

A Christian Perspective on the Rise of Islam

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ABSTRACT

Islam is one of the most populated world religions. This religion has a great root from the Arabic world. Although birthed several hundreds of years before Christianity, Islam remains the greatest contender of the Christian faith. While the interval between the death of Christ and the birth of Muhammad is about four hundred (400) years; the religious movements of both individuals remain close contenders. The appearance of the person of Muhammad in history spurs a serious wonder in the heart of the modern man, how the religion has come to gain so much ground and prominence in the world today. It might not be possible to find an absolute reason for the rise of Islam; however, this article discusses certain undeniable factors that contributed to the birth of this theistic world religion. This article explores the rise of Islam via the Christian lens of history in connection with the historical and cultural context in which the religion began. Islam rose via the negligence of the Christian Church, which includes the inability to maintain the purity of the Christian faith and witness the true Christian Gospel to the Arab world. Attaching Islam to Ishmael in the books of Genesis implies that even Islam did not come through the person of Muhammad; a religion more or less like it would have sprung and threatening the Christian faith.

Keywords: Allah, Arab, Bible, Christian, Early Church, Islam, Muhammad

INTRODUCTION

The New Testament Gospel and Acts reveal the emergence of several wrong doctrines and heresies, even while several Apostles were still alive. During the Early Church, there were several heretic sects which rose with indicted false teachings with the aim of threatening the true Gospel. This is why Paul warned the people of Galatians about the proclamation of another gospel – Paul even mentioned that even if it is angels that proclaim another gospel other than the one already preached (Christ, the risen Lord), it should not be welcomed. “But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that brought them and bring upon themselves swift destruction” (2nd Peter 2:1). The Church is forewarned and alerted against false doctrines that would spread during the present age. With this in mind, it is not easy to place the Islamic religion in just any category. Although Islam possesses several stories and biographical account of the Christian Bible, it can still not be classified as Christian heresy. This is because Christian heretical groups on the outward cling at least to some biblical truths as final and authoritative. On a contrary, Islam claim to possess the final and definite record of

divine revelation. This revelation is said to be total submission to the will of Allah. Whatever led to the emergence of Islam is still an important factor to be reckoned with today.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Because of the lens employed in this article (Christian perspective), a lot is said about the Church that existed before the rise of Islam. The advent of the Early Church precedes the rise of Islam, coupled with the fact that Jesus Christ died in c. 27 A.D and the canonization of the Christian scripture already concluded many years before Muhammad was born. Much is owed to the heroes of Christian faith who lived and died in the Early Church days before the birth of Muhammad. The continuous mention of ‘Early Church’ in this article should be taken as defining the Church from the days of the Apostles until the rise of Islam. While this stance is correct, the term is used in this article to refer to the Christian Church in the two centuries that precedes the advent of Islam in the 6th and 7th century.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

For Christians, the study of Islam will enable adequate proclamation of the Gospel to Muslims. Historical background and context of

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Islam will greatly help Christians interact well with her adherents. This article is situated within the large context of Christian missions to Muslims. Thus, this research is of immense help to Christian teachers, missionaries, evangelists and disciplers of Muslim converts; this is because an effective mission work among Muslims must not be devoid of information about Islam and how it became what it is in human history.

While this article is of credible significance, it becomes dangerous if the primary aim of the research is forgotten. Proclaiming the Gospel, especially to Muslims today (the Great Commission) is the heart of this research. Christ presents the mission mandate for the Church with the task of thoroughly equipping all people in order to advance the kingdom of God on earth, regardless of color, race, gender, or ethnic identity. The Great Commission reveals the mind of God toward the people God created, through faith in Jesus Christ as the platform for human redemption and salvation.¹ Thus, zeal for reaching out to Muslims and basic knowledge of Islam will help Christian achieve this huge task. In view of the fact that Islam is a post-Christian religion and the Quran gives several versions of the biblical accounts; Christian engagements of Islam thoughts (just as this article) could easily be tagged as an apology.

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE ARAB WORLD

A vivid interface with the historical documents about the 6th and 7th century reveals that it seems the Church in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire had lost its missionary zeal and vision. As a result, the Arabs who lived around the Church in Syria and Palestine remained untouched. This accounts for why Muhammad grew up to meet a whole lot of idolatrous practices among His people. Unlike several other parts of the world, the then Arabs were devoid of information and encounters about the person of Jesus Christ. The Church in Yemen which had a close ties with the Church in Ethiopia did not manage to spread the good news to the northern part of Arab; although very minute were affected in a little manner.

¹ Kolawole O. Paul, "The Great Commission Mandate of the Church in Matthew 28:18-20", *Holiness and Discipleship; Word and World*, Vol. 40 [4] Fall. St. Paul, Minnesota: Luther North-western Theological Seminary, (2020), 419-426.

Madany rated the impact of the early Church on the Arab world very low.² The translations of the Bible to the language of Arabs was not in place; meanwhile, biblical understand is more effective in convert's language.³ In other words, the Early Church failed to give Arabs the Bible in their tongue. Thomsen asked Diallo Oumar, a Senegalese Christian who was from a Muslim family how he had come to faith. Diallo told the story of a Senegalese Muslim of Mauritanian ancestry, Djibril Fall. When Djibril finished his Quranic studies, the Muslim scholar who had been his teacher gave him an Arabic Bible. Reading the Bible, he committed his life to Jesus Christ. Without contact with the Christian community, Djibril surrendered his life to Christ through the power of the Spirit working through the biblical witness. This new born Apostle was the source of Diallo's Christian faith.⁴ The Bible is the only book, which when reading, the writer is always beside the reader. Djibril and Diallo's testimony unveils the liberating and transforming power of the Bible. This is an experience Muhammad never had.

The inability to provide Arabic Bible to the Arabs is often nipped by several Christian scholars who sought to explain away the negligence of the then Christians. They argue that the Arabic language has not gotten a clear form of itself then. But on a contrary, the popularly known names by which Christians and Jews are called in the Arab world were "the people of the book". If this is the case, how then did the famous get to be kept as a hidden treasure, hoarded and not cast abroad? There were several Bible translations;⁵ Italia, Syriac, Latin Vulgate (LXX), Egyptian and American; all of which took place before the advent of

² Bassam Michael Madany, *The Bible and Islam: Sharing God's Word with Muslims* (Bukuru: ACTS, 2013), 126.

³ Oderinde Olatudun Abosede and Kolawole Oladotun Paul, "African Biblical Hermeneutics: An Excursus on Covenant in Yoruba Context" *Asia Pacific Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 8, August; No. 3 (Batangas City, Philippines: Lyceum of the Philippines University, 2020), 125-131.

⁴ Mark W. Thomsen, "Christian Mission within the Muslim World" *Word and World*, Volume. XVI, Number 2, Spring (1992), 198 - 199.

⁵ Jacob Peter Oluwashola and Kolawole Oladotun Paul, "Is the Bible the Word of God? A Theo-Apologetical Rethink", *Pharos Journal of Theology*, volume 101, no 4, (2002), 1-3.

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Islam. "...I am not afraid to preach the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation, to the Jews first and then the Gentiles" (Romans 1:16). Unfortunately somehow, no one bothered to take the word of God to the Arabs.

With clear reference to the context that Muhammad grew, it would have been of great help if he had Jewish and Christian Scriptures in his possession, to read and understand. This lapse created a vacuum in history. Muhammad grew on the hearsay of believers who fed him with romantic and filmy tales about Jesus Christ. Several stories about Jesus and other personalities of the Old Testament narrated in the Quran are suggestive of the fact that Muhammad was privy to some information.⁶ These data were not in full details or proper manner as it is in the *Torah*, Psalms and the New Testament. Although weaved to form a whole in the Quran, a systematic observation reveals that these hearsay stories are somewhat disjointed and some contradictory.

There is no sufficient evidence to prove that Muhammad laid hold of the complete Christian Bible. Although plausible that he may have seen fragments of several tales heard from his unserious Jewish and Christian friends; thus, it is be logical to argue that he was not also privy to have access to the original manuscripts. Muhammad was an illiterate; this did not help in his quest for the true God, therefore, he could not bring to the Arab people the gospel of the book nor proclaim the true messiah of the book. On this note, Sweetman concluded; the apocryphal Christ emerged in the consciousness of Muhammad, not the Christ of the canonical scriptures.⁷

The possibility of Christian interaction with few Arabs is plausible since there are Churches close to the axis of the Arabia peninsula; coupled with the fact that commercial engagements brings people of the then world far beyond borders. But how will they hear is there is no one to proclaim? Even with few Arabs that Christians probably engaged, there is absolutely no understandable document to keep them in check or turn their hearts on and firm on what they have heard and believed in the course of their journey of faith. Therefore, they obviously

⁶ White L. Vibert, *The Nation Islam: A Historical and Personal Testimony by a Black Muslim* (Orlands: University of Florida Press, 2001), 46.

⁷ J.W. Sweetman, *The Bible in Islam* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1953), 9.

return home and gladly return to their idolatrous lifestyle as if nothing ever happened.

THE EARLY CHURCH'S FAILURE TO MAINTAIN THE PURITY OF FAITH

With great expression and expansion of the Church in the early days of Christianity, how possible was it that Muhammad still encountered unserious Christians? Within the range of six centuries, why was it that the Christian faith grew cold too soon?

After the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the rolls of the Church were filled with people who were not true converts. Such that people neglected the scripture and false piety took over the Bible and Christ-centred way of life. The conversion of Emperor Constantine helped Christianity gain ground among the Greeks as against terrible Emperors who persecuted the Church, this lacuna tells on the genuine growth and expanse of the Christian Church. During this era, the Church relied heavily on the arm of the state, such that the inner lives of Christians in Palestine and Syria was weakened.⁸ Many Christians were not living out the Bible, some were not even aware of the distinctive feature of their faith: a redemptive religion.

Due to the state support and freedom Christianity enjoyed, several neighbouring people such as the Arabs, were neglected. This inherently answers the question of why the founder of Islam could not and eventually did not arrive at the true knowledge of the Christian faith. During the time Muhammad hungered and taste for the one true God, the Bible was already a closed book among Christians; tales and legends of the lives and achievements of the saints took place of the true bible stories and doctrines.

THE UNIQUE CONDITIONS OF MUHAMMAD'S ENVIRONMENT

As at 7th century, Arab was ripe for a radical change because its paganism was worn out. During Muhammad's time, the Christians were already anticipating the second coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus' first coming seven hundred years before had established a spiritual kingdom of God on earth, actively growing in the course of time and being built up through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ's second coming in is resurrected glory will be to received His

⁸ Sumrall Lester, *Time Bomb in the Middle East* (Tusla: Hands on House, 1994).

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spiritual children and rule forever. The religious environment of Muhammad's time was not unaffected by this messianic expectation of the so called Christians, even the Jews, since they do not regard Jesus son of Joseph as messiah.

Muhammad's first wife, Khadijat, was from an Ebonite Christian background. The Ebonites did not accept the letters of Apostle Paul. They simply observe the Old Testament dietary laws and only view Jesus as a prophet and not as God's incarnate.⁹ The sect Muhammad's wife belongs explains why Muhammad easily adopts several stories of the Old Testament into the Quran. Khadijat played a significant role in the rise of Islam. Khadijat's religious background and the Haniffs influenced Muhammad's messages and revelations.¹⁰ Aside from the fact that Khadijat's wealth was a prowess to Muhammad, helping in his funding and several other affluences he accrued. Khadijat also helped affirm Muhammad's call as a prophet by making several consultations in view of the Muhammad's alleged revelations at the cave of Hira.¹¹

There were admonitions with the Quran that Muhammad has actual constant contacts with demons, especially in Hira cave. The Quran identifies with Jinns (demons - Sura 46: 29-37); in fact, Sura 72:14 is entitled "Jinns". Also, it is often said that the said Jinns have converted to Islam.¹² "Recite thou from the name of the lord who created man from the clot of blood" – Sura 96. The physical components of man disproves this, even science terms this as a false genesis of man.¹³ Discerning the stated Sura as false

⁹ Ebionism argue that Jesus was merely the human son of Mary and Joseph, but became God's son when he was adopted at baptism. Anes Zaka and Diane Coleman, *The Noble Quran's Teachings in the Light of the Holy Bible* (New Jersey: R and R Publishers, 2004), 34.

¹⁰ The Hannifs are neither Jews nor Christians, but openly declare the vanity of all idols and the existence of a Supreme Being. Madany, *The Bible and Islam: Sharing God's Word with Muslims*, 45.

¹¹ M. Ali, *Islam Reviewed* (Fort Myers: Fish House Publishing, 1999), 77.

¹² The concept of demons (Jinns) in Islam is explicitly different. The Bible defines demons as angels who followed Satan in His rebellion against God (Rev 12:7).

¹³ Kolawole Oladotun Paul, "God's Image in Man; A Biblical Perspective" *American Journal of Biblical Theology: Illuminating God's Word*, April. Volume 20: 14, (2019). Kolawole Oladotun Paul, *The Reality*

evidence attached to man's creation and formation, Muhammad confessed to have been influenced by Satan. Could it be that it is only on this one occasion that Muhammad was actually given and pronounced by his own tongue a demonic revelation? Meanwhile, the alleged satanic revelation came just like every other revelation since he could not differentiate not until people reacted.

Notable among Muhammad's encounter was the one he had with the Jinns believed to have taken place at a time he lost his wife Khadijat and his uncle Abu Talib who were protecting and helping him all along. "Among us (Jinns – demons) are some who submit wills (to God) [i.e Muslims] and some that swerve from justice. Now, those who submit their wills [demonic Muslims] they sought out [the path] of right conduct" – Sura 72:14. After listening to the Quran, the Jinns began to proclaim it to others. This implies that demons became missionaries for Islam. As expert whisperers, demons whispered to the villages; "...lo, we have heard a wonderful recitation so believe it" (Sura 46:31). It is logical to argue that the conversion of 73 Yatribis in Medina cannot be unconnected with the evangelistic activities of faithful demons.¹⁴

While this transition was going on in history; it is most likely that Muhammad met with Christians in the southern part of Palestine, most probable those who belong to one heretic group or the other (probably Docetism, Monopystism, Nestorianism or Ebionism, among others), due to the persecution of the State against them, seeking for refuge against the Byzantine. During the medieval period (c. 500 – 1500 A.D.) the Roman Church made Latin the language of the Bible, few Christians knew or could read the Bible.¹⁵ They only bear the name 'Christians' but cannot convincingly explain what it means to be Christ-like; this condition gave home for heresy. Christians should trust the Bible as the Word of God, defend the faith and be able to openly discuss controversial issues. But how will a reasonable number of Christians in the middle age do this when they could not study the Bible for themselves? This plausibly

of God's Love for Mankind: A Sharp Lens on the Book of Genesis (Mauritius: Blessed Hope Publishing Company, 2019), 45.

¹⁴ Ali, *Islam Reviewed*, 38.

¹⁵ Ergun M. Caner and Emir F. Caner, *Unveiling Islam* (Nassarawa: Evangel Publishers, 2002), 209.

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explains why Muhammad views the Trinity concept as a scam. Muhammad get a clear grasp of the one God concept but probably did not encounter a convincing explanation of the Trinity, maybe if he had, the story wouldn't be what it is today. The Trinity is a difficult mystery taught in the Bible, but can only be adequately explained with a functional understanding of the Bible.

Another contact of Muhammad with Christians is narrated by Ali; "...A time came when Islam was on the chase that 83 Muslims including Muhammad has to flee for safety to Abyssinia, a Christian country (now Ethiopia). The Negus protected the Muslims and lavish love on them. When the Mecca's persecutors demanded their repatriation, they didn't hand them over. Among the Abyssinian Christians, the Muslims had earlier presented and defended their faith but didn't declare their position on Christ's sonship and resurrection. After the Muslims were fully established, they revealed their true colour as an anti-Christian religion"¹⁶

Islam rose through conquests. After Muhammad's death, his successors and their armies conquered lands between western India and Southern France. Following Muhammad's command and activity of Jihad, then Muslims carry on the course with the aim of forcefully converting anyone that crosses their path. Favourably for the growing religion then, the Roman and Persian Empire have exhausted themselves in ending warfare; this gave way to the advancing army of Islam. The Middle East who was tired of the imperial overlords welcomes the Arabs as liberator. In 1453, Muslim Caliphs ended the Byzantine Empire when they overran Constantinople and changed its name to Istanbul. The Ottoman Turks colonized vast territories in Central and Eastern Europe. Twelve years after Martin Luther penned his 95 theses; the Turks laid their first siege of Vienna.¹⁷ This means is still in use today, Islam adherents tend to win souls for Allah via fire-flame brigade approach.

The slave-trade activity also fostered the rise of Islam. Although argued by several Islamic scholars. This article posits that slavery is another cardinal means of Islam expansion. Many Islamic historical scholars often paint the blame-game portrait; they argue that

Christianity consistently abetted the enslavement of black Africans, while Islam traditionally opposed the erroneous practice. Suffice to this, the encyclopaedia Britannica is in favour of the Islamic faith with reference to the Roman Catholics from Spain and Portugal as the first among Christians to take slaves from Africa beginning in 1601. Meanwhile, after Islam spread across North Africa in the 700's, Muslim entrepreneurs were in the chartered routes, engaging slaver caravans from Muslim regions (now known as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lybia and Egypt); they coerced Hausas and Fulanis to be slave raiders, while they simply buy and sell slaves at retail prices.¹⁸

While the slave trade activity continues, Muslim traders brought teachers of the Quran to convert not just the sub-Saharan black tribe, but also those who agree to kidnap and sell their neighbours. If these ascensions are baseless, then why was Islam unable to spread much across the sub-Saharan Africa? The work of the Islamic missionaries became ineffective simply because people in sub-Saharan Africa were far from being eager to join the religion of slave raiders. Here, Islam encountered a great mid-set resistance.

Islam had one thousand years head start before Christianity in Africa. But because Muslim missionaries sided and aided Muslim slavers their available advantage was forfeited. If not, Islam would have successfully Islamize the whole of African continent without any contention. Even though Christianity arrived late in African history, handful missionaries have caused two hundred and fifty million in sub-Saharan Africa be categorized as Christians.¹⁹ Though Christians were involved, Christian missionaries opposed slavery everywhere they encountered it. Typical examples are; David Livingstone (who stood against Muslims slavers in Uganda) and Maryslessor (who engaged fellow Christian Europeans who fostered slave-trade in Nigeria).²⁰

¹⁶ Ali, *Islam Reviewed*, 76.

¹⁷ Ali, *Islam Reviewed*, 84.

¹⁸ Don Rrichardson, *A Response to Louis Farrakhan's Anti-Christian Propaganda*" M. Ali, *Islam Reviewed* (Fort Myers: Fish House Publishing, 1999), 113.

¹⁹ C.G. Pflander, *The Balance of Truth* (Villach: Light of Life, 1986).

²⁰ Samuel W. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2012), 68.

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Slavery was declared illegal in Saudi Arabia in 1965 and Sudan in 1991; but several data shows that this simply is in principle, not in practice. The declaration was simply to save their faces from being termed as barbarian.²¹ Unlike Christians like William Wilberforce, James Chamberlain and Abraham Lincoln who strove tenaciously until slavery was abolished in Great Britain, the British colonies and Southern United States. For Islamic countries, the declaration was a mere decoy. While slave trade was on, the non-Muslims in such areas remained illiterate. Prior to the European intervention, these people have no united record of their pre-colonial history.²² Later on, lessons taught repeatedly in school soon seem more real than a memory of long-dead great grand dad's tale of a curse not only coming by ship from the West but also by caravan from the north.

CONCLUSION

Muslims disengaged many achievements of early apostles, invading the Christian populated North Africa, slaughtering many and forcing the rest to Islam by sword. "And the angel of the Lord said to her, behold, thou art with child, and shall bear a son and shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" Genesis 16:11-12. This biblical text gives a clear framework for Islam, though contestable, the information this text provides is not be unconnected with the rise of Islam.

Christian missions in Islamic areas can be affected greatly via the presence of Christian love and service. The witness of listening and service must permeates Christian's interaction with Muslim. The presentation of peace, reconciliation and the love of God is a good Christian value than arguments. If only someone could have met Muhammad and adequately explain him with the truth of the Christian Gospel; maybe Christianity would have been spared the taunts of these years. However, the hard truth is that; Muhammad or no Muhammad, some kind of false religion would still come to Arabia – a prophet, an Islam or something similar. This conclusion align with

Luther's opinion as quoted by Zaka and Coleman; 'Islam is a religion of the natural man and the rod of correction for our sins.'²³ Therefore, the Church must pray, repent and return to the Word as a means of stopping Islam's influence.

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²¹ George Brasswell, *Islam* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 26.

²² Jacques Jomier, *How to Understand Islam* (New York: Cross Road, 1991), 20.

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