

3 Alternative accounts of the Qurʾān's formation

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Friedrich Schwally's revision of Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorāns*, parts one and two, published in 1909 and 1919 respectively, presented the current status of Western scholarship on the Qurʾān's formation at the beginning of the twentieth century. W. Montgomery Watt's revised edition of Richard Bell's *Introduction to the Qurʾān*, published in 1970, provided a new stock-taking of the then widely accepted wisdom on the topic. A comparison of the two works, however, reveals little development in the intervening half century as far as their main topics are concerned. Yet this interlude of relative scholarly calm contrasts sharply with the turbulent decades that followed. From the 1970s onwards several assertions about the origin and formation of the Qurʾān have been the object of detailed revision and the results of these studies more often than not have challenged the accepted wisdom. The year 1970 can thus be considered a watershed in the scholarly history of this research, and Watt's book can serve as a suitable point of reference for a sketch of the more recent developments. In the following, some of these alternative accounts will be introduced taking the primary issue which each of them tackles as a starting-point. The portrayal of each account focuses on its premises, methods and results.

AUTHORSHIP, FORMATION AND CANONISATION

According to the prevailing consensus, the Qurʾān originated in the first third of the seventh century CE in the towns of Mecca and Medina. Its author (in Muslim eyes, its transmitter) was Muḥammad who 'published' his revelations in segments which he later rearranged and edited, in large measure himself. Yet he did not leave a complete and definitive recension. The canonical text such as it has been known for centuries was not achieved until twenty years after the Prophet's death. The qurʾānic material which had been preserved in written and oral forms was then carefully collected at the behest of the third caliph, ʿUthmān, who published it as the only

officially authorised version of the Qurʾān. The stylistic uniformity of the whole proves its genuineness. This historical account is based on evidence found in the Qurʾān itself as interpreted in the light of the Muslim tradition, i.e., the biography (*sīra*) of the Prophet and traditions on the collection of the Qurʾān after his death.¹

All the elements of this account have been challenged by John Wansbrough in his *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (1977) and *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (1978). Wansbrough doubts the value of source analysis that seeks to detect historical facts and to reconstruct ‘what really happened’. He begins from the premise that the Muslim sources about the origin of Islam, including Qurʾān, *sīra*, the traditions from the Prophet (*ḥadīth*), Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and historiography, are the product of literary activity, i.e., fictional literature, which reflects ‘salvation history’. The sources need to be analysed, therefore, as literature, i.e., by using literary-critical methods. Factual historical conclusions can be at best a by-product of such literary analysis.² The method of analysis that Wansbrough adopted, form criticism, is drawn from biblical studies.

Wansbrough points to ‘the fragmentary character’ of the Qurʾān and to the frequent occurrence of ‘variants’ in both the Qurʾān and other genres of early literature, i.e., texts or narratives that are similar in content but different in structure or wording. These phenomena do not support the idea of a primitive text (*Urtext*), originating from or compiled by an individual author or a text carefully edited by a committee, but are better explained by assuming that the Qurʾān has been created by choosing texts from a much larger pool of originally independent traditions. Wansbrough labels these essential Qurʾānic forms ‘pericopes’ or, because of their content, ‘prophetic *logia*’. The latter term does not mean, however, that they derive from the historical Muḥammad. The different *logia* can be reconstructed by form-critical analysis which distinguishes between: (1) the forms through which the themes of revelation are expressed (i.e., the prophetic *logia*); (2) rhetorical conventions by which the *logia* are linked and in which they are clothed; (3) variant traditions in which they have been preserved and (4) exegetical glosses and linguistic or conceptual assimilation.³

The content of the prophetic *logia* is characterised by four main themes: retribution, sign, exile and covenant. They display a ‘monotheist’ imagery known from the Bible and this suggests that the Qurʾānic forms of prophetic expression continue already established literary forms. The fact that most texts which articulate the monotheist themes are introduced, sometimes even concluded, by formulas and literary conventions indicates

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 61

for Wansbrough that these pericopes were originally independent traditions. The formulas function to make the texts suitable for a '*Sitz im Leben*', i.e., a special use such as prayer or preaching. The rhetorical conventions of the Qur'an are also derived from Jewish and Christian literature. This and the polemical style of the texts suggest an origin in a sectarian milieu, i.e., in communities which distanced themselves from mainstream Judaism and Christianity. Such a milieu can be better imagined in Mesopotamia than in Mecca and Medina.

Analysis of qur'anic narratives with a similar content ('variant traditions') also leads Wansbrough to the conclusion that they reflect different stages of literary elaboration and that they were originally 'independent, possibly regional, traditions incorporated more or less intact', or sometimes slightly edited, into the canonical compilation of the Qur'an. Variants of the qur'anic pericopes are also found in other literary genres, e.g., in the *sira*. A comparison between qur'anic and extra-qur'anic variant traditions shows their commonality and the more expansive narrative formulation of the latter may even suggest an earlier date for them than for the qur'anic versions. Wansbrough argues, therefore, that the extra-qur'anic narratives used by Muslim exegetes to explain and illustrate the shorter qur'anic texts cannot be taken to provide the historical background for the latter.

His form-critical analysis leads Wansbrough to the conclusion that the traditional account of the Qur'an's formation, that which considers Muḥammad to be its main conduit and the canonical version to be the result of a collection and redaction shortly after his death – an account based essentially on Muslim traditions – cannot be true. For him, these reports are fictions which, perhaps following the Jewish model, aimed at dating the canon back to the early period of Islam. The hypothesis of a much longer development, one lasting many generations, seems more likely. The corpus of the prophetic *logia* that served as source for the compilation of the canon probably developed through oral composition, whereas the emergence of the canonical text itself was a mainly literary undertaking.⁴

Wansbrough dates the canonical version of the Qur'an to no earlier than the third/ninth century. He sees such a late date for the canonisation of the Qur'an corroborated by the development of the qur'anic exegetical literature. In the last part of his *Quranic studies* he dates the beginnings of the juridical ('halakhic') exegesis, which refers to the Qur'an as a source, to about the same time as the canonisation of the Qur'an. Joseph Schacht's findings concerning the development of Islamic jurisprudence and the role of the Qur'an therein are also thought to favour such a late date. That does not mean, however, that there were not any texts labelled *qur'an* before that

62 *Harald Motzki*

date, but only that a canonical, and thus authoritative, collection of them did not yet exist.⁵

If Wansbrough's theory is accepted, there is no way to establish anything of the revelation or the life of the historical Muḥammad from Qurʾān, *sīra*, *tafsīr* or ḥadīth. To look for historical facts in this sort of literature would be a meaningless research exercise.

COLLECTION, ʿUTHMĀNIC CODEX AND
COMPANION CODICES

Most Western Islamicists reject Muslim traditions about a first collection of the Qurʾān made on behalf of the caliph Abū Bakr shortly after the demise of the Prophet as unlikely because the details in these accounts are unconvincing. They accept, however, the traditions about the official collection during the caliphate of ʿUthmān, although these reports also contain problematic details. The text achieved under ʿUthmān is the Qurʾān as we now have it as far as the consonantal text and its structure is concerned. Variant readings of earlier collections made by other Companions and suppressed by ʿUthmān are transmitted that suggest that 'there was no great variation in the actual contents of the Qurʾān in the period immediately after the Prophet's death', only the order of the sūras was not fixed and there were slight variations in reading.⁶

As mentioned above, Wansbrough rejected this account without further study of the relevant sources because it was incompatible with his theory about the formation of the Qurʾān. An alternative account, based on a detailed study of the traditions in question, has been given by John Burton in his book *The collection of the Qurʾān* (1977). Burton starts from the premise, adopted from Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, that traditions (*ḥadīths*) do not pass on historical facts about the time and persons they purport to report on, but reflect the opinions of later Muslim scholars who used the traditions to substantiate their own views. His hypothesis is that Islamic source theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) 'has fashioned' the traditions which recount the history of the collection of the Qurʾān. In his study Burton argues that these traditions derive from the discussions among the *uṣūl* scholars about the authority of the two main sources of Islamic jurisprudence, the Qurʾān and the sunna of the Prophet, as well as about the issue of abrogation (*naskh*) of Qurʾānic verses. All the traditions that report collections of the Qurʾān after the death of Muḥammad are, therefore, fictitious hypothetical constructs that were invented to back their legal views. According to Burton, neither a

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 63

collection on Abū Bakr's behalf nor an official edition made by order of the caliph 'Uthmān ever happened.

Why did the legal scholars invent different collections and claim that the Qur'an as it exists is the result of an incomplete redaction of the revelations made during 'Uthmān's caliphate? Burton thinks that Muslim legal scholars needed an incomplete qur'ānic text because there were established legal practices which had no basis in the Qur'an and which had been disputed for that reason. To save these practices scholars claimed that they were based on revelations which did not find their way into the Qur'an as it was. Such a view presupposed that the Prophet had left no definitive collection of his revelations. To substantiate this supposition, the legal scholars invented reports about the existence of different precanonical collections and then, in order to explain that there was actually only one Qur'an, they promoted the idea of an incomplete official edition made on 'Uthmān's behalf. If all the traditions about different qur'ānic collections and codices are spurious, the only historically reliable fact that remains is the Qur'an as it was and is. Yet when and by whom was that Qur'an compiled? Burton assumes that the Qur'an as we now have it was that left by Muḥammad himself.⁷ Yet this last conclusion does not derive ineluctably from Burton's investigation; other scenarios can be imagined as well.

COMPOSITION OF SŪRAS AND EMERGENCE
OF A CANON

The prevalent opinion in qur'ānic scholarship views the original units of revelation to have been short passages. Several such passages were afterwards 'collected' by Muḥammad himself to form the longer sūras. After his death those who compiled the canonical version added to the 'embryonic sūras' all the material circulating as qur'ānic revelations and not yet included somewhere. The change of rhyme indicates where heterogeneous passages have been secondarily assembled.⁸ The sūras are thus considered to be textual units in which bits of revelation have been lumped together in some way or other, rather than being unities in themselves.

This view has been challenged by Angelika Neuwirth in her *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (1981). Her premise is that the individual sūra is the formal unit which Muḥammad chose for his prophecy. Therefore, the individual sūra must be the heuristic basis of a literary study of the Qur'an, not the Qur'an as a whole as favoured by others, such as Wansbrough.⁹ In her study, Neuwirth analyses the Meccan sūras with the aim of detecting structures within them which the Prophet himself gave to

64 *Harald Motzki*

them. Since the verse is an important structural element of the sūra, the first step of an investigation which aims at analysing the composition of sūras is an examination of the traditional systems of separating the verses. Using the rhyme and structure of the verses as criteria, Neuwirth is able to suggest several corrections of the Kūfan division of the verses displayed in the Muslim standard edition.

The qur'anic verses are marked by end rhymes so the rhyme may have a function in the composition. Since the qur'anic rhymes and their literary function had not been studied properly before, Neuwirth, in a second step, analyses and describes the different types of rhymes, their occurrence and their development in the three layers of Meccan sūras that Nöldeke had distinguished. She argues that in almost all these sūras change or modification of rhyme functions to organise formally the development of ideas. This function is particularly crucial in the sūras of the earliest Meccan period that are characterised by short verses.

The length of the verses in the Qur'an varies. They are short in the early sūras and become longer and longer in the second and third Meccan period, respectively. The structure of the verses and the relation between verse and sentence can also be determined by rules of composition. Neuwirth therefore studies the verses and distinguishes different types of verses according to their length. She shows that the use of certain types of verses has consequences for the composition of larger groupings of verses and she emphasises the important role of the '*clausula* phrase' in sūras when the structure of verses becomes more complex.

The next question is: are the verses grouped together in a systematic manner to form larger units, each of them containing a particular content or topic which distinguishes them from one another (termed *Gesätze*)? Secondly, are these larger units of content only arbitrarily or loosely put together to form a sūra or are they combined in a carefully considered way? Here, too, her study detects different types of *Gesätze* and even different types of sūras, each type displaying a similar structure.

Neuwirth's study comes to the conclusion that the sūras, as well as the numerous literary forms found in them, are, from the beginning, composed of clearly proportioned elements. The composition becomes more complex and less varied in the course of time but nevertheless reveals, in most cases, an intentional design. Neuwirth concludes that it must have been the Prophet himself who composed the bulk of the Meccan sūras in the form which they have now, occasional cases of later revision notwithstanding. Whether this can also be proven for the Medinan sūras remains to be examined. The historical context (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Meccan sūras,

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 65

which can be characterised as texts intended for liturgical recitation, was most probably the early forms of the Islamic worship service. The more composite middle and late Meccan sūras with their ceremonial introductions suggest that they were used as 'lessons' in the liturgical services of the growing Muslim community, comparable to the lessons and recitations of the Jewish and Christian services.¹⁰

If this evaluation of the Meccan sūras is accepted, a comparison of the structural changes which the sūras underwent in the course of time (reflected in their rough classification into three periods) allows for theories about the first stages of the qur'anic canon's emergence mirrored in the Qur'an itself. Neuwirth herself pursued this issue of the 'canonical process' in several later publications.¹¹ In a study of Q 15 (Sūrat al-Hijr), for instance, she argues that the composition and content of this sūra indicates not only that it is a coherent text but also one that presupposes a stock or corpus of several sūras 'published' earlier, among them Q 1 (Sūrat al-Fātiḥa) as an earlier liturgical text. At the same time Q 15 reflects a crucial stage in the emergence of the Islamic community: the introduction of a new form of liturgical service, one which resembles the pattern of the Jewish and Christian services, and emancipates the Islamic cult from the pre-Islamic cultic ceremonies at the Ka'ba.¹²

PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY

Until the third decade of the twentieth century the issue of Jewish and Christian influences and sources contained in the Qur'an was a prominent research topic in Western scholarship but then it went out of fashion. Watt mentions the issue only at the end of his *Introduction* in the chapter on 'The Qur'an and occidental scholarship' and remarks that 'the study of sources and influences, besides being a proper one, has a moderate degree of interest'.¹³ He suggests that such a study does not contribute much to the appreciation of the new scriptural synthesis created in the Qur'an on the basis of earlier ideas.

This view is questioned by Günther Lüling in his study *Über den Ur-Qur'an: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'an* (1974). His approach is motivated by theories about the development of Jewish and Christian religious ideas, more precisely by the idea that both religions have forgotten or abandoned their primitive dogmas. These dogmas can be rediscovered and reconstructed by re-reading the sources without the distorting lens of the later orthodoxy of the two religions. By manipulating and reinterpreting the sources, this orthodoxy

66 *Harald Motzki*

has fostered a development detrimental to the religions and cultures in question.¹⁴ Lüling assumes that the same dynamic has operated in Islam. Another premise of his study is that pre-Islamic Arabia had been flooded with Christian, particularly Judeo-Christian, ideas, that Christian communities existed all over the peninsula, even in Mecca, and that a large part of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry has a Christian background.

Lüling analyses several *sūras* (or parts of them) traditionally considered to be early Meccan by asking whether there may be Christian sources behind them that are hidden by the traditional reading and interpretation. He looks for other possible meanings of words and verses, especially in cases where the traditional meaning is opaque, by going back to the primitive significations of words or their meaning in other Semitic languages which may have influenced pre-Islamic Arabic. If this does not yield the expected result, the bare consonantal text (*rasm*) of the Qurʾān, i.e., the script without the dots which distinguish the Arabic letters of the same form, is checked in order to discern whether another reading is possible, one that gives the words or the grammatical construction of the verse the pre-supposed archaic Judaeo-Christian understanding and fits into the literary form of an assumed Christian text. Sometimes he even suggests that the consonantal text be slightly changed or passages added or deleted. Such emendations of the qurʾānic text are then justified by lexical, grammatical, stylistic and religious-historical arguments.

The results of Lüling's study are the following: The text of the Qurʾān as it is transmitted through the ages contains a pre-Islamic Christian text as a primitive layer. Parts or fragments of this Christian liturgical recitation (*qurʾān*) are scattered throughout the entire Qurʾān. They can be reconstructed and their original meaning recovered. The new reading of such passages provides a grammatically and lexically more convincing text than the traditional reading. The texts belonging to the primitive Christian '*qurʾān*' were written by Christian theologians at least a century before Muḥammad. They are poetic, i.e., have a rhyme, and are structured in strophes of three lines. The language of the primitive Christian texts in the Qurʾān is an elevated literary language which differs from the language of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and shows grammatical correspondences to early Christian Arabic. According to Lüling the methods which the early Muslims used to recast the primitive texts were largely the same as those he used to recover them.

According to this theory, the Qurʾān as we now have it consists of two types of texts: (1) passages with a double meaning because they were originally Christian texts which had been given a new Islamic meaning, and (2) original Islamic passages which had been added to the Christian ones.

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 67

The content of both types of texts is shaped by the ideas of pre-Islamic Arab paganism that were adopted by the Muslims. Since, however, the primitive Christian texts were hostile to the pagan religious concepts, the Muslim Qur'an has an anti-Christian undertone. A formal characteristic of the Muslim Qur'an is its composition in rhyme-prose whereas the hidden Christian texts in it were originally written in poetic strophes. Further, the language of the Muslim Qur'an is not homogeneous and can be classified into four different types of language: (1) the highly literary language of the primitive Christian *qur'an*; (2) the chaotic 'language' which resulted from the Muslim reinterpretation of the Christian hymns; (3) the language of the early editorial glosses and comments added to the revised primitive Christian texts – these additions were in a colloquial language and may reflect Muḥammad's way of speaking – and (4) the language of the larger, Muslim-originated passages that is literary, perhaps an early form of classical standard Arabic. This language may have been produced by the educated scribes who recorded the Qur'an at Muḥammad's request.

The Muslim Qur'an is then, according to Lüling, the result of several stages of textual revision. The first stage was the refashioning of the content and style of the primitive 'Christian *qur'an*' to fit this document, probably an archaic Christology, confessed by the so-called *ḥunafā'* (sing. *ḥanīf*), into a national pagan Arab framework. This revision was motivated by the wish to create a monotheistic Arab orientation independent of the competing Christian factions of Mecca and their political patrons outside Arabia. This period of revision may have already started two generations before Muḥammad and was continued by him. The second stage of revision of the Qur'an as it existed then started after the victory of the Muslims over the Meccan Christian (!) *mushrikūn* (according to Lüling, these were people who made Jesus a 'partner' of God). This revision was motivated by a desire to mitigate the anti-Christian tenor of the first revision in order to win these Meccan Christians for the Muslim cause and to hide the real origins of Islam as an anti-Christian movement with pagan and national Arab inclinations. The last stage consisted in a revision of the entire Qur'an to align it as closely as possible with the standard literary Arabic, the language of the poetry. This editing may have already started during the life of the Prophet but was perhaps finished only after his death.

LANGUAGE AND READING

In the Qur'an the language used is called 'Arabic' (*ʿarabī*).¹⁵ There was a lively discussion at the beginning of the twentieth century as to precisely what that means. In what type of Arabic did Muḥammad recite the

68 *Harald Motzki*

Qurʾān? In 1906 Karl Vollers argued that it was originally in the Meccan dialect and that later Muslim scholars redacted the text to make it accord, as far as possible, with the artificial literary language of Arabic poetry. Prominent Islamicists have rejected Voller's theory and hold the view that the language of the Qurʾān is not a dialect but essentially the literary language of the Arab tribes with some Meccan dialectical peculiarities, reflected, for instance, in the orthography of the Qurʾān. The consensus is thus that the Qurʾān has been recited and written in 'a Meccan variant of the literary language'.¹⁶

That does not mean, however, that all words contained in the Qurʾān are 'pure Arabic', i.e., derived from the reservoir of Arabic roots. Western scholars have identified many loanwords from other languages, most of them belonging to the Aramaic-Syriac group of Semitic languages. The list published by Arthur Jeffery in 1938 contains about 322 loanwords¹⁷ that amount to 0.4 per cent of the complete qurʾānic vocabulary (proper names included). A large portion of these loanwords are already found in pre-Islamic Arabic texts and can be considered part of the Arabic language before the Qurʾān.¹⁸ That means that the loanwords found in the Qurʾān do not contradict the common assumption that its language is essentially a literary Arabic close to that of the pre- and early Islamic poetry and to the classical Arabic of prose texts written in the Islamic period.

The first codices of the Qurʾān were written in a *scriptio defectiva*, i.e., without short vowels, even without some long vowels, and without distinguishing between consonants of a similar shape. (The Arabic term for this skeletal form of qurʾānic script is *rasm*.) This script was very difficult to read and, therefore, theoretically a potential source of variant readings and interpretations. In practice, however, substantial differences of reading remained minimal because 'knowledge of the Qurʾān among the Muslims was based far more on memory than on writing', the script being 'little more than an elaborate mnemonic device'.¹⁹ The correct reading of the Qurʾān was transmitted from the Prophet's time onwards by Qurʾān-reciters (*qurrā*) who knew the text by heart. On the basis of the oral reading tradition the defective script of the early codices was gradually improved during the first Islamic centuries and so the written qurʾānic text emerged as we know it today.²⁰

This view was challenged by Lüling as mentioned above. He not only rejects the view that the Qurʾān is a text which derives almost completely from one 'author' (Muḥammad), but also disputes the idea that the language of the Qurʾān is homogeneous. Only the original Muslim parts are close to classical Arabic. In his attempt to retrace a primitive Christian liturgical

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 69

text in the Qur'an he sometimes suggests that Arabic words have a meaning closer to their Aramaic or Hebrew counterparts than the meaning current in classical Arabic, assuming that the pre-Islamic Arabic *koine* (standard language) was influenced by Aramaic, then the *lingua franca* of the near east.²¹ Lüling is also convinced that the primitive *qur'an* has been consciously changed by Muḥammad and later Muslims.

In a more radical form similar ideas about the original language of the Qur'an are expounded in a study by Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym) entitled *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (2000). Its premises are that Syro-Aramaic was the most important literary and cultural language in the region of the vicinity in which the Qur'an originated. Since Arabic was not yet a literary language, educated Arabs used Syro-Aramaic for literary purposes. This suggests that literary Arabic itself was developed by Arabs educated in the Syro-Aramaic culture. These Arabs were mostly Christianised and brought much of their religious and cultural language into Arabic. These premises lead Luxenberg to the hypotheses that the Qur'an, as one of the earliest specimens of literary Arabic, must reflect this Syro-Aramaic heritage and that in addition to words already identified as Syro-Aramaic loanwords, many more lexical items and syntactical structures, generally considered to be genuine Arabic by Muslim and Western scholars, may be of Syro-Aramaic origin.

The study focuses on qur'anic passages that Western scholars consider obscure and on which early Muslim exegetes expressed variant interpretations. Luxenberg's philological method involves several steps. The first is to check al-Ṭabari's (d. 310/923) large commentary of the Qur'an and the *Lisān al-'Arab*, the most substantial lexicon of classical Arabic, to see whether the early exegetes preserved a meaning of the unclear words that better fits the context than the meaning assumed by the most prominent Western translations. If this search does not yield a result, he next asks whether there is a homonymous lexical root in Syro-Aramaic that has a meaning other than that of the Arabic word and one clearly better suited to the context. If this exercise proves futile, Luxenberg then returns to the undotted form (*rasm*) of the word to determine whether another reading (dotting) of it produces an Arabic or Aramaic word or root that makes more sense. If this step also fails he tries to translate the alleged Arabic word into Aramaic in order to deduce its meaning from the semantic of the Syro-Aramaic expression. Should this step prove unproductive, he consults the material preserved from Aramaic-Arabic lexica of the fourth/tenth century searching for meanings of Arabic terms unknown in classical and modern Muslim sources of Arabic but recorded by Christian lexicographers. A final step has him

70 *Harald Motzki*

reading an Arabic word according to the Syro-Aramaic phonetic system, a process that, as Luxenberg claims, sometimes produces a useful meaning.

Luxenberg doubts that there has existed a continuous tradition of reading and commenting on the Qurʾān from the time of the Prophet onwards because some Muslim traditions contradict that claim. The qurʾānic writing of Aramaic names suggests that they were transliterated from Syro-Aramaic and therefore not originally pronounced according to the traditional reading based on the (later) phonetic rules of classical Arabic, but in the Aramaic way (e.g., not *Jibrīl* and *Mūsā*, but *Gabriēl* and *Mōshē*). Luxenberg gives examples of qurʾānic expressions which do not smoothly fit the context when read according to the rules of the classical Arabic grammar, but are perfectly translatable if read as Syro-Aramaic terms. He concludes from these cases that grammatical forms of Arabic and Syro-Aramaic occur in the Qurʾān side by side and, therefore, the Qurʾān cannot be understood and explained only on the basis of the grammatical rules fixed for classical Arabic.

Luxenberg discusses several examples of words which seem to suggest that in the earliest written qurʾānic texts the undotted ‘tooth letters’ were used not only to indicate the letters *b*, *t*, *th*, *n*, *i/y* as in classical and modern Arabic, but occasionally the long vowel *ā* which in standard Arabic orthography is rendered by a long vertical stroke.²² He argues that several words of the Qurʾān had been read and dotted wrongly because later readers and copyists did not know this early function of the ‘tooth letter’ any more. This and other obviously wrong cases of dotting prove for him that there was no continuous reading tradition after the death of the Prophet. Later Muslim scholars and copyists of the Qurʾān reconstructed its reading and interpretation on the basis of written copies.

In his study Luxenberg reviews the translation and interpretation of several qurʾānic verses and a few short sūras arguing that they have been misunderstood because particular words have been interpreted from the viewpoint of the classical Arabic lexicon and grammar. Reading them, in contrast, as Syro-Aramaic words and taking into account that qurʾānic expressions may also reflect the phenomena of Syro-Aramaic grammar, produces more plausible meanings. In a few cases his reconstruction leads to a Christian content.

The results of his analyses corroborate Luxenberg’s premises: the language of the Qurʾān is a mixture of Aramaic and Arabic. This has consequences for the understanding of the historical background. If the Qurʾān was ‘published’ in the language of the Quraysh, as Muslim tradition states, and if this language was neither an Arabic dialect nor the standard literary

Alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation 71

language of Arabic poetry, but a mixed language of Syro-Aramaic and Arabic that was understood by Muḥammad's Meccan compatriots, then, Luxenberg presumes, Mecca must originally have been an Aramaic settlement. The many cases of qur'ānic words and passages which remained unclear to Muslim scholars and were misread by them suggest that the knowledge of the Meccan language spoken at the time of Muḥammad had been lost by the period when the punctuation and exegesis of the qur'ānic text began. According to Luxenberg, this must have been in the second half of the second/eighth century because the Muslim reconstruction and interpretation of the Qur'ān is based on the literary Arabic language standardised at that time. He thus assumes a gap of one and a half centuries between the first 'publishing' and recording of the Qur'ān and the final editing by which it received its traditional form. During this period the Qur'ān was preserved only in written form and, so it appears, did not play a significant role in Muslim cult and community. Luxenberg suggests that had the situation been otherwise, the tradition of reading the Qur'ān as it developed in the time of the Prophet would not have been cut off.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The alternative accounts of the Qur'ān's formation presented in this chapter have been described without a concurrent evaluation of them. Each is a sophisticated piece of scholarship that deserves to be carefully studied for the quality of its arguments and methods. The reader interested in the scholarly echo which these alternative accounts provoked will find the relevant literature in 'Further reading'.

Notes

1. W. M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), chs. 2 and 3.
2. J. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. ix, 118–19, and his 'Res ipsa loquitur: History and mimesis' (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987) (Albert Einstein Memorial Lectures); repr. in H. Berg (ed.), *Method and theory in the study of Islamic origins* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 10–19.
3. J. Wansbrough, *Qurānic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ch. I.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., pp. 44, 170–202.
6. Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, ch. 3.

72 *Harald Motzki*

7. J. Burton, *The collection of the Qurʾān* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), chs. 1, 6–10.
8. Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, pp. 38–9, 90–7, 111, 113.
9. A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), pp. 1–2.
10. *Ibid.*, passim.
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13. Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, pp. 184–5.
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15. Q 12:2; 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3; cf. 13:37; 16:103; 26:195; 41:44; 46:12.
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22. This observation is corroborated by the earliest fragments of qurʾānic manuscripts; see G.-R. Puin, 'Über die Bedeutung der ältesten Koranfragmente aus Sanaa (Jemen) für die Orthographiegeschichte des Korans', in H.-C. Graf von Bothmer, K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin, 'Neue Wege der Koranforschung', *Magazin forschung* (Universität des Saarlandes) 1 (1999), 37–40, on <http://www.uni-saarland.de/verwalt/kwt/f-magazin/1-99/Neue.Wege.pdf>, esp. 39–40.

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74 Harald Motzki

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