Offprint from

JERUSALEM STUDIES IN ARABIC AND ISLAM
28(2003)

S. Hopkins

Review of
Christoph Luxenberg, Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM
THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

It is common knowledge that the Qur‘ān is fraught with difficulties: philologists and theologians have been grappling with the textual problems of Muslim scripture ever since the Qur‘ān was committed to writing. The latest attempt at penetrating some of the Qur‘ānic mysteries is to be found in the book under review.

According to the author of the present study, about one quarter of the Qur‘ān must be regarded as undeciphered, and this already large proportion of obscure matter is considerably increased when we take into consideration many passages hitherto regarded as explained, but in fact (according to the author) misinterpreted (p. 83). *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran* is the first instalment of a series of investigations which the author plans to devote to the identification and solution of textual problems in the Qur‘ān. Developing in an extreme form certain ideas once put forward by A. Mingana, his point of departure is the consideration that in the pre-Islamic Near East, before the emergence of a literature in Arabic, the dominant language of written culture was “Syro-Aramäisch” (=Syriac). This leads to the assumption that the origins of literary Arabic in general and the Qur‘ān in particular must be sought in circles which were linguistically Aramaic and culturally Christian (pp. viii - ix, 36 n. 44, 275, 297). Mecca was originally an Aramaic colony, whose inhabitants spoke the “aramäisch-arabische Mischsprache” in which the Qur‘ān was composed (p. 299). This language (which was apparently not understood outside Mecca) was soon forgotten, no reliable oral tradition remained (p. 306), and so by the time of the early Muslim readers and exegetes the Qur‘ān was already a sealed book. The first Muslim scholars, writing about a century and a half after Muhammad, laboured under the false impression that the Qur‘ān was written in classical Arabic - it is no surprise, therefore, that they did not understand what they were reading (p. 302).

Against this background the author embarks upon his own independent “Entschlüsselung” of the Qur‘ānic text, departing radically from most of the conventions of Arabic scholarship. His method consists of two general techniques, one graphic, the other linguistic. Noting the fact that early Arabic documents dispense with diacritic points for the consonants and marks for the vowels, the author feels at liberty to alter diacritics and change vowels at will.
This procedure is made all the easier in view of his claim that the traditional reading of the Qur'ānic text is utterly unreliable and quite without authority. Sometimes these changes of reading produce a text which may be understood as Arabic. If not, recourse is freely had to the theory of the “aramäisch-arabischische Mischsprache” and the word in question is read as if written in Syriac; for in addition to the spoken Meccan “Mischsprache,” the author believes in a “Qur’ān” (or perhaps a “proto-Qur’ān”) actually written in Syriac script. By combining the extensive possibilities allowed by (a) free alteration of the received readings and (b) interpretation of the result as either Arabic or Aramaic, the author sets about his business with gay abandon. Free use of his textual techniques leads him, e.g. to the real meanings of the allegedly suspect (“verdächtig”) Qur’ānic يِلْحُدِون. This, we learn (p. 88), cannot be correct as it stands and is to be explained as a misread Syriac يِلْحِدِون (lgr). Without diacritical dots this would appear in Arabic garb as لَحْر. Then, by mispointing the intended جيم as حاء and misreading the س as د some Arab scribe produced the monstrosity لَحْد which has been a part of the Qur’ānic text ever since. Luxenberg is quite undeterred in his reconstruction by the fact that this لَحْد does not actually occur in classical Syriac, but is a late loan in that language from Arabic لَحْر. It would appear, therefore, according to the proposed development, that the genuine Arabic root لُحْر entered “Syro-Aramäisch” as لَحْد, was transcribed back into Arabic as لَحْر (i.e. لَحْر) and subsequently mangled into لَحْد, the Qur’ānic form of the root. Having thus dealt with the graphic side of the matter, all that remains is to establish what the word means. In Qur’ān 16:103 the proposed signification is “to hint at,” while in Qur’ān 7:180 and 41:40 the meaning is said to be “to mock.”

A couple more concrete examples will give a good idea of the type of philological exegesis practised in this book. One could begin almost anywhere; one example from the beginning and another from the end of the book will suffice. On p. 30 exception is taken to the traditional reading and understanding of Qur’ān 11:24 and 39:29 هل يشتوان مثالا “sind die beiden gleich als Beispiel?”. What is unacceptable about this straightforward Arabic sentence we are not told. Luxenberg, however, addresses himself to this imaginary problem and proposes a different understanding. The Muslim exegetes, being ignorant of the Meccan Mischsprache in which the Qur’ān was written, were unaware that final العل could mark -ة as in Syriac and therefore misread مثالا as if it were an Arabic التمييز, viz. المباalan of the received text. In reality, the theory goes، مثالا is not Arabic المباalan (indefinite) at all but a transcription of Syriac مثالة = مثالة (definite), so that the sentence really means “sind die beiden Beispiele etwa gleich?”; the classical Arabic equivalent being: هل يستوي المثالان.

The last textual treatment in the book is yet more inventive. Here the author turns his attention to the form بِبيِكَة at Qur’ān 3:96, traditionally understood as بِ-بَكَّة, a variant of مَكَّة. Luxenberg, however (pp. 300ff. n. 318), will have none of this. Far from being a proper name، بِبيِكَة is in reality (“in Wirklichkeit”) a misread verbal form. Availing himself of the possibil-
ity of disregarding or rearranging any diacritical points, the author proposes that we read تَيْكَة instead. This may give little sense in Arabic, but decipherment becomes possible as soon as we revert the allegedly misread Qur’ānic word to its putative Syriac original: حَمْدُ (tyk). This is to be understood as the verb tayyek “to enclose,” allowing the Arabic to be read as tayyakahu: "Das erste Heiligtum, das für die Menschen errichtet wurde, ist dasjenige, das er umgaumt (umgrenzt) hat als heiligen . . . (Bezirk) und (als) rechte Leitung für die Menschen.”

These examples of the author’s philological methods are typical of the whole work and there seems little point in going into further detail. The guiding principle throughout is that what may look to the uninitiated like Arabic is in fact Aramaic (pp. 37, 205). Indeed, knowledge of classical Arabic may even be a hindrance to the correct understanding of the Qur’ān (p. 118).

Beyond the treatment of individual verses, three larger Qur’ānic themes are discussed in some detail and deserve brief mention. A large section of the book (pp. 228ff.) is devoted to the Hūris of paradise; these have been explained out of existence, transformed by Luxenberg’s philology into celestial grapes. The analysis of Sūra 108 (al-Kawthar) on pp. 269ff. reaches the conclusion that “kaum ein Wort in dieser Sure arabischer Herkunft wäre”; even is claimed to be of Aramaic origin, derived by the author from كَمَ (!). Sūra 96 (al-‘Alaq), “ein zweites Musterbeispiel für ein weitgehend mißverständenen Text,” is completely rewritten on pp. 276ff.

The author of Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Korans claims not only to have elucidated a good part of the Qur’ānic text, but also to have contributed to the study of Arabic grammar (p.41). The most substantial passages of grammatical import treat the presence of تَمْرَة marbūta on masculine words such as خَلِيْقَة (p. 34 n. 43) and its absence from feminine words such as مَرْضِع (pp. 208ff.). The explanation of the former (via خَلِيْقَة) as a transcription of مَرْضِع (m. sg. st. emph.) is purely ad hoc and mechanical, while the claim on p. 210 that the مَرْضِع phenomenon has now been “geklärt” is unlikely to find many adherents.

There are a number of errors in the author’s transcription of Syriac words. There is no nominal pattern qūțālā in old Syriac; words such as كَمَا “translation” should not be given as pušāqā (p. 82 n. 107), but puššāqā with short u and gemination of the middle radical. This mistake occurs repeatedly, e. g. several times on p. 87 n. 114.

In addition to the reckless methodology of the book, the author’s use of the learned literature leaves much to be desired. One is surprised both by some of the items which appear here and by some which do not. The frequent appeal to the modern (!) Arabic dictionary of Wehr is more than a little strange in a study devoted to the very earliest examples of the Arabic language. Nor is Luxenberg fair to the Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart, e. g. when (p. 64) he quite gratuitously blames Wehr for uncritically (“ungeprüft”) recording the traditional meaning of زَنَم (Q 68:13) as “niedrig, verachtet” etc.
Wehr's definition is perfectly correct, for this is the meaning the word has in Arabic; in Luxenberg's opinion this word should be read رَتِّمَتْ "stammering." The author uses a few frequently quoted favourite books (and very good books they are too), but seldom goes beyond them. Perhaps this is because of his belief that indigenous and orientalist scholarship alike is so basically misguided (cf. pp. 173, 226, 304) that further use of the philological literature would not be worthwhile (p. ix). Nevertheless, one cannot but remark with astonishment that in a book on Qur'anic exegesis no reference at all is made to the work of Goldziher. And since ḫmāla plays a major part in the author's argumentation (pp. 25ff.), a reference or two to the literature on this subject (especially to A. Levin) would not have been amiss; we should then have been in a better position to judge the probability (or rather the improbability) of e. g. قال مَلَك "Wort, Rede" (p. 79). In the field of lexicography too, Luxenberg's choice of reference works is very unsatisfactory. It is extraordinary that a work of Qur'anic philology published in Germany in the year 2000 should discuss items such as ḥdh (pp. 87ff.) and kawbar (pp. 269ff.) with no mention whatever of Ullmann's magnificent WKAS.

Quite apart from the wayward philology and exegetical caprice exemplified above, the book makes no attempt to place its findings in any plausible historical context. Who were the Christian inhabitants of pre-Islamic Mecca who used the alleged Qur'anic "aramäisch-arabische Mischsprache" and what exactly were their Syriac writings which are supposed to have produced the Arabic Qur'ān? How does the theory account for the Jewish elements in Muslim scripture, and how did the early Islamic exegetes manage to achieve so thorough a misunderstanding of their holy book? Indeed, how did they come to have such a holy book at all? One will readily concede that the text of the Qur'ān is fraught with problems. It is difficult, however, to believe that many (or indeed any) of them have been solved in Mr Luxenberg's book.

Simon Hopkins
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem