

On a proposal for a “Syro-Aramaic” reading of the Qur’ān

Federico CORRIENTE
Universidad de Zaragoza

A very practical and commonly followed procedure to know the overall contents of a book is to begin at the end and read the résumé, should there be one, or the conclusions drawn by the author, only then undertaking the lengthy and close examination of the previous chapters containing the arguments in support of his contentions.

In the case of the book entitled *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Kor’an. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*¹, signed by Christoph Luxenberg, the reader of those final pages (299-306) can hardly remain unperturbed by the bold and far-reaching consequences of the proposals advanced by this scholar, namely

1) That the original language of the Qur’ān would not have been Arabic, but an admixture of this and Aramaic (*eine aramäisch-arabische Mischsprache*), the very name of Mecca supposedly being Aramaic and the city itself an Aramaean settlement,

2) That the original wording and contents of the Qur’anic text that has reached us would have been substantially altered, not only in order to adjust it to the rules of Classical Arabic², but also because, in the alleged absence of a consistent and reliable oral transmission, the people in charge of producing its written records, were often no longer able to understand the Aramaic ingredients of that *Mischsprache*, and tried to give them sense in Arabic, with the expectable result of countless passages which would be

¹ Berlin: Weinert, 2000.

² As purported by K. VOLLERS, *Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien* (Strassburg, 1906), whose theory has been repeatedly refuted by scholars since Th. NÖLDEKE, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg, 1910) on account of both internal and historical grounds, as reported by Luxenberg himself (p. 4) who, nevertheless, appears to accept it.

difficult to understand, scarcely idiomatic and even clashing with the true and genuine tenets of Islam³.

3) That, consequently, it would be in order to re-read the Qur'ān in a new manner, basically characterized by special and steady attention to passages where the original Syriac wording might have been graphically misspelled or orally misunderstood, since the main core of the Muslims' Holy Book would merely have been a Syriac Christian horologium (pp. 79 and 296).

These conclusions have been reached, in the author's words, through the application of a "critical philological method" (pp. 8-15), geared to explaining dark passages of the Qur'ān through the assumption of misunderstood or misinterpreted Syriac words, phrases or idioms which, when restored, would produce perfectly clear and coherent concepts. While one can well understand the reasons why such original and daring proposals may have made the use of a pen name advisable, we must say here and now that their author appears to be an undoubtedly seasoned scholar, well at home in Syriac language and literature, also endowed with a remarkable command of Classical Arabic and versed in the Qur'anic sciences, although his nearly absolute faith in the rectitude of his endeavour and excellence of this method has led him, we daresay most likely on purpose and not out of ignorance, to disregard historical facts concerning the socio-linguistic situation of proto-Islamic Arabia and the circumstances surrounding the emergence of Islam and the preaching of the Qur'ān, as well as Comparative Semitic evidence that should have been taken into account upon dealing with the first book composed in Arabic, as we have always been taught, in a country which was a

³ In Luxenberg's view who, it appears, plays down the characteristically and undoubtedly native Arabian ingredients of Islam in favour of an ecumenical levelling of the main dogmatic and ethical principles of all monotheistic religions, giving the impression at times that he considers Muḥammad as just another reformer of Christianity, misunderstood and misrepresented by his followers. Luxenberg follows such a preconceived ideological scheme, e.g., when assuming no other interpretation of 5:114 than the liturgy of the Last Supper (pp. 296-298), which had been previously suggested side by side with other possibilities, or in his re-interpretation and deconstruction of the many passages dealing with the houris, where one can easily detect a typically Pauline dislike for unnecessary and unbecoming sex in Paradise, not extensive however to other equally earthly pleasures, such as food and drink.

crossroad of other Semitic and non-Semitic civilizations, and not just the backyard of Aramaic-speaking lands, as the author overemphasizes in his preface (pp. vii-ix).

Beginning with facts generally accepted as historical and recorded in the works of unimpeachable authors that cannot be contradicted without a heavy burden of proof, our disagreement with this theory starts with our conviction that there is no reason to affirm that Alḥiḡāz as a whole, and its cities, Mecca, Medina, Aṡṡā'if, etc., in particular, did not practise a relatively pure Western Arabic dialect⁴, not as conservative as those of Naḡd in Eastern Arabia, but still far from the much more interfered and evolved pre-Islamic dialects of Syria and Iraq, labelled as *nabaḡī* by the Arabs, as well as from those of South Arabia, where the gradual abandonment of the old language produced a linguistic melting-pot⁵. Therefore, there are no grounds to presume that Muḡammad spoke and transmitted the Qur'anic text in any other language than Arabic, i.e., the high register of cultivated Meccans, slightly divergent from middle or low registers which, however, have occasionally crept into the received readings. He knew no Aramaic, nor did he ever need to learn it in his younger days as a caravan driver to and from Syria, since bilingual Nabaḡīs were always at hand there in order to facilitate trade and communication with monolingual Aramaic, Persian or Greek speakers. Whatever his contacts could have been with Christian monks during those journeys and whichever access he might have gained through them to Christian texts, such exchanges must necessarily have taken place orally and in Arabic, most likely of a rather low or mixed register. It is one thing to admit, as everybody must, that Aramaic loanwords were many in

⁴ On this, see the classical work of Ch. RABIN, *Ancient West Arabian* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951).

⁵ It is quite symptomatic of this flaw in Luxenberg's book that he does not even mention the trend-setting study of H. KÖFLER, "Reste altarabischer Dialekte", *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 47 (1940), pp. 61-130, 233-262; 48 (1941), pp. 52-88, 247-274; and 49 (1942), pp. 15-30, 234-256, not to speak of F. CORRIENTE, "From Old Arabic to Classical Arabic through the pre-Islamic koiné: some notes on the native grammarians' sources, attitudes and goals", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 21 (1976), pp. 62-98, containing a survey of tribes, dialects and isoglosses, and Anna G. BELOVA, *Očerki po istorij arabskogo jazyka* (Moscow: Vostočnaja Literatura, 1994) reviewed by F. CORRIENTE in *Estudios de dialectología norteafricana y andalusí* 4 (2000), pp. 238-241.

Arabic, and more so in its ḥiǧāzī dialects, or to reject the notion of the utmost correctness of the language of Qurayš, obviously forged for religious purposes, as detectable in the native sources themselves, and quite another to contend that the inhabitants of Mecca would have been not just mere speakers of Neo-Arabic, as purported by Vollers⁶, but even further downgraded to the condition of Nabaṭīs, unable to broadly understand the poems recited at ‘Ukāz or, by the same token, the suras of the Qur’ān.

For there is no more serious reason to sever Qur’anic Arabic from the poetical koine, as Luxenberg repeatedly insists on doing (pp. 9, 13, 25, 54, 101, 299, etc.), than to claim that the oral transmission of the Qur’anic utterances, as given out by Muḥammad, played no decisive role in their subsequent collection and edition, which would have mostly depended on written records, according to the requirements of Luxenberg’s hypothesis⁷, whose distrust of the Easterners’ amazing capacity to memorize very long texts is again characteristically Western. The almost total grammatical and lexical identity of the Qur’anic *lisān mubīn*⁸ with the ‘*arabiyyah*’ of poets and rhapsodists requires no other proof than the fact of their simultaneous description by native and Western grammars and dictionaries⁹, while the

⁶ K. VOLLERS, *Volksprache und Schriftsprache...*

⁷ To the disputed but undeniable fact that remarkably accurate preservation by heart of thousands of verses for centuries has been common in the East, as is generally admitted in the case of pre-Islamic poetry, we can add a personal anecdote of modern times: having once taught a course on Comparative Semitic linguistics in a university of a certain Arab country, when the time came to read the students’ examinations, it became suspiciously evident that all of them had delivered roughly the same text. However, they had not cheated: they had just memorized the lessons on that abstruse subject literally.

⁸ In F. CORRIENTE, “Libro de los Jubileos”, in A. DíEZ MACHO (ed.), *Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1983), II, p. 114 (fn. 25) we had suggested that similar expressions in Greek (*hē phainoménē dialéktos*, Gə’əz (*ləssan əntü təstārə’i*) and Hebrew (*lāšon rā’ūy*) would in principle have meant “highly regarded language”, therefore “chosen” as most adequate to spread the Revelation. It stands to reason that messages of religious propaganda would be conveyed in the highest available register of the most koineized language in each milieu, Hebrew in Canaan, Aramaic in the post-exilic Middle East, ‘*arabiyyah*’ in Arabia, and not in the local dialect of each prophet or religious leader.

⁹ It is true that Arabic dictionaries contain many more unusual words (*ǧarīb*) than the Qur’ān, but it could not be otherwise for statistical reasons, as they reflect not just one book but many compositions reflecting different diachronical, diatopic and diastratic situations, unlike the case of the Qur’ān. The grammar, however, is surprisingly identical,

very preaching of the Islamic faith and its spread in a mostly illiterate milieu necessitated the existence of that oral transmission within a limited range of variability, allowed in minor matters of pronunciation and wording, but rather strictly controlled when the substance of the message could be altered in vital points, such as the retribution (*ağr*) of the just in the hereafter. Re-reading every Qur'anic passage where the paradise virgins or houris are mentioned so as to turn them into mere luscious white grapes (pp. 221-229), a task to which the author has devoted particularly strenuous efforts, may be an accomplished feat of ingenuity and linguistic dexterity¹⁰, but it remains hard to believe that only Christian Syriac underlying texts, even as widely circulated as Ephraem's hymns, had provided the ideological patterns so unswervingly followed by the Qur'ān and that, should the original message merely have spoken of fruits, Muḥammad, his companions and closest followers would not have reacted to such a radical doctrinal switch¹¹.

Since neither the sources for the history of Early Islam nor trustworthy reports on the socio-linguistic situation of Arabia in those days appear to support Luxenberg's claims, cleverly interwoven as the warp of his hypothesis of the usefulness of an alternative Syro-Aramaic reading of the dark passages of the Qur'ān, one wonders about the correctness of the particular solutions offered by him in each case, only to find that a few of

when those differences are taken into account, which can only be attributed to the fact that all those users were trying to practise a high register koineized kind of Arabic.

¹⁰ The number of interrelated words and phrases that had to be altered in order to remodel the traditional interpretation of these passages is rather large and has required a huge investment of science and imagination, deserving no lesser adjectives than admirable and dramatic too, since the task was impossible. Not only the classical *ḥūrūn 'īn* "big-eyed houris" had to become "white grapes" in dauntless verbal acrobatics, but also terms like *zawğ* "wife", *zawwağ* "to marry", *qāşirātu ḥarf* "restrained in glance", *maqşirātun fi lḥiyām* "restrained in tents", *abkār* "virgins", etc., had to be metamorphosed in each appearance in order to turn them away from the forbidden realm of females and sex into inoffensive vegetable and edible connotations.

¹¹ That Muḥammad was, understandably in a diglottic and multi-dialectal milieu, quite indifferent to minor variants in the recitation of the Qur'ān, as reported by Luxenberg (pp. 21-22), is no less true than that he kept a watchful eye on substantial deviations from the main core of his message, as proven by the story of the famous "satanic verses", excised from the Qur'anic text, and by the doctrine, embedded therein, of abrogated (*mansūḥ*) and abrogating (*nāsīḥ*) verses.

them may be accepted as improvements to the traditional interpretations, while some are allowable but unnecessary as sheer interpretative alternatives, and some must be outright rejected because of misapprehensions or misinformation. It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a detailed step-by-step criticism of every such a proposal, which would demand more time and space than we are now allowed, but it will be only fair and proper to analyse a significant share of cases in the three categories in order to give the reader a proportionate appraisal of this theory.

Among the cases in which Luxenberg's proposals may be considered as positive contributions to the interpretation of the Qur'anic text and to the present levels of knowledge of the Arabic language are some terms of Aramaic origin to be added to those listed by Jeffery¹², such as *qayyūm* "everlasting" (p. 44) in 2:255, 3:2 and 20:111, *musahharāt* (pp. 211-213, to be understood as Syriac *mšawhrāt* "held") in 16:79, *šarrikhum* in 17:64 (pp. 219-220, "entrap them", better than *šārikhum* "share with them"), *kawtar* in 108:1 (p. 273, plausibly interpreted as Syriac *kūtārā* "steadiness"; cf. also calques like *baqiyyah* "gain" in 11:86, pp. 200-201, where the uncommon meaning in Arabic reflects the semantics of Syriac *yutrānā*), as well as other instances in which his surmise of misreading of the consonantal skeleton provides an alternative interpretation which may be preferable to the traditional one (e.g., p. 60-61, *iddāka* "they said then", vs. *ādānnāka* "we protest to Thee" in 41:47, p. 138-139, *bāraknā* 'alayhimā "We blessed them", better as *taraknā* in 37:78-9, pp. 170-171, *arattu an uḡayyibahā* "I wanted to hide it", better than *u'ayyibahā* "to damage it" in 18:79, p. 220, *ḡayra nāzīrīna inātahu* "not looking to his wives", better than *ināhu* "his time" in 33:53), plus a host of other cases where each scholar may be more or less prone to accept the presence of Syrianisms, depending on his position regarding the rather complex issues of interference between Semitic languages and degree of authenticity of the received Qur'anic text.

There is, however, a significant number of cases in which the alternative proposals offered by Luxenberg do not cast new light nor appear to provide the definitive solution to a given dark passage, e.g., his

¹² A. JEFFERY, *The foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938).

interpretation of *qawsarah* (pp. 45-48, for 74:51) as “old ass”, instead of “lion”¹³, his unnecessary preferences for *uzliqat*, instead of *uzlifat* (in 26:90-91, pp. 141-143), and for {‘*sy*}, instead of {*ḡṣb*} (in 18:79, pp. 172), etc. In many other instances, his suggestions must be rejected because of the very philological considerations which are supposed to support his whole argument. This forces us to dwell longer on such cases, which can be classified under different headings, as follows:

1) In a number of cases where the Qur’anic text has words ending with the *alif* marking the indefinite accusative (pronounced *-an* in context and *-ā* in pause) our colleague wants to recognize the Aramaic marks of the emphatic state and the masculine plural, as in p. 30, where he is not content with *hal yastawiyāni maṭalan* “are they both equal as examples?” (11:24 and 39:29), suggesting a misread Syriac plural *matlē*, and immediately after rejects *suḡḡadan* “while being prostrate in adoration” as an uncommon broken plural¹⁴ in favour of the Syriac plural *sagdē*, or in p. 41, where he takes issue with perfectly idiomatic Arabic *māḏā arāda llāhu bihādā maṭalan* “what did God want through this in the way of an example?” (2:26 and 74:31) and prefers to again consider that final *alif* as mark of the Syriac emphatic state, consequently understanding “with this example”.

2) Even the *tā’ marbūṭah* in pausal position is considered by Luxenberg as an occasional rendering in Qur’anic spelling of the Aramaic mark of the emphatic state (p. 32-35), which would provide in his view the suitable explanation for such anomalous masculine nouns as *ṭāḡīyah* “tyrant” and *ḥalīfah* “Caliph”: while the existence of matching Syriac

¹³ It is noteworthy that many lexicographers attach to that word the meaning of “hunters” or “bowmen”, perfectly fitting into the context and perhaps reflecting a hybrid **qows āvar* “owner of a bow”, where Arabic *qaws* (borrowed by Persian, although its native term is *kamān*) would have been attached to Iranian *āvar* “bearer” in a way characteristic of many compound words in Persian (cf. *jang āvar* “warrior”, *del āvar* “brave”), as this language exerted considerable influence upon the Arabic lexicon.

¹⁴ Which it is not, since this pattern is a mere prosodic alternative to {*lu22ā3*}: see W. WRIGHT, *A grammar of the Arabic language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 206-2077, A. MURTONEN, *Broken plurals. Origin and development of the system* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p. 74 and F. CORRIENTE, *Problemática de la pluralidad en semítico. El plural fracto* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1971), pp. 12 y 101.

ḫā'yā and *ḫlīfā* may prove him right in both cases, it is unlikely that they had provided the model for *'allāmah* “very learned”, *rāwiyah* “rhapsodist”, etc., and absolutely certain that Arabic plurals such as *malā'ikah* “angels” and *safarah* “scribes” bear no relation to Syriac *malākē* and *sāprē*, being respectively a loanword from Ethiopic *māla'əkt*¹⁵ and a broken plural pattern {1a2a3at} extensively used in all branches of South Semitic for singulars of the template {1ā2i3}.

3) Out of eagerness to detect Syrianisms wherever possible, Luxenberg proposes changes in passages exhibiting an irreproachable Arabic style, e.g., p. 31, where he tries to substitute Syriac *gawwā* for an original *ḫawāyā* “intestines” (6:146), a plural of *ḫāwiyah*, parallel to the more common *ḫašā*,¹⁶ or suggests in p. 44 that the regular broken plural *suḡūd* (22:26 and 2:125) in fact masks the Syriac plural adjective *sāgōdē*, or considers the natural agreement (e.g., in 7:160 *iḫnatay 'ašara asbātan* “twelve tribes”, and 18:25 *ḫalāḫa mi'atin sinīn* “three hundred years”) as a Syrianism (p. 42), though it is found everywhere in Semitic, or questions cases of *maḡdars* with the template {1u23ān} in order to buttress the hypothesis of the Syriac origin of the word *qur'ān*¹⁷. Entire derivational categories such as the intensive agentive {1a22ā3} (p. 35, fn. 43) and the deteriorative {1u2ā3} are supposed to have been imitated by Arabic from that language, in spite of their being well established in other Semitic tongues, and the same applies to the alleged calques of Arabic *an* for Syriac *d* (p. 159), subordinating *wāw* (p. 160, p. 176 and pp. 183-188), interrogative *a(wa)* (pp. 285-287), all of which go back to much older Semitic stock.

¹⁵ A. JEFFERY, *The foreign vocabulary...*, p. 269.

¹⁶ Secondary designations of the bowels in Arabic hesitate between allusions to the abdominal cavity (*ḡawf*) as their container (*ḫāwiyah*) and names suggesting their filling (*ḫašā*).

¹⁷ Which is not to be absolutely excluded, although it must be kept in mind that {qr'} “to call” is found everywhere in West Semitic (see C. GORDON, *Ugaritic textbook* [Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1965], p. 480), that the prevailing pronunciation with *hamzah* is rather characteristic of Old Eastern, not Western Arabic, that {1u23ān} is not exceptional as a genuine Arabic *maḡdar* template (see W. WRIGHT, *A grammar...*, I, p. 111) and, last but not least, that in the illiterate mentality of pre-Islamic Arabia a religious message was more readily understood as a call or appeal to a given belief or behaviour than as an injunction to read the Holy Writ.

4) This fixation on the avowedly great impact of the Aramaic language and culture on pre-Islamic Arabia appears to have averted our colleague’s eyes away from looking everywhere else for other traces, which Jeffery spotted appropriately and are quite visible in the Qur’ān, e.g., of Muḥammad’s contacts in Alḥiḡāz with South Arabian and Ethiopian Christians and Jews¹⁸. Had he paid sufficient attention to such matters, he would not have propounded Syriac *ḥenpā* “pagan” as etymon of Arabic *ḥanīf* “pious”, phonetically much closer to Hebrew *ḥānēf* “impious”¹⁹, nor the derivation of the characteristic Arabic verb *a‘ṭā* “to give” from Syriac *aytī*, which incidentally has an Arabic cognate *ātā*, often used in the Qur’ān, since the perusal of Leslau²⁰ would have led him in the right direction, towards its Arabic variant *anṭā* and Ethiopic *māṭṭiwā*²¹. Or he might have reconsidered his proposed emendation in pp. 291-292 to *zabāniyah* (96:18), hitherto understood as “guardians of Hell”, most likely reflex of a Gə’əz unattested **zābāni*, inherited by Amharic *zābāñña* “bodyguard”²², mostly those of the Negus, well known for their brutality to the Arabs who visited the kingdom of Axum²³. Or, at least, he might have desisted from his etymological interpretation of the name of Mecca

¹⁸ Although in the foreign vocabulary in the Qur’ān Syriac outnumbers Ethiopic items, the fact that these include such basic concepts as “angel” (*māl’ak*), “devil” (*šāyṭan*), Hell (*gāḥannām*), “Apostle” (*ḥawarəya*), “hypocrite” (*mənaḥəq*), “proof” (*bərhan*), “heavenly books” (South Arabian *šḥf*), etc., does not allow any disregard of the impact of other than Christian Syriac features in this realm.

¹⁹ Of course, through the preservation of this technical term in Jewish Aramaic. The reason for this at first sight surprising semantic shift is probably that pagan Arabs borrowed the Jewish term and applied it to those of them who, having converted to monotheistic creeds, no longer partook in pagan ceremonies.

²⁰ W. LESLAU, *Comparative dictionary of Ge’ez* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), p. 374.

²¹ Additional bibliography and discussion of this cognate and similar cases in F. CORRIENTE’s review of W. LESLAU, *Hebrew Cognates in Amharic*, in *Sefarad* 29 (1969), 9.

²² See I. GUIDI, *Vocabolario amarico-italiano* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1953), p. 618. This etymon, ultimately an adjective derived from Gə’əz *zābān* “back”, seems phonetically preferable to Pahlavi *zendānbān* “jailer”.

²³ See F. CORRIENTE, *El léxico árabe andalusí según P. de Alcalá* (Madrid: Departamento de Estudios árabes e islámicos, 1988), p. 85 and F. CORRIENTE, *El léxico árabe andalusí según el Vocabulista in arabico* (Madrid: Departamento de Estudios árabes e islámicos, 1989), p. 135.

(pp. 299-300) as reflecting Syriac *mākkā* “low (place)”, and ensuing supposition that it had been an Aramaean settlement, absolutely unsupported by history and tradition. For not only it is uncommon to find cities in high locations, because of problems of access and water supply but, according to Ptolemy’s famous report, the original name of that town was Macoraba, i.e., South Arabian *mkrb* “shrine”²⁴, in perfect agreement with its traditional character of a pilgrimage centre of a cult motivated by the presence of a sacred heavenly stone, which would continue under Islam, as one of its several differentiating traits from Christianity and Judaism.

Summing up, Luxenberg’s plea for an interpretation of dark passages of the Qur’ān based upon the hypothesis of a misread or misinterpreted Syriac *Vorlage* of its texts is not convincing in most cases, because the philological arguments wielded by him in order to prove his case do not have the necessary weight to counteract the previous more traditional views on this topic, grounded as they are on solid historical and socio-linguistic data.

This rather negative judgment on his enterprise does not detract a bit from his merit as a very knowledgeable scholar endowed with an active and provocative mind, who has devoted considerable time and effort in an interesting attempt to cast light on an abstruse subject, surrounded by scientific and other perils. As stated above, he appears to have hit the mark at times, although his personal convictions and professional preferences have not contributed to keep him in the middle of the road or let him avail himself of all the extant data, even those which he probably knows well but has preferred to discard.

²⁴ The reasons for the phonetic evolution of this place name are probably that, being a no longer understood foreign word, it underwent successive phenomena of *tarhīm* or apocope, characteristic of Arabic proper names in the vocative, aided by the instability of labial consonants in South Arabian (F. CORRIENTE, *Introducción a la gramática comparada del semítico meridional* [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000], p. 16; cf. the variant *Bakkah* of *Makkah*), as well as that of all sonorant phonemes in most languages of the world, and especially in Semitic.