

Christoph Luxenberg (ps.), *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000), ix + 311 pages. ISBN 3 86093 274 8. Euro 29.70.

Ever since Abraham Geiger wrote his study *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (1833), scholars have endeavoured to trace the content of the Qur'ān back to its Jewish or Christian sources. Whereas the importance of specifically Syriac language and culture for the early history of Islam has long been known—Jeffery in his study of foreign words in the Qur'ān had already claimed that about 80% of all Qur'ānic loan words were Syriac<sup>3</sup>—the monograph under review takes the discussion one decisive step further. Luxenberg's book is an interesting attempt to read the text of the Qur'ān with an eye to Syriac and produces some stunning results. It is presented as a preliminary pilot study of what will become a more comprehensive investigation, while in its present form it constitutes, in the author's wording, 'merely an attempt to clarify some problems of the language of the Qur'ān' (p. viii).

Two important facts serve as L.'s point of departure. First, the fact that Syriac culture, including religious literature in Syriac, was conspicuous at the time of the rise of Islam, even on the Arab Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> The second point is that during the first century of the textual trans-

<sup>3</sup>A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), pp. 27-28.

<sup>4</sup>For a general overview, see e.g. S.P. Brock, 'Syriac Culture in the Seventh Century', *Aram* 1 (1989), pp. 268-80.

mission of the Qur'ān the Arabic script was defective, in the sense that it was written without the diacritical points which distinguish between the consonantal values of many basic letter-forms. Whereas in Hebrew or Syriac this is relevant only for the difference between *šin/śin* and *reš/dālat* respectively, in the Arabic script the omission of the diacritical points is particularly troublesome: seven letter-forms are ambiguous, in that they represent two different phonemes (*d/ḍ*, *r/z*, *s/š*, *ṣ/ḍ*, *t/ẓ*, *'/ġ*, *f/q*), one indicates three (*ġ/h/ḥ*) and one can have as many as five different phonemic values (*b/t/ṭ/n/y*). Without the diacritical points, no less than twenty-two out of the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet are ambiguous.

An important feature in early Arabic orthography is that the *yā'* without dots could serve as a *mater lectionis* for long *ā* not only in word-final position, as is well known, but also in the middle of a word. As this was later 'forgotten', such cases were subsequently interpreted as indicating either the vowel *ī* or the consonant *y*. This would explain 'odd' Arabic word-forms such as *ابراهيم* *ibrāhīm* or *شيطان* *šaytān*, which originally must have been pronounced *abrāhām* and *šātān*, with the same vowels as their equivalents in Syriac, from which they derive. According to L., hitherto enigmatic orthographic alternatives such as *توراة* and *تورية* must both be pronounced as *tawrā*, since the *yā'* in the latter form should be dotless and hence represents *ā*. (The present reviewer might add that these forms were even more probably pronounced simply as *tōrā*, as in Hebrew, since already Nöldeke doubted the tripartite vowel system *a-i-u* for Classical Arabic.)

L.'s main point is that a fair number of problematic passages in the Qur'ān can in fact be understood if one assumes some words to have been misread (and hence 'mis-pointed') Syriac. It must be said that many of L.'s findings are stunning indeed. In some cases he even manages to reread entire *sūrahs*, which, when read against their Syriac background, suddenly turn out to be coherent texts. A convincing example is L.'s treatment (pp. 269-276) of *sūrat al-Kawtar* (108): 1. *'innā 'aṭaynāka l-kawtar*; 2. *fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nḥar*; 3. *'innā šāni'aka huwa l-'abtar*. This enigmatic text is usually translated as follows: '1. Verily, We have given thee the abundance; 2. So pray to thy Lord, and sacrifice; 3. Verily, it is he who hateth thee who is the docked one.' The expression *كوتر* *kawtar* is usually taken to be derived from the root *ktr* 'numerous' and translated as 'abundance', while at the same time it is supposed to refer to one of the rivers of Paradise. L., however, identifies it with the Syriac noun *ܟܘܬܪܐ* *kuṭārā* (or *kuttārā*) 'pensis-

tence'. Then the verb *نحر* *naḥara*, which presents theological problems in view of Muhammad's position towards pagan sacrifices, is apparently a misreading for Syriac *ܢܗܪܐ* *nḡar* 'to continue, last'—that is, *ܚܗܐ* *ḥā* 'was read instead of *ܓܡܢ* *ḡm*. Finally, the problematic expression 'abtar should be repointed as 'atbar, which L. derives from Syriac *ܛܒܪܐ* *tbar* 'to be defeated'. This then yields an understandable text, which would fit perfectly within the context of an emerging religion: '1. Verily, We have given thee the (virtue of) persistence; 2. So pray to thy Lord, and persevere (i.e. in prayer). 3. Verily, it is thy enemy (i.e. Satan) who is the loser.' Moreover, as L. points out, such a text is reminiscent of passages like 1 Peter 5.8-9. One may agree with L.'s new reading of this *sūrah*, even though doubts remain on some points, such as his claim that Arabic *أعطى* *a'tā* 'to give' should be derived from Syriac *ܐܘܬܝܐ* *ayti* 'to bring'. Not only is this particular proposal linguistically problematic, it also fails to lead to a better understanding of the Qur'ānic text, since the meaning of this Arabic verb is fairly straightforward.

The same can be said for L.'s reinterpretation of *sūrah* 96 (*al-'alaq*, 'the blood-clot'), another challenge to both traditional and modern exegetes. The word *علق* *'alaq*, according to L., does not refer to a blood-clot from which God is supposed to have created man. It should rather be connected with Syriac *ܐܠܘܩܐ* *'alōqā* 'sticky clay'. The fact that corroborating evidence for this idea is found in the Qur'ān itself simply clinches the matter: *إنا خلقناهم من طين لازب* *'innā ḥalaqnāhum min ṭīn lāzib* 'We created them of sticky clay' (Q 37.11). Even though L. is at his most convincing here, one is inclined to disagree with some of his conclusions, such as his interpretation of the last word of this *sūrah*, *واقترب* *wa-qtarib*, which he translates as 'and celebrate the Eucharist!' But the verb *اقترب* *iqtaraba* 'to draw near' cannot simply be identified, as L. does, with the form *تقرب* *taqarraba*, which is actually the Christian Arabic term for celebrating the Eucharist.

L.'s main conclusion is far-reaching: the influence of Syriac on the early text of the Qur'ān is much more pervasive than has hitherto been assumed. Many unclear expressions from the Qur'ān are actually understandable if read with Syriac in mind, sometimes by repointing the traditional Arabic text. This also implies that the supposed reliability of the oral reading tradition of the Qur'ān leaves much to be desired; the misunderstandings must have originated from misreading unpointed Arabic manuscripts. L. even goes as far as assuming an Aramaic *Urkoran* and that the language of the inhabitants of Mecca must have spoken a Syriac-Arabic *Mischsprache*.

Some critical remarks might be made, which are not meant to detract from the overall value of this book. In a remarkable passage in the preface the author apologises for having omitted much secondary literature since it 'hardly contributed anything to the new method presented here' and begs for the reader's indulgence in that shortcomings such as the lack of indexes will be made good in a revised edition of the book or in a second volume.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the author's humble request, a critical reader might be inclined to disagree. In some cases, mentioning secondary studies could have changed L.'s conclusions or claims. Thus, for instance, when stating somewhat naively that the Arabic script seems to be derived from Syriac cursive script, he contents himself to refer to Grohmann's *Arabische Paläographie* (1967–71) and an Arabic-written handbook on calligraphy from 1968 (p. 15). Even though this view has indeed been put forward in scholarly literature, L.'s 'representation' of the state of affairs is incomplete. He makes no mention of the detailed study by Gruendler,<sup>6</sup> who argued that the Arabic script was derived from Nabataean, nor of earlier articles by Healey, who suggested more specifically that the origin of Arabic script is to be found in the cursive variety of the Nabataean script.<sup>7</sup> For a brief overview of the various views, see now John F. Healey, 'The Early History of the Syriac Script', *JSS* 45 (2000), pp. 55–67 (64–66).

Sometimes it seems that when L. has found a pair of cognates in Syriac and Arabic, he simply declares the Arabic word to be a loan from Syriac, even when from a historical-linguistic point of view this is not plausible. Such is the case, for instance, with the root طغى *ṭagā* and its Syriac cognate ܬܥܐ *t'ā*.<sup>8</sup> In making such claims, however,

<sup>5</sup>In dieser Arbeit konnte nicht auf die gesamte einschlägige Literatur eingegangen werden, da diese zu der hier neu vorgelegten Methode kaum etwas beiträgt. Der interessierte Leser wird darüber hinaus manches vermissen, was bei einer philologischen Untersuchung zum Standard gehört wie ein Index der behandelten Termini. Der Autor ist sich dieses Mangels wie auch der Unvollkommenheit dieser ersten Arbeit bewußt und bittet insoweit um Nachsicht, als ein solcher Anhang einer vorgeplanten erweiterten Auflage bzw. einem zweiten Band vorbehalten bleibt' (p. ix).

<sup>6</sup>Beatrice Gruendler, *The Development of the Arabic Scripts: From the Nabatean Era to the First Islamic Century according to Dated Texts* (Harvard Semitic Studies, 43; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>John F. Healey, 'The Nabataean Contribution to the Development of the Arabic Script', *Aram* 2 (1990), pp. 93–98; *idem*, 'Nabataean to Arabic: Calligraphy and Script Development among the Pre-Islamic Arabs', *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 5 (1990–91), pp. 41–52.

<sup>8</sup>'Außer dem sekundären ܬܥܐ *t'ā* hat diese Verbalwurzel nichts Arabisches an sich' (p. 283).

one implicitly takes issue with major themes in historical phonology of Semitic: L. presupposes that we do not have *merger* of *ġ* and *‘* in Aramaic, but rather *split* of these phonemes in Arabic.<sup>9</sup> While L. is entitled to such a view, a critical reader is justified in expecting an exposition on the matter.

All in all, Luxenberg's *Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* contains a wealth of original ideas and interesting observations, which might indeed have major implications for our understanding of the emergence of Islam. In many instances he makes a convincing case for what he calls a 'Syriac reading of the Qur'ān'. His proposals often do lead to a better understanding of impenetrable Qur'ānic passages, which in itself is a major achievement and a challenge for historians of early Islam. Whether one should go along with his more far-reaching statements, on the Syriac-Arabic mixed language of Mecca or an Aramaic *Urkoran*, is something that further research will make clear. Rumour has it that a second volume with Luxenberg's findings is in the making. One can only hope that it will contain just as many original ideas as the first volume. Copies of this book may be ordered online at <http://www.verlag-hans-schiler.de/>. Finally, it is worth pointing out that an English translation of the work is about to appear.<sup>10</sup>

Martin F.J. Baasten, Leiden

<sup>9</sup>Cf. e.g. S. Moscati *et al.*, *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages. Phonology and Morphology* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969) §§ 8.44-8.49. On *merger* and *split* of phonemes in general, see, e.g., Theodora Bynon, *Historical Linguistics* (rev. edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 47-53.

<sup>10</sup>A detailed philological discussion of some parts of L.'s book by the present reviewer will appear in the proceedings of the conference 'Historische Sondierungen und methodische Reflexionen zur Korangeneese – Wege zur Rekonstruktion des Vorkanonischen Koran', which was held in Berlin, 21–24 January 2004.