THE JEWISH AND/OR CHRISTIAN AUDIENCE OF THE QUR'ĀN AND THE ARABIC BIBLE

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Many stories in the Qu'rān are only understandable to those with a good working knowledge of a wide range of Jewish and Christian narratives. What does this tell us about the nature and identity of the Qu'rān's intended audience? Is it reasonable to assume that this knowledge was imparted/acquired orally or should we conclude that some familiarity with textual sources is necessary to account for the knowledge evidently possessed by Muḥammad's adherents? And does it not make sense to infer that an Arabic translation of the Bible was one of these written sources (*pace* Griffith)?

Ever since Geiger in the early nineteenth century, with renewed efforts by Torrey and Bell in the early twentieth, scholars have sought to demonstrate Jewish and Christian influence upon the content of the Qu'rān.[1] This influence is evident not only in its stories about Old and New Testament figures, but also in many of its legal and ritual prescriptions. Moreover, the Qu'rān recounts some stories in a very allusive and elliptical manner and one cannot really discern their import if one does not know the Jewish or Christian counterpart to which they refer. Much less attention has been paid to what this tells us about Muḥammad's audience. Since the Qu'rān contains both Jewish and Christian narratives, does this mean that Muḥammad's followers were acquainted with both traditions? And if so, would this imply that they were Judaeo-Christians of some sort, or was West Arabia exposed to Jewish *and* Christian teachings to a much greater extent than has usually been supposed? Or else should we infer that we only have the Qu'rān in an abbreviated form and that Muḥammad imparted these accounts (at least on some occasions) in a fuller form?

Let me first give an illustration of what I mean before I continue this line of thinking. A simple example is provided by the story of how Mary, mother of Jesus, was given sustenance by a palm tree (Q 19:24): "He (the new-born Jesus) called to her (Mary) from below her (*min taḥtihā*): 'Do not be sad, your Lord has put below you a rivulet (*sarīyan*)." Although the

1. A. GEIGER, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen*, Bonn, 1833. Ch. TORREY, *The Jewish Foundation Of Islam*, New York, 1933; R. BELL, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, London, 1926.

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mention of a "rivulet" is not immediately comprehensible here, the Qu'rān is clearly alluding to the tale in the Christian tradition that recounts how Mary, tired on the journey to Egypt, sought rest under a palm tree, whereupon Jesus, "looking up from his mother's bosom", calls upon the palm tree to lower its fruit-bearing branches and to let a stream come out from under it so that Mary is able to eat and drink.[2]

Most of the verses in the Qu'rān that relate episodes connected with the Bible concern Old Testament characters rather than New Testament ones, and for that reason it has been assumed, at least since Torrey, that Muḥammad was much more indebted to Judaism than to Christianity. However, many of the narratives in the Qu'rān about Old Testament personalities are closer to versions found in late antique Christian commentaries and homilies than to those occurring in the Old Testament itself or in late antique rabbinic works. This has recently been demonstrated by Josef Witztum in connection with the Qur'anic tales about Satan refusing to bow before Adam, Cain and Abel, Abraham's building of the Ka'ba and Joseph's relationship with Potiphar's wife.[3] Here I would like to present the intriguing case of the anonymous sleeper of Q 2:259:[4]

> Or it is like the one who passed by a township which had fallen into ruin. He said, "How will God bring this to life after its death?" So God made him die for a hundred years; then He revived him. He said, "How long have you remained (thus)"? The man said, "I have remained (thus) a day or part of a day." He said, "Rather, you have remained (thus) one hundred years. Look at your food and your drink; it has not gone bad. And look at your donkey; and so that, We make you a sign for the people, look at the

2. The Qu'rān itself recounts elements of this story in 19:23-26. For the Christian traditions (especially the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*) see G. PARRINDER, *Jesus in the Qur'ān*. Oxford, 1995, p. 75-78, and S. MOURAD, "Mary in the Qu'rān: a reexamination of her presentation," in G.S. REYNOLDS (ed.), *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, London-New York, 2008, p. 167-69, who notes that the story draws on the Greek myth of Leto's labour and the birth of Apollo. J. VAN REETH, "L'Evangile du Prophète," in D. DE SMET *et al.* ed., *Al-Kitāb: La sacralité du texte dans le monde de l'Islam*, Brussels, 2004, p. 165-66, explains the Qu'rān's placement of the palm-tree story amid the birth of Jesus (not in the course of Mary's flight from Egypt) by reference to the influence of the Diatesseron tradition. S. SHOEMAKER, "Christmas in the Qu'rān: the Qur'anic account of Jesus' nativity and Palestinian local tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), p. 11-39, links these traditions with the Kathisma church near Jerusalem to argue for a Palestinian origin.

3. J. WITZTUM, *The Syriac Milieu of the Qur'an: the recasting of Biblical narratives*, Princeton University (PhD. Thesis), 2011; see also *id.*, "The Foundations of the House (Q 2:127)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72 (2009), p. 25-40.

4. I used this example in an unpublished lecture entitled "The Language of the Qu'rān and a Near Eastern Rip van Winkle," which was given at an event in Marburg, in May 2012, on the occasion of the retirement of Professor Wim Raven.

bones (of this donkey) how We put them in their place and then We clothe them with flesh." And when it became clear to him, he said, "I know that God has power over all things."

No further information is given here or elsewhere in the Qu'rān as to the identity of "the township that had fallen into ruin" or of the person who questioned God's ability to revive it. The majority of Muslim commentators were in agreement that the former was Jerusalem, but were divided over whether the latter was Jeremiah (sometimes identified with al-Khiḍr) or Ezra ('Uzayr in Arabic).[5] Both of these prophets were connected by the writings attributed to them with the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. Yet in the works of Jewish and Christian exegetes neither was known to have undergone a lengthy period of sleep. This honor went to the Ethiopian Abimelech, the faithful servant of Jeremiah, who was rewarded by God for his loyal service (he twice freed his master from imprisonment) by being spared from witnessing the destruction of Jerusalem. Though this character is known in the Jewish tradition, it is the story told by a Greek Christian apocryphal text known as *4 Baruch* or "the things omitted from Jeremiah" (*Paraleipomena Jeremiou*) that seems closest to the Qur'anic narrative.[6]

Just before the siege of the holy city commenced, Abimelech was sent by Jeremiah to collect some figs to give to the sick; having picked a few and put them in his basket he lay down under a tree to rest, whereupon God, in observance of the promise he had made to Jeremiah, put him to sleep for sixty-six years. When Abimelech awakes, he assumes that, like the man of Q 2:259, he has only slept for a little while (*oligon*), "a day or part of a day" (*yawman aw baʿḍa yawmin*). Interestingly, we encounter the same reaction – and the same wording (18:19) – in another account of extended sleep, namely "the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", or in the Qur'anic

5. Jeremiah tends to be regarded as the more likely contender and al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, M.J. DE GOEJE *et al.* (ed.), Leiden, 1866-1901, 1. p. 647-8, has him perform exactly the same actions as Abimelech does in *4 Baruch* (on which see below), except that he sleeps for 70 years, which, interestingly, is the figure given in the Coptic version of this text (again see below). The Muslim tradition would seem to have omitted the minor characters of Abimelech and Baruch and assigned their roles to Jeremiah. For full discussion see H. SCHÜTZINGER, "Die arabische Jeremia-Erzählungen und ihre Beziehungen zur jüdischen religiösen Überlieferung," *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte* 25 (1973), p. 2-8.

6. In the Bible (Jer. 39:16-18) Jeremiah's servant (called Ebedmelech rather than Abimelech) is told by God that he will escape the destruction of Jerusalem, but it is not revealed how this comes about and it is this gap that *4 Baruch* fills. Since it draws upon the first-century Syriac text *2 Baruch* (which does not mention Abimelech), *4 Baruch* is usually dated to the late first/early second century AD (see J. HERZER, *4 Baruch (Paraleipomena Jeremiou)*, Atlanta, 2005, p. xxx-xxxvi). For earlier scholarship on the link between Q 2:259 and Abimelech/Ebedmelech see H. SCHÜTZINGER, "Die arabische Jeremia-Erzählungen," p. 9-13.

recasting "the companions of the cave" (*ahl al-kahf*), which relates how a group of youths hide in a cave from the persecution of the pagan emperor Decius and are put to sleep by God only to wake up some three centuries later in a now Christian realm (18:9-26).

Abimelech sets off towards Jerusalem, but he is confused by the changed appearance of the city. He asks an old man on the road about the whereabouts of Jeremiah and receives the answer that the prophet is now in captivity in Babylon with much of Jerusalem's Jewish population. Abimelech argues that not enough time has elapsed for all of this to have happened and he remarks upon the freshness of his figs in order to confirm how little time can have gone by. But the old man points to the fields, observing that the crops have not yet matured and figs are not yet in season. This immediately signals to Abimelech, and to us, that his perception of time is out of synch with the reality of the world around him. A similar moment of recognition features in the Qur'anic tale of the sleepers of the cave, when one of them tries to purchase goods in the market with coins of the pagan emperor Decius, only to be told by the vendor that they are no longer in circulation.[7] In the case of both the figs and the coins, they are out of their proper time, an anachronism, and so make clear to their owners that they too are an anachronism.

Abimelech was next taken by an angel of the Lord to see Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe, who, on seeing the figs, proclaims (6:5):

> Look at this basket of figs, for behold, they are sixty-six years old and have not become shriveled or gone bad (*ouk emaranthēsan oudhe ōzesan*), but they are dripping milky juice (*alla stazousi tou galaktos*).

The figs dripping with milky juice echo the "food and drink" of Q 2:259, as indeed was realized by Muslim commentators, who explain the words in the Qu'rān as a reference to "fruits and their juice,"[8] even though they attribute them to Jeremiah rather than to Abimelech. The same observation, "they have not gone bad" (*oudhe ōzesan / lam yatasannah*), is found in both texts, and the point of this statement in the Qu'rān,

7. We only learn this from the Christian account; the Qu'rānic narrative is characteristically elliptical, but clearly alludes to it: "So send one of you with this silver coin of yours to the city and let him look to which is the best food and bring you provision from it, but let him not make you known to anyone, for if they become aware of you they will stone you or return you to their religion, and then you will never prosper. And thus did We bring about their discovery" (18:19).

8. For example, al-Ṭabarī in his commentary on this verse (*Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-qur'ān*, ed. 'A.'A. AL-TURKI, Rabat, 2001, 4.596) quotes the paraphrase of Isma'īl al-Suddī (d. 774): "Look at your food [of dates and grapes/*min al-tīn wa-l-'inab*] and your drink [of juice/*min al-'aṣīr*]."

which some scholars have branded illogical or obscure,[9] now becomes clear. Indeed, the phrase is doubly meaningful. On the one hand, the fact that the figs have "not gone bad," though out of season, serves to occasion a moment of *anagnōrisis* in their owner, a sudden realization of the truth about his situation and how long he has slept. And on the other hand, the fact that the figs have "not gone bad" after such a long passage of time is a clear indication of the intervention of God and of his power over all Creation, plants just as much as humans and animals.

Though *4 Baruch* is set in the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, it is an early Christian text, and one that emphasizes the idea of the resurrection. The verbs used for Abimelech's sleep and awakening, *anapausis* and *exypnizein*, allude to the sleep of death and the entry into eternal life. The ripe flesh and juice of the figs symbolizes the fleshly home (*sarkikos oikos*), the dwelling place of the soul, which shall not rot, but will be reserved for the bodily resurrection promised to the righteous, as is indicated by what Baruch goes on to say to Abimelech after his exclamation about his ripe figs:

> Thus will it be for you, my flesh, if you do the things commanded you by the angel of righteousness. He who preserved the basket of figs, the same one will again preserve you by his power (6.6-7).

Bodily resurrection is a key aspect of Christian doctrine and features already in the New Testament, but it is also a major theme in the Qu'rān, and indeed it links the stories of the companions of the cave and the subject of verse 2:259. In both cases, the sleepers are put to sleep and roused from it directly by God, the verb for the latter action being *ba'atha*, which is also employed in the context of the resurrection of the God-fearing on Judgement Day. In both cases, too, the sleepers are asked how long they remained (*kam labithtum*) in their respective sleeping spots, and this same question is, according to Qu'rān 23:113, put to the souls of the departed lined up on Judgement Day, with the sense of how long had they remained on the earth. In all three cases, the answer is the same: "a day or a part of a day," though it is of course a common perception of multi-year sleepers that they have only dozed a brief while, as for example in the tale of Abimelech above and also in the Greek myth of Epimenides, who awakes after a fifty-seven-year sleep in a cave in Crete firmly of the opinion that his slumber was of short duration (*nomizōn ep' oligon kekoimēsthai*).[10]

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9. E.g. Ch. LUXENBERG, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the* Qu'rān, New York, 2007: "One cannot see why God first of all points out to the man who has been restored to life that his food and drink have not gone bad."

10. Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum*, ed. M. MARCOVICH, Stuttgart, 1999-2002, p. 109.

The other element of the story of verse 2:259 that has been considered obscure is the man's donkey. One could assume that it is a mistake and try to retool it, as Christoph Luxenberg does in his analysis of this verse, replacing the Arabic word for "donkey" (*ḥimār*) with the Syriac word for "perfection" (*gemārā*).[11] Indeed, one does not need to turn to Syriac for this reinterpretation; the Arabic root underlying the word "donkey" conveys the sense of redness, ruddiness, and one could stretch this to healthiness. Both the Syriac "perfection" and the Arabic "ruddiness/healthiness" would seem to fit well with the remaining portion of the Qur'anic verse, which speaks of Abimelech's rejuvenation: the re-knitting of his bones and re-clothing with flesh, itself an allusion to Ezekiel's vision of how God spoke to dry bones, saying:

> Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live: I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord (37:5-6).

Otherwise, one could cast around for parallels in other traditions from which the Qu'rān might have borrowed, such as the Talmudic tale of the enigmatic Ḥoni the Circle-Drawer, a holy man and miracle-worker of the first century BC, who fell asleep for 70 years and upon waking saw that his donkey was still alive and had sired many offspring.[12] One could also, though, simply accept that the Qu'rān is not merely imitating Jewish and Christian narratives, but innovating to some extent and producing its own distinctive new take on old stories. In this view, one could regard the donkey as a narrative elaboration that took place in the Arabic-speaking monotheist circles of Syria-West Arabia. The same goes, perhaps, for the dog that acts as a guardian in the tale of the companions of the cave. And this is an interesting point: not only does the Qu'rān assume that its audience knows these Biblical tales, but what is more it is alluding to different versions of these tales from those that are known to us from mainstream Jewish and Christian texts.

From what we have said, it would seem certain that the story of Abimelech and the figs, as expounded in the Christian apocryphal text known as *4 Baruch*, underlies Q 2:259. The same story appears in a Coptic Jeremiah apocryphon that was copied in the seventh century, so we know that it was still in circulation among Christian communities of the

11. C. LUXENBERG, *Syro-Aramaic Reading*, p. 194-95.

12. For references and previous scholarship see H. SCHÜTZINGER, "Die arabische Jeremia-Erzählungen," p. 12-13. Note that again food plays a role in indicating the passage of time, for the first thing Ḥoni sees when he awakes is a man picking carobs, and when he asks him "are you the man who planted the tree?", he is told that he is his grandson whereupon "he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years!".

Near East at the time of Muḥammad.[13] This example, therefore, backs up the contention of Luxenberg, Witztum and many others, though arrived at and expressed in different ways, that late antique Christian texts are more often the inspiration for the Qu'rān than the Jewish tradition. Even direct allusions to the Old Testament, such as that in Q 2:255 ("God is neither affected by slumber or sleep" / *lā ta'khudhuhu sina wa-lā nawm*) in respect of Psalms 121:4 ("He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps" / *lā yanūm wə-lā yīšān*), need not exclude a Christian origin, since large portions of the Old Testament had become part and parcel of Christian lore by the seventh century. So could we go as far as to say, that all of the references to the Old Testament in the Qu'rān had come via Christianity? This would require further investigation, but certainly we could reasonably make the case that late antique Christianity, particularly its Syriac form, could have provided all the raw material for the Qu'ranic Biblical narratives without there being any necessary recourse to Jews or, for that matter, to Judaeo-Christians.

But how was this material transmitted to Muḥammad's Arabia? Sidney Griffith has provided some interesting discussion of this question and his conclusion is, in a nutshell, that Syriac Christianity was *only* disseminated orally to Arabophone Christians in Arabic:

> Given the lack of an earlier written translation of any portion of the Bible done under Jewish or Christian auspices prior to the rise of Islam, and the consequent fact that for liturgical and other purposes, especially among Christians, translations must have been done on the spot by Arabic-speaking Christians according to an oral tradition of translation from mostly Syriac originals, the somewhat counterintuitive conclusion emerges that the Arabic Qu'rān, in the form in which it was collected and published in writing in the seventh century, is after all the first scripture written in Arabic.[14]

And much the same position has recently been advocated by Emran el-Badawy: "It is they ['Arabic-speaking Christians'] who were the cultural agents, this study argues, absorbing various elements of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions into the oral tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia, elements that eventually entered into the Qu'rān's milieu".[15]

No concrete proof has so far been unearthed to counter the assumption that Syriac Christian ideas and stories were communicated only by oral means to the West Arabians of Muḥammad's day; as Griffith notes:

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13. See K.H. KUHN, "A Coptic Jeremiah Apocryphon", *Le Muséon* 83 (1970), p. 97. The story of Abimelech/Ebedmelech is recounted in paragraphs 22 and 38-40 (*ibid.*, p. 293-94 and p. 320-24).

14. S. GRIFFITH, *The Bible in Arabic*, Princeton, 2013, p. 53.

15. E. EL-BADAWI, *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, London, 2013, p. 8.

"there is as yet no sure basis to support the thesis that prior to the rise of Islam Arabic-speaking Christians were in possession of a written Arabic Bible, or portions of it, such as the Gospel or the Psalms."[16] The evidence for a pre-Islamic Arabic Bible is indeed mostly circumstantial and relies on two key points. Firstly, there is the fact that in the course of the fourth-sixth centuries Christians of other language traditions (Georgian, Armenian, Coptic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic-speakers and others) worked in tandem with Greco-Syriac missionaries to have key Christian texts translated into their own tongues, devising a new script for that purpose. Secondly, there is the fact that a distinctively Arabic script began to be used by Arabophone Christian communities in Yemen and Syria[17] from the late fifth century onwards, as is attested by a number of surviving inscriptions.[18]

The focus of Griffith, el-Badawy and others in their discussion of the existence of a pre-Islamic Arabic Bible is very much on Muḥammad's Hijaz, but two of the pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions are found on the lintels of churches in Syria, one near Aleppo and the other, dated to 567 AD, near Damascus; the latter is placed there next to a Greek text on the orders of the person who commissioned the building, one Sharahil ibn Zalim. It makes more sense, then, to concentrate on late antique Syro-Mesopotamia and Palestine when considering a home for the incubation of an Arabic Bible rather than Muḥammad's locale. In Syro-Mesopoamia we encounter the likes of the holy man Ahudemmeh, who would "visit all the camps of the Arabs, instructing and teaching them in many sermons... establishing in every tribe a priest and a deacon...and founding churches and naming them after tribal chiefs."[19] To the southwest, in Palestine, we observe the celebrated monk Euthymius (d. 473) attracting the devotion of the local Arabophone pastoralist tribes, whom he catechised and baptised, successfully encouraged to build churches and settle nearby, and

16. S. GRIFFITH, *The Bible in Arabic*, 49. He is here discussing the theories of Irfan Shahid and Hikmat Kachouh that the Bible existed in written Arabic translation in pre-Islamic times.

17. And very likely also southwest Iraq, most obviously around al-Hira, but we have no contemporary evidence for this, only the say so of later Arabic sources; see E. HUNTER, "The Christian Matrix of al-Hira," in C. JULLIEN (ed.), *Les Controverses des Chrétiens dans l'Iran Sassanide*, Paris, 2008, p. 41-56, and I. TORAL-NIEHOFF, *Al-Ḥīra: Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext*, Leiden, 2014.

18. This material is now handily collected and discussed (by Z.T. Fiema, A. al-Jallad, M.C.A. Macdonald and L. Nehme) in G. FISHER, *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, Oxford, 2015, p. 395-433. The inscriptions from Yemen are not mentioned there; see Ch.J. ROBIN, 2014: "Inscriptions antiques de la region de Najrān", *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres: Comptes Rendus de l'année 2014*, p. 1033-1128.

19. "Histoires d'Ahoudemmeh et de Marouta", ed./tr. F. NAU, *Patrologia Orientalis* 3, 1905, p. 26-27.

assigned them priests and deacons.[20] In the political arena of this region we find the Christian Arabophone brothers, al-Ḥārith and Abū Kārib, sons of Jabala, acknowledged as kings and powerbrokers on a variety of different media: local inscriptions, the colophon of a sixth-century Syriac manuscript from a monastery near Palmyra, a south Arabian monumental building, a papyrus from Petra, as well as in Byzantine historical and religious texts, which document their role as soldiers and supporters of the church in the eastern provinces of the Empire.[21] As regards more direct links between Arabic and the Bible in this region, we have Jerome talking about "the Arabic language" in the context of his translations of the books of Daniel and Job, and an Arabic glossary on the Psalms surviving on a papyrus in the mosque of Damascus has been shown to have its roots in "pre-Islamic Graeco-Arabic texts".[22]

Nevertheless, though Syria-Palestine may well have been the home of Arabophone Christianity, the fact that Christianity had also become entrenched in Yemen by the sixth century meant that Muḥammad's audience in central west Arabia would have been exposed to Christian traffic passing between southwest Arabia and the Levant in the form of various Christian officials and emissaries, priests and holy men. For instance, the first two bishops of Najran in north Yemen were consecrated by the renowned Philoxenus, bishop of Mabbug, in the early sixth century; and the south Arabian martyr Elias had been a monk at the convent of Mar Abraham of Tella (east of Edessa) and had been ordained a priest by John, bishop of Tella. The connection was strong enough between the two regions that the news of Christians killed by the Jewish king of Yemen in the 520s very quickly spread and prompted such senior figures as Jacob, bishop of Serug, and John the Psalter, from the monastery of Aphtonia at Qenneshre (east of Aleppo), to pen works in honor of these Christians martyrs.[23]

In any case it would seem to be agreed by all that Biblical and quasi-Biblical narratives were circulating in Arabic among Christian Arabo-

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20. "Life of Euthymius" in Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the monks of Palestine*, ed. E. SCHWARTZ, Leipzig, 1939 (tr. R.M. PRICE, Kalamazoo, 1991), 18.24-25.

21. F. MILLAR, 'Rome's Arab Allies in Antiquity," in H. BÖRM and J. WIESEHÖFER, (eds.), *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in memory of Zeev Rubin*, Dusseldorf, 2010, p. 210-13; F. MILLAR, "A Syriac Codex from near Palmyra and the 'Ghassanid' Abokarib", *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 16 (2013), p. 15-35.

22. F. MILLAR, "Jerome and Palestine", *Scripta Classica Israelica* 29 (2010), p. 76; A. AL-JALLAD, *The Damascus Psalm Fragment: Middle Arabic and the Legacy of Old Higazi* (Oriental Institute; Chicago, forthcoming), Appendix 2 and chapter 3.

23. I. SHAHID, *The Martyrs of Najran: new documents*, Brussels, 1971, p. vi-vii/p. 45-46 (ed./tr.); R. SCHRÖTER, "Trostschreiben Jacobs von Sarug an die himjaritischen Christen," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 31 (1877), p. 361-405.

phone populations inside and on the Arabian borderlands of the Byzantine and Persian empires before Islam, whether only in oral form or in both oral and written form. Perhaps, then, rather than continuing to hunt down the elusive specter of Judeo-Christian communities in west Arabia, it would be worthwhile to devote more attention to the different ways in which a monotheist vocabulary and a monotheist corpus of (oral and/or written) literature had been developed and disseminated in Arabic across the Syro-Mesopotamian and Arabian regions in the century or so before Muḥammad. It inevitably entailed interaction with other Christian traditions and Christian literatures, in particular with the Peshitta Bible, which was the most authoritative version of the Christian Scripture in the Aramaic-speaking lands of the Near East in the sixth century.[24] To some extent at least the Qu'rān assumes such a Christian Arabic *Vorlage*. The advanced form of the Qu'rān's polemic, both in terms of language and arguments, and the familiarity of Muḥammad's audience with so much Biblical material make it certain that monotheist vocabulary and concepts had circulated in the Hijaz long before Muhamamd's lifetime.[25] Although much of this material may have been spread orally, some of the allusions to the Bible in the Qu'rān are suggestive of a written context.[26] Further investigation of this point, which is effectively a refinement of Luxenberg's position, might open up a whole new avenue of research, namely the reconstruction of pre-Islamic theological discourse in Arabic.

24. S. Griffith and E. el-Badawi assume Aramaic-Arabic bilingualism explains the interaction, though some posit direct knowledge of Syriac; e.g. S. Seppälä, "Reminiscences of Icons in the Qur'an?," Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 22 (2011), p. 3-21, see p. 7: "My own estimation is that, if the author of the Qu'rān had direct contact with Christian texts, the most likely possibility is that he heard recitation of Syriac hymns related to liturgical feasts, in addition to Gospel readings from Syriac Qeryana."

25. This point is argued in a different vein by G. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, Cambridge, 2006, and P. Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010), p. 151-200, in their studies on the monotheist coloring of the *mushrikūn*.

26. Consider the example in Ch. Luxenberg, *Syro-Aramaic Reading*, p. 210-11: the parallel between Q 24:31 ("let them [believing women] not stamp their feet [*lā yaḍribna bi-arjulihinna*] to give knowledge of the finery they conceal") and Isaiah 3:16 ("[the women of Zion] walk and trip along with their feet tinkling [from their ankle-rings]") – in the version of the Peshitta Bible, which has *mṭarrpān b-reglayhēn*, rather than that of the Hebrew Bible, which has *ṭāfōf b-raglēhem* – is more suggestive of written rather than purely oral transmission.

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