

SYRIAC IN THE QUR'AN

Classical Muslim theories

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It is important to remember that by no means are Christoph Luxenberg or even Alphonse Mingana the first people to contemplate the presence of Syriac in the Qur'an. Starting in the early centuries of Islam, Muslim exegetes frequently discussed various words which they considered to be of Syriac origin. Early Muslim writers were apparently aware of a language either still spoken in their midst or evident in texts called *suryani* or *nabati* – and they appear to have appealed to that knowledge to solve exegetical problems in the Qur'an. The basic thrust is the same as the one for Luxenberg¹ and Mingana:² if the text is problematic, then perhaps Syriac can solve the issue. Medieval Muslims took a similar basic approach.

In this paper I will examine the use of Syriac as a tool for medieval Muslim exegetes and investigate the reasons why they felt it necessary to look to the foreign origin of certain words and why it might be that they chose Syriac in certain Qur'anic instances, as compared to Greek, Coptic or Hebrew, other popular “foreign languages” which are adduced in their commentaries.³ In order to accomplish this, I will first speak about the concept of foreign languages in the Qur'an and contrast the classical Muslim approach with that of the more recent scholarly attitude. I will then turn specifically to the area of Syriac, try to add some clarity to the concept itself, and then consider the Muslim use of the category. With that information at hand, we will then be in a better position to try to compare some of the approaches of modern scholarship with the classical, which is the underlying theme of this essay.

A basic philological approach to the Qur'an might well suggest that looking for foreign vocabulary in the text is simply a “natural” thing to do; languages interact, they grow, they change due to the mingling of people in situations in which they employ different languages. The evidence is plain to see in the emergence of modern English and there is no reason not to think that Arabic would not be exactly the same. Scholarly philological observations regarding Arabic were certainly stimulated in the past especially by the particular form of proper names which were familiar from the Biblical tradition which are found in

the Qur'an; they definitely suggested certain linguistic questions: how is it that Avraham became Ibrahim in Arabic? Or, Yitshaq, became Ishaq? Through what language vehicles did these names enter Arabic in order to adopt these forms? These can genuinely be said to be questions of scholarly curiosity. Also, considering the history of the scholarly interest in the Arabic language, the observation of foreign vocabulary might be said to have been certain to arise as well. The great European philologists of the seventeenth, eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries were attracted to the study of Arabic because of its value to the understanding of Biblical Hebrew. There clearly was a sense that the isolation of the desert would have preserved the purity of the Semitic languages and that Arabic would be the key to understanding some of the puzzles of the Bible. This romantic thought clearly motivated a good deal of interest. Polyglot lexica started to emerge in the seventeenth century – a famous one was published by Castell in 1669 and it provided a comparison of Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Samaritan, Ethiopic and Arabic along with some Persian as well. Thus, the examination of Arabic vocabulary in the context of Biblical studies alerted modern scholars early on to the fact that certain terms used in the Qur'an were, in fact, being used in a technical religious sense that was found in other Semitic languages. This created the complicated situation of a dual goal for this type of study of foreign vocabulary in Arabic. For one, there was the historical question related to language itself, of understanding how languages grow. For the other, there is the search for meaning where some sense of the "original" word in an etymological context is felt to have a bearing on how the Qur'an is to be understood. The pitfalls of this latter approach have been explored by people such as James Barr and I will not focus attention on that problem in this context except to say that I do think that one can gain some appreciation for the accomplishment of Islam and the Qur'an by seeing how vocabulary gets transformed: etymology cannot be viewed as a determinant of meaning, but it is revealing of transformation and inventiveness.

There is, however, another dimension to these modern scholarly investigations. The polemical tinge to the study of foreign vocabulary is notable and this appears to arise out of a concern with the context in which Islam arose. That is, the concern is for the contextualizing of the Qur'an in a Christian or Jewish background (or Zoroastrian or Manichaean, for that matter), an exercise which often proves to be a reductive process of removing any sense of originality from Islam and attributing all the good (or bad) ideas to a previous religion. This is often placed within many studies (despite the cautions explicitly expressed) in a specific linguistic context, rather than speaking of an ethos of monotheism or a metaphorical universe, concepts which appear to make historians edgy because they are unspecific and the route of influence cannot be traced. Be that as it may, the reductive impulse may be seen in many of the modern writings on the topic. Mingana is the most famous in this regard in finding Syriac as a key to understanding the Qur'an such that it allows him to declare that "The Jewish influence of the religious vocabulary of the Qur'an is indeed negligible" and that Christianity is the source of all the religious inspiration of Islam.⁴

For classical Muslim scholars, on the other hand, the discussion of foreign languages in the Qur'an occurred in quite a different context, that of general theories about the presence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an. This was an area of some considerable controversy but it certainly may be asserted immediately that, contrary to modern scholarship, the thought of foreign languages, or Syriac specifically, did not, of course, imply any sense of a Christian substratum to the text of the Qur'an.

To the ninth-century philologist Abu 'Ubayda is ascribed the statement, "Whoever suggests there is anything other than the Arabic language in the Qur'an has made a serious charge against God."⁵ This sentiment appears to have been widespread in the formative centuries of Islam. Abu 'Ubayda clearly recognized the existence of a similarity between certain words in foreign languages and those in the Qur'an but his response to that observation is to state that the form of a word in one language can correspond (*yuwafiqu*) to its form in another and its meaning in one language can approach that of another language, whether that be between Arabic and Persian or some other language.⁶ Also in the early ninth century al-Shafi'i suggested that no one knew the entire stock of Arabic vocabulary, so what might be thought of as "foreign" to one group of Arabs was, in fact, known to others. He says

Of all tongues, that of the Arabs is the richest and the most extensive in vocabulary. Do we know any man except a prophet who apprehended all of it? However, no portion of it escapes everyone, so that there is always someone who knows it. Knowledge of this tongue to the Arabs is like the knowledge of the *sunna* to the jurists: We know of no one who possesses a knowledge of all the *sunna* without missing a portion of it In like manner is the knowledge concerning the tongue of the Arabs by the scholars and the public: No part of it will be missed by them all, nor should it be sought from other people; for no one can learn this tongue save he who has learned it from the Arabs.

(Al-Shafi'i, *Risala*, 27–8⁷)

At the same time, al-Shafi'i admitted that there may be "in foreign tongues certain words, whether acquired or transmitted, which may be similar to those of the Arab tongue, just as some words in one foreign tongue may be similar to those in others, although these tongues are spoken in separate countries and are different and unrelated to one another despite the similarity of some of the words."⁸ Thus, while similarities may exist, they are there simply by coincidence and not because of a relationship between the words.

Also in the early ninth century Abu 'Ubayd makes a historical argument: words of foreign origin are found in the Qur'an but they had entered into Arabic before the revelation of the Qur'an and are thus now to be considered Arabic. The usage of the Arabic words is deemed to be superior to that of other languages.⁹ In the tenth century, al-Tabari provided yet another angle to the problem, although

the view may well not originate with him: words which appear to be foreign reflect a similarity between languages; this does not indicate anything about the historical origins of the words. Al-Tabari argues a position that suggests certainty in these matters cannot be obtained; we will never know for sure whether a word started in one language or another. He suggests that, of the person who says, “these words were originally Arabic, and then spread and became current in Persian,” or “they were originally Persian and then spread to the Arabs and were Arabized,” one should say that,

We should deem this person to be unlearned, because the Arabs have no more right to claim that the origin of an expression lies with them rather than with the Persians than the Persians to claim the origin lies with them rather than the Arabs. The only certain fact is that the expression is employed with the same wording and the same meaning by two linguistic groups.

(Al-Tabari, *Jami‘ al-bayan*, 1, 15¹⁰)

Such arguments were used in a variety of apologetic settings especially when debating the merits of the Qur’an. Arguments over the inimitability of the Qur’an were reinforced by denying that any special words were introduced into Arabic by Muhammad. Ultimately, the point was a theological one, tied into conceptions of the nature of Arabic as a language and Islam as divine revelation. To admit that there were foreign words in the Qur’an that had been intentionally borrowed would be to undermine the meaning of the challenge put forth to the masters of Arabic speech to produce a chapter of text which was “like” the Qur’an.

Especially in later centuries, the idea of “foreign” vocabulary was not denied by commentators. The twelfth-century al-Jawaliqi, for example, spoke plainly about “foreign words found in the speech of the ancient Arabs and employed in the Qur’an” without any cautious restrictions.¹¹ In the late fifteenth-century, al-Suyuti took the incorporation of foreign languages within the Qur’an as a positive fact, a change in attitude which was the result, perhaps, of an increased emphasis on the universal appeal of Islam and certainly taken as a part of the argument for the excellent qualities of the text of the scripture.¹²

Underlying all of these discussions was the reality of the language of the Qur’an as it was observed by Muslims. As is already apparent, such observations were, in fact, encouraged or stimulated by certain attitudes: some argued that the inclusivity of the Qur’an was reinforced by the presence of foreign words: so, the more languages that could be found the better! The claim even emerges that there are expressions in the Qur’an from every language.

It is frequently pointed out that, among the early Arab grammarians, lexicographers and exegetes, there was a substantial number who had a language other than Arabic either as their mother tongue or as the language of their religious upbringing. It has been argued that some knowledge was brought to the study of “loan words” in Arabic, a topic which certainly was of some interest both within

the exegesis of the Qur'an and in general lexicography. For example, a number of Persian words were identified, often correctly by the judgment of today's scholarship, probably as a result of the scholars' personal knowledge of the language. Another factor that may have led to this type of observation would be words which were known from other languages by the early scholars, the meaning of which in the Qur'an was such as to suggest a relationship between the Qur'anic usage and the foreign language; this may have occurred because the meaning of the Arabic root would not support such a usage: *din* as both "religion" and "day of reckoning" may be an example.¹³

Yet another factor which led to observations about foreign words was the rise of grammatical studies in Arabic which led to understandings about the actual form or pattern of Arabic words. This then allowed observations about the aberrance – by Arabic standards – of some words found in the Qur'an. Among these would be examples of difficult morphological structures and irregular phonetic features as found in words such as *istabraq*, Persian for "silk brocade," found four times in the Qur'an (Q 18:31; 44:53; 55:54; 76:21); *zanjabil*, meaning "ginger" (Q 76:17); *barzakh*, meaning "barrier," used three times (Q 23:100; 25:53; 55:20); *firdaws*, meaning "paradise" (Q 18:107; 23:11); and *namariq*, meaning "cushions" (Q 88:15). Another such mode of consideration would be words from barren roots – that is, words which have no verbal forms associated with them – such as *tannur* in the sense of "oven" (Q 11:40; 23:27); *jibt*, meaning "idol," (Q 4:51); and *rahiq*, meaning "wine" (Q 83:25). The isolation of these features as "aberrant" depended, of course, upon a set of criteria being established which could act to define Arabic as a linguistic structure as such. These criteria were developed by early grammarians such as the famous eighth-century figures Sibawayhi and al-Khalil who established, for example, the permissible morphological forms of Arabic words. As well, certain combinations of letters which could not occur in Arabic words were determined and that acted as another criterion. Among the observations cited in al-Suyuti, for example, is that a *jim* and a *qaf* cannot be found in the same word. Words which violate these rules are deemed to be "foreign."¹⁴ Finally *hapax legomena* and other infrequently used words were also often included in lists of foreign words (even, it should be remarked, in some cases if the origin of the word does, in fact, seem to be Arabic in our perception today).

Many languages are isolated by the classical grammarians and lexicographers as sources of Arabic words, among them Syriac. Syriac, referred to as *suryani* or *nabati*, appears to have been well-known as a spoken language according to anecdotes found in the works of Ibn Qutayba and Ibn Durayd, both living in the tenth century. The association of Syriac with Christianity is also clear in the work of the eleventh-century writer al-Biruni.¹⁵

But we need to be extremely careful with terminology here. Our use of the term Syriac in modern parlance is in itself a slippery one, illustrated by Mingana's simple lumping of Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac along with Eastern Aramaic under the umbrella term Syriac.¹⁶ The use of the term Syro-Aramaic here might

be preferable although one might be justified in wondering just what that term refers to and it does lead to the suspicion that we have a subtle slide from a linguistic to cultural or even geographical category. I would observe tangentially that it does seem to me that Mingana's argument about the lack of Jewish influence is quite shaky if, indeed, his concept of Syriac is one which includes an inventory of Western Aramaic associated with the Jewish Targums. If Syriac for him includes Jewish Aramaic but Syriac as a term also implies Christianity for him, then the entire grounds for his argument seem decidedly uncertain. Overall, the discussion of the topic of just what we mean by these linguistic terms would be helped immensely by careful definition of terms. We need to be very careful about projecting modern categorizations of language back into earlier times and expecting a direct correlation. The significance here goes much further. If we take Luxenberg's work, even if using the notion of "Syro-Aramaic" in its German sense, the argument is significant: Luxenberg argues that the Qur'an developed within a Syriac or Syro-Aramaic culture, Arabic not being a written language at the time. Many of the people involved in the emergence of this early Islam were Arab Syriac Christians who brought their approach to scripture to the development of the Qur'an. If, as is, it seems to me, reasonably generally accepted, Arabic script grew out of the Nabataean script, then are we now claiming that this is a part of this Syro-Aramaic network? Are we talking about Iraq or Syria or Palestine when we talk of this cultural environment? Western or Eastern Aramaic? What are the textual sources that actually underlie the claims? Too often there seem to be simple appeals to the dictionaries of Payne-Smith or Brockelmann with little consideration of the geographical and historical context which is involved in the assumptions about the rise of the Qur'an in relationship to the Syriac sources.

But more critical for my immediate purposes is the parallel question of what did Muslims think of by the term Syriac? And what knowledge did they have of the language?

The issue, too, is complicated and somewhat difficult to reconstruct. First it would seem that, as I have mentioned, two words are used to refer to what might be considered Syriac: Suryaniyya and Nabatiyya. The latter is a vexed term as a glance at the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entry will disclose.¹⁷ First, in Arabic usage, the term appears to be a homonym, referring to two groups, one of them inhabiting northern Arabia and the other Mesopotamia. How that homonymity came about is a disputed historical matter, although some point to the Jewish Targum of Genesis 25:13 and elsewhere which appears to gloss these two Nabataeans by associating the eldest son of Ishmael, Nebaioth, (Ne-bay-oth) a name associated with ancient Assyria, with the spelling Nabat in reference to the northern Arabian community, involving a gloss with *ta'* becoming *ta'*. Be that as it may, the Nabataeans (as we call them today) appear to share a common culture with contemporary Arabic speakers (given their names) and they spoke a western Aramaic dialect very close to the language of the earliest Arabic inscriptions (but, even then, some people claim their language may have some historical connections to eastern Aramaic). So, these Nabatis are what we might think of as the

Nabataeans today, although not every Arabic author of classical times associates these people with Petra and the like, which certainly produces a continuing lack of clarity for scholars today. In the time prior to the rise of Islam, these people were still associated with being traders – for example, there is reference to a Nabataean souk in Medina in the pre-Islamic period according to al-Waqidi, using the word Nabati.¹⁸

However, it is, in fact, the other usage of Nabati in which we are apparently interested. The Mesopotamian group is of Aramaean origin, and spoke an eastern Aramaic dialect, close to Mandaean, from which Syriac was derived. The tenth-century historian al-Mas'udi speaks of this group in relation to the Assyrians, saying “the inhabitants of Nineveh (were) of those whom we have called Nabataeans and Syriac-speaking people; they are,” he emphasizes, “of the same race and they speak the same language.”¹⁹ For Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century, the Nabataeans were the native inhabitants of Mesopotamia before the Islamic conquest of Iraq. Assyrians, Babylonians and Chaldaeans are called Nabataeans; they were renowned for their magical practices. Other writers make it apparent that this designation was not linguistic exclusively (if at all) but rather an ancient group of people distinguished by their agricultural practice, as opposed to pastoral or military life.²⁰

Aharon Maman's *Comparative Semitic Philology in the Middle Ages*²¹ indicates quite clearly that some additional clarity (or perhaps it is an additional level of confusion) can be gained by consulting Jewish linguistic sources (written in Hebrew or Arabic) stemming from the classical Islamic time period. For writers such as Saadya writing in Arabic, Aramaic is called Suryani, the word itself understood as a transformation of the Hebrew for Assyrian, a language which is now known linguistically as Akkadian. So, Aramaeans are called Suryanis; post-Biblical Aramaic is called Suryani by both Hebrew and Arabic Jewish writers. But, Babylonian grammarians writing in Hebrew often use al-Nabati to refer to the same thing as do those writing in Arabic. Just to give an example, the tenth century Iraqi Saadya Gaon, writing in Arabic, uses Suryani to refer to Aramaic in his treatment of Job 15:29 in order to draw a linguistic comparison between Hebrew and Aramaic; but he also uses Nabati in reference to Daniel 3:8 (where the word is translated in English as Chaldeans). For the eleventh century al-Fasi, Suryani means the Aramaic of the Bible specifically, as compared to that of the Targums which he denoted by his use of the word Targum itself for the language. In other words, Suryani is usually used by Jewish authors writing in Arabic to mean what we would call Aramaic; but they may also call it Nabati, seemingly less frequently.

So, in general, we may be able to assert that, for the Arab Muslim writers, it would appear that Nabatiyya is an ancient form of Suryaniyya, and both languages are to be associated with peoples of Iraq. One of the famous manifestations of Syriac for Arabs in classical Islamic times was the *Kitab al-filaha al-Nabatiyya*, “The Book of Nabataean Agriculture,” of Ibn Wahshiyya, an agricultural treatise apparently translated from Syriac.²² While it is difficult to

be certain, there is a case to be made, especially on the basis of the Judaeo-Arabic sources, for Nabati being what we might call Syriac and Suryani being Aramaic, the opposite of what has sometimes been assumed. But then it is also possible that both refer to Syriac. Even then, what that might precisely refer to in terms that we can relate to today is, to say the least, ambiguous.

Al-Suyuti, who died in 1505, edited in several different versions lists of foreign words in the Qur'an. One of his works is called *al-Mutawakkili fima warada fi-l-Qur'an bi-l-lughat*. The treatise, named after the caliph al-Mutawakkili who died in 943/1536 who ordered the author to compile the work, is a list of Qur'anic words that are "to be found in the speech of the Ethiopians, the Persians or any other people other than the Arabs."²³ The list is composed of 108 words attributed to eleven languages and is organized according to language and, within that organization, according to the order of the Qur'an, which makes it particularly useful for my current purpose; it may not necessarily be the best presentation of the Muslim tradition on foreign vocabulary but it is, I believe, at least representative.

In his section on Suryani, seventeen words are listed. He also has a section on Nabati with eighteen words listed and there is a remarkable cross-over between the list with at least six words considered to come from either language. Another list has nineteen Hebrew words, including two from the Suryani list. The vocabulary treated is as follows:

sari meaning "river" (Q 19:24)
taha meaning "O Man!"
jannat 'adn meaning "vineyard and grapes"
tur meaning "mountain"
hawn meaning "wise men" (Q 25:63)
hayta laka meaning "come here" (Q 12:23)
wa-lata meaning "and there is not" (Q 38:2)
rahwan meaning "tranquil"
sujjad^{am} meaning "with uplifted heads" (Q 2:55; 4:154)
qayyum meaning "one who does not slumber"
asfar meaning "books" *qummal*
 meaning "fly, bee" *shahr* (no
 definition given) *yamm*
 meaning "sea" (Q 7:132)
salawat meaning "synagogues" (Q 9:100; 22:41)
darasta (no definition given)
qintar meaning "bull's hide full of gold or silver"

Now then the critical question is why did exegetes think these particular words to be Syriac and why did they choose Syriac as the language to designate rather than something else?

In the case of apparent Arabic words which are classed as “foreign” words, the immediate suspicion must be that an exegetical problem led to the suggestion of the foreignness of the word, as Arthur Jeffery argued in his work, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran*.²⁴ The hermeneutical advantage is clear: if the word is foreign, then it is open to a far greater interpretational variation than if the word is to be taken as a common Arabic word. That may account for some of the words on the list.

However, the question remains as to why Syriac was chosen as the language. Was it on the basis of knowledge or was, it, as Jeffery states on several occasions, “as a cloak for their ignorance” or that Muslims writers used the designation “for anything ancient, time honored, and consequently little understood” or to denote “a word was of the old learned tongues and so more or less unintelligible to the ordinary person”?

In specifying which non-Arabic language a given word might be thought to originate from, it appears to me that Muslim exegetes incorporated two elements into their procedures: one, some knowledge of foreign languages and, two, typical Muslim exegetical tools. At times, the combination of these two elements must have resulted in what must have appeared even to the exegetes themselves as intuitively “wrong” designations.

In a previous essay, I pointed out that certain languages seem to have cultural associations for classical Muslims, in the same way that we might say “it’s all Greek to me” or use French expressions in English that have a certain social status (e.g. RSVP).

Overall, it may be noted that, while there appears to be a knowledge that the Jewish Bible was written in Hebrew, the language of the Biblical characters spoken of in the Qur’an does not seem to have been connected to Hebrew very often. In al-Suyuti’s *al-Mutawakkili*, as I indicated only nineteen words are cited as possibly being Hebrew, and seven of those are cited in a manner which clearly indicates that al-Suyuti did not consider these claims to have much support. This is odd: one might have thought that Muslims would have known the Hebrew Bible was written in Hebrew and thus would have assumed that the ancient characters would have spoken Hebrew and that would be a popular language to suggest as a source of the Arabic vocabulary. However, suggestions regarding other languages such as Aramaic, Syriac and Coptic are quite significant, even when words arise in the context of narratives about prophets of the ancient past. This suggests that the ideas surrounding the languages from which “foreign” words were thought to originate were dictated to some extent by the *spoken* foreign languages known to the Arabs, suggesting a very nonhistorical view of the world: that is, that the language a group of people was speaking in the present was the language they had always spoken.

There seem to be other factors at play as well.²⁵ Certain common Arabic words – *tahta* said to mean “within” rather than its normal “under” in Q 19:24 for just one example – are attributed to Coptic when the words take on meanings which are opposite to their common Arabic designation. This leads to the

observation that perhaps Coptic played a cultural role as a language of deception for Arabic speakers; there may well be a larger social picture behind this of an image of Copts as deceptive in their dealings with Muslims and twisting the Arabic language to their own advantage.

Likewise, the attribution of a number of words to Greek seems to convey certain cultural assumptions rather than linguistic knowledge. In this case it appears to be matters related to commerce and urban society. For example, the following words are commonly attributed to Greek: *qist*, “justice;” *qistas*, “scales;” *sirat*, “road;” and *qintar*, “hundred weight.” It is worthy of note that while, in a number of instances, modern philology agrees with the early Muslim thoughts on certain words being derived ultimately from Greek, that does not indicate necessary linguistic knowledge. The idea that these words come from Greek does not, in fact, account historically for the words in Arabic. In no instance is it likely that the word passed directly into Arabic from Greek. It is far more likely that Aramaic or Syriac was the conduit for the transmission of the Greek words. In a number of cases, Greek is not the ultimate source anyway; rather, the words are Latin and have moved into the Middle Eastern languages through their Hellenized forms during times of Greek administrative rule. The idea held by Muslim exegetes that the words are Greek, therefore, is unlikely to be the result of linguistic observation.

Given the context of classical Arab understanding of Nabati and Suryani especially as reflected in various statements that are found in classical writers and the existence of the *Book of Nabataean Agriculture*, we might expect to see a focus on agriculture, water, magic and so forth in the words which are designated as coming from this language. It is tempting to make that generalization – seeing words like *yamm*, “sea,” *sari*, “river,” and *jannat ‘adn*, “Garden of Eden,” but really that would be on the basis of only a few words out of the overall collection. The other intuitive place we might think of would be with words associated with Christianity but there, too, we do rather come up short once again with only a few words being specifically Christian in context within the Qur’an. Ultimately, the answer to this question of why these words would be chosen to be thought of as Syriac would seem at best to lie in multiple contexts about which it is difficult to generalize: at least my imagination cannot quite make the leap.

But some Muslims did think of these words as having a Syriac background or parallel and that is the interesting fact with which we are dealing. In order to bring this paper to a conclusion, then, let me return to where I started and bring us back to the modern day. There’s no doubt that our knowledge of the transmission of language is much better developed than that of classical Muslim writers. But, of course, no one argues that mere parallels between Syriac and Arabic prove the case – lots of words have linguistic parallels and both languages share much common vocabulary. Careful modern scholars have thus generally looked to technical terms, especially religious ones, including proper names, as the key to understanding the Syriac background. The example of Qur’an and *qeryana* is

an obvious case, as is the instance of many proper names. In-built here is a presumption of a setting embedded in Christianity that has conveyed terminology presumably not present in Arabic before, because it had no particular application and thus no need for development.

But an issue remains here that puts much of this discussion in the same realm of speculative association as the treatises of the medieval scholars: we have little sense of a social context in which to see this linguistic transfer happening and thus the talk is of “Syriac Christianity” defined in quite a loose manner. This is even more inconvenient when one considers the Qur’an to have originated in the Hijaz: the question must be, how did all this vocabulary infiltrate? We embark on a speculative path that becomes closer and closer to my attempts at generalizations for medieval theories: in medieval times, there were perhaps cultural images of water, agriculture and magic that became associated with Syriac; today we associate camel caravans and wandering Christians with the cultural forces and base this on isolated *hadith* reports that give some credence to the speculation. A review of the assumptions of Jeffery’s *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an* will quickly show how dated the notions of cultural interchange are in historiographical terms.²⁶

For those like Luxenberg who wish to see an even stronger Syriac presence in the text, the need to account for the mechanism by which this happened and, especially, to place that in a context of what we can postulate about the emergence of the text of the Qur’an itself, is even more compelling. That is, all the philological knowledge in the world is not going to help unless that is combined with a historical picture related to the emergence of the text of the Qur’an. All these factors definitely need to come together. François de Blois has made this point well in his recent article on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam although he uses his evidence as an argument against the “revisionist” stance without himself postulating a critical assessment of the history upon which he relies beyond the philological–linguistic – other than saying that one could “imagine a situation where there existed, presumably in Mecca, an isolated outpost of Nazoraean ‘Jewish Christianity.’”²⁷

Only when we gaze back to the tenth century can we see any sense of real certainty. For medieval Muslims, the answers to many of these matters were easy: they knew about the origin of the Qur’an and that the presence of Syriac words in the text – if one accepted that there were any to begin with – was a part of the revelation of God’s mystery and knowledge, and this did not need to be accounted for on a human level, in the way in which we must today. And that surely is the only difference between the two approaches, the modern and the medieval: modern speculative theories or theories based upon assertion do not, in fact, take us anywhere beyond the medieval position. Faith in the historical record rivals faith in the divine. Certainly I think that as our knowledge of early Islam and the Qur’an evolves, the place of foreign vocabulary in the text of the Qur’an will be one element – a critical one, I do think – in helping us understand the emergence of the phenomenon which we know as the Qur’an. But the attempt to specify this

outside the general flow of history within an overall sectarian milieu of the Near East will always remain speculative. The search thus is not for the “origin” of the text of the Qur’an: the text of the Qur’an as we have it is what we must deal with, but that must be viewed as one element within the Jewish and Christian *midrash* of the Near East, a trend which continues down until today as we participate in that very process ourselves. Surely here is the significance of Luxenberg: what does he tell us about who he is, about his times, about his religious perspective in relationship to the Qur’an? Surely those are the most interesting questions.

Notes

- 1 Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000.
- 2 Alphonse Mingana, “Syriac influence on the style of the Koran,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 11, 1927, 77–98, reprinted in Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran really says. Language, Text, and Commentary*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002, 171–92, to which reference is made hereafter.
- 3 I have also treated aspects of these topics previously in recent essays: Andrew Rippin, “The designation of ‘foreign’ languages in the exegesis of the Qur’an,” in J. D. McAuliffe, B. D. Walfish, J. W. Goering (eds), *With Reverence for the Word. Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 437–44; Andrew Rippin, “Foreign vocabulary,” *EQ*, 2, 226–37.
- 4 Mingana, “Syriac influence on the style of the Koran,” in Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran really says. Language, Text, and Commentary*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002, 180.
- 5 Abu ‘Ubayda, *Majaz al-Qur’an*, F. Sezgin (ed.), Cairo: al-Khaniji, 1954, 1, 17–18.
- 6 *Ibid.*, I, 17.
- 7 Muhammad Sayyid Kilani (ed.), Cairo: Halabi, 1973. English trans. M. Khadduri, *Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i’s al-Risala*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961, 88–9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 28; English trans., 90.
- 9 Claude Gilliot, *Exégèse, langue, et théologie en Islam. L’exégèse coranique de Tabari (m. 311/923)*, Paris: Vrin, 1990, 98–9.
- 10 *Jami’ al-bayan ‘an ta’wil ay al-Qur’an*, Shakir (ed.), Cairo, Dar al-Ma’arif, 1954.
English trans. J. Cooper, *The Commentary on the Qur’an by Abu Ja’far Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, 14.
- 11 Al-Jawaliqi, *al-Mu’arrab min al-kalam al-a’jami ‘ala huruf al-mu’jam*, Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (ed.), Cairo: Matba’at Dar al-Kutub, 1942, 3.
- 12 This, it seems to me, is the underlying point of the various works of al-Suyuti devoted to foreign words in the Qur’an; see “Foreign vocabulary,” *EQ*, 2, 231–2.
- 13 This is a topic which has been studied in some detail by Ramzi Baalbaki, “Early Arab lexicographers and their use of Semitic languages,” *Berytus* 31, 1983, 117–27, reprinted in his *Grammarians and Grammatical Theory in the Medieval Arabic Tradition*, Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2004.
- 14 Al-Suyuti, *al-Muzhir fi ‘ulum al-lugha wa-anwa’iha*, Muhammad Abu l-Fadl Ibrahim et al. (eds), Cairo: Dar Ihya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1958, 1, 270.
- 15 Baalbaki, “Early Arab lexicographers and their use of Semitic languages,” *Berytus* 31, 1983, 118–20.
- 16 Mingana, “Syriac influence on the style of the Koran,” in Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran really says. Language, Text, and Commentary*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002, 174.

- 17 “Nabatiya,” *EI2*.
 18 Ibid.
 19 Ibid.
 20 Ibid.
 21 Aharon Maman, *Comparative Semitic Philology in the Middle Ages from Sa’adiah Gaon to Ibn Barun (10th-12th C.)*, Leiden: Brill, 2004; for what follows see especially 53–5: “Nomenclature for Aramaic.”
 22 See the recent analysis Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, “The Nabatean Agriculture: Authenticity, textual history and analysis,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der arabisch- islamischen Wissenschaften* 15 (2002/3), 249–80.
 23 Al-Suyuti, *al-Mutawakkili fima warada fi-l-Qur’an bi-l-lughat*, Trans. W. Bell (ed.), Cairo: Nile Mission Press, 1926.
 24 Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran*, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938, 31–2.
 25 As I have pointed out in my entry on “Foreign Vocabulary” *EQ*.
 26 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, for example, 38.
 27 François de Blois, “*Nasrani* and *hanif*: Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam,” *BSOAS* 65, 2002, 27.

