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

REVIEWS

Christoph Luxenberg. *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache.* Das Arabische Buch, Berlin, 2000, ix + 311 pp.

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 Muḥammad, 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-arabische
Mischsprache" and the word in question is read as if written in Syriac; for in ad-
dition 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
يلحدون. This, we learn (p. 88), cannot be correct as it stands and is to be
explained as a misread Syriac ܠܓܙ (lgz). Without diacritical dots this would
appear in Arabic garb as لحر. Then, by mispointing the intended jīm as ḥā' and
misreading the ر as د some Arab scribe produced the monstrosity لحد which has
been a part of the Qur'ānic text ever since. Luxenberg is quite undeterred in his
reconstruction by the fact that this ܠܓܙ does not actually occur in classical
Syriac, but is a late loan in that language from Arabic لغز. It would appear,
therefore, according to the proposed development, that the genuine Arabic root
لغز entered "Syro-Aramäisch" as ܠܓܙ , was transcribed back into Arabic as لحر
(i. e. لجر) and subsequently mangled into لحد, 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 philo-
logical 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 يستويان مثلا "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
alif could mark -*ē* as in Syriac and therefore misread مثلا as if it were an Arabic
tamyīz, viz. *maθalan* of the received text. In reality, the theory goes, مثلا is
not Arabic *maθalan* (indefinite) at all but a transcription of Syriac ܡܬܠܐ =
matlē (definite), so that the sentence really means "sind die beiden Beispiele
etwa gleich?", the classical Arabic equivalent being: هل يستوي المثلان.

The last textual treatment in the book is yet more inventive. Here the
author turns his attention to the form بكة at Qur'ān 3:96, traditionally un-
derstood as *bi-Bakkata*, a variant of *Makka*. Luxenberg, however (pp. 300ff.
n. 318), will have none of this. Far from being a proper name, بكة 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 تیکه 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: ܬܝܟ (tykh). This is to be understood as the verb tayyek̠ "to enclose," allowing the Arabic to be read as tayyakahu: ان اول بيت جعل (!) للناس للذي تیکه مبارکا وهدى للعلمين "Das erste Heiligtum, das für die Menschen errichtet wurde, ist dasjenige, das er _umzaumt_ (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 Ḥūris of paradise; these have been explained out of existence, transformed by Luxenberg's philology into celestial grapes. The analysis of Sūra 108 (al-Kawθar) on pp. 269ff. reaches the conclusion that "kaum ein Wort in dieser Sure arabischer Herkunft wäre"; even اعطى is claimed to be of Aramaic origin, derived by the author from ܐܝܬܝ (!). Sūra 96 (al-'Alaq), "ein zweites Musterbeispiel für ein weitgehend mißverstandenen 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 tā' marbūṭa on masculine words such as خليفة (p. 34 n. 43) and its absence from feminine words such as مرضع (pp. 208ff.). The explanation of the former (via خليفه) as a transcription of ܒܠܘܬܐ (m. sg. st. emph.) is purely ad hoc and mechanical, while the claim on p. 210 that the مرضع 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 qūtālā in old Syriac; words such as ܦܘܫܩܐ "translation" should not be given as pūšāqā (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 زنيم (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 رتم < ܐܬܡܚܪ "stam-
mering." The author uses a few frequently quoted favourite books (and very
good books they are too), but seldom goes beyond them. Perhaps this is be-
cause 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'ānic exegesis no reference at all is made
to the work of Goldziher. And since *imāla* 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.
قيل being interpreted as قال < ܡܠܟ "Wort, Rede" (p. 79). In the field of lex-
icography too, Luxenberg's choice of reference works is very unsatisfactory. It
is extraordinary that a work of Qur'ānic philology published in Germany in the
year 2000 should discuss items such as *lḥd* (pp. 87ff.) and *kawθar* (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 histori-
cal context. Who were the Christian inhabitants of pre-Islamic Mecca who used
the alleged Qur'ānic "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 misunder-
standing 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