

Ahmed YOUSSEF:
Le moine de Mahomet. L'entourage judéo-chrétien à La Mecque au VI^e siècle
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Ahmed Youssef has a PhD in the University of Sorbonne, pertaining the image of Egypt in the French imaginary. A «specialist in the relations between France and the East [...] a writer and a correspondent in Paris of the Al-Ahram, prestigious daily Egyptian», as described in the book. He wrote in 2003 *Bonaparte and Mahomet*.

In *Le Moine de Mahomet*, the author studies the presence and influence of Judaism and Christianity in the life of the Prophet, by analysing a set of characters from these religions that had impact in his life. Based in the traditional sources like the *Sira* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad) and the historians Ibn Isaac, Ibn Hicham or Tabari, Ahmed Youssef intends to make a new biography of Muhammad, focusing in those figures.

Even though the approach is entirely new, the book fits in the historiography that searches how Judaism and Christianity may have had influenced the origins of Islam.¹ However, this kind of study is often controversial, because Islamic religion defends that the Koran is the word of *Allah*, therefore there would be no external influences. This

¹ Andrae, Tor, *Les origines de l'Islam et le Christianisme*, col. Initiation a l'Islam VIII, Paris, Jean Maisonneuve, 2005 (1ère edition 1955); Azzi, Joseph, *Le Prêtre et le Prophète: aux sources du Coran*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001; Gallez, Édouard-Marie, *Le Messie et son Prophète – Aux Origines de L'Islam* (2 vols.), vol. I – *De Qumran à Muhammad*; vol. II – *Muhammad des califes au Muhammad de l'histoire*), Paris, Éditions de Paris, 2005.

is why the modern Islamic historians, as Ahmed Youssef states in the introduction, have avoided the theme and the analysis of some figures, neglecting the influence of Judeo-Christianity (pp. 16-17).

This work is divided in two parts: the first focus on Christian figures, to each of whom the author dedicates a chapter; the second follows the same scheme, but regarding Judaism.

The two initial chapters explore the history of two founding characters that, although not having a physical presence in the life of Muhammad, had a great significance in the history of Islam. The first figure is Abraham, from whose sons, Isaac and Ishmael, have descended the sons of Israel and the Arabs, correspondingly. From the last ones, according to the Bible, would emerge a prophet, which will be assumed as being Muhammad, creating therefore the first connection of the Prophet to the Christianity. The second figure is the “father” of the *Sira* (biography of Muhammad), Ibn Isaac, born in Medina in the year of 704. Ahmed Youssef describes the life of this author, focusing on his Christian origins (though he converted to Islam) and the opposition he and his work suffered, forcing him to escape to Bagdad, because of those origins and because he used a daughter of Muhammad, Fatima, to establish the authority of the traditions (*hadith*).

The following chapter studies the context of the birth of Muhammad, especially the Arabic hopes in the coming of a Prophet to lead them. Even the *hanifs*² expected a Prophet, who would come to close the cycle of biblical prophecies, leading the author to state that Muhammad was conceived even by Arabic Christianity (p. 43). Related to this was another event: the Christian expansion of king Abraha (monophysite with traces of Nestorian’s doctrine), which failed, but contributed to the encounter of the Arabic Christians with Islam by the intercession of Muhammad (p.48).

The fourth chapter starts by describing the early years of the life of Muhammad: his commercial journeys with his uncle Abd Al-Muttalib;

² Monotheist followers of the religion of Abraham. Cf. p. 40.

the first confirmation as a Prophet by Bahira, a Christian monk, in one of those journeys to Syria; and the initial teachings about Christianity with Jabra and Waraka Ibn Nawfal, Christians of Mecca.

Through Waraka, Muhammad meets the character studied in this chapter, Khadija, his future wife and cousin of Waraka. The author debates the many aspects, like age, family, wealth, that separated them, concluding that it was religion that led them to marriage, because Khadija and part of her clan would have affinities with Christianity or could even be Christian. That fact would explain her rapid conversion to Islam, and the image of Muhammad as a *hanif* that wanted to abolish polytheism and injustice in Arabia (p. 60).

The following chapter returns to Waraka Ibn Nawfal and to his life as a monk, whose influence could explain the tolerance and the greater biblical relations in the early Islam of Mecca compared to the more political Islam of Medina (p.78). According to the author, Waraka would be the only one who could teach Muhammad about Christianity, creating therefore a solid relation between them, maybe master and disciple (p.75). But Ahmed Youssef does not think that Waraka was the director of conscience of Muhammad, disagreeing with Joseph Azzi³, who defends that there was a complot to make Muhammad the successor of Waraka as the chief of Nazarene Church.

The last figure of part one is another wife of the Prophet, Mariya, an Egyptian, which the author uses to demonstrate how the Christianity from Egypt and Abyssinia attracted Islam and how Muhammad created a series of matrimonial pacts with those states to enforce his political position and to expand Islam, a universal religion.

The second part of the book is about the figures of Judaism and it begins by a convert of Judaism to Islam, Ibn Sallam. In fact, this chapter reveals the significant presence of Jews and their culture in Arabia, namely in Medina and the South, dominating a wide range of commercial activities. The author elaborates the philosophic and

³ See note 1.

spiritual proximity between these two religions, especially the rigid monotheism, the refusal of the Trinity, the existence of a Law, the Prophets and the prayers, reasons for explaining the gradual conversion of Jews to Islam (p. 109). This contributed to the opposition of rabbis and the confrontation of Muhammad, in order to discredit him and his message.

If the initial confrontation with Judaism was more philosophical, the three last chapters demonstrate the growing resistance of Jews towards Muhammad, whom had concentrated in him more political and military power after the battle of *Badr* (p.129). The author gives a detailed history of this war, from which Muhammad get acquaintance with the three Jewish women, revealing his human side, like his predecessor Moses (p.154). The first woman, Saffiya, married the Prophet but did not abandoned her religion, connecting therefore Islam and Judaism (p.149). The second, Rayhana, is poorly known, but it seems she did not marry the Prophet, though she stayed in his harem and was very appreciated by him. The last characters are both named Hind; one is pagan and the other is Jewish, both being poets that wrote against Muhammad, illustrating the fearsome opposition that Islam overcomes. Another recurring idea in these last chapters, but also in the entire book, is that if Muhammad was tolerant towards those religions and figures, his successors [would not].

Ahmed Youssef finishes the book with three appendixes, with transcriptions of the Koran, about the “People of the Book”, the confirmation of the revelation given to Moses and Jesus and the previous prophets, testifying the prime objective of the author, that at the end of the book rests clear: there were Christians and Jews that influenced the life of the Prophet and marked Islam.

However, and despite the amount of sources in use, the author does not give to the reader, most of the times, the source were he extracted the information, therefore leaving the reader in doubt about the interpretation and the historical fact. Besides this, the book lacks the presence of a bibliography in the end, which would provide more searches about a specific theme or give more credit to the work in place.

Furthermore, Youssef seems to gather the information without giving it a proper analysis and regarding the interests behind that affirmation. For example, the “easy” conversion of Khadija may be a later construction to grant more impulse to the message of Muhammad. So, comparing to other biographies⁴ and similar studies that put the information into perspective, this author gives a rather exacerbated vision of the influence of Judaism and Christianity over Islam. If Ahmed Youssef is critique about the modern Islamic historians for avoiding this theme, he himself seems to rush into conclusions.

In the end, it is an interesting book, full of details but in a simple language, that gives us a different approach and a new insight about the relations of Islam with Judaism and Christianity and is a sign of the rising studies about this theme, without the restraints of religious dogmas, but also without attacking religious beliefs.

⁴ See Andrae, Tor, *Mahomet. Sa vie et sa doctrine*, Paris, Maisonneuve, 1945; Watt, W. Montgomery, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford University Press, 1953.