

**‘An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'ān’?
Genealogy of Alphonse Mingana’s Hypothesis [Pre-Print]**

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1. Introduction

Probably the most fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the Byzantine and Latin Christian authors discussed in this volume and, on the other hand, the Christians using the literary dialect of Aramaic called Syriac is the fact that the latter were engaging Islam as *residents* of the Islamic world. Indeed, ever since the Muslims came to power in the traditional Mesopotamian heartlands of the Syriac-using Christian communities, the history of the Christians living in these territories (mainly West Syrians or ‘Jacobites’, East Syrians or ‘Nestorians’, and Chalcedonians or ‘Melkites’) has become intertwined with that of their Muslim neighbours.¹ The earliest surviving Syriac responses to the Arab conquest and the challenge of the rise of Islam come in a variety of literary genres, including chronicles, letters, canons, biblical commentaries, and apocalypses.² From at least the eighth century onwards, Syriac churchmen also felt the need to compose apologetic treatises to rebut the charges made against them by the Muslims. Yet, Christian apologetics vis-à-vis Islam would not become a very popular genre in Syriac. Little more than eight writers are usually considered for the period up to the fourteenth century.³

This relative scarcity of sources calls attention to the fact that Syriac was not the only language in which Syriac-using Christians sought to defend the credibility of Christianity in their increasingly Arabicised and Islamicised milieu. Already by the turn of the ninth century, apologists from all the three major Syriac Christian communities had switched to Arabic as the primary language for religious debate with Islam. It was also in these Arabic Christian apologies that allusions to and quotations from the Qur'ān would feature

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¹ For orientation on the Syriac churches, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6-22.

² A useful compilation of the relevant Syriac texts is Michael P. Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims: A Sourcebook of the Earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015). See also id. *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). On the most detailed early Syriac description of the origins and main tenets of Islam, see Bert Jacobs, “The Rise of Islam according to Dionysius of Tell-Mahrē: Tentative Reconstruction through Three Dependent Texts,” *Le Muséon* 133, no. 1-2 (2020): 207-234.

³ The classic survey of the main Syriac apologetic texts in response to Islam is Griffith, “Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286),” in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, ed. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 19), 251-273. See also Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Kottayam: St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995; Barbara Roggema, “Pour une lecture des dialogues islamo-chrétiens en syriaque à la lumière des controverses internes à l’islam,” in *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, ed. Flavia Ruani (Paris: Geuthner, 2016), 261-294. See now also Joachim Jacob, *Syrisches Christentum und früher Islam: Theologische Reaktionen in syrisch-sprachigen Texten vom 7. bis 9. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2021).

prominently, both as defensive proof-texts for Christian doctrines and practices or as ammunition to criticise tenets of Islam.⁴ The situation in the extant Syriac apologies directed at Islam, on the other hand, is quite different. Whereas many of them allude to the Qur'ān and some of its teachings, direct quotations from the Qur'ān are quite rare. The few authors that do provide them include the East Syrian Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823)⁵ and two later West Syrian churchmen and representatives of the so-called 'Syriac Renaissance', Dionysius bar Ṣalībī (d. 1171) and Gregory bar 'Ebrōyō (d. 1286).⁶

This very quick sketch of the socio-cultural situation of Syriac Christians under Islam suffices to draw attention to the fact that any impetus seems lacking for a Syriac translation of the Qur'ān to be produced. Arguably, there simply was no need to undertake such a complex and perhaps even risky project that is the creation of a Syriac Qur'ān, whether a complete translation or translation of select sūras only: Syriac Christian intellectuals, who more often than not also mastered Arabic, had a direct knowledge of the main tenets of the Qur'ān's message through their daily, lived experience. Not only were parts of the Qur'ān to be heard in public recitations or during live encounters with Muslims, its message was also broadcasted throughout the Islamic empire on coins, inscriptions on buildings, and in literary texts.⁷ And the latter Islamisation of the public

⁴ The main sources are surveyed in Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian Texts: The Development of an Apologetic Argument: Abū Qurrah in the Maḡlis of al-Ma'mūn," *Pd'O* 24 (1999): 203-233; id., "Christians and the Arabic Qur'ān: Proof-texting, Polemics, and Intertwined Scriptures," *IHIW* 2, no. 1-2 (2014): 243-266. See also Clare E. Wilde, *Approaches to the Qur'ān in Early Christian Arabic Texts* (Bethesda: Academic Press, 2014); J. Scott Bridger, *Christian Exegesis of the Qur'an: A Critical Analysis of the Apologetic Use of the Qur'ān in Select Medieval and Contemporary Arabic Texts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015); and the articles collected in Mark Beaumont, ed., *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the Origins of Islam to the Medieval Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

⁵ On Timothy's quotations, see most recently Alexander Schilling, "Der Koran des Katholikos-Patriarchen: Eine synoptische Analyse der sowohl in Timotheos' I. Dialog mit al-Mahdī als auch in Dionysios bar Ṣalībī's "Disput gegen die Nation der Araber" zitierten Koranverse," in *Griechische Philosophie und Wissenschaft bei den Ostsyrern: Zum Gedenken an Mār Addai Scher (1867–1915)*, ed Matthias Perkams and Alexander M. Schilling (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 135-156. Note, however, that Schilling has overlooked the fact that already Martin Heimgartner, the modern editor of Timothy's letters, has pointed out that large parts of Timothy's *Disputation* were incorporated into *mimrē* I-II of Bar Ṣalībī's treatise, including a few quotations from the Qur'ān (Heimgartner, *Disputation*, ed. XXVII). Attempting to extrapolate these parallels to a common eighth century "Koran *florilegium*" is hence entirely futile. On Bar Ṣalībī's substantial borrowings from Timothy's *Disputation*, see Bert Jacobs, *Syriac Testimonies against the Muslims: The Qur'ānic and Extra-Qur'ānic Quotations in Dionysius bar Ṣalībī's Disputation against the Arabs* (unpubl. doctoral diss. KU Leuven, 2021), ch. II.3.

⁶ On Bar Ṣalībī, see below. Most of Bar 'Ebrōyō's Syriac quotations from the Qur'ān occur in his refutation of Islam included at the end of his works on the Incarnation, see the Qur'ānic index of Joseph Khoury, ed. and trans., *Le Candélabre du sanctuaire de Grégoire Abou'lfaradj dit Barhebraeus*. Quatrième base: de l'Incarnation, *Patrologia Orientalis* 31/1 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1963), 259-262; and François Nau, "Deux textes de Bar Hébraeus sur Mahomet et le Quran," *JA* 210 (1927): 311-329. A number of Qur'ānic verses are also translated in his Syriac translation of a philosophical work by Ibn Sīnā, see Herman G.B. Teule, "The Transmission of Islamic Culture to the World of Syriac Christianity: Barhebraeus' Translation of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Isārāt wa l-Tanbīhāt*. First Soundings," in *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interactions in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, ed. J.J. Van Ginkel, H.L. Murre – Van den Berg, and T.M. Van Lint, (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 179. The standard introduction to the Syriac Renaissance (ca. 1026-1318) is Teule, "The Syriac Renaissance," in *The Syriac Renaissance*, ed. Herman G.B. Teule, Carmen Tauwinkl, Bas ter Haar Romeny, Jan van Ginkel. Eastern (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 1-30.

⁷ On the ways in which Arabophone Christians learned about the text of the Qur'ān, see Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahīra: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 134-136. It has been suggested that samples from the Qur'ān were also used for Christian grammatical instruction in Arabic, see Wilde, "We shall neither learn the Qur'ān nor teach it to our

space in the conquered territories was already set in motion by the Marwānids, beginning with the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (r. 692-705). It is thus not very surprising that no Syriac Qur'ān translation from the early or medieval Islamic period has reached us today, nor is it very likely that such a text ever existed.⁸

Nearly a century ago, however, a contrary opinion was put forth by the famous Iraqi Christian scholar and manuscript collector Alphonse Mingana (ca. 1880-1937), in his 1925 article "An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'an Exhibiting New Verses and Variants".⁹ Incidentally, the hypothesis presented in the latter article is actually, to some extent, analogous to our current understanding of Nicetas of Byzantium's preservation of substantial portions of an older Greek Qur'ān in his *Refutation of the Qur'ān*¹⁰: Focusing on the final part (chs. 25-30) of Bar Ṣalībī's treatise *Against the Muslims*, Mingana asserted that the extensive excerpts from the Qur'ān in Syriac translation compiled there were not translated by our bishop himself, but were quoted and re-arranged by him using a complete Syriac translation of the Qur'ān, which he argued was made as early as the late seventh (!) century. Other than with Nicetas, however, Mingana's thesis was based on a somewhat idiosyncratic, revisionist approach to the early history of the Qur'ānic text: At the heart of Mingana's thesis stands what he perceived as 'new verses and variants', i.e., sentences, terms and phrases, which, when back-translated literally, have no direct equivalents in the standard Arabic text of the Qur'ān, although, curiously, a handful of passages among them *are* attested in later Muslim sources as prophetic or exegetical traditions. These divergences, Mingana asserted, point to a text-form of the Qur'ān in the Syriac translator's Arabic *Vorlage* which significantly differs from and antedates the canonical text that was officially promulgated by the early caliphs. Thus, he believed to be able to show that the Qur'ān in its early days of circulation was a quite different and much more Christian-like book than the received text known today.¹¹

While Christian Høgel recently still lamented that the Greek Qur'ānic excerpts preserved by Nicetas have received little to no attention as an early source to the textual history of the Qur'ān,¹² it is clear that, in the case of Bar Ṣalībī's excerpts, the relevance for Qur'ānic studies has been at the forefront from the very beginning. Given the interest a Syriac version of a pre-standard *mushaf* of the Qur'ān might hold for the history of the text of the Qur'ān, it did not take long before the news of Mingana's latest discovery

children': The Covenant of 'Umar of Learning," in *The Place to Go: Contexts of Learning in Baghdad, 750-1000 C.E.*, ed. Jens Scheiner and Damien Janos (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 2014), 237-265.

⁸ In an obituary for Yusuf Matti Qozi posted on Facebook by George Kiraz (8 September 2021), it is reported that the late professor prepared a complete Syriac translation of the Qur'ān, which will be published soon. See also Amir Harrak, "In Memoriam: Yusuf Matti Ishaq," *Hugoye* 24, no. 2 (2021): 391-393. I have also been informed in a personal correspondence by the Egyptian scholar Salah Mahgoub Edris that he is making preparations for a complete translation of the Qur'ān in classical Syriac.

⁹ Alphonse Mingana, "An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'an Exhibiting New Verses and Variants," *BJRL* 9/1 (1925): 188-235.

¹⁰ [Add crossreference to relevant contributions in this volume.](#)

¹¹ This is how one close colleague and supporter of Mingana paraphrased the latter's contribution, see James Rendel Harris, "The New Text of the Qur'an," *BJRL* 10/1 (1926), p. 219.

¹² Christian Høgel, "An Early Anonymous Greek Translation of the Qur'ān: The Fragments from Niketas Byzantios' Refutatio and the Anonymous Abjuratio," *CCO* 7 (2010): 67-120, p. 67. This is now beginning to change, see Manolis Ulbricht, *Coranus Graecus: Die älteste überlieferte Koranübersetzung in der « Ανατροπή τοῦ Κορανίου » des Niketas von Byzanz. Einleitung – Text – Übersetzung – Kommentar*, 3 vols (Unpubl. doctoral diss., FU Berlin, 2015), p. 716-8, where the author argues *against* a reading tradition that substantially differs from the now dominant reading of Ḥafṣ 'an 'Āṣim in the Arabic *Vorlage* of the anonymous Greek translator(s).

reached Europe's leading Islamicists. Thanks to Alexander Schilling's recent publication of the relevant extant correspondence between Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930) and his colleagues, most importantly Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933), we are now in the position to read the initial, 'unfiltered' appraisals of these towering Qur'ānic scholars.¹³ These letters show that Mingana's hypothesis was unanimously dismissed as shoddy and biased scholarship. This is perhaps best illustrated by Bergsträsser's vehement criticism of Mingana's methodology and credentials as expressed in one letter to Nöldeke:

Ueber den Character der [Syrische] Uebersetzung ist kein Wort zu verlieren; aus ihr nicht-osmanische Varianten gewinnen zu wollen ist nur einem fanatischen Muhammedaner-Missionar ohne die nötige methodische Schulung und Kritik wie Mingana möglich. Und das ist mein Schluss-Eindruck: dass mich diese Art, tendenziös ein ganz nettes Kuriosum zu einer Quelle ersten Ranges aufzubauschen verdriesst.¹⁴

The correspondence between Nöldeke and Bergsträsser would culminate in the latter's formal response to Mingana's hypothesis included in *GdQ3*, the third volume of the *magnum opus* of western Qur'ānic studies, the second, fully revised edition of Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qurāns*.¹⁵ Bergsträsser's evaluation that the Syriac excerpts are of no use to the study of the earliest history of the text of the Qur'ān would later be seconded in Arthur Jeffery's 1937 *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices*, the first major western survey of the variants in the codices of the companions as reported in Islamic sources (mainly the *tafsīr* and *maṣāḥif* literature).¹⁶ The responses by these two scholars, which have generally been overlooked, marked the end of the utility of the latter's quotations for Qur'ānic studies. From then on, what Mingana suggested in his article would simply be ignored by most Islamicists.¹⁷

As far-fetched as Mingana's hypothesis may be, it deserves an explanation as to why he so fervently believed otherwise. This is important not only for our understanding of Mingana as a Qur'ānic scholar. Perhaps even more crucially, learning from the latter's mistakes is also vital for future attempts at making sense of the sources underlying Bar Ṣalībī's Syriac quotations from the Qur'ān, which to date remains an urgent *desideratum*. To this aim, the remainder of this contribution traces the genealogy of Mingana's hypothesis in two steps. First, I reconstruct Mingana's discovery and writing process by drawing on personal letters from his closest collaborator at the time, James Rendel Harris,

¹³ See Alexander M. Schilling, "Ein Koran-Florilegium in syrischer Überlieferung: Alphonse Mingana und der 'Disput gegen die Nation der Araber' des Dionysios bar Ṣalībī", in *Studia Syriaca: Beiträge des IX. Deutschen Syrologentages in Eichstätt 2016*, ed. Peter Bruns and Thomas Kremer, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 155-60. Ironically enough, Schilling seems to be unaware of Bergsträsser's published response in *GdQ3*, although he has edited the very correspondence that was leading up to it.

¹⁴ Bergsträsser to Nöldeke, 14 April 1925, quoted in Schilling, "Ein Koran-Florilegium," 160.

¹⁵ See Bergsträsser, "Der Konsonantentext," (first published in 1926) in Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Otto Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qurāns*, 2nd ed., (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970; 1981), Vol. 3, 100-102 ("Die angebliche syrische Übersetzung eines nicht-othmanischen Korantexts"). The significance of this fundamental work is testified to by its recent translations into Arabic and English: *Ta'riḫh al-Qur'ān*, trans. Georges Tamer (Beirut: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2004); 2nd ed. (Köln, Beirut: Al-Kamel, 2007); *The History of the Qur'ān*, trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

¹⁶ Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān: The Old Codices* (Leiden: Brill, 1937), 14-15, no. 1.

¹⁷ A notable exception is the late Keith Small who cited Mingana's "An Ancient Syriac Translation" and earlier study with Agnes S. Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns*, among the rare examples known to him of "word and phrase length variants in extant manuscripts", see Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'ān Manuscripts* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 125. Apparently, also Small was unaware of Bergsträsser's vehement critique of both works.

which the latter addressed to his companion Helen Travers Sherlock. Then, going further back in turn, I contextualise Mingana's hypothesis against the backdrop of early twentieth century trends in biblical and Qur'ānic studies, as well as his previous scholarly engagement with the Qur'ān.

2. From Manuscript Acquisition to Publication

Alphonse Mingana's adamant passion for collecting and studying oriental manuscripts, in particular those composed in Syriac and Arabic, is well-known. Already in his twenties, when teaching Syriac at his *alma mater*, the Syro-Chaldean seminary in Mosul, he reportedly travelled the countryside in search of Syriac manuscripts, presumably for the seminary, building up a collection of some seventy pieces, including twenty ones on vellum.¹⁸ Likewise in the first years following his 1913 migration to England, he played a role in the acquisition of five Syriac manuscripts for the John Rylands library in Manchester.¹⁹ This was the institution which in 1915 appointed him as cataloguer of Arabic manuscripts on the recommendation of James Rendel Harris (1852-1941), the biblical scholar and fellow manuscript collector who had invited Mingana to come to England and who would become a life-long mentor, collaborator, and friend.²⁰

None of these earlier collection activities, however, would parallel the large-scale manuscript expedition to the Middle East that Mingana was planning for the spring of 1924 together with Rendel Harris. Whereas only Mingana would undertake the journey, the latter was mainly responsible for securing the necessary financial and practical arrangements with their Quaker sponsor, the rich industrialist Edward Cadbury, as well as the Rylands library, which at that time employed both scholars. Since Mingana did not document the course of his travels and collection activities, scholars are dependent on the extant correspondence of Mingana and his colleagues for reconstructing this acquisition history, as was recently carried out by Kristian Heal and Alessandro Falcetta.²¹ The extant correspondence of Rendel Harris to his companion Helen Travers Sherlock also allows for a reconstruction of the study of these new manuscripts after their arrival in England. A fellow scholar trained in classics, Sherlock had a strong personal interest in the work of Harris and his colleagues, and Harris regularly provided her with updates on the latest developments.²² As the scholar charged with the delicate task of fairly distributing the new manuscripts between the Rylands library and Cadbury's envisioned research library

¹⁸ Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 8. This collection was apparently destroyed during the Great War.

¹⁹ J. F. Coakley, "A Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts in the John Rylands Library," *BJRL* 75, no. 2 (1993), 108.

²⁰ On the alliance between Harris and Mingana, see now the excellent biography by Alessandro Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries of a Bible Scholar and Manuscript Hunter: A Biography of James Rendel Harris (1852-1941)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), chapter 31 ("The Mingana Collection").

²¹ Kristian Heal, "Notes on the Acquisition History of the Mingana Syriac Manuscripts" in *Manuscripta Syriaca: Des sources de première main*, ed. Françoise Briquel Chatonnet and Muriel Debié (Paris: Geuthner, 2015), 11-38; Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 437-440.

²² Rendel Harris's wife, also named Helen, had died in 1914 at the age of 73. Her death and Harris' subsequent relationship with the much younger Helen T. Sherlock (born 1893) are described in Falcetta, *Daily Discoveries*, 299-302; 424-428. Harris did not want his relationship with Sherlock to go public and instructed the latter to destroy his letters so that no one could read them. Luckily for us, Sherlock did not heed word to this instruction, apart from some exceptions maybe. These papers are currently kept at the Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham. All citations below are based on MS943, *Papers of Helen Travers Sherlock relating to J. Rendel Harris*, Box 1. I thank the special collections staff for their kind assistance in providing me with digital copies of the relevant papers.

(the ‘Rendel Harris Library’ as it was to be called) at the Woodbrooke study centre in Birmingham, Harris had a front row seat in following the development of Mingana’s thinking. Thanks to his letters, a vivid picture can be sketched of what went on in the six à seven months that passed between the arrival of the new manuscripts and the publication of Mingana’s article.²³

Having set sail eastwards on 15 February, Mingana returned to Manchester on 15 April from a remarkably successful expedition. Among his personal belongings, he carried a few valuable items, but the real treasure lay in a shipment to come. On its way to Manchester was a case containing some 170 manuscripts, mostly in Syriac, purchased from local Christians of the Mosul district. After an agonizing wait, the manuscripts finally arrived toward the end of June.²⁴ At first dawn, Mingana and Harris eagerly began inventorying the contents of the manuscripts and appraising their value for distribution among the two sponsoring institutions. This work apparently was quite overwhelming. As the record shows, both scholars at first entirely overlooked the contents of the final part of Bar Ṣalībī’s *Against the Muslims* in the manuscript numbered 89, a piece which they estimated of average value and had selected for the Rylands library.²⁵ It was only two months later, on 11 September, when Mingana and Harris were reviewing their inventory of the new acquisitions selected for the Rylands library, that Mingana made the startling discovery. The next day, Harris immediately broke the news to Sherlock:

In going through our treasures yesterday, Mingana detected that one of the mss. contained a Syriac translation of large parts of the Koran, made perhaps 150 years after the time of the Prophet. What do thee think of that? [...] It should be a mine of information for the lexicographer and for the interpreter of the Koran. The book is not supposed to be translated: it is too sacred for that, there we almost have a contemporary translation.²⁶

This report strikingly shows how rapidly major assumptions about the provenance of Bar Ṣalībī’s Qur’ānic excerpts were being made. Already within a day of research, the larger literary context of the apologetic and polemic treatise in which they are embedded, which remains tellingly unspoken of here, played no longer any role of significance: the excerpts had become fully conflated with the ‘ancient Syriac translation’ to which they are believed to provide access. What appears to have triggered this move is the fundamental assumption that Dionysius had no share in the translation work. Since it is impossible that Mingana at this early stage had already conceived of all seven of his eventual arguments to dismiss Bar Ṣalībī’s involvement as translator,²⁷ it would seem that one specific element had been decisive; the other arguments, then, would be supplemented at a later stage as corroborating evidence. It was undoubtedly Bar Ṣalībī’s colophon that compelled Mingana to this conclusion so quickly. This is the passage he would later also discuss at the head of his final draft and translated as such:

Our Treatise against the Muslims has extended thus far. We have refuted their objection concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son, and by proofs taken from Nature and from philosophical books we have demonstrated our truth. Then we have confuted

²³ The main developments are briefly surveyed in Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 440, the study that first drew my attention to the importance of the Sherlock papers for my purposes.

²⁴ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 21 June 1924.

²⁵ With the assistance of Mingana, Harris initially appraised the manuscript’s value at 30 £ (out of a total of 170 manuscripts worth £ 4000), see J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 25 September 1924.

²⁶ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 12 September 1924.

²⁷ See Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 191-194; 214-215.

them in many points from their own book. After that we have arranged in one systematic division *parts of the Qurʾān, which has been translated from their language into Syriac*, and we have succinctly refuted it in the column that is below, because in the previous chapters we have given a detailed refutation. The time has now come to put an end to our labour. Let any one who reads and understands, profits and makes others profit, pray for Mar Dionysius the stranger, who is Jacob Barṣalībī from Milīṭīni, Metropolitan of Amed.²⁸

Since Bar Ṣalībī does not specify in the italicised clause that he was the translator at work in *mimrō* III, Mingana deduced that the opposite must be true. Given the alleged conspicuous care by which Bar Ṣalībī mentions his name “in sonorous phrases” in all of his works, Mingana reasoned, he would not have hesitated to highlight his achievement if indeed he were involved. Rather, in that case, Mingana purports, “he would have written something like ‘which we Dionysius the stranger ... have by the Grace of God translated from Arabic into Syriac’”.²⁹

Thus, assuming Bar Ṣalībī’s dependence on some kind of extant Syriac document, the first issue that Mingana had to address was the question of whether the latter had an integral Syriac translation of the Qurʾān at his disposal, or only parts of it. As Mingana realised, the crucial verb *nfaq*, which he rendered “*has been translated*”, in reference to ‘Qurʾān’ in the integral sense, may also be read as “*have been translated*”, in reference to “*parts (mnawōtō) of the Qurʾān*”.³⁰ Although he would come to disfavour the latter, more grammatically straightforward reading, arguing that no collections of Qurʾānic *testimonia* are attested in the Syriac tradition,³¹ it is not unlikely that a Syriac source containing only translated parts was seriously envisioned at this initial stage. The tentative dating to the 780’s reported by Harris may actually be a clue to this. Since the latter date perfectly matches the period when the East Syrian writer Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī flourished, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Mingana initially entertained the possibility that Bar Ṣalībī’s final *mimrō* depends on Abū Nūḥ’s lost *Refutation of the Qurʾān (Šurrāyā d-Qurān)*.³² As a preliminary estimation this would not seem far-fetched at all. After all, Mingana was well aware that Abū Nūḥ’s *Refutation* is the only known Syriac text prior to Bar Ṣalībī to deal specifically with the Qurʾān.³³ Moreover, Mingana would have readily recalled Bar Ṣalībī’s reputation of borrowing heavily from East Syrian sources in other of his works.³⁴

²⁸ Translated in Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 190 (my italics).

²⁹ Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 191.

³⁰ Note the further complication that almost all manuscripts read ܢܦܩܘܢܝܢ, which suggests a masculine plural antecedent, a reading which makes little sense, as already noted by Mingana. It would only make sense in the *aphʿel* form, “which they translated” (ܢܦܩܘܢܝܢܝܢ), but this reading is not attested in the manuscripts.

³¹ See Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 190-191.

³² See Mark Swanson, “Abū Nūḥ al-Anbārī,” in *CMR* 1, 397-400. Although an Arabic version entitled *Tafnīd al-Qurʾān* is also reportedly seen in Cairo, the text most likely originally was composed in Syriac, as suggested by the earliest mention of it in Abdishōʿ bar Brikhā’s *Catalogue of Syriac Books*, and only at a later stage was translated into Arabic. On the improbability of a public figure like Abū Nūḥ having composed a work which such a polemical content in the official language of the Caliphate, see Krisztina Szilágyi, “Christian Learning about Islam in the Early ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate: The Muslim Sources of the *Disputation of the Monk Abraham of Tiberias*,” in *The Place to Go*, 325.

³³ See Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 196, where he refers to Abū Nūḥ’s *Refutation* as “the first mention of the refutation of a complete Qurʾān recorded in Syriac literature”. See also Mingana, “Transmission of the Qurʾān,” 39, referring to Abdishōʿ’ s *Catalogue*.

³⁴ Harris had earlier suggested that Bar Ṣalībī’s *Commentary on the Gospels* are almost entirely dependent on the works of the East Syrian Ishoʿdad of Merv (fl. ca. 850) and the West Syrian Moses bar Kiphō (d. 903), see Harris, “Introduction,” in Margaret D. Gibson, ed. and trans., *The Commentaries of Ishodad of*

Whatever Mingana's primary intuition may have been, speculations about a possible early East Syrian origin of the excerpt collection were soon abandoned. What changed his mind were the many discrepancies he noted as he began to identify and compare the Syriac excerpts to their equivalents in the Arabic Qur'ān. As Mingana would later describe this realisation: "I was not long in detecting the fact that they often represented a version which not only was not always in harmony with the *textus receptus* of the Qur'ān, but exhibited whole verses not found in it at all".³⁵ The presence of considerable deviation from the standard Arabic text is indeed reported by Harris as early as September 13, two days after contact, and not without great enthusiasm on his part:

Two days since, in making our second inventory of the Mesopotamian Mss., A. Mingana detected a Syriac version of large parts of the Koran, which, to all appearance, comes from a hundred years after the death of the Prophet; more than that, it appears to differ in some respects from the authorized text. This may be a very great discovery. The Ms. is to go to Woodbrooke, but the study of it will probably be made here [at the Rylands library]. More about this later.³⁶

Once Mingana's drew the conclusion that these divergences derive from the *Vorlage* of the Syriac translator (and not from the latter's inaccuracies or Bar Ṣalībī's redactional adaptations, possibilities which Mingana mentioned only to briskly dismiss them³⁷), a verdict about the origin of the Syriac translation soon followed. Two more days later, Harris writes to Sherlock: "As for the Koran, Mingana is in a great state of excitement; he thinks now that it must have been translated in the seventh century not very long after the death of Mohammad. If so, we have got a treasure indeed".³⁸ Thus, within four days of study, Mingana had reached the exciting conclusion that the Syriac translation depends on a pre-standard codex of the Qur'ān. Based on the historical argument he advanced earlier that the authoritative text of the Qur'ān was only fixed under Caliph 'Abd al-Malik and his governor al-Ḥajjāj, this then suggests that the Syriac translation was produced prior to this standardisation, i.e., around the late seventh century.³⁹

Once this argument had crystallized, the preparations for publication advanced rapidly. Further news on a more circumstantial note comes through in a letter to Sherlock dated 25 September. Apparently, Harris and Mingana had made a deal with Henry Guppy, the Rylands librarian, to apply a certain secrecy to the Syriac Qur'ān project, granting that the privilege of publicly announcing the discovery comes to the Rylands bulletin. Presumably, this arrangement was made in return for the librarian's consent that the manuscript afterwards may go to the Woodbrooke collection, other than what initially

Merv Bishop of Hadatha (c. 850 A.D.) in Syriac and English, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911-1916), Vol. 1., xxxi. For a similar statement by Gibson, see *ibid.*, Vol. 4, vii.

³⁵ Mingana, "An Ancient Syriac Translation," 189.

³⁶ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 13 September 1924.

³⁷ See, for instance, statements like "[w]e have no reason to doubt the fairness of the translator", since the latter is confident that "he is writing a work which is in every respect genuine" (210-211). As for Bar Ṣalībī, he "may always be taken as a faithful repertory of ancient records" (193). For similar views on Bar Ṣalībī's works as a being a "magazine of early traditions", see Harris, "Introduction," in Gibson, ed. and trans., *The Commentaries of Isho 'dad of Merv*, Vol. 1, xxxi, where this phrase is used in urging scholars to turn their attention to the sources that Bar Salibi quoted and "leave Bar Salibi alone". See also *id.*, *Testimonies Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), 7; *id.* "Introduction," in Mingana, ed. and trans. *A Treatise of Barṣalibi against the Melchites* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons Limited, 1927), 3.

³⁸ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 15 September 1924.

³⁹ See Mingana, "An Ancient Syriac Translation," 199-203, where he draws on materials from his 1915 article "The Transmission of the Qur'ān".

was decided.⁴⁰ Excited as he was, however, Mingana apparently failed to honour this deal, perhaps by sharing his discovery with some of his former colleagues at the University of Manchester.⁴¹ Additionally, we hear that Harris seriously regretted having underestimated the value of this manuscript at first appraisal:

Now I find a pile of things requiring attention. Mingana let the cat out of the bag here about his Koran in Syriac and I was rather afraid that Mr. Guppy would have risen up in wrathful disappointment; but he was very reasonable, and we are impressing on Mingana that, under any circumstance, the prior announcement and the ultimate publication of text must go to the Bulletin of the Library. My impression is that this Ms. is now, by a turn of the wheel of fortune, the most important in our hand, and the most valuable. It has other good things in it. But I only appraised it on first inspection at the value of £ 30.⁴²

A final report on Mingana's work progress is provided the next day. By then, two weeks after contact, a "first draft" had already been completed. That day, Harris writes to his companion: "I have done some bits of work since I came back: have gone over the first draft of Mingana's new discovery, where we have already added some eight verses to the Koran, and let the higher criticism into that highly fortified precinct".⁴³ The statement according to which they are exposing the Qur'ān to the "higher criticism" is telling for their belief that Mingana's text-critical work is foundational for a historical-critical study of the Qur'ān, which should then further address questions of authenticity, attribution, and the historical evolution of texts.⁴⁴ These eight 'new verses' are obviously the same as those listed in Mingana's final draft: four totally new verses, attested neither in the Qur'ān nor in the Islamic tradition, and four new verses which, Mingana claims, are "attested in the tradition to have been actually uttered by the Prophet," and as such

⁴⁰ This Bar Ṣalībī manuscript (no 89) was one of the ten pieces formerly belonging to the Rylands library which by 1932 had 'migrated' to the Mingana collection at the Woodrooke study centre in Birmingham and swapped by pieces of lesser value, see Coakley, "Catalogue," 109-113. Coakley generally suspects these pieces to have been embezzled by Mingana without the consent of Harris or the Rylands librarian (see also Heal, "Notes," 17; Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 443-4). At least in our specific case, however, Harris and Guppy do appear to have been involved. The role of Harris is evident given his statement to Sherlock that the "Ms. is to go to Woodbrooke" (13 Sept.) and his later report saying that the manuscript "is to go presently to Woodbrooke" (15 Dec., see below). As for Guppy, he most likely agreed to swap the manuscript for another piece (pieces?) of the 1924 manuscript expedition provided that Mingana would study the manuscript at the Rylands library and publish the text and his study in the Rylands bulletin. Such an agreement would explain why Harris was so insistent on the fact that, "under any circumstance, the prior announcement and the ultimate publication of text must go to the Bulletin of the Library" (25 Sept, see below). Guppy's approval of this deal is implicit in his eventual announcement that an important Syriac Qur'ān manuscript "has recently been deposited in our library *for purposes of investigation*", see Henry Guppy, "Library notes and news," *BJRL* 8, no. 1 (January 1925): 11 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ Between 1916 and 1923 Mingana held the position of 'special lecturer' in Arabic at the University of Manchester, see Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 23. The suggestion that Mingana 'leaked' information to acquaintances at the university is very tempting. In the same year the article was first published, it would be reprinted by Manchester University Press. In any case, a formal, written announcement of the discovery prior to publication on the part of Mingana, as suggested by Falcetta, not appears to have been the issue here, see Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 440.

⁴² J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 25 September 1924.

⁴³ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 26 September 1924. The use of 'we' is obviously an exaggeration and should not be read as though Harris himself contributed to the identification of these 'new verses'.

⁴⁴ Harris would later attempt to make this step himself by suggesting that two of the 'new verses' were borrowed by Muḥammad from Jewish or Christian sources, see Harris, "The New Text of the Koran," *BJRL* 10/1 (1926): 219-222.

may “in the heroic times of conquest, have constituted an integral part of some old Qur'ans”.⁴⁵

Having issued a first draft by the end of September, it likely took Mingana but a few more weeks to finalise his article. At any rate, by 15 December, his final draft had long been submitted to press and was fully ready for publication in the Rylands bulletin. The latter date we know from a peculiar twist that requires elucidation in its own right. As seen from Harris' letter from 12 September, in which Mingana's discovery was first announced to Sherlock, Harris suspected from day one that one of the manuscripts which he had sold to Harvard in 1905 also contains Mingana's find.⁴⁶ When by 15 December his two former manuscripts containing Bar Ṣalībī's disputations were sent back to Manchester through Harris' mediation, and most likely, on his request, this suspicion was confirmed. One of them, Harvard Syriac MS 91 (formerly Harris Syr cod. 83), included indeed the part Mingana was so thrilled about. However, by the time this copy reached Mingana, his final draft had long been submitted to press. The *ad hoc* solution for Mingana was to append a supplemental note to his article with a brief textual comparison.⁴⁷ Since Harris almost certainly informed Mingana about the Harvard copies and his efforts to have them sent back for study, it comes as rather unexpected that the latter did not await their arrival to check his readings and findings before submitting his final draft. Apparently, Mingana felt there was no time to waste in getting the word out of his ‘stunning discovery’.

The speed, not to say haste, by which Mingana proceeded, testifies to his zeal for making known his discovery. More importantly, though, the fact that his mind was largely made up within just four days of research indicates that he had not come to the subject *tabula rasa*, but was building on some of his earlier ideas and presuppositions. In order to understand the emergence of Mingana's hypothesis, it is necessary to take several steps back and retrace the scholarly background and development of his previous scholarly interests in the text of the Qur'ān.

3. Context in Early Twentieth Century Scholarship

Trends in Biblical and Qur'ānic Scholarship

By the end of the nineteenth century, modern text-critical and historical-critical studies of the Bible were well underway for over a century, mostly in liberal Protestant circles. These ushered in fundamentally new ways of understanding the Christian scriptures. The

⁴⁵ Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 204-207. Note that Mingana failed to identify the *ḥadīth* relating the so-called Abrahamic prayer (*al-ṣalāt al-Ibrāhīmīyya*), see *ibid.*, 230, no. 3.

⁴⁶ See J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 12 December 1924: “The curious thing is that I suspect I had a copy of it in the Mss. which I sold to Harvard, the Americans have not detected it”. In his *Testimonies I* (56-57), Harris says that Bar Ṣalībī's treatise *Against the Jews* aroused his interest because he had read the Old Testament testimonies in *Against the Muslims*, the treatise preceding it in his former manuscript containing Bar Ṣalībī's works against the Muslims, Jews, Nestorians, etc. which he proposed to call in brief a book against ‘Jews, Turks and Heretics’.

⁴⁷ J.R. Harris to H.T. Sherlock, 15 December 1924: “Then there arrived from America those mss. which I sold to Harvard, containing the treatise against the Moslims with a Syriac Koran in it. It turns out to be a copy of Mingana's find, which is to go presently to Woodbrooke. So now we are busy over that”. The second manuscript containing the treatise sent back, Harvard Syriac MS 53, lacks the third *mirmō* among other parts and was therefore irrelevant to Mingana's purposes. For this brief supplemental note, see Mingana, “An Ancient Syriac Translation,” 233-235.

year 1881, incidentally the year around which Mingana was born,⁴⁸ marked a decisive turn in New Testament textual criticism. After centuries of increasing resistance to the *Textus Receptus*, edited by Erasmus in 1516 and updated by him and later editors,⁴⁹ it was definitively made obsolete for the scholarly world with the publication of *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, the critical edition of the Greek New Testament by Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J.A. Hort. The fall of the *Textus Receptus* was the culmination of the application of new methodologies based on more rigid text-critical criteria, as well as the increased availability of ancient textual witnesses, including recently discovered manuscripts such as the *Codex Sinaiticus*. The impact in the English-speaking world of the edition by Westcott and Hort, both based at Cambridge, was all the more profound because of the fact that the Revised King James Version of the New Testament, published just a few days later, depended on their edition, which had been circulating privately among the members of the revising committee.⁵⁰

Although this radical rupture with the *Textus Receptus* was not without fierce opposition from within traditionalist ecclesiastical circles,⁵¹ there was great excitement about these developments among those sensitive to the impetus of this scholarly project. As the rather bold title words of the Westcott-Hort edition ‘in the Original Greek’ suggest, it was believed that the transmission of the New Testament text was now being traced to its earliest apostolic stages, if not to the autographs themselves. It was this exciting prospect that led a bright Cambridge student named James Rendel Harris to abandon a career in mathematics for textual criticism in the year 1881.⁵² It would not take long before Harris, greatly inspired by Constantin von Tischendorf’s 1844 discovery of the *Codex Sinaiticus*, traversed the Sinai desert and other regions of the Middle East in search of manuscripts of early Christian texts, particularly those written in Syriac, a niche he considered neglected by previous scholars. Although his desire of finding what is probably the earliest Syriac version of the New Testament, Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, remained unfulfilled, his guidance and encouragement of Agnes Smith Lewis would prove instrumental to her 1892 discovery of the *Sinaitic Palimpsest*, an Old Syriac version of the Gospels predating the Peshitta, of which so far only the version discovered in 1848 by William Cureton was known.⁵³

The major leaps forward taken in biblical studies were not without appeal to scholars working on the Qur’ān. Rooted in the Enlightenment idea that every sacred scripture is open to critical inquiry, various efforts had been made by the end of nineteenth century in applying the insights and methods developed in historical criticism to the Qur’ā. Most

⁴⁸ The problem of the conflicting reports on Mingana’s year of birth, 1878, 1881 or 1883, has not yet satisfactory been resolved, see Baarda, “Firmly Established,” 5.

⁴⁹ The term ‘*Textus Receptus*’ traces its origin to the 1633 second edition which was commended in the preface: “Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum: in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus”, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 152.

⁵⁰ Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 174-181; Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *Der Text des Neuen Testaments: Einführung in die wissenschaftlichen Ausgaben sowie in Theorie und Praxis der modernen Textkritik*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1989), 24-9.

⁵¹ Most notably, John W. Burgon, *The Revision Revised* (London, 1883). On the reception of the Westcott-Hort edition, see Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 181-183.

⁵² Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 13-23.

⁵³ On this discovery, see Falcetta, *The Daily Discoveries*, 115-129. For the state of research on the Old Syriac versions and the caution by which they must be used for New Testament textual criticism, see Jean-Clause Haelewyck, “Les vieilles versions syriaques des Évangiles,” in *Le Nouveau Testament syriaque*, ed. Jean-Clause Haelewyck, *Études syriaques* 14 (Paris: Geuthner, 2017), 67-113.

groundbreaking in this regard were Gustav Weil's *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in den Koran* (1844, 2nd ed. 1878) and, above all, Theodor Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qurāns* (1860).⁵⁴ But contrary to its smooth take-off in New Testament studies, Qur'ān textual criticism proved very difficult to initiate. Scholarly aspirations of tracing the Qur'ān's textual transmission to a stage prior to its '*Textus Receptus*' – the consonantal text that according to Islamic tradition around 650 was collected and standardised by Caliph 'Uthmān⁵⁵ – stranded upon what one might call 'The Great Wall of Invariance'. Already in 1694, Abraham Hinkelmann observed that the variation in early Qur'ān manuscripts is so minimal, touching principally on orthography such as omissions of *alif*, that producing an exhaustive survey would be of little avail.⁵⁶ Despite a growing awareness of reported non-canonical variants in Islamic sources (i.e., variant readings not based on the 'Uthmānic *rasm*), hardly any variant of significance that could shed light on issues of textual transmission was found in the ancient Qur'āns accessible to Western scholars. It was widely assumed that the authority of the 'Uthmānic text had been so overwhelming that no direct trace of these pre-standard codices had survived. The availability of new manuscripts in the mid-nineteenth century shed no different light on this strikingly invariant text. As Nöldeke expressed it in his prized study:

In den uns erhaltenen Qorānhandschriften findet sich, außer rein orthographischen Abweichungen, keine Verschiedenheit vom 'Otmānischen Texte, wenn man nicht Lust hat, bloße Schreibfehler für solche zu halten.⁵⁷

It is against the background of this wide gap between, on the one hand, the breadth of innovation in New Testament textual criticism, which generated so much enthusiasm in Mingana's new academic milieu, and, on the other hand, the *de facto* impossibility of applying these methods to the text of the Qur'ān, that Mingana's burgeoning quest for finding ancient Qur'āns that diverge from the standard text has to be situated.

Mingana's Awakening to Qur'ān Textual Criticism

Mingana's migration to England in March 1913 marked a new personal start, closing the very tumultuous chapter of his life that was his early scholarly and priestly career. Not only had his academic debut been severely blemished by two major accusations of manuscript forgery, he also ran into troubles within his own community because of his open scepticism about the apostolic foundation of the Chaldean Patriarchate. The long term consequences proved to be dire: academically, an aura of suspicion would henceforth surround his editing work; personally and ecclesiastically, he had to break off

⁵⁴ For orientation, see Marco Schöller, "Post-Enlightenment Academic Study of the Qur'ān," in *EQ* 4, 187-208. On the history of the competition dedicated to the history of the Qur'ān which culminated into the publication of Nöldeke's fundamental study, see François Déroche, « La genèse de la Geschichte des Qorāns », in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. François Déroche, Christian J. Robin, and Michel Zink (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2015), 1-25.

⁵⁵ The term '*Textus Receptus*' has taken on two connotations when applied to the Qur'ān. It can refer to the consonantal text said to have been collected and standardised under Caliph 'Uthmān, but also, more specifically, to the reading of Ḥafṣ 'an 'Aṣim, the most widespread text-tradition of the canonical readings, which formed the basis for the 1923 Egyptian standard edition. The authors that will be dealt with here invariably use the term in the former, more general sense.

⁵⁶ Keith E. Small, "Textual Transmission and Textual Variants: A Survey of Textual Variants in Early Qur'āns," in *Les origines du Coran, le Coran des origines*, ed. François Déroche, Christian J. Robin, and Michel Zink (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2015), 94.

⁵⁷ Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860), 279.

relations with his community, a major impetus for his exit from the Middle East.⁵⁸ In these difficult circumstances, having published nothing for over five years after what was a very productive career start, Mingana now, with Harris as his guide, would soon encounter an array of new impulses for resuming his scholarly activities. It would not take long before his mentor's passion for textual criticism inspired Mingana to venture into that field of inquiry too.⁵⁹ Yet it was not the Bible that became the subject of his first study in textual criticism, but the Qur'ān. By introducing Mingana to several of his colleagues, Harris set the stage for the event that would spark Mingana's scholarly interest in the textual history of the Qur'ān.

On 27 November 1913, Mingana was invited to spend two days in Cambridge at the home of the learned twin sisters Agnes Smith Lewis (1843-1926) and Margeret Dunlop Gibson (1843-1920). At one point during their talks, Lewis showed Mingana her book based on an ancient palimpsest which she had bought in 1895 from an antiquarian at Suez. Browsing the work, Mingana stumbled upon the sections in which Lewis discussed the fragments of two Qur'āns which she had detected in the *scriptio inferior* of several folios. Lewis had edited these texts by transcribing the incipits and explicits of every page or half-page. It was in the footnotes to these transcriptions that Mingana was bewildered to find a large amount of *sic*'s, marking what Lewis took for spelling mistakes.⁶⁰ Lewis later recalled this crucial moment: "As he turned its pages I was suddenly startled by the question, 'What are you doing with *sics* in the Qurān?' 'Because they are there,' I replied, 'and I can shew you where I got them'".⁶¹

After further scrutiny and comparison with the palimpsest which Lewis kept at home, Mingana argued that these 'spelling mistakes' actually represent an archaic orthography. This, however, with one exception in Q 7:158, which Mingana considered a potential semantic variant of major theological significance, namely *الله و كلمته* for *الله و كلماته*, giving 'God and his Word (!)' instead of 'God and his words'.⁶² Although dropped from the final list, indicating that by then he had realised that such omissions of *alif* are orthographically quite common, the significance of these folio's must have seemed obvious to Mingana as a possible means to breach the 'Great Wall of Invariance'. Infected by Mingana's enthusiasm, Lewis entrusted the task of deciphering these folios to him, regarding him the most competent scholar for the job on account of his much younger,

⁵⁸ See Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 7-16. For an evaluation of the four main accusations of forgery, see Baarda, "Firmly Established," 9-12.

⁵⁹ Nearly all of Mingana's work on the old Syriac versions dates to his first three years in England, when Harris's influence is likely to have been most prominent, see Mingana's bibliography in Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 53-4 (items 10, 11, 14, and 17).

⁶⁰ See Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protoevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae, with texts from the Septuagint, the Corān, the Peshiṭta, and from a Syriac Hymn in a Syro-Arabic palimpsest of the fifth and other centuries*, Studia Sinaitica 11 (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1902), xlix-lxviii.

⁶¹ Alphonse Mingana and Agnes S. Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns possibly pre-'Othmānic, with a list of their Variants* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), vi.

⁶² Lewis reported this potential variant in her preface, see Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns*, vii; cf. Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, liv, no. 1. Mingana's initial reading would imply, quite presumptuously, that Muḥammad adhered to the Christian belief in Christ as the divine *Logos*, as can be shown by adopting the verse accordingly: "Say [Muhammad], 'People, I am the Messenger of God to you all, from Him who has control over the heavens and the earth. There is no God but Him; He gives life and death, so believe in God and His Messenger, the unlettered prophet who believes in *God and his Word*, and follow him so that you may find guidance' (Q 7:158, adapted from Abdel Haleem's translation).

sharper eyes and his native Arabic tongue.⁶³ She herself had previously not undertaken this further analysis, nor had any of her peers suggested it. Besides the difficulty of reading the subtext and deciphering its script, she had estimated it not worth the effort, being “prepossessed by the belief that all copies of the Qurān are in duty bound to be exactly alike”.⁶⁴

Six months later, in May 1914, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns, possibly pre-‘Othmānic* was published, comprising a preface by Lewis, Mingana’s introduction, and an edition of the Qur’ānic subtexts as transcribed by Mingana and verified by Agnes S. Lewis and her sister. As the title indicates, Mingana assigned the subtexts on paleographic grounds, unlike Lewis, not to two but three different Qur’āns. The variant list, arguably the work’s centerpiece, presented quite a fruitful harvest: no less than 38 consonant/word variants, interpolations and omissions. Mingana estimated the profound significance of this discovery:

[I]t is evident that if we find a manuscript of the Qurān presenting various readings of consonants and of complete words, and more specially if this manuscript offers some interpolations and omissions, it would not be too rash to suppose that it goes back to a pre-‘Othmānic period. The conclusion is clear and corroborated by the constant history of the Muḥammadan world, from the VIIth century down to our own day.⁶⁵

The revolution Mingana was aiming at was obvious and much appreciated by some. Praising the achievements of their new cataloguer of Arabic manuscripts, the Rylands librarian Henry Guppy pointed out that Mingana had presented “portions of a text differing so much from the *Textus Receptus*, as to constitute the beginnings of a textual criticism of the Qur’an”.⁶⁶ Perhaps the most enthusiastic review came from the scholar-missionary William St. Clair Tisdall. Comparing the palimpsest variants listed by Mingana to the various readings reported in al-Bayḍāwī’s *tafsīr* (d. 1319), one of the first Qur’ān commentaries to be printed in Europe,⁶⁷ Tisdall did not find a single agreement. Rather than casting doubt on the accuracy of Mingana’s readings, this lack of external support in Tisdall’s view “seems to tell in favour of the antiquity of the readings”.⁶⁸ Thus he appraised the first-rate importance of Mingana’s discovery:

Orientalists will welcome the list of *variae lectiones* supplied by this discovery. It is one of the *desideranda* of the time that an edition of the Qur’an should appear which would give the variations from the Received Text recorded by Baiḏāwī [*sic*] and other Moslem Commentators and Traditionists. When this is done, doubtless Mrs. Lewis’ MSS. will occupy the place of honour in connexion with the Qur’an that the Sinaitic and Vatican Codices do in the textual criticism of the Greek New Testament.⁶⁹

However, most Islamicists were far less compliant than Tisdall. The ostentatious title words “possibly pre-‘Othmānic” combined with his ardent calls for a ‘corrective’ study

⁶³ Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, vii. Note, however, that Mingana most likely spoke Sureth at home, see Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 7.

⁶⁴ Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, vi. Cf. Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, xix.

⁶⁵ Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, vii.

⁶⁶ Guppy, “Library notes and news,” *BJRL* 2/2 (April 1915): 108.

⁶⁷ See Walid Saleh, “al-Bayḍāwī”, in *EI*³

⁶⁸ William St. Clair Tisdall, “New Light on the Text of the Qur’ān,” *MW* 5/2 (April 1915), 149.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 150. The first explicit call for a critical edition of the Qur’ān is usually credited to Rudolf E. Geyer, “Zur Strophik des Qurans,” *WZKM* 22 (1908), 286.

of the Qurʾān triggered serious suspicions and polemics.⁷⁰ The accuracy of his palimpsest readings was severely doubted, all the more given his “overzeal of finding a variant”⁷¹, his “religious bias and bigotry”,⁷² and his “fanatical zeal against Islam”.⁷³ Since no facsimile of the text was published, and the palimpsest disappeared after 1914⁷⁴, the text was even suspected to be yet another one of Mingana’s forgeries⁷⁵. If such criticisms were expressed most ferociously on the Muslim side,⁷⁶ the situation was not so different among non-Muslim scholars, where Mingana’s theory of a pre-ʿUthmānic provenance was called “unfortunate” since the significant variants in reality number only five.⁷⁷ Finally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser and Régis Blachère, not the least Qurʾānic scholars, pointed out the overall proximity to the ʿUthmānic text, the unlikelihood of many of the readings, and called for a verification of the edition against the original manuscript.⁷⁸ Only recently has such a re-assessment been carried out independently by Alba Fedeli and Alain George, who have brought to light numerous shortcomings.⁷⁹ As Fedeli concluded in her digitally enhanced

⁷⁰ In his opening statements Mingana expressed his desire to challenge “the enthusiastic and often blind fascination” for the Qurʾān among Muslims and their “puerile servility” and “low traditionalism”, see Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, xi (for similar statements by Lewis, see *ibid.*, ix-x). Given this agenda it is not surprising that all of Mingana’s articles on the Qurʾān have recently been reprinted in three volumes of essays collected by the Islam critic Ibn Warraq (pseudonym), published by Prometheus Books (1998, 2002, 2011), a publishing house known for advocating projects of religious skepticism. Islamicists have severely criticised the reprint of Mingana’s articles. With respect to *Leaves*, one scholar observes: “Perhaps its greatest value is that it demonstrates how far from blatant orientalism we have come,” see Herbert Berg, “Review: The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam’s Holy Book by Ibn Warraq,” *BSOAS* 62/3 (1999): 557-558, p. Likewise, Mingana’s *Leaves* and *The Transmission of the Qurʾān* are described as “not much better” than Tisdall’s *The Sources of Islam*, a “decidedly shoddy piece of missionary propaganda”, see François De Blois, “Review: The Origins of the Koran. Classic essays on Islam’s holy book. Edited by Ibn Warraq,” *JRAS*, 3rd s. 10/1 (2000): 88.

⁷¹ Sadr-ud-Din, “Leaves from three ancient Qurans,” *Islamic Review and Muslim India* 3 (1915): 219-233, 224.

⁷² al-Qidwai, “A Glance at the Quranic Palimpsest,” *Islamic Review and Muslim India* 3 (1915): 234-236, 236.

⁷³ Henri M. Léon, “Review: Leaves from three ancient Qurans possibly pre-ʿOthmānic, ed. Mingana and Lewis,” *Islamic Review and Muslim India* 3 (1915): 239-250, 250.

⁷⁴ See Alba Fedeli, “Manuscript Acquisitions and Their Later Movements: A Further Note about the Case of the Lewis Quranic Manuscript,” in *Manuscripts, Politics and Oriental Studies: Life and Collections of Johann Gottfried Wetzstein*, ed. Boris Liebrecht and Christopher Rauch, *Islamic Manuscripts and Books* 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 228-247.

⁷⁵ Especially the British convert to Islam, Henri M. (or Haroun Mustapha) Léon, questioned the palimpsest’s authenticity, see nr. 35. A brief reply to Léon’s allegations is found in Mingana, “Syriac Versions of the Old Testament,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 6, no. 3 (1916), 398. Because of Mingana’s puffery (“marktschreierischen Anpreisungen”), also Bergsträsser initially suspected the palimpsest to be faked, see Bergsträsser to Nöldeke, 14 April 1925, quoted in Alexander M. Schilling, “Ein Koran-Florilegium in syrischer Überlieferung. Alphonse Mingana unter der „Disput gegen die Nation der Araber“ des Dionysios bar Šalībī,” in *Studia Syriaca. Beiträge des IX. Deutschen Syrologentag in Eichstätt 2016*, ed. Peter Bruns and Thomas Kremer (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 160.

⁷⁶ For a more recent Muslim critique, see Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿzamī, *History of the Qurʾānic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), 311-313.

⁷⁷ Reynold A. Nicholson, “Review of Mingana – Smith Lewis, Leaves from three ancient Qurans possibly pre-ʿOthmānic,” *JTS* 16 (1915): 437-440, p.

⁷⁸ Bergsträsser, “Kapitel: Der Konsonantentext,” 53-7; 97-100; Régis Blanchère, *Introduction au Coran*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1977), 36-37, no. 38.

⁷⁹ Alba Fedeli, “Mingana and the manuscript of Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis, one century later,” *MO* 11, no. 3 (2005): 3-7; *id.*, “The Digitization Project of the Qurʾānic Palimpsest, MS Cambridge University Library Or. 1287, and the Verification of the Mingana-Lewis Edition: Where is Salām?” *Journal of Islamic*

study of the palimpsest, “only in 16% of the cases has it been possible to confirm Mingana-Lewis’ readings”.⁸⁰

The Quest for Variant Texts Continues

Lewis concluded her preface by expressing her hopes that more pre-ʿUthmānic texts be uncovered in the Qurʾān manuscripts held in European collections, so that “ours may prove to be only the first drops of a shower”.⁸¹ Mingana surely cherished the same hopes, if not more ardently so. Having grasped the significance of the palimpsest, after all, was primarily to his credit. This quest for variants left a clear mark on Mingana’s scholarly activities during the next year as he began cataloguing the collection of Arabic manuscripts at the John Rylands library. His primary interest in the Qurʾāns from this collection seems no coincidence, the results of which appeared in two brief articles published in 1915 in the Rylands bulletin.

The first article, *An Important Old Turḳi Manuscript in the John Rylands Library*, deals with a massive but incomplete 14 volume interlinear translation of the Qurʾān in both Middle Turkic and Persian.⁸² Mingana principally focuses on the linguistic value of the Turkic text, one of the rare extant sources in this particular medieval dialect. Nevertheless, text-critical issues are not far from his mind. As such, he points out that the Arabic text, which he argued on the basis of a scribal note was copied from an ancient Kūfic manuscript,⁸³ does not always match with the standard text, while the two translations surprisingly do match it in such cases.⁸⁴ In his partial analysis of one volume, Mingana noted variant diacritics, a shift in direct object in Q 3:120 (وإن تصبكم: وإن تصبهم), and an omission of the word الله in Q 45:19. Rather than evaluating these discrepancies as “bloße Schreibfehler”, to borrow a phrase from Nöldeke, Mingana held them as variants, especially as regards the omission of الله. What is more, in the latter case Mingana speculates that the copyist found in his *Vorlage* a reading akin to the variant for الله which he had noted at exactly the same place in Lewis’ palimpsest, i.e. اللكم or اللك. The scribe’s inability to make sense of such an obscure reading, Mingana conjectures, is possibly what caused the scribe to omit it. From this perspective, he adds, this omission certainly is “worthy of the attention of [textual] critics”.⁸⁵ In other words, in a highly speculative construction, Mingana suggests that the alleged pre-ʿUthmānic readings of Lewis’ palimpsest had a *Nachleben* in the Kūfic *Vorlage* on which the Arabic text of this interlinear translation was based.

Manuscripts 2, no. 1 (2011): 100-17; id. “The Provenance of the Manuscript Mingana Islamic Arabic 1572: Dispersed Folios From a Few Qurʾānic Quires,” *Manuscripta Orientalia* 17, no. 1 (2011), 45-56; id., *Early Qurʾānic Manuscripts, their text, and the Alphonse Mingana papers*; Alain George, “Le palimpseste Lewis-Mingana de Cambridge, témoin ancien de l’histoire du Coran,” *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 155/1 (2011): 377-429. Alba Fedeli, *Early Qurʾānic Manuscripts, their text, and the Alphonse Mingana papers held in the Department of Special Collections of the University of Birmingham* (Unpubl. PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2015), 276-330.

⁸⁰ Fedeli, *Early Qurʾānic Manuscripts*, 315.

⁸¹ Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, x.

⁸² Mingana, “An Important Old Turḳi Manuscript in the John Rylands Library,” *BJRL* 2, no. 2 (April 1915): 129-138.

⁸³ The note is cited in Mingana, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts*, 38.

⁸⁴ Eckmann has confirmed the independence of the Turkic translation from the Arabic text, but also pointed out the former’s independence from the Persian translation, calling for further study of the relationship between these three texts, see János Eckmann, *Middle Turkic Glosses of the Rylands Interlinear Koran Translation*, Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica 21 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 15-16.

⁸⁵ Mingana, “An Important Old Turḳi Manuscript,” 136. Cf. Mingana and Lewis, *Leaves*, xxxvii.

By the summer of 1915, Mingana had been able to browse all sixty Arabic manuscripts of the Rylands's collection containing Qur'āns or treatises on Qur'ānic sciences. Observations on the most remarkable specimens are provided in *Notes Upon Some of the Qur'ānic Manuscripts in the John Rylands Library*. The most prominent Qur'ān featuring is *MS John Rylands Arabic 46*, which is introduced as “a very curious manuscript of the Qur'ān”.⁸⁶ It was doubtless of this piece that the Rylands librarian wrote that it “appears to furnish evidence of the need for a textual criticism of the book”.⁸⁷ In addition to a brief paleographical and codicological description of this, Mingana listed a number of scribal errors, pointed to occasional archaic spellings which he believed to be highly unusual for such a late manuscript (13th-16th century), and gave examples of secondary harmonisations with the standard text. But most importantly, he also collected three variant readings which are said to be unattested in al-Bayḍāwī's *tafsīr*.⁸⁸ Probably, this hints at their high antiquity in Mingana's view, a reasoning he apparently borrowed from Tisdall's aforementioned review of *Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'āns*, which then had just appeared.⁸⁹ Although the variants are actually much less significant than Mingana assumed,⁹⁰ it is interesting to note that he is adopting here Tisdall's methodology of comparing manuscript readings to the variants reported in Muslim sources. It is also in light of the latter's call for a critical edition that Mingana's mention of Ibn Sa'īd al-Dānī's (d. 1053) work on the early codices should be seen:

It may not be out of place here to remark that in the *al-Muqni* ' of ad-Dānī (d. A.H. 444), there are some interesting variants of the Qur'ān about which, as is commonly admitted, al-Baiḍhāwī maintains silence. In the hope, expressed by a few scholars, for a critical edition of the sacred book of Islām, is some day to be realized, Dānī's composition will be found useful.⁹¹

Unfortunately, Mingana was able to collect but a few more 'variants' from Qur'ān manuscripts. However, his growing familiarity with works on Qur'ānic sciences was instrumental to his shift to another issue, namely the date of the Qur'ān's first standardization. Disgruntled by what he regarded as the uncritical acceptance of the traditional narrative by Western scholars as Theodor Nöldeke, Mingana in 1916 published *The Transmission of the Qur'ān*. In this article, he endorsed and expanded on Paul Casanova's thesis that the Qur'ān's standardization took place several decades later than commonly assumed, at the instigation of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 692-705) and his governor al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 714).⁹² A key methodological feature is the historical primacy with which he endows early Christian sources, most notably *The Apology of al-Kindī*, a text he dated prior to the earliest Islamic sources and therefore

⁸⁶ Mingana, “Notes Upon Some of the Qur'ānic Manuscripts in the John Rylands Library,” in *BJRL* 2/3 (July-September 1915): 241. Cf. Mingana, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts*, 45-46.

⁸⁷ Guppy, “Library notes and news”, *BJRL* 2, no. 3 (1915), 209.

⁸⁸ Mingana, “Notes,” 243.

⁸⁹ See no. 68.

⁹⁰ Whereas the first one is probably a scribal error (قال: وقال 7:28), numbers two and three are recurrent canonical variants (يسيركم: ينشركم 10:22; بما كسبت: بما كسبت 42:30), see Aḥmad 'Umar Mukhtār and 'Abd al-'Āl Sālim Makram, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya*, 2nd ed. (Kuwayt: Maṭbū'at Jāmi'at al-Kuwayt, 1988), Vol. 3, 66-7; Vol. 6, 91; 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt* (Cairo: Dār Sa'd al-Dīn, 2002), vol. 3, 520-2; vol. 8, 330-331.

⁹¹ Mingana, “Notes,” 243. This work would later be edited by Otto Pretzl, see Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān Ibn Sa'īd al-Dānī, *Kitāb al-muqni 'fi rasm maṣāḥif al-amṣār*, ed. Otto Pretzl (Istanbul: Devlet Matbaası, 1932).

⁹² Mingana, “The Transmission of the Qur'ān,” *The Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society* 5 (1916): 25-47.

considered more historically weighty, despite the work's polemic character. This article would become one of Mingana's most influential contributions to Qur'ānic scholarship.⁹³ After the rush of the first years following his 1914 'conversion' to Qur'ān textual criticism, Mingana's research on the Qur'ān waned, with plenty of other edition and translation projects going on.⁹⁴ A single minor contribution was an 1918 encyclopaedia entry on the Qur'ān co-authored with the Oxford Arabist, David Margoliouth, in which Mingana provided additional arguments in favour of Casanova's theory.⁹⁵ But his hopes for discovering other manuscripts of the Qur'ān containing pre-standardisation variants were never abandoned. Indeed, they were reinvigorated when Mingana stumbled upon the Syriac Qur'ānic excerpts in Bar Ṣalībī's *Against the Muslims* after his return from his 1924 manuscript expedition to the Middle East.⁹⁶

4. Conclusion: A 'Perfect Storm'

Retracing the history of Mingana's scholarly occupations with the text of the Qur'ān sheds much light on why Mingana was in such a "great state of excitement" upon his discovery of seemingly non-canonical Qur'ānic material in Syriac. Given all that he previously had done, searched and hoped for, it is understandable that Mingana had a hard time to resist the temptation of concluding that he had uncovered more significant texts for the earliest history of the text of the Qur'ān. The main components of his approach to the Syriac Qur'ānic excerpts in Bar Ṣalībī's *Disputation* are all present in his earlier work: In *Leaves of Three Ancient Qur'āns*, he had formulated the view that variant Qur'ānic texts point to a pre-canonical setting. In *The Transmission of the Qur'ān*, he had claimed the value of early Christian sources for re-evaluating the Qur'ān's textual history and had pushed the Qur'ān's official canonisation to the time of 'Abd al-Malik. In *An Ancient Syriac Translation*, he simply had to take one next step: Using a Syriac translation as a significant element for the Qur'ān's early textual history. Thus, the idea of an 'old Syriac version' of the Qur'ān was born, a text that was believed to parallel, if not surpass, the significance the old Syriac versions of the Gospels that recently had been discovered by William Cureton and Agnes Smith Lewis. His friend and colleague David Margoliouth probably best described the pioneering role to which Mingana probably felt himself to be entitled:

Until January of this year no ancient version of the Koran had been introduced into the criticism of that book; Dr. Mingana, who has discovered a Syriac version of high antiquity, and described it in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, is the pioneer in

⁹³ See, further, Gordon Nickel, "Scholarly Reception of Alphonse Mingana's 'The Transmission of the Qur'ān': A Centenary Perspective," in *The Character of Christian-Muslim Encounter. Essays in Honour of David Thomas*, ed. Douglas Pratt et al, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 343-364.

⁹⁴ See the bibliographical references in Samir, *Alphonse Mingana*, 54-56.

⁹⁵ David S. Margoliouth and Alphonse Mingana, "Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 10, ed. James Hastings, 538-50 [Mingana wrote § 10-12 on editions and variant readings, external sources, and translations].

⁹⁶ Although beyond the scope of the present study it should be pointed out that Mingana's quest for collecting ancient Qur'ān manuscripts continued after 1924 with other major acquisitions, of which the most famous specimen is undoubtedly the so-called Birmingham Qur'ān. A comprehensive study of these Qur'āns is offered in Fedeli, *Early Qur'ānic Manuscripts*.

this matter. The same scholar in his *Leaves from Three Ancient Korans* (Cambridge, 1914) called attention to noteworthy variants in old manuscripts.⁹⁷

Despite all that Mingana may have hoped for, it is not his name that is remembered nowadays for pioneering the modern field of Qur'ān textual criticism, but those of Gotthelf Bergsträsser, Arthur Jeffery, and Otto Pretzl.⁹⁸ Now the time has surely come to look for scientifically more rigorous ways to explain the origin of Bar Ṣalībī's Syriac quotations, not just those included in the final part of the treatise but also those in the preceding chapters, which have all too often been ignored in past scholarship. Given the unlikelihood of the existence of a full or partial Syriac translation of the Qur'ān, one is advised to investigate other possible sources to account for these materials. One important hypothesis which has not received sufficient attention in this respect is Bar Ṣalībī's possible use of a Syriac collection of *testimonia* against the Muslims, based primarily on passages from the Qur'ān but occasionally also including materials from other authoritative sources of Islam. But this is a topic for another time.⁹⁹

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⁹⁷ Margoliouth, "Textual Variations of the Koran," *The Moslem World* 15, no. 4 (October 1925): 334. See also Guppy's announcement: "A very important manuscript has recently been deposited in our library for purposes of investigation, in which are found portions of a previously unknown translation of the Qur'ān into Old Syriac", see Guppy, "Library notes and news," *BJRL* 8, no. 1 (January 1925): 11.

⁹⁸ See Small, *Textual Criticism and Qur'ān Manuscripts*, 3-5; Gabriel S. Reynolds, "Introduction: Qur'ānic studies and its controversies," in *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008, 3-7.

⁹⁹ See Jacobs, *Syriac Testimonies against the Muslims*.

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