JOHN ANDREW MORROW, *MUHAMMAD AND THE CHRISTIANS: COMMEMORATING THE COVENANTS OF THE PROPHET,* ACADEMICA PRESS, WASHINGTON 2025, XXXVI, 246 PP., FIGURES B/W, ISBN: 9781680533873.

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The book under review, by J.A. Morrow, aims to chart the ways in which the so-called covenants of the Prophet Muḥammad circulated over the centuries among Christians and the role played by these important Islamic documents. The volume consists of a prologue by Marianne Farina, a preface by the author, and the seven chapters that comprise the bulk of the work. The book concludes with the bibliography section and an index of proper names and subjects.

Chapter 1 (« The Qur'anicity of the Prophet's Covenants », p. 1–37) argues that the Prophet Muhammad's covenants with Christians are fundamentally consonant with the Qur'ān and therefore authentic. While prior debates have alternated between viewing the covenants as genuine or as political fabrications, the chapter insists that the Qur'ān must be the ultimate arbiter (*prima scriptura*). Building on ten external criteria identified by Ibrahim Mohamed Zein and Ahmed El-Wakil, it maintains that qur'ānic consistency outweighs all other evidence.

Using the critical edition of the Covenant with the Christians of Nağrān, the author examines its clauses alongside qur'ānic verses. He finds sustained alignment on: the *basmala*; Muḥammad's mission as warner and bearer of glad tidings; the universal address to Christians (*al-naṣārā*) as 'People of the Book'; the sanctity of covenants (*'ahd*, *mīṯāq*, *ḏimmah*); justice; protection of churches and monasteries; limits and ethics of warfare; fair, non-oppressive taxation (including nuanced treatments of *ǧizyah* and *ḫarāǧ*, exemptions for clergy and the vulnerable, and moderation by capacity); hospitality; non-compulsion in religion (Q 2:256); courteous disputation; interfaith marriage with full respect for a Christian wife's religious practice; and communal solidarity without treachery. Violations of the covenant incur, of course, qur'ānic censure.

Addressing verses perceived as hostile to Christians, the chapter proposes four contextualising readings: specificity to certain groups; reference to Arabian heresies; critique of tritheism rather than the orthodox Trinity; and the coexistence of theological disagreement with ethical obligation. It rejects abrogation in favour of 'occasionalism', whereby verses apply contextually rather

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than being cancelled, thus preserving the Qur'ān's ethical core. Concluding, the chapter contends that the covenant's coherence with qur'ānic principles of justice, mercy, and pluralism strongly supports its Prophetic origin and invites further corroboration from sunnah and sīrah.

Chapter 2 (« Muhammad, Mount Sinai, and the Mystical Eagle: Unearthing the Mythic Substrata », pp. 39–71) investigates the long-circulating Sinai tradition that a pre-prophetic Muḥammad visited the Monastery of St. Catherine and was shaded by an eagle, assessing its historical kernel and mythic accretions. After outlining the stable narrative core (monks witnessing a protective raptor, an abbot predicting Muḥammad's future eminence, and an early pledge later fulfilled in the ashtiname) the chapter surveys candidates and intermediaries (e.g., Tamīm al-Dārī, Diḥyah al-Kalbī, Ṣuhayb al-Rūmī) and considers possible settings (Sinai, Aylah, Tabūk). A newly surfaced Arabic legend of Pachomius (MS 814, Dār al-Kutub) is presented as an Islamic account of a monastic encounter, structurally akin to Baḥīrah's traditions, though tinged with ambivalence about astrology and divination.

The 'eagle' is examined zoologically (four plausible Sinai raptors) and symbolically, drawing on Jewish, Christian and Islamic associations (John the Evangelist, apocalyptic throne imagery, Būrāq/Gabriel banners). Parallel avian motifs in early sources include hostile Latin polemics (*Istoria de Mahomet*; *Tultusceptru*) and the contested 'Satanic verses' (*ġaranīq*, cranes). Angelology is central: early reports suggest an initial role for Isrāfīl/Seraphiel –often depicted with avian attributes– before Ǧibrīl, raising questions about transmission, form, and later doctrinal discomfort. The chapter situates these motifs within broader Near Eastern mythic strata (bird-headed divinities, Zoroastrian angelic genealogies), and notes their afterlives in Islamic art (eagle capitals) and Sūfī speculation (e.g., Peacock Angel resonances).

In sum, the Sinai eagle legend likely preserves an ancient stratum predating the canonised *Sīrah*, with monastic memory retaining avian imagery that later Muslim redactors sometimes transposed (e.g., 'cloud'). Whether or not Muḥammad physically visited Sinai is ultimately secondary: the covenant's existence and ethical programme stand, while the eagle narrative illuminates the mythopoetic environment in which Muslim-Christian covenants were imagined, transmitted, and defended.

Chapter 3 (« Gabriel Sionita and the Covenant at the University of Cambridge », p. 73–90) traces the transmission, reception, and contestation of the Covenant of the Prophet Muḥammad with the Christians of the World, foregrounding the 1630 Arabic–Latin edition issued in Paris by the Maronite scholar Gabriel Sionita. The chapter catalogues an extensive roster of early-modern and modern proponents who treated the text as authentic, alongside a substantial corpus of detractors (from Grotius and Bayle to twentieth-century scholars) some of whom alleged

forgery. Against this polemic, the author foregrounds manuscript evidence that multiplies the text's attestations and complicates charges of fabrication. Newly highlighted witnesses include copies linked to Fāris al-Shidyāq and the John Rylands Library, as well as Cambridge University Library holdings: Dd.11.33 (a neat transcription associated with Antoine Vitré) and Add.1901 (a large scroll fragment), the latter bequeathed via Mrs Petermann, widow of the orientalist Julius Heinrich Petermann.

Through close comparison, the Cambridge scroll is shown to belong to the Muʿāwiyah transmission lineage and to share a striking pattern of named witnesses with the Shidyāq/Rylands recension, while differing in wording and style. The chapter situates these recensions in a broader ecology of early covenants, arguing that many later copies adapt a foundational treaty – the Naǧrān Covenant preserved in the Chronicle of Seert – rather than the shorter versions in Muslim sources. It also reconstructs seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian printing and distribution networks (Vitré, Capuchins, *Propaganda Fide*) that likely facilitated circulation to Arabic-speaking Christians, and suggests Ottoman (and, to a degree, Safavid) state adoption of covenantal norms as instruments of plural governance. The conclusion reframes the authenticity debate around historical reception: whatever the precise archival pathway, the covenant functioned as a shared moral–legal charter underpinning Muslim-Christian coexistence across centuries.

Chapter 4 (« The Arabic Garshuni *Covenant of the Prophet* from Mar Behnam Monastery in Iraq », p. 91–122) examines and contextualises a Garšūnī manuscript (Arabic written in Syriac script) preserving a Covenant of the Prophet, now held in the Syriac Catholic Archdiocese of Baghdad and digitised by the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. The text was copied on 25 July 1934 by Rufāʾīl, son of the priest Yaʿqūb Sākā, for the priest Fetrus Sābā of Bartella. It resurfaced in 2017, when monks safeguarded manuscripts during the ISIS assault on northern Iraq. The copying is linked to the Assyrian massacres of 1933, when Christian communities revived Prophetic covenants as protective instruments amid persecution.

The manuscript proves to be a version of the Ashtiname of St. Catherine (Covenant with the Monks of Sinai) rather than the « Covenant with the Christians of the World ». It guarantees: the inviolability of churches and Christian property; prohibition of demolishing places of worship; exemption from *ǧizyah* and *ḫarāǧ* for clergy and ascetics; protection against forced conversion and military conscription; the right to maintain and repair churches, with Muslim assistance when needed; courteous interfaith disputation; and « validity until the Hour. »

The chapter addresses critical objections such as linguistic anachronisms, the absence of a seventh-century autograph, and the covenant's seemingly unilateral nature, and counters them by situating the text within early Islamic diplomatic and legal practice. It highlights continuity from the Prophet's Naǧrān treaty,

corroboration of the *ḏimmah* concept through inscriptions and papyri (e.g., Jerusalem 32, Nessana 77), and rhetorical coherence with qurʾānic discourse and later *ʿahd-nāmes* of the Ottoman Empire, which, though issued unilaterally, generated bilateral obligations.

The chapter concludes that the Iraqi Gharšūnī manuscript is a faithful copy of the Sinai covenant, significant both for its transmission context and as evidence of how Middle Eastern Christian communities mobilised Prophetic covenants as claims to protection in times of crisis.

In chapter 5 (« The Art of the Covenant: Symbolic Representations and their Significance », p. 123–156) the author examines the artistic and symbolic dimensions of the Prophet Muḥammad's covenants with Christian communities. These documents are not only juridical texts but also visual artefacts conveying authority, protection and interfaith respect. Islamic art, generally aniconic and abstract due to juristic discouragement of figurative representation, nevertheless produced richly decorated covenants that combined calligraphy, geometry, colour symbolism and, at times, human or prophetic imagery.

The chapter first analyses a celebrated miniature in Rašīd al-Dīn Hamadānī's *Ǧāmiʿ al-Tawārīḫ*, long debated in meaning. Dimitrios Kalomirakis proposed that it promotes Shīʿī claims to ʿAlī's succession, but the author argues instead that it visualises the granting of the ashtiname (covenant) to the monks of Sinai, stressing Mongol rulers' Christian ties and their endorsement of the Prophet's protection. The narrative of Muḥammad's youthful encounter with the monk Baḥīrā is critically reviewed, noting legendary embellishments and historical implausibilities, yet acknowledging a core memory of contact with Christian monastics.

A substantial section surveys artistic features of extant covenants. Central is the hand of the Prophet, appearing in varied forms (right or left, upright, palm-down, stylised or lifelike) symbolising divine authority, protection, warning, or welcome. Other motifs include mosques, minarets, monastic landscapes (especially St Catherine's at Sinai), talismanic circles and stars, vegetal ornament, and colour codes (black for authority, gold for royalty, red for prestige, white for peace). Exemplary pieces include Ottoman Turkish banners from Sinai, Mount Athos and Syria, some incorporating mystical ladders, protective seals, and numerological symbolism such as the number twelve.

The chapter concludes that these covenants constitute purposeful didactic and political art: official proclamations visually affirming Islam's commitment to mercy, justice, and the protection of Christians as People of the Book, blending legal authority with enduring artistic heritage.

Chapter 6 (« The Christians of Najran: Two Conflicting, Incompatible, and Irreconcilable Portraits », p. 157–193) examines two irreconcilable portrayals of the Christians of Nağrān: an Islamic narrative that casts their encounter with

Muḥammad as a failed debate ending in a threatened mubāhala and subordination through *ǧizyah*; and the Exordium to the Naǧrān Covenant, which presents long-standing trust, collaboration, and protection. The chapter argues that, despite contradictions, the 'gist' (a delegation, exchange, and a treaty) is historically plausible. It reconstructs the treaty tradition: recensions transmitted by al-Šaybānī, al-Balāḏurī and others, renewed by the Rašīdūn Caliphs Abū Bakr, ʿUmar and ʿUthmān, guarantee life, property, clergy, churches and exemption from military service, albeit with tribute; some clauses appear later interpolations. Claims of deportation under ʿUmar are reassessed; epigraphic and papyrological evidence indicates continued Christian presence in Naǧrān for centuries. The Exordium (preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert*) praises bishops and monks for aiding Muḥammad's mission, suggests early contacts (possibly with Jewish-Christians) and reframes Q 3:61 less as a literal cursing duel than as a Late Antique oath-curse appended to compacts.

Polemical Sunni and especially Twelver Shīʿī traditions amplified the episode to assert doctrinal supremacy via the 'People of the Cloak' and a *mubāhalah* festival, often caricaturing the Naǧrānites. By contrast, covenantal texts and Timurid–Safavid artworks present a conciliatory tableau; a Timurid miniature dignifies a Christian delegation.

The chapter concludes that the Naǧrān dossier was reworked to underwrite jurisprudence and triumphalist narratives. Yet, taken as normative, the Prophet's covenants furnish a precedent for protection of the People of the Book and warrant a reassessment of Islamic legal memory regarding non-Muslim rights.

Chapter 7 (« Were the Covenants of the Prophet Ever Negated? Imam al-Shafiʿi's *Covenant of Protection* and The *Covenant of the Prophet* », p. 195–211) examines whether the Prophet's covenants with Christians were ever annulled, arguing they were not, though later jurists reshaped their application. It opens by situating the covenants within a scribal culture in which authorised variation (glosses, harmonisations, and formulaic substitutions) was normal. Despite such redactional activity, core legal formulae (especially *ḏimmat Allāh*) display striking stability across recensions, indicating a shared 'master template'.

A substantial section contextualises Muslim-Christian relations through ruling elites' family ties with Christians and corroborating Christian testimonies. Early Umayyad practice – exemplified by Muʿāwiya and Yazīd – appears broadly laissez-faire and consonant with protective covenants, a picture reinforced by documentary and epigraphic traces. The chapter also notes the pervasive Christian maternal lineage of Ottoman sultans, suggesting durable, pragmatic incentives to maintain Christian protections.

The analytical centrepiece is a line-by-line comparison between the Prophet's covenants and Imām al-Šāfiʿī's Template Covenant of Protection (in *al-Umm*). While clearly indebted to the prophetic model, al-Šāfiʿī's text reframes it within

ʿAbbāsid statecraft, retaining guarantees (life, property, churches, clergy, due process, capped *ǧizyah*) yet adding restrictive clauses: forfeiture of protection for public blasphemy, bans on public Christian rites and church building in Muslim garrison towns, distinctive dress and saddlery, limits on intermarriage, entry prohibitions for Mecca and residence limits in al-Ḥijāz. The tone thus shifts from ally-facing benevolence to hegemonic regulation. Subsequent policy (al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik, ʿUmar II, al-Mutawakkil) and the later, spurious Pact of ʿUmar further entrenched constraints, overshadowing prophetic protections in some legal circles.

The chapter concludes that al-Šāfiʿī did not abrogate the Prophet's covenants; rather, he adapted their template to new social conditions. The covenants endured – textually and normatively – though their spirit was progressively diluted by later juristic and political developments.

Although *Muhammad and the Christians* offers an impressively wide-ranging survey of the so-called covenants of the Prophet, its argumentative edifice rests on several contested foundations. The book's strength lies in the sheer breadth of sources marshalled, together with the author's determination to read the covenants as a coherent whole. Yet the work at times conflates textual reception with historical origin: late Gharšūnī or Ottoman copies are treated as if they could decisively illuminate seventh-century practice, and the line between hagiographical accretions and authentic memory remains blurred. Consequently, while the book is valuable as a synthetic and imaginative defence of the covenants' relevance for Muslim–Christian relations, its historical argumentation is more persuasive as advocacy than as a decisive demonstration of authenticity. On the other hand, for the benefit of the book, it would have been advisable to use a standard transliteration system for Arabic words, names and titles of works.

The main strength of this work lies in its historical scope, and it remains, indeed, a valuable study for understanding the subject of the covenants of the Prophet Muḥammad or those attributed to him, thus helping to shape interfaith relations throughout history. We therefore sincerely congratulate the author for his tireless efforts in offering us this new tool of research.