CHAPTER 36

St. Ephraem the Syrian, the Quran, and the Grapevines of Paradise: An Essay in Comparative Eschatology

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1 Syriac and the Arabic Quran

For many years, scholars engaged in the study of the Quran and of Islamic origins have been aware of the fact that works written in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity, in the dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac, offer them one of several sure paths into the religious thought-world of Arabian Christianity. It was into this world that the Arabic Quran appeared of a sudden in the first third of the seventh Christian century. Historically speaking, this is only to be expected; the Arabic-speaking Christian communities in the milieu in which Islam was born, be they from Sinai, Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, lower Mesopotamia, or even southern Arabia, all belonged to communities whose liturgies, doctrines, and ecclesiastical associations were of primarily Aramaic expression.1 As for Syriac itself, there is an interesting, if not a very compelling, reference to it already in early Islamic tradition to the effect that some Syriac books had come to Muhammad's attention. According to the report deriving from his well-known secretary, the Prophet is alleged to have said to Zayd b. Thabit, “Do you know Syriac well? Some books have come to my attention. I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Learn it.’ So I learned it in nineteen days.”2

Alphonse Mingana, writing in 1927, estimated that seventy percent of the “foreign influences on the style and terminology” of the Quran could be traced to “Syriac (including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac).”3 Noting this high incidence of Syriac etymologies for a significant portion of the Quran's ‘foreign vocabulary,’ Arthur Jeffrey wrote in 1938 that “one fact seems certain, namely that such Christianity as was known among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times was

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1 See the helpful survey in Hainthaler, Christliche Araber vor dem Islam.
2 Ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif 6. I am grateful to Prof. David Powers of Cornell University for bringing the passage to my attention.
3 Mingana, Syriac influence.
largely of the Syrian type, whether Jacobite or Nestorian."⁴ He noted further that numerous early Islamic texts mention Muḥammad’s contacts with both Syrian and Arabian Christians, and this observation prompted Jeffery to conclude that these texts “at least show that there was an early recognition of the fact that Muḥammad was at one time in more or less close contact with Christians associated with the Syrian Church.”⁵

More radically, and most recently, Christoph Luxenberg has been exploring what he calls the ‘Syro-Aramaic’ reading of the Quran.⁶ His method involves the use of the Syriac lexicon and the consultation of Syriac grammatical usages to help in the reading of certain passages in the Quran, to explore the possibility that a more historically intelligible reading of hitherto obscure passages might be attained, often found to be congruent with earlier, Aramaean Christian ideas and formulations.⁷ Luxenberg’s ongoing work has inspired a number of other researchers, who have pushed his ideas further, virtually re-inventing early Islamic history in ways that have evoked considerable controversy.⁸ On the one hand, these inquiries have underlined the importance of Syriac for Quranic studies; on the other hand, in the enthusiasm for finding new readings and new interpretations, based on perceived grammatical and lexical possibilities, sometimes too little attention has been paid by these scholars to the usages of classical Syriac literature that underlay the religious idiom of Arabic-speaking Christians in the Quran’s milieu. The present writer has undertaken cautious soundings in this area in previous essays⁹ and now he approaches it again, this time in the context of the Quran’s eschatology, and particularly in connection with Christoph Luxenberg’s widely publicized reconstruction and

⁴ Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary* 20–1.
⁵ Ibid., 22.
⁷ Luxenberg was preceded in this enterprise by Günter Lüling, who had argued that about a third of the Quran as we now have it is built on the foundation of an earlier Christian, strophic hymnody that was concealed under successive layers of text. According to him, this early Arabic, Christian hymnody, which celebrated an angel-Christology, was at home among the pre-Islamic Arabs and had a place in Christian liturgy in the then-Christian Ka’ba in Mecca. See Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān*; Lüling, *Der christliche Kult*; Lüling, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad*. For a more personal discussion of his idea and its reception among scholars see Lüling, Preconditions for the scholarly criticism.
⁸ See, e.g., Ohlig and Puin (eds.), *Die dunklen Anfänge*; Ohlig (ed.), *Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion*; Ohlig and Gross (eds.), *Schlaglichter*.