

**The Etymological Fallacy and Quranic Studies:
Muhammad, Paradise, and Late Antiquity¹**
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The voluminous secondary literature on the Qur'ān that discusses its supposedly foreign vocabulary is so unruly that it is impossible to characterize. Yet one can safely assert that there is one rule that has been used as a foundational premise in the works of scholars engaged in establishing the lineage of quranic vocabulary. The rule is presented differently by different scholars, but in a nutshell it states that for every word in the Qur'ān for which the native philological tradition fails to give a solitary explanation and instead offers multiple meanings, modern scholars have to presume that we are dealing with a foreign word. This is a benign enough view. It is, however, the next step in this exercise that is of interest here. Having determined that a word in the Qur'ān is foreign, scholars have gone ahead and presumed that its meaning in a cognate language or in its purported language of origin was the determining factor and not its usage in its quranic context. I will show in this article that such a method is neither defensible on linguistic or philological grounds nor does it deliver us the insight that it promises into the Qur'ān.

¹ I am grateful to professor James Turner of Notre Dame University for his comments on this paper; my thanks go also to professor Marc Witkin of Middlebury College for his comments on successive drafts.

It is not clear how this rule was first formulated, yet one can find examples of it dating back to the beginning of the last century. Let me give examples culled from different historical periods. The first comes from *The Foreign Vocabulary in the Qur'ān* by Arthur Jeffery, arguably the most important summation of scholarly work done on the origins of quranic vocabulary during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In discussing the word *furqān*, Jeffery states that:

The philologers [Arab philologers], however, are not unanimous as to its meaning This uncertainty and confusion is difficult to explain if we are dealing with a genuine Arabic word, and is sufficient of itself to suggest that it is a borrowed term.²

Jeffery seems to imply that native philologists were competent enough to offer us the meaning of any native Arabic word that they may have encountered in the Qur'ān. Therefore, the implication is that discord among the philologists – and here he really means Qur'ān commentators – as to the meaning of a certain quranic term is itself reason for calling into doubt its Arabic origins.

Both claims are problematic, to say the least. It is not clear why native scholars from a later historical period in any tradition, who are at a linguistic remove from the documents they are examining, should be equipped to solve all the riddles of their inherited language. Far more unfounded is the supposition that the failure on the part of medieval scholars to come up with a unanimous explanation of a word means that we should conclude that we ourselves are unable to solve the problem using the customary philological methods, on the premise that the native philologists were disinterested parties who did all that they could to solve the problem at hand. Moreover, our unwillingness to reinvestigate a given term in its linguistic tradition first before reaching a conclusion about it, carries the implicit conviction that knowledge of that linguistic

² (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 226.

tradition, Arabic in this case, has remained static since medieval times. The rule articulated by Jeffery is thus categorical in its implication: if the native philologists have failed to come up with one meaning, modern scholars have to look into other languages to explain these words.

If we are to take seriously the rule that the absence of a native unanimity on a term disqualifies it then we have to call into doubt a large portion of undisputedly Arabic vocabulary of the Qur'ān as being non-Arabic. The simple fact is that Qur'ān commentators were rarely in accord on the meaning of most of the quranic terminology. One only need peruse any medieval commentary to observe this fact. Take verse 93:7 “did He not find you [Muhammad] erring (*dāllan*), and guide you?” It should come as no surprise that Muslim commentators offer various interpretations in order not to give us the lexical meaning of the word *d-l-l*. Indeed, by al-Zamakhsharī's time, a clearly articulated statement against a literal understanding of the verse had become central to how this word was interpreted. One cannot understand the word here, al-Zamakhsharī indignantly states, to mean Muhammad was a heathen.³ No modern scholar would consider it worth his time even to entertain the idea that *d-l-l* is a foreign word.⁴ In this instance medieval commentators were not so much elucidating as obfuscating. The lexical meaning was precisely the meaning they did not want to be operative. Muslim commentators' disagreement over the meaning of a certain word, in and of itself, can hardly be used as a criterion to decide what words to count as foreign.

³ For al-Zamakhsharī's treatment see my *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Tha'labī* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 146-149. See also Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muḥammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims* (New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1995), 90-96.

⁴ The root *d-l-l* is not a common Semitic word, for only South Arabic and Arabic have this root; see Martin Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 265.

Yet even a scholar of the caliber of Franz Rosenthal, though uncomfortable with this rule, is unwilling to discard it. Here is his torturous reasoning as to why, although this rule is unconvincing, we are all the same obliged to use it in order to elucidate the word *al-ṣamad*:

It might seem an all too obvious and unconvincing argument to point to the constant differences of the interpreters and conclude from their disagreement that none of them is right. However, there is something to such an argument. Although most of the commentators have their special axe to grind, one should think, at least in a number of instances, that if an evident and simple explanation existed, there would have been much less obstinate disagreement.⁵

But what is quranic commentary literature, if not the most theological of Islamic literatures and, as such, a field that does not offer us simple straightforward explanations for words that can become source of doctrinal dispute? Every rising theological camp sought to find support for its positions in the Qur’ān and soon after its codification, words and sentences were taken out of context to support such positions.⁶ Why should an obvious meaning of the word *dāllan* in verse 93:7, which might destroy, for example, the prophetic infallibility doctrine, be allowed by Muslims commentators to exist?⁷

Modern scholars have long misunderstood the function and aims of medieval quranic exegesis. Though medieval quranic exegetes always claimed that they were engaged in a disciplined philological approach to the Qur’ān, one can demonstrate that that was not always the case. Taking medieval Qur’ān commentators at their own word, modern scholars have been quick to think that what we read in any given Qur’ān commentary reflects the state of philological knowledge at the time it was written. This

⁵ Franz Rosenthal, “Some Minor Problems in the Qur’ān,” in *The Jeshua Starr Memorial Volume* (New York, 1953), 68.

⁶ In the case of *al-ṣamad* the theological use of this term is too apparent for it to escape the probing of a careful eye. The word was used to justify many an understanding of the nature of God. See below the article by Van Ess for more on this word.

⁷ On the doctrine of the infallibility of prophets see M.M. Bravmann, “The Origin of the Principle of ‘Iṣmah: Muḥammad’s Immunity from Sin,” *Le Museon* 88 (1975): 221-225.

could hardly be the case, however, given the myriad concerns that were motivating the exegetes. Much of their work was actually a keenly crafted attempt to circumvent philology, while playing by its rules. Add to that the anthological nature of the exegetical tradition, whereby various conflicting interpretations for a certain word were accumulated instead of being discarded, and we have a situation that is ripe for misunderstanding. On the one hand scholars have assumed that they were doing philology, on the other we mistrusted their conclusions. Yet, instead of recognizing the complicated character of the tradition of *tafsīr* for what it is, we have viewed it only as a sign of the ignorance of the medieval scholars and as a sign of the failure of their philological tools. Because the anthological feature of medieval quranic exegesis was seen as a major indication that the philological solutions from Arabic were exhausted, a new way was sought to solve the problems encountered in the text.

Far more misleading than even the misunderstanding of the anthological nature of *tafsīr* has been the recourse of scholars to classical dictionaries with the assumption that philological discussions of quranic roots found there would be more likely than commentaries to tell us the meaning of a term without any theological biases. This is of course is not the case, as Lothar Kopf long ago showed us.⁸ Lexicography and the study of the Qur'ān went hand in hand in many instances, and rarely do lexicons dare to undermine the maneuvers of the commentators. Rather, they reinforce each other's findings.

Modern scholars have felt that a comparative Semitic philological exercise would solve the problem of difficult terms. In a few instances this supposition worked well in advancing our knowledge of quranic terms. Yet, the enterprise of finding origins of the

⁸ See his "Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology," *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956): 33-59.

foreign vocabulary was from the beginning highly speculative and undisciplined, and many modern scholars came to it with their own prejudices and preferences. As a matter of fact, most of the scholars working on quranic terms were far more interested in finding cognates than in studying the quranic terms in their context. In this sense they fit James Barr's depiction of the philologist who, when asked about the meaning of a word, gives all the meanings of the cognates of the word but not of the word he was asked about. His analysis of this approach is worth quoting in full here:

The comparative emphasis, like the historical, tended to make an appreciation of semantic realities rather more difficult. We all know the type of philologist who, when asked the meaning of a word, answers by telling us the meaning of its cognates in other languages. This over-etymological approach is the result of excessive reliance on comparative thinking. The meaning of a word is its meaning in its own language, not its meaning in some other. To say this is not to deny that it is of considerable interest to know the meaning of cognate words in cognate languages. But the characteristic procedure of many scholars has been to start with comparative data; and the attempt to state the meaning in the actual language under study (in our case, Hebrew) has often been biased by a striving to fit this meaning into a possible derivation process starting from the comparative material. Thus comparative emphasis, which has done so much to clarify fields like phonology and morphology, has often tended to confuse the field of semantics."⁹

Indeed, the background and training of the modern scholars engaged in this process is reflected in their findings. Thus those studying Northwestern Semitic languages will see Ugaritic behind obscure quranic words, while those inclined to see Islam coming out of a Christian background would prefer Syriac etymologies; those favoring a Jewish matrix would see Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic as the sources of many quranic terms.¹⁰

Al-Şamad

A good example that illustrates the degree of confusion that comes from following the rule of absence-of-native-unanimity is how modern scholars dealt with the word “*al-*

⁹ *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 90.

¹⁰ One only needs to read the titles of the works from this vein of scholarship to realize that there was a race as to who could claim Islam as their progeny. The situation was such that J. Fück was forced to write an article with the title “The Originality of the Arabian Prophet.” See the translation in Merlin L. Swartz’s *Studies on Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981): 86-98.

ṣamad” of verse 112:2, a hapax legomenon in the Qur’ān. The first modern scholar to study the term, Rosenthal, having realized that medieval philologists failed to offer one explanation, takes that as a reason to search in other Semitic languages for cognates.¹¹ Rosenthal claims that *al-ṣamad* was “a survival of an ancient Northwestern Semitic religious term.”¹² But since the quranic usage does not accord with the new-found meaning Rosenthal discovered – which he now takes to be the ‘genuine’ meaning of *al-ṣamad* – he has to conclude that the term “may no longer have been properly understood by Muḥammad himself.” This statement – fascinating as it is to our ears now – is an unavoidable conclusion if one is to accept the premise of his exercise and follow it to its logical conclusion. The medieval philologists were unable to give a unanimous meaning to a term and hence one has to conclude that it is foreign. Having found the putative foreign origin of the quranic term, the modern scholar looks back on the Qur’ān to discover that the new meaning given to the word does not make sense there, hence Muhammad must have misunderstood the word and misused it. That Muhammad misunderstood words he used would become the refrain of a whole scholarly literature.¹³ As to the question what Muhammad or the Qur’ān understood the word to mean and how it was used, no one seems in a hurry to answer. In our quest for a meaning of a term in its

¹¹ See note 4 above where I quoted his reasoning.

¹² Rosenthal, *Some Minor*, 83

¹³ Theodor Nöldeke entitled the third section of his study of the language of the Qur’ān as “Willkürlich und missverständlich gebrauchte Fremdwörter im Korān.” He went on to state that Muhammad has changed the meanings of the supposed loanwords either as a rule or out of sheer arbitrariness; see his *Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trübner, 1910), 23. Arthur Jeffery had a special category of words that Muhammad invented or misunderstood: “It has been remarked that not infrequently that the Prophet had a penchant for strange and mysterious sounding words, though frequently he himself had not grasped correctly their meaning, as one sees in such cases as *furqān*, and *sakīnah*. Sometimes he seems even to have invented words, such as *ghassāq*, *tasnīm*, and *salsabīl*.” See his *Foreign Vocabulary*, 39. Muhammad was being turned into a philologist, a badly trained one in this case, by the 19th century scholars, as such he was conceived in their own image. The number of languages that Muhammad had to have dabbled in is staggering according to this explanation of the genesis of his prophetic career.

context, the Qur'ān, we forget about the context, declare the word misused and turn the text into a high school paper by a student writing in a foreign language he has barely mastered. Meanwhile, the fundamental bedrock of philology that a term, any term, must have an intelligible meaning in its linguistic context is all but forgotten.

Köbert, writing in 1961, sees the meaning of *al-ṣamad* as originating from a Jewish context.¹⁴ By 1981, the term has become a “problem” that Schedl is determined to solve.¹⁵ Schedl is in agreement with Köbert’s understanding of *al-ṣamad* as a translation of the Hebrew *šūr* (rock). Interestingly, Schedl regrets the absence of an Arabic early Targum for the Hebrew Bible. The implication is that such a Targum would have solved the problem at hand and showed, apparently inconclusively, that *al-ṣamad* would have been used by Muhammad to translate the Hebrew *šūr*.

It would take an article by Uri Rubin in 1984 to recover the heart of the matter. In order to offer a solution to the meaning of *al-ṣamad*, Rubin has to formulate a new and different methodology than the one that has been so far assumed vis-à-vis the proper way to study difficult quranic terms.¹⁶ Rubin sees the problem arising from the refusal on the part of modern scholars to assess what the medieval Muslim exegetes have to offer. The different meanings offered by the tradition were not sheer inventions but arose out of theological considerations as well as philological investigations, and thus one must not dispense with the whole material, but rather reevaluate it. In order to understand any term a general assessment of all the available Arabic sources has to be undertaken. Rubin seems to mean that it matters little that medieval Muslim scholars differed about the

¹⁴ R. Köbert, “Das Gotteseppitheton *aṣ-ṣamad* in Sure 112,2,” *Orientalia* 30 (1961): 204-205.

¹⁵ Cl. Schedl, “Probleme der Koranexegese: Nochmals *ṣamad* in Sure 112,2,” *Der Islam* 58 (1981), 14.

¹⁶ Uri Rubin, “Al-Ṣamad and the High God: An Interpretation of sūra CXII,” *Der Islam* 61 (1984): 197-217.

meaning of a term; the difference should not be taken to mean that these scholars have done an exhaustive analysis within the Arabic language, or for that matter that the term cannot be explained by the reference to the usage of the term inside its linguistic context. Thus only after such an investigation, and in the case that we fail to find a sound philological reading depending on Arabic sources, could we move on to study the cognates in other languages. Far more importantly, Rubin refuses to offer a reading of *al-ṣamad* that is independent of the whole of Sura 112. In many ways Rubin is restating the obvious: a sound philological investigation has to study all the available evidence on a given term and its context. That these two basic exercises have been missing, however, in many of the discussions on the term is characteristic of the field of quranic etymological studies.

By the time a post-mortem analysis of the literature on *al-ṣamad* appeared in 1986 it had to deal with eight articles, almost 70 pages in total.¹⁷ By then it had become clear, however, that the claim for a foreign origin of the term had to be fully discounted. The author, Arne Ambrose, states that no shred of evidence exists to support a foreign borrowing or even foreign influence.¹⁸ Unfortunately, Ambrose failed to realize the significance of Rubin's work and that his article marked a departure from the usual method of studying quranic terms.

In looking at the learned articles written on *al-ṣamad* before Rubin's, one is struck by both their erudition and their flimsiness. At the heart of the exercise is the supposition that finding the suitable cognate would solve the problem of the inclusion in the Qur'ān

¹⁷ Arne A. Ambrose, "Die Analyse von Sure 112," *Der Islam* 63 (1986): 219-247.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 221. His analysis is confirmed by the work of Martin Zammit who does not find any cognates for the root *ṣ-m-d* in any of the eight Semitic languages he investigated. See his *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 258. Thus a root that is mostly attested in Arabic was deemed un-Arabic because we ourselves failed to recognize the complex history of quranic exegesis.

of a word that is supposedly not understood either by Muhammad or the Qur'ān. At no point was the historical question raised whether the proposed cultural or religious interaction between Arabic and the putative origin of a given term is even feasible: for example, how did a Northwest Semitic root, despite the death of the language it came from, survive underground to surface in Arabia a millennium later? Far more damning to this kind of approach to the Qur'ān is the fact that in scholarly circles no interest was expressed in *al-ṣamad* before it was pronounced foreign. The moment it was, however, a slew of articles was produced on its foreignness. The Qur'ān can only repay our attention when we catch it in an act of borrowing, which invariably entails the judgment that it itself does not understand what it is pronouncing. As such, we philologists are not only deciphering the Qur'ān, a right we are entitled to, but we are discovering that the Qur'ān was not using words properly. As such we understand the Qur'ān better than it understood itself, and we are thus able to tell what it means to say without even accounting for what the Qur'ān thought it was saying.

A remarkable example of the lack of historical perspective in the literature that had analyzed *al-ṣamad* is that none of the scholars who worked on this verse mentions that it is the earliest attested quranic chapter we have. Sura 112, which includes the word *al-ṣamad*, was stamped on the first Arabized gold and silver coins of 'Abd al-Malik (minted ca. 696 C.E. onwards).¹⁹ Thus it would stand to reason that such a prominently figured sura would have been intelligible to the early Arab population who were the targeted audience of the propaganda on imperial coins. But perhaps this search for

¹⁹ Heinz Gaube, "Nummismatik" in *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, ed. Wolfdietrich Fischer (Weisbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1982), v. 2: 232. The whole of sura 112 was inscribed by mosaic on the Dome of the Rock, see Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1997), 699-700 (for coins of 'Abd al-Malik), 696 (for Dome of the Rock inscriptions).

origins is an unavoidable obsession in our scholarly approach to religious traditions which reduces the essence of a phenomenon to its genesis, since this approach is part of the evolutionary hermeneutical model of the Enlightenment and modernity. To speculate about origins, regardless of whether we have evidence for our musings or not, is considered more “scholarly” than researching a more documented later period. The prestige of the field lies in explicating how the “thing” originated in its infancy, thus any new theories of origins are accorded a level of tolerance and recognition that is denied to any other kind of account.

Finally, the medieval Muslim scholars left us with a huge literature on the interpretation of this sura. Sura 112 was one of the earliest chapters to detach itself from the Qur’ān and to start receiving independent analysis, yet one is hard-pressed to find any reference in the secondary literature to this engagement with sura 112 in Islamic religious history, let alone a study or analysis of such an engagement.²⁰ It is of course not the duty of Qur’ān specialists to study the subsequent history of the reception of the Qur’ān, this being the job of scholars who study *tafsīr*. In the case of *al-ṣamad* it was by a close reading of the literature of *tafsīr* that Rubin was able to solve the riddle – if indeed there was one.²¹ Prior to the appearance of Rubin’s article, the muddled methods of those studying the word forced Josef Van Ess to despair of their ways and decide instead to

²⁰ Cf. with Rosenthal: “It would be tempting to trace the history of the word in Muslim dogmatics, philosophy, and mysticism,” in his *Some Minor*, 76.

²¹ Gordon Newby admits that the exegetical tradition was more or less in unanimity regarding the meaning of *al-ṣamad*, the tradition preferred the same meaning that Rubin established. It is interesting the Newby claims that we have to know the meaning of the word in isolation before we can solve the riddle of the sura 112, thus turning the philological exercise on its head: “the consensus, *ijmā’*, that the word means the relied-upon sayyid, obviously presents a barrier to our understanding, and the first task is to seek a definition of *aṣ-ṣamadu* before the syntactical problems of verses one and two can be solved.” See his “Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ: A Reconsideration,” in *Orient and Occident*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner (Berlin: Verlag Butzon, 1973), 129.

take the reader into a history of the interpretation of this term in Islamic religious history as a far more defensible scholarly endeavor.²²

The Etymological Fallacy and Quranic Studies

It is perhaps appropriate to pause here and ponder the foundations and assumptions of the exercise that we have seen characterizes so many of the etymological approaches to the Qur’ān. One is reminded of the criticisms of James Barr, who dealt with the same approach to the Hebrew Bible and who pointed out the fallacies that lie at the heart of such an approach. Barr reminds us that an etymological investigation studies “the past of a word, but understands that the past is no infallible guide to its present meaning.”²³ He adds that etymology “is not, and does not profess to be, a guide to the semantic value of words in their current usage, and such value has to be determined from the current usage and not from derivation.”²⁴

Despite these modest declared claims of etymology, Barr goes on to document and describe what might be called the “etymological fallacy” that underpins many of the scholarly approaches to biblical words. Barr’s account of the false application of etymology in the field of biblical scholarship describes the problems of much of the scholarship done on the Qur’ān:

Nevertheless there is a normative strain in the thought of many people about language, and they feel that in some sense the ‘original’, the ‘etymological meaning’, should be a guide to the usage of words, that the words are used ‘properly’ when they coincide in sense with the sense of the earliest known form which their derivation can be traced; and that when a word becomes in some way difficult or ambiguous an appeal to etymology will lead to a ‘proper meaning’ from which at any rate to begin.²⁵

²² Josef Van Ess is rightly impatient with the literature on *al-samad* and he takes Ambrose to task; see his *The Youthful God: Anthropomorphism in Early Islam* (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1988), 4 and esp. note 27, p. 15.

²³ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Barr emphasizes that the “etymology of a word is not a statement about its meaning but about its history.” This has to be kept in mind when approaching the Qur’ān, for while indeed a few of its key terms are loanwords, their etymological history is at best of secondary significance in our understanding of their usage in the Qur’ān. Barr also states that it is quite “wrong to suppose that the etymology of a word is necessarily a guide either to its ‘proper’ meaning in a later period or to its actual meaning in that period.”²⁶ For while it is true that etymology seeks the ‘original’ meaning, Barr continues, “the (historically) original is necessarily not the ‘general’ or the ‘proper’.”²⁷

Let me give an example of another quranic term and the history of the scholarly investigation into its etymological meaning, the word *ḥanīf*.²⁸ One of the latest to study the word was Andrew Rippin, who points to the fact that no other word has been so extensively studied.²⁹ Rippin wisely avoids any rehashing of the etymological speculations that have been put forward and instead offers a detailed analysis of its quranic usage and a refutation of any claim to certainty about its etymology, with the exception of a possible Syriac origin. Rippin concludes that the term *ḥanīf* in the Qur’ān, “reflects a notion of basic religious impulse in humanity towards dedication to the one God. This is part of an overall social and ritual religious context, for sure, but more importantly, it is the basis of the Qur’ānic ideology of belief which is embodied in the

²⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

²⁸ See now the entry in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, v. 2: 402-403 (Uri Rubin).

²⁹ Andrew Rippin, “RHMNN and the ḤANĪFS,” in *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams*, ed. W. B. Hallaq and P. D. Little (Leiden: Brill, 1991): 153-168. Since then a new study on *ḥanīf* has been published by Francois De Blois. See his “*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (εθνικός): studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *BSOAS* 65 (2002):1-30. De Blois’s article has the most extensive bibliography to date on *ḥanīf*. His analysis however, does not change the picture of what I have to say here about earlier studies done on the term.

myth of Abraham and captured in the word muslim.”³⁰ This is a remarkable moment in the history of the study of the word *ḥanīf*; for once a scholar has decided that a proper approach to the term *ḥanīf* is first and foremost an analysis of its occurrence in the Qur’ān. This analysis is sufficient to give us a clear and definite idea as to how it was used and what it meant there. One has to ask as to what purpose the previous attempts at finding the ‘original meaning’ were carried out: to understand the quranic term better or to postulate a source from which it originated? In either case, Rippin shows that the etymological history was not necessary for achieving a proper understanding of the term in the Qur’ān.

While Rippin dismisses most of the etymological speculations offered for *ḥanīf* and points to the inherent problems with such speculations, he notes that all scholars are in agreement that the Arabic word comes from the Syriac *ḥanpe* which means “heathen.” Taking a closer look, however, shows that there is no such unanimity. He then asks: “how was the word transformed from a term of rebuke to one of eminent spiritual development?”³¹ Once more we see lurking behind this question the etymological fallacy: that knowing the history of a word might help with understanding its current usage. There are endless possibilities as to how such a transformation might have happened; but then of course we are presuming that Arabic did not have such a term, an argument made from silence, and that Arabic had to borrow it in the first place.³²

³⁰ Rippin, *RHMNN*, 161. Cf. with De Blois: “*ḥanīf* can, in all quranic contexts, plausibly be translated as ‘gentile’, or more specifically as a ‘person in the state of religious innocence, not bound by Jewish law’, even if this is not the most immediately obvious rendering.” *Naṣrānī*, 23-24.

³¹ Rippin, *RHMNN*, 167.

³² One of my graduate students, Kevin Casey, put forward the proposition that Muhammad took a term of abuse (*ḥanīf* in Aramaic and Syriac means pagan or ungodly) and gave it a positive connotation. This is a sociological phenomenon we are familiar with, when a minority takes on the most abusive term used against it and turn it into a word of pride to be used by the minority to describe itself, thus robbing the word of its power to dominate. Kevin is working on publishing his paper.

Moreover, if we were to presume it is a borrowed term, one is bound to ask if we are as absolutely certain that the word was from Syriac as Rippin states. Rippin mentions the already discussed fact that the Nabataeans had a cognate of *ḥanīf* and that it was used to designate one of their co-religionists. Nabih Faris, the author of the most extensive study on the etymology of *ḥanīf* before Rippin's was of the opinion that it came to Arabic from its Nabataean usage.³³ If this is so, then is it really from Christian Aramaic (Syriac)? A similar case could be made that the word comes from Hebrew, where the root is used to denote heretics, something that Uri Rubin points out. The absence of a clear methodology governing these etymological musings makes us very hesitant to take any of the possibilities as certain. Yet, even if we were certain of the origin of the word, its usage in the Qur'ān is uniquely after its own fashion. Rubin was right to relegate the evidence from non-quranic usage of *ḥanīf* to secondary significance in his article on the term in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.

In recent decades scholars working on Semitic languages, and Hebrew in particular, have called into question the whole discipline of Semitic etymological studies when it bears on semantic usage as it has developed during the last two centuries. Since quranic etymological studies were an outgrowth of that discipline we should bear in mind the caveats raised there when studying the Qur'ān. These scholars have not only shown the inconsistency and unscientific approach of the whole etymologizing exercise, but

³³ "From the evidence which has so far been presented the conclusion seems inescapable that Koranic *ḥanīf*, with all that it implies, must have come via pre-Islamic Arabic from the dialect of the Nabataeans, in whose language it meant a follower of some branch of their partially Hellenized Syro-Arabian religion," in "The Development of the Meaning of Koranic Ḥanīf," *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 19 (1939/1940): 1-13, reproduced in Rudi Paret, *Wege der Forschung*, Der Koran (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), 267.

have doubted its very usefulness.³⁴ Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, in his *Introduction to the Lexicography of Modern Hebrew*, is pointed in his critique of a discipline that was primarily a theologically-driven enterprise.³⁵ He characterizes this quest for the “etymology” of the Hebrew words as a search “in effect, for the ‘true meaning’ of a biblical expression according to Arabic, Aramaic, etc. – with an intent of almost a ‘true tiding’”. This quest came for the most part in order to achieve exegetical understanding of a difficult passage, and this often would have a theological bias. The same linkage of words or roots that could be used to suggest relevancy for solving an exegetical problem – was regarded as the ‘correct’ etymology.”³⁶ Goshen-Gottstein then states the obvious result of such an approach: “The discovery of an etymological-exegetical solution turned into the yardstick according to which the dependency of Hebrew words on words in other languages was a given; and since the text which they were trying to comment upon was a Hebrew text (the Hebrew Bible), it was the Hebrew language in any case that appeared to be the borrowing and depending language.”³⁷

The same effect is blatantly clear in the case of the Qur’ān, for not only was its vocabulary presumed derivative and mostly misused, but in the end its very theology was seen as confusedly primitive. Thus any discrepancy between the theology of the Qur’ān

³⁴ See the debate in *Questions disputées d’Ancien Testament: Méthode et Théologie*, ed. C. Brekelmans (BETL 33, 1974), esp. the articles by James Barr (pp. 39-61) and J. F. A. Sawyer (pp. 63-70).

³⁵ (Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing, 1969), 160-162 (in Hebrew). I would like to thank here Dr. Isaac Hollander for translating the relevant parts of this introduction (private communication). Paragraph 244 is worth quoting in full here: “The problematic degree of all etymological work may be sensed if we point out at the outset that in the various fields of linguistics there is no unified approach to the actual purpose or function of the term “etymology”. There are several traditions as to etymological works, and it is possible that in this particular lexicon – linking a Semitic tradition of study to the lexicographic tradition of the European languages – they may end up contradicting each other. The etymology is indeed the most enticing parts of the variant readings (“aparāt”), but from a scientific standpoint it is also the most uncertain, most dangerous and most prone to failure. The simple comfortable and safe solution is that the author of a lexicon completely exempts himself from dealing with etymology. We have not chosen that path.”

³⁶ Ibid. 161.

³⁷ Ibid. 162.

and that of Christianity and Judaism was seen as a mere garbling of what was supposed to be a failed borrowing and not a new take on an old problem. Perhaps the clearest sign of the awareness within the discipline of biblical studies of the problems of the etymological approach is the fact that the editor of *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, David J. A. Clines, refused even to contemplate the citing of cognates in the entries of his dictionary, let alone allowing for etymological discussions. Thus the proud achievement of 19th century philology, the cognate lists that are given priority in *Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew Dictionary*, is now discarded. Clines discounts the citing of cognates as neither justifiable by modern linguistic methods nor by any merit of their own.³⁸ If there is a rule to keep in mind, then, it is this: *The meaning of a word is derived from its linguistic medium, and that holds true even for "borrowed" words.*

It is also clear that most of the significant scholars working now on the Qur'ān have either fully admitted the limitation of etymological work, as Andrew Rippin does, or have totally eschewed the method, as Uri Rubin does. Indeed, in his entry on Foreign Vocabulary in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Rippin highlights the limitations of this enterprise, in so far as modern scholars are unable to work out a clear methodology that allows for certainty in their speculations. So why bring the topic up? Are we not beating

³⁸ *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 14-18, esp. pp 17-18 no. 7: "Cognates in other Semitic languages have not been listed in this Dictionary. Such information has become traditional in Hebrew lexica of the last two centuries, but its presence in a Hebrew dictionary is highly problematic, and it is difficult to see what purpose it serves. Theoretically speaking, that is, data about the meaning of cognate words in Akkadian and Arabic, for example, are strictly speaking irrelevant to the Hebrew language; and, practically speaking, there is evidence that the significance of the cognates has been systematically misunderstood by many users of the traditional dictionaries. It is often said, for example, that the function of noting the cognates is to indicate how it is that we know the meaning of the Hebrew word to be such and such; but this is incorrect, since there is usually quite complex set of evidences for such matters, ranging from internal consistency within the Hebrew texts to the testimony of ancient versions and to Jewish lexicographical and exegetical tradition; and there is no reason to privilege the particular type of evidence, problematic as it is, that is provided by the cognate languages." See also the pertinent remarks on pages 25-26; the whole introduction is an antidote to the flawed etymological legacy in biblical studies (and hence quranic studies).

a dead horse? There are several reasons why I am presenting my own investigation of this method. The first is that no such systematic analysis and probing of the foundations of etymological approach have been undertaken in quranic studies. Thus the field is almost 40 years behind when compared to Biblical studies. The second is that despite the demonstrated absence of a scientific justification for etymology as a guide to the meanings of quranic usage, the method is still alive and well in quranic studies.

The impetus for the continuous survival of the etymological approach to the Qur'ān and for the preponderate significance of etymological studies in the field of quranic studies lies in the dearth of pre-quranic textual or material evidence at hand. We lack any significant paleographic, archeological, epigraphic and historical evidence from before the rise of Islam from the Hijaz area; we are still as surprised as the seventh century inhabitants of the Near East as to why Islam came out of Hijaz and why at that particular moment in history. The unfortunate and unjustifiable downgrading of pre-Islamic poetry at the beginning of the 20th century to the level of an unreliable source left us virtually nothing with which to compare the Qur'ān. As such, an etymological study becomes a substitute for all that is missing. In the absence of such a pre-Islamic corpus we are unwilling to admit the severe limitations that face anyone trying to study the *Sitz im Leben* of the Qur'ān. The proper response to this predicament would have been for scholars to concentrate on the Qur'ān itself, and to refine our methods of reading that text. Instead, we have opted to declare the text unreadable, or if readable, unwieldy, and to proceed to etymological reflections. The fruitful studies of Hartwig Hirschfeld, Edmund Beck, M.M. Bravemann, Harris Birkeland, Toshihiko Izutsu, Angelika Neuwirth, Uri Rubin, John Wansbrough, and even Arthur Jeffrey (I have in mind his

short monograph, *The Qur'ān as Scripture*), have unfortunately not changed the nature and method of approaching the Qur'ān. A classic such as *Mohammed und der Koran* by Rudi Paret is hardly ever mentioned now by scholars. As a consequence there is an absence of methodological refinement in the field due to a lack of cumulative scholarly engagement with the work of these scholars. To give one example, despite the work of Angelika Neuwirth's *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* on the coherent unity of Mekkan suras, we still hear about the "apparently arbitrary structure and organization" of the Qur'ān.³⁹

There are thus several reasons for a reexamination of the theoretical foundations of the scholarly work on the meaning of quranic words through etymological analysis. The most significant is the sheer amount of this literature. This literature still weighs heavily on new scholars entering the field, and one is bound to be impressed by the acumen and erudition of this production and to forget its tendentiousness and its flimsy scholarly foundations. Indeed, one is bound to think that this is *the proper method* of doing quranic studies. The etymological study of the Qur'ān is so deeply rooted in the field that it is an *idée fixe* even outside the confines of quranic scholarship. It indeed influences the whole Geist within which quranic scholarship is received and disseminated.⁴⁰

Finally I have been compelled to review the etymological studies on the Qur'ān by the phenomenon of the periodic flare-up of interest in etymologies as the key to

³⁹ David Waines in his *An Introduction to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23. This is just one textbook example of the usual way of dismissing the Qur'ān by simply declaring it disheveled.

⁴⁰ Notice the widespread reporting in the media that the maidens of paradise, a staple of Islamic eschatological thinking, were a mistaken belief on the grounds that they are a misreading of a Syriac word. Many have not read the Qur'ān, but many can tell you about the etymology of the *al-hūr al-'īn*; see *The New York Times* 2 March 2002, for a reportage on Luxenberg's claims in regard to this misreading.

solving “the mystery of the Qur’ān.” This can be seen in two ways. The first way is peripheral: a non-specialist on the Qur’ān writes a piece dealing with some quranic terms. I will take Michael Cook’s recent book as my example of this type. The second is the major way, when a new book such as that of Christoph Luxenberg would claim that by positing a foreign origin to most of the “difficult” words one solves their mystery and hence the supposed matrix of the Qur’ān. This is usually done with a lot of publicity as if to announce a truly new method of studying the Qur’ān.

Strata and *Ṣirāṭ*

In 2000 Oxford University Press issued a book by Michael Cook on the Qur’ān in its series, Very Short Introduction, entitled: *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*. Cook takes the opening chapter of the Qur’ān (*al-Fatiḥah*) as an example to adumbrate the message of the Qur’ān. As customary in these Oxford booklets, a concept or a snippet of information is enclosed in a box and printed in boldface to highlight it. Cook, having translated *al-Fatiḥah*, dwells on ‘The Straight Path’, the famous *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*, and places the information pertaining to this term in a box. I quote the box in full here:

‘The Straight Path’: *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. The word *ṣirāṭ* is interesting. The Romans used the Latin ‘strata’ for the kind of paved road they built so straight. From them the word passed to the peoples of their empire and even beyond, so that from ‘strata’ derive both the Arabic *ṣirāṭ* and the English ‘street’. But whereas ‘street’ has remained a secular term, *ṣirāṭ* came to be used only in religious contexts. It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing our sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path.⁴¹

The word is interesting, apparently, because of its etymology; the reader is informed that the word comes originally from the Latin *strata*. This insight is nothing we owe to modern scholarship, for some medieval Muslim exegetes were aware of its foreign origin. Cook, however, makes two observations, the first that the word *ṣirāṭ* “came to be used

⁴¹ Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

only in religious contexts.” Cook could not be talking about how the term was used in the Qur’ān, for the term *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur’ān is not only used in religious contexts.⁴² Verse 7:86 speaks of those who squat in every highway (*ṣirāṭ*) threatening and corrupting the believers, while verse 35:66 speaks of God turning blind the unbelievers such that they roam the road (*ṣirāṭ*). So strictly speaking *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur’ān is not only used in religious contexts. All the same, having moved to explain its post-quranic understanding, it is not clear why Cook does not give us the most common and general understanding of the term that has become standard among Muslim commentators. There *ṣirāṭ* is taken to refer to the bridge that traverses Hell and connects to Heaven. The term *ṣirāṭ* became an integral part of the eschatological imagination of the Islamic medieval thinking. Thus the reader is still not informed about the meaning of the word in its *many* contexts in the Qur’ān itself, nor in post-quranic literature. The reader will never be. If in a very short introduction to the Qur’ān one has space to offer only the bare minimum, Cook has decided that telling his readers that *ṣirāṭ* derives from Latin *strata* is the most enlightening piece of information we need for an appreciation of the term.

But let us look more closely at the term *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur’ān. The term is used 46 times in the Qur’ān, and one cannot speak of one usage – Jeffrey’s observation notwithstanding.⁴³ Moreover, it is clear that the *ṣirāṭ* in quranic Arabic comes to denote not a straight path but a path, any path, and that is why the adjective ‘straight’ is always added, among other adjectives. To state its origin is hardly illuminating.⁴⁴ Indeed, to

⁴² Cook was misled here by Arthur Jeffrey who mentions that *ṣirāṭ* was “used only in religious sense,” see Jeffrey, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 195.

⁴³ See note 41 above for the observation of Jeffrey.

⁴⁴ On roads and camels in late antiquity see Richard Bulliet’s *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

understand the use of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur’ān, one has to investigate what I call the “theology of orientation” that the Qur’ān fashions. The Qur’ān weaves a matrix of words around the concept of journeying, guidance, path, and destination. It speaks of finding one’s way, of getting lost, of roaming the earth, of straight paths and crooked paths (Q. 7:86); it speaks of lurking near highways to ambush, it speaks of stampeding on a highway; it speaks of darkness lit by lightning through which one attempts to walk, only to halt again as the skies darken, thus recreating day and night in an instant, guidance and bewilderment in the flash of a moment, while the believers have their light guiding them on the way. It depicts believers wondering as to where one should face when in need of guidance, only to be answered that direction is meaningless, for God’s face is everywhere. Lost in the desert a human being rushes to a mirage only to find God waiting there.⁴⁵

Indeed the vocabulary is so rich and so varied, the imagery so complex and adroit that one has to take this imagery as fundamental in the message of the Qur’ān as to how it understands guidance, and hence salvation.⁴⁶ At the heart of this theology, finally, lies the justification for migration or *hijrah*, arguably the most important act instituted by Muhammad and the beginning of the Islamic calendar and the Islamic polity.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Qur’ān equates the two words *sabīl* (path) and *ṣirāṭ* (path) and a study of the relationship between the two terms is unavoidable. Indeed, verse 14:12 had the

⁴⁵ The verse (24:39) reads: “As for the unbelievers, their works are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty traveler thinks it is water, but when he comes near he finds that it is nothing. He finds God there, who pays him back in full. Swift is God’s reckoning.”

⁴⁶ See these roots in the Qur’ān, all relating to paths, streets, and journeying: *ṭrq*, *slk*, *wrd*, *nhj*, *shr*, *mshy*, *sār*, *sh’b*, *hām*, *athr*, *jrā*, *wṭ*, *’rj*, *’dā*, and finally the famous *sbl*. These are only few of many other roots that deal with the theology of orientation.

⁴⁷ Verse 4:97 mocks those who refuse to revolt against oppression by reminding them that God’s land is vast and as oppressed they were obliged to migrate or else they have only themselves to blame.

prophets speaking about God guiding them to the paths (*subulana*) thus even linguistically the Qur'ān has pluralized the word path in one of its usages in the context of divine guidance (cf. also with 69:29 where the case is even more apparent). Such a thematic approach to the Qur'ān as the one I am proposing is exactly what an etymological atomistic approach to the Qur'ān will not allow.⁴⁸ The Qur'ān, according to the underlying premise of the etymological approach, is a disparate hodgepodge of a book, derivative at the lexeme level, chaotic at the compositional level, and ultimately fascinating only in so far as that we will never be able to explain its paradoxical power to hold the attention of the benighted Muslims. Indeed, a few pages before the box on *ṣirāt*, Cook in another box all but declares the Qur'ān impossible to categorize, regardless of what is meant by that, and sure enough the idea that the chapters of the Qur'ān do not have “thematic unity” makes its appearance here.⁴⁹ According to Cook, the Qur'ān is not a story book, like the Book of Exodus (although Cook informs the reader that the Qur'ān does mention Moses a lot), and it is not a Deuteronomy (although it has many legal passages). It does have preachy parts, but not like the Gospel where Christ is preaching; in the Qur'ān it happens that God preaches. Here once more, the Qur'ān is *ab initio*

⁴⁸ Thus Cook's section on Guidance is more concerned with showing how the Qur'ān's statements do not coalesce: “This is not a question to which the Koran provides an answer; it is after all, a scripture, not a treatise on dogmatic theology.” *Koran*, 17.

⁴⁹ Readers are spared an earlier judgment of Cook's about the literary character of the Qur'ān that appears in *Hagarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 18: “The book [the Qur'ān] is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions.” See a similar, but a rather harsher assessment in his *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 68. The first time Cook offers this assessment on the Qur'ān he attributes it to Wansbrough; by the time it appears in *Muhammad* it is already his own view. For the history of European “appreciation” of the style of the Qur'ān see Stefan Wild, “Die schauerliche öde des heiligen Buch: Westliche Wertungen des koranischen Stils,” in *Gott ist Schön und Er Liebt die Schönheit*, ed. Alma Giese and J.C. Bürgel (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994): 429-447. It is regrettable that this article is not translated into English.

impossible to categorize for it fails to conform to a certain extra-quranic notion of what should be or should not be scripture.⁵⁰

The second nugget of information Cook offers to the reader is about the absence of a plural to the term *ṣirāṭ*: “It is a curious feature of the word that it has no plural in Arabic, reinforcing *our* sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path.” This information is, needless to say, wrong. There is a plural for *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic: *ṣurūṭ*. There is more than one actually. This plural is attested in Classical Arabic, and in Modern Standard Arabic – since it is not clear to which Arabic Cook is referring. An inspection of the commonest of Arabic modern dictionaries, *al-Munjid*, (the equivalent of high school Webster dictionaries), gives the plural. Cook either got the misinformation from Surūsh,⁵¹ or was misguided by the nature of classical medieval Arabic lexicons. These lexicons are not exhaustive collections of all the instances and morphologies of a word, and indeed, in most cases, plurals are not given when the noun fits a standard pattern of plural formation. Had Cook perused any of the classical Qur’ān commentaries, however, he would have encountered the plural there. Thus al-Zamakhsharī, having discussed the term exhaustively, does give its plural: “*wa-yujma’ ṣurūṭan, naḥw kitāb wa-kutub*” (the plural is *ṣurūṭ* like in the case of *kitāb* (book) which has the form *fu’ul*).⁵² But one does not need this arcane knowledge about the whole apparatus of medieval Arabic; a careful reading of the instances of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur’ān would have sufficed. Had Cook read all

⁵⁰ Cook, *The Koran*, 6. Cook seems to be elaborating on the words of David Waines in his *An Introduction to Islam*, 23.

⁵¹ Since Cook mentions later in his book the work of Surūsh, *Ṣirāṭ-hā-yi mustaqīm* (Tehran, 1998), he might have got his information there. I have, however, been unable to find any reference in Surūsh’s book regarding an absence of a plural to *ṣirāṭ*, but his discussion of the term on page 27 might be construed to imply that.

⁵² Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.) v. 1:15, or any other edition *ad loc*. Al-Zamakhsharī is thus stating the obvious: *ṣirāṭ* has a regular plural that makes it uninteresting to lexicographers who were more interested in recording the unusual forms.

the citations of *ṣirāṭ* in the Qur'ān he would have been more careful and looked more closely at the word. There seems to be many a *ṣirāṭ*, even one that leads directly to Hell (37:23). Even a close reading of *al-Fatiḥah* (and I would say the proper reading), which Cook translated, would have alerted him that the Qur'ān already posits at least two *ṣirāṭs*, if not more.

Having discussed *ṣirāṭ*'s origin and the presumed absence of a plural, Cook moves on to inform the reader that “our” sense of the uniqueness of the Straight Path is reinforced. One is bound to ask whom Cook has in mind when he says “our.” Is it the native reader who had a supposed knowledge of the absence of the plural? Or is he implicating the reader of his book, who having been supplied with an “expert’s” knowledge and insight, is now privy to a fundamental resonance of the word that escapes the consciousness of the natives, yet somehow is operative all the same upon their subconscious? The rhetorical sleight of hand, the “our”, thus is the locus where the knowledge of the underlying structure of the language now purports to allow us a moment of profound understanding of the effect of the text on the believers.

Cook fashions his small book around his etymological and philological presentation of *ṣirāṭ*.⁵³ The wrong information about the absence of a plural is used not only to imply an exclusivist orientation of the message of the Qur'ān – not a difficult thing to prove by other citations from the Qur'ān – but to impinge directly on the ability of what Arabs, that is modern Arabs, can and cannot express in their own language.

⁵³ Another box devoted to *ṣirāṭ* is placed at the middle of the book, p. 110. Here Cook misses the significance of the debate on foreign vocabulary in the medieval tradition. For a nuanced detailed analysis of the nature of the debate on foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān in medieval literature see Andrew Rippin's entry on Foreign Vocabulary in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*.

Cook finishes his small introduction to the Qur'ān by discussing a modern Persian work with the title "Straight Paths."⁵⁴ The point here is that *ṣirāṭ* in the original Persian title of the book has been pluralized; the implication is that because of the strictures of their language, the Arabs have been so far unable to conceptually conceive of pluralism. The last two sentences of Cook's book, also intended as a punch-line, state that "it may not be wholly accidental that Surūsh writes in Persian. The very title of his book defies translation into Arabic."⁵⁵ One is left puzzled at the meaning of such a sweeping statement.

It should be clear why I have taken the trouble to disentangle what appears at first to be a trivial mistake by a non-specialist on the Qur'ān. It is indeed inconsequential whether Arabic has a plural or not for *ṣirāṭ*. It hardly matters. But the conclusions built on such an "objective" observation are what counts. The point made by Cook – that of an Arab mind unable to envision a map with more than one broad road – is so succinct, so cogent, that it is what sticks in the mind of the reader. Etymological studies as practiced in quranic studies are hazardous because they are given the role of social sciences: one need not do much to discover what Arabs are beside some philological musings. An absence of plural of a word and its Latin origins become our window to a collective mental setting. Higher criticism of the Qur'ān turns out to be an exercise in explaining the modern Arab character. It seems that we have barely left the 19th century. That etymological studies are predominantly an ideological tool in quranic studies, as they were in biblical studies, is a reality that has to be stated and stated clearly.

⁵⁴ See note 48 above.

⁵⁵ I offer here a translation of the title in Arabic: *ṣuruṭ mustaqīmah*. The other plural for *ṣirāṭ* in Arabic is *aṣruṭ*, which can be used also. It is of course heartening that the *Shu' bīyah* movement is alive and kicking in Princeton.

Luxenberg and How to Read the Qur'ān

The second type of etymological work that I would like to discuss is exemplified by the new book *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* by Christoph Luxenberg.⁵⁶ The author claims to read into the Qur'ān a supposedly suppressed or misread Syriac ur-text which the early readers of the Qur'ān – as well as western scholars of the past two hundred years – failed to recognize. The work has fundamental flaws in its methodology, indeed if one could call such a hash of a work methodic in any way, in itself reason not to bother reviewing it. The book, however, has generated such excitement – never before has a work on quranic studies been featured in major European and American newspapers and magazines – that a refutation of its faulty premises has to be undertaken.⁵⁷

The overarching justification the author offers for this reading rests on two suppositions that he makes in his introduction.⁵⁸ The first is the fact that native commentators, when confronted with these parts of the Qur'ān that are of Syriac Christian origins, were at the “end of their Arabic.” In other words no amount of philological work based on Arabic language on the part of medieval commentators was able to decipher the quranic text into clear meaning.⁵⁹ The main argument for judging the native exegetical tradition as having failed to properly read the Qur'ān is the presence in

⁵⁶ (Berlin: Druckerei Weinert, 2000).

⁵⁷ It is an indication of the dire situation in which the field finds itself that such a blatantly polemical work is not immediately recognized for what it is, and thus requires this refutation.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-22.

⁵⁹ Luxenberg does make a nod to the philological principle of *lectio difficilior*, the principle that a difficult reading is better than an easy reading till we prove differently, but then moves on to dismiss its relevance outright in the case of the Qur'ān. On *lectio difficilior* see D.C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 282. See also Martin L. West, *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique Applicable to Greek and Latin Texts* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1973), 50-51.

al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* of the phrase "the people of exegesis are in discord over the matter" (*ikhtalaf ahl al-ta'wīl fī ta'wīl dhālika*).⁶⁰ This phrase Luxenberg claims shows that the native commentators are not sure of the meaning of the supposedly Syriac Qur'ān that lies in front of them.⁶¹ One cannot dispute that many times the native commentators did not understand the Arabic text – or did not want to understand it – and as I have made clear, there are several reasons why this is the case. But to deduce from this that the language of the Qur'ān itself is what is mysterious, and hence non-Arabic, instead of faulting the methods of the exegetes, is unjustifiable.⁶² Al-Ṭabarī's Qur'ān commentary is used by Luxenberg as the main source for fishing for words that need elucidation and hence rereading as Syriac.

Let us once more revisit medieval Qur'ān commentaries and look more closely at their structure, nature and suppositions, to see if the presence of this sentence can be used as an indication that the Arabic of the Qur'ān is unclear. To repeat what I have already said earlier, medieval Qur'ān commentaries were not, as many modern scholars suppose, after 'one' meaning for any given word or verse. The fundamental characteristic of medieval quranic commentaries was their anthological nature, whereby the exegetical premise was that words and verses can have more than one meaning, and it was the business of the commentator to adduce them to the reader. Thus to come across the sentence "people of exegesis are not agreed on the meaning of this verse" in al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān* is like finding fish in the sea.

⁶⁰ Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² The relationship between modern quranic studies and the native exegetical tradition is yet to be investigated fully.

I will give two examples selected randomly from al-Ṭabarī. In discussing verse 7:17 “then spring upon them from the front and from the rear, from their right and from their left. Then you will find the greater part of them ungrateful,” he informs the reader that “people of *ta’wīl* are in disagreement on the meaning of this verse.”⁶³ No word in this verse is remotely unclear, problematic, or for that matter a loanword. The same holds for verse 7:26, on whose meaning exegetes are not in agreement, etc. Thus medieval quranic exegesis is not taken on its own terms, but is used by Luxenberg in order to argue for a project whose scholarly credentials are dubious in the extreme. I cannot see how a careful reader of al-Ṭabarī would manage to claim that this sentence could reflect the clarity or the ambiguity of the quranic text or even the totality of the history of the medieval exegetical tradition regarding the Qur’ān – after all al-Ṭabarī is at the beginning and not the end of this complicated history. Indeed, sometimes the very obvious in the Qur’ān is the locus of extensive commentary, not to explain it to the reader, but exactly the opposite, to excise a theological conundrum or expound on a doctrine that has no quranic basis. Thus a major aim of medieval quranic exegesis is not taken into account by Luxenberg: exegetes sometime obfuscate, and they do that precisely because they want to “explain”.

That the Qur’ān has some unclear passages and words is of course obvious. It is not clear, however, why Syriac should ever be an option to explain these passages, let alone why using Syriac as the primary code of elucidation for them is methodologically justifiable. Luxenberg claims that since the Qur’ān, supposedly, developed under the hegemony of Syriac culture and since, as he claims, Arabic at that time was not a written

⁶³ *Jāmi’ al-bayān, ad. Loc.*

language, it is thus self-evident that the initiators of the Arabic script have their model in what he calls the Syro-Aramaic cultural sphere.⁶⁴ He goes on to add that since most of these Arabs were Christians and took part in the Syriac Christian liturgy, then reading the Qur'ān as a work whose model and underlying foundation are Syriac is the right method to use in solving its unclear parts. This is the second presupposition about how to understand the development of the Qur'ān that the author uses as justification for his work.

These assertions of Luxenberg about the Qur'ān growing out of solely a Syriac Christian cultural sphere and about the state of the Arabic script at the time of the rise of Islam are so unhistorical that they are perplexing, at least until the polemical intent behind the assertions is understood. It is not clear which Arabs Luxenberg is talking about: those of the 2nd century C.E., the third, or the fifth, or the seventh. When he claims that Arabic was not a written language, he seems to be generalizing, basing himself on the state of Arabic script up to the 3rd century C.E. Yet, he leaves his statements vague enough that one is left to believe that on the eve of Islam, Arabic was a language that had barely found its own script. The footnote he cites for all these sweeping claims is based on Nöldeke's 19th century work, where it is clear that Nöldeke is speaking not of the seventh century Arabs, but of their ancestors in the second and third century C.E., when the Nabateans and Palmyrians were ruling the steppes of Syrio-Palestine.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Luxenberg, *Lesart*, vii-ix.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII.

Moreover, Luxenberg gives the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions short shrift. His statement that Arabic script has developed out of a “Syro-Aramaic” background is left ambiguous, so that the reader is left with the impression that it was through Syriac that Arabs learned how to write. He does not seem to have read the work done on the development of Arabic script since the mid-20th century, or if he has, he insists on ignoring it or reinterpreting what it signifies. Both Nöldeke and Grohmann have suggested that Arabic script developed out of the Nabatean alphabet. Since their pioneering work other scholars have confirmed this origin. In her review of the state of the art on the development of Arabic script, Beatrice Gruendler makes clear that the scholarly community is now in agreement that Arabic script developed out of Nabatean script and it developed rather early: “At the present state of paleographic evidence, the emergence of the Arabic *abjad* must be assigned to the late second or third century C.E., between the latest cursive Nabatean and the earliest attested Arabic script.”⁶⁶

Indeed, one of the most troubling features of Luxenberg’s book is its neglect or ignorance of the massive literature on the complex social, political, and religious situation in late antiquity in the Near East. In vain does one search for a refined understanding of the historical developments in this area. Scholars working on the Near East of late antiquity have shown us the complexity of the developments taking place and more importantly of the danger of sweeping generalizations about these developments. The absence from Luxenberg’s bibliography of the works of Averil Cameron, I. Shahid, Christian Decorbet, Garth Fowden, Frank Trombley, J.H.W. Liebeschuetz, Fergus Millar, Joseph Henniger, Toufic Fahd, M. Lecker, J. Wellhausen, Robert Schick, and J.F.

⁶⁶ *The Encyclopaedia of the Qurān*, v. 1:139, Arabic Script.

Haldon, to name but a few of the scholars who have worked on late antiquity, suffices to point to the degree that his work lies outside scholarly consensus.⁶⁷ Even with all the acumen of these scholars and the abundance of the sources from late antique Byzantine Near East, we still do not have a clear picture as to what the linguistic situation was in Syria and to what degree Christianization of the countryside was complete by the end of the sixth century C.E. To venture to speak about the Hijaz area and inner Arabia without using paleographic, epigraphic and historical evidence is hazardous in the extreme.⁶⁸

Averil Cameron, for example, warns against any generalizations about Syria and its culture in the sixth century. She disputes the notion of high and low cultures, one associated with Greek the other with Syriac; moreover she disputes the notion that Greek lost its significance in the Near East to advancing Syriac. She also calls into question the very notion of a Syriac culture “as a separate entity.”⁶⁹ She then highlights three

⁶⁷ Averil Cameron, “The Eastern Provinces in the 7th Century A.D. Hellenism and the Emergence of Islam,” in *Quelques jalons pour une histoire de l’identité grecque*, ed. S. Said (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991): 287-313; see also her articles in *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium* (Variorum, 1996). Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archeological Study* (New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1995). Pierre Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, tr. B.A. Archer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). *L’Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel*, ed. T. Fahd (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989); see also his *Le panthéon de l’Arabie centrale à la veille de l’Hégire* (Paris, 1986). Frank Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C. 370-529*, 2 volumes (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). J.H.G.W. Liebeschuetz, *From Diocletian to the Arab Conquest: Change in the Late Roman Empire* (Variorum, 1990). J.F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 volumes (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995). Christian Décobert, *Le mendiant et le combattant: L’institution de l’Islam* (Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1991). Walter Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), see especially his first chapter where he discusses the sources and methods of researching this period. F. Miller, “Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987): 143-164. Michael Lecker, *Muslims Jews and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 2nd edition, (Berlin, 1897, repr. 1961). Josef Henniger, “Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion,” in *Studies on Islam*, translated by Merlin Swartz (New York, 1981): 3-21.

⁶⁸ See for example the article of David F. Graf, “Rome and the Saracens: Reassessing the nomadic Menace,” in *L’Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel*, ed. T. Fahd (E. J. Brill, 1989), 344-400, for an example of a measured analysis of evidence pertaining to North Arabia in Roman times.

⁶⁹ Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-600* (London: Routledge, 1993), 184.

important points when considering the cultural and linguistic state of the Near East in late antiquity; the first is that Greek cannot be considered the language or culture of outsiders in the Near East. Hence Luxenberg's assertion that the only cultural influence on the Arabs was Syro-Aramaic is unhistorical. The second point that Cameron makes is that "the spectacular development of Syriac literature has to be taken into consideration," though this should not force us to overlook the third point, that "Semitic culture had already been represented by Arabs, and later by a form of Arabic, in these regions since the Nabatean period (ended AD 106)."⁷⁰ She then concludes by stating:

The culture of the Near East in late antiquity was a fascinating mosaic which can only be interpreted by reference to local differentiation. The great difficulty remains of matching modern notions of 'Arab', 'Syrian', 'Semitic' and other such terms, which are still entangled in a mesh of confusion and even prejudice, with the actual situation in our period. What might perhaps be observed in late antiquity is a heightened awareness of and readiness to proclaim local traditions, with a consequent increase of their visibility. ... Yet the Christianization of Syria progressed very slowly in its early stages and was still incomplete in the sixth century. Again, there is no simple description which can do justice to the whole picture.⁷¹

Indeed we are now aware that paganism survived in Syria into the late 6th and early 7th century, even into the Islamic period, as J.F. Haldon makes clear.⁷² In his review of the epigraphic evidence Liebeschuetz summarizes as follows:

There was resistance to the destruction of temples in the Arabian provinces too, and here paganism seems to have maintained itself longest of all. Roman Arabia certainly has impressive Christian sites, but not only did the carving of pagan inscriptions continue longer than elsewhere but even by the 6th century Christian inscriptions had not achieved predominance which in N. Syria they gained in the second half of the 4th century. The success achieved by Islam in Syria after the Arab invasions is easier to understand if we bear in mind that over large parts of rural Syria the population had become Christian within the last 150 years or less.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid., 185

⁷¹ Ibid., 185-186.

⁷² *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 327-337; see also the stories related by John Mochus (d. 619 or 634) about pagan Arabs in Palestine/Jordan quoted in Irfan Shahid's *Byzantine and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995), v.1: 597-600.

⁷³ J. H.G.W. Liebeschuetz, "Epigraphic Evidence on the Christianisation of Syria" *Akten des XI. Internationalen Limeskongresses Budapest: Akademiai Kiado*, 1981, 498; republished in his *From Diocletian to the Arab Conquest* (Variorum, 1990).

Luxenberg fails to be specific as to what the situation was in Hijaz at the time of the rise of Islam. Indeed, it is remarkable that he fails to mention any Jewish influence on the new religion, given the presence of Jewish tribes in Hijaz, and the earlier Jewish Kingdom of South Arabia, and the fact that Rabbinic Judaism is easily discernable as an interlocutor of the Qur’ān. Luxenberg fails to also mention any possible influences from Arab paganism, South Arabian religions, Roman and Hellenistic cultures.⁷⁴ To claim that the sole determinant factor in the rise of Islam is Syro-Aramaic Christianity itself needs proving and could not simply be used as a basis for an elaborate rereading of the text of the Qur’ān. Furthermore, his use of “Syro-Aramaic” as the word for Syriac Christianity is a misleading hypercorrection, for it seems to convey the notion that Jewish Aramaic is also included in his consideration, which is not the case.

Luxenberg then posits seven steps that he will use to decipher those problematic locutions in the Qur’ā that al-Ṭabarī failed to solve. I will list them here briefly:

- 1- In the case of a verse that western scholars consider “dunkel” or obscure, Luxenberg would revisit al-Ṭabarī⁷⁵ and see if scholars have overlooked a meaning that might fit and solve the problem; failing this,
- 2- Luxenberg would inspect Arabic Lexicons (he really means the *Lisān*) to see if al-Ṭabarī failed to mention a meaning that is available there; failing this,⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See Garth Fowden’s *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) for a detailed analysis of the situation of the Near East on the eve of the rise of Islam, esp. chapter 6. Fowden’s work remains one of the finest studies on the rise of Islam in the context of the culture of late antiquity. See also Christian Decobert, *Le mendiant et le combattant: l’institution de l’Islam* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), esp. 17-55.

⁷⁵ The fixation on al-Ṭabarī by Luxenberg is itself a reflection of the golden age myth that governs non-specialists’ and even many specialists’ approach to the genre of *tafsīr*. Is al-Ṭabarī really the beginning and the end of quranic exegesis?

- 3- Syriac roots will be examined to see if homonyms or cognates could help solve the meaning of the Arabic term; failing this,
- 4- The diacritical pointing of the Cairian Royal edition of the Qur'ān would be either removed or manipulated to arrive at a better Arabic term that the readers failed to see; failing this,⁷⁶
- 5- Under the altered conditions obtained in number 4, Luxenberg would investigate whether a Syriac term could be found that would help shed light on the meaning of the term; failing this,
- 6- The Arabic term that so far has defied a suitable explanation and seems to be a genuine Arabic term would then be back-translated into Syriac, in order to see if the meaning of the Syriac term, in Syriac, could make better sense in the context (such is the absurdity of the rules of a philology gone amok!)
- 7- On a separate level, Luxenberg investigates a wholly different category of “genuine” Arabic quranic words that have no satisfactory explanation either in the *Lisān* or when one back-translates them by going to Syriac medieval dictionaries (never mind the contamination from Arabic). On the whole this method has been very helpful according to Luxenberg; Syriac medieval cognates to these words have a meaning that can explain the Arabic terms.

⁷⁶ We leave aside the ahistorical understanding exhibited here of the relationship between the Arabic lexicon and the tradition of Qur'ān commentary. Luxenberg fails to tell us why he does not revisit the other quranic commentaries that arose after the rise of the lexicographic tools starting with the *Lisān* onwards.

⁷⁷ Note here that Luxenberg is upholding the consonantal integrity of the transmitted quranic text. This golden rule would be thrown out when it threatens his Syriac readings of the Qur'ān. See later on this.

The first point that one needs to emphasize here is that the result of this exercise on the part of Luxenberg is the discovery of a Syriac Christian ur-text beneath the apparent Arabic of the Qur'ān. Few if any are the instances whereby, following these rules, Luxenberg manages to produce genuine Arabic terms that can be solved either by going back to al-Ṭabarī or to the *Lisān*. The exercise so to speak is predetermined.

Far more damaging on the methodological level is the absence of the fundamental principle of linguistic and textual analysis: in studying a text, any text, one should first and foremost study it before stepping outside it to interpret it. Luxenberg does implicitly accept the coherency of the quranic text, that it came as a whole; if so, then the only proper way to approach such a text is to read it and study it as a cohesive whole. Its language, style, content, presuppositions, logic, diction, vocabulary, and mode of expression should be assessed first in order to analyze it. What is “dunkel” in a certain verse could be illuminated, or better understood, when compared with other parts that are either linguistically or thematically similar. This rule, the *sine qua non* of philology, which Rudi Paret and Edmund Beck have already emphasized, is woefully neglected by Luxenberg.⁷⁸ This is an axiomatic rule and that we need to reiterate it is all the more an indication of the flawed approach that Luxenberg constructs in approaching the Qur'ān.

⁷⁸ Rudi Paret : “Was den Kommentar angeht, so soll er ... einem ausgesprochen historischen Verständnis des Korans dienen, d. h. aus dem Text jeweils das herausinterpretieren, was Mohammed ursprünglich in einer durch bestimmte Zeitumstände und Milieuverhältnisse gegebenen Situation damit sagen wollte.” In the introduction to his *Der Koran: Kommentar und Kondordanz*, 4. Auflage (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989), 5; id.: “Mit besonderer Sorgfalt habe ich den Koran selber zur Deutung des Textes beigezogen, indem ich zu jedem Vers und Abschnitt alle irgendwie in Betracht kommenden Parallelsstellen ausfindig gemacht und die einzelnen teils gleichartigen, teils unterschiedlichen Formulierungen in sprachlicher und sachlicher Hinsicht gegeneinander abgewogen habe,” in his *Der Koran: Übersetzung*, 7 Auflage (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1979), 8. Of great significance is his book *Grenzen der Koranforschung* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1950) where he discusses what methods and techniques one has to employ for studying the Qur'ān. Edmund Beck's article “Die Sure ar-Rūm (30),” *Orientalia*, Nova Series 14 (1945) is also a fundamental article that serves as an example of how to approach the Qur'ān, see esp. pages 334-335.

Surely, one will face many problems when dealing with the quranic text. And if we accept that it comes from the early seventh century C.E. – and Luxenberg does accept this – then we are all the more stuck with the Qur’ān alone. This is yet further reason to concentrate on the Qur’ān to see what it says and what it presupposes, takes for granted, etc. One may resort to other material in so far as this material can be first proven to be of relevance, i.e. contemporaneous with the Qur’ān and produced in the same milieu. To speak of “influence,” however, and then to proceed to make the texts that supposedly influenced the Qur’ān the main criteria for reading it, is to render the quranic text into a puzzle whose parts are only decipherable by an external code. The quranic text in the method of Luxenberg is obliterated as a unity and its coherency is denied from the very beginning. Indeed, the six-point approach results in a total dismantling of the quranic text, rendering it putty in the philologist’s hands.

Moreover, it is indeed inconsistent to presume that Syriac is at the base of the Qur’ān on the one hand as Luxenberg does, and to use the supposed misreadings of the medieval Muslim commentators on the other as a proof that the quranic text is indecipherable through the proper philological methods. Why would what Muslim scholars did and did not do matter if we are concerned with the seventh century meaning of the quranic text? This question is one that Luxenberg neither asks nor seem to be bothered by. Moreover, what western scholars considered “dunkel” fifty or sixty years ago should not mean it will remain so forever. Nor does it mean that solutions for difficult passages in the Qur’ān are not possible using the methods these same scholars developed.

Another point that needs addressing is rule number 4, where Luxenberg takes liberty with the Masora of the received quranic text and alters it in order to arrive at a “satisfactory” meaning for certain words. He refuses to follow through the logical conclusion of this premise. If the received Masora does not stand when we face difficult passages (although even here the judgment of what constitutes difficult has to be addressed) then why should it hold in clear passages? If guess-work was at hand in “dunkel” passages, then most probably the whole Qur’ān must have been supplied with diacritics haphazardly. This much Luxenberg argues, since he concludes from the alleged fact that the Masora was supplied much later that it is unreliable. If we agree to this analysis, then the whole of the Qur’ān has to be reread using whatever method Luxenberg thinks proper. As such, before any discussion of any particular word in a verse, he has to supply us with a full reading of the whole chapter and the context in which the word is found. Thus when he chooses to discuss the words *al-ḥūr al-’īn* (the large-eyed ladies of paradise; I will return to a discussion of this term later) in passages talking about paradise, Luxenberg seems not to notice that he already submitted to the received Masora on one hand, and is challenging it on the other at the same time, with no clear distinction as to why this is so. Having called into question the whole of the Masora one needs to state clearly why it is still to be relied upon in certain sections while other words need to be supplied with a different diacritic pointing.

The liberty that Luxenberg allows himself in changing the diacritics of the quranic text rests on two implied misunderstandings of the nature of the development of the Qur’ān. They resemble the assumptions that James Barr had already detected in the works of some scholars on the Hebrew Bible. The first notion is that there was “a long

period during which the consonantal text was carefully cherished and transmitted.” The second is the notion that “a late and arbitrary process in which a vocalization [in the case of Arabic also diacritics] was more or less imposed on this text by men who indeed tried their best to understand it but were handicapped by their knowledge of Hebrew [in Luxenberg’s case it is Syriac, which is the text of the ur-Qur’ān].”⁷⁹ James Barr asks if this is a credible picture in the case of the Hebrew Bible; and we are bound to ask the same of the Qur’ān. First, the earliest attested quotations of the Qur’ān, those present on the Dome of the Rock, have diacritics; but even the earliest manuscripts that we have, the ones written in slanted Hijazi script have diacritics. British Library Or. 2165 has numerous diacritical pointing. The process of supplying diacritics was not a late inorganic development in the history of the Qur’ān, as Luxenberg would have us believe. To paraphrase Barr and apply his insights to the case of the Qur’ān, Luxenberg’s approach assumes that the Arabs lost early on the understanding of their scripture and transmitted it faithfully, all the same, and then later on tried to clothe it with an invented diacritical system that obfuscated it.⁸⁰

To claim that there is no secondary literature that bears on this particular topic, as Luxenberg does, is of course inaccurate. James Bellamy has spent his scholarly career doing exactly this, trying to propose certain emendations to the received Masora.⁸¹ To

⁷⁹ James Barr, *Comparative Philology*, 194.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 194-195: “Does it not raise in another form the question which Nyberg raised against the older textual criticism, namely that it assumed that the Jews very early lost the understanding of what their own Scripture meant, while they transmitted it by a mechanical copying procedure?—And, it would appear (in this we go beyond what Nyberg argued), having transmitted this consonantal skeleton of a Scripture by a mechanical copying procedure, did they then centuries later attempt to clothe it in the flesh of a newly created vocalization?”

⁸¹ See his “Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” *JAOS* 113 (1993): 562-573; *id.* “More Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” *JAOS* 116 (1996): 196-204. The interesting question that Luxenberg never asks here is that why if the text of the Qur’ān is proving difficult should we not do first

read Bellamy's leveled and measured arguments and premises as to how and when one needs to amend the Qur'ān and to look at Luxenberg's work is to realize the difference between scholarly work and polemical work.

Paradise in the Qur'ān and Luxenberg's analysis

I will here select an example of Luxenberg's analysis of the quranic text and show why it neither follows the rules he proposes, (notwithstanding the fact that the rules themselves are flawed), nor does his analysis stand on its own.⁸² I will look closely into his analysis of the paradise motifs in the Qur'ān, the maidens and the youths of paradise, since it is the largest continuous analysis of a quranic concept in his book. I am also choosing this section because it was the most frequently cited story in the sensational coverings by tabloids and newspapers of this book. Luxenberg claims that the whole Muslim understanding of the maidens (*al-ḥūr al-'īn*) and the youths of paradise, and consequently their whole understanding of quranic paradise, is based on misunderstanding and misreading of a putative Syriac quranic ur-text. He claims that if the Qur'ān is read properly, that is as a Syriac text, one will find that it talks about neither maidens nor youths.

It is in the preamble to this long section that we encounter for the first time the real, and only principle that governs Luxenberg's exercise. It soon becomes clear that a polemical doctrinal assumption about what the Qur'ān should mean is the impetus behind Luxenberg's rereading of the Qur'ān and not any obscurity in the quranic text as such.

what Bellamy or any textual critic would have told us to do, emend the text using the language it is written in and test if sensible emendations can work? Moving into a different language is methodologically indefensible.

⁸² Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 221-269.

Luxenberg claims that in so far as the Qur'ān states that it came to confirm the previous scriptures (Q. 2:41, 89, 91; 3:3; 4:47; 5:46; 6:92) and insofar as verse 4:82 means what Luxenberg understands it to mean – that the Qur'ān is saying that it agrees with all that is in previous revelations (Jewish or Christian?) – then any differences between the Qur'ān and previous “Scripture” have to be accounted for.⁸³ Luxenberg claims that the Qur'ān is true to its word on this particular aspect of its nature. When read as a Syriac text the Qur'ān happens to tally perfectly well with the previous “Scripture”. Luxenberg never manages to tell us what Scripture he has in mind, but it is clear that he has a confessional theological understanding of Scripture in mind here; that is, he is not talking about the Hebrew Bible as it has come to be seen and understood in Rabbinic Judaism but as it has been understood by the typological reading of the lens of the New Testament.

The claim that the Qur'ān tallies with Christian scripture is certainly one of the least substantiated claims about the Qur'ān and the nature of its relationship to previous scriptures ever to be stated. First, Luxenberg fails to take into account the polemical tone of the Qur'ān, where on the one hand it claims that it is nothing but what God has already revealed in previous revelations, and on the other that it itself is now a judge and an arbitrator for what the people of the Book differ about. What do we do with a verse such as Q. 27:76, “This Qur'ān expounds to the Israelites most of the matters over which they disagree” and many others in the Qur'ān? As for the attitude of the Qur'ān towards Christianity, it suffices to read the Dome of the Rock quranic inscriptions to realize that

⁸³ Ibid., 225. Verse 4:28 reads: “Will they not ponder on the Qur'ān? If it had not come from God, they could have surely found in it many contradictions”. Luxenberg translates this as following: “Were it (the Koran) not from God, they would have found in it [with comparison to the Scripture] many differences.” We are not told how the phrase he added came into being.

from early on we have a distinct polemical attitude towards Christianity. I am limiting myself to the Dome of the Rock inscriptions (late seventh century of the C.E.) simply to make the point that from early on the quranic attitude was one of polemics, even before the exegetical tradition that Luxenberg claims came to stand between us and the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is nothing if not a polemical work whose main thrust is to secure itself a position in the claim for truth and in the Abrahamic divine covenantal scheme. The Qur'ān is always disputing what Jews and Christians have to say, denying them the foundations of their claims.⁸⁴ To turn around and claim that verse 4:82 says that the Qur'ān agrees with all that is in the "Scripture," which it does not, is baffling, if it is not sheer polemics on the part of Luxenberg. Early Islam is thus denied even the possibility that it might have grown out of Judaism and Christianity and yet self-consciously differed from them. To Luxenberg, the difference between quranic Islam and Christianity are mere philological misreadings on the part of Muslim exegetes who have failed to recognize the Syriac subtext of the Qur'ān.

Moreover, Luxenberg claims in the same preamble to his analysis of the quranic paradise that his approach is "pure philology" (rein philologische Analyse).⁸⁵ After so many historical and cultural claims that have been advanced to explain who originated Islam, where and how, each presenting itself as historical assessment of the situation on the eve of the rise of Islam, Luxenberg's claims that he is indulging in something that can

⁸⁴ Granted the Qur'ān does seem to have unorthodox Christian ideas as to what Christianity is about; Jesus' childhood becomes miraculous, Mary is seen as part of the trinity, the trinity is called a lie, the last supper is a table from heaven, and Christ was a mere human like Adam. Jesus is the Messiah, but that does not preclude Muhammad's coming. He is not divine, yet he is God's word. Far more interesting is that the *Injīl* (Gospel) is seen as a divine book that was revealed to Jesus. I am not sure how all this tallies with late antique Syriac Christianity; saying that all these quranic doctrines are the result of corruptions in the quranic text or the result of misreading of its Syriac words might get us out, but the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions are an insurmountable impediment to Luxenberg's argument.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 224.

be called “pure philology” is perplexing. That he could claim that there is such a thing as “pure philology” shows to what degree he lacks a sophisticated methodology and is caught in a totally mistaken conception of what philology is about. Not only is a post-modern attitude to the problems of historical studies lacking, but even something as mundane as a rigorous historical approach to textual criticism is nowhere in the picture.⁸⁶

Luxenberg claims that since the concept of paradise in the Qur’ān is a Christian one – a point not open to dispute since he takes it as an axiom – then any differences between the Qur’ān and the Christian understanding of paradise have to be the work not of Muhammad, but of the commentators. Note that we thought the Qur’ān was supposed to tally with Christian Scripture and not Christian doctrines – an important distinction since paradise in the New Testament is not as fully elaborated a theme as it is in the Qur’ān, but this is the least problematic issue with Luxenberg’s analysis. Luxenberg thus wants to read the expression *ḥurun ‘īn*, taken in the Islamic exegetical tradition to refer to the large eyes of the maidens of paradise, as a Syriac expression which means grapes (or raisins). Yet he fails to mention that the maidens of paradise are not something the exegetical tradition is in discord about. Thus there is no “dunkel” aspect here to warrant Luxenberg’s starting a fresh investigation. It is not that the quranic text is unclear inasmuch as it does not tally with the Christian beliefs that prompted Luxenberg to reread the Qur’ān. There is thus no linguistic or textual reason whatsoever for the central contention of Luxenberg’s study to claim that the Qur’ān is Syriac.

⁸⁶ For a detailed discussion of philology, both old and new, see the special issue of *Speculum* 65 (1990), entitled *The New Philology*.

When Luxenberg mentions that al-Bayḏāwī (d. 685/1286) is uncertain about the maidens of paradise, he fails to elaborate that what al-Bayḏāwī is wondering about is whether the maidens are the earthly wives of the believers or new virginal wives, hardly a philological point, but rather an interpretive one. Al-Bayḏāwī's discomfort reflects a rising tension between the domestic conceptions of happiness of the urbanite medieval scholars and the quranic paradise they are promised in the life to come. From early on we start witnessing in the medieval exegetical literature a discomfort towards the presence of these maidens and the relationship between them and the human wives of the male believers. Thus we start seeing discussions as to who is better, who is more beautiful, etc. Luxenberg's use of al-Bayḏāwī betrays the complete lack of historical understanding that permeates his approach to Islamic religious history. What al-Bayḏāwī said centuries after the codification of the Qur'ān is taken out of context and used as a proof that the quranic text is unclear. Never mind that in setting forth his seven steps, Luxenberg promised us to inspect al-Ṭabarī's analysis and the *Lisān* before indulging in Syriac reading of the Qur'ān.

What is more methodologically flawed about Luxenberg's supposed Syriac reading of the expression *al-ḥūr al-'īn* is that in order for this reading to work, he has to reread many clear and unambiguous quranic terms that surround the expression, expressions about which there is no discord in the exegetical literature. Even mundane words such as the verb to marry, be purified, are called into question. He has to do this in at least 13 instances, rendering the quranic text absolutely unstable. Ambiguous or not, the Qur'ān is thus reread at the whim of the author. Nothing can stand in the way of the preconceived outcome of his exercise.

Moreover, Luxenberg fails to mention that quranic paradise, even with the absence of maidens, is still radically different from any late antique Christian understanding of paradise, including St. Ephrem's poetical depictions. The inhabitants of quranic paradise are bedecked with silk embroidered cloths and gold and silver jewelry; they sit in drinking sessions, recline on furniture, they are served drinks in cups on golden trays, and more importantly, seem to eat flesh of birds (*lahm tayr*, Q. 56:21). None of this is mentioned in the *Hymns on Paradise*; animals are not allowed into the realm of the blessed, let alone the notion that one should be eating their flesh. What is of course ironic is that Edmund Beck has already proven that the maidens of paradise in the Qur'ān are not from St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*.⁸⁷ Yet Luxenberg insists that the *Hymns* are the basis of the quranic paradise, thus the maidens have to be a misreading of the quranic text. If the mountain does not come to Muhammad then Muhammad has to go to the mountain! One is left with the impression that Muhammad, having taken his inspiration of the paradise from St. Ephrem, is unable to embellish it, and we are not told why this is the case. If St. Ephrem could have a vision of paradise, why cannot Muhammad? Luxenberg seems to think that grapes are less fantastic a thing to encounter in the afterlife than boys or virgin brides. That the Qur'ān has its own understanding of the afterlife is denied simply because it is derivative.

Let me leave Luxenberg's analysis of the maidens of paradise for the time being and move to his treatment of the verses that deal with the youths of paradise. It is here that the whole arbitrariness of Luxenberg's exercise and its polemical nature is blatantly clear. We stand face to face not with philological readings but with philological

⁸⁷ Edmund Beck, "Eine christliche Parallel zu den Paradiesjungfrauen des Korans?," *Orientalia christiana periodica* 14 (1948): 398-405.

acrobatics. Luxenberg victoriously declares that the “dream” of the Muslims about the maidens of paradise that awaits them is nothing, and he will move on to abolish the dream of the youths of paradise, and hence any one seeking solace – one presumes he has in mind the lewd Muslims – shall find none.⁸⁸ The tone is inappropriate for speaking about a religious community’s conception of eschatology. Even if the whole Islamic paradise was dreamt up by later commentators, without basis anywhere, should it be ridiculed? Many are the later Islamic conceptions that were read into the Qur’ān, from the notion of punishment and reward in the grave before resurrection, to Muhammad’s intercession on the behalf of his *ummah*. Indeed, the Qur’ān itself goes against these two cherished Islamic (Sunni) conceptions, for death in the Qur’ān is seen as a long sleep and intercession is something that god does or does not grant according to his will. Scholars of any religion can cite many examples of such rereading of scripture in the long history of any religious tradition. It is the stuff of the religions of scripture; the ability to read into the scripture new ideas is what keeps them going. To ridicule this process is the business of polemicists; to study it is the business of scholars.

Luxenberg claims that the word for youth in the Qur’ān (*wildān*) in verses 56:17 and 76:19 should be read as the Syriac *yalda da-gfetta* (daughters of vine, or wine), since the Qur’ān cannot be speaking about something that is not present in the “Scriptures” that he claims came before it. Here, instead of offering an example from the *Hymns of Paradise*, the text that supposedly inspired the quranic paradise which Luxenberg used to

⁸⁸ Luxenberg, *Lesart*, 260: “Ist nun der Traum von *Hūrīs* oder *Paradiesjungfrauen* dahin, mag mancher in der Vorstellung der verbleibenden, *Jüngliche* des Paradieses Trost suchen. Denn auch von solchen soll im Koran die Rede sein.”

refute the maidens of paradise, he has to go to the Gospel of Matthew verse 26:29, where the Syriac phrase appears – never mind that the verse in the Gospel is not about paradise.

Let us recall the rules that Luxenberg set at the beginning of his book as the justification for rereading the Qur’ān as Syriac. The premise was that the text should present us with difficulty (*dunkelheit*). The quranic passages at hand speak of male servants serving wine on trays to the believers. There is nothing either ambiguous about the language or the context. Moreover, no subsequent Muslim exegete was ever at the end of his Arabic here. There is actually no disagreement whatsoever in the exegetical tradition on the meaning of this word in the Qur’ān. Thus the reason that is compelling Luxenberg to reread *wildān* is not any ambiguity in the quranic text. The word is actually a common Semitic word. Hence to claim it is Syriac and not Arabic is absurd, especially since it is written in Arabic with a *wāw* and not a *yud* as it would be in Aramaic were it indeed from Syriac. Any Semitic paleographer who finds this word in an Aramaic text written with a *wāw* has to deduce that there is a contamination from Arabic. Thus, the word as it appears in the Qur’ān has to be Arabic. Yet, even if we, for argument’s sake, read *wildān* as a Syriac word, it would still mean youths. Thus even in Syriac it agrees with Arabic. Luxenberg has to add a new word not attested in the text or in any other manuscript, and he does so without any justification. What textual integrity does the quranic text have? If it is a Syriac text, why is it writing Aramaic roots using Arabic spelling and, in the case of *wildān*, with *wāw* instead of *yud*? Why is it deleting essential Syriac words also? And how did Luxenberg deduce that this Syriac word is the missing word? The more important question is, how many other such instances are there in the Qur’ān of its dropping Syriac words? Luxenberg offers none.

However, the Achilles' heel of Luxenberg's analysis is verse 52:24, where a synonym, *ghilmān* for *wildān*, is given. Luxenberg dismisses this verse as if his analysis still stands. But if the consonantal quranic text is giving a synonym to a word then it must mean that that word, *wildān*, was understood at the time of the fixing of the codex (if not at the time of its writing) to mean what the synonym means, i.e. youths. If so then we cannot accuse later Muslim commentators of not getting it right. The redactors of the Qur'ān itself at the level of its codification read *wildān* and *ghilmān* as equivalent. Either the consonantal skeleton (*rasm*) of the Qur'ān stands as a whole and thus we have to take the synonyms for words to be what they are, or if not, then we are calling into question the whole stability of the transmitted consonantal text. And if the consonantal quranic text was reread and adjusted using Arabic philology, then how can we reconstruct the Syriac ur-text that is now either emended, deleted, or corrupted, by making it conform to Arabic philological norms?

I will here offer a thorough reading of the verses that deal with “youths” in the Qur'ān and show why it is impossible to accept the reading of Luxenberg. The verses that have the word “youths” in them are:

52:24 “*yaṭūfu ‘alayhim ghilmānun lahum ka-annahum lu’lu’un maknun*”⁸⁹

56:17-18 “*yaṭūfu ‘alayhim wildānun mukhalladūn, bi-akwābin wa-abāriqa wa-ka’sin min ma’īn*”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غُلَامَانِ لَهُمَا كَأَنَّهُمَا لَوْلُؤُنْ مَكْنُونٌ

⁹⁰ يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَدَانِ مَخْلُودُونَ بِالْكَوَابِ وَأَبَارِيقٍ وَكَأْسٍ مِنْ مَعِينٍ

76:19 “*wa-yaṭūfu ‘alayhim wildānūn mukhalladūn idhā ra’aytahum ḥasibtahum lu’lu’an manthūran*”⁹¹

The verses where the Qur’ān gives the same phrasing without the word youths are:

37:45-46 “*yuṭāfu ‘alayhim bi-ka’sin min ma’īn, bayḍā’ ladhdhatan li-al-shāribīn*”⁹²

43:71 “*yuṭāfu ‘alayhim bi-ṣiḥāfin min dhahabin wa-akwābin ...*”⁹³

76:15-17 “*wa-yuṭāfu ‘alayhim bi-āniyatīn min fiḍatīn wa-akwābin kānat qawārīra, qawārīra min fiḍatīn qaddarūhā taqdīra, wa-yusqawn fihā ka’san kāna mazājuhā zanjabīla.*”⁹⁴

As I have shown Luxenberg is neither following his own rules, nor does what he is doing stand on its own merit. Thus, an uncontested word, *wildān*, is declared Syriac, which is impossible, since it should have been written with a *yud* and not a *wāw*. Luxenberg then adds a Syriac word into the text, something we were not told about in the rules. Moreover, the Qur’ān offers a synonym for *wildān*, and thus we have internal evidence that the word is indeed what the Qur’ān says it is! But even with all these dubious stratagems Luxenberg has still to face the syntax of the Arabic sentence. In all the instances where *wildān* appears it is the subject of the sentence, and thus even with his new reading the sense does not stand. Wine cannot serve itself after all. Consequently Luxenberg has to claim that verb *yaṭūf* (active form) is to be read as *yuṭawwafu* (passive

⁹¹ لدون اذا رايتهم حسبتهم لؤلؤا منشورا ويطوف عليهم ولدان مخ

⁹² ويطاف عليهم بكاس من معين بيضاء لذة للشاربين

⁹³ ويطاف عليهم ببصحاف من ذهب والكواب

⁹⁴ ويطاف عليهم بأنية من فضة والكواب كإنت قواريرا , قواريرا من فضة قدروها تقديرا , ويسقون فيها كاسا
كان مزاجها زنجبيلًا

form) in verses 56:17 and 76:19. The purpose is to render the word “*wildān*” into the object of the sentence and not its subject. But as verses 37:45, 43:71 and 76:15 make abundantly clear, when the Qur’ān uses the same verb in the same context (verbatim repetition) in the passive, it uses *yutāf*. Moreover, the only words missing in the passive sentences are the words *ghilmān* and *wildān*, and thus they are the subjects and not the objects. There is *no other possibility* but to read *ghilmān* and *wildān* as the subjects of the sentences. To claim that the issue of the subject is clarified by the content of the *Hymns of Paradise* is not only perverse, but simply nonsensical. The syntax of the sentence has to be the deciding factor, not the content of the supposed text that influenced the sentence. Notice that Luxenberg is now having recourse to the *Hymns* and not the Gospel of Matthew. Luxenberg claims that in the *Hymns of Paradise* the plants and fruits lower themselves to the believers. Thus the same should hold true in the Qur’ān. But the Qur’ān is speaking of cups and trays which are circulated among the believers.

There is moreover another problem that Luxenberg has to address, the article *bi-* in the Arabic sentences. This article is never attached to the words *wildān* and *ghilmān* in the examples we have, but it is attached to the other nouns in the sentence which could only be possible if these nouns, that is the ones that have the article, are the objects of the verb. The article is thus not attached to the subject. The article *bi-* is thus another irrefutable indication as to how to read the sentence. To get around this insurmountable textual problem, Luxenberg claims that the particle *bi-* is ambiguous in these verses and that in any case the Qur’ān does not differentiate between the usage of *bi-* and the article

fi.⁹⁵ There is no supporting evidence for such a statement, and if Luxenberg has any examples of such confusion from the Qur’ān he should supply them. The usage of *bi-* here is not only very clear, but it is also idiomatically Arabic. When *bi-* is used with verbs in Arabic it turns them into factitive. I will quote here the leading comparative Semitic philologist who happens to speak about this kind of *bi-* at length:

“In all Semitic languages we find a number of verbs, the actual meaning of which depends not merely on their context, but also on the prepositions and prepositional phrases which they govern. Such combinations based on sequentiality of verb and preposition create syntagmatic relations which give a new dimension to the semantic load of the verbs in question. In Arabic, for example, intransitive verbs denoting movement acquire a factitive meaning when they are used with preposition *bi-*; eg. *atāhu bi-kitāb*, “he came to him with a book”, meaning that “he brought him a book”; *qāma bi-ghāratin*, “he got up with a raid”, means that “he launched a raid.”⁹⁶

The article *bi-* thus makes it unambiguous that *wildān* and *ghilmān* are the subjects of the sentences. If they were the objects then the particle *bi-* should have been attached to them. This is why Luxenberg needed to claim that *bi-* in the Qur’ān is haphazardly used, which in linguistic terms is nonsense. Even if Arabic then was a mixture of many languages it would still have had a grammar.

For those who know Arabic it has been for long apparent that I am belaboring the point here, which is exactly my purpose. However you choose to read the sentence you will have to violate the text in order to read it the way Luxenberg wishes. But we are not told why the whole sentence is in Arabic and only the word *wildān* is a reflection of a Syriac ur-text. The method of Luxenberg is so idiosyncratic, so inconsistent, that it is simply impossible to keep his line of argument straight.

⁹⁵ *Lesart*, 267: “Die Präposition *bi* bedeutet im Arabischen sowohl *mit* als auch *in*, da der Koran zwischen *bi* und *fi* nicht immer unterscheidet und die gleichlautende syro-aramäische Präposition *b* beides bedeuten kan.”

⁹⁶ Edward Lipinski, *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar*, 2nd Edition (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2001), 566.

Yet let me ask the reader this question: who in the mythology of antiquity and late antiquity was the cup-bearer of Zeus, and was rewarded for his services by being granted immortality, thus remaining a youth for eternity? I am speaking here of Ganymede. The similarities between the quranic youths and Ganymede are too stark to be coincidental. Both are cup-bearers who reside in the heavens, both are eternally youthful (hence the Arabic term *mukhallad*, made immortal, is very fitting and it is not *mujjallad* (frozen) as Luxenberg would have us believe), and they both are of exceptional beauty (like hidden pearls as the youths of paradise are described).⁹⁷

The appearance of the Ganymede of Olympus in the quranic paradise is not as surprising as one might think.⁹⁸ The Arabs of Hijaz were the last upholders of paganism, and they doubtless shared the by-then universal mythological heritage of the late antique world or at least were familiar with its broad conceptions. The whole joyful hedonist atmosphere of the quranic paradise is more akin to the lives of the gods of Olympus than to the asceticism and sensibilities of late antique Christianity. Late antique Christianity was busy enshrining the monastic ideal. Christian polemicists could hardly contain their disgust at the sensuality of the quranic paradise.⁹⁹ Reading the *Hymns* and the quranic

⁹⁷ Indeed verse 52:24 could be seen as echoing a faint voice of the erotic tones of the Ganymede myth. The verse has a possessive pronoun, the youths *belong to* (*ghilmānun lahum*) the believers, which was politely glossed over by almost all the commentators. Luckily, the Arabic belle lettres tradition was not so coy. One of the most famous of Arabic medieval homoerotic epistles makes clear that there is something more to these boys than meets the eye. See al-Jāhiz's *Mufākarat al-Jawārī wa-al-ghilmān*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut, 1957). There the author leaves no doubt that some Muslims understood the verses to have sexual undertones.

⁹⁸ On Ganymede see the dissertation of Penelope Cromwell Mayo, *Amor Spiritualis et Carnalis: Aspects of the Myth of Ganymede in Art* (New York University, Dissertation, 1967). See also James Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁹⁹ The Syriac Dionysius (d. ca. 842 C.E.) has this to say about Muhammad's paradise: "As for Muḥammad's conception of Paradise, it is sensual and crude in the extreme. He envisages food and drink, copulation with glamorous courtesans, beds of gold to lie upon with mattresses of coral and of topaz, and rivers of milk and honey. They also maintain that there will be an end of torment. Their view is that every man suffers torments commensurate with the sins he has committed, then comes out of that Place into

depictions one is struck by their different considerations and presuppositions. The quranic depictions could not be more different than their supposedly Christian sources. St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise*, are a long poetic analogy of what paradise is like, and the poem makes clear that all the imagery is metaphorical and as such a textually induced imagery.¹⁰⁰ Muhammad's paradise is a visionary and prophetic proclamation of a world to come that is declared a reality and the only certitude in the universe. Is Luxenberg claiming that Muhammad or the Qur'ān could not even get the spiritualizing analogy of Ephrem had they read it? The Light Verse (Q. 24:35) and the hundreds of examples in the Qur'ān of *amthāl* make clear that when it suited the Qur'ān or, when it wanted to, it could wrap its mind around an image and the images are not bad at all. Quranic paradise was a paradise of bodily as well as sensual enjoyment, with full attendants of youths as cup-bearers and unearthly women as wives.

Let us return now to the maidens of paradise and ask the same question. Who was the consort of Zeus, and who had come to represent the very essence of marriage and blissful copulation both in Heaven and earth? I am speaking here of Hera, the *būopis*, the

Paradise." *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Andrew Palmer (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 132; the Greek historian Theophanes (d. 818) has this to say: "He taught his subjects that he who kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy goes to Paradise; and he said that this paradise was one of carnal eating and drinking and intercourse with women, and had a river of wine, honey and milk, and that the women there were not like the ones down here, but different ones, and that the intercourse was long-lasting and the pleasure continuous; and other things full of profligacy and stupidity." *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, tr. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 465. Both Dionysius and Theophanes are drawing on a lost Syriac common source which both Lawrence Conrad and Robert Hoyland believe is Theophilus of Edessa (d. 785), see Robert Hoyland's *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 400-409 and 631 ff. The earliest Christian polemical text to poke fun at the quranic paradise is John of Damascus, see *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"*, Daniel J. Sahas (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 138-141.

¹⁰⁰ See Saint Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise*, tr. Sebastian Brock (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymn XI, 4-9, 155-157; See also the Syriac edition *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiso und Contra Julianum*, edited by Edmund Beck (CSCO, Scriptorum Syri, 78), 47-48.

oxen-eyed Goddess.¹⁰¹ That is what the *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* (wide eyed) expression is, a reflection and elaboration on the mythical cow-eyed female Goddess of marriage. The Qurʾān was thus promising a blissful heavenly marriage to the believers. Note that both Ganymede and Hera have been transformed by the Qurʾān into a multitude of Ganymedes and Heras. Some of the purist Arab philologists were upset with the expression *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*, not because they did not know what it means, but on the contrary, because they insisted it should have only referred to the eyes of cows and animals. Why the Qurʾān was using it to describe females was a problem they could never come to solve to their own satisfaction. Could it be that the Qurʾān, by using an elliptic construct, was after the alliteration between the name Hera and the word *ḥūr*? That might be possible, but lest I be accused of what I am complaining about, I hasten to add that this presumed alliteration is mere conjecture on my part with no evidence. Whatever the antecedents of the quranic paradise are, we have to admit that there is a strong parallel here between two mythical worlds, that of the Qurʾān and Greek mythology. We can only come up with probable scenarios to explain the similarity between the two, and short of new evidence we cannot venture beyond this.¹⁰² Yet it should be clear from my analysis that reading the Qurʾān as an Arabic text is in no sense meant to absolve it of “borrowing.” On the contrary, in this instance we are able to

¹⁰¹ I owe my discovery of this motif to professor Marc Witkin of the Classics department at Middlebury College. The literature on things Greek is as usual immense, on Hera see Joan O’Brian, *The Transformation of Hera: A Study of Ritual, Hero, and the Goddess in the Iliad* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993). It is important to point out that one aspect of Hera, her ability to renew her virginity, will be also ascribed to the *Ḥūrīs*, but not without improving on the myth. While Hera can do that only once a year and after bathing in the spring of Canathus, the *Ḥūrīs* regained their virginity after finishing intercourse. Thus every copulation was a deflowering.

¹⁰² See now the article of Maher Jarrar on the later development of the myth of the maidens of paradise in early Islamic literature “The Martyrdom of Passionate Lovers: Holy War as a Sacred Wedding,” in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, et. al. (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999), 87-107.

discover a pagan background that would have been lost if we pretended that the text is otherwise. But let it be clear that discovering parallels and borrowings should not become an end in itself. My drawing attention to the parallels between the Qur'ān and Greek mythology is done primarily to discredit any claim that these motifs as present in the Qur'ān are so unique that they must be a confusion resulting from textual corruptions. In the final analysis an account of the Paradise in the Qur'ān has to be based on the Qur'ān itself.

It is perhaps appropriate now that I sum up my assessment of Luxenberg's method. The first fundamental premise of his approach, that the Qur'ān is a Syriac text, is the easiest to refute on linguistic evidence. *Nothing in the Qur'ān is Syriac, even the Syriac borrowed terms are Arabic, in so far as they are now Arabized and used inside an Arabic linguistic medium.*¹⁰³ Luxenberg is pushing the etymological fallacy to its natural conclusion. The Qur'ān not only is borrowing words according to Luxenberg, it is speaking a gibberish language: Arabic in so far as he decides it is not Syriac, and Syriac

¹⁰³ For a sober assessment of the difficulties encountered in etymological analysis see Paul V. Mankowski's introduction to his *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lakes: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 1-13. See especially his quotation from M O'Connor's article "The Arabic Loanwords in Nabatean Aramaic" *JNES* 45 (1986), 215: "Reconsideration of Cantineau's list involves the fundamental difficulty of all intra-Semitic language study: there is a common stratum of vocabulary and grammatical structure which makes it impossible to assign many words and formants to a particular language. The difficulty of recognizing loans of various sorts is inversely proportional to the relationship of the languages." The point I have raised all through this article is not about the absence of borrowing and loanwords, a phenomenon that is easily attestable, but of semantics. The etymology of a word is a poor indication of what it means in a new context. Cf. with the remarks of Mark Brett in his *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The impact of the canonical approach on Old Testament studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 105-106: "One of the characteristic features of synchronic linguistics may be described in the same way. Especially since the publication of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, linguists have emphasized that the meaning of a word may bear little relation to its prehistory. To put the point positively, a lexical item (which may be larger than a single word) is most adequately understood as a function within the synchronic system of which it is part. Over the past three decades, this point has been repeatedly stressed by biblical scholars like James Barr and John Sawyer who have been anxious to correct the misuse of diachronic hypotheses formulated by comparative Semitists. Once again, the point has not been to deny that words have a history; rather, it is emphasized that synchronic semantic description, which seeks to understand language within its contemporary linguistic system, has methodological priority. Diachronic semantics is strictly speaking dependent on the results of synchronic description, and not the other way around."

in so far as he claims it is not Arabic. For his theory to work also, the Qur'ān has to be two different things at the same time: on the one hand, a paleographically frozen seventh century document that represents a document used by Muhammad, and on the other, a garbled text that has been modified by later Muslim scholars who were clueless as to its meaning. Luxenberg is claiming that for the last two hundred years, scholars (that is Western scholars – forget for the time being about the Islamic tradition) have totally misread the Qur'ān. Indeed, no one can read the Qur'ān. Only he can fret out for us the Syriac skeleton of this text. Only he has the key to decipher the Qur'ān. Luxenberg's method is oracular not philological. What we thought all along was an Arabic word is actually a Syriac word; and they all uncover a Christian layer that has been misread by all of us. Indeed, one could describe Luxenberg's method as a typological reading of the Qur'ān masquerading as philology. Luxenberg's work is in the final analysis a Christian polemical tract. As such it belongs to a venerable tradition.

That the two consorts of Zeus appear in the paradise of the Qur'ān is rather befitting. For what is the Qur'ān but a grand barbarian attempt at solving all the problems besetting late antique society? It is not merely that the long-awaited barbarians appeared at the gates of the old civilized cities of the Near East (from the wrong direction, no less), but they came also with a solution, not to everybody's liking of course, for the problems that were plaguing that world. Christianity and Judaism were both harmonized (and in the process admonished), the life of the Gods of the pagan world was turned into the future awaiting humanity in paradise, and an imperial dream of world dominion was enacted. In that sense Muhammad has more to do with Constantine than with Jesus, and more to do with Moses than with Paul. This was a bitter victory of the

periphery over the center. My understanding of the event of Islam in late antiquity, hence of Luxenberg's misuse of philology, is thus fully based on the work of scholars studying this period, in particular the understanding of Garth Fowden and, more recently, Peter Brown and Polymnia Athanassiadi.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, it is rather remarkable how little hold Christianity managed to have on the author of the Qur'ān. To claim as Luxenberg wishes to demonstrate, that Christianity is the single determining factor is thus to mistake the whole thrust of the Qur'ān in the historical setting in which it originated.

We modern scholars have long been caught in the web of the self-presentation of early Islam. For not only was the prophet of this religion presented to us as illiterate, and the quranic word *ummī* now taken to mean "illiterate" instead of "unversed in Scripture," but his people were claimed to be fully axenic and unsullied by contact with other civilizations. Arabs burst into the Near East, as it were, from the bosom of the desert, with a book from heaven and having barely heard of the world outside. The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān belies this image. Arabs were "not unhellenized," to use a favorite phrase of Cavafy, and they were not cut off from civilization. The presence of foreign words in the Qur'ān has thus to be understood not as the direct work of Muhammad alone but of the Arabs before and around his time. Unfortunately for the scholarship on early Islam, sensational positions get the most publicity. If, on the one hand the Qur'ān is taken seriously and fully analyzed, as Wansbrough admirably did, then its complexity is deemed as too sophisticated to be the work of Arabs of the early 7th

¹⁰⁴ See the second edition of Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 285-294. The analysis of Brown of the rise of Islam is one of the most succinct and historical one could ever hope for. It sums up the whole literature on late antiquity and allows us a better understanding of the rise of Islam. See also the remarks of Polymnia Athanassiadi in her article "The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy," in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 181.

century of the C.E.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, given what we are supposed to know about the Arabs of the seventh century – all based on early Islamic propaganda, I should add – then a Qur’ān coming out of such isolated nomadic tribes should not be worthy of sustained analysis. Only the German school, best represented in the works of Nöldeke-Schwally-Paret-Neuwirth, has been willing to deem the Qur’ān both a seventh century document and one worthy of serious study.

One of the most pernicious harms done to the field of quranic studies as a result of the preoccupation with foreign vocabulary has been the failure to allow an analysis of the Qur’ān as a text to take hold in the scholarly tradition. Having accused the medieval commentators of an atomistic interpretive approach to the Qur’ān, we ourselves have failed to offer a genuine alternative. We keep hearing about the absence of thematic unity in the chapters of the Qur’ān, but we have never been able to offer an explanation, for example, as to why some are one paragraph and some are sprawling booklets. Is it possible that we have not given enough attention to their structure? Angelika Neuwirth’s work has yet to be carried further; meanwhile some of the most profound analysis of the Qur’ān has come from camps unexpected. The article of Norman Brown on chapter 18 remains a stinging rebuke to our failure as quranic studies specialists to appreciate the thematic unity of even the most apparently maddening of chapters.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ We could hardly find a more learned reader of the Qur’ān than Wansbrough; that he had failed to see the Syriac ur-text and instead read the Qur’ān as a classical Arabic text is a headache Luxenberg does not seem willing to face.

¹⁰⁶ Norman O. Brown, “The Apocalypse of Islam,” in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 155-170.

