When observing the corpus of works that Arthur Jeffery completed during his lifetime, regardless of one's opinion towards the biases and presuppositions of the author, one cannot help but admire the devotion to philology and precision that Jeffery accorded to all of his works. Undoubtedly he based many of his conclusions regarding the compilation of the Qurʾān and Muhammad’s alleged sources on his assumption that the Qurʾān is primarily a revision of existing religious traditions, and a work that underwent revisions at the hands of Muhammad and his successors, ending with ʿUthmān’s codex. Starting from this basic assumption, he attempted to apply the tools of historical and textual criticism at his disposal from his training in Biblical higher criticism to the Qurʾān. Controversial in and of itself for Muslim theologians, this method of transferring a methodology that was designed to be applied to a certain text (the Bible) with its own unique historical development to a separate tradition and text with a radically different history of compilation led to faulty conclusions in many cases.

Nevertheless, the specific work that this review addresses, The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān, suffers from less of the aforementioned flaws than other works by Jeffery. The premise of the book is that there are “foreign” words in the Qurʾān, defined by Jeffery as of three types:

(i) Words which are entirely non-Arabic, such as َنَارَق, َفَرْدُوس, َزَحْيْل, َرَاسِبَرْق, etc., which cannot by any linguistic juggling be reduced to developments from an Arabic root, or which though seemingly trilateral, e.g. َجِبْت, have no verbal root in Arabic. There words were taken over as such from some non-Arabic source.

(ii) Words which are Semitic and whose trilateral root may be found in Arabic, but which nevertheless in the Qurʾān are used not in the Arabic sense of the root, but in a sense which developed in one of the other languages. Such words as َفَاطِر, َصُوَامِع, َدَرْس, َبَارْك are illustrations. Words of this class when once naturalized in Arabic may and do develop nominal and verbal forms in a truly Arabic manner, and thus frequently disguise the fact that originally they were borrowings from outside.

(iii) Words which are genuinely Arabic and commonly used in the Arabic language, but which as used in the Qurʾān have been coloured in their meaning by the use of the cognate languages.1

Jeffery then lists 318 entries of the allegedly foreign words with his explanations for their origins and annotated references to the early debates about meaning among the Muslim exegetes. The value of this list as an accurate reference for the definition of the words in question is dubious, although the linguistic analysis of this list for the sake of comparative Semitic linguistic study is great. Certainly, progress during the last century has given rise to new discoveries in Syriac, Middle Persian, Geʾez, Coptic and Aramaic studies that must be taken into account when reading Jeffery’s analysis and it can be hoped that this republication will spur further interest in this field.

However, the name of the book presents a potential problem in and of itself. Jeffery himself acknowledges that so-called foreign vocabulary is co-opted into any living language with the prerequisite structural changes in the words. Is the term “foreign” a useful one when applied to words in a linguistic context? The term itself implies the existence of a “pure” language, pristine and untouched by outside influences. This view of languages as *sui generis* does violence to

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the contemporary understanding of language as inextricably linked to culture. If the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula were completely isolated from the surrounding linguistic geographies of the Sassanian Empire, the Ethiopian and Yemeni kingdoms and the Byzantine Empire, then an examination of the particular aspects of “pure” Arabic could be usefully investigated. Instead, historical records and archeological discoveries reinforce the understanding of the Arabian Peninsula as comprised of intricately interrelated groups of tribes and sub-tribes with unbroken cultural contact and trade partnerships with surrounding regional powers and languages. Jeffery was well aware of this cultural contact, but rather than viewing it as part of the organic growth of a language, he chose to use it as a jumping off point to make somewhat strained implications regarding the content of the Qur’an and its “foreignness.” One could plausibly question whether the labeling of Qur’anic vocabulary as “foreign” disguises an attempt by the author to unmask its latent Judeo-Christian identity.

Examples of an ahistorical approach to textual reconstruction abound in this book. One of the most striking examples is the common Arabic word *kataba* (he wrote). Jeffery took great pains to show that this word was existent in many other languages of the region, including Aramaic, Hebrew, Nabataean, Phoenician, and Syriac, all of which meant *he wrote*. Undoubtedly this word was part of a proto-Semitic vocabulary that circulated throughout the region in the centuries preceding the appearance of written Arabic, but how does the labeling of *kataba* as a “foreign” word enhance our understanding of the historical development of the Arabic language? Just as other languages that develop in close proximity to one another share a multitude of cognates and grammatical similarities, the Arabic language also benefited from its proximity to its linguistic neighbors to broaden and enhance its vocabulary. It is a foolhardy task to attempt to trace the history of a language purely from these borrowings, without a clear textual record of who first borrowed the term and exactly when it was first utilized in the new language.

Returning to Jeffery’s example of *kataba*, he goes on to surmise that since *kataba* means to write in all of the other languages that he listed, this word “may have taken place at al-Ḥira, whence the art of writing spread among the Arabs, but as both nominal and verbal forms are common in Nabataean, it may have been an early borrowing from N. Arabia.” Without providing any specific example of this alleged borrowing in the historical records from al-Ḥira or the Nabataean kingdom, Jeffery takes as a foregone conclusion that written Arabic was first developed at al-Ḥira, a claim of dubious veracity, and does little to actually shed light on the exact moment when *kataba* first appeared in the Arabic language. Jeffery’s book is filled with many other examples of what appear to be little more than assumptions or educated guesswork regarding the linguistic history of the Arabic language, without the prerequisite historical proof texts to bulwark his hypotheses. He also seems to ignore dialectical differences within the various oral traditions of the Arabic language that may have contributed to some of this “foreign” vocabulary, traditions that may be unrecoverable following the standardization of the Arabic language after the appearance of the Qur’an. The undisputed existence of these varying oral dialects of Arabic in the Arabian peninsula further prove the difficulties inherent in the use of the term “foreign” when discussing linguistic development.

Despite these shortcomings, Jeffery’s work can be useful both for historiography of the methodology and conclusions of early twentieth century Orientalists, as well as a starting point for further research into comparative Semitic linguistic analysis. Rather than using Jeffery as a reliable source for information on the textual sources, many of which have been superseded, discovered, edited or supplemented in the seventy years since the original publication of his book, the researcher can compare his conclusions with newly discovered early manuscripts to