

Title: The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran.(Book review)

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THE SYRO-ARAMAIC READING OF THE KORAN: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DECODING OF THE LANGUAGE OF THE KORAN. By Christoph Luxenberg. Berlin: Hans Schiler. 2007. Pp. 349. \$124.84.

A translation of *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000), this study consists of an introduction, 18 chapters, and an appendix. The first ten chapters deal with reference works, methodology, the Arabic script, the oral tradition, Koranic exegesis, the language of the Koran, and the Syro-Aramaic that is found in the Koran. These chapters lay the groundwork for the close textual study and analysis that follow.

The meaning of certain Koranic passages have been – and are today – disputed among translators and commentators. As Luxenberg indicates, an estimated 25 percent of the Koran is still considered unexplained (108). To this discussion L. brings new linguistic and cultural dimensions, lexica, and grammars, his awareness of the Syro-Aramaic linguistic matrix within which the Koran emerged, and his further awareness of the overall clarity these sources can lend to the interpretation of contentious Koranic terms, when assiduously applied.

L. selects his sources and research tools well, narrowing in on specific commentaries and translations. These are basically three: an English version by Richard Bell (1937-1939), French by Régis Blachère (1957), and German by Rudi Paret (1962). For Arabic, L. works from the tenth-century, magisterial commentary of Al-Ṭabarī. Of lexica and grammars, he uses *Lisan al-ʿarab* for classical Arabic, and for the Syro-Aramaic he relies on Payne Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus* and Eugène Manna's *Vocabulaire Chaldéen-Arabe* (well ahead of other commentators). Among the Syriac grammars are those of Carl Brockelmann and Theodor Nöldeke. Since his arguments are primarily linguistic, these tools are essential. In search of its original meaning, L. delivers not a compendium of opinions but a fresh look at the text.

Since the original text of the Koran was written without dots, and considering how similar the letters of Arabic are without these distinguishing dots (31), mistaking one letter for another was likely. L. further claims that the original versions of the Koran were written in Garshuni, that is, in Arabic but written in Syriac letters. This adds confusable Syriac letters to the mix, especially when not written with appropriate dots. Awareness of the possibility of confusing one letter with another, in both Arabic and Syriac, is the basis for emendations suggested for

the current Arabic text. There is no sample of an extant Garshuni text included here. Three samples of the unmarked Arabic text are included (348-49).

L.'s procedure is to locate an obscure passage, consult the commentary of Al-Ṭabarī, move to the three translations for an initial reading, then proceed to the lexica and grammars. In the process one looks for possible interchanges of similar letters or Syro-Aramaic cognates. Of the Koran's 114 Suras, 69 Suras contain at least one, but frequently several, terms that are obscure. L. offers a list of such verses on pages seven and eight. Touching on the linguistic substance of the Koran, the study also reaches into many of the Suras; all such passages are listed in an appendix (340-49).

Apart from individual passages, L. makes larger claims about the Koranic text. For him, the Koran is an Arabic lectionary on the model of the Syro-Aramaic lectionaries of the time. Even the word "Koran" is a reflex of the Syro-Aramaic word *qeryānā* (70). The original Koranic text was written in Garshuni, and the misunderstandings and misinterpretations of terms are largely due to misunderstanding their Syro-Aramaic originals. Not all of L.'s readers will readily accept these claims. L. concludes with a completely new translation of the earliest two Suras (Suras 108 and 96) with the Syro-Aramaic taken into account.

The book is demanding. One needs to be familiar at least with Arabic and Syriac, in addition to being at ease with phonetic transcriptions. Unfortunately, the book has no index; neither does the Arabic or Syriac include all the pointing and diacritics. Also, the text is not free of typos. These are serious matters when the whole endeavor is to correct precisely such errors. The bibliography is primarily attentive to the German scholarship without paying much attention to other languages. It does not even mention the new Encyclopedia of the Qur'an edited by McAuliffe (2001). Still, the work is a meticulous, philological, and cultural study of the Koran that clarifies many textual obscurities. L. proceeds with the extreme care and reverence that a sacred text deserves. Though one may not agree with some or much of the work, one may not ignore it.

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