5) The Prophet Muhammad and the Assyrian Christians (pp. 177–190); and (6) The Prophet Muhammad and the Armenian Christians of Jerusalem (pp. 191–202).



These covenants have been preceded by an introductory chapter (pp. 1–63), which sheds light on the Prophet’s (peace be on him) life with reference to his encounters with Christians and Jews. Discussing each covenant, the author begins with an introduction, evaluates its authenticity, comments on its contents, and ends with a conclusion. The second part (pp. 203–320) provides the available texts/versions of the covenants along with typographical corrections and available English translations. The third part (pp. 321–73) examines authorities of these covenants and ends with recommendations for future research. The last part (pp. 375–440) includes two appendixes (“witnesses to the covenants” and “possible modes of transmission of the covenants”), illustrations, a bibliography, and index.

An important aspect of the life of the Prophet (peace be on him), which attracted attention of both the Western and Muslim scholars, was the letters, which he sent to different religious communities of his time. Among the significant academic works on this subject are Muhammad Hamidullah's *Majmū'at al-wathā'iq al-siyāsiyyah li 'l-'abd al-nabawī wa 'l-khilāfah al-rāshidah* (1956) and 'Awn Sharīf Qāsim's *Diblūmāsiyyat Muḥammad: Dirāsāt nash'at al-dawlah al-Islāmiyyah fī daw' rasā'il al-Nabī wa mu'āhadātih* (1970). The work under review may be considered a continuation of the said scholarly tradition.

Morrow has focused on six covenants, which are surprisingly not recorded in the classical Islamic sources, such as the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* collections, the *sīrah* writings, books of Islamic history, and manuals of Islamic law. Four of them have no mention at all in Islamic sources. However, two of them (i.e., the first and the third) have a couple of indications which may lead one to trace some of their sentences back to Islamic sources. For that reason, the authenticity of these covenants has been questioned by both the Muslim and Western scholars. The author refers to the relevant criticism of these covenants and answers it accordingly. He reached the conclusion that all of these covenants are authentic and genuine whether they are mentioned in the Islamic sources or not. To prove his claim, Morrow has set the following criteria: First, some of these covenants have their shorter versions in the Islamic sources. For instance, the treaty of Najran, which is also cited in Ibn Sa'd's *al-Ṭabaqāt* should be considered authentic on the ground that its version found in the Islamic sources is simply a summary of the complete covenant found in the Christian monastery (p. 354). Second, he holds that the content analysis of these covenants proves them to be sound (p. 353). Third, while they contain certain variations due to scribal negligence, the content of these covenants is in complete agreement with the true teachings of Islam (p. 353). Fourth, they are witnessed by a number of Prophet's companions (p. 353). Fifth, with reference to certain covenants, the absence of definitive evidence of forgery, in author's view, is a proof of their authenticity (p. 98).

Each of these criteria set by the author to prove the authenticity of the selected covenant(s) needs further scholarly investigation. These treaties cannot be considered sources of Islamic law without critical examination. Since the only primary sources of Islamic law are the Qur'ān and authentic Prophetic traditions, these treaties allegedly concluded between the Prophet (peace be on him) and different religious communities cannot attain the status of a source of Islamic law if their authenticity is not established on the criterion set by early *ḥadīth* scholars and jurists, which certainly rejects any tradition, document, or report transmitted either on behalf of a Christian/non-Muslim authority or without a chain of transmitters, or with a

broken chain of narrators. A report with reliable chain of narrators can also be challenged if it contradicts the Qur'ān or other more authentic Prophetic traditions. However, contrary to this criterion, Morrow maintains that "it would be foolish to reject a tradition which agrees with the Qur'ān and Sunnah simply because its chain of authorities is absent or incomplete" (p. 77). He further claims that "the covenants of the Prophet are of important jurisprudential value. In fact, a large number of *shari'ah* rulings can be derived from them" (p. 77). Responding to the question why did Muslim scholars particularly the traditionists not show any interest in such important documents? the author remarks, "In the mind of any *muhaddith*, there were no traditions of the Prophet to be found in Christian monasteries in the Sinai, Arabia or Iraq" (p. 77). However, such an answer is not convincing, because some of these covenants mention certain companions of the Prophet (peace be on him), but none of them passed down any information about these documents to their students and successors! Moreover, these covenants bear the names of certain companions as witnesses to them. However, one may ask many questions about them. For instance, do the other historical records affirm the presence of these witnesses when these covenants were finalised? Were they Muslims when these covenants were signed? If they were not Muslims when these agreements were written, in which capacity they accompanied the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him)? The author admits that many of these witnesses "were not Muslims at the time, some were dead, and others cannot be identified in any of the works of *'ilm al-rijal*" (p. 353) In such a case, how can these covenants be regarded as authentic documents?

As far as the contents of these covenants are concerned, the reviewer likes to highlight following problems:

First, the treaty titled "The Prophet Muhammad and the Monks of Mount Sinai" (65–98), about which the author admits that its original copy is lost (pp. 77, 82), contains an impression of a hand which is claimed to be of the Prophet (peace be on him) (see pp. 81, 222). However, the impression surprisingly shows the outer side of the hand, which is possible only if it is taken using a camera!

Second, in contrast to the authentic covenants of the Prophet (peace be on him), these covenants (such as those with the Christians of Najran and the Monks of Mount Sinai) read, "This must not be violated or altered until the hour of the Resurrection, Allah-willing" (pp. 220, 300, 310). Moreover, many language expressions used in this covenant do not resemble to those of the Prophetic expressions preserved in the authentic *ḥadith* collections.

Third, these covenants were concluded with particular Christian communities, but their texts surprisingly include all Christians of the world (pp. 218, 222, 305, 315).

Fourth, one of the covenants titled “The Prophet Muhammad and the Armenian Christians of Jerusalem” was written in Persian (see pp. 191–202, 315–20). The author is of the view that the Prophet (peace be on him) had an excellent command of Persian (177–78). However, the proof he has provided does not support this claim.

Morrow claims that “whether one considers them authentic, weak or spurious, the covenants of the Prophet and the Christians from the Sinai, Egypt, the Levant, Assyria, Najran, and Persia, present Islam in an entirely new light. As any objective observer will admit, the standards set by such treaties are simply sublime, morally, ethically, socially, politically, and economically. Not only were they imminently just and merciful in the context of their time, but they were also superior to many of the forms of social organization of our own age” (p. 354). According to this “new light,” the following points discussed in the book are of special concern due to their conflict with established concepts of mainstream Muslims: The Prophet (peace be on him) spent twenty-five years of his life out of Arabia; Christians and Jews are also considered “*Mu'minīn*,” Madīnah was a pluralistic state; and Islam was a broader movement of monotheistic believers.

In the following lines, these points will be further elaborated.

Relying upon the episode of Baḥīrā, a monk lived in Bosra (Syria), which is also referred to in the classical *sīrah* literature without a complete chain of trustworthy narrators, and hence, has been considered by the mainstream Muslims a spurious one. The author agrees with Western historians, such as Richard A. Gabriel (b. 1942), Aloys Sprenger (d. 1893), Francis Deward Peters (d. 1927), and Sir John Glubb (d. 1986) who concluded that “Muhammad was well acquainted with the customs of Christian monks” due to his several encounters with them (p. 4). However, contrary to these orientalist, the author argues that “Muhammad, as Prophet and Messenger, also had a profound impact on the Christian faith. While most Muslims and Christians are ignorant of the possibility . . . some assert that the Prophet learned such doctrines from the Eastern Christians, but ignore the strong evidence that the Christians might in fact have learned it from him” (p. 13).

Contrary to the traditional Muslim standpoint, the author held that there was a period of about twenty-five years which Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) did not spend in Arabian peninsula! He lived this period among the Christian monks at the monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai. This period starts when he was fifteen years old and ends when he was forty years old. To

prove his claim, Morrow associates Prophet's encounter with monk Bahīrā, his early life (teenage) as a shepherd, and his travel to lead Khadijah bint Khuwaylid's trade caravans to Syria, with a series of events related to the monks of Mount Sinai, completely drawing upon certain non-Islamic sources (pp. 6–12, 68–70, 98). Moreover, the author's claim that the Prophet spent most of his pre-Prophetic life out of Arabian Peninsula contradicts the Qur'an which proclaims that most of his pre-Prophetic life was spent among the Makkans (10:16).

The "Covenant of Prophet Muḥammad with the Christians of Persia," which is reproduced by the author only with its English translation, reads, "Whosoever also shall irreverently despise this Writ, the same shall be held worthy of punishment, whether he be a king, or one of the people, whether he be a pious believer (*sc.*, a Moslem), or *only a believer* (*sc.*, a Christian). . . . *All pious believers* shall deem it their bounden duty to defend believers and to aid them wheresoever they may be" (p. 223; emphasis mine).

Based on the emphasised phrases, Morrow is of the view that "treating Christians as *mu'minin* or believers is consistent with the *Constitution of Medina*. . . . The Christians referred to, of course, are those who are friends of Islam, the brothers and sisters of the believers, and not Crusaders, colonizers or imperialists. This principle, one can only expect, will be met with outrage by Salafis, Wahhabis, and Takfiris" (p. 104).

On behalf of the said covenant with the Christians of Persia, Morrow extended the term *mu'min* even to the Jews, as he clearly stated, "In contrast to post-prophetic interpretations of Islam, in which the People of the Book are considered as *kuffar* or infidels, and only the best of Muslims are considered *mu'min* or Believers, the Prophet created an inclusive community of Believers which included members of all the Abrahamic faiths. In the time of the Prophet, the *ahl al-dhimmah*, both Jewish and Christian, belonged to the community of believers. The term *kuffar* was reserved for those who actively attacked and plotted to destroy Islam" (p. 33). However, at the same time the author agrees neither with those who opined that "Islam is not a distinct faith," nor with those who maintained that "Islam was a Jewish or Christian heresy" (p. 33).

Traditional Muslims would not accept such a view because they find no support for this in the traditional interpretations held by Muslim scholars relying upon the available authentic sources of Islam.

Morrow holds, "The Prophet Muhammad's Community was a unique system which had never existed before and which *has never been seen since despite honest efforts to emulate it.*" (p. 32; emphasis mine). Such a view implies

that even the rightly guided caliphs failed to maintain the system established by the Prophet (peace be on him)!

Elaborating the characteristics of this “unique system” established by the Prophet (peace be on him), Morrow writes, “Identity and loyalty were no longer to be based on family, tribe, kinship, or even religion: the overriding identity was membership in the *ummah* of Muhammad. The *Constitution of Medina* decreed that the citizens of the Islamic State were one and indivisible regardless of religion. Be they heathen, People of the Book, or Muslims, all those who were subject to the *Constitution* belonged to the same *ummah*. In so doing, he created a tolerant, pluralistic government which protected religious freedom” (p. 32).

Thus, depending on the Constitution of Madīnah, the author preferred to label the first Islamic state a pluralistic government in the modern sense.

In a commentary on the contents of the covenant of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) with the Christians of Najran, the author supports Fred Donner’s (b. 1945) claim that the Prophet Muḥammad’s (peace be on him) Believers’ Movement included, not only Muslims, but Jews and Christians as well and that they both fought alongside the Muslims and also played important role in early Islamic administration. He quotes the Prophet (peace be on him) saying, “All of the Arab chiefs, all of the leading Muslims, and all the People of the Vocation, from around the world sent me letters expressing the fondness of Christians towards my cause, their zeal to push back the incursions made along the fortified borderlines of their religion, their determination to observe the treaty which they contracted with me when they met with me and which I granted them. For, truly, the bishops and the monks showed an unshakable loyalty in their attachment to my cause and the devotion of their persons to confirm and support the spread of my mission” (p. 129). In his covenant with the Christians of Najran, however, this portion has not been recorded by the early Muslim historians.

All the covenants reproduced in this book witness that the Christians of the time of the Prophet (peace be on him) had a friendly, harmonious, loyal and sympathetic relationship with the Muslims, something which was noticeably absent with regards to the Jewish community. To clarify this point, the author has made several arguments including the following one: “In fact, Muslims are closer to Jews in belief than they are to Christians and the differences between the Law of Moses and the Law of Muhammad are slight. Jews and Muslims lived together harmoniously for most of Islamic history. This relationship, however, was virtually ruined by the establishment of the State of Israel. But even so, Muslims differentiate between Jews, as followers of

Abraham, with whom they have no problems, and Zionists, whom they oppose vehemently as usurpers and oppressors” (p. 128).

The author consulted both the Sunni and Shi‘i sources and preferred Shi‘i opinions in some cases (see pp. 70, 87, 116, 118). He opines that “no complete picture of early Islam can be derived solely from Sunni, or even Shi‘ite, sources, for that matter. It is only when we combine all accounts passed down by Sunnis, Shi‘ites, and Christians, as with the case of the covenants, that we can obtain all of the relevant details” (p. 118).

Morrow has defended Islam and Muslims on several hot issues including *jihād* and terrorism (pp. 59–62, 111). However, he has strangely consulted only the secondary sources of the *sīrah* (for instances, see pp. 45, 47, 49, 84, 113, 117, 118, 126) while the original sources are widely available. The reviewer could not find a single reference to primary sources of *sīrah* throughout the book. Moreover, many citations lack the reference at all (see pp. 83, 115–116, 122) and some of them have incomplete references (see pp. 43, 47, 56, 78, 122).

Though the book contains highly disputed documents and many controversial findings, it includes a comprehensive collection of all the covenants of the Prophet (peace be on him) allegedly concluded with the Jews and the Christians, along with their various available copies and translations, regardless of their authenticity. Thus, it offers scholars an opportunity to further examine the significant aspects of the work, particularly the controversial ones.

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