
Muslim-Christian Relations in the Era of Prophet Muhammad: Review of Najrān Delegation's Case in Modern Context

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Abstract

Muslim-Christian relations are as mature as Islamic history itself. Historical evidences state the first interaction of Muslims and Christians occurred in 5th year after nabuwwah (615 AD) when Muslims migrated to Ḥabshah (Abyssinia) and second contact was established after immigration of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) to Madinah. After getting socio-political stability in 8th hijrī (629 AD), Muhammad (PBUH) sent letters and ambassadors to different statesmen and religious leaders to spread the Islamic Mission and Message globally. One letter was also sent to the chief Bishop of Najrān. In response, the chief Bishop of Najrān accepted the invitation and personally came to meet the Prophet (PBUH) with his reputed delegation. The beloved Messenger (PBUH) warmly welcomed this delegation. As a result, the peace agreement was reached after some theological debate and discussion. Later on, throughout history, the relations between Muslims and Christians have been in situation of up and down. It's also a fact that over the centuries, the Muslims-Christians relations had sometimes been one of enmity, sometimes one of rivalry, competition, and encounter. In spite of it, the Najrān's delegation case has a historical significance in Muslim-Christian relations in the literature of both religions. Therefore, in this study efforts were made to explore the event of Najrān delegation as theological foundations for Muslim-Christian relations in times of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and how can we get benefit from it in modern era. Moreover, this study perceives that the case of Najrān delegation was the first practical interaction between Muslims and Christians of that age. Hence, we could get benefit from it with its modern applications and interpretations. The analytical, comparative and historical approaches have been adopted in this study with qualitative paradigm. I compared and analysed the case in Islamic and Christian context and then gave recommendation for its application.

Keywords: Muslim-Christian Relations, Prophet's (PBUH) Era, Case of Najrān Delegation, Application, Review, Modern Context.

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Introduction

It is a historical fact that Muslim–Christian (*ahl al-kitāb*¹) relations are as old as the history of Islam itself. The first interaction of Muslims and Christians occurred in the 5th year after *nabuwwah* (615 AD) when a group of Muslim believers migrated to the land of Habshah (Abyssinia) on the recommendation of the Beloved Prophet (PBUH) due to persecutions of the Quresh of Makkah. The King of Habshah, Najāshī, welcomed Muslims’ delegation. His hospitality and behavior towards Muslims were very proactive and excellent. He was influenced by Muslims’ character and behavior during their stay in Habshah and later on, he also embraced Islam and Prophet (PBUH) offered his funeral prayer in Madinah on the news of his death. A good number of hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH) and historical evidence are witnesses to this event. Imam Muhammad bin Ismail Bukhārī narrated in his book of Hadith: “Abu Huraira reported that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) gave the people news of the death of Negus on the day he died, and he took them out to the place of prayer and observed four takbirs.”² After immigration of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from Makkah to Madinah with his companions, the city of Madinah was announced as Capital of the Islamic state. After getting some socioeconomic and socio-political stability in 8th hijrī (629 AD), Muhammad (PBUH) sent letters to different statesmen and religious leaders to spread the Islamic Mission and Message globally. One letter was sent to the governor of Roman Empire and another letter was sent to the chief Bishop of Najrān. The Hadith literature tells us;

In the name of God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A letter from Muhammad (PBUH) the prophet of Allah to chief Bishop of Najrān and the people of Najrān. I call you to the worship of Allah from the worship of people, to the sign of Allah from the sign of people. So, come to the friendship of Allah from the friendship of people. If you accept it then you will pay ransom otherwise, you will ready for war.³

However, two different responses were received from the Roman governor and Bishop of Najrān. The Roman governor killed the ambassador (Hārith b. Umair Azdī (RA) of the Prophet (PBUH) and the chief Bishop of Najrān accepted the invitation and

¹ *Ahl al-kitāb* is a *Qu’rānic* Terms which means people of the book and it’s used for Christian and Jews both. Some scholars considered Zoroastrians and *Sābits* also from people of the book.

² Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al- Bukhārī* (Lahore: Dār as-salām, 2008), Hadith no. 121.

³ Abū al-Fidā’ Ibne Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa-Nihāyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Reyyān, 1988), 5:48.

personally came to meet the Messenger (PBUH) with his delegation. The beloved Prophet (PBUH) also responded to them in two different ways. The Muslim Army was sent for war to take revenge of the ambassador's murder. This battle was known as the Battle of Mu'tah in 9th AH (629 AD). While in response to Christian Bishop, the event of *munāẓrah* (Debate), *mubāhlah* (Imprecation) and peace agreement (*methāq*) was done.

Later on, throughout history, the relations between Muslims and Christians have been in the situation of up and down. Therefore, according to the scholar's views, over the centuries the relationship between Muslims and Christians has sometimes been one of enmity, sometimes one of rivalry, competition, and encounter. There also have been periods of productive dialogue, mutual collaboration and sincere friendship. Here, Zafar Ishaq Ansari speaks about this issue:

The Christian and Muslim civilizations are geographical neighbors and there is long diversified history of frequent tension, acute rivalry, and armed conflict, military alliance across religious lines, peaceful cultural exchange, economic traffic and occasional cooperation. Some would have us believe that the past of these two civilizations necessarily fixes their future.⁴

In spite of it, the event of the delegation of Najrān has a historical significance in Muslim-Christian relations in the literature of both communities. Due to its historical and theological significance, this study explores the incident of Najrān delegation as a theological foundation for Muslim-Christian relations in the era of Muhammad (PBUH) and its application in contemporary times as well. This study also derives some important principles and parameters for interfaith dialogue with Christians and Jews and will play a hallmark step towards interfaith peace, harmony, and relations.

Literature Review

The under-discussion topic entitled, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Najrān Delegation's Event* has been a significant topic throughout the Islamic and Christian history. Thus, most of the Muslim *mufasssīrīn*, *muḥaddithīn*, historians and *sīrah* writers gave importance to it in their work. Ibn-i Khatīr in his *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm* gave more importance to it and described it in detail. According to him, this incident has landmark significance in Muslim Christian relations in the era of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

⁴ Ismā'īl Ibrāhīm Nawāb, "Muslim and the West in History" *Muslim and the West: Dialogue and Encounters*, ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari and Johan L. Esposito, (eds.), (Islamabad: IRI, 2001), 3.

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Secondly, the early *sīrah* writers paid more attention to this topic and made some important contributions about Muslim-Christian relations with reference to the event of Najrān delegation. One of them was Muhammad bin Abdul Malik b. Hishām in his book *Sīrah Ibne Hishām*. The people of Najrān did not agree to make *mubāhlah* with the Prophet (PBUH) but they decided they will return back to their homes with an agreement with the Prophet (PBUH). The Holy Prophet (PBUH) sent with them an honest man from his companions named Obaidah b. Jarrāh (RA). The historians of early times also made their focus on this historic event. Allāmah Balādhri in his book, *Fatūh-ul Buldān*, considers it as a unique agreement for peaceful Muslim-Christian relations. The end of the debate was on agreement which revealed that the lives, property, lands, and places of worship of the people of Najrān shall be under the protection of Allah and His Prophet.

In the modern era, some Muslim scholars consider this event as cooperation of Islamic government with non-Muslim minorities. Some scholars also count it as first regular interfaith interaction between Muslims and Christians of the Prophet era. Besides, some orientalist and Christian scholars also critically analyse this event. The orientalist have two groups on this issue. Some portray it as positive image of Muslim and Christian relations. As a Christian scholar and historian, *Hugh Goddard* has described some information about the Event of *Najrān* Delegation in his famous book: “*A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*” and John Andrew Morrow described it in his book “*Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with People of the Book*”. They concluded that the Christians of Najrān came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and met him in a good environment with a possible best agreement in these circumstances. Alfred Guillaume in “*the Life of Muhammad*” and John Slomp in the “*Meeting of Christians of Najran with Prophet Muhammad*” and some others also agree with this point of view. However, some orientalist criticize this event and even some of them reject the history of this incident. As a renowned orientalist Philip Khuri Hitti, K. Zebri, and MA Salāhī consider it as an agreement with marginalized Christian community which had no other option.

Some contemporary Muslim scholars have the latest research on this issue: Muhammad Hamidullah in Government system in era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and political treaties of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Abū 'l-A'ālā Maudūdī in *Tafhīm-ul-Qur'an* and *Sīrat Sarwar-i 'Aālam*, Zafar Ishaq Ansari with John L Esposito and in “*Muslim and the West: Dialogue and Encounter*”, Muhammad As-Sulābi in his Book “*The Noble Sīrah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)*”, in addition “*Fiqh al-Sīrah*” by

Muhammad al-Ghazālī and Saeed Ramzan Al-Būti. They count it as an important incident of the Islamic history which can prove a base for Muslim-Christian relations in modern era. In most recent literature some research papers are also found on this important topic, “*A Delegation of Christians from Najrān Visits the Prophet Muhammad: Contemporary English Sīrah Literature for a Western Audience*”, from Mahan H Mirza, “*Initial Muslim-Christian interaction and its application in Christian-Muslim interaction in modern era*”, by Riaz Ahmad Saeed, “*the Prophet's Sīrah and its impact on peaceful co-existence with special reference to the Christians of Najrān*”, by Muhammad Habib Raza. These articles represent formulation of Muslim-Christian dialogue in contemporary era.

In this scenario, there is an entire need to study this incident in the context of modern interfaith and especially Muslim–Christian relations. How can we use it and implement this event for peaceful interfaith relations and peaceful co-existence in contemporary era? In this regard hopefully my study entitled, “*Muslim-Christian Relations in the Era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Appraisal of Najrān Delegation's Case in Modern Context)*” will prove to be a beneficial addition.

Research Methodology

The qualitative approach is adopted in this analytical, comparative and historical study. The published authentic data and literature including, academic books, research papers, periodicals, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, and the dissertations have been thoroughly reviewed. Moreover, some secondary sources were also used where necessary in form of websites, blogs and important search engines after careful evaluation and assurance of their validity and reliability. A sufficient amount of time, capital and human resources were involved in this study. In addition, the academic discussion and consultation with senior scholars and researchers of that specific area were also involved in this important study. No doubt their opinions added significant value to the recommendations and endorsed findings of the study. The case was also compared in Islamic and Christian context and then recommendations were given for its contemporary application.

Najrān's Delegation event in Islamic Context

The case of Najrān's⁵ Delegation is one of the most momentous incidents in the history of Islam. It also has some academic and theological symbolic importance for interfaith engagements from the Prophet (PBUH) for the Ummah. Therefore, most of the scholars declare the event of Najrān's delegation as the first communiqué of Christians-Muslims communities of that era. Some Christian scholars also consider it a first collaboration of the Muslims and Christians. It is also measured as a foundation for interfaith dialogue between Muslim Ummah and *Ahl al-kitāb*. According to scholarly views;

Muslim-Christian dialogue dates back to the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Rooted as both traditions are in the monotheism of the patriarch Abraham, Muslims and Christians share a common heritage. For more than fourteen centuries, these communities of faith have been linked by their theological understandings and by geographical proximity.⁶

According to the Islamic sources, when the Prophet (PBUH) sent letters to important figures of the Arabian Peninsula, the elders and religious leaders of Najrān were also included in it. More than 10 letters were written to religious leaders especially to the Christians. Many historical evidences support it. A renowned Muslim scholar Muhammad Hamidullah counted them and revealed their details in his research studies. "In 6th after Hijrah (617 AD), when the Prophet (PBUH) started writing letters to the emperors, some letters were written to the bishops of Najrān. Four were written by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the others were written by the four righteous caliphs."⁷ After receiving a letter from the Messenger (PBUH), chiefs of Najrān's Christians came to Madinah to ask some queries from Muhammad (PBUH) in 9th year after hijrah (620 AD)

⁵ Christians of Najrān: Najrān was a district or town in the northern Yemen in Roman occupied territory. Najrān was the first place in Arabia where the Christianity took its roots. According to scholars they were Monophysite Christians. They are called Nestorian and Catholics had excluded them from Christianity.

⁶ Charles A. Kimball "Muslim-Christian Dialogue," in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/>, accessed on : August 15, 19.

⁷ Muhammad Hamidullah, *Majmū'āt al-Wathā'iq al-Siyyāsiyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Ish'āt, 1969), 139-152.

after the historic conquest of Makkah by Muslims. We find it mentioned in the Quran, and details in hadith, *sīrah*, history and Islamic literature. The Holy Quran speaks out likewise:

The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam: He created him from dust, and then said to him: Be and he was. The Truth from Allah alone: so be not of those who doubt. If anyone disputes in this matter with thee, now after the knowledge hath come to thee, say: Come! Let us gather together -our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie! This is the true account: There is no God except Allah⁸

These verses of the Noble Quran elaborate Najrān's event and their discussion and challenge of *mubāhalah* to the Prophet (PBUH). At the end of the conversation, the Noble Quran appeals to them to a communal word which is ultimately *tawḥīd* (Monotheism) and People of the Book (Christians and Jews) also claimed that they believe in *tawḥīd*. According to Ibne Kathīr, a representative delegate of the Christians of Najrān came to the Prophet (PBUH), "The delegation consisted of sixty horsemen, including fourteen of their chiefs who made decisions. These men were *Al-Aqib*, *as-Sayyīd*, *Abu Ḥāritha*, etc. *Al-Aqib* was their leader and to whom they referred for advice and decision: *As-Syīd* was their religious scholar and leader in journey and social gatherings: And *Abu Ḥāritha* was their patriarch, priest and religious leader. *Abu Ḥāritha* knew the description of the messenger of Allah (PBUH) from what he read in earlier divine scriptures as a Christian because he was honored and had a high position among the Christians."⁹ Besides, it is specified in many *tafsīr* and *sīrah* books, "The *Najrān* delegation came to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in *Madinah*, entered his *Masjid* wearing robes and garments after the Prophet had said the 'Aṣar prayer. They accompanied a caravan of camels led by *Bani Al- Ḥāritha b. Ka'ab*. The companions of the Prophet who saw them said that they never saw a delegation like them after that. Then *Abu Ḥāritha* and *Al-Aqib* spoke to the Holy Prophet and they were Christians like the king. However, they disagreed about *Isa (A.S)*. Some of them said he is God, while some said, he is the son of God, and some others said, he is one of the trinities. But the Noble Quran declares it as a fake claim; Allah is far from what they attribute to

⁸ Al-Quran 3:59

⁹ Abū al-Fidā' Ibne Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur' ān al-'azīm*, (Riyadh: Dār as-salām, 2003), 2:182.

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Him.”¹⁰ Certainly, these are the creeds of the Christian community of Najrān. They claimed that Isa is God and Son of God. He further speaks;

When these Verses of surah Ale-Imran revealed to the Prophet, thus judging between him and people of the Book, Allah also command him to call them to *mubāhalah*. They said O! Abu al-Qāsim! Let us think about this matter and get back to you with our decision to what we want to do. (After consultation) They came to the Prophet and said, O Abu al-Qāsim! We decided that we cannot afford to do *mubāhalah* with you and that you to remain on your religion, while we remain on our religion. However, send with us a man from your companions whom you are pleased to judge between us regarding our monetary disputes, for you are accepted to us in this regard.¹¹

In addition, according to the comments of Zuhālī on this historic event: “It has been proved that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) called the Christian of Najrān for *mubāhalah*¹² but they refused it...the Holy Quran sets the reason on their claim that Jesus is God and calls them to actual religion and preaching which was the basic *Da’wah* of all the Prophets and that is *tawhīd*.”¹³ According to Syed Maudūdī’s statement, “The summary of the main points which was presented in front of Najrān delegation is the following: The first thing is that the faith of Jesus’ divinity is futile. The second thing is that the mission of Jesus and Muhammad is the same. The third thing is that religion of Quran and Christianity and the companion of Jesus is the same.”¹⁴ The Holy Quran invited the people of the book to the common word;

Say: "O People of the Book, Come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims."¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 1:177.

¹¹ Ibid., 178.

¹² *Mubāhalah* (Imprecation) is derived from the Arabic word *bāhlah* (curse). *Bāhlah* is a root verb meaning to curse. In the *Qur’ān*, *al-mubāhalah* was mentioned as a decisive solution to the dispute over Jesus between the delegation of the Christians of Najrān and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

¹³ Wahbah az-Zuhailī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr*, (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1998), 3:252.

¹⁴ Abū ‘l-A‘lā Maudūdī, *Tafhīm-ul Qur’ān* (Lahore: Maktabah T‘amīr-i Insāniyyat, 1972), 1:260.

¹⁵ *Al-Qur’ān* 3:64

Therefore, Islāhī writes under the interpretation of this verse:

The meaning of *sawā* (كَلِمَةً سَوَاءً) is centre which is common, well-known and central thing between two people or parties. According to Quran, *tawhīd* is the common thing between Muslims and people of the Book, so Quran starts its *Da'wah* from this common thing. This way of conversation is according to this verse of Quran, Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching. And the special aspect of this way is that when you find a common thing with the audience then call them to this point.¹⁶

At that place Shafī' *Usmāni* adds his views similarly: "We find in this verse an important principle of preaching, and it is that when you want to reach a group which is different from your own faith then you call him on the common point as the Holy Prophet(PBUH) wrote a letter to Hariqal the King of Rome."¹⁷ Likewise, Maudūdī says about these verses of the Quran; "The invitation here is for the two parties to agree on something believed in by one of them, the Muslims, and the soundness of which could hardly be denied by the other party, the Christians. For this was the belief of their own prophets and had been taught in their own scriptures."¹⁸ Ghulām Rasūl Sa'īdī interprets this verse of the Quran in this way in *Tibyān al-Qur'ān*: "This Verse is the basic rule of preaching to the people of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) because the Prophet (PBUH) used this verse in his letter to the Hariqal, the Roman Emperor."¹⁹

Imam Muhammad bin Ismail *Bukhārī* has categorized this momentous event in *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* under the chapter, the story of the people of *Najrān* (Christians):

Narrated by Hudhaifa (R.A.) Al-Aqib and Sayyīd, the ruler of the *Najrān*, came to Allah's Messenger of doing *li'an* (Curse) (process of *mubāhla*), one of them said to the other ,Do not do this *Liā'n*, by Allah if he is Prophet and we do this *li'an* neither we nor our offspring after us will be successful. The both of them said to the Prophet, we will give what you ask but you send a trustworthy man with us. The Prophet said: I will send an honest man who is really trustworthy.²⁰

¹⁶ Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Lahore: Fārān Foundation, 1983), 2:112.

¹⁷ Muhammad Shafī' Usmānī, *Ma'aārif-ul-Qur'ān* (Karachi: Maktbah al-Ma'ārif, 2003), 2:87.

¹⁸ Maudūdī, *Tafhīm-ul Qur'ān*, 1:262.

¹⁹ Ghulām Rasūl Sa'īdī, *Tibyān-ul Qur'ān* (Lahore: Freed Book Depot, 1995), 2:87.

²⁰ Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al- Bukhārī*, Hadith no. 4380.

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A renowned classical scholar Ibn-i Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī depicts some important details of this event in “*Fath-ul Bārī: Sharah Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī*”. He articulated about this momentous event in this way, “We find the permission of Debate (*mujāddlah and munāzrah*) with the people of the Book. We also find the permission of *mubāhala* (*Imprecation*), when they totally reject the message, we find softness in *shrī’ah* for the People of the Book, permission of *jizyah* (*protection Tax*) for the People of the Book.”²¹ A number of other *muhaddithīn* and *mufasssīrīn* also pointed out this important event in their books of hadith. Imām Bahaqī mentions a letter from Prophet (PBUH) to the chief Bishop and people of the Najrān and this arrival was the response of this letter. Bahaqī narrated:

In the name of Allah who is God of Abraham, Isaak and Jacob (AS). From Muhammad ((PBUH)) to the Bishop and people of Najrān. Praise be to Allah who is God of Abraham, Isaak and Jacob. Worship Allah, the one and leave the worship of others. I invite you to come to the worship of Allah who is One. Accept the invitation, give *jizyah* (Security Tax) or be ready to fight. May peace be up on you.²²

In this response, the religious and political leaders of Najran came to meet the Prophet (PBUH) and this journey ended on peaceful agreement between Muslims and Christians of that Era. The commentary and placement of this historical event show its significance, worth and historical status.

In addition, another classical prominent *sīrah* writer *Abdul-Malik Ibn-e-Hishām* labelled the story of Najrān delegation in more details in his renowned book *Al-Sīrah al-Nabwiyyah*. He summarizes the incident of the *Najrān* delegation in these words, “a deputation from Christians of *Najrān* came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). There were 60 riders, fourteen of them from their chiefs, especially three of their nobles dealt with their political and religious affairs, Aqib Abdul-Masīh, Syed Al-Ayham, and the Bishop-Abu-Ḥāritha. When they came to Medina they came into the Prophet’s Mosque. He prayed the afternoon prayer dressed in Yamani garments, cloaks and mantels with the elegance of men of *Banī al-Ḥārith b. Ka’ab*. The Prophet’s companions who saw them that day said that they never saw any such deputation that came afterward. At the time of their

²¹ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath-ul Bārī: Sharah al-Bukhārī*, (Riyadh: Dār as-salām, 2003), 8:119.

²² Aḥmad b. Ḥussein Abū Bakr al-Bahaqī, *Dalā’il al-Nabuwwāh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), 374:5.

prayer, they stood and prayed in the apostle's Mosque, and he said that they were to be left to do so. They prayed towards East (The three leaders of them debated with Prophet (PBUH)). Though they varied among themselves in details of some important points, saying he (Jesus) is God, and he is the son of God, and he is the third person of the faith of Trinity, which is the doctrine of Christianity. They argue that Christ is God because he used to raise the dead and healed the sick. They also argue that He is the son of God as he had no known father."²³ They were incessantly arguing that he (Jesus) is the third divine, one of the three. Until they reached on the concluding point that God is one, but Jesus is also son of God. According to many *sīrah* writers and interpreters of the Holy Quran and concerning all these questions, the Quran came down, at the beginning of the *Surah Al-e-Imran* up to more than 80 verses.

In addition, a renowned classical *sīrah* writer Ibne Hishām speaks:

When they came to the apostle, news of Jesus from God and a decisive judgment between him and them, and he was commanded to resort to the mutual invocation of a curse if they opposed him. He summoned them to begin. But they said O Abu al-Qāsim, let us consider our affairs, then we will come to you later with our decision. So, they came to apostle and told him that they had decided not to resort cursing and to leave him in his religion and return home. But they would like him to send a man he could trust to decide between them in certain financial matters in dispute among them.²⁴

At the end of the debate, the kind Messenger of Allah sent Abu Ubaidah b. Jarrāḥ and said, "Go with them and judge between them faithfully in matters they dispute about."²⁵ In this way, this book of *sīrah* describes the whole incident with all necessary details. Moreover, we find this event in many other notable *sīrah* books. But we cannot find these details in them.

Contemporary *sīrah* writers also describe this significant historic event. Muhammad *Hamidullah* is among them. He articulates, "When the Prophet (PBUH) ordered a Muslim tribe of the Najrān (*Banū Hāritha*) that they break up their relationships with their non-Muslims, even relatives, but we do not find this order for Christians of Najrān because the

²³ Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath-ul Bārī*, 8:119.

²⁴ Muhammad b. Abdul Malik Ibne Hishām, *Sīrah Ibne Hishām* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1990), 220-22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 220-22.

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Prophet (PBUH) had contracted with the Christians of the Najrān. It was an exceptional case for the people of the Book.”²⁶ Moreover, Hamidullah has described some important covenants between both communities of that era, which shows the significance of relations between Muslims and Christians. These letters and agreements show the importance and history of Muslim-Christian interactions.

A classical Islamic scholar Imam Ibn-e-Hazam al-Zāhiri expresses his views in *Zād al-M’āād*:

When the delegation was coming to Madinah from Najrān, during the journey, the horse of a man slipped. He cursed the Holy Prophet but his brother Abu Hāritha said curse on you, he is a true Prophet of God. He said why you do not believe in him? He said due to respect of our nation. So, this person believed later in the Holy Prophet (PBUH).²⁷

After this discussion, he lists some key advantages of the mentioned incident:

Affirmation of Prophet-hood is not enough to accept Islam, permission of debate with People of the Book, respect of mankind is not greater than Allah, Allah will not punish one due to other, and agreement is conditional with non-Muslims. There is no permission of interest to Christians in Islamic State.²⁸

In above discussion of the Quran, hadith and *sīrah*, we find many important points from this historic incident. As well as it shows the deep interest of Muslim scholars in this most important event of the Prophet’s (PBUH) era. Almost every *mufasssir*, *muhaddith*, Muslim Jurist, *sīrah* writer, and Islamic historian has given importance to this vital event of the era of Muhammad (PBUH).

The Event of Mubāhilah in Najrān delegation (Imprecation)

It is observed that the event of mubāhilah (Imprecation) in Najrān delegation happened during this high-level interfaith meeting. It is also perceived that Muhammad (PBUH) first listened to the Christians of Najrān humbly and tried to understand their viewpoint and then reopened the discussion. Their point of view was that since Christ was born without a father, he is god or has godly attributes. Quran rejects this false claim and tells us that the example of Jesus Christ is like that of Adam. Adam was created without a

²⁶ Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Prophet of the Islam* (Multan: Bacon Books, 2005), 636.

²⁷ Ibne Ḥazam al-Zāhirī, *Zād al-M’ād* (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1990), 3: 188-194.

²⁸ Ibid.

father and mother. If Adam was not a god or had no attributes of God, then how could Jesus Christ be a god or have godly attributes?

“This similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam: He created him from dust then said to him, Be and he was.”²⁹

After the discussion which lasted for many days, when they did not agree with the Prophet on the position of Jesus Christ and some other pertinent issues, the verses of the Holy Qur’an regarding *mubāhala* were revealed. The Prophet (PBUH) offered them *mubāhah* and they refused it after mutual consultation. The Holy Quran presents this incident in this way:

If anyone disputes in this matter with thee now after (full) knowledge hath come to thee say: Come, let us gather together our sons and your sons our women and your women ourselves and yourselves: then let us earnestly pray and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie.³⁰

Here, a prominent *sīrah* writer Muhammad bin Sa’ad describes the reaction of the Christians: “We are looking at such pious faces that if they curse us, neither Christianity nor Christians will remain on this planet. They will be destroyed forever.”³¹ So, they refused to participate in *mubāhla*. However, both parties ultimately reached the conclusion that they should live and let others live as peaceful neighbors. An agreement was signed between Christians of Najrān & Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Muhammad bin Yaquḅ Balādharī describes this historical agreement as:

This is a deed from Muhammad, the Prophet of Allah, in favor of the people of Najrān and its outskirts. The order and decision of Muhammad about the entire property and wealth of the people of Najrān is that they will pay (*jizyah*-protection tax) to the Islamic government every year. And in case there is a danger of war from the Yemen, they shall help out, as a mark of co-operation with the Islamic Government. Furthermore, the lives, property, lands, and places of worship of the people of Najrān shall be under the protection of Allah and His Prophet (PBUH).³²

²⁹ Al-Qur’ān 3:59

³⁰ Al-Qur’ān 3:61

³¹ Muḥammad b. Abdullah Ibne S’ad, *Ṭabaqāt* (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1982), 2:135.

³² Abu al-‘Abbās Ahmad b. Jabir Balādharī, *Fatūh-ul Buldān* [Origins of the Islamic State] trans. PK Hitti, (New York: Columbia University, 1916), 1:100.

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A renowned Christian scholar and compiler of the wonderful work “The Covenants of Hazrat Muhammad with the Christians of the World”, Professor Andrew Morrow³³ stated in his book regarding the treaty to the Christians of Najrān: “Whoever follows the Christian faith must not be forced into becoming a Muslim; mercy must be spread to them and anything harmful must be kept away from them wherever they may be in the land.”³⁴ Allāmah Balādhārī further stated that in Umar b. Khattāb’s era the people of Najrān were dispersed into Syria due to some administrative issues. So, the Jews of Najrān too were included in this agreement. “The People of Najrān were dispersed in Syria and others in Najrānīyyah.”³⁵ A Muslim scholar who collected some important covenants of the Messenger (PBUH) comments on the peace treaty of Najrān as:

This reflects how much tolerance Islam shows towards other creeds and beliefs. Those who advocate the killing of non-Muslims under this pretext or that should learn from this covenant. This text shows you the pristine beauty of Islam and the Prophet's self-confidence and deep conviction. It is a charter of human rights the like of which is seldom found anywhere.³⁶

In my view, the Christians of Najrān were very wise people. If they had accepted *mubāhlah* with Prophet (PBUH), they would have been defeated and received the curse from Almighty Allah and His angels. Thus, due to soft dealing with delegation, it was the result of that the brother of chief bishop Karaz bin Hārith embraced Islam at that time, at the hands of the Prophet (PBUH) and after the passage of some time, after they reach their homes, some of them, ‘Āqib and Syed also entered into the fold of Islam. As a renowned Muslim writer Muhammad Ibn-i Sa'ad says: "When they went back to Najrān, two of them Syed and ‘Āqib came back to *Madinah* and accepted Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) respected them and settled them in the house of Abu-Ayyūb Anṣārī (R.A.).”³⁷ This was the brief introduction of this most important event in the Islamic sources. The incident, due to its

³³ John Andrew Morrow: John Andrew Morrow is a religious authority, academic, and activist. He is the author of a wide body of works in the field of Islamic studies, the most critically acclaimed work of which his is *The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*. He is also writer of many other academic works.

³⁴ Morrow, John Andrew, *The Covenants of Prophet Muhammad with Christians* (USA: Engleco Press, 2003), 298.

³⁵ Balādhārī, *Fatūh-ul Buldān*, 1:101.

³⁶ Yāsīn Jabourī, *The Concept of God in Islam* (Bloomington: Author House, 2013), 2:451.

³⁷ Ibne S‘ad, *Ṭabqāt*, 2:134-136.

significance, was reported in Islamic sources in detail. This historic event not only describes the foundations of Muslim-Christian relationship but also depicts some important injunctions related to Muslim-Christian affairs.

Delegation of Najrān in Contemporary Christian Discourse

It is observed that Christian scholars have not sufficiently written about this eminent event of the Christian–Muslim history due to certain reasons. Subsequently, after rigorous exploration, there are only some sources that have been found about this renowned historic incident. A renowned Christian Scholar, Prof. Andrew Morrow, collects all the treaties of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with Christian community and the event of Najrān delegations is one of them. He articulated in his book, “The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians of the World”; “The covenants concluded by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE) (First Nabuwwāh -62AH) with the Christian of Mount Sanai, Najrān, Persia, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Armenia are some of the most important covenants of the world. Yet, it is the neglected literary monuments in the history of Islam.”³⁸

Furthermore, an eminent Christian scholar and historian, *Hugh Goddard* has described some information about the Event of Najrān Delegation in his new and famous book: *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*.³⁹ He articulates the details of this incident of Muslim-Christian history. He narrates this important incident likewise;

The Christians of Najrān came to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and met him in a good environment. They asked some questions to the Prophet and the Prophet also asked some questions to the leaders of the delegation. It was a kind of debate and dialogue between Muslims and Christians. And after that they agreed upon an agreement. According to him it was the first interaction between Muslims and

³⁸ Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World*, 1.

³⁹ *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* by Hugh Goddard: An important book on Muslim-Christian, especially, it describes the initial interactions of Muslim and Christian at the time of the emergence of Islam. This book investigates the history of Christians-Muslims relations over the centuries, from their initial encounters to the modern period when the balance of power seems to have been reversed. This much-needed overview of the Christian-Muslim encounter places the emphasis on the context which perceptions and attitudes were worked out and provides a depth of historical insight to the current complexities.

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Christians in history and it can also become a base for modern Muslim Christian dialogue.⁴⁰

Another Christian scholar, Jan Slomp, has described his arguments about Najrān Delegation in a research article. He says: “Christianity entered Arabia at an early stage. The apostle Paul spent already some time in the Peninsula attended two synods of Arabian Christians in which fourteen Bishops were present. The pre-Islamic Christians were mainly Con-Teghlides and among the Nabataeans and the Harithides of Najrān.”⁴¹ He further added about this particular event;

The prayer of Christian’s delegation was in the Mosque of the Prophet (PBUH). The Prophet did not hesitate to enter into a deep religious conversation with the Christians leaders. The Prophet (PBUH) listened to the point of view of the Christians of the Najrān. The Christians of Najrān were connected to the Orthodox Church (Nestorian Christianity). The Prophet (PBUH) challenged them for *mubāhalah* but they did not accept it, the best possible treaty between Christians and the Prophet after the conversation.⁴²

However, some orientalist criticize this incident and the approach with which the Christians of the early Islamic period were dealt with. Montgomery Watt⁴³ is one of them. He said: “The early Muslim encounter took place with marginal Christian sects. Muslim scholars mostly misinterpret this issue. Islam never encountered mainstream Christians. Islam needs to have more accurate knowledge to adopt an appropriate approach to an

⁴⁰ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: University Press, 2000), 41.

⁴¹ Jan Slomp, “The Meeting of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with Najran’s Christians”, *Al-Mushir* 18, no. 3 (1976): 227-234.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴³ Montgomery Watt: He was a Scottish Orientalist and Anglican priest. He was Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Edinburgh since 1979. Watt was one of the foremost non-Muslim interpreters of Islam in the West. Watt's comprehensive biography of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956), are considered to be classics in the field.

encounter with Christianity.”⁴⁴ Another prominent Orientalist⁴⁵ Alfred Guillaume⁴⁶ mentioned and commented on this important event in his translation of *sīrah* Book, “The Life of Muhammad (PBUH)”. He stated about this event; “That was the best possible treaty between Christians and the Prophet (PBUH) after the conversation under the circumstances.”⁴⁷ It is also a strange matter that a contemporary Orientalist and *sīrah* writer, Karen Armstrong, does not discuss this issue in her work on Muhammad (PBUH). However, another Orientalist Martin Lings⁴⁸ stated this event in his book;

Deputations still continued to come as in the previous year, and one of these was from the Christians of Najrān, who sought to make a pact with the Prophet. They were of the Byzantine rite, and in the past had received rich subsidies from Constantinople. The delegates, sixty in number, were received by the Prophet in the Mosque, and when the time for their prayer came, he allowed them to pray it there, which they did, facing towards the east.⁴⁹

A notable Western writer M.A. Salāhī⁵⁰ also shows his concern regarding this event:

When the conflict in Arabia moved strongly in favor of the Muslims, the Prophet sent a letter to the bishop of Najrān which read: 'In the name of the God worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I call on you to worship Allah alone

⁴⁴ William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christians Encounters, Perceptions and Misperceptions* (USA: Routledge, 1991), 17.

⁴⁵ Orientalist: A person who studies and learns the languages, art, religion and science of oriental countries. The focus of the orientalist has been on the *Qur'ān*, hadith and *sīrah* of the Prophet (PBUH) in the field of Islam.

⁴⁶ Alfred Guillaume: He was a famous Orientalist. He learned Arabic and Islamic knowledge. He written many books one of the most important works was edited and translated many books. *The Life of Muhammad* is one of them. His field of research was *Qur'ān*, hadith, *sīrah* and *fiqh*.

⁴⁷ Alfred Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (New York: Oxford University press, 1987), 273.

⁴⁸ Martin Lings: He was a renowned orientalist and wrote a number of books on Seerah of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in early 20th century. During this journey, he embraced Islam and named as Abū Bakr Sirājuddīn. His famous book was *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* is still under study.

⁴⁹ Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on Earliest Sources* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006), 336.

⁵⁰ M. Adil Salahi is a scholar, author and translator, who has written or translated into English various books on Islam. He formerly taught at the Marklfield Institute of Higher Education. He was also, for over thirty years, the editor of 'Islam in Perspective', a regular full-page column in the *Arab News*, a Saudi daily newspaper. His book: life entitled: *Muhammad: Man and Prophet* get critique from Muslim and Western.

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and not to worship anyone alongside Him, and I call on you to give loyalty only to Allah rather than to any of His servants. Should you refuse, you only have to pay *jizyah* [a tax denoting loyalty and entitling the people who pay it to be protected by the Muslim state.] Should you also refuse that, I will declare war against you⁵¹

Moreover, a renowned contemporary Christian scholar, Kate Zibri⁵², looks at this event and other Muslim encounters with Christianity with suspicion. He argued: “The Muslims encountered a divided Christendom; some Christians particularly the Copts in Egypt⁵³ had reason to prefer their new masters to oppose Byzantine.”⁵⁴ Here it can be said if Christianity was divided or not united then it was not a Muslim fault. I think it is the style of orientalists that they exegete in some issues and in some issues, they use it according to their special objectives and motives to criticize Islam. Muslim scholars respond to mainstream Christianity in every phase of history wherever they interacted and felt its need. Muslims have never been afraid of Christian knowledge and faith, but they perceive that the Christian sources are amended while they have the Quran which is a non-amended and final revelation from Almighty Allah.

It is perceived that these necessary details about the early Christian-Muslim relations, encounters, and interactions give us a sketch on the account of the event of Najrān delegation in the era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) according to the Christian perspective. Through the above references, we come to know about the importance and validity of this important event in the history of Muslim-Christian relations.

⁵¹ M. A. Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1995), 689.

⁵² Kate Zibri: Known as K. Zebiri is a British scholar and academician. She is professor of Arabic & Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. She is the author of many books including *Muslims and Christians Face To Face*. Muslim-Christian Dialogue and relation is her most favorite field of study.

⁵³ Copts Christians: An important Christian sect in history of Christianity. They differ from Catholicism in some fundamental issues. Copts in modern Libya. The largest Christian group in Libya is the Coptic Orthodox Church, with a population of 60,000. The Coptic Church is known to have historical roots in Libya long before the Arabs advanced westward from Egypt into Libya. At the time of the Prophet (PBUH) it was the major sect of Christian in this area. The major differences are: The nature of Jesus Christ, The Filioque Controversy, Purgatory, and Infallibility of the Pope, Primacy of St. Peter, and Fasting etc.

⁵⁴ Kate Zibri, *Muslim and Christian Face to Face* (Oxford: One World Publishers, 2000), 23.

Modern Application of the Najrān Delegation's Case

This event has many implications and significance in theological, academic, interfaith and historical perspectives. Therefore, this study comes to draw some valuable principles and rules which lead us towards interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims in contemporary era. Here, I would try to list some important principles and parameters derived from this most significant incident with special reference to the modern Muslim-Christian dialogue. Some of them are given below:

1. We find the parameters of interfaith discussions, debate, and dialogue, especially with Jews and Christians.
2. Book of Allah, the Holy Quran and *sīrah* of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) will decide between Muslims and other faith in case of any dispute.
3. Islam allows other faiths to live in Islamic society and state with some terms and conditions.
4. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right of all human beings and it will be respected.
5. The Quran, the sunnah and noble *sīrah* of Muhammad (PBUH) permit peace and political agreement to other faiths, especially to people of the Book.
6. Result of the interfaith discussion is not necessary to imprecate Islam; we can discuss for mutual understanding and peace as well.
7. During the debate, we call other faiths to the common points, common values, and common interests and show respect, honor and tolerance to the other faiths with complete care.
8. This incident tells us we can meet and agree despite all theological, social and political differences and grievances.
9. Christian scholars differ regarding this important incident. Some deny it, and some accept it and some ignore it. However, some impartial scholars accept its importance in Muslim-Christian relations.
10. Most of the scholars consider this incident as the first regular academic contact between Muslim and Christian communities of the Prophet's (PBUH) time.
11. The discussion with Christian delegate shows the humbleness, respect, and tolerance of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) towards non-Muslim minorities.

12. This also eradicates the so-called objection on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from some western orientalist that Islam spread under the power of the sword.

It reveals a relationship with other faiths and communities in order to understand their religious beliefs and their ways of life and how their faiths affect their attitude towards mankind in general. Moreover, the event of Najrān also provides us some valuable principles of mutual understanding, respect of others, tolerance, and communication. We must implement them in the age of conflict and clash.

Conclusion

It is perceived from the above study that the Najrān delegation event is a historic and important event of initial Muslim-Christian interaction. Moreover, some Muslim and Christian scholars also consider it the first regular academic and interfaith infarction between Muslims and Christians communities of those ages. Although, Muslims had visited and lived under hospitality of the king of Abyssinia Najāshī. But it was a migration, an exile for some time. While this event occurred after invitation letters of the Prophet (PBUH) to political and religious leaders of that time.

It is also perceived that after this meaningful interaction some senior members of the delegation came back from Najrān to *Madinah* and some of them accepted Islam. It basically results of humble dialogue and conversation with opponents of Islam. In the contemporary era, although the interfaith dialogue is not for conversion purpose, we see many people have embraced Islam after a meaningful debate and dialogue with other faiths. It is our moral and religious duty. This dialogue is an important tool to clarify the teachings of Islam and to remove objections that are raised against it in contemporary era. One of the vital goals of interreligious dialogue is to deliver messages and understanding of Islam to others.

Moreover, this incident has many modern applications to improve interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence and interreligious relationships. This incident shows the freedom of expression, religion, and criticism during interfaith discussion. During the incident, the delegation performed their prayer in the Prophet's Masjid (PBUH) which shows symbolic and practical interfaith harmony. Moreover, the Prophet (PBUH) called them to the common point so this tells us that the common values should be focused on interreligious activities first.

Recommendations

1. It is suggested we should follow the guidelines of Najrān delegation to maintain an interfaith relationship in contemporary era for a multi-ethnic, diverse and pluralistic society.
2. There is a need to study comparatively Muslim and orientalist's approach to this event.
3. We may get benefit with reference to Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue from this important interfaith interaction of the Prophet (PBUH) era.
4. This case may also become an example between two communities having different faiths, interests, and priorities.

It is also recommended we should make it part of the national curriculum for better interfaith harmony and interreligious relations, especially in Muslim countries.