

**The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran:
A Contribution to the Decoding of
the Language of the Koran**

Christoph Luxenberg

Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007. 349 pages.

Christoph Luxenberg's (a pseudonym) highly controversial book, now available in English, has caused some to see in him an important ally in the war against Osama bin Laden and others to shake his book off as "orientalism." There has been, in English at least, little substantive reporting on the actual arguments advanced. I will try to present a critical review of the main contentions and types of arguments Luxenberg offers in support.

This book has two theses: one brazen and sweeping, the other a collection of specific arguments and analyses. The sweeping thesis is that the Qur'an was originally a lectionary, a collection of texts from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to be read out loud (p. 104). It was set down in Karshuni, a form of Syriac written in Arabic characters; however, the Qur'an employed an alphabet more primitive than the one now in use. In particular, diacritical dots were lacking. Given this double bind, so to speak, its first students had great difficulty understanding the text, particularly insofar as they mistakenly took it to be written in Arabic. Hence the large amount of significant misreadings, the individual reinterpretations of which collectively form what I call the book's second thesis.

This is clearly not a book that will convince the faithful. But even if one sets aside one's personal beliefs, some major problems emerge. For example, who was responsible for establishing the Qur'anic text? A key role is

assigned to a mysterious group of “originators” (p. 37) who pointed the Syro-Aramaic text and whose philological and theological competence seems to have been inadequate to the task. In a footnote fifteen pages on (p. 52, n. 62), Luxenberg reveals that Christian Arabs of Syria and Mesopotamia were the “originators of written Arabic.” The possible connection between the two “originators” is not clear. However, other individuals or groups also played a role. In one case at least (*tawra*), the “erroneous” reading is attributed to Jewish informants (p. 92). This point is made at the culmination of an extremely involved chain of arguments (including, to Luxenberg’s credit, some backtracking from earlier claims). Though the word in question was pronounced in both Jewish and Christian dialects of Aramaic as *ʕraytha*, it was supposedly written in the lectionary as *yʕraya*. Unable to make sense of it, the “Arabic reader” turned to Jews, who (despite their probably being more comfortable in Aramaic than in Hebrew!) misread it as an approximate transcription of the Hebrew *tʕrah*. In the case of *Ibrahim*, Luxenberg introduces “the Koran writer” (p. 93), who placed a “small peak” (*kursi*) between the *ha*’ and the *mim* to emphasize the accented syllable: *Abrahám*. This was mistaken later for a *ya*’.

Another serious problem that remains unanswered is Muhammad’s role. One can understand Luxenberg’s reticence – after all, what he has already written about the Qur’an has forced him to conceal his identity. Nonetheless, his theories compel one to think about the role of Muhammad, the “founder” of Islam, if one may still use that term. A great divide separates believers (who hold that the source of the Prophet’s revelations is divine) and non-believers (who do not). But all agree, or at least have until now, that the Qur’an’s exhortations were taught by Muhammad, who knew what he was saying. In Luxenberg’s telling, it seems to me that his role is reduced to that of a sage who was asked about the verses’ meaning but could give no clear answer. His inability to elucidate the meaning of verses or decide between alternate explanations is cited repeatedly as evidence for the author’s thesis.

However tenuous, even preposterous, Luxenberg’s sweeping thesis may seem, the myriad examples he adduces of problematic passages, the meaning of which is clarified when their Syro-Aramaic roots are exposed, cannot be dismissed out of hand. Before giving some examples, I offer one general comment: his quite involved arguments for the transformation of Syriac forms (occasionally citing Hebrew, Ethiopic, and other forms) are not founded on any clear set of systematically applied rules. The conclusion thus often seems arbitrary, whatever the merits of the philological analysis.

Surely he would have done well to avail himself of some works on comparative Semitics, such as the (by now) classical comparative grammars of William Wright and De Lacy O'Leary or the much more recent work of Edward Lipinski. None of these are mentioned in the bibliography or applied, as far as I noticed, in the examples.

A good case in point is his analysis of *al-raqim* from 18:9 (pp. 80-85), a word that has challenged interpreters both medieval and modern. Working from the very reasonable hypothesis that a form of the root *r-q-d* would be appropriate here, he arrives at the form *al-raqid* in the text that stood before "Arab readers." However, as the form *raqid* does not exist in Arabic, these "readers" had no alternative but to change the final consonant to *mim*. That reading makes no sense in the given context, but at least the word exists in Arabic! To my mind, it would have been much more reasonable to have left the form *al-raqid*, for even if it does not exist in Arabic, it is legitimate morphologically and, as an intensive, makes good sense: "deep sleeper." By no means do I wish to suggest this emendation. I do not believe in tampering with the word of God, and I do not think that the "Arab readers" would have done so. I simply wish to suggest, following Luxenberg's line of thought, that there was a good alternative.

On the strong side, Luxenberg suggests that the final *alif*, which has, with great difficulty, been interpreted as an accusative in words such as *mathalan* (11:24) or *al-hawaya* (6:146), can be better explained on the basis of corresponding Aramaic forms (pp. 44-45 and elsewhere).

Some brief remarks about the translation from the German. The English version is based mainly on the first edition (a third has already appeared), but contains minor additions, including some oblique replies to hostile reviews. The translator's name is not given – I suspect that "Luxenberg" himself prepared it or at least had a major hand in it. On the whole, it reads much like a reader of English would expect an involved work of German philology to read. The arguments are clear enough, or at least as clear as they are in the original. In a few places, the author/translator simply forgot to translate (*arabisch*, twice on p. 90) and has not always paid attention to the differences in pronunciation between English and German (*j* on p. 90 should be *y*). Proofreading by a native speaker could have avoided such miscues as translating *fremde* as *strange* rather than *foreign*.

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