

THE COVENANTS OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD: TRUE OR FALSE?

Edited by L.D. Waterman

1 INTRODUCTION

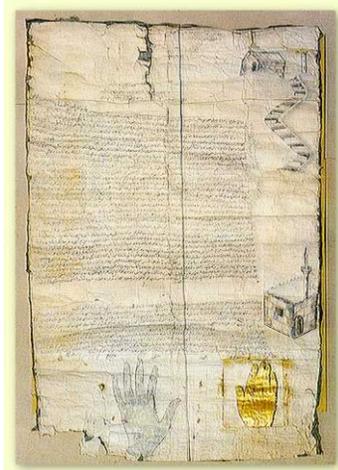
Relationships between Muslims and Christians play a vital role in world events, not only for adherents of the world's two largest religions but also for the rest of the world's people, impacted by the interaction of adherents of these two faiths. Attitudes and actions of these two large groups toward one another are significantly influenced by historical events and documents from the rise of Islam up to the present. Ironically though, *perspectives* on those historical events and documents are significantly influenced by pre-existing attitudes held by members of either group.

Propaganda and rewriting history play a major role in efforts to convince audiences of the views held by various groups. A person or group's willingness to trust or to question a source plays a major role in conclusions reached. Again ironically, the willingness to trust or question a source is strongly influenced by prior inclinations and attitudes.

These important dynamics were visible in an email discussion among some members (listed at the end) of the [Bridging the Divide](#) Network. This group of scholar-practitioners with special interest in the Muslim world interacted on two different occasions concerning a purported historical document entitled "The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad" ("Ashtiname of Muhammad"). The following excerpts of an in-house email discussion are posted with permission from all those quoted.

2 THE DOCUMENT AND THE QUESTION: TRUE OR FALSE?

LDW: I recently ran across this citation on line, and I'm wondering if any of you have seen or heard of it before and can either vouch for its accuracy or clarify that it's errant in some way.



A copy of the *Ashtiname* of Muhammad hanging in the Mt Sinai Museum

English Translation of the *Ashtiname*

1. *Muhammad the son of 'Abd Allah, the Messenger of Allah, and careful guardian of the whole world; has wrote the present instrument to all those who are in his national people, and of his own religion, as a secure and positive promise to be accomplished to the Christian nation, and relations of the Nazarene, whosoever they may be, whether they be the noble or the vulgar, the honorable or otherwise, saying thus: Whosoever of my nation shall presume to break my promise and oath, which is contained in this present agreement, destroys the promise of God, acts contrary to the oath, and will be a resister of the faith, (which God forbid) for he becomes worthy of the curse, whether he be the King himself, or a poor man, or whatever person he may be.*
2. *That whenever any of the monks in his travels shall happen to settle upon any mountain, hill, village, or other habitable place, on the sea, or in deserts, or in any convent, church, or house of prayer, I shall be in the midst of them, as the preserver and protector of them, their goods and effects, with my soul, aid, and*

protection, jointly with all my national people; because they are a part of my own people, and an honor to me.

3. Moreover, I command all officers not to require any poll-tax on them, or any other tribute, because they shall not be forced or compelled to anything of this kind.
4. None shall presume to change their judges or governors, but they shall remain in their office, without being deported.
5. No one shall molest them when they are travelling on the road.
6. Whatever churches they are possessed of, no one is to deprive them of them.
7. Whosoever shall annul any of one of these my decrees, let him know positively that he annuls the ordinance of God.
8. Moreover, neither their judges, governors, monks, servants, disciples, or any others depending on them, shall pay any poll-tax, or be molested on that account, because I am their protector, wherever they shall be, either by land or sea, east or west, north or south; because both they and all that belong to them are included in this my promissory oath and patent.
9. And of those that live quietly and solitary upon the mountains, they shall exact neither poll-tax nor tithes from their incomes, neither shall any Muslim partake of what they have; for they labor only to maintain themselves.

3 FIRST ROUND OF DISCUSSION

3.1 *What's easily available on the internet?*

Rob: An internet search led me to the fount of all truth: Wikipedia: :-)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_community_of_Najran. [Editor's note: these sites may have been edited since being accessed by the writers in this discussion.]

Scroll down and you will find the text of the letter under Najran pact. Here is the source of the text in the Wikipedia article: <http://books.google.com/books?id=wf8QZWL1NlwC&pg=PA41#v=onepage&q&f=true>

Also this: <http://www.covenantsoftheprophet.com/>. The "Covenant with the Christians of Najran" appears to be a longer version of this, but it is a different translation so I'm not entirely sure.

3.2 *Support for the document relies on secondary sources and late documents*

Benjamin: Thanks Rob. Upon reviewing these links, the alleged 628 "Charter of Privileges to the Saint Catherine Monastery" as cited in Maryam Sakeenah's *Us Versus Them and Beyond* comes from a quote from another secondary source quoting, in turn, another translated secondary Indian source of Muslim History, etc. (Hmm....)

As I glanced at Sakeenah's citations in the PDF, she is cherry picking through rare 'reciprocally nice' historical texts, still trying to defeat (in 2010) Samuel Huntington's 1993 *Clash of Civilizations* theory. Clearly Sakeenah has not read Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (1997).

Wikipedia, in turn, relies on Sakeenah for their sources. And the web site called "Covenants of the Prophet" bases its source on a text published by Gabriel Sionita in AD 1630. A little late.....

All of the above fails the scrutiny of serious scholarship, which explains, LDW, why you had not heard of it before.

3.3 *Questions concerning the document's true source and current usage*

Rob: Thanks for looking at those Benjamin. The lack of provenance and historical context do seem to suggest that they are not authentic and that the people who are using it are not playing fair. On the popular level, you can get away with putting forward historical documents read at (apparent) face value. On the other hand, the document in question is historical and it does have a provenance. I wonder what it is? Sounds like an interesting story. Perhaps a Christian fabrication? Also, am I right to interpret the various uses on line as supporting Muslim apologetics? ("Hey religiously tolerant Westerners, the prophet was also tolerant.")

3.4 *Tentative conclusions*

Benjamin: You're right Rob, it could be a very interesting "story," one that promises to join the alleged (and highly cited by Muslims) *Gospel of Barnabas* and other pseudepigrapha which date to late middle age southern Italian authors.

Yes, I would also assume that a tolerance-loving writer for, say, "The Charter of Privileges" on Wikipedia (among other sites) will be less edited than one who calls such texts fabrications.

3.5 *Caution about hasty conclusions, noting our inclination to assess in light of our pre-existing views*

Alan: It's been very interesting following this discussion and I would certainly love to know the source but until there is something more conclusive I'd be inclined to withhold judgement. It strikes me that the sayings "we see what is behind our eyes" and "we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are" are quite relevant in this discussion to all of us.

Given the Quran's many positive statements concerning Christians and their book (not to be confused with statements about the Jews and their book), along with some historical evidence showing some churches – such as the Coptic Orthodox – to have viewed the expanding Islamic empire as a safer option than the suppressive Christian Byzantine empire, is it not possible that the letter was Muhammad's view, whether authentic or not?

So whilst we should be diligent in researching its historical reliability we should also be slow in prejudging it. Though I of course also "see what is behind my eyes." : -) I'm so glad we have some great scholars amongst us to help us out here.

3.6 Scholarly comment favouring authenticity

Greg: If it helps, I asked Joseph Cumming about this. Many of you know Joseph, who knows a lot about these kinds of "issues" and how they are viewed by scholars (Christian, secular or Islamic). He has extensively researched many of the Islamic commentators on various views in the Koran related to views of Christ, Trinity, etc. for his PhD dissertation called "The Trinity in Islam" – and other writing and speaking.

He wrote: "The letter you attached looks real to me. I have read similar texts, and this sounds like those I have read. Western scholars tend to question whether such documents really go back to Muhammad or not, but what matters is whether the Muslim community sees them as authentic, and generally Muslim scholars do. I will forward to you an email I sent just last week to another brother who sent me a similar inquiry."

The email he mentioned referred to two books that talk about such documents: *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* "The Prophet Muhammad's treaties with the Christians of his time, which John Andrew Morrow has rediscovered in obscure collections and often newly translated, uniformly state that Muslims are not to attack peaceful Christian communities, but defend them 'until the End of the World.'"

I just found this site with a bunch of notes about the book and the author: <http://www.patheos.com/Books/Book-Club/John-Andrew-Morrow-Covenants-Prophet-Muhammad.html> "The Patheos Book Club features *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* by John Andrew Morrow, a collection of rediscovered and newly translated treaties stating that that Muslims are not to attack peaceful Christian communities, but defend them "until the End of the World."

Joseph wrote in reply to this brother asking him about the Morrow book: "I don't know the book, but I know and respect some of the people who wrote blurbs for the book. Glancing superficially at the book's description, I would note the following: 1) By 'little-known' he must mean 'little-known to the general public.' Most of these documents are well known to scholars. 2) For the book to be accepted by the scholarly community, it will need to address the question of the historicity of these texts.

Many Western scholars will doubt whether these texts really do go back to the Prophet himself. The good news, however, is that most Muslim scholars do not doubt that, so it's good for these documents to become better known to the general public. I hope this helps."

3.7 Standards of evaluation

Benjamin: LD, Thank you for floating the question: we are all learning much through it.

Joseph wrote: "Western scholars tend to question whether such documents really go back to Muhammad or not, but what matters is whether the Muslim community sees them as authentic, and generally Muslim scholars do." By that standard, *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion* and *The Gospel of Barnabas* are equally authentic. Let's not go there.

Again, how is "they see it as authentic" not an argument for pragmatics: "It works to consider it authentic, therefore use it." Also, if a work is "little known," there are usually authentic scholarly reasons. *Caution*, not *anticipation* is the more prudent response.

Rob's point stands: this would make an interesting study.

3.8 Misuse of historical information

Rob: Benjamin, I'm thinking generally in the same direction as you. I think that a historical document always has something valuable to tell us: first it tells us something about the time and place that produced it (which may not necessarily be the purported time and place!). Second, its subsequent uses (including contemporary uses) tell us something about the values and aims of individuals and groups throughout history. I think that Joseph is

emphasizing the latter to the exclusion of the former. Of course, both the current view of the Muslim community and the document's provenance are important, but in different ways and in relation to different questions.

I recently attended a lecture up at Regent College about "Axial Myths" which critiqued the way in which many people are using highly suspect historical claims to promote their own contemporary values, particularly the notion that there was a time when all the great religions lived harmoniously and that we should draw inspiration from that. After the lecture someone in the audience asked what's the big deal if people misuse historical information? It's for a good cause, right? He was genuinely puzzled. The lecturer (Ian Provan) answered that truth matters, pure and simple. Misuse of facts can lead to so many complications that we are better off just staying with the truth.

I'm sure I'm preaching to the choir here. But I'm also struck by the value that people attach to historical (mis?)information that promotes their own cause, even while on average most people have very little interest in history. History is more and more becoming the playground of ideology; maybe it always has been. So I think that we do well do well to be attentive to historical detail and questions of historical fact. It's a question of honesty and intellectual leadership.

I wrote a post about that lecture if anyone is interested:

<http://www.fellowtravelerblog.com/2013/10/23/whassup/>

3.9 *Historiography and current relevance*

Gene: Rob, I wanted to pick up and comment briefly on the part of your statement:

"History is more and more becoming the playground of ideology; maybe it always has been. So I think that we do well do well to be attentive to historical detail and questions of historical fact."

This is where the problem lies, in historiography. The problem of understanding what "really" happened in the past is often shipwrecked on the shoal of what is included and excluded from extant accounts. There is only one historical document that we can rely on 100% and even the Bible is shaped by historiography (except in this case it was directed by the Holy Spirit).

Furthermore, even if the document is authentic (and I see that as a distinct possibility), it does not exist in a historical vacuum. Considering what we do know with reasonable certainty, Islamic powers have seldom acted in accordance with the "covenant" in question, and when they did it was usually only because of political expediency. Furthermore, let us never forget that there are historic Christian communities that have their own understanding of their historical relations with Islam.

Therefore, I would say that in the larger picture, such documents have marginal value for shaping Christian-Muslim relations today. And I saw this even though I lean toward the "peacemaker" end of the scale and will probably buy the book.

3.10 *Discovery of decisive critique*

Gene: I just found a very well written critique of the book [*The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*](#) which brings the covenant in question to light.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/roberthunt/2013/12/the-covenants-of-the-prophet-muhammad/> This book review is well worth the few minutes to read for anyone interested in this topic.

3.11 *Case closed?*

Benjamin: Thank you, Gene! Robert's Hunt excellent review of Morrow's work says it much better than what I wrote earlier. We no longer need a book review. This is it. It's worth keeping a copy of this on file. I would suggest that after reading Hunt you'll agree: it's "case closed."

4 SECOND ROUND OF DISCUSSION

One year later, additional members had joined the BtD network, and in discussion about the "Golden Age of Islam," the topic of "The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad" arose again.

4.1 *Citation as evidence of a Golden Age of Islam*

Rudi: Dear Brother Mark, the former president of Indonesia, K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid said something positive about Islam pre-Mecca, the *Ashtiname* of Muhammad, the constitution of Medina, and the Golden Age of Islam. Also Prince Charles said something positive about the Golden Age of Islam.

4.2 *Caution about testimonials and critique of the "Golden Age of Islam"*

Mark: Thank you brother Rudi. I have respect for those people you mentioned, like President Wahid (Gus Dur). But no matter how great a person is, just because they believe or say something is true, doesn't mean we can just take their word for it. We still need to ask "why" and "where is the evidence."

Many people have said positive things about the Golden Age of Islam. This idea of a "golden age" was developed by 19th century European scholars – actually mainly Jewish scholars – to put pressure on Christians to respect the rights of other faiths.

When we consider the evidence carefully, this Golden Age time is quite similar to the present day "Islamic State" (*Daesh*) in many respects. For example, harems were full of Christian women taken captive as slaves in jihad, many people were being killed in jihad, Christians were paying *jizya* to keep their heads and wearing seals around their necks to show they had paid the tax for another year.

If that was Islam's Golden Age, maybe the present-day Islamic State will be considered a Golden Age of peaceful Islam at some time in the future as well. Love and truth belong together: truth without love tends to hate; love without truth tends to folly.

4.3 Clarification, with scholarly backing

Rudi: Dear Brother Mark, by "Peaceful Islam," I meant Islam Pre-Mecca, as validated by:

1. *Ashtiname* of Muhammad (600s AD). Prof. Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab, MA, a respected Yemeni Indonesian scholar of Islam stated that the *Ashtiname* of Muhammad is a well-trusted document to prove that the expression of Islam should be peaceful. The Indonesian name for it is "*Surat Nabi Muhammad*." Dr. Shihab said it was probably dictated by the Prophet for Ali to write. See his informal Facebook posting: "*Nabi Muhammad SAW Serukan Kaum Muslim Lindungi Umat Nasrani*" ("The Prophet Muhammad Appeals to Muslims to Protect Christians"). <https://www.facebook.com/585736218180206/photos/a.585738991513262.1073741828.585736218180206/617493678337793/>

2. The Constitution of Medina (620 AD) was drafted by the Arabian prophet. It constituted a formal agreement between him and all of the significant tribes and families of Yathrib (later known as Medina), including Muslims, Jews, Christian and pagans. It instituted a number of rights and responsibilities for them bringing them into the fold of one community, the *Ummah*.

The Golden Age of Islam during the reign of the Abbasid caliph Harun ar-Rashid (786-809 AD) appointed people to do research and life-long learning. Harun ar-Rashid set up بيت الحكمة *Bayt al-Hikma* (the "House of Wisdom," where scholars from various parts of the world sought to translate and gather all of the known world's knowledge into Arabic – including the Torah, the Writings, Psalms and the Gospels. This is why we in the modern times can benefit from Astronomy, Medicine, Algebra, Chemistry, Geography, and the Sciences.

In fact the Torah, Psalms and Gospels are an integral part of Islam. I agree with you in saying even Christians of any kind are an integral part of the Community, the *Ummah*. Christians should not have been regarded as outsiders to the community.

It's too bad that Islam Post-Mecca tended to be full of biases against Christians and unfairly stereotype Christians. Islam Post-Mecca is, of course, full of worriers, politicians and polemicists and of people claiming to be the defenders of God.

3. Last but not least, the sacrificial life of unknown and undocumented Muslim followers of Jesus around the world. This is possible only because of following Jesus' example of leading a peaceful and sacrificial life.

4.4 Substantial evidence the document is a forgery

Mark: Dear Rudi,

1. Islam pre-Mecca was a myth invented by the Messenger.

2. The *Ashtiname* of Muhammad is a forgery – not written by Muhammad. See Moritz's *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Sinai-Klosters* <https://archive.org/details/beitrgeszurgesc00moriuoft>

This is the most authoritative discussion of the document. On page 11, 2nd paragraph, he says (in German): "The impossibility of finding this document to be authentic is clearly apparent. Date, style and contents each independently provide its inauthenticity."

For several pages from p. 11...Moritz gives many reasons, for example (translated from German):

1. The date in the document is AH 2. However it is most unlikely that Muhammad sent any letters before AH 5, and the groups to whom he first turned would have lived in the region of Medina, and not outside Arabia.
2. Muhammad could have had no relationships with tribes in Sinai (to whom this was addressed) at that time; it was too early. He only made contact with these tribes several years later.
3. Ibn Sa'd gives a list of Muhammad's 47 writings, but the *Achtiname* is not included in this list.

4. The form is quite inconsistent with features of letters of Muhammad's time: there is the complete absence of the standard forms of address and concluding comments.
5. There is oscillation in the identity of the person who is speaking in the letter: at the start Muhammad is spoken of in the third person, and then there is a switch to the first person.
6. The quite confused, awkward and at times uneducated style is quite unlike Muhammad's Arabic (many examples are listed).
7. The letter sometimes addresses humanity in general, and sometimes Muhammad's followers.
8. There are features suggestive of Christian Arabic.
9. There are several features unique to Egyptian Arabic (several examples are given).
10. There are features of medieval Arabic - suggestive of a date centuries after Muhammad.
11. The term sultan, which is found in the document, was only used to refer to rulers a few centuries after Muhammad
12. The contents of the letter address abuses which only became pressing for Egyptian Christians later such as gaining permission to repair churches (prohibited under dhimmi conditions), the desire to prevent forced marriages of Muslim men with Christian women (a widespread abuse under *dhimma* conditions); and the desire to prevent plundering of churches to help build mosques. The *Achtiname* is seeking to alleviate for Christians some of the more onerous *dhimma* covenant provisions as well as well-known *dhimma* abuses – such as the abduction of women by Muslims. These were unknown to Egyptian Christians at the time of AH 2, but became commonplace in later centuries.
13. The concerns of the letter are mainly not those of a monastery, which suggests that the document was composed outside a monastery. E.g. What could a concession granted to a monastery possibly have to do with Christian women marrying Muslims, which is one of the concerns of the document?
14. Another example of something out of place is an exemption of Christians from military service in Islamic armies. In AH 2?
15. The *Achtiname* forbids Muslims taking building materials from churches to erect Islamic buildings, but there were no such Islamic buildings in Egypt in AH 2.
16. It was impossible in AH 2 for Muslims to be granting military protection to Mount Sinai, because the influence of Muhammad's armies did not reach that far at the time.
17. Early covenants of Muhammad generally are focused on the duties of protected groups, but in the *Achtiname*, the focus is on the privileges of the Christian monks and the duties of Muslims towards them. For example, no Islamic regime ever gave Christians the right to self-select the rate to tribute for themselves, as the *Achtiname* does.

This letter appears to address characteristic abuses of *dhimmis*, in terms which only make sense after the *dhimma* regulations were established (after Muhammad's time). It seems to refer to a time of more intense persecution against Christians, including the general population outside the monasteries. It may have been dated, according to Moritz, in the time of the Caliph Hakim (996-1020 AD), during whose rule there was severe persecution against Christians.

I suspect that it is later, namely during the period of the Turkish invasion of Egypt (early 16th century). Such a document would have been little use as a defense against Hakim, but the Turkish Sultan Selim I was keen to get Christian support while fighting the Mamluks.

Please note that those most keen to claim this document as authentic are pious Muslims. This serves the purposes of their revisionist history of *dhimmitude*. How ironic that a forgery designed to moderate abuses of Christians is taken as a measure of Islamic tolerance.

3. The Constitution of Medina was the basis used by Muhammad to eradicate the Jews of Medina through expelling them and finally through a massacre. During this period he had many Jews assassinated – like just happened recently in Paris. This was not a peaceful period.

4. The so-called golden age of Islam was a time of jihad, harems (full of female Christian slaves taken in jihad), jizya and massacres of non-Muslims. This was not a peaceful period.

5 CONCLUSION

LDW: As aptly noted by Alan, “we see what is behind our eyes.” Our inclination to believe or disbelieve something can be strongly influenced by our prior attitudes and convictions. The more we are willing to acknowledge this and the more we are willing to listen to those who see things differently, the more likely we are to arrive at an accurate perspective.

Both iterations of the discussion end with what appears (at least to this writer) to be conclusive proof that the “*Ashtiname* of Muhammad” was written long after the time of Muhammad. The fact that it took a group of relatively well-read scholars so much discussion to reach this conclusion (and even then *perhaps* with some silent dissenters) illustrates graphically the danger of forged documents being accepted as authentic and history being rewritten with ideological agendas and then accepted by scholars.

If the *Ashtiname* is not from Muhammad, the person, date and motives of the writer are unknown. Some interesting hypotheses have been proposed, but short of additional discovery, these will probably never be known.

I suspect that most or all readers of this article would agree that “truth matters, pure and simple...we do well do well to be attentive to questions of historical fact.” Yet a related question may be more complex. As cited by Rudi, many Muslims (including Muslim scholars) accept the historicity of the *Ashtiname* and consider it a foundational document for their commitment to tolerant Islam. Dr. Shihab’s Facebook page cited by Rudi contains numerous links to the site www.islamtoleran.com (“Tolerant Islam”; with tagline “World Gateway for Friendly Islam”). When large numbers of Muslims consider a document foundational for tolerance toward those of other religions, how much advantage is gained (and in what contexts) by debunking the document?

At the level of historical scholarship, “true or false” is an essential question. For scholars, intellectuals and those willing to think critically, clear consideration of evidence is vital. For conversation with most Muslims in everyday life, though, it may be preferable to steer toward other topics more likely to touch the heart than to stir academic debate. Truth matters, including focusing on the most important truths at the right times and places.

My personal conclusion is that the *Ashtiname* is a forgery, and I consider it important for as many people as possible to not be duped by its use to buttress claims of a “Golden Age” of tolerant Islam. But in most of my day to day conversations with Muslims, I would prefer to talk about God’s love being so great he has made a way for all their sins to be forgiven and for them to have assurance of eternal life.

Contributors to the discussion:

L. D. Waterman (pseudonym) has served among Muslims in SE Asia for the past 21 years.

Rob Haskell is a former missionary and current member of the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

Benjamin Hegeman has served with SIM in West Africa for 25 years; Adjunct Professor of the Christian study of Islam at Houghton College and co-founder of the Liliias Trotter Center.

Alan Hallmart (pseudonym) has worked amongst Muslims for 36 years, firstly in the Middle East and then in a global role supporting CP teams.

Greg H Parsons serves in Global Ministries of Frontier Ventures (which is the new name for the USCWM) and as Chancellor of William Carey International University.

Gene Daniels (pseudonym) has been involved with ministry and research in the Muslim world for 18 years.

Rudi is one of the Muslim followers of Isa

Mark Durie is a pastor of a congregation of Muslim background believers in Melbourne, Australia, a human rights activist, a Shillman-Ginsburg Writing Fellow at the Middle East Forum, and an Adjunct Research Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at Melbourne School of Theology.