CHAPTER 12

A Syriac Reading of the Qur'ān? The Case of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*[*]

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1   Luxenberg's Syriac Reading of the Qur'ān

The publication of Christoph Luxenberg's study entitled *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*[1] provoked rather mixed reactions, ranging from uncritical acclaim to scathing dismissal.[2] The author indeed presented a rather unorthodox view on the early history of Islam, more specifically on the textual history of the Qur'ān and its historical and linguistic context. He contends that the Qur'ān originated as a Christian lectionary, and that it was written in a sort of Arabo-Aramaic mixed language, that was soon misunderstood due to the fact that the earliest manuscripts are unpointed, thus leaving considerable uncertainty about the correct reading of many consonants and hence the basic meaning of numerous words, phrases and passages.

Luxenberg's far-reaching thesis concerning the original text and context of the Qur'ān should obviously not be believed or ridiculed, but confirmed or refuted on the basis of scholarly arguments. By far the most thorough, instructive and balanced treatment of the Luxenberg hypothesis so far was

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[1]   Chr. Luxenberg (ps.), *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin 2000), henceforth quoted as *SLK*. The book was translated into English in a revised and enlarged edition as *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran. A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin 2007), henceforth *SRK*. The German adjective *syro-aramäisch* was possibly chosen to avoid the ambiguity of *syrisch*. In an English context, however, 'Syro-Aramaic' is an unhappy choice; there is no reason to abstain from the usual 'Syriac' (as against 'Syrian').

[2]   For a useful summary of scholarly reactions to Luxenberg's book, cf. Daniel King 2009. In his discussion of my own review of *SLK* (published in *Aramaic Studies* 2/2 [2004] 268–272), however, King partly misrepresents my position as being supportive of 'the *liturgical* reading of Sura 108' (emphasis mine), whereas I merely stated that Luxenberg's Syriac reading 'yields an understandable text, which would fit perfectly within the context of an emerging religion'.

written by Daniel King. On the basis of meticulous philological research he concludes that Luxenberg's method

> is severely lacking in many areas, although he may on occasion have hit upon a useful emendation. Thus although the hypothesis as a whole is faulty, the individual textual suggestions ought to be treated on a case-by-case basis.[3]

In other words, Luxenbergs sweeping and exceedingly self-confident statements on the Qurʾan as having originated as a Christian lectionary and having been written in an Arabo-Aramaic mixed language are largely unfounded and his philological method contains many serious and demonstrable flaws—as we shall also see below. Yet, in concrete cases he may have come up with valuable ideas and suggestions for plausible readings of the text of the Qurʾān.

What is needed, therefore, is for each and every one of Luxenberg's philological proposals to be carefully examined and critically evaluated, to see whether on closer consideration there is some value in them.[4] The present paper offers a detailed philological analysis of Luxenberg's treatment of *Sūrat al-Kawt̲ar*, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of his approach, with special attention to the Qurʾānic context of this sūrah and the question to what extent a 'Syriac reading of the Qurʾān' is a helpful concept.[5]

2   The Case of Sūrat al-Kawt̲ar

Sūrat al-Kawt̲ar as a whole is treated by Luxenberg in a separate chapter.[6] The text as it is traditionally read is presented below, alongside the English rendering by Bell:[7]

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إِنَّآ أَعْطَيْنَـٰكَ ٱلْكَوْثَرَ (١) فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَٱنْحَرْ (٢) إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ ٱلْأَبْتَرُ (٣)

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3   King 2009: 44.

4   An important contribution to the discussion is made by Guillaume Dye in the present volume. reference? Whereas King (2009: 55–61) negatively evaluates Luxenberg's view on the *waw* of apodosis in Qurʾānic Arabic, Dye actually makes a convincing case for its plausibility.

5   King (2009: 66) considers Luxenberg's re-reading of *Sūrat al-Kawt̲ar* 'not unappealing … It deserves further consideration and research'.

6   *SRK*, 292–301; *SLK*, 271–275.

7   Bell 1939, II: 681.

1. *innā aʿṭaynāka l-kawṯar*   Verily, we have given thee abundance;
2. *fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nḥar*   So pray to thy Lord, and sacrifice.
3. *inna šāniʾaka huwa l-abtar.*   Verily, it is he who hateth thee who is the
                                      docked one.

It is fair to say that modern exegetes are just as much at a loss in making sense of this short passage as their medieval fellows.[8] In order to give an impression of the problems and exegetical challenges that this texts presents, we shall quote Bell's concise commentary in full:

V. 1

al-kauthar, properly and adjective, 'full', 'abundant' (N.S., i, p. 92, note 4). According to some, 'much wealth'; according to others 'many followers'. It is sometimes said to be the name of a river in Paradise. Nöldeke suggests that the beginning of the surah has been lost; it may possibly be a fragment from somewhere else, but it is difficult to suggest a context.

V. 2

inḥar, 'sacrifice', only here in the Qurʾān; it seems improbable that Muhammad would have taken part in the sacrifices of the Pilgrimage in the Meccan period of his activity. Hence this exhortation is probably Medinan, at the introduction of the sacrifices of the *ʾaḍḥā* (?).

V. 3

shāniʾaka, 'the one who hates you', is interpreted as referring to a definite individual who had called him *ʾabtar*, 'mutilated', 'tailless, i.e. having no son; see N.S., i, p. 92 for the persons mentioned. It certainly looks as if an individual were referred to, though other authorities interpret it as referring to a class.[9]

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8 For an overview of traditional exegesis of this *sūrah*, see Birkeland 1956: 1–140, esp. 55–99. Birkeland concludes 'that the legendary picture of Muhammed formed as early as in the last quarter of the first century has prevented Muslim interpreters from a historically correct understanding of Surah 108' (p. 99).

9 Bell 1939 II, *Surahs xxv–cvix*, 591. The German translation by Paret (1979) equally reflects the exegetical problems: 'Im Namen des barmherzigen und gnädigen Gottes. 1. Wir haben dir die Fülle gegeben. 2. Bete darum zu deinem Herrn und opfere! 3. (Ja) dein Hasser ist es, der

The main questions concerning the interpretation of these lines are to what the 'abundance' is supposed to refer, how the act of sacrifice fits in the social context of early Islam, why the enemy is called 'the docked one' and, finally, what the connection between these elements could be so as to yield an understandable text and Sitz im Leben of this particular sūrah.

2.1 *Luxenberg's Reading of* Sūrat al-Kawṯar

In Luxenberg's Syriac reading, however, the passage runs as follows:

1.	*innā aʿṭaynāka l-kawṯar*	We have given you the (virtue of) constancy;
2.	*fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nǧar*	so pray to your Lord and persevere (in prayer);
3.	*inna šāniʾaka huwa l-abtar.*	your adversary (the devil) is (then) the loser.

Luxenberg's conclusion is that most of the allegedly difficult words are actually Syriac. Indeed, according to him, there is hardly a single genuinely Arabic word to be found in this *sūrah*.[10]

It must be admitted that as for the general meaning and context of this *sūrah*, Luxenberg's reading is attractive. Nothing remains of the enigmatic, opaque nature of the traditional text. In its new interpretation we are not dealing with a fragment from somewhere else, but with a clear-cut passage conveying a plausible message. The text seems to comprise a straightforward exhortation to steadfastness in piety against the adversary, whose final defeat is predicted. Such a passage, moreover, would fit rather well within the context of an emerging religion. The question remains whether Luxenberg's Syriac reading will hold against close scrutiny.

2.2   أعطى aʿṭā *'to Give' as an Syriac Loanword*

Concerning the expression *aʿṭaynāka* 'we have given thee' in verse 1, Luxenberg considers the Arabic verb أعطى *aʿṭā* 'to give' to be a dialectal, secondary formation—by means of a shift from *hamz* to *ʿayn* and an ensuing emphatisation of ܬ *t*—from Syriac ܐܝܬܝ *ayti* 'to make arrive, bring': **ʾaʾtā > *ʾaʿtā > aʿṭā.*[11] As an additional argument for this etymology he adduces the fact that the root عطى *ʿaṭā*—which Luxenberg claims to have no cognate in any other Semitic

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gestutzt (oder: schwanzlos, d.h. ohne Anhang(?) oder ohne Nachkommen?) ist. (Oder (als Verwünschung): Wer dich haßt, soll gestutzt bzw. schwanzlos sein!)'. Cf. also Paret, ²1977, ad loc.

10   *SRK*, 298.

11   *SRK*, 298–299.

language—is used much less frequently in the Qurʾān than اتى *atā*, which, he believes, is also derived from Syriac ܐܬܐ *eṯā*.

From a linguistic point of view, however, Luxenberg's Syriac derivation of أعطى *aʿṭā* 'to give' is seriously flawed for several reasons. First of all, it requires two *ad hoc* sound changes ʾ > ʿ and *t* > *ṭ*.[12] The causative derivation of I-*hamza* roots is commonly attested in Arabic without any sort of dissimilation: آكل *ākala* < **aʾkala* 'to feed', آتى *ātā* < **aʾtā* 'to bring'. There is also no phonological reason why pharyngealization should spread from ʿ*ayn* to adjacent non-emphatic consonants: أعذب *aʿḏab* 'more punishing' (not **aʿḏab*).

Secondly, it is not true that the root عطى *ʿaṭā* is unique to Classical Arabic. The verb is attested in Dadanitic (= Lihyanite) in the 5th–4th c. BCE, a time and place where it is hard to posit a strong Aramaic adstratum. The same root is also known from Safaitic proper names. On these grounds, too, it is unlikely that عطى *ʿaṭā* should have been borrowed from Syriac.[13]

Thirdly, the mere fact that أتى *atā* is more frequent than عطى *ʿaṭā* is in itself no argument in favour of the alleged Syriac origin of the latter.[14]

In other words, there is no reason to doubt the 'Arabicness' of the verb أعطى *aʿṭā* 'to give' and hence there is just as little reason to assume any influence from Syriac at this point in *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*. Since even Luxenberg's interpretation of أعطى *aʿṭā* as a Syriac loanword does not yield a better or indeed a different meaning, it seems that the whole exercise is done just in order to strengthen Luxenberg's claim that hardly a word in *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* is genuinely Arabic.

2.3   كوثر *kawṯar 'Constancy'*

The enigmatic expression كوثر *kawṯar* is traditionally taken to be derived from the root *kṯr* 'numerous' and translated as 'abundance' or, alternatively, explained a reference to one of the rivers in Paradise.[15] Luxenberg, however, identifies it with the Syriac noun ܟܘܬܪܐ *kuttārā* 'awaiting, persistence, stability, duration'. Also in the light of his re-reading of *wa-nǧar* in verse 2 (see below, § 2.5), this seems an excellent suggestion that yields a plausible meaning.

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12   Fassberg (2005: 243–256, esp. 249–250) is critical of a general shift from glottal stop to ʿ*ayin*.

13   Needless to say, even if عطى *ʿaṭā* had been unique to Arabic, that still would not have been a sufficient reason the deem it suspect. The well-attested Hebrew root *ʿåśå* 'to do, make' is a case in point.

14   In addition, Luxenberg's claim that Egyptian Arabic *əddīnī* 'give me' is also derived from Syriac *ayti*, is equally unlikely. *Iddī* is most probably a denominal verb from the word id 'hand', as in *hand me X = give me X*.

15   See Birkeland 1956: 57–70.

The root *ktr* is well attested in Syriac, with derivations of nouns, adjectives and adverbs: ܟܘܬܪܐ *kuttārā* 'staying, remaining', ܟܬܪ *kattar* 'to wait for, persist, remain', ܐܬܟܬܪ *eṯkattar* 'to remain, dwell', ܡܟܬܪܘܬܐ *mḵattruṯā* 'continuance', ܡܟܬܪܢܐ *mḵattrānā* 'lasting, stable, enduring', ܡܟܬܪܢܐ *mḵat-trānā* 'abiding, existence', ܡܟܬܪܢܐܝܬ *mḵattrānāʾiṯ* 'permanently'.[16] Moreover, as Luxenberg pointed out, the same basic meaning of 'constancy' is equally plausible in Q 20:33,34 كي نسبّحك كثيرا ونذكرك كثيرا *kay nusabbiḥaka kaṯīrā wa-naḏkuraka kaṯīrā* 'that we may *constantly* glorify Thee and make *constantly* remembrance of Thee'.[17]

The Arabic diphthong *aw* for Syriac *u* possibly has its origin in a graphic reinterpretation[18] of the written form كوثر, just as تورية/توراة *tawrā* most probably derived from *tōrā*[19] and قسورة *qaswara* in Q 74:51 might have come from a Syriac form *qāsōrā* for ܩܘܣܪܐ *qusrā* 'donkey'.[20]

On the other hand, one must count with the possibility that this Qurʾānic lexeme did not come from Syriac, but from some other Arabic dialect strand. Hence is it certainly possible, but not certain that كوثر *kawṯar* 'constancy' is a Syriac loanword.

2.4   صلّى *ṣallā 'to Pray'*

Luxenberg mentions in passing that the verb صلّى *ṣallā* 'to pray' in verse 2 is a Syriac loanword. This does not seem to be controversial or new.[21]

2.5   نجر *naǧara 'to Persevere'*

For *wa-nḥar* in verse 3 Luxenberg proposes to read وانجر *wa-nǧar*—that is, a single dot should be added to this *rasm*—and to take the verb نجر *naḥara* 'to persevere' as a loanword from Syriac ܢܓܪ *nǧar* 'to persevere, persist'. It is indeed

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16   Sokoloff 2009: ss.vv.

17   *SRK*, 295. See also the contribution by Dye in the present volume.

18   Even though the oral tradition of the Qurʾānic text may prove to be less unreliable than Luxenberg suggests (*SRK, passim*), there are strong indications for actual *misreadings* of a written word in manuscripts. To mention only two examples: The form مُعَقِّبَت *muʿaqqibāt* in Q. 13:12 appears in the Codex Ibn Masʿūd as مَعَاقِيب *maʿāqīb*; both forms can be explained as different readings of one and the same unpointed *rasm* معقب. The same is true for Q 13: 31 يَاْيَسِ *yayʾasi*, for which the Codex Ibn Masʿūd has يتبين; both forms go back to an unpointed *rasm* سس. Cf. Jeffery 1937: 50–51. Much further research is needed here.

19   *SRK* 85–88.

20   *SRK*, 60, 63.

21   *SRK*, 297. Cf. Jeffery 1938: 198–199.

attractive to read a form of 'to persevere' here, especially also in the light of كوثر *kawṯar* 'constancy' in verse 1.

However, even though the Syriac verb is unproblematic, it is not absolutely necessary to assume a Syriac influence here either. As the root *nǧr* is attested in Safaitic inscriptions, too, one may also assume linguistic influence from there. Thus, in KRS 598 *l ḥmy w ngr {ẓ}lm b- ḥm* 'By Ḥmy and he NGR miserably by/in the heat',[22] it is conceivable that this verb should be translated as 'and he endured (suffered?) miserably in the heat'.

While Luxenberg's interpretation of verse 2 deserves acclaim, the use of the verb *naǧara* 'to persevere' does not necessarily support a Syriac provenance of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*.

2.6   شانئ *šāni*ʾ *'Adversary'*

Luxenberg takes the phrase شانئك *šāniʾaka* 'your adversary, the one who hates you' to be a 'further adapted transcription form Syro-Aramaic ܣܢܐܟ *sānāḵ*'. He further believes this to be a reference to Satan, since '[i]n the Christian Syriac terminology, Satan is referred to, among other things, as a "*misanthrope*"—hence and "*adversary*"—in contrast to God'.

Taking the phrase *šāniʾaka* as a transcription of Syriac, however, is problematic. Luxenberg forgets to explain why the Arabic form has retained the etymologically correct *š* (i.e. /s²/), while Syriac has *s* due to the merger of both phonemes in Aramaic. This makes a Syriac origin of the phrase unlikely.

Moreover, Luxenberg's interpretation of *šāniʾ* 'adversary' specifically in the sens of 'Satan' seems to be due to his exclusive interest in a Syriac Christian origin of the Qurʾān and hence forms part of a circular argument: the idea that *šāniʾ* should mean 'Satan' originates in his hypothesis of the Qurʾān as a Christian lectionary, while at the same time it forms a confirmation of this hypothesis. (See also §5 below.)

Furthermore, the interpretation of *šāniʾ* as 'Satan' is unnecessary in view of the fact that the more general meaning 'adversary, enemy' is also clearly attested in Biblical Hebrew שֹׂנֵא *śoneʾ*,[23] as well as in Safaitic *šnʾ*.[24] As we shall see below (§3.3), there are good reasons to assume that *šāniʾ* in verse 2 has the more general meaning of 'adversary'.

Therefore, in this case, too, there is no reason to assume any specific influence from Syriac in *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*.

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22   All Safaitic examples are quoted according to Al-Jallad 2015, 'Appendix of inscriptions'.

23   Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000: s.v. שֹׂנֵא *śoneʾ*.

24   Al-Jallad 2015: 'Dictionary', s.v. *s²nʾ*.

2.7 أَبْتَر abtar *Derived from Syriac* ܬܒܪ *tḇar?*

As regards the elative form أَبْتَر *abtar* in verse 3 Luxenberg states that its Arabic root بَتَر *batara* 'to cut off, to amputate' is derived from Syriac ܬܒܪ *tḇar* 'to break' through metathesis.[25] Hence he reads al-abtar as 'the loser'.

Even though Luxenberg's interpretation of *abtar* admittedly yields an attractive meaning within the context of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*, his linguistic analysis of the form is highly implausible in view of the fact that the root *btr*, with the basic meaning of 'to cut', is clearly attested in several Semitic languages. Biblical Hebrew has בָּתַר *båṯar* 'to cut in pieces' and בֶּתֶר *bɛṯɛr* 'piece (of sacrificial meat)',[26] in Geʿez we find በተረ *batara* 'to cut, to hit' and በትር *batr* 'stick, rod',[27] and even in (Jewish Palestinian) Aramaic—though apparently not in Syriac—one finds the noun בתר *btr* 'portion'.[28]

In order to maintain that Arabic *batara* is derived from Syriac *tḇar*, Luxenberg would have to suppose that all Semitic languages concerned must have borrowed this root from Aramaic,[29] after which in each language metathesis occurred independently—which is highly improbable. An alternative explanation would be that the root *tbr* first became *btr* due to metathesis in Aramaic, after which *btr* was borrowed in all languages concerned. In that case, however, Luxenberg should explain, first, why the original Aramaic *tbr* remained in use alongside the allegedly metathesised root *btr* and, secondly, why this metathesised form subsequently all but disappeared from Aramaic. Yet Luxenberg does not seem to be aware of the linguistic complications he has raised by his proposal, or at least fails to account for them. We may conclude, therefore, that there is no reason to assume Syriac or Aramaic influence in the case of Arabic *batara* 'to cut off'. As the root is attested in various other Semitic languages as well, it can be considered genuinely Arabic; its meaning 'to cut off' is well-established.[30]

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25   *SRK*, 297–298: 'Finally, the root بَتَر *batarᵃ* (*to break off, to amputate*) … is a metathesis of the Syro-Aramaic ܬܒܪ (*tḇar*)'.

26   Koehler and Baumgartner 1994. vol. I, p. 167b.

27   Dillman 1991: s.vv. *batara* and *batr* I. Cognate lexemes are found in various modern Ethio-Semitic languages.

28   Sokoloff 1990: 116. The attested plural form ביתרין *bytryn* /*bitrīn*/, a nominal *qiṭl* pattern, suggests that we are not dealing with a loanword from Hebrew in this case.

29   Obviously not from Syriac, since at least in the case of Biblical Hebrew this would be chronologically impossible.

30   In addition to the traditional *abtar* 'having the tail cut off', Lane (1863–1893) also mentions the Arabic lexemes *batara* 'to cut off', *inbatara* 'to become cut off', *bātir* 'sharp sword'.

Since *al-abtar* in verse 3 is indeed problematic, we must assume that it is not the root *btr* that is suspect, but the reading *al-abtar* is. Somewhat surprisingly, Luxenberg does not suggest to actually read *al-atbar*—a possible alternative reading of the same unpointed *rasm*—thus taking the word as a direct loan from Syriac *ṯbar* and saving himself the trouble of explaining the alleged metathesis of *batara*. This is all the more remarkable, as the root *tabara* is attested elswhere in the Qurʾān: Q 71.29 *tabār* 'destruction', Q 25.41 *tabbara* 'to break in pieces', Q 17.7, 23.41 *tatbīr* 'utter destruction', Q 7.135 *mutabbar* 'destroyed, broken up'.[31]

However, one reason why Syriac *ṯbar* does not provide a good source for Luxenberg's interpretation of our verse—'your adversary is the one who loses'—is that this verb does not simply mean 'to lose'; its basic meaning is 'to break' in a transitive sense. The only evidence Luxenberg provides for the meaning 'to lose' is that in Mannā's dictionary the verb *ṯbar* in its second meaning is rendered as انسحق *insaḥaqa* 'to be crushed', انكسر *inkasara* 'to get broken, be defeated', and in its third meaning as فرّ *farra* 'to flee, escape', انهزم *inhazama* 'to be defeated'.[32] But in Syriac the meaning 'to lose' could only be construed from the use of this verb in passive stems (peʿil, etpeʿel or etpaʿʿal, as in ܗܕܢ, ܠܒ ‍ *ṯḇiray lebbā* 'shattered of heart'. On the other hand, in view of the fact that Lane also mentions an Arabic verb *tabira* 'to perish', the reading *al-atbar* cannot be entirely excluded.[33]

A possibility that I propose here, is to read الأثبر *al-aṯbar* 'the one who loses'—a reading that also requires nothing other than repointing the traditional *rasm*. This yields the same meaning as Luxenberg proposed, but I deem it linguistically more probable. The Arabic verb ثبر *ṯabara* does have a basic intransitive meaning 'to perish'[34] an it is well-attested, also in the Qurʾān. There is an adjectival participle *ṯabir* 'suffering loss; erring; going astray; perishing', of which *aṯbar* would be the regular elative. In the Qurʾān we also find *ṯubūr* 'perdition, becoming lost' (25:14–15) and *maṯbūr* 'overcome, made to lose' (17:104).[35]

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31   Luxenberg surprisingly does not refer to Schall 1984–1986: 371–373, esp. 371–372, who already suggested an Aramaic origin for *mutabbar*.

32   Mannā 1900: 829a. It is difficult to understand why Luxenberg does not mention Mannā's rendering of the first meaning of *ṯbar*: تبر *tabara* 'to destroy', هلك *halaka* 'to perish', فني *faniya* 'to perish'.

33   Lane 1863–1893, s.v.

34   Lane 1863–1893: 330b-c s.v. ثبر. In addition, Lane mentions a transitive meaning: ثبره *ṯabarahū* 'he caused him to fail of attaining his desire'.

35   On account of the expression ثابر عليه *ṯābara ʿalayhi* 'he applied himself perseveringly [!]

Further corroborative evidence supporting the reading *al-aṯbar* 'the one who perishes, loses' may be gathered from the use of *ṯbr* in Safaitic, cf. NST 3 *h-ṯbrn* 'the warriors (*ṯabbārīn*?)'.[36]

In conclusion, the traditional *al-abtar* in verse 3 is suspect. Even though the reading *al-atbar* 'the loser' cannot be ruled out—in which case we would be dealing with an Aramaic loanword—a more probable reading is possibly *al-aṯbar* 'the loser'. If this is correct, there is no reason to assume any influence from Syriac in this case.

3   Qur'ānic Parallels to Sūrat al-Kawṯar

We may conclude that Luxenbergs proposal to interpret *kawṯar* 'constancy' as a Syriac loanword is a good one (§ 2.3). The phrase *wa-nǧar* 'and persevere' should indeed be interpreted as Luxenberg suggests, but even though an influence from Syriac and *nǧar* 'to persevere' is possible, influence from Safaitic or the possibility of a rare Arabic noun cannot be excluded (§ 2.5). The verb *ṣallā* 'to pray' is clearly a Syriac loanword (§ 2.4). In the case of *a'ṭā* 'to give' and *šāni'* 'adversary', however, there is no reason whatsoever to assume any Syriac influence (§§ 2.2, 2.6). Finally the form *al-abtar* should probably be read as *al-aṯbar*, in which case no Syriac influence could be assumed, but it is possible that the phrase should be read as *al-atbar*, in which case we are dealing with a Syriac loanword. In sum, we then arrive at the following reading of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*:

إِنَّآ أَعْطَيْنَٰكَ ٱلْكَوْثَرَ (١) فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَٱنْحَرْ (٢) إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ ٱلْأَبْتَرُ (٣)

1. *innā a'ṭaynāka l-kawṯar*   Verily, we have given thee constancy.
2. *fa-ṣalli li-rabbika wa-nǧar*   So pray to thy Lord, and persevere.
3. *inna šāni'aka huwa l-atbar*.   Verily, it is thy adversary who will perish.

Our next task is to investigate to what extent the interpretation proposed would fit within the wider context of the Qur'ān and whether is is possible to find parallel passages conveying the same idea, both for single verses as for

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to it' mentioned by Lane, it is even possible that we are dealing with a subtle pun in our *sūrah*: 'then the enemy is the loser (and we'll see who will last longest)'. But this latter point is obviously mere speculation.

36   Cf. Al-Jallad 2015: 'Dictionary', s.v. *ṯbr*.

the whole surah. Even though in some isolated cases Luxenberg does refer to
Qurʾānic parallel verses,[37] in this respect he could have done much better.

3.1   *Qurʾānic Parallels to the First Verse*

If understood in the sense proposed by Luxenberg, the first verse of *Sūrat al-
Kawṯar*, إِنَّا أَعطينٰك الكوثر *innā aʿṭaynāka l-kawṯar*, is to be translated as 'Verily,
we have given thee (the virtue of) constancy/perseverance'. As such the verse
conveys the idea that it is God who bestows the virtue of endurance or perse-
verance upon the believers. This precise notion is demonstrably not foreign to
the Qurʾān, as it is also expressed—albeit in different words—in Q 7:126 ربّنا أفرغ
علينا صبراً *rabbinā afriġ ʿalaynā ṣabran* 'O our Lord, pour out upon us patience'.
There can be little doubt that the noun *ṣabr* 'patience' is used here as a plain
Arabic synonym for the otherwise unattested expression *kawṯar*.[38]

3.2   *Qurʾānic Parallels to the Second Verse*

The second verse of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* according to its new reading ('So pray
to thy Lord and persevere') shows a close connection between prayer and
endurance. This particular motif, too, is found elsewhere in the Qurʾān, e.g. 2:153
يأيّها الذين ءامنوا استعينوا بالصبر والصلوة *yā-ayyuhā llaḏīna āmanū staʿīnū bi-ṣ-ṣabri wa-
ṣ-ṣalāt* 'O ye who have believed, seek help in patience and the Prayer'. Again,
ṣabr 'patience' is used as a synonym for *kawṯar*. Three other close parallels to
verse 1, in which the close connection between acts of piety and endurance
become explicit, are already referred to by Luxenberg: Q 20:132 (*Ṭāhā*) وَأْمُرْ
أَهلَك بِالصَّلاةِ وَٱصطَبِرْ عَلَيْها *wa-ʾmur ahlaka bi-ṣ-ṣalāti wa-ṣṭabir ʿalayhā* 'Command
thy household to observe the prayer and endure patiently in it'; Qurʾān 19:65
(*Maryam*) فَٱعبُدهُ وَٱصطَبِرْ لِعِبٰدتِه *fa-ʿbudhu wa-ṣṭabir li-ʿibādatihī* 'So serve Him
and endure patiently in His service'; Q 70:22–23 (*al-Maʿāriǧ*) إِلَّا ٱلمُصَلّينَ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ
عَلَىٰ صَلاتِهِمْ دَآئِمُونَ *illā l-muṣallīna llaḏīna hum ʿalā ṣalātihim dāʾimūn* 'Except those
who pray, those who at their prayer continue long'.

   In view of these Qurʾānic parallels to verse 2, there are good reasons to
assume that Luxenbergs interpretation of this verse is the correct one.

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37   Luxenberg himself does refer to Q 20:132, 19:65 and 70:22–23 quoted below (§ 3.2). The
      other parallel passages I shall discuss in §§ 3.2–3.4 he does not mention.

38   On the relation between the two terms *kawṯar* and *ṣabr*, see below (§ 5).

3.3   Qurʾānic Parallels to the Third Verse

The first question to be asked in relation to our third verse ~~2~~ is what the *šāniʾ* 'adversary' is actually aiming at within the context of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*. An instructive Qurʾānic passage is 5:2 (*al-Māʾida*):

وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَآنُ قَوْمٍ أَنْ صَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ ... إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ

wa-lā yağrimannakum šanaʾānu qawmin an ṣaddūkum ʿani l-masǧidi l-ḥarāmi (…) inna llāha šadīdu l-ʿiqāb

And let not the hatred of a people,[39] in that they have debarred you from the Sacred Mosque, incite you to provoke hostility … Allah is severe in punishment.'■non-matching quotation mark

The use of the noun *šanaʾān* 'hatred' is especially enlightening. There can be little doubt that *šanaʾān* denotes the emotion that the *šāniʾ* 'adversary' has. It is expressed in an attempt to keep the faithful away from the mosque. This forms an exact parallel to *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*, where the faithful are encouraged to counter the adversary's attempt by keeping on with their prayer (v. 2).

Another important parallel to verse 3 is Q 2:109 (*al-Baqara*):

وَدَّ كَثِيرٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَوْ يَرُدُّونَكُم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ إِيمَٰنِكُمْ كُفَّارًا حَسَدًا مِّنْ عِندِ أَنفُسِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ

wadda kaṯīrun min ahli l-kitābi law yaruddūnakum min baʿdi īmānikum kuffāran, ḥasadan min ʿindi anfusihim min baʿdi mā tabayyana lahumu l-ḥaqq

'Many of the People of the Book would like if they might render you unbelievers again after your having believed, because of envy on their part after the truth has become clear to them.'

Here, too, the enemy is described as trying to prevent the faithful from performing their acts of piety. The noun used to denote his emotion is *ḥasad* 'hatred, envy', which should clearly be considered a synonym for *šanaʾān* in Q 5:2 quoted

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39   Paret's translation of this phrase (²1977, ad loc.) as 'der Haß, den ihr gegen (gewisse) Leute hegt, …', taking *qawmin* as a genitive of object, is probably incorrect. The reference is to the hatred that the adversary feels towards Muslims.

above. In Q 113:5 (*al-Falaq*) the enemy is called *ḥāsid*, an active participle precisely parallel to *šāniʾ* 'adversary'.

In other words, the content of verse 3 according to its new reading is confirmed by other Qurʾānic passages.

3.4   *Qurʾānic Parallels to the Sūrah as a Whole*

So far we have seen some parallels to separate verses of our *sūrah* according to its new interpretation. In order to corroborate the plausibility of the gist of this *sūrah* as a whole, it now remains to see whether it is possible to find Qurʾānic parallels to the entire passage. Four different themes may be distinguished: (a) the call to endurance and patience; (b) the expression of piety, especially through prayer; (c) the presence of an adversary; (d) a prediction of victory or defeat ('we will win, they will lose').

On closer consideration, the Qurʾān proves to contain at least six concise passages that constitute precise parallels to these same four themes found in *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* according to its new reading and hence have the same gist:

A first parallel is found in Q 3:120 (*Āl ʿImrān*):

> If, however, ye endure (*taṣbirū*) and act piously (*tattaqū*) their cunning (*kayduhum*) will not harm you (*lā yaḍurrukum*) at all; verily Allah comprehendeth what they do (*inna llāha bi-mā yaʿmalūna muḥīṭ*).

In this passage the acts of piety are expressed by the verb *tattaqū*, which does not necessarily imply prayer, but does denote a way of behaviour according to Muslim rules. The adversary is present in the phrase *kayduhum*, and the motif of victory and defeat fact that 'we' will win (*lā yaḍurrukum*) and 'they' will lose—that is, they will not escape their final punishment (*inna llāha bi-mā yaʿmalūna muḥīṭ*)—is equally apparent.

The second Qurʾānic parallel appears in Q 7:126 (*al-Aʿrāf*):

> And thou takest vengeance upon us (*tanqimu minnā*) only because we have believed in the signs of Our Lord (*āmannā bi-āyāti rabbinā*) when they came to us; O our Lord, pour out upon us patience (*afriġ ʿalaynā ṣabran*), and call us in (at our death) as Moslems (*tawaffanā muslimīn*).

In this case, the reference to endurance is present in the desire to be bestowed with patience (*afriġ ʿalaynā ṣabran*; see also above, § 3.1), whereas the idea of piety is expressed by the fact that Muslims have come to believe (*āmannā bi-āyāti rabbinā*). The presence of the adversary is implicit in the call for

vengeance (*tanqimu minnā*) and the fact that 'we' will die still being Muslims, clearly implies that the Muslims in the end will have succeeded in their attempts to remain faithful (*tawaffanā muslimīn*).

The third Qurʾānic parallel to *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* that deserves to be mentioned is Q 76:23–26 (*al-Insān*):

> ²³Verily it is We who have sent down to thee the Qurʾān actually; ²⁴so wait patiently (*fa-ṣbir*) for the decision of thy Lord (*li-ḥukmi rabbika*), and obey not from amongst them any guilty or unbelieving one (*āṯiman aw kafūran*); ²⁵But remember the name of thy Lord, morning and evening, And part of the night; ²⁶do obeisance to Him (*fa-sǧud lahu*), and by night give glory to Him (*sabbiḥhu*) long.

The motif of perseverance is expressed by the phrase *fa-ṣbir*, a verb of the same root as the noun *ṣabr* that we saw before. The theme of piety is clearly present in two explicit references to prayer (*fa-sǧud lahu*; *sabbiḥhu*). As for the ultimate fate of the adversary (*āṯiman aw kafūran*), there can be little doubt concerning the content of God's final verdict (*li-ḥukmi rabbika*).

The fourth Qurʾānic parallel to *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* can be found in Q 52:45–49 (*aṭ-Ṭūr*):

> ⁴⁵Leave them then (*fa-ḏarhum*) until they meet their day on which they will be stunned (*yuṣʿaqūn*); ⁴⁶The day when their stratagem will not avail them (*kayduhum*) at all, and they will not be helped (*wa-lā hum yunṣarūn*). ⁴⁷For those who have done wrong is a punishment this side of that, but most of them do not know. ⁴⁸And endure patiently (*wa-ṣbir*) till the decision of thy Lord (*li-ḥukmi rabbika*), for thou art under Our eyes (*fa-innaka bi-aʿyuninā*), and give glory (*wa-sabbiḥ bi-ḥamdi rabbika*) with praise of thy Lord when thou arisest. ⁴⁹And during the night give glory to Him (*fa-sabbiḥhu*), and at the withdrawal of the stars.'■ non-matching quotation mark

In this case the exhortation to perseverance is not only expressed in a call for patience (*wa-ṣbir*), but a further connotation of endurance is also mentioned: one must not react violently (*fa-ḏarhum*). Instead, one should rather stick to prayer as an expression of piety (*wa-sabbiḥ bi-ḥamdi rabbika*; *fa-sabbiḥhu*). Whereas the enemy (*kayduhum*) awaits a dire fate (*yuṣʿaqūn*; *wa-lā hum yunṣarūn*), the Muslims will ultimately be safe (*fa-innaka bi-aʿyuninā*).

A fifth close parallel to the entire *sūrah* in its new reading may be found in Q 2:109–110 (*al-Baqarah*):

'Many of the People of the Book (*kaṯīrun min ahli l-kitābi*) would like if they might render you unbelievers again after your having believed, because of envy (*ḥasadan*) on their part after the truth has become clear to them; so overlook and pay no attention (*fa-ʿfū wa-sfaḥū*) until Allah interveneth with His affair (*bi-amrihī*); verily Allah over every-thing hath power. Observe the Prayer (*wa-aqīmū ṣ-ṣalāta*) and pay the Zakāt (...)'.

The element of patience is expressed here in a similar way as in the previous example: one should not react violently (*fa-ʿfū wa-sfaḥū*). Not only are the pious Muslims encouraged to persevere, but this perseverance now turns out to also consist in refraining from a violent or aggressive reaction. Here, too, the reference to prayer is explicit (*wa-aqīmū ṣ-ṣalāta*). The enemy (*kaṯīrun min ahli l-kitābi*) cherishes hatred (*ḥasadan*; see also § 2.6) and will eventually be punished in God's verdict (*bi-amrihī*).

The sixth and final Qurʾānic parallel passage is Q 5:8–10 (*al-Māʾida*):

O ye who have believed, be steadfast (*kūnū qawwāmīna*) witnesses for Allah in equity, and let not the hatred of a people (*šanaʾānu qawmin*) incite you not to act fairly; act fairly that is nearer to piety; show piety towards Allah (*wa-ttaqū llāha*), verily Allah is aware of what ye do. Allah hath promised those who have believed and done the works of righteousness (that) for them is forgiveness and a mighty hire (*maġfiratun wa-aǧrun ʿaẓīmun*). But those who have disbelieved and counted Our signs false (*wa-llaḏīna kafarū wa-kaḏḏabū*)—they are the people of the Hot Place (*asḥābu l-ǧaḥīm*)'.

As we saw in the previous parallels, the Muslims are encouraged to persevere (*kūnū qawwāmīna*) and remain pious (*wa-ttaqū llāha*). The enemy (*wa-llaḏīna kafarū wa-kaḏḏabū*), who cherishes hatred (*šanaʾānu qawmin*), will ultimately lose and be punished (*maġfiratun wa-aǧrun ʿaẓīmun*; *asḥābu l-ǧaḥīm*).

An systematic overview of the corresponding elements between *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* and the six passages discussed above is found in the table on p. .

In conclusion, then, we may say that the general interpretation of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* as proposed by Luxenberg is plausible, since it is corroborated by the text of the Qurʾān itself. When read in this new way, *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* turns out to be a coherent text that fits well within the rest of the Qurʾān.
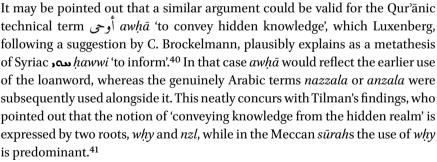
	Perseverance	Piety	Adversary	Victory & defeat
al-Kawṯar (108:1–3)	*al-kawṯar; inǧar*	*ṣalli li-rabbika*	*šāniʾaka*	*huwa l-aṯbar/atbar*
Āl ʿImrān (3:120)	*taṣbirū*	*tattaqū*	*kayduhum*	*lā yaḍurrukum; Allāha … muḥīṭ*
al-Aʿrāf (7:126)	*ṣabran*	*āmannā bi-āyāti rabbinā*	*tanqimu minnā*	*tawaffanā muslimīn*
al-Insān (76:23–26)	*iṣbir*	*isǧud lahu; sabbiḥhu*	*āṯiman aw kafūran*	*li-ḥukmi rabbika*
aṭ-Ṭūr (52:45–49)	*fa-ḏarhum; iṣbir*	*wa-sabbiḥ bi-ḥamdi rabbika; fa-sabbiḥhu*	*kayduhum*	*yuṣʿaqūn; wa-lā hum yunṣarūn; li-ḥukmi rabbika; fa-innaka bi-aʿyuninā*
al-Baqara (2:109–110)	*iʿfū wa-sfaḥū*	*wa-aqīmū ṣ-ṣalāta*	*kaṯīrun min ahli l-kitābi; ḥasadan*	*bi-amrihi*
al-Māʾida (5:8–10)	*kūnū qawwāmīna*	*ittaqū llāha*	*šanaʾānu qawmin; allaḏīna kafarū wa-kaddabū*	*maġfiratun wa-aǧrun ʿaẓīmun; aṣḥābu l-ǧaḥīm*

4   A Development in Qurʾānic Phraseology?

The question that remains is why, for instance, next to the possible—but not certainly so, cf. §§ 2.3, 2.5 above—Syriac loanwords *kawṯar* 'endurance' and *naǧara* 'to persevere' purely Arabic synonyms such as *ṣabr*, *ṣabara* and *dāma* were used, or, why next to rare words such as *šāniʾ* 'adversary' and *šanaʾān* 'hatred' we find *ḥāsid* 'enemy' and *ḥasad* 'hatred'.

I would suggest that the Syriac loanwords reflect an earlier strand in Qurʾānic liturgic phraseology, whereas the Arabic synonyms came to be used in a later phase. Another possibility, of course, is that there is no chronological development, but that we are dealing here with simultaneous different strands of liturgy. A parallel may be found in early Christian religious terminology. Thus, for instance, the originally Aramaic term משיחא *məšīḥā* 'anointed one' was adopted as a loan word into Greek, the language of the new religion: Μεσσίας. But since this expression lacked a literal meaning in Greek, the term was also translated into genuine Greek as χριστός 'anointed' or ὁ Χριστός 'the Anointed One'.

The same phenomenon may have taken place in Qurʾānic phraseology, where a loanword was used (either from Syriac or other languages, such as Safaitic) or a less common Arabic root used as a calque (as in the case of *šāniʾ*, see § 2.6), which were later suppleted with more common Arabic terms, according to the table below:

Christian phraseology				
	Origin		Loanword	Equivalent
'anointed'	משיחא	*məšīḥā*	Μεσσίας	ὁ Χριστός
Qurʾānic phraseology				
	Origin		Loanword / calque	Equivalent
'constancy'	ܟܘܬܪܐ	*kuttārā*	*kawṯar*	*ṣabr*
'to persevere'	ܢܓܪ	*nḡar*	*naǧara*	*ṣabara, dāma*
'adversary'	ܣܢܐ	*sānē/šnʾ*	*šāniʾ*	*ḥāsid*
'hatred'		*šnʾn*	*šānaʾān*	*ḥasad*

It may be pointed out that a similar argument could be valid for the Qurʾānic technical term أوحى *awḥā* 'to convey hidden knowledge', which Luxenberg, following a suggestion by C. Brockelmann, plausibly explains as a metathesis of Syriac ܚܘܝ *ḥawwi* 'to inform'.[40] In that case *awḥā* would reflect the earlier use of the loanword, whereas the genuinely Arabic terms *nazzala* or *anzala* were subsequently used alongside it. This neatly concurs with Tilman's findings, who pointed out that the notion of 'conveying knowledge from the hidden realm' is expressed by two roots, *wḥy* and *nzl*, while in the Meccan *sūrah*s the use of *wḥy* is predominant.[41]

But if indeed the earlier terminology, such as *kawṯar*, *naǧara* and *aṯbar/ atbar*, was indeed so strange and rare, the question is legitimate why they survived at all and why they were not replaced by less problematic terms, as elsewhere in the Qurʾān? In the case of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* the answer seems

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40   *SRK*, 125. Cf. C. Brockelmann 1928: s.v., 220a.

41   Cf. Tilman 1996: 59–68, esp. 63.

obvious. These three problematic terms were all part of the end rhyme and hence could not have been replaced without destroying the literary structure of the text.

5   Christian Epistolary Literature in the Qurʾān?

After having presented his Syriac reading of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* (see above, §3.1), in a separate section entitled 'Christian Epistolary Literature in the Koran'[42] Luxenberg resolutely states: 'This brief Sura is based on the Christian Syriac Liturgy'. From this *sūrah*, he informs us, 'arises a clear reminiscence of the well-known passage also used in the *compline* of the Roman Catholic canonical hours of prayer, from the First Epistle General of Peter' according to the Pšiṭṭa version:

> 1 Peter 5:8–9

> [8] Wake up (Brothers) and be vigilant, because your *adversary*, the *devil*, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: [9] Whom *resist steadfast* in the faith.[43]

Luxenberg believes the parallel between *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* and this New Testament passage to be so strong as to warrant his speaking of the 'first evidence of Christian epistolary literature in the Koran'. Accordingly, he claims that this text 'is without a doubt pre-Koranic' and as such was part of the matrix out of which, in his view, the Qurʾān was originally constituted as a Christian liturgical book.

    In this case, however, Luxenberg seems to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of extremely tenuous evidence. We are obviously not dealing with a *verbatim* quotation from the New Testament in the Qurʾān, so in order to demonstrate his claim of a *Vorlage* from the New Testament, Luxenberg should have argued the supposed parallelism in detail.

    However, as I have argued in §§ 2.6–7 above, the *shāniʾ* in verse 3 is probably not a reference specifically to the devil; it should rather be understood as a generic reference to the opponents of the newly-founded religion. Luxenberg's argument at this point is clearly circular:[44] he first takes *shāniʾaka* in Q 108:3 as

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42   *SRK*, 300–301.

43   *SRK*, 301 (italics by Luxenberg).

44   To be sure, a circular argument does not necessarily contain an false statement. The

a specific reference to the devil on no other ground than the fact that this is the case in the Syriac Christian texts,[45] and subsequently uses this alleged Qurʾānic reference to the devil as proof of a parallelism between Q 108 and 1 Peter 5:8–9 in the Pšiṭṭa, where the devil is indeed referred to as 'your adversary'.[46]

In other words, the New Testament passage quoted by Luxenberg is no parallel at all. The only common feature between this New Testament passage and *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* is a call for steadfastness in faith against the enemy. Whatever one's stance on the possibility of pre-Qurʾānic passages in the Qurʾān, the alleged parallel between 1 Peter 5:8–9 and *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* is not specific enough for this New Testament passage to be considered a textual *Vorlage* for our *sūrah*.

Sūrat al-Kawṯar, therefore, is not necessarily a pre-Qurʾānic passage. Whether it was part of an originally Christian liturgical book, remains hypothetical. In any case, Luxenberg's firm conclusion that *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* constitutes the 'first evidence of Christian epistolary literature in the Koran' is as yet unfounded.[47] In §3 above we have seen that *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*, when interpreted according to its new reading, has much more precise parallels within the Qurʾān itself.

6   Conclusion

On the basis of a comparison with other Qurʾanic passages, there is reason to assume that Luxenberg's general interpretation of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*—with some minor modifications I proposed in the foregoing—is probably the correct one and he is to be credited for that achievement. *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* is not an enigmatic or fragmentary text and it does not generate any problems pertaining to its historical and religious context that could only be solved by assuming it to be a later Medinan intrusion. It is a clear-cut adhortation to steadfastness against the enemy and as such fits perfectly within the context of an emerging religion and has the hallmarks of belonging to a genuine strand of the text of the Qurʾān.

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proposition that (parts of) the Qurʾān started off as a Christian lectionary is not necessarily untrue, but the case cannot be argued in this way.

45   'In the Christian Syriac terminology, Satan is referred to (…) as a *misanthrope*—hence an *adversary*', SRK, 297 sub 3.

46   It may be pointed out that the Syriac phrase 'your adversary' in 1 Peter 5:8 is not *sānāḵ*— the cognate expression of *šāniʾaka*—but ܚܠܕܒܒܟܘܢ *bʿeldḇāḇḵon*.

47   King (2009: 66–67) comes to a similar negative evaluation of Luxenbergs claim of *Sūrat al-Kawthar* having its origin in Christian liturgy.

As for the concept of a 'Syriac reading of the Qurʾan', however, things are different. Luxenberg correctly pointed out that there is possibly more Aramaic in *Sūrat al-Kawṯar* than was previously believed: *kawṯar* 'constancy', *naǧara* 'to persevere'. But at the same time our *sūrah* contains less Aramaic than Luxenberg claims. There is no reason to assume that Arabic *aʿtā* 'to give' and *šāniʾ* 'adversary' are derived from Syriac *ayti* 'to bring, present' and *sāneʾ* 'adversary' respectively. And even though the enigmatic *abtar* could be read as the Aramaic loanword *atbar*, it is more probably to be read as *aṯbar*, a genuinely Arabic word, which proposal is possibly corroborated by Safaitic epigraphic texts.

Our conclusion, therefore, must be that Luxenberg has correctly understood the gist of *Sūrat al-Kawṯar*, but there is no reason to speak of a specifically Syriac reading of the Qurʾan.

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