REEXAMINING THE FIRST HIJRAH AS A FOUNDATION FOR ETHICAL PLURALISM IN ETHIOPIA

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Abstract
This article revisits the First Hijrah to Abyssinia and the Muslim community's engagement with the Christian kingdom of Najāshī as a foundational narrative for ethical pluralism and shared political sovereignty within Islamic thought. In contrast to conventional historiography that marginalizes Islam's role in Ethiopia's state formation, this study foregrounds the early interfaith alliance between Muslim migrants and their Christian host, King Najāshī. Drawing on classical sources such as Ibn Hishām, al-Sarakhsī, and al-Shāfiʿī, the article reconstructs the legal and ethical discourse surrounding Muslim military involvement in Najāshī's defense. It critiques traditional jurisprudential interpretations that condition Muslim solidarity on Najāshī's conversion to Islam and instead emphasizes a paradigm of mutual protection founded on trust and civic responsibility. By contextualizing this episode within Ethiopia's religious historiography and political tensions, the study challenges nationalist and colonial narratives that erase Muslim agency. The findings advocate for reviving this legacy of interfaith coexistence as a model for ethical citizenship in plural societies—affirming the right to live together through a shared commitment to justice rather than doctrinal uniformity.

Abstrak
Artikel ini meninjau kembali peristiwa Hijrah Pertama ke Habasyah dan keterlibatan komunitas Muslim dengan kerajaan Kristen Najāshī sebagai narasi dasar bagi pluralisme etis dan kedaulatan politik bersama dalam tradisi pemikiran Islam. Berbeda dengan historiografi konvensional yang meminggirkan peran Islam dalam pembentukan negara di Ethiopia, kajian ini menyoroti aliansi antaragama pada masa awal antara para migran Muslim dan tuan rumah Kristen mereka, Raja Najāshī. Dengan merujuk pada sumber-sumber klasik seperti Ibn Hishām, al-Sarakhsī, dan al-Shāfiʿī, artikel ini merekonstruksi wacana hukum dan etika mengenai keterlibatan militer Muslim dalam membela Najāshī. Tulisan ini mengkritisi pandangan fikih tradisional yang menggantungkan legitimasi solidaritas Muslim pada konversi Najāshī ke dalam Islam, dan justru menekankan paradigma perlindungan timbal balik yang didasarkan pada rasa saling percaya dan tanggung jawab sipil. Dengan membingkai episode ini dalam lanskap historiografi keagamaan dan ketegangan politik di Ethiopia, studi ini menantang representasi nasionalis dan kolonial yang menghapus agensi Muslim. Temuan artikel ini menegaskan pentingnya menghidupkan kembali

warisan koeksistensi lintas iman tersebut sebagai model kewargaan etis dalam masyarakat plural, yang menegaskan hak untuk hidup berdampingan melalui komitmen bersama terhadap keadilan, bukan melalui keseragaman doktrinal.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has long been portrayed as a civilizational bastion of Christianity in Africa, with its religious identity deeply intertwined with its national historiography. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has functioned not merely as a spiritual institution but as a foundational pillar of Ethiopian statecraft and cultural continuity. This Christian identity has been cultivated and reinforced through historical episodes such as the Christianizing campaigns of Emperor Zara Yaqob in the fifteenth century and the consolidation of the EOTC-state alliance under the Neo-Solomonic dynasty in the nineteenth century.[1] The church's moral authority and its embeddedness in state ideology helped shape a dominant narrative in which Ethiopian-ness is coextensive with Christianity, particularly Orthodoxy.[2]

However, this civilizational narrative, while foundational, has proven to be exclusive. Despite being home to one of the earliest Islamic diasporas and the historic site of the First Hijrah—wherein early Muslims sought refuge from persecution in Mecca—the role of Islam in shaping Ethiopia's social and cultural life has been systematically marginalized. While the EOTC was elevated as a moral and cultural center, Islamic polities and communities were often depicted as peripheral or adversarial, even when their historical contributions were substantial.

Modern Islamic scholarship has emphasized the significance of the First Hijrah as an ethical and political milestone in interfaith relations. The event—where the Prophet Muhammad advised his followers to seek asylum in Abyssinia under the Christian king, Ashama ibn Abjar (Najashi)—is remembered not merely as a tactical maneuver, but as an early prototype of interfaith cooperation and mutual recognition. Najashi's protection of Muslim refugees is interpreted as an act of moral leadership, and the episode is often cited as a historical precedent for religious pluralism and the ethical treatment of religious minorities. As Khan et al. (2020) observe, the First Hijrah represents a paradigm of interfaith cooperation rooted in shared moral commitments rather than doctrinal unity. The Christian monarch's protection of Muslim guests exemplified a transcendent ethic of humanity and mutual care, while the Muslims' trust in a non-Muslim ruler underscored Islam's early orientation toward dialogue and coexistence.[3]

This enduring memory of the Hijrah, however, has not been institutionally preserved within Ethiopian national discourse. Contemporary Ethiopian education, media, and public memory often emphasize a mono-religious national identity, neglecting the Islamic dimensions of Ethiopia's formation. Scholars such as Liyew (2024) and Gebru et al. (2023) have critiqued the secular and religious elites for employing Machiavellian tactics to control and depoliticize the

1   Sileshie Semahagne Kumlachew, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as Religious Other in Contemporary Ethiopia: Discursive Practices of Three Selected Religious Authorities," *Religions* 15, no. 6 (June 19, 2024): 744, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060744; Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast* (University of California Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780520968974.

2   Marco Guglielmi, "Sharpening the Identities of African Churches in Eastern Christianity: A Comparison of Entanglements between Religion and Ethnicity," *Religions* 13, no. 11 (October 26, 2022): 1019, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111019.

3   Issa Khan et al., "A Critical Appraisal of Interreligious Dialogue in Islam," *Sage Open* 10, no. 4 (October 5, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020970560.

religious landscape, often relegating Islam to a place of suspicion or marginality within the national imaginary.[4]

Following the 1974 revolution and the fall of the Derg regime, Ethiopia underwent a series of socio-political transformations that deeply affected religious representation and power distribution. Although the 1995 Constitution formally enshrined freedom of religion, the centralization of power within Christian-majority institutions has fueled feelings of exclusion among Muslim communities—most notably among the Oromo, who constitute one of the largest ethnic and religious constituencies in the country.[5] Reports of marginalization in education, media, and state institutions have heightened intercommunal mistrust, revealing the persistence of asymmetrical power dynamics that belie the ideal of equal religious citizenship.[6]

Efforts at interfaith reconciliation, including government-sponsored dialogues and grassroots initiatives, have emerged in response to these challenges. While commendable, such efforts often operate within frameworks that continue to privilege dominant historical narratives. The enduring focus on Ethiopia as a paradigmatic space of religious harmony—rooted in symbolic events like the First Hijrah—may inadvertently obscure structural grievances that require more substantive engagement. It is within this tension between memory and materiality, symbolism and structure, that this study seeks to intervene.

A critical reassessment is thus required of the historiographical frameworks through which Islam in Ethiopia has been traditionally studied. Much of the existing literature, particularly during the colonial and missionary periods, presents Islam as either a marginal presence or a foreign import. These perspectives, though sometimes informative, tend to downplay the agency of local Muslim actors and the depth of Islamic rootedness in Ethiopian society.[7] The limited availability of indigenous Muslim sources has also contributed to a scholarly imbalance that reinforces Christian-centric or Western interpretations of Ethiopian religious history.

To address these historiographical and epistemic imbalances, this study employs a qualitative, historically grounded, and interpretive methodology. Primary textual sources include classical Islamic biographies and historiographies such as the Sīrah of Ibn Hisham (d. 834), Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), and Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' by al-Aṣbahānī (d. 1030), which provide foundational narratives concerning the First Hijrah and the figure of Najashi. These sources are employed not simply to document history but to reconstruct the ethical architecture underlying early Islamic-Christian relations.

This article examines how this foundational memory of Islamic-Christian encounter—embodied in the First Hijrah—has been silenced, reshaped, and contested in Ethiopia's historical

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4 Dereje Melese Liyew, "Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression or Co-Option towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church?," *European Scientific Journal, ESJ* 20, no. 11 (April 30, 2024): 33, https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2024.v20n11p33; Micheale K. Gebru, Getachew Zeru, and Yohannes Tekalign, "The Impact of the Middle East and Gulf States' Involvement on the Horn of Africa's Peace and Security: Applying Regional Security Complex Theory," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 3 (July 30, 2023): 223–45, https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12301.

5 Abraham Hailu Weldu and John Bosco Kiingati, "Christian-Muslim Narratives and Their Dialogue for Sustainable Peace and Development in the Oromia Region, Ethiopia," *African Journal of Empirical Research* 5, no. 3 (July 25, 2024): 370–83, https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.5.3.33.

6 M Elius, "Interfaith Dialogue: An Islamic Framework," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Humanities* 68, no. 2 (December 17, 2023): 193–206, https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v68i2.70363.

7 Rugare Rukuni and Erna Oliver, "Africanism, Apocalypticism, Jihad and Jesuitism: Prelude to Ethiopianism," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (June 6, 2019), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5384; T Ostebo, "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a 'Governmental Islam,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (June 6, 2013): 1029–60, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lft060; Sara Marzagora, "Refashioning the Ethiopian Monarchy in the Twentieth Century: An Intellectual History," *Global Intellectual History* 7, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 533–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2020.1796237.

discourse. It investigates how Islam's early presence has been rendered marginal through historiographical exclusion and institutional neglect. Finally, it considers whether the memory of the First Hijrah can be ethically reclaimed to offer a pluralist framework for navigating Ethiopia's contemporary religious tensions. The study engages interdisciplinary tools: historiographical critique, textual-normative interpretation, and discourse analysis, aiming to connect seventh-century interfaith ethics with twenty-first century struggles over recognition, memory, and justice in a fractured religious landscape.

Ethiopia as Ethical Encounter: The Hijrah, Najāshī, and Shared Protection

The First Hijrah to Abyssinia (615 CE) must be situated within the broader geopolitical and religious context of the Kingdom of Aksum. As the dominant power in the Horn of Africa from the 1st to 7th century CE, Aksum encompassed modern northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, parts of Sudan, the Red Sea coast including the ports of Adulis and Avalites, and parts of Yemen such as Himyar and Saba.[8] This was not a marginal outpost but a significant Afro-Arabian empire with strategic maritime and land routes, which made it a viable destination for exilic asylum.

According to Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the Christianization of Aksum began through the missionary work of Frumentius, a Syrian merchant-turned-cleric who was consecrated bishop by Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria. He returned to Aksum and baptized King Ezana, thus initiating a Christian state religion in the fourth century CE.[9] The influence of Christianity in Aksum was deeply institutional, shaping not just spirituality but also statecraft, artistic production, and political legitimacy.[10]

As the Prophet Muhammad PBUH recognized the moral integrity of the Christian king, Najāshī, he advised some of his followers—suffering religious persecution in Mecca—to seek protection in this Christian land. The migration was both strategic and moral, as reflected in this directive:

لَوْ خَرَجْتُمْ إِلَى أَرْضِ الْحَبَشَةِ، فَإِنَّ بِهَا مَلِكًا لَا يُظْلَمُ عِنْدَهُ أَحَدٌ، وَهِيَ أَرْضُ صِدْقٍ، حَتَّى يَجْعَلَ اللهُ لَكُمْ فَرَجًا مِمَّا أَنْتُمْ فِيهِ.

> "If you go to the land of Habasha, you will find there a king who does not wrong anyone. It is a land of truth, until Allah grants you relief from what you are suffering."[11]

This moment, though often read as a tactical maneuver, is rich with ethical implications. The Muslims chose not to confront the Quraysh with violence but instead sought refuge with a religiously different, yet morally respected king. It is a testimony to the Prophet's trust in shared moral values beyond confessional boundaries.

Upon arrival, the Muslims were received with unprecedented hospitality. According to Sahih al-Bukhari 4230, they found themselves living under the protection of Najāshī for years, participating in religious life without compulsion or threat. Their sense of exile and solidarity is evident in the report of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī:

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8   JACKE PHILLIPS, "PUNT AND AKSUM: EGYPT AND THE HORN OF AFRICA," *The Journal of African History* 38, no. 3 (November 1, 1997): 423–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853797007068.

9   Gabriele Castiglia, "An Archaeology of Conversion? Evidence from Adulis for Early Christianity and Religious Transition in the Horn of Africa," *Antiquity* 96, no. 390 (May 20, 2022): 1555–73, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2022.136; "Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church | History, Beliefs & Practices | Britannica," April 15, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ethiopian-Orthodox-Tewahedo-Church.

10   Paul B Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2000), http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-1-137-11786-1.

11   'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah li Ibn Hishām.* (Kairo, Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Misrī, 1983).

فَأَلْقَتْنَا سَفِينَتُنَا إِلَى النَّجَاشِيِّ بِالْحَبَشَةِ، فَوَافَقْنَا جَعْفَرَ بْنَ أَبِي طَالِبٍ فَأَقَمْنَا مَعَهُ حَتَّى قَدِمْنَا جَمِيعًا... فَكَانَ أُنَاسٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ يَقُولُونَ لَنَا سَبَقْنَاكُمْ بِالْهِجْرَةِ.

"Our ship landed us with Najāshī in Abyssinia. We met Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib and stayed with him until we all returned together... Some people used to say to us: 'We beat you to the Hijrah.'"[12]

This sense of marginalization by fellow Muslims upon returning underscores how being physically distant did not diminish the spiritual unity the exiles felt. Their political safety came from a Christian monarch, who not only tolerated them but defended them from Quraysh envoys and potential enemies.[13]

From the Christian side, Najāshī's hospitality aligns with Aksumite political theology. As Christianity in Aksum had been nurtured through missionary, monastic, and imperial ties with the Eastern Roman Empire, ethical governance had become a hallmark of Christian kingship.[14] Najāshī embodied this ethos, choosing justice over diplomatic expedience.

His declaration to the Meccan emissaries—documented in multiple Islamic sources—makes this clear:

اذْهَبُوا فَأَنْتُمْ سُيُومٌ بِأَرْضِي... مَا أُحِبُّ أَنَّ لِي دَبْرَ ذَهَبٍ وَأَنِّي آذَيْتُ رَجُلًا مِنْكُمْ.

"Go, for you are safe in my land... I would not want a mountain of gold if it meant harming a single one of you."[15]

This policy was not without risks. At one point, Najāshī faced an insurrection from within his kingdom—an episode reported by Umm Salama and later chronicled by Ibn Hishām. The Muslims, deeply integrated into their host society, prayed for Najāshī's victory. Their commitment to his rule illustrates that this was not a passive cohabitation but an ethical alliance forged under duress:

فَدَعَوْنَا اللَّهَ تَعَالَى لِلنَّجَاشِي بِالظُّهُورِ عَلَى عَدُوِّهِ... فَقَدْ ظَفِرَ النَّجَاشِي، وَأَهْلَكَ اللَّهُ عَدُوَّهُ.

"We prayed to Allah for Najāshī's triumph over his enemy... Najāshī was victorious, and Allah destroyed his foe."[16]

The geopolitical decline of the Aksumite kingdom—driven by shifting trade routes, Sassanian incursions, and internal fragmentation—began not long after these early interfaith encounters.[17] Yet the legacy of this era, particularly the principled hospitality extended to the early Muslims by Najāshī and the theological dialogue articulated by Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib, remains a profound testament to ethical pluralism and interreligious solidarity.

Despite Ethiopia's foundational role in protecting Islam's first diaspora and modeling one of history's earliest examples of religious coexistence, the longer trajectory of Islam in Ethiopia has

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[12] Muḥammad ibn Ismāʾīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī*, 1st ed, p. 1037. (Damaskus-Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2002).

[13] Ibn al-Jauzī, *Talqīh Fuhūm Ahl Al-Aṣar Fī ʿUyuni Al-Tārīkh Wa Al-Siyar*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Syirkah Dār al-Arqām bin Abī al-Arqam, 1997); Abū ʾAbdillāh Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal, Syuʾaib al-Arnāʾūṭ, and ʾĀdil Mursyid, *Musnad Al-Imam Aḥmad Bin Ḥanbal*, 1st ed. (Kairo: Muʾassasah ar-Risālah, 2001); Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah li Ibn Hishām*.

[14] Mark Cartwright, "Kingdom of Axum," *World History Encyclopedia*, April 16, 2024, https://www.worldhistory.org/Kingdom_of_Axum/.

[15] Abū Nuʾaim Aḥmad al-Aṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat Al-Awliyaʾ Wa Ṭabaqāt Al-Aṣfiya'* (Kairo, 2009).

[16] Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah li Ibn Hishām*. p. 338.

[17] Rodolfo Fattovich, "From Community to State: The Development of the Aksumite Polity (Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea), c. 400 BC–AD 800," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 27, no. 2 (April 15, 2019): 249–85, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-018-9122-x; Dominik Fleitmann et al., "Droughts and Societal Change: The Environmental Context for the Emergence of Islam in Late Antique Arabia," *Science* 376, no. 6599 (May 20, 2022): 1317–21, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abg4044.

been relegated to the margins of both Islamic historiography and broader Muslim intellectual memory. The reverence for the First Hijrah seldom translates into sustained scholarly or communal engagement with the continued presence, contributions, and struggles of Ethiopian Muslims in subsequent centuries.

Historiographical Erasure and the Political Economy of Conflict

Despite the centrality of the First Hijrah and the protection provided by Najāshī in early Islamic narratives, the broader trajectory of Islam in Ethiopia has been sidelined in both Islamic historiography and Ethiopian nationalist discourse. The depiction of Ethiopia as a predominantly Christian civilization has frequently erased the deep-rooted and evolving presence of Islam, its institutions, and its sociopolitical agency. Colonial, missionary, and nationalist historiographies have played a decisive role in this marginalization, constructing a historical memory that frames Islam as an alien presence, often in opposition to an Orthodox Christian national identity.

Colonial and missionary narratives, particularly during European incursions and missionary enterprises, often depicted Islam as a destabilizing force that encroached upon Ethiopia's Christian legacy. Italian colonial sources, for instance, portrayed the expansion of Islam as a geopolitical and religious threat to Ethiopia's Christian monarchy, justifying interventionist policies.[18] Similarly, missionary literature interpreted the spread of Islam as symptomatic of Christian moral decline, framing conversions as failures of Christian authority.[19]

This framing persisted in modern Ethiopian nationalist historiography, which valorized Christian episodes such as the First Hijrah and Najāshī's benevolence while neglecting centuries of Islamic governance, intellectual productivity, and economic influence. Islam was often depicted not as a native tradition but as a foreign force, its contributions minimized and its actors stripped of ideological agency.[20] This historiographical erasure not only marginalizes the role of Muslims in Ethiopian history but also impedes the development of inclusive narratives of nationhood.

In contrast to such portrayals, archaeological and textual evidence highlights the extensive political and economic influence wielded by Muslim sultanates such as Shoa, Ifat, and Adal. From the 9th to the 16th centuries, these entities managed trade routes, established international alliances, and posed substantial political challenges to the Christian empire.[21] Their significance was not only religious but deeply intertwined with regional economic networks. For instance, Harlaa—a crucial hub of trade—connected Ethiopia with the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the broader Islamic world.[22]

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[18] Namhla Thando Matshanda, "Ethiopia's Civil Wars: Postcolonial Modernity and the Violence of Contested National Belonging," *Nations and Nationalism* 28, no. 4 (October 11, 2022): 1282–95, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12835.

[19] Birhanu Bitew Geremew, "The Tragedy of Colonialism in a Non-Colonised Society: Italy's Historical Narratives and the Amhara Genocide in Ethiopia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59, no. 6 (September 4, 2024): 1892–1907, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221147002; Vladimir Vasilievich Astafiev and Artem Valentinovich Krestyaninov, "Memoirs of E. A. Malov as an Important Educational Resource in the Field of Propaganda Science," *Propósitos y Representaciones* 9, no. SPE3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.20511/pyr2021.v9nSPE3.1290.

[20] Kumlachew, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church as Religious Other in Contemporary Ethiopia: Discursive Practices of Three Selected Religious Authorities."

[21] Abdul Hafizh Dababsiya, "Al-Hajarāt Al-Islāmiyyah Ilā Bilād Al-Ḥabasyah Wa Āṯāruhā Al-Ḥaḍariyyah Min Al-Bi'tsah Al-Nabawiyyah Ḥattā Suqūth Al-Dawlah Al-Abbāsiyyah," *Universitas 8 Mei 1945 Guelma*, 2018, http://dspace.univ-guelma.dz/jspui/handle/123456789/7664; Jorge de Torres Rodriguez, "Built on Diversity: Statehood in Medieval Somaliland (12th-16th Centuries AD)," 2020, https://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/216279/1/Jorge de Torres-Built on diversity.pdf.

[22] Timothy Insoll et al., "Material Cosmopolitanism: The Entrepot of Harlaa as an Islamic Gateway to Eastern Ethiopia," *Antiquity* 95, no. 380 (April 21, 2021): 487–507, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.169; Wehib M.

Conflicts such as those involving Sultanate of Ifat and later the campaigns of Imam Ahmed Gragn have frequently been interpreted through the lens of religious confrontation. Yet, as historical evidence shows, these confrontations were more often rooted in strategic competition for resources, access to trade corridors, and political sovereignty.[23] Control over ports like Zeila and inland centers such as Harar played a key role in shaping the religious and political tensions between Muslim and Christian powers. Trade was not merely an economic concern but a locus of political legitimacy.

However, by privileging moments of Christian magnanimity—like Najāshī's protection of Muslim refugees—modern Ethiopian narratives obscure the long-standing rivalries and the active role Muslims played in shaping Ethiopia's history. Rather than emphasizing pluralism as a negotiated and dynamic reality, historiography has presented it as a passive legacy.

Following the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, Ethiopia's new constitutional framework provided religious freedoms but institutionalized ethnic federalism, further complicating the recognition of Islam's historical role. By tying state legitimacy to ethnic identity, the system inadvertently marginalized religious communities, particularly Muslims, whose identities transcend ethnic boundaries.[24]

This marginalization is intensified by rising Islamophobia, particularly among evangelical Christians. Fueled by media and societal prejudices, Islam has often been portrayed as a threat to national unity and Christian heritage.[25] Such representations hinder interfaith dialogue and obstruct the recognition of Islam as an integral part of Ethiopia's cultural and political heritage.

Hence, the dominant narrative focusing solely on peaceful coexistence—as seen in the First Hijrah—needs to be revised to include the complex interplay of religion, politics, and economy that defined the Islamic-Christian encounters in Ethiopia. Recognizing the political economy behind these conflicts, rather than viewing them through a narrow religious lens, is essential to dismantling exclusionary narratives and building a more inclusive understanding of Ethiopian pluralism.

Reinterpreting Hijrah as Ethical Citizenship and Shared Sovereignty

The historical episode of Muslim participation in the internal conflict of Ḥabasha during the time of Najāshī marks a vital but often underexamined juncture in Islamic political ethics. It reveals not merely a story of asylum but of mutual defense, loyalty, and civic solidarity. Far from being passive

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Ahmed, "HISTORY OF HARAR AND THE HARARIS," 2015, https://www.hararibooks.com/history-of-harar-and-the-hararis-msn.

[23] Travis J Owens, "BELEAGUERED MUSLIM FORTRESSES AND ETHIOPIAN IMPERIAL EXPANSION FROM THE 13TH TO THE 16TH CENTURY," 2006, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/36697755.pdf; Timothy Insoll et al., "Material Cosmopolitanism: The Entrepot of Harlaa as an Islamic Gateway to Eastern Ethiopia," *Antiquity* 95, no. 380 (May 21, 2021): 487–507, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.169.

[24] Kjetil Tronvoll, *Ethiopia: A New Start?*, *Minority Rights Group International Report* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2000); Bitew Geremew, "The Tragedy of Colonialism in a Non-Colonised Society: Italy's Historical Narratives and the Amhara Genocide in Ethiopia"; Yonas J Abdela, "THE NATURE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AMONG EVANGELICAL BELIEVERS IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA," 2022, https://www.academia.edu/84236570/THE_NATURE_OF_ISLAMOPHOBIA_AMONG_EVANGELICAL_BELIEVERS_IN_ADDIS_ABABA_ETHIOPIA?uc-sb-sw=72672503.

[25] Abdela, "THE NATURE OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AMONG EVANGELICAL BELIEVERS IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA"; Adane Dechassa Teshale, *Mission and Peace in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2023), https://www.academia.edu/117457336/Mission_and_Peace_in_Ethiopia; Jon Abbink, "Religion and Violence in the Horn of Africa: Trajectories of Mimetic Rivalry and Escalation between 'Political Islam' and the State," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 2 (June 6, 2020): 194–215, https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1754206; Asebe Debelo Regassa and Rony Emmenegger, "The Emperor, the Lion and the Peacock: Monuments and Contested State Sovereignty in Contemporary Ethiopia," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 41, no. 5 (August 20, 2023): 903–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/23996544231165448.

recipients of Najāshī's protection, the Muslim emigrants—most notably Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām—took up arms to defend the land that offered them sanctuary. This section argues that such actions represent a form of early Islamic political belonging rooted in ethical reciprocity, not conditional on religious uniformity.

According to Ibn Hishām and corroborated by al-Wāqidī and al-Balādhurī, Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām participated directly in battle on Najāshī's side against internal enemies. Asmāʾ bint Abī Bakr narrated that Zubayr fought valiantly in this encounter and was rewarded by Najāshī with a spear—al-ʿanza—which the Prophet PBUH later used in prayers and which became a ceremonial item in early Islamic rituals.[26]

This precedent of political and military solidarity between Muslims and a Christian sovereign has long intrigued Muslim jurists. Al-Sarakhsī, writing in *al-Mabsūṭ*, invokes this very incident to discuss the permissibility of Muslims fighting under non-Muslim leadership. He affirms:

"وَإِذَا كَانَ قَوْمٌ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مُسْتَأْمَنِينَ فِي دَارِ الْحَرْبِ فَأَغَارَ عَلَى تِلْكَ الدَّارِ قَوْمٌ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْحَرْبِ لَم يَحِلُّ لِهَؤُلَاءِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ أَنْ يُقَاتِلُوهُمْ؛ ... إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ ... فَعَرَفْنَا أَنَّهُ لَا بَأْسَ بِذَلِكَ عِنْدَ الْخَوْفِ".

Here, al-Sarakhsī explains that while fighting under non-Muslim banners is generally impermissible, it becomes lawful when done out of fear for one's safety or that of the Muslim community. He roots this opinion in Jaʿfar's and Zubayr's actions in Ḥabasha, noting their cooperation with Najāshī's forces as ethically justified under those conditions.[27]

A similar position is echoed by al-Shāfiʿī in *al-Umm*, who, while cautious, acknowledges that the historical precedent of Zubayr's participation in Najāshī's war supports permissibility if Najāshī was indeed Muslim at the time:

"قَدْ قِيلَ: يُقَاتِلُهُم، قَدْ قَاتَلَ الزُّبَيْرُ وَأَصْحَابٌ لَهُ ... وَلَوْ ثَبَتَ كَانَ النَّجَاشِيُّ مُسْلِمًا، كَانَ آمَنَ بِرَسُولِ اللَّهِ ، وَصَلَّى النَّبِيُّ ﷺ عَلَيْهِ".

Ali Jumʿah, a contemporary Egyptian jurist, refines this view by proposing two possible justifications: first, that Najāshī had converted to Islam, and second, that there was no other refuge for Muslims at the time thus legitimizing their defense of their host land.[28] However, this interpretative tendency, which ties Muslim defense of Ḥabasha strictly to Najāshī's conversion, deserves critical reassessment. It overlooks the broader ethical and civic logic embedded in the Muslim actions. Primary sources such as Ibn Hishām confirm Najāshī's conversion, as does the Prophet's ṣalāt al-ghāʾib upon his death. Furthermore, the letter correspondence between the Prophet PBHU and Najāshī, documented in al-Bayhaqī's *Dalāʾil al-Nubuwwah*, highlights a tone of invitation, not imposition. The Prophet PBUH wrote, calling him to Islam, and Najāshī's reply accompanied by acts of humility and conviction confirms his acceptance of the message. Yet crucially, no sources indicate that conversion was imposed or institutionalized. Thus, the key moral

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26 Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā ibn Jābir ibn Dāwūd Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb Al-Ashrāf*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār dan Riyāḍ Al-Zarkalī, 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), vol 1, p. 524.
27 Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Sahl Al-Sarakhsī, *Al-Mabsūṭ* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʾrifah, 1993), vol. 10, p. 98.
28 ʾAlī Jumʾah, *Al-Taʾayush Maʿa Al-Ākhar Fī Ḍawʾ Al-Sīrah Al-Nabawiyyah: Al-Usus Wa Al-Maqāṣid*, 1st ed. (Kairo: Buruj Books, 2018), p. 48.

lesson lies not in Najāshī's faith per se, but in the mutual trust and political cooperation that unfolded irrespective of doctrinal alignment.[29]

This line of reasoning suggests that participation in conflict was not conditioned upon a theological uniformity, but on a pragmatic and moral assessment of security and gratitude. Ummah Salamah's own narration—"فَكُنَّا فِي خَيْرِ دَارٍ، عِنْدَ خَيْرِ جَارٍ..."—attests to the profound trust and emotional allegiance Muslims felt toward Najāshī and his realm (*Sharḥ al-Siyar al-Kabīr*, 4:1424).[30]

These sources, taken together, dismantle the restrictive framework of conditional solidarity that ties cooperation strictly to religious conversion. They open a discursive space within Islamic thought to recognize civic loyalty and mutual defense as legitimate acts of faith, grounded in ethics rather than dogma.

More importantly, such readings challenge the legacy of exclusivist jurisprudence that emerged in later centuries—often shaped by polemical contexts and imperial rivalries—which retroactively interpreted these events as justifiable only if Najāshī had embraced Islam. This post facto interpretation reduces the ethical gravity of Muslim-Christian solidarity in Habasha into a doctrinal loophole, rather than recognizing it as a deliberate moral stance.

Reframing this moment offers a critical intervention in both historiographical and theological discourse. By presenting Zubayr's defense of Najāshī as an example of *shared sovereignty*, not merely asylum, we are offered an alternative ethical grammar of pluralism—one that defines citizenship not by confession, but by commitment to justice and mutual protection.

This ethical pluralism is especially instructive for contemporary political theology. It invites Muslim thought to reimagine the boundaries of loyalty, alliance, and national belonging in multi-religious societies. In contrast to narratives that conflate religious identity with political exclusivity, this historical case provides an example of how Islamic ethics can underwrite interfaith solidarity on the basis of shared moral responsibility.

The Muslim participation in defending Habasha under Najāshī's reign is not an anomalous footnote, but a foundational episode in the formation of Islamic political ethics. It embodies a vision of citizenship that transcends doctrinal borders, affirming the possibility of a nation where faith communities coalesce not through assimilation, but through principled coexistence. This narrative, when revisited with historical fidelity and ethical sensitivity, offers a powerful paradigm for rethinking pluralism not only in Ethiopia, but across the global Muslim imagination.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the First Hijrah to Abyssinia and the subsequent Muslim participation in the defense of Najāshī's reign are not peripheral episodes but foundational narratives in Islamic political ethics and interfaith solidarity. The historical reexamination of Muslim-Christian encounters in Ethiopia reveals a tradition of ethical reciprocity, civic loyalty, and shared protection that transcends doctrinal boundaries. While historiographical traditions—both colonial and nationalist—have marginalized Islam's presence in Ethiopian history, the Muslim defense of Ḥabasha under Najāshī illustrates an alternative grammar of belonging: one anchored in moral duty and mutual respect, not religious exclusivity. By challenging classical jurisprudential interpretations that limited such acts to the condition of conversion, this study opens a space for rethinking

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[29] Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah li Ibn Hishām, p. 340.*; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, p. 949.*; Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Mūsā Al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il Al-Nubuwwah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah - Dār al-Rayyān li al-Turāth, 1988), vol 2, p. 309.

[30] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Sahl Al-Sarakhsī, *Sharḥ Al-Siyar Al-Kabīr* (al-Sharikah al-Sharqiyyah li al-I'lānāt, 1971), vol 4, p. 1424.

pluralism and ethical citizenship in multi-faith societies. Reclaiming the memory of Ethiopia as an interreligious refuge affirms the possibility of constructing inclusive national narratives that acknowledge the complex, plural contributions to a shared polity. Such a paradigm, rooted in both historical fidelity and ethical imagination, offers rich insights for contemporary political theology and interfaith relations worldwide.

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