

The Impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān

Abstract

The impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān has long been a matter of debate among scholars, especially among those of the western academe but also with circles of traditional Muslim scholarship. Central to this discussion is the language and audience of the Qur'ān. Studies on the Qur'ān's foreign vocabulary gradually gave way to more in depth analyses on the text's relationship to Syriac Christian literature as well as debates surrounding the Jewish-Christian dimensions the text's audience. The textual theories employed in studying the Qur'ān's relationship to the Syriac language and Biblical canon contain the strongest debate concerning the impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur'ān. These textual theories have been given consideration in recent scholarship, which reads the Qur'ān in light of the Aramaic translations of the Gospels, as well as the Syriac translation of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*.

Introduction

To understand the impact of Aramaic language and literature upon the Qur'ān, one should gain a full appreciation of the historical context in which the text arose. Although written in “clear Arabic language” (*lisān 'arabī mubīn*; Q 16:103; 26:195), the *lingua franca* of the world in which the text operated, i.e. Near Eastern late antiquity (ca. 2nd-7th century CE), was Aramaic. It is the Bible translations and late antique Christian writings in the eastern Aramaic dialect called Syriac in particular, which are most in conversation with the Qur'ān. Medieval Muslim scholars took an interest in exploring the Syriac language and Biblical canon in order to better understand of the text as a whole. They include Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī' (d. 911/1505) who collected and examined the text's loan words (*mu'arabbāt*), especially Syriac (*al-suryāniyyah*), and Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (d. 808/1460) who accepted the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) as the *injīl* mentioned in the Qur'ān.

Early scholars of the modern western academe sometimes ignored Syriac when comparing the Qur'an and Bible. Their dependence on the Greek texts did not sufficiently account for the importance of Aramaic in the Qur'ān's milieu, i.e. Near Eastern late antiquity. However, beginning with Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) and Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), scholars paid more attention to the Qur'ān's relationship to Aramaic (especially Syriac) Biblical and post-Biblical tradition. Examples of the text's dialogue with Syriac Christian literature are found in the narratives concerning the seven sleepers (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*) and the “two-horned one” (*dhū al-qarnayn*) in Q 18.

Over the past century, and especially during the last two decades, the contribution of Aramaic (especially Syriac) to the Qur'ān has been a subject of significant discussion and debate. This article begins by documenting this lively scholarly exchange by reviewing modern studies on the Qur'ān's language and audience generally, and then focusing on recent scholarship on the Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospels.

The Qur'ān's “Vocabulary”

During the 1920s a number of scholarly works were published which examined the Qur'ān's language in light of Syriac. Alphonse Mingana set the foundation for research on the Qur'ān in light of Syriac in a study entitled "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Qur'ān." He provides a brief typology and some examples of Syriac words used in the Qur'ān, asserting that 70% of the Qur'ān's "foreign vocabulary" is Syriac in origin.¹ Mingana's study, however, would have had a greater impact on the field had he followed it up with further research.

The cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism of the Qur'ān's language is demonstrated best in the work of Arthur Jeffery who provides systematic philological evidence to expand the Qur'ān's cultural sphere to its greatest extent in the *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. From the many loan words that gradually worked their way into the Arabic of the Qur'ān, including words from Hebrew, Akkadian, Sumerian, Persian, Greek, Egyptian, Ethiopic, and Indic dialects, it becomes evident from Jeffery's research that the majority of these terms come from dialects of the Aramaic language, and the Syriac dialect more specifically.²

Concurrent with the attention given to the Qur'ān's relationship with Syriac, however, was its relationship to Christianity. With its scholarly debate soon followed.

Trouble in Paradise: Maidens or Grapes?

The intimacy of the Qur'ān with the liturgical idiom of Syrian and Mesopotamian churches (Syriac) came into being, also in the 1920's, with Tor Andrae's *Der Ursprung der Islams und das Christentum*.³ After portraying an image of late antique Arabia similar to that of Richard Bell's, in which the Nestorian churches from the Persian sphere and Monophysite churches of the Abyssinian sphere exercised much influence along Arabian trade routes, Andrae's insightful analysis compares the description of paradise in Q 56, likening the "wide eyed maidens" (*hūr 'īn*) with the imagery of the bridal chamber (Q 34:37)⁴ in the Hymn of Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373).⁵ Decades later Andrae's thesis was criticized by Edmund Beck and the matter was put to rest.⁶

All of this changed in 2000 with the publication of Christoph Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* in which he argues the Qur'ān was originally a Syriac Christian lectionary that was misinterpreted by classical Muslim exegetes.⁷ Luxenberg emends the meaning and orthography of dozens of Qur'ānic verses to fit what he deems to be a suitable Syro-

¹ Alphonse Mingana, "Syriac Influence on the Style of the Qur'ān," *BJRL* 2, 1927, 80.

² Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*, Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938.

³ See Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung der Islams und das Christentum*, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926; Fr. trans. Jules Roche, *Les origines de l'islam et le christianisme*, Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955, 21, 118, 131, 205.

⁴ 'Uthmān's codex states *ghurufāt*, "chambers," whereas Ibn Mas'ūd's codex states the singular *ghurfah*, "chamber." See Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices/Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, Leiden: Brill, 1937, 77.

⁵ Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung der Islams und das Christentum*, 151-61.

⁶ Edmund Beck, "Les Houris du Coran et Ephrem le syrien," *MIDEO* 6, 1959-1961, 405-8.

⁷ Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2000, 20. Other than reminding us that the Arabic *qur'ān* corresponds to Syriac *qeryānā* he does not substantiate his argument with concrete evidence.

Aramaic reading. The most publicized case for which Luxenberg has been attacked concerns his revival and development of Andrae's theory, adding that the *ḥūr 'īn* are "white grapes." While it is quite clear that the Qur'ānic description of *ḥūr 'īn* does not refer to white grapes but rather women, it is equally clear that the description of Q 56 has the imagery of the bridal chamber of Syriac literature in mind, including Aphrahat's *Demonstration on Death and the Last Days*.⁸ It is not uncommon to find descriptions of paradise associated with hanging fruit in both the Qur'ān and the extant corpus of Syriac literature.⁹ Oddly enough, Luxenberg does not make this case. Nor does he identify any specific genre or corpus of Syriac literature to compare with the Qur'ān. Furthermore, he does not systematically explain the arbitrariness of selecting Syriac words of his predilection to fit his new Qur'ānic reading. In fact, while Luxenberg's book provides rich—though often unsubstantiated—insights, and a handful of solutions to previously problematic passages, his work produces more problems in their place and is so methodologically problematic as it maintains an exclusive focus on philology, with little regard for the Qur'ān "as a literary text...that has to be de-coded and evaluated historically."¹⁰ Several scholarly reviews have assessed the strengths and limitations of Luxenberg's work.¹¹ What remains to be said about Luxenberg is that his flawed—and some would say polemical¹²—study finally delivered a rude awakening to the field of Qur'ānic Studies concerning the importance of Syriac.

Urtext, Intertext or Subtext?

It would be a grave error to claim that all scholarship on the impact of Syriac—or Aramaic more generally—on the Qur'ān argues the text is derivative of a Biblical text

⁸ Aphrahat, "Demonstrations," *PS* 1, 1894, 1003-7 (On Death and the Last Days).

⁹ E.g. Q 2:266; 6:99; 16:11; 36: 34; 56:20; 95:1; etc.; Ephrem, "Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de paradiso und contra Julianum," *CSCO* 174-175, 78-79, 1957, 19, 18 (hymn 5.15); Kouriyhe's unpublished paper cites similar examples from Jacob of Serugh's (d. 521) *Memre*.

¹⁰ Angelica Neuwirth, "Qur'ān and history - A disputed relationship: Some reflections on Qur'ānic history and history in the Qur'ān," *JQS* 5.1, 2003, 8-9.

¹¹ Ibid.; Phoenix, R. and C. Horn. "Review of Christoph Luxenberg (ps.) *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran; Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Qur'ānsprache*," *HJSS* 6:1, 2003; Simon Hopkins, "Review of Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*," *JSAI* 28, 2003; Wilhelm Maria Maas, "Der Koran – ein christliches Lektionar?," *NZSE* 11-12, 2003, 18-22; F. Corriente, "On A Proposal For A 'Syro-Aramaic' Reading Of The Qur'ān," *CCO* 1, 2003; Murtaḍā Karīmī-Nyā, "Masaley-e ta'sīr-e zabānhay-e arāmī va siryānī dar zabān-e Qur'ān," *ND* 4:107, 1382/2004, 45-56; Jan van Reeth, "Le vignoble du paradis et le chemin qui y mène: la thèse de C. Luxenberg et les sources du Coran," *Arabica* 53, 2006, 511-24; Aḥmad al-Jamal, "al-Qur'ān wa lughat al-suryān," *MKLT* 10, 2007, 62-109; Devin Stewart, "Notes of medieval and modern emendations of the Qur'ān" in idem (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, pp. 225-245; Walid Saleh, "The etymological fallacy and Quranic Studies: Muhammad, paradise, and late antiquity" in Angelika Neuwirth et al. (eds.) *The Qur'ān in Context*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009, pp. 649-98; Daniel King, "A Christian Qur'ān? A Study in the Syriac Background to the Language of the Qur'ān as Presented in the Work of - Christoph Luxenberg," *JLARC* 3, 2009, 44-71. Of course, writing Arabic in Syriac script (*garšūnī*)—which Luxenberg contends the Qur'ān was written in originally—was used to write some of its verses by Christians after the fact. For more on this see Salah Mahgoub Edris, "Teile des Qur'ān in Garšūnī Umschrift. Eine Studie zur Berliner Handschrift Nr. Sachau 98," *PDO* 22, 1997, 641-665.

¹² Fred Donner, "The Historian, the Believer, and the Quran" in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* 2, London; New York: Routledge, 2011.

(i.e. *urtext*). The scholarship, rather, demonstrates a spectrum of positions. On one end of the spectrum is the Luxenberg school, which despite its marginalization, still has a small following who argue the Qur'ān we possess today was originally a Syriac Christian liturgical text.¹³ This claim is hotly contested, if not rejected outright by most Qur'ān specialists.

On the other end of the spectrum is Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran: Band 1* which examines the early Meccan Suras according to the chronology established in Islamic tradition and accepted by Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans*. For Neuwirth the Qur'ān is fundamentally a text of late antiquity and belonging to the Arabian context illustrated in Islamic tradition. The relationship between Qur'ānic passages and Syriac Christian literature are only part of a wider intertextual dialogue between the Qur'ān and religious works of late antiquity.¹⁴

In the middle of the spectrum is *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* by Gabriel Reynolds, who neither accepts the traditional Qur'ānic chronology, nor an explicit *urtext*. Reynolds argues that Qur'ānic passages are best understood when read solely through the lens of late antique Syriac Christian homiletic literature. The utility of Islamic tradition (especially Tafsir) is diminished significantly given the *mufassirūn*'s unawareness of the subtexts behind the passages they examine. For Reynolds it is more fruitful to understand the Qur'ān by reading it "as homily."¹⁵

There is quite evidently a lack of consensus about the contribution of Aramaic (especially Syriac) Christian literature to the Qur'ān. There is equally a lack of consensus about whom the audience of the Qur'ān were in light of the impact of Aramaic.

From Pagan to Jewish-Christian

The religious symbols and figures that flourished in different Aramaean spheres intersected with the Qur'ān's milieu. Some scholars demonstrate that the Qur'ān's language shared many pagan and heterodox religious beliefs with Aramaic speaking cultures.¹⁶ Others interpret certain Qur'ānic narratives with respect to the cultural and mythological ideas circulating in the Near East, including those of the illusive Sabians, whose tradition is written in the Mandaic dialect of Aramaic.¹⁷

¹³ This would include many who are part of the *Inarah. Institut zur Erforschung der frühen Islamgeschichte und des Koran*. See further Manfred Kropp, "Äthiopische Arabesken im Koran. Afroasiatische Perlen auf Band gereiht, einzeln oder zu Paaren, diffus verteilt oder an Glanzpunkten konzentriert" in Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Markus Gross (eds.) *Schlaglichter: Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*. Berlin: Schöner Verlag, 2008, pp. 384-410; Jan van Reeth, "Eucharistie im Koran" in idem. (eds.) *Schlaglichter*, pp. 457-60; Gabriel Sawma, *The Qur'ān: Misinterpreted, Mistranslated, and Misread. The Aramaic Language of the Qur'ān*. Plainsboro, NJ: GMS, 2006.

¹⁴ Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren*. Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011.

¹⁵ Gabriel Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext*, New York; London: Routledge, 2012, 232-57.

¹⁶ Siegmund Fraenkel, *Die Aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962, 11, 141, 255, etc. See also Rudolf Dvorák, *Ein Beitrag zur Frage über die Fremdwörter im Koran*, München: F. Straub, 1884.

¹⁷ Ilse Lichtendstadter, "Origin and Interpretation of some quranic Koranic Symbols," in G. Makdisi (ed.) *Arabic and Islamic Studies in honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1965, pp. 426-36; Tamara Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1992, 6, 104.

However, far more scholars hint at the possibility that Jewish-Christian sects made up an important part of the Qur'ān's audience, or played some role in its development. Among them Yūsuf al-Durrah and Jospheh Azzi argue that the Qur'ān was inspired by the Jewish-Christian book known as the *Aramaic Gospel of Matthew*;¹⁸ and for Azzi it was the individual dubbed by the Islamic literary sources as Waraqaḥ (i.e. scribe?)¹⁹ b. Nawfal (d. 610), the cousin of Muḥammad's first wife Khadijah bt. Khuwaylid (d. 619), who was his alleged teacher.²⁰ These theories remain controversial within mainstream Qur'ānic Studies. Some scholars—notably Sidney Griffith—completely reject a Jewish-Christian substratum to the Qur'ān's text or Muḥammad's religious movement.²¹ It is true that such theories, like all those that seek to find a hidden and meanwhile convenient “source” for Islamic origins, are either short sighted or have within them the polemical tendency to rob Islam of its creative force and reduce it to heretical—i.e. illegitimate—beginnings. However, in recent years more nuanced studies—including that by Holger Zellentin—have searched within the verses of the Qur'ān itself to guide their search for neighboring textual or religious impulses that might shed some light on the Qur'ān's “legal culture,” and its place between “Rabbinic Judaism and Ecclesiastical Christianity.”²² Central to Zellentin's argument is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, an important late antique Syriac legal treatise.

More from the Syriac Christian context

Sidney Griffith remains a central figure for scholarship on the Qur'ān in light of Syriac Christian literature. Keeping in mind that the religious, cultural and linguistic landscape of 7th century Arabia was for centuries inextricably tied to communities in the greater Near East compels one to avoid simplistic generalizations. Griffith cautions against reductionist theories of direct or linear “influences,” and expounds upon the complex, diffuse, diverse, and free flowing ideas present in the Qur'ān's “thematic context.”²³ Among many studies Griffith convincingly argues that Qur'ānic language concerning the Trinity, the nature of Jesus and the story of the Youths of Ephesus (Q 18:9-26) are all informed by an intimate understanding of Syriac Christian literature.²⁴

¹⁸ Joseph Dorra-Haddad, *al-Qur'ān da 'wah naṣrāniyyah*, Beirut: Durūs Qur'āniyyah, 196?, 88. 124-37; Joseph Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète: aux sources du coran*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001, 190.

¹⁹ Cf. C. F. Robinson, EI², “Waraqa b. Nawfal.”

²⁰ Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète*, 265-284.

²¹ Sidney Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur'ān: Who were those who said ‘Allah is third of three’” in Meir Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins, Sarah Stroumsa and Bruno Chiesa (eds.) *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Medieval Exegeses of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān*, Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007, p. 87; Sāmī 'Aṣṣās, *al-Qur'ān laysa da 'wah naṣrāniyyah: radd 'alā kitābay al-haddād wa al-ḥarīrī*, Damascus: Dār al-Wathā'iq, 2003.

²² Holger Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013 argues that within Islamic origins, the “Qur'ān's legal culture” may be in close dialogue with that of the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. See also John Jandora, *The Latent Trace of Islamic Origins Subtitle: Midian's Legacy in Mecca's Moral Awakening*, Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012.

²³ Sidney Griffith, “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The ‘Companions of the Cave’ in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition” in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, p. 111.

²⁴ Sidney Griffith, “Syriacisms in the Arabic Qur'ān,” pp. 83-110; “The Gospel, the Qur'ān, and the Presentation of Jesus in al-Ya'qubi's *Tarikh*” in John Reeves (ed.) *Bible and Qur'ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004, pp. 133-60; “Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān,” 109-38.

A similar study by Kevin van Bladel traces the qur'ānic story of Dhū al-Qarnayn in Q 18:83-98 to the Syriac *Alexander Legend* which circulated in the Near East in the final years of Muḥammad's life.²⁵ Also, Yousef Kouriyhe systematically discusses the role of the qur'ānic *ḥūr 'īn*—which Luxenberg fails to do—and the relationship to its counterpart in Syriac literature. Kouriyhe ultimately corroborates the qur'ānic notion of the term while staying true to its conceptual, Syriac precedent. He argues that the *ḥūr/ḥūrāyē* are symbols—hanging fruit—of virgin female companions for which desert hermits longed, but to whom they could only allude.²⁶ In addition, Joseph Witztum demonstrates that in addition to Rabbinic literature, Syriac Christian literature also preserves stories of Hebrew patriarchs upon which the Qur'ān built. Witztum argues this is especially the case with Abraham's founding of “the house” in Q 2:127 and the retelling of the Joseph story in Q 12.²⁷

The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions

Recently Emran El-Badawi has embarked on a literary and historical analysis between *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, which the rest of this article discusses.²⁸ El-Badawi demonstrates how the Qur'ān, via the agency of the late antique *lingua franca* of the Near East—Aramaic—selectively challenged or re-appropriated, and therefore took up the “dogmatic re-articulation” of language and imagery coming from the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, in order to fit the idiom and religious temperament of a heterogeneous, sectarian Arabian audience.

To contextualize dogmatic re-articulation in this study consider that amid the divisive theological controversies surrounding the nature of God and creation—exemplified in the discussion on monotheism found in *Gēnzā Rbā* R1:1:34-39;²⁹ Aphrahat's (d. 345 CE) heated exchange with his Jewish interlocutors, Ephrem's (d. 373 CE) *Refutation of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*,³⁰ to Q 112's response to the Nicene Creed of 325 CE³¹—the prophet Muḥammad's espousal of strict monotheism set the

²⁵ Kevin van Bladel, “The Alexander legend in the Quran 18:83-102” in idem (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, pp. 175-203.

²⁶ Yousef Kouriyhe, unpublished paper.

²⁷ Joseph Witztum, “The Foundations of the House Q 2:127,” *BSOAS* 72:1, 2009, 25-40. Cf. also Joseph Witztum, “A Re-Examination of Surat Yusuf (Q 12)” in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Quran*, New York: Routledge Press, 2011 with Malek Bennabi, *Le phénomène caranique: essai d'une théorie sur le Coran*, 1968, Arab. trans. 'Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, *al-Zāhirah al-qur'āniyyah*, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1968, 109-53.

²⁸ Emran El-Badawi, *The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*. London; New York: Routledge Press, 2013.

²⁹ Anonymous, *Gēnzā Rbā*, Ed. Husām H. al-'Aydānī, Baghdad: Mawsū'at al-'Uyūn al-Ma'rifiyyah, 2011. Its books are divided between the Right (19 total) and Left (7 total).

³⁰ Ephrem the Syrian, *St. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, 2 vols., Ed. C. W. Mitchell, London; Oxford: William Norgate, 1912.

³¹ This point has been discussed by a number of studies including Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: die literarische Form des Koran - ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007, 26; Manfred Kropp, “Tripartite, but anti-Trinitarian formulas in the Qur'ānic corpus, possibly pre-Qur'ānic” in idem (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* 2, London; New York: Routledge, 2011, 251, 260; Naṣr H. Abū Zayd, “Theological Interpretation,” Lecture delivered to the Bibliotheca Alexandria, Alexandria, Egypt, December, 2008, concerning an earlier discussion with Angelika Neuwirth.

agenda for the dogmatic re-articulation of qur'ānic passages from the Aramaic Gospels. In addition, the Qur'ān not only promotes this hermeneutical agenda—centered around a vision of strict monotheism—when debating the nature of God and creation, but also when re-telling the stories of the prophets and their followers, as well as relaying stories and lessons from the past more generally.

El-Badawi analyses the literary process, i.e. dogmatic re-articulation, behind the 'qur'ānic homily' on verses emanating from the Aramaic Gospels. It demonstrates dogmatic re-articulation by analyzing correspondences between the discourse of salient qur'ānic passages and those in dialogue with them from the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Of the four canonical Gospels he argues that due to its popularity in the late antique world³² and its emphasis on a prophetic and apocalyptic worldview, the Gospel of Matthew became somewhat more diffused in the Qur'ān's milieu via the participation of Arabic speaking Christians in the sphere of Arabian oral tradition.

El-Badawi argues that Arabic speaking Christians lived in a state of diglossia, wherein they used Arabic for common everyday purposes and Aramaic (probably Syriac) for liturgical and religious purposes.³³ It is they who were the cultural agents absorbing various elements of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions into the oral tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia, elements that eventually entered into the Qur'ān's milieu.

Furthermore, El-Badawi's study analyzes the Arabic language of qur'ānic passages, verses, phrases, idioms, words and rhetorical schemes, as compared to the Aramaic text of the Gospels in an effort to demonstrate that the process of cultural absorption took place over an extended period of time—decades or centuries—and not overnight. He argues against a Jewish or Christian *urtext* to the Qur'ān and problematic notions of 'influences' or 'borrowings' as were prevalent in earlier studies on the text. For instance, the Qur'ān's phrasing of the verses *lah" maqālīd al-samāwāt wa al-arḍ*, "to Him are the keys of the heavens and the earth" (Q 39:63), or *kull" nafs dhā'iqat al-mawt*, "every soul shall taste death" (Q 3:185), originate in the context of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, but find no exact verbal equivalent in those traditions. Furthermore, the rhetorical style of Jesus's speech in the Gospels, namely of responding to questions he himself posits by stating, "truly I say to you" (*amīn ēmar lak[ūn]*; Matthew 5:18; Mark 11:23; Luke 4:14; John 3:3; etc), is modified in the Qur'ān that it may respond to its own questions with the command, "say, indeed" (*qul innamā*; Q 10:20; 13:36; 21:45; etc). Furthermore, verses which discuss matters of faith and orthopraxy preserving the formula "if it is said to them...they say..." (*idhā qīl lahum...qālū..*; Q 2:170; 5:104; 6:30; 25:60; 31:21; 36:47; Cf. Q 45:32) are styled as dialogues like those found in Syriac Christian as well as Mandaic literature.³⁴ However, unlike the dialogue between Bardaisan (d. 222) and his student Awīdā or between the speaker and the "Magnificent Living

³² Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: Other Early Writings*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 9.

³³ John Tringham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, Beirut: Longman, 1979, 19; Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 8-9, 12; Ernst A. Knauf, "Arabo-Aramaic And 'Arabiyya: From Ancient Arabic To Early Standard Arabic, 200 Ce–600 Ce" in Angelika Neuwirth *et al.* (eds.) *The Qur'ān in Context*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009, p. 199.

³⁴ E.g. Bardaisan, *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, Ed. H. J. W. Drijvers, Piscataway, NJ: Gogrias Press, 2007; *Gēnzā Rbā* R3:1.

One,” the qur’ānic verses typically illustrate a dialogue between an omniscient third person (God?) and an un-named interlocutor(s), both of whose names have been deliberately stricken from the record. The point is that these qur’ānic verses demonstrate a long process of cultural exchange, theological debate, and morphological adjustment—not mere borrowing. There was therefore no process of “cut and paste.” Having absorbed and localized aspects of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, the Qur’ān transformed pre-Islamic Arabian oral tradition into a collection of dogmatic prophetic speech.

Final Remarks

The Impact of Aramaic (especially Syriac) on the Qur’ān has been a subject around which there has been much scholarly debate, both long ago and in recent years. There is no doubt that Luxenberg’s research invigorated Qur’ānic Studies, albeit in a controversial and divisive manner. As a result, the scholarly pendulum has swung widely. However, the field continues to change and there is some indication that research is now taking place within a more focused area of inquiry. In this vein, there is hope that new work by Zellentin, El-Badawi and others will tread a path between that of Neuwirth and Reynolds.

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