

# A WORD FITLY SPOKEN

Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of  
the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān

presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai

Edited by

Meir M. Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins, Sarah Stroumsa and  
Bruno Chiesa



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# דבר ז

מחקרים בפרש

מאיר מ' בר-אשר



ממ  
יד יצר

# **Syriacisms in the "Arabic Qur'ān": Who were "those who said 'Allāh is third of three'" according to *al-Mā'ida* 73?**

Sidney H. Griffith

## I

### **The Aramaean context of early Islam**

Modern Western scholars, for the most part operating outside the hermeneutical horizons of the Islamic communities, have long searched for the intercultural, interreligious and multilingual historical circumstances that the "Arabic Qur'ān's" (XII *Yūsuf* 2) own narratives seem to demand for a fuller understanding of the context in which the Islamic scripture first appeared. The high profile that the Aramaic expression of Christianity can be seen to have, against the background of the "Arabic Qur'ān" in its canonical recension, is a special case. Of course, the Christian Aramaean context is only one of several that may be profitably examined; the Qur'ān certainly has more than one context, and even more than one Christian horizon. For example, to name just a few of them, there are Manichean affinities to be explored, along with Ethiopian and Egyptian Christian frames of reference, not to mention the numerous interactions with Samaritan, Jewish and Rabbinic law and lore.<sup>1</sup>

Here it is not a question of alleging that Aramaic-speaking Christians actively influenced the composition of the "Arabic Qur'ān". Rather, it is a matter of perceiving in the Qur'ān's Arabic diction, particularly in passages that evoke biblical narratives or other accounts of Christian lore or Christian teaching, wording or phrasing that reveals the Aramaic cast of many of the Christian

1 The several contexts of the Qur'ān most readily appear in the "foreign vocabulary" of the text. See Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), esp. pp. 1-41.

לא ידעתי. פועם קווי.  
מן אלמחאל אן יתו  
אנה קד קתלה. קאל  
בה [פלו עלמת'] פכ  
קט מאת מן מת'ל ד  
ויאמר מה עשית. א  
תלך אלגנם אלתי ק  
פמא ד'א צנעת. והה

<sup>1</sup>השלמתו של מ' צוקר,  
באלמעני: קטע זה מצוי  
תרגומו לעברית שם.

b = מ

ואמא קין פלם יקר  
ד'לך עלי טריק אל  
פקלת לי אין הו. וז  
במא לא ילזמני ואק  
פאקול לך ולא אנא  
פאכבר פי הד'א<sup>5</sup> אי

<sup>1</sup>שי, פ. <sup>2</sup>לכנה, פ. <sup>3</sup>הד'

topics the Qur'ān addresses. Historically speaking, this is only to be expected; the Arabic-speaking Christians in the milieu in which Islam was born, be they from Sinai, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Syria, lower Mesopotamia or even southern Arabia, all belonged to communities whose liturgies, doctrines and ecclesiastical associations were of primarily Aramaic expression.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Christians living in Sinai, Palestine or Trans-Jordan, where "Byzantine" Orthodoxy held sway from the mid-fifth century and Greek was the dominant ecclesiastical language in the numerous international monastic communities, the Aramaic dialect of the local churches was Christian Palestinian Aramaic.<sup>3</sup> In Syria and Mesopotamia, where the local Christian communities straddled the frontiers of the Roman and Persian empires, and where "Byzantine" imperial Orthodoxy was often rejected, Syriac was the Aramaic dialect that served as the dominant ecclesiastical language. Most Syriac-speaking Christians accepted Christological formulae articulated the most effectively either by Severus of Antioch (c. 465–538) and Philoxenus of Mabbog (c. 440–523),<sup>4</sup> echoing the theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), or by Babai the Great (551/2–628), reflecting the positions of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428).<sup>5</sup> Popularly, the three Christian denominations represented in the Syriac-speaking milieu of the world in which Islam was born were the three called "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians",<sup>6</sup> usually initially by their theological adversaries.

- 2 For a quick survey of Christians in Arabia prior to Islam see J. M. Fiey, "Naṣārā", *EP*, vol. 7, pp. 970–73. See also René Tardy, *Najrān: Chrétiens d'Arabie avant l'Islam* (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq Éditeurs, 1999).
- 3 See Sidney H. Griffith, "From Aramaic to Arabic: the languages of the monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), pp. 11–31.
- 4 Severus of Antioch's works were originally in Greek; his very influential *Cathedral Homilies* survive only in Syriac. Philoxenus wrote in Syriac. For further bibliographic guidance see Joseph Lebon, "La christologie du monophysisme syrien", in *Das Konzil von Chalkedon; Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Aloys Grillmeier and Heinrich Bacht, 3 vols. (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1951–1954), vol. 1, pp. 425–586; André de Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog; sa vie, ses écrits, sa théologie* (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1963); Roberta Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).
- 5 On Babai and the theology of the "Church of the East" see Geevarghese Chediath, *The Christology of Mar Babai the Great* (KMITayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies; Paderborn: Ostkirchendienst, 1982); Sebastian Brock, "The Christology of the Church of the East in the synods of the fifth to early seventh centuries: preliminary considerations and materials", in Sebastian Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, No. 2: *History, Literature and Theology* (Hampshire: Variorum/Ashgate, 1992), no. XII.
- 6 See Sebastian P. Brock, "The 'Nestorian' Church, a lamentable misnomer", *BJRL* 78 (1996), pp. 23–35.

But it is worth noting in the present context that these appellations, all common in Syriac and Arabic texts, gained currency for the most part only in early Islamic times.<sup>7</sup>

Presumably, the Christians whom the "Arabic Qur'ān" had in mind when speaking of "those who say 'We are *al-Naṣārā*'" (V *al-Mā'ida* 14, 82) were Arabic-speaking Christians. And given the probability that the Qur'ān's Arabic term here reflects the cognate Syriac term *Naṣrāyē* in the sense of "Nazoreans" or "Nazarenes",<sup>8</sup> a term also sometimes used to designate "Christians" in Syriac works by east Syrian writers living in the Persian empire, particularly when reporting the references of non-Christian speakers to "Christians",<sup>9</sup> it is reasonable to suppose that the Arabic/Qur'ānic usage followed suit.<sup>10</sup> While the Qur'ān itself makes no further specification, it also seems reasonable to presume that by means of the term *Naṣārā* the Qur'ān intends to refer to Christians actually present in its own Arabic-speaking milieu of the early seventh century, and not to any earlier group who may have been designated by the Greek form of this name in the works of Christian heresiographers who wrote in Greek with reference to a much earlier time and a different place. In the present study, I hope to show that the most likely case is that the Christians whose doctrines and practices are subject to critique in the "Arabic Qur'ān" are Arabic-speaking Christians associated with the largely Aramaic-speaking

7 See Sidney H. Griffith, "'Melkites', 'Jacobites' and the Christological controversies in Arabic in third/ninth-century Syria", in *Syrian Christians under Islam; the First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 9–55.

8 See Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, pp. 280–81.

9 See Sebastian Brock, "Christians in the Sasanid Empire: a case of divided loyalties", in *Religion and National Identity*, ed. Stuart Mews, Studies in Church History 18 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 1–19, esp. 3–6. See also Sebastian Brock, "Some aspects of Greek words in Syriac", in *Synkretismus im syrisch-persischen Kulturgebiet*, ed. A. Dietrich (Symposium, Reinhausen bei Göttingen, 1971), Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Dritte Folge, 96; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975), pp. 91–95; Christelle Jullien & Florence Jullien, "Aux frontières de l'Iranité: 'Nāṣrāyē' et 'Kṛīstyonē' des inscriptions du Mobad Kirdīr; enquête littéraire et historique", *Numen* 49 (2002), pp. 282–335.

10 See Fiey, "Naṣārā", p. 970. The most recent study of this term as it appears in the Qur'ān is by François De Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (ἑθνικός): studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), pp. 1–30. For reasons that will appear below, the present writer does not accept De Blois' final conclusions regarding the ecclesial identity of the Arabic-speaking Christians whose religious idiom is reflected in the Qur'ān.

denominations, the existence of whom to Arab tribesmen in the early seventh century is a matter of historical record. They are the "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians" of whom the later Syriac and Arabic sources, both Muslim and Christian, regularly speak.<sup>11</sup> But this presumption requires further discussion because neither Muslim nor Western non-Muslim commentators on the Qur'ān have in fact always assumed it.

While most writers in the Arabic-speaking world, both Christians and Muslims, have in fact used the term *Naṣārā* to designate "Christians" in general, some Muslim commentators over the centuries have argued that the term *Naṣārā* should be considered to refer only to a now unknown community of "Christians" in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad, of whom the Qur'ān had some good things to say (e.g. V *al-Mā'ida* 82), and who were therefore commendable. They say that the "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians," whom Muslim scholars in the early Islamic period knew well by name,<sup>12</sup> were different groups of "Christians", of whom there is little positive to say from an Islamic point of view and much to which to object.<sup>13</sup> But there is little or no historical evidence to support this contention; it seems to have been motivated solely by the requirements of interreligious polemics.<sup>14</sup>

Western commentators have also often sought to identify the Christians whose views they assume are reflected in the Qur'ān. Most often, researchers have looked for Christian influences on Qur'ānic and other early Islamic doctrinal formulae that seem to them to reflect Christian teachings at variance with the main-line Christian views of the Qur'ān's own day, but that seem to accord well with the Qur'ān's own judgements. This endeavour has led many

- 11 See Fiey, "Naṣārā", p. 970 — notwithstanding De Blois, "Naṣrānī and ḥanīf", who seems to posit the presence of Judeo-Christian "Nazarenes", known from a much earlier era and a different milieu, in the Qur'ān's Arabic-speaking ambience of the early seventh century.
- 12 The most astute Muslim observer of Christian denominations in the early Islamic period was undoubtedly Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq (fl. c. 850). See esp. David Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 45 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); idem, *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity: Abū 'Isā al-Warrāq's "Against the Incarnation"*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 13 Paul of Antioch, the "Melkite" bishop of Sidon in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, addressed this issue in his famous "Letter to a Muslim Friend". See Paul Khoury, *Paul d'Antioche; évêque melkite de Sidon (XIIe s.)* (Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1964), pp. 169–87 (French), 59–83 (Arabic).
- 14 See e.g. the case of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) in Thomas F. Michel, ed. and trans., *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984).



scholars to postulate the influence of such earlier groups as those vaguely classified as "Jewish Christians",<sup>15</sup> the heretical "Nazarenes",<sup>16</sup> the "Ebionites", the "Elchasaites" and even the "Collyridians".<sup>17</sup> From the present writer's point of view, there are at least two problems with most of these suggestions. First, there is little or no historical or linguistic evidence for the presence of any of these groups in the world into which Islam was born and in which the Qur'ān first appeared.<sup>18</sup> As both Tor Andrae and J. M. Fiey have pointed out, all the available historical evidence points to the conclusion that the Arabic-speaking Christians actually present in the Qur'ān's milieu were associated with the well-known "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians" pressing into the Arabic-speaking heartlands from the peripheries, whose scriptural, liturgical and patristic

15 In this connection see especially H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1949), esp. pp. 334–42. See also the studies on Judeo-Christians by Shlomo Pines, now collected in Shlomo Pines, *Studies in the History of Religion*, The Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, vol. 4: *Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), pp. 211–486.

16 See Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period until its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Jerusalem/Leiden: Magnes Press/ Brill, 1988); Simoun C. Mimouni, "Les Nazoréens: recherche étymologique et historique", *Revue Biblique* 105 (1998), pp. 208–62. See also De Blois, "Naṣārā and ḥanīf" for arguments in support of the thesis that the ancient "Nazarenes" were the Christians to whose views the Qur'ān refers.

17 See e.g. Joseph Azzi, *Le prêtre et le prophète: aux sources du coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001); Joseph Dorra-Haddad, "Coran, prédication nazaréenne", *Proche Orient Chrétien* 23 (1973), pp. 148–55; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); J. M. Magnin, "Notes sur l'ébionisme", *Proche Orient Chrétien* 23 (1973), pp. 233–65, 24 (1974), pp. 225–50, 25 (1975), pp. 245–73, 26 (1976), pp. 293–315, 27 (1977), pp. 250–73, 28 (1978), pp. 220–48; M. P. Roncaglia, "Éléments ébionites et elkésaites dans le coran: notes et hypothèses", *Proche Orient Chrétien* 21 (1971), pp. 101–26.

18 As François De Blois has written, "It is one thing to notice similarities between the teachings of two religious traditions, and another to construct a plausible historical model to account for the influence of one upon the other". De Blois, "Naṣrānī and ḥanīf" pp. 25–26. De Blois is convinced he has met this criterion in the instance of the Qur'ānic *naṣārā*. He concludes (p. 16) that it is "likely that there was a community of Nazoraean Christians in central Arabia, in the seventh century, unnoticed by the outside world". But the likelihood seems to rest (ibid.) ultimately on the assumption that "if *naṣārā* means 'catholic Christians', then it is very difficult to see how their food should be 'permitted to you'". Here the reference is to V *al-Mā'ida* 5, where the Qur'ān speaks of the "food of the People of the Book" as "permitted to you", i.e. to the Muslims, not the food of the *Naṣārā* specifically. Arguably, the Qur'ān no more has the *Naṣārā* in mind here than it has the Jews in mind when it speaks of the "People of the Book" who "say three" in IV *al-Nisā'* 171. So it is difficult in the end to see how De Blois' argument really depends on more than the old perception of doctrinal or practical similarities, without the historical plausibility.

heritage was largely Aramaean.<sup>19</sup> Second, and perhaps more important, the search for “influences” or “borrowings”, or for pre-existing Christian templates for the Qur’ān’s Christological or theological judgements, seems to be methodologically flawed.<sup>20</sup> Those who have engaged in this search seem to have paid insufficient attention to the Qur’ān’s own rhetorical purposes and to have overlooked the Qur’ān’s manifest intention not to report but to critique the religion of the “People of the Book”: “Do not exceed the proper bounds in your religion” (IV *al-Nisā*’ 171; V *al-Mā’ida* 77).

As many scholars of the past and the present have suggested, it seems not unlikely that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad and the Qur’ān, in addition to winning converts to their own creeds, will have also come into conversation with persons who as a consequence will have elaborated distinctive religious views of their own. In addition to Muḥammad himself, and his associates — the most notable cases in point<sup>21</sup> — one thinks most readily in this connection of those whom Islamic tradition calls *ḥunafā*<sup>22</sup> and of others who are often presented as non-Jewish and non-Christian Arabic-speaking monotheists.<sup>23</sup> It may well have been the case that from the point of view of the theologies of the mainline Aramaean churches, not all of the Christian interlocutors of the Arab monotheists were well tutored. But when all is said and done, in most instances the most plausible suggestions about Christian

19 See Tor Andrae, *Les origines de l’Islam et le christianisme*, trans. Jules Roche (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1955), esp. pp. 201–11; Fiey, “Naṣārā”, p. 970.

20 Seemingly prompted by the assumption that the Qur’ān must have borrowed or inherited its doctrinal positions from some earlier religious community, rather than have elaborated them from its own religious principles and assumptions, scholars have often looked for earlier groups with parallel or comparable views, and then designated them as “sources” for the Qur’ān’s similar teachings, without paying much attention to the socio-historical plausibility of the designated group’s presence in the actual Arabian milieu in which Islam was born. What is more, the designated influences have then often been used to explain only one or two Qur’ānic usages, without any discussion of how they might fit into the larger framework of the critique of the Christians and their doctrines in the Qur’ān.

21 See Claude Gilliot, “Les ‘informateurs’ juifs et chrétiens de Muḥammad: reprise d’un problème traité par Aloys Sprenger et Theodor Nöldeke”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 22 (1998), pp. 84–126.

22 The most recent, thorough study of the significance of the term *ḥanīf* in its several senses, along with bibliographical references to earlier studies, is in De Blois, “Naṣrānī and ḥanīf”, pp. 16–25.

23 See the sometimes intriguing ideas presented in Yehuda D. Nevo & Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).



confessional identity seem to flow from the assumption that in the first third of the seventh century the Qur'ān's *Naṣārā* were in fact Arabic-speaking Christians with connections to the "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians", historically and archaeologically actually discoverable in the region.<sup>24</sup>

The proposal advanced in the present essay is that one should read the Qur'ān as a scripture in its own right, in dialogue with previous scriptures through the oral reports of them that circulated among the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in the Qur'ān's own milieu. There is so far no completely convincing evidence that there were any pre-Islamic written translations of the Torah or the Gospel into Arabic,<sup>25</sup> nor that among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times there was an Arabic, Christian, strophic hymnody that can still be discerned in the deep structures of the Qur'ān.<sup>26</sup> As for the evocations of Christianity in the text, the assumption here is that the Qur'ān's announcer became aware of the Bible and of the lore of the Christians through their oral expression among the Arabic-speaking Christians of the day, whose Christianity was largely what was preached and taught by Aramaic-speaking monks, missionaries and traders who brought Christianity to the Arabs from the world of the Aramaeans during the

24 See Barbara Finster, "Arabien in der Spätantike: ein Überblick über die kulturelle Situation der Halbinsel in der Zeit von Muhammad", *Archäologischer Anzeiger* (1996), pp. 288–319; René Tardy, *Najrān*. For more bibliography on this subject see Sidney H. Griffith, "Christians and Christianity", in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), vol. 1, pp. 307–16.

25 See Sidney H. Griffith, "The Gospel in Arabic: an inquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century", *Oriens Christianus* 69 (1985), pp. 126–67.

26 Günter Lüling has argued in support of the proposal that about a third of the Qur'ān as we now have it is built on the foundation of an earlier Christian, strophic hymnody that was concealed under successive layers of the Qur'ān's text after a number of revisions, about which Islamic tradition itself furnishes some evidence. According to him, this early Arabic, Christian hymnody, which celebrated an angel-Christology, was at home among the pre-Islamic Arabs of the Hijaz and had a place in Christian liturgy in the then-Christian Ka'bah in Mecca. Lüling discerns this pre-existing hymnody on the basis of his analysis and reconstruction of the unvowelled, consonantal text of selected passages from the Qur'ān. See Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1974); idem, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und christlichen Theologie* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977); idem, *Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad: eine Kritik am "christlichen" Abendland* (Erlangen: Hannelore Lüling, 1981). For a more personal discussion of his idea and its reception among scholars see Günter Lüling, "Preconditions for the scholarly criticism of the Koran and Islam, with some autobiographical remarks", *Journal of Higher Criticism* 3 (1996), pp. 73–109.

fifth and sixth centuries. Furthermore, it is assumed that the mind behind the Qur'ān was well aware of the Christian doctrinal formulae in regular use among the Arabic-speaking Christians and that the Qur'ān's rhetorical purpose was to critique and often to reject the doctrines expressed in these formulae. On the basis of these assumptions it seems that a more likely account can be given of the Qur'ān's interactions with Christians, one that in the end will ring historically and literarily truer than any account given on the basis of other assumptions, such as those that presume "influences", "borrowings" or repetitions of pre-existing Christian doctrinal paradigms on the Qur'ān's part. This approach offers the possibility for a fuller account of the Aramaean context of the Qur'ān, as might be detected in the "Syriacisms" in its diction — a term to be defined below, especially in those passages of the Qur'ān that deal expressly with Christian doctrines and practices.

## II

### Syriac and the "Arabic Qur'ān"

Muslim commentators after the time of Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūfī (1445–1505) seem to have concentrated almost exclusively on Arabic philology and lexicography to aid their reading and understanding of the Qur'ān. Non-Muslim, mostly Western scholars have in modern times given renewed attention to the Arabic scripture's "foreign vocabulary". The Aramaic, and specifically the Syriac background for a significant portion of the Qur'ān's wording has assumed a significant place in their work.<sup>27</sup> Alphonse Mingana, writing in 1927, estimated that 70 percent of the "foreign influences on the style and terminology" of the Qur'ān could be traced to "Syriac (including Aramaic and Palestinian Syriac)".<sup>28</sup> Noting this high incidence of Syriac etymologies for a significant portion of the Qur'ān's "foreign vocabulary", Arthur Jeffery said in 1938 that "one fact seems certain, namely that such Christianity as was known among the Arabs in pre-Islamic times was largely of the Syrian type, whether Jacobite or Nestorian".<sup>29</sup> He noted further that numerous early Islamic texts mention Muḥammad's contacts with both Syrian and Arabian Christians, and

27 See the review, in a broader context, in Martin R. Zammit, *A Comparative Lexical Study of Qur'ānic Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), esp. pp. 51–63.

28 A. Mingana, "Syriac influence on the style of the Qur'ān", *BJRL* 11 (1927), pp. 77–98.

29 Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary*, pp. 20–21.

this observation prompted Jeffery to conclude that these texts "at least show that there was an early recognition of the fact that Muḥammad was at one time in more or less close contact with Christians associated with the Syrian Church".<sup>30</sup>

Looking beyond the Syriac etymologies for much of the "foreign vocabulary" of the Qur'ān, a more recent commentator, writing under the pseudonym Christoph Luxenberg, has been exploring what he calls the "Syro-Aramaic" reading of the Qur'ān.<sup>31</sup> This is a much broader enterprise than Mingana's or Jeffery's inquiries, involving the use of the Syriac lexicon and the consultation of Syriac grammatical usages to help in the reading of some early passages in the Qur'ān. Alleging that traditional Muslim *mufasssīrūn* and modern scholars alike have neglected what he calls the "Syro-Aramaic" roots of Qur'ānic Arabic in favour of an overly exclusive reliance on Bedouin language for data to substantiate their researches,<sup>32</sup> Luxenberg's method is to examine selected *crucis interpretum* in the text from his own "Syro-Aramaic" perspective. He changes the vowels and diacritical points as necessary, to explore the possibility that with the Syriac lexicon in hand a more intelligible reading of hitherto obscure passages may be attained, often found to be congruent with earlier, Aramaean Christian ideas and formulations. In the ensemble, the overall impression is given that when it is read from Luxenberg's "Syro-Aramaic" perspective, the Qur'ān can be thought to have once been a very different scripture from the one it has become in the hands of its Muslim and Western commentators. Luxenberg's enterprise seems, under the guise of a philological quest, to be a modern-day analogue of the efforts of some earlier Arabic-speaking Christian apologists in the early Islamic period to argue that before it was "corrupted" by early Muslims and Jewish converts to Islam, the Qur'ān was actually a book of Christian meaning and sensibility.<sup>33</sup> Luxenberg's work once again calls attention to how much Syriac one can be tempted to try to read into the "Arabic Qur'ān", but that may be precisely the problem with many of the alternate readings he

30 Ibid., p.22.

31 See Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000; 2nd rev. ed.; Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2004).

32 In this connection see also Joshua Blau, "The role of the Bedouins as arbiters in linguistic questions and the *mas'ala az-zunburiyya*", JSS 8 (1963), pp. 42–51.

33 In this connection see Sidney H. Griffith, "The Qur'ān in Arab Christian texts; the development of an apologetic argument: Abū Qurrah in the *maḡlis* of al-Ma'mūn", *Parole de l'Orient* 24 (1999), pp. 203–33.

proposes. We will return to Luxenberg's suggestions below. For now, let us note in passing only what seems to be the fundamental conundrum of his enterprise — namely, the effort to read the indisputably “Arabic Qur’ān” as if much of it were written instead in “Syro-Aramaic”, i.e. Syriac.

Tor Andrae undoubtedly remains the modern scholar who has most systematically investigated what he considered to be Muḥammad's and the Qur’ān's indebtedness to the Syriac expression of Christianity.<sup>34</sup> In his study *The Origins of Islam and Christianity*, Andrae readily speaks of “influences” and “borrowings” from Syriac in the Qur’ān, but his emphasis is on religious ideas and their characteristic formulae rather than on grammar or lexicography. He first calls attention to the Christianity in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad, mentioning in particular its flourishing in Najrān and al-Ḥira and among the Ghassanids; he highlights the Syriac cast of the Christianity flourishing in these milieux. Then, having dismissed the pre-Islamic Arabic poets and the so-called “*ḥanīfs*” as sufficient sources for the Christian ideas and expressions he finds in the Qur’ān, Andrae in fact devotes most of his study to what he calls “the eschatological piety (*Frömmigkeit*) of Muḥammad”. He means the Muslim prophet's systematic thinking about the “last things”, final judgement and the hereafter, resurrection, reward and punishment. According to Andrae, this piety of Muḥammad's was “a coherent, well-defined conception (*Anschauung*) that provided the most important expression of his religious personality”.<sup>35</sup> What is more, according to Andrae, this eschatological conception, articulated in finished formulae, reflected a precise homiletic programme (*prédication précise < bestimmte Verkündigung*) with which he thought Muḥammad must have been thoroughly familiar.<sup>36</sup> In

34 See Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam et le christianisme*. This work was originally published as a series of articles under the title “Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum” in three successive issues of the periodical *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 23 (1923), pp. 149–206; 24 (1924), pp. 213–92; 25 (1925), pp. 45–112. It was subsequently published in monograph form in Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926). References to this work in the present essay are to the French translation by Jules Roche. See also the later works of Tor Andrae, *Mohammed, sein Leben und sein Glaube* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1932), English trans. Theophil Menzel, *Mohammed: the Man and His Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); and *I Myrtenträdgården: Studier i Tidig Islamisk Mystik* (Lund: Albert Bonniers Forlag, 1947), English trans. Birgitta Sharpe, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

35 Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, p. 68.

36 See *ibid.*

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the sequel, following his detailed analyses and comparisons of passages in the Qur'ān and in selected Syriac texts, Andrae argues that this "precise homiletic programme" was that of the Syriac-speaking Christian community, which, in his view, served as the model for Muḥammad's own eschatological preaching.<sup>37</sup> According to Andrae, "whatever Muḥammad received from Christianity he only learned it by way of oral preaching and personal contacts".<sup>38</sup> Presumably, although he does not say so explicitly, Andrae supposed that Arabic was the language of the oral preaching and personal contacts. He does say that he thinks the "Church of the East", the so-called "Nestorian" church, was the source of the influences and borrowings from the Syrian Christians that went into the make-up of Muḥammad's "eschatological piety".<sup>39</sup> More specifically, Andrae proposed that the missionary preaching of the "Nestorians" came to Muḥammad's attention from Yemen, where a "Nestorian" mission had been established in the late sixth century.<sup>40</sup>

But Andrae was also alive to what he called the "Monophysite" influence on Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. He found it in the Qur'ān's reflection of the Christology it rejected. According to Andrae, the Qur'ān's surprising idea that the Trinity consists of God, Jesus and Mary,<sup>41</sup> its polemic against the allegation that God is the Messiah,<sup>42</sup> and its reflection of an interest in the apocryphal narratives of Jesus' infancy all suggest a polemical response to "Monophysite" interlocutors. He supposed that they were to be found in the Abyssinian associations of the early Islamic community.<sup>43</sup> But later Western commentators would posit as close a connection between Muḥammad and the originally Syriac-speaking "Jacobites" as Andrae had posited between Muḥammad and the "Nestorians". For example, John Bowman, pointing to the presence of the so-called "Monophysites" in Najrān and among Arab confederations such as the Ghassānids, argued that the Qur'ān's prophetology and its biblical awareness are best explained on the hypothesis that Muḥammad

37 See *ibid.*, pp. 145, 160, 203.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

39 See *ibid.*, pp. 192, 199, 202.

40 See *ibid.*, p. 206, with a reference back to p. 24.

41 Presumably a reference to V *al-Mā'ida* 116. More on this verse below.

42 Presumably a reference to the Qur'ān's dictum "They have disbelieved who say God is the Messiah, son of Mary" (V *al-Mā'ida* 72).

43 See Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, pp. 209–10. See also Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and his Faith*, p. 91.

was in conversation with "Jacobites" among whom the *Diatessaron* circulated. According to Bowman, Muhammad gained even his knowledge of the Old Testament from the harmonised Gospel; he noted that the only Old Testament personages named in the Qur'ān are those that also appear in the *Diatessaron*.<sup>44</sup>

Tor Andrae singled out the works of St. Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306–373), the early Syriac writer beloved by "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians" alike, as texts in which he could most readily find vocabulary, turns of phrase and religious conceptions cognate with those to be found in the Qur'ān.<sup>45</sup> One of his suggestions in particular instigated a minor scholarly storm. Andrae proposed that the *houris* of Paradise as depicted in the Qur'ān (XLIV *al-Dukhān* 54; LII *al-Tūr* 20; LV *al-Rahmān* 72; LVI *al-Wāqī'a* 22) could be found prefigured in one of St. Ephraem's hymns, *De Paradiso* (VII:18).<sup>46</sup> Andrae wrote:

One may recognize a veiled reference to the virgins of Paradise in Afrem's saying: "Whoever has abstained from wine on earth, for him do the vines of Paradise yearn. Each one of them holds out to him a bunch of grapes. And if a man has lived in chastity, they (feminine) receive him in a pure bosom, because he as a monk did not fall into the bosom and bed of earthly love".<sup>47</sup> ... Popular piety certainly interpreted this daring imagery in a crass and literal sense, and under such circumstances one cannot blame a citizen of pagan Mecca for doing the same thing.<sup>48</sup>

44 See John Bowman, "The debt of Islam to monophysite Syrian Christianity", *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 19 (1964/65), pp. 177–201; also published in E. C. B. MacLaurin (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Griffiths Wheeler Thatcher (1863–1950)* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), pp. 191–216. In connection with the "Jacobite" Ghassanids, see esp. Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 vols. (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002).

45 See esp. Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, pp. 145–61. Andrae used the old, uncritical *Editio Romana* of the works of Ephraem; see J. S. Assemani (ed.), *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine*, 6 vols. (Rome, 1732–1746). He was apparently unaware of the problems of distinction and authenticity between the works of the so-called "Ephraem Syrus" and "Ephraem Graecus"; he refers to them indiscriminately. In this connection see Sebastian Brock, "A brief guide to the main editions and translations of the works of St. Ephrem", *The Harp* 3 (1990), pp. 7–29.

46 See Andrae, *Les origines de l'Islam*, pp. 151–54, where, on p. 151 n. 4, he attributes the original insight to Hubert Grimme, *Muhammad*, 3 vols. (Münster im W.: Aschendorff, 1892–1895), vol. 2, p. 160 n. 9. See also Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and his Faith*, pp. 87–88.

47 This is Andrae's version of a strophe from St. Ephraem's Syriac *Hymni de Paradiso*, VII:18, based on the text in the *Editio Romana* of his works, Assemani, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 3, pp. 563ff.

48 Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and his Faith*, p. 88.



In 1948 Dom Edmund Beck, OSB, the modern editor of the critical editions of most of the Syriac works of Ephraem the Syrian, wrote a response to what he took to be Andrae's claim about St. Ephraem's meaning.<sup>49</sup> Beck took it that Andrae was proposing that St. Ephraem's words suggested a heavenly reward for the celibate monk comparable to that provided by the *houris* of the Qur'ān for the faithfully departed Muslim. So he went to some trouble to show that such could not have been St. Ephraem's meaning. Beck called attention to the faulty text of the *Editio Romana* of Ephraem's hymn that Andrae had used, and then set about explaining the imagery and symbolism of the passage in its context, by a somewhat complicated word-study of several key terms. In sum, Beck argued that St. Ephraem's imagery of the grape-vine, its stocks and shoots, evoked a vision of Paradise and a line of thinking that he thought definitively excluded any concept of the kind of delights provided by the *houris*. While Beck's exposition of St. Ephraem's own thought is convincing, it seems that he did not in fact completely grasp Andrae's point. Andrae did not actually say that Ephraem envisioned *houris* in Paradise. Rather, he suggested that "popular piety", not to mention "a citizen of pagan Mecca", might have been inspired by such lines as Ephraem wrote to conjure up the *houris*. It was Andrae's major point that homiletic descriptions such as those by Ephraem, envisioning the blessings of Paradise in terms of a garden of delights, could reasonably be supposed somehow to lie behind the similar descriptions of Paradise in the Qur'ān, especially if one were prepared to concede that Ephraem's descriptions could well have been reflected in the discourse of Arabic-speaking Christians.

In his recent, aforementioned book on the "Syro-Aramaic" reading of the Qur'ān,<sup>50</sup> Christoph Luxenberg also addresses the subject of the *houris*. He examines all the passages that concern both the *houris* and the "immortal boys" (LII *al-Ṭūr* 24; LVI *al-Wāqī'a* 17; LXXVI *al-Insān*) who are said to be in attendance on the believers in Paradise. To begin with, Luxenberg calls the reader's attention to how much, in his opinion, the very idea of the *houris*

49 See Edmund Beck, "Eine christliche Parallele zu den Paradiesesjungfrauen des Korans?", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 14 (1948), pp. 398–405. Beck returned to the issue with some further observations in a later communication; see idem, "Les Houris du Coran et Ephrem le syrien", *MIDEO* 6 (1959–1961), pp. 405–8. For Beck's own understanding of Ephraem's hymn see idem, *Ephraems Hymnen über das Paradies*, *Studia Anselmiana* 26 (Rome: Herder, 1951), pp. 63–76. See also Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Paradiſo und Contra Julianum*, CSCO, 174 and 175 (Louvain: Peeters, 1957).

50 See Luxenberg, *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart*, pp. 221–61.

departs from the Qur'ān's principle to confirm the teachings of the Bible (e.g. in XL *al-Aḥqāf* 12), in which, he says, no such notion can be found. He recalls the efforts of Western commentators to explain the *houris* by reference to Persian lore and practice.<sup>51</sup> He highlights the lexical, grammatical and syntactical difficulties that one might have with the traditional, Islamic understanding of the Arabic text, and how he thinks it puts the contexts askew. He proposes that the conventional idea of the *houris* stands in contrast and even contradiction to other passages in the Qur'ān that have to do with life in the hereafter. Then he turns his attention to the key phrase in XLIV *al-Dukhān* 54 and LII *al-Tūr* 20: *وزوجنهم بحور عين*.

Luxenberg proposes that the first word in this phrase be re-pointed to *وروجنهم* and that it be read as *rawwah-nā-hum* in the sense of "We give them rest or comfort". With this change in the reading of the consonants, and with the "Syro-Aramaic" lexicon in hand, the phrase can now be contrived to say "We will make it comfortable for them under white, crystal-clear [grape clusters]".<sup>52</sup> The adjectives are made to yield their sense when read through the lens of Syriac usage. The context of the "garden of delights", both Qur'ānic and Syrian, is invoked to supply the "grape clusters". With this reading achieved, Luxenberg moves on to the other passages in the Qur'ān that have customarily been interpreted in light of their supposed reference to the *houris*. He proposes that the imagery of the "grape clusters" can, with the help of the "Syro-Aramaic" lexicon, be read into all of them. The resulting interpretation he offers is an understanding of the descriptions of Paradise that is not only much more consistent with what Luxenberg takes to be their own Qur'ānic contexts, but they are also consistent with what Luxenberg and Tor Andrae posit as their eschatological background in Syriac eschatological homiletics, such as are to be found, for example, in St. Ephraem the Syrian's hymns *De Paradiso*.

The assumption behind both what one might call the "history of religions" approach of Tor Andrae and the lexical, philological approach of Christoph Luxenberg is much the same. It seems to be that in the Arabic-speaking world in which Islam was born and the Qur'ān came down, the Arabic-speaking Christians of whom the Qur'ān speaks would have acquired their religious

51 Luxenberg quotes *in extenso* from A. J. Wensinck, "Hūr", *ET*, vol. 3, pp. 581ff.; Luxenberg, *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart*, pp. 222–24.

52 Luxenberg, *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart*, p. 226: "Wir werden es ihnen unter weissen, kristall(klaren) (Weintrauben) behaglich machen".

phraseology and biblical lore from the originally Syriac-speaking Christians from whom they presumably first learned Christianity. Against this background, the "Arabic Qur'ān" would then be thought to have addressed its own distinctive message to the Arabs and to have criticised the Christian teachings that ran counter to its central tenets. On Luxenberg's assumption, Qur'ānic Arabic would itself be seen as emerging from a "Syro-Aramaic" linguistic matrix. It would be thought to have become an independent language only after the "collection" of the Qur'ān and the inception of its function as a text in a society whose lexicographers and grammarians systematised it by reference to Persian and Bedouin sources, ignoring its "Syro-Aramaic" origins.

This is not the place to undertake a systematic critique of the work of Luxenberg, a task that would call for a closer analysis of the details of his arguments than can be undertaken in the present essay. Suffice it now to say only that from the point of view of the present writer, a major problem with the approach he adopts is that it ignores the integrity of the Qur'ān's Arabic text almost completely, along with the distinctly Islamic hermeneutical horizon within which one would expect to find the text's fundamental meaning. The methodology allows for the reconstruction of the text's orthography, words and phrases, and grammar and syntax solely on the basis of a reference to comparable features of the Syriac language in any period. In the process, Luxenberg readily appeals to the hermeneutic control of the Qur'ān's own principle to confirm the teachings of the Bible, but he leaves out of account any control that might be supplied by the Qur'ān's equally evident purpose to critique, from its own distinctive point of view, the interpretations of the Bible's teachings as articulated by the earlier "People of the Book". Consequently, the only criterion of verisimilitude for Luxenberg's own *Lesart des Koran* seems to be the congruity of the new readings he proposes with a single, Syro-Aramaic and Christian frame of reference, limited only by the possibilities of reading the bare Arabic script as if it were being used to express religious ideas already current in Syriac. Nowhere does he seem to leave any room for the hermeneutical difference that the Islamic inspiration of the Qur'ān might be expected to have contributed to the sense of the narrative in the first place. And he leaves out of his book any satisfactory account of how the text in fact became an "Arabic Qur'ān". Nevertheless, as in the case of Tor Andrae's earlier work, Luxenberg's proposed readings of a number of the Qur'ān's verses do forcefully call attention to the unavoidable Syriac resonance of much of the

Qur'ān's Arabic diction, especially when it is read in the interreligious context of its origins.<sup>53</sup> So how can one reasonably take account of it?

### III Syriacisms in the "Arabic Qur'ān"

While the theories so far mentioned about the high level of Syriac influence on the Qur'ān are far-reaching and controversial, they do serve the purpose of linguistically and thematically calling attention to the already historically plausible suggestion of an Aramaic, and specifically Syriac frame of reference for much of the intertextual and interreligious material in the Qur'ān. This material consists, on the one hand, of the allusions to and interactions with the biblical narratives, the evocations of the apocryphal stories and legends about biblical figures and hagiographical lore such as the Christian legend of the "Seven Sleepers" in *sūrat al-Kahf* (XVIII).<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, there are also the passages in the Qur'ān that speak explicitly about the Christians and criticise their doctrines and practices. Without going all the way with either Tor Andrae or Christoph Luxenberg, one can at the very least accept that their suggestions have called attention to an important dimension of the Qur'ān's interaction with Christians. Specifically, their work gives one every encouragement to be on the watch for what I have called "Syriacisms" in the Christian-oriented passages in the Qur'ān and in other early Islamic literature.

For the present purpose, one may define Syriacisms as words or phrases in the Arabic diction of the Qur'ān that betray an underlying Syriac locution. That is to say, they are calques, or "loan translations" from Syriac into Arabic; they are not simply Syriac words used in place of Arabic words and phrases. Syriacisms may be thematic, lexical or even grammatical. The recognition of Syriacisms implies prior recognition of the integrity of the Arabic syntax and vocabulary of the Qur'ān. One may then expect that these Syriacisms could supply a new dimension to the search for the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of any number of

53 The reviews and discussions of Christoph Luxenberg's work that have appeared by now are too numerous to be listed here. For an account of the ongoing controversy see Christoph Burgmer, *Die Luxenberg — Debatte: Eine Koran-Exegese und ihre Folgen* (Berlin: Hans Schiler Verlag, 2004).

54 For a summary, with rich bibliography, of this material see François Jourdan, *La tradition des sept dormants: une rencontre entre chrétiens et musulmans* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2001).

the *āyāt* in the scripture. The Syriacisms should help the interpreter to identify more exactly the Christian motif addressed in a given passage, as well as to gauge more correctly the Qur'ān's response to it. In short, the identification of Syriacisms has the potential to allow the commentator to identify with more confidence Arab Christian locutions with which the Qur'ān itself would already have been familiar.

The discernment of Syriacisms in the Qur'ān requires commentators on the Islamic scripture to make a certain attitudinal adjustment in their customary approach to the text. On the one hand, the admission of Syriacisms implies the presence of actual Christian dialogue partners in the Qur'ān's own world of discourse; on the other hand, the fact that the Syriacisms are part of the Qur'ān's Arabic discourse means that they should find their interpretation primarily within the parameters of meaning of the Arabic language, and not solely by reference to the Syriac or any other non-Arabic lexicon. While consultation of the Syriac lexicon may significantly enhance understanding of the Syriacisms, the Qur'ān's Arabic should not be read as if it were simply Syriac in a different script.

Historically, as far as the Syriacisms are concerned, the Qur'ān's dialogue partners would hypothetically be presumed to have been Arabic-speaking Christians who learned their Christianity directly or indirectly from its earlier, Syriac expression. Furthermore, the hypothesis requires one to presume that these Arabic-speaking Christians were in association with the contemporary "Melkites", "Jacobites" or "Nestorians", virtually the only Christian communities known to have been in the original ambience of the Qur'ān. One can find no real historical traces of primitive "Jewish Christians", Elchasaites, Ebionites or heretical "Nazarenes" in the Qur'ān's Arabia. As mentioned above, the suggestions of their presence there by many scholars, both early and late, are all based on perceived doctrinal parallels between passages in the Qur'ān and the reported teachings of one or another of these groups.

Intentionally, the hypothesis of the presence of Syriacisms in the Qur'ān, interpreted in the context of the Qur'ān's own Arabic diction, supports a presumption of familiarity on the part of the Qur'ān's audience with the biblical narratives, apocryphal and hagiographical legends to which the Qur'ān alludes or makes reference, as they could be reasonably supposed to have actually circulated among Arabic-speaking Christians. The Qur'ān makes comments about them, makes its own points in reference to them, and some times

“inter-textually” adds elements to their stories.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the hypothetical presence of Syriacisms suggests that the Qur’ān’s critique of Christian doctrines and practices, from the perspective of Islam’s distinctive point of view, expresses a judgement about the veracity or propriety of the doctrines and practices actually current among contemporary Arabic-speaking Christians. This recognition then entails the further assumption that the Qur’ān’s rhetoric of critique should not be mistakenly read as a somehow faulty report of what Christians believed or did in the time and place of its origins. Rather, the hypothetical assumption should be that the Qur’ān expresses itself in reaction to what its contemporary Christians believed and in reaction to the formulae in which they confessed their beliefs, the Qur’ān’s own intention being to highlight what is wrong with them from an Islamic perspective, to critique and even correct them.

The method of recognising Syriacisms in the Qur’ān’s diction and using them to help discern its fuller meaning in passages with an immediate Christian relevance does not in the first instance involve a presumption of influences or borrowings. Neither does it rely on reading Arabic as if it were Syriac. Rather, it is a method of understanding more concretely the Qur’ān’s own references to the Christian language, lore or practice it evokes. So at this point it would be better to consider a concrete example rather than to continue talking about Syriacisms in the abstract. Ideally it would be more enlightening to study an example of the Qur’ān’s involvement with an extended Christian narrative. But space will not allow that here. Suffice it for now to be content with consideration of the Qur’ān’s evocation of a hitherto not often recognised Syriac title of Christ in the context of the Qur’ān’s rejection of the Christian belief in the Christ’s divinity.

#### IV

##### Who were “those who said ‘Allāh is third of three’”?

The Qur’ān says “They have disbelieved who say that God is third of three (*thālithu thalāthatin*) and there is no god except one God” (V *al-Mā’ida* 73). In the immediate context the concern is to reject the divinity of Jesus, son of Mary, whom both the Christians and the Qur’ān call “the Messiah”. The

55 In this connection see the studies included in John C. Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, Symposium Series 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).



preceding verse says "They have disbelieved who say that God is the Messiah, son of Mary" (V *al-Mā'ida* 72). It is clear that the intention is to reject what the Christians say about Jesus the Messiah. Yet no Christian of that time customarily said "God is the Messiah" in so many words. Rather, Christians in the world of the Qur'ān would more readily have said "Jesus, the Messiah, is God". Similarly, while Christians in that same world would not object to calling Jesus "Son of Mary", as the Qur'ān does, they nevertheless did not normally do so; they regularly spoke of him as "Son of God". It seems most reasonable, then, to suppose that in both instances the Qur'ān's adoption of a different phraseology was for the purpose of rhetorically more forcefully expressing its negative judgement of a Christian teaching. It would not likely have been the case that the Qur'ān was unaware of the actual Christian parlance. In fact some commentators have seen in these very phrases the Qur'ān's rejection of its understanding of the theological position of the "Jacobites", because of their stress on the divinity of Christ and their seeming de-emphasis of his humanity, and therefore of his status as a creature.<sup>56</sup>

The phrase "They have disbelieved who say that God is ..." — used three times in this *sūra* (V *al-Mā'ida* 17, 72, 73), twice reproving those who say "God is the Messiah" (vv. 17, 72) — obviously intends to emphasise the incompatibility of the Christian belief in the divinity of Christ with the main premise of Qur'ānic monotheism — indeed, the more forcefully to stress rhetorically the absurdity of the Christian confession from the Qur'ān's perspective. The conundrum is in the third utterance of the formula, where the text reproves those who say "God is third of three" (v. 73), using the curious phrase *thālithu thalāthatin*. Readers ancient and modern, Muslim and Christian have thought immediately in this connection of the doctrine of the Trinity. They often recall that in another place where the Qur'ān critiques and corrects what the Christians say about the Messiah, the text admonishes them "Do not say 'Three'; stop it; it is better for you" (IV *al-Nisā'* 171). Here is the evidence of the realization in the Qur'ān that from the Islamic perspective, the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ leads to the equally objectionable doctrine of the Trinity. This too reflects a

56 See e.g. the remarks of Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 15–22. See also the comments of Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, n.d.), vol. 4, esp. pp. 53–58, where he also reports the views of earlier Muslim commentators regarding these verses.

rudimentary Christian consciousness — namely, that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ entails the doctrine of the Trinity. But what exactly does the enigmatic Arabic phrase “third of three” actually mean, and who were the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur’ān’s milieu who might be thought to have said it?

The classical Muslim commentators reached something of a consensus that the Arabic phrase *thālithu thalāthatin* grammatically means “one of three”<sup>57</sup> and that it is Christ who is so described. While some of them took the Qur’ān verse then to be a rejection of what they perceived to be Christian “tritheism”, others rejected this idea as inaccurate, rightly pointing out that the Christians did not in fact profess a belief in three gods.<sup>58</sup> Rather, these latter commentators offered two alternate explanations.<sup>59</sup> Some said that the phrase refers to one of the three *aqānūm* (i.e. “hypostases”) that the Christians postulate in the one God.<sup>60</sup> Others proposed that as applied to Christ, the epithet named him the third member of the Trinity: Allāh, Mary and Christ. They cited as confirmation, the passage in V *al-Mā’ida* 116, where God said “O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people ‘Take me and my mother as two gods, apart from Allāh’?” The first explanation reflects the Muslim commentators’ knowledge of contemporary Christian theology in Arabic and its technical vocabulary, originally derived from Syriac.<sup>61</sup> The second explanation interprets the phrase in question by reference to another passage in the Qur’ān. In the process, this second explanation has

57 See W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896–1898), vol. 2, par. 109, p. 246; H. Reckendorf, *Arabische Syntax* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1921), par. 117, pp. 210–11; idem, *Über Paronomase in den semitischen Sprachen; ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1909), p. 127.

58 See e.g. the discussion in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zādu al-masīr fī ‘ilm al-tafsīr*, vol. 4 (Beirut/Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1974), pp. 402–3.

59 See the summary in Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 4, pp. 53–58. See also Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr at-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl āy al-qur’ān*, 24 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-ma’ārif, n.d.), vol. 10, pp. 481–83; vol. 11, pp. 233–37; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī: al-mashhūr bi-l-tafsīr al-kabīr wa mafātīḥ al-ghayb*, 16 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-fikr, 1981), vol. 4, pp. 63–65.

60 Arabic-speaking Christians regularly used the Arabic word *uqnūm* (pl. *aqānūm*), a loan from the Syriac term *qnōmā* (pl. *qnōmē*), to designate what Greek-speaking Christians called the *hypostases* of the one God. On the *aqānūm* in post-Islamic Christian Arabic literature, see Sidney H. Griffith, “The concept of *al-uqnūm* in ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s Apology for the Doctrine of the Trinity”, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 218 (1982), pp. 169–91; Rachid Haddad, *La trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes (750–1050)* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985).

61 The Christian Arabic term *uqnūm* (pl. *aqānūm*) is a loan from the Syriac term *qnōmā* (pl. *qnōmē*) as explained in n. 60 above.

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Cambridge: Cambridge  
dorf, *Arabische Syntax*  
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given currency to an erroneous idea of the Qur'ān's presentation of the Christian Trinity, supposed by mistaken commentators actually to be in the Qur'ān, one that has often been repeated, even by later Western scholarly commentators.<sup>62</sup> There is no indication here that the Qur'ān itself really entertained any such idea of the Christian Trinity. Rather, the Muslim commentator sought to explain the phrase *thālithu thalāthatin* in V *al-Mā'ida* 73, which he recognised as an epithet modifying the Messiah, by reference to the passage in V *al-Mā'ida* 116, where no triad is named, but where the Messiah may be thought of as "third" in the triad, Allāh, Mary, Jesus. But in fact the rhetoric of the passage suggests the absurdity, from the Islamic point of view, of the Christian designation of the Messiah as "Son of God" by intimating that such an appellation would logically imply the obviously unacceptable conclusion that the Messiah and his mother must then be reckoned as "two gods, apart from Allāh". It is one more instance of the suppositions of the commentators wrongly attributing a mistaken idea to the Qur'ān, which is then cited as evidence that the Christians in the Qur'ān are other than those historically known to have been present in its milieu.

Some further light may be shed on the sense of the phrase *thālithu thalāthatin* by recognising it as a Syriacism. That is to say, it may be understood to be an Arabic calque on an originally Syriac expression, presumably used by Arabic-speaking Christians in the world in which the Qur'ān was revealed. The Syriac term is *tlīthāyā*, approximately congruent in meaning with the Arabic term *thālith* and usually defined in English as meaning "third, threefold, triple, treble, trine".<sup>63</sup> In Syriac texts it not uncommonly occurs in Trinitarian contexts, where it is used to characterise a noun in terms of the divine triad. For example, a text may speak of God as *tlīthāy qnōmē*, i.e. "treble of hypostases/persons", "three-personed";<sup>64</sup> or, in the plural, one may speak of the divine names Father, Son and the Holy Spirit as *shmāhē tlīthāyē wa-mshabbhē*, i.e. "the threefold and glorious names".<sup>65</sup> In these instances the adjective is not just an ordinal "third", but it describes its referent as "treble" or "threefold", in the sense of

62 See e.g. Ludwig Hagemann & Ernst Pulsfort, *Maria, die Mutter Jesu, in Bibel und Koran*, Religionswissenschaftliche Studien 19 (Würzburg: Echter Verlag/Altenberge: Oros Verlag, 1992), 119–21.

63 See J. Payne Smith (ed.), *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary. Based upon the Thesaurus Syriacus by R. Payne Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), p. 614.

64 See R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879–1901), col. 4453.

65 See e.g. George Howard (trans.), *The Teaching of Addai*, Texts and Translations 16, Early Christian Literature Series 4 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 60.

being somehow characterised by reference to a triad. This sense of the word is perhaps clearer when Christ himself is described as *tlīthāyā*.

In a number of instances in his religious poetry St. Ephraem the Syrian, who was by far the most often quoted of the early Syriac writers, spoke of Christ as *tlīthāyā* within several frames of reference. Several times he spoke of Christ as "the treble One" in reference to his three-day stay in the grave prior to his resurrection,<sup>66</sup> once, probably in this same context, calling him "God's own treble one" (*tlīthāyā d-Alāhā*).<sup>67</sup> In another passage Ephraem spoke of Christ as "the treble one" (*tlīthāyā*) in reference to his threefold role in God's dispensation as priest, prophet and king.<sup>68</sup> In all of these contexts, of course, given Ephraem's typological hermeneutic and Nicene orthodoxy, there would have been for him and his readers an evocation of Christ as one of the divine Trinity. All of the other "triads" or "threesomes" in the biblical accounts of Christ, either in the Gospel or prophetically in the Torah, Ephraem would also have read as types, and interpreted proleptically, in reference to the persons of the Trinity.<sup>69</sup>

A further instance of the typological echo of the term *tlīthāyā* in Syriac exegetical discourse about Christ may be seen in the works of another popular writer, Jacob of Sarug (c. 451–521), whose compositions often made their way into the liturgy and hence into the popular religious consciousness. In Genesis 22:4 the text speaks of Abraham's journey with his son Isaac to the place where Abraham intended to sacrifice his son at God's command. The text says "And on the third (*tlīthāyā*) day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from afar". In his homily on this verse in Genesis, Jacob of Sarug wrote that while, according to the narrative, father and son on the first day of their journey saw nothing special, nor on the second day was there any typology to be discerned

66 See Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Erster Teil)*, CSCO, 218 and 219 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1961), 1:11, 2:5; Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Carmina Nisibena (Zweiter Teil)*, CSCO, 24 and 241 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1963), 41:16.

67 See Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, CSCO, 186 and 187 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1959), *de Epiphania* 8:6. See also Beck's explanatory note, *ibid.*, vol. 187, pp. 157–58 n. 9.

68 See Edmund Beck, *Des heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Hymnen de Virginitate*, CSCO, 223 and 224 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1962), 17:5.

69 See Sidney H. Griffith, 'Faith Adoring the Mystery': *Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology, 1997 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997).

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by the Christian interpreter, it was another matter with the "third" day, which Moses mentioned explicitly. Jacob says:

- a — The burial of the Son [Christ] was depicted by the righteous one [Moses];  
on "the third" [day] he overcame murder and escaped from it.
- b — Three days Isaac was without care in his father's company; so that he might hold up the image of the Son's death, after which he would be resurrected.
- c — On the third [day] he overcame murder and escaped from it; this is the fact: it was the Son, who on the third [day] rose from the grave.<sup>70</sup>

Already long before the time of the Syriac writers Ephraem and Jacob of Sarug, the Greek writers Origen (c. 185–c. 254) and Clement (c. 150–c. 215), both of Alexandria, had called attention to what they thought of as the mystical, typological significance of the phrase "on the third day" in Genesis 22:4, within the broader context of what they considered to be the Christological cast of the whole narrative in Genesis 22:1–18, where they saw Isaac as a type of Christ.<sup>71</sup> As for their thoughts on "the third day", Origen developed the theme most helpfully when he wrote:

The third day, however, is always applied to the mysteries. For also when the people had departed from Egypt they offered sacrifice to God on the third day and they were purified on the third day (Exodus 19:11, 15, 16; 24:5). And the third day is the day of the Lord's resurrection (Mt. 27:63; Mk. 8:31). Many other mysteries also are included within this day.<sup>72</sup>

It was in the tradition of scriptural exegeses along these lines that Syriac writers like Ephraem, Jacob of Sarug and others could find the matrix for carrying

70 Jacob of Sarug's *mēmārā*, "On Abraham and His Types", in P. Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, 5 vols. (Paris: Via Dicta/ Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1905–1910), vol. 4, pp. 77–78. Lines *b* and *c* are repeated in Jacob's *mēmārā* "On the Mystery-Symbols, Types and Images of the Messiah", in Bedjan, *Homiliae Selectae*, vol. 3, p. 312.

71 See Clement of Alexandria, *Les Stromates*; *Stromate V*, Sources Chrétiennes 278, ed. A. Le Boulluec, trans. P. Voulet (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1981), pp. 146–47; Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine: *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), pp. 136–41.

72 Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, p. 140.

the mystical significance of the term "third" beyond its immediate reference to "the third day" and to associate it with other triads in their discourse about the Messiah. They came eventually to employ the term *tlūthāyā* as a personal epithet of Christ. For them in this context Christ was the one whose truth was to be discerned in terms of the several mystical triads in reference to which, from their typological viewpoint, Jesus, the Messiah, can be accurately characterised.

The recognition of this use of the Syriac epithet *tlūthāyā* as a title of Christ should now add depth to the understanding of the Qur'ān's rejection of "those who say God is *thālithu thalāthatin* (V *al-Mā'ida* 73), if the phrase is seen to be a Syriacism. In context, the Qur'ān is surely rejecting the divinity of Christ, as we have seen. And Christians in the Qur'ān's audience, whose patristic, liturgical and theological heritage was Aramaic, and specifically Syriac, would undoubtedly have been the ones prepared to describe Christ as *tlūthāyā*, thereby alluding to the full range of typological reminiscences we have described above.<sup>73</sup> But in the Qur'ān's world the Christians would surely have been speaking in Arabic. In Arabic the cognate word *thālith*, being the equivalent ordinal number, would definitely have recommended itself as a translation term for the Syriac ordinal *tlūthāyā*. But *thālith* would not by itself have carried the full nuance of the Syriac term in this context. And this circumstance most likely explains the choice of the ordinal *thālith*, somewhat awkwardly in construct with the cardinal number *thalāthatin*, to heighten its intended sense of describing its referent as one of three, or as characterised by his relationship to a set of typological "triads", which only the Christians could have had firmly in mind. While one must inevitably seek an explanation for the terms the text actually provides, one may nevertheless wonder why Arabic-speaking Christians would not have chosen the Arabic word *thulāthī* to render the Syriac *tlūthāyā* in this context. But this choice — suggesting that its referent is tripartite, made up of or somehow related to three things<sup>74</sup> — though perhaps serviceable from an abstract point of view, would ultimately have been misleading. Suggesting, as it

73 In V *al-Mā'ida* 73 the Qur'ān actually says "They disbelieve who say Allāh is *thālithu thalāthatin*". The phrase is parallel to the immediately preceding statement in V *al-Mā'ida* 72: "They disbelieve who say Allāh is the Messiah". One recognises the Qur'ān's rhetorical strategy in its reversal of the customary Christian usage, which would be to confess that the Messiah is God. The reversal accents the Qur'ān's critique of the Christian usage by pointedly highlighting its logical import.

74 See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863 ff.), vol. 1, p. 348.



does, something of three component parts, it lacks the full lexical redolence of the Syriac epithet as the classical writers actually used it, and it also removes the immediate echo of the "third day" (*yawmā tlīthāyā*), the underlying Syriac scriptural phrase from Genesis 22:4 (Peshitta) which lies behind the derived typologies.

The range of meanings inherent in the expression *thālithu thalāthatin*, as a Syriacism, translating a typologically inspired epithet of Christ, would perhaps have been fully understood only by the Christians; but on the reading proposed here the Qur'ān can nevertheless be seen to have correctly reported, critiqued and rejected a genuine Christian locution. One has only to recognise it as a Syriacism to understand its authenticity. The recognition of its authenticity in turn frees the commentator from the temptation to impugn the Qur'ān's veracity as a reporter in this instance, or to use the expression as a basis to postulate an impossible Christian Trinity. The phrase could easily be imagined to have been on the lips of any "Melkite", "Jacobite" or "Nestorian" of the sixth or seventh century; St. Ephraem's legacy lived among them all.<sup>75</sup>

It is interesting to observe in passing, and by way of a *suasio* for the interpretation of *thālithu thalāthatin* proposed here, that an Arab Christian apologetic writer of the tenth or eleventh century still understood V *al-Mā'ida* 73 in this "Syrian" way. He spoke of God, "the *thālithu thalāthatin* in person (*bi-l-'ayn*), according to the saying of the Qur'ān",<sup>76</sup> as the one who had once enjoyed a meal with Abraham. In context, the author was citing biblical passages that stand in the background of the doctrine of the Trinity. His reference was to the passage in Genesis 18:1–21, where the Lord is said to have appeared to Abraham, as the Christians understood it typologically, in the guise of three men. In the history of Christian biblical interpretation, this passage, with its divine/human triad, has early and late been cited both as a type of the three persons of the one God, as confessed by the Christians, and as a type of Christ, "the threefold one". For the Arab Christian apologetic writer of the tenth

75 See Sidney H. Griffith, "Christianity in Edessa and the Syriac-speaking world: Mani, Bar Daysan and Ephraem; the struggle for allegiance on the Aramean frontier," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 2 (2002), pp. 5–20.

76 Sinai Arabic MS 434, f.176v. For more information on this text by an anonymous writer, preserved in a text copied in the year 1138, see Haddad, *La Trinité divine chez les théologiens arabes*, p. 38; Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 504–5, esp. n. 178.

or eleventh century the phrase *thālithu thalāthatin* in the Qur'ān clearly still evoked this same understanding.

## V

### Islam and Syrian Christianity

The study of Syriacisms in early Islamic diction takes one beyond the range of the search for foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān. As Arabic expressions of underlying Syriac words and concepts, Syriacisms open the path for the researcher into the very terms of the dialogue between the Qur'ān and Syrian Christianity. They also mark the probable point of entry for much of the biblical, hagiographical and apocryphal lore of the Christians into the religious discourse of the Arabs who first articulated the Islamic critique of Christianity. It is clear that the Qur'ān already presumes in its audience a ready familiarity with these matters. The presence of Syriacisms in its diction suggests that the familiarity came about by way of the oral circulation of Christian ideas and practices among Arabic-speaking Christians who learned their Christianity from originally Aramaic sources. Furthermore, the recognition of Syriacisms as genuine Arabic locutions rather than borrowed words or phrases enables the interpreter to discern how the Qur'ān uses them for its own rhetorical purposes, often to critique and not just to report alleged Christian views. In other words, by the evidence of the Syriacisms the "Arabic Qur'ān" came to participate in an already ongoing interreligious conversation in Arabic. It made its intervention and in the process called a new religious community into being. That new community, in the felicitous phrase of Garth Fowden, would, through further dialogue and interchange, evolve into the Islamic Commonwealth,<sup>77</sup> the fruit of the religiously productive encounter between the cultures of Roman and Persian Late Antiquity and the world of the Arabs.

The discernment of Syriacisms in early Islamic diction could go a long way toward taking the guesswork out of the effort to identify the Qur'ān's Christian dialogue partners. Attempts in this enterprise have often relied on the search for Christian groups that espoused theological positions comparable to those perceived to be espoused in the Qur'ān. Without overlooking the homology evident in a number of these instances, the fact remains that most often there is

77 See Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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little or no evidence for the presence of these groups in the cultural or linguistic milieu of the Qur'ān. Put concretely, the Syriacisms could help the researcher recognise the "Melkites", "Jacobites" and "Nestorians" in the world in which the Qur'ān was revealed and warn him away from "Nazarenes", "Elchasaites", "Ebionites" and other ill-defined "Jewish Christian" groups who otherwise have left no trace now discernible in Arabia.

The recognition of Syriacisms and their function in the burgeoning Arabic religious vocabulary in the era of the emergence of Classical Arabic from the welter of pre-existent Arabic and Bedouin dialects could help the scholar avoid the traps of reductionism in the study of early Islam. The presumptions of the comparative religionist, such as Tor Andrae, prompt him to speak of influences and borrowings, without any suggestion of how the common themes he perceives in both the Syriac and the Arabic discourses can otherwise be at home in both of them. One is left with the impression that in his judgement the Qur'ān simply took over the whole eschatological framework of the Syriac-speaking Christians. Rather, from the point of view of the discernment of Syriacisms, one may think of the Qur'ān as participating in an ongoing Arabic conversation in which the eschatological framework had already been translated into Arabic, at least orally, and become part of the hermeneutical horizon within which new ideas were being suggested. Similarly, Luxenberg's "Syro-Aramaic" reading of the Qur'ān often seems to ignore the fact that while it owes much to its Aramaic heritage, not least in the realm of its religious lexicon, Arabic is after all a different language. The Qur'ān, as read by its early interpreters, is arguably Classical Arabic's first real textual expression. The recognition of Syriacisms in its diction may enable the interpreter to engage it on its own terms and avoid reading it as if it were simply Syriac transposed, thereby creating a *tertium quid*, neither Syriac Christian nor Arabic Islamic, in its message.

This concentration on discerning possible Syriacisms in early Arabic diction draws attention away from many other interpretive temptations. The purpose has been to propose a way to gain entry to the Christianity in the world in which Islam was born. Even here they cannot provide a complete guide; the Christianity of that time and place also had other linguistic expressions, albeit that those in Syriac seem to have been the dominant ones in Arabia. Early Islam obviously interacted with Jewish thought and practice in a determinative way, and other scholars than those named here have been and are exploring the historical and thematic evidence for this interaction in Islam's origins. There are

intimations of a Manichaean presence as well, not to mention the indigenous religious traditions of the Arabic-speaking peoples. All of these are strains in the religious discourse in Arabic that flourished in the world in which Islam was born. Islam itself cannot be reduced to any of them, nor is it an amalgam of all of them, although it can be seen to have been conversant with all the religious ideas of the world in which it was born. The recognition of Syriacisms in early Islamic Arabic diction merely affords the researcher a glimpse into one corner of the foreground of the Qur'ān and other early Islamic documents. They help reveal the largely Aramaean context of the Christianity that was one of the important religious strains in that milieu.