

The Qur'ān in its Historical Context, **By Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed)**

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Review by Phil Bourne

This collection of essays grew out of a symposium, 'Towards a New Reading of the Qur'an?' held at Notre Dame University in April 2005. The title of the symposium itself provoked controversy, because a number of scholars suggested that the meaning and interpretation of the words of the Qur'ān seemed clear enough. But an examination of translations of the Qur'ān into other languages shows this is not the case.

Reynolds, in his introduction, describes how the Arabic text published in Cairo in 1924 has become adopted as the standard text, even though it was never intended to be the definitive text. Since then a number of scholars have bewailed the lack of a critical edition of the Arabic text. Gotthelf Bergsträsser's and Arthur Jeffery's project to produce such a critical edition floundered largely as a result of the chaos surrounding World War II. More recently, there have been some attempts to re-start the project, using computer technology to publish and collate the manuscript material, but there is a long way to go.

Recently there have been a number of controversial theses on the origin of the Qur'ān, collectively known as the Revisionist School: Günter Lüling, John Wansbrough, Yehuda Nevo and Christoph Luxenberg, etc. All of these reject the Muslim account of the origin of the Qur'ān as being a text dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel: the master narrative.

The 2005 conference sought to look at the relationship between the Qur'ān as we have it today and the history of late antiquity. There has been a tendency in Western Scholarship to study the Qur'ān through the eyes of the Medieval Muslim commentators, so that *tafsīr* and Qur'ān studies became confused. The Revisionist School was in part a reaction to this trend, challenging scholars to look at

the context in which the text was given or emerged, rather than at the text from a retrospective perspective. They demonstrated just how easily the 'master narrative' can be set aside. But in doing this they have failed to find a coherent alternative narrative. The new approaches have little in common. "Their theories form a cacophony, not a symphony, all of which contributes to the sense that Revisionists have provided no respectable alternative narrative." (:9).

To a significant extent, the essays published in this collection are a reaction to Luxenberg's thesis that the Qur'an had a Syriac pre-history. Much of the hostility to his thesis has been generated by the attention given to it in the popular press. Some of the essays here point to significant flaws in parts of Luxenberg's argument. So that while most would argue that his overall approach is unsound, some of his re-constructions have merit.

It would be impossible to survey the full range of views in the different essays. I will attempt, however, to give a brief summary of each, with some comments.

PART 1: LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

1. The Qur'ān in Recent Scholarship: Challenges and desiderata *Fred M. Donner, University of Chicago*

Donner begins by suggesting that Qur'ān studies are in a state of disarray. We do not know some very basic things about the text of the Qur'ān: How did it originate? Where did it come from? When did it first appear? How was it written and in what language? What form did it take? Who was its first audience? On these questions there is little consensus among scholars. Donner lists five questions that need to be answered:

1. Can the Qur'ān we have today be traced back to some kind of original version - an Ur-Qur'ān? Wansbrough would say no, while most other scholars would suggest yes - but with varying answers.

2. What was the original nature of this Ur-Qur'ān? All agree that it was a source of religious and moral guidance. But scholars disagree over what the underlying message of the original was: was it essentially Islamic, or Judaic (Geiger, Torrey) or Christian (Tor Andre, Lūling, , Luxenberg.)?

3. What kind of language does it represent: the Quryashi dialect, the poetic *koine*, of the Bedouin or some cognate language such as Syriac or Aramaic? The text was originally written without diacritical marks and vowels markings. This creates room for considerable re-interpretation. The more radical approaches of Lūling and Luxenberg, do not find much support. But most scholars would recognise that there are a significant number of loan words in the text whose meanings are unclear.

4. How was the Qur'ān transmitted? There is general agreement that some editing took place in the transition from Ur-Qur'ān to the text we have it today. Was this merely to make the ambiguous unambiguous? Or was it a complete transformation of the text? Also, was the transmission written or oral? The evidence suggests that a written text was transmitted, where stray marks were misunderstood and needed correction at a later stage. But on the other hand, the text without vowels or diacritical marks was ambiguous and needed the oral tradition to decipher it - it could not have been read cold.

5. How did codification and canonization take place? The two processes go hand in hand. Wansbrough challenged the traditional view that the text was fixed by the time of 'Uthmān. But Burton's analysis came to the exact opposite view. The available evidence points to both to early codification and late codification. How do we reconcile this?

Donner concludes by suggesting that the current disarray is not a bad thing. It encourages careful examination of the evidence. It also highlights the need for a critical edition of the text as a first stage in resolving some of the contradictions.

2. Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur'ān

Robert Hoyland, University of St Andrews

Aramaic existed in various forms: there was the imperial Aramaic of the Iranian empire (550-300BC), and also numerous dialects that emerged at the time of Alexander. These latter continued to be used in the Christianised states up until the 13thC AD (Bar Hebraeus). The version used in Edessa was Syriac, was known as *al-ārāmiyya* according to Bar Hebraeus. The Nabataean kingdom used another variety, but here public discourse was conducted in Greek rather than Aramaic. While the Palestinian Aramaic was used principally to translate Greek Christian texts, in Syriac we have original works, including poetry, theology, biblical commentary and astrology. Before Islam, Syriac inscriptions are rarely found outside of Northern Syria, and none at all in Western Arabia.

Old Arabic probably existed from about 500 BC, but it was seldom written. When it was, it used one of the scripts borrowed from other languages - Dedanite, Sabeen, Nabataean. In the 6thC AD we have a clutch of inscriptions in an Arabic script - mostly in Syria - all from the Nabataean sphere of influence.

It is therefore likely that the script used to write Arabic emerged from Nabataean. This is confirmed not only by the form of the letters but also by the content of early inscriptions. The changes in the form of the characters can be explained by the transition of writing a script hanging from a baseline (Nabataean) to one sitting on the baseline (Arabic).

Hoyland rejects the argument that the script was developed by Syriac Christian missionaries, a contention which is important to Luxenberg's thesis.

3. Recent Research on the Construction of the Qur'ān

Gerhard Böwering - Yale University

Böwering gives an overview of the various theories about the origin of the Qur'ān, including the traditional Muslim view. But none of the alternatives suggested have attracted significant support.

The attempt by Western scholars such as Nöldeke, Paret and Bell to fix the chronology of the individual sura's has not produced any agreement. Lüling's and Luxenberg's projects lack compelling evidence: Böwering argues that the exclusive use of a philological approach, as in Luxenberg's thesis, is unlikely to break new ground. Nor have attempts to identify the nascent Muslim community with a Jewish-Christian sect, (e.g. the Ebionites - Joseph Aziz) have not been successful. No single source underlying the Qur'ān has been identified.

4. Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'ān: Is the Qur'ān partly the fruit of a progressive and collective work?

Claude Gilliot, University of Provence, France

The idea that the Qur'ān has multiple authors has rarely been expressed, although it often is assumed. Who were Muhammad's informants and what role did they play in the creation of the text? Gilliot argues that to a significant extent views originally expressed by these informants were, in latter traditions, attributed to Muhammad himself. For example, Zayd ibn Thābit, who became Muhammad's secretary in Medina was already fluent in Hebrew and well versed in Jewish tradition, and would have had a significant role in framing the text.

Gilliot distances himself from Nöldeke's view that the Qur'ān preserves good Arabic. The 'Uthmānic Qur'ān is not necessarily the original. Paul Casanova has suggested that the 'Uthmānic recension is a fable. Gilliot make use of Kropp's distinction between the Qur'ān downhill and the the Qur'ān uphill: those after the 'Uthmanic text and those before it. It is important in framing our argument to distinguish the two.

Gilliot concludes: "The historical basis that is lacking in the work of Luxenberg might be partly found in Syriac literature, and partly in the bond which, according to the Muslims sources, existed between Muhammad and those who enthroned him as prophet (Waraqā b Nawfal, Khadīja and others), or those who furnished him with reports or enriched those that he already possessed on the Bible and post-Biblical literature." (:101)

5. Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in Sūrat al-Kahf and in Syriac Christian tradition.

Sidney Griffith, Catholic University, USA

Sidney Griffith makes a very compelling case for the derivation of Qur'anic account from a 6th century Syriac source. It is a version of John Serugh homily of the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. There are a number of features in this account which connect with the Qur'anic version. On this basis he argues that uncertain term, *raqīm* refers to a lead inscription set up outside the cave, and does not mean 'sleep' as Luxenberg contends. Griffith further argues that the retelling of the story in the Qur'ān sets out to counter the Christian version, stressing that the youths were monotheists. It warns against speculating over the number of sleepers or the time spent in the cave, as some of the Christian versions are apt to do.

PART 2: THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF THE LATE ANTIQUE NEAR EAST

6. The theological Christian influence on the Qur'ān: A reflection

Samir Khalil Samir, St Joseph's University, Beirut and Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome.

Rather than focus on the familiar passages about Jesus, John, Mary, etc. Samir focuses on a number of Qur'anic texts that reflect Christian theological issues. The passages chosen are: 3³³⁻³⁴ - God's choice of the family of Imran, 3⁴⁹ 5¹¹⁰ - Jesus creates of birds from clay, 3⁵⁹ - Christ, the new Adam, 5¹¹²⁻¹¹⁵ which reflects the Eucharist, 4¹⁵⁶⁻⁵⁹ - the non-Crucifixion of Christ, 4¹⁷¹⁻⁷² - that Christ did not think it improper to become a slave, and 43⁶¹ - Jesus and the Hour.

Samir argues that the Qur'ān is faithful to its sources: its human author gathers his material faithfully, although sometimes without understanding its significance. There is evidence of both written Christian influence as well as oral Jewish and Christian influence. This may have come from Christian sects in Arabia, but the historical evidence for the existence of such groups ambiguous. He sug-

gests that after the Byzantines re-conquest of Jerusalem in 629/30, Jews and heterodox Christians that were expelled found refuge in Arabia.

7. Mary in the Qur'ān: a re-examination of her presentation

Suleiman A Mourad, Smith College, USA.

Mourad looks at three aspects of the Qur'ānic presentation of Mary with a view to establishing their background in Christian tradition: the identity of Mary, the annunciation and birth of Jesus and the flight of Mary and Jesus into Egypt. He suggests that the identification in the Qur'ān of Imran's daughter and Aaron's sister is meant to highlight their biblical heritage. The use of the *Protoevangelium* and the *Luke/Diatesseron* as sources suggests that Christian influence on Muhammad was mainstream, not heretical. Furthermore, Medieval Muslim exegetes who sought to comment on these passages, for the most part, did not have any solid knowledge of Arabian Christianity.

8. The Alexander Legend in the Qur'ān 1883-102

Kevin van Bladel, University of Southern California.

Bladel argues that the Qur'ānic account of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn is based on a Syriac document of late antiquity now known as the *Alexander Legend*. It was written in 629-30 as religious and political propaganda in favour of Herculus after a devastating war with the Persians. He contains two prophesies: the first about the impending end of the world in a war of all nations, the other predicting that Roman, Christian rule would come over the entire earth before the Messiah's return. The Qur'ānic account contains only the first of its two prophesies, thereby implicitly rejecting the view that Christianity is about to conquer the world. The thesis is carefully argued, trying to make sense of the Qur'ānic data in terms of contemporary history.

Bladel concludes "It seems now that the future of Qur'ānic studies lies not within the discipline construed as Islamic studies alone but rather that many major historical problems of the Qur'ān will now be solved by historians of Late Antiquity, whose approaches to the first century of Islam are proving more successful than the various

apologetic and polemical approaches that predominate in modern study of early Islam.” (:196)

9. Beyond Single Words: Mā’ida - Shaytān - jibt and tāghūt. Mechanisms of transmission into the Ethiopic (Gə’əz) Bible and the Qur’ānic Text.

Manfred Kropp, Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz.

It has long been suggested that some of the loan word in the Qur’ān come from Ethiopic. Kropp wants to get beyond mere words and identify possible sources that may have impacted the Qur’ānic narrative. Kropp begins with brief discussion of the links between Ethiopia and Arabia, followed by a discussion of four words that are thought to have been borrowed from Gə’əz - *mā’ida*, *shaytān*, *jibt* and *tāghūt*. He concludes by drawing our attention to an Ethiopian homily that may or may not be a source of the word *mā’ida*. His conclusions are tentative and beyond quoting extracts from the homily, he doesn’t produce any arguments as to why this should be the source.

10. Nacent Islam in Seventh Century Syriac Sources

Abdul-Massih Saadi, University of Notre Dame, USA

Saadi looks at the words used to describe the Arab invaders in the 7th century in order to try to gain some understanding of how their presence was understood by the conquered peoples. The ‘Christian’ Syriac writers used the designation *Mhaggrayē*: immigrant, reflecting the view that their presence was temporary. Many Christian sources at the time viewed the Arab invasion as a punishment for sin: but they expected that the punishment was temporary. The titles used of the Muslim leaders to describe themselves were secular, rather than religious.

The Syriac writers were the first to engage the Immigrants on religious matters. A document dating from 644 reports a religious colloquium between the Emir and John of Sedreh. It describes the *Mhaggrayē* as having accepted the Torah. There was considerable discussion about the Scriptures, but the Qur’ān is not mentioned: this is a

this is a possible indication that the latter did not yet exist. None of these sources describe the *Mhaggrayé* as Jews.

Saadi's assessment would support the revisionist theories of John Wansbrough, *et al*, who argue that Islam emerged as a distinct religion some time after the Arab invasion. Saadi's contribution seemed to me to be a conscious attempt to provide evidence for this thesis.

PART 3: CRITICAL STUDY OF THE QUR'ĀN AND THE MUSLIM EXEGETICAL TRADITION

11. Notes on Medieval and Modern Emendations of the Qur'ān

Devin J Stewart, Emroy University, USA

Stewart begins by quoting Phenix and Horn's enthusiastic review of Luxenberg's work in *Hugoye*, but questions whether Luxenberg's work is the 'critical turn' they claim it to be. Stewart points out that the real 'critical turn', at least among Western scholars, should be dated to the publication of Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans* in 1860. He notes that a critical approach to the study of the Qur'ān by Muslim scholars can also be found in classical Medieval Scholars.

In this paper Stewart focuses on Luxenberg's proposed textual amendments. While many have criticised Luxenberg's methodology, Stewart argues the each proposed amendment should be judged on its merit. Stewart works through a number of proposed changes. Some he finds plausible in that they resolve an outstanding problem; others are judged either as unnecessary - the traditional reading was not a problem - or that the grounds for the change was based on an error of judgement. In particular, he dismisses Luxenberg's suggested reading of the passages about the *hū* as unnecessary. In conclusion he finds Luxenberg's contribution to be good in parts.

To my mind the weakness of Stewart's assessment is that it fails to take seriously the point Luxenberg is trying to make: the Qur'ān was at least partly based on a written Syriac text that was consistently misunderstood by those who later edited the text. When he cites a proposed amendment to a text that has not been seen as problematic,

he is seeking to show that he is amending the text in a systematic way. But where Luxenberg's amendment is based on his own misunderstanding to Syriac usage, Stewart's criticisms hold weight.

12. Syriac in the Qur'ān: Classical Muslim Theories

Andrew Rippin, University of Victoria, Canada

Rippin points out that Luxenberg and Mingana were not the first to point out Syriac words in the Qur'ān. The Muslim exegetes frequently discussed various words they considered to be of Syriac origin. In the earliest commentators, the tendency was to minimise the significance of foreign words - that did not imply they were not proper Arabic. Clearly a theological motivation stood behind this stance. But later commentators (e.g. as-Suyūfī) saw the presence of foreign words as a sign of its universal appeal - some even suggested there were words from every language in the world.

With the rise of grammatical studies it was increasingly recognised that some word forms were of a foreign origin: These terms were designated aberrant on the basis of criteria established by the grammarians. *Hapax legomena* were frequently included in the list of foreign words.

The designation of the various language groups is often confusing. Mingana lumped Aramaic, Palestinian-Syriac and Eastern Aramaic together under the term Syriac. The Arabic terms to designate the different languages/speakers were equally confusing. *Suriyāniyya* and *Nabatiyya* were used of different language groups. *Nabatiyya* might refer to the inhabitants of Petra, or the Aramaic speakers of northern Mesopotamia - a form of Aramaic close to *Mandaean*. Most Muslim writers thought of *Nabatiyya* as an ancient form of *Suriyāniyya*, both languages of Iraq. Also the ascription of words in the past to a particular language did not imply genuine knowledge of their origins - sometime it was just an acceptance of ignorance on the part of the author. Rippin gives examples of this in as-Suyūfī's treatise on foreign words.

Today our knowledge of the transmission of language is much greater. Because of the similarities between Syriac and Arabic, the tendency is to try to trace direct borrowing in the Qur'ān by looking

at religious technical terms: e.g. qur'ān = qeryānā. But this is based on the assumption that Christianity in Arabia conveyed terminology that was not present in Arabic before. Unless one can point to external evidence of such Christian communities it remains no less an assumption than some of the assumptions used by classical Muslim scholars. Such assumed cultural interchange lies behind much of the suggestions in Jeffery's *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. Those like Luxenberg, who wish to see a strong Syriac presence in the text of the Qur'ān, must give some account of how this came about.

Medieval Muslims knew the answer to these questions - the words came from God and were part of his revelation - whether Arabic or foreign. They did not need to account for it on a human level as we do today. "[T]he modern speculative theories or theories based upon assertion do not, in fact, take us anywhere beyond the medieval position. Faith in the historical record rivals the faith in the divine. Certainly I think that as our knowledge of early Islam and the Qur'ān evolves, the place of foreign vocabulary in the text of the Qur'ān will be one element ... in helping us understand the emergence of the phenomenon which we know as the Qur'ān. But the attempt to specify this outside the general flow of history within an overall sectarian milieu of the Near East will always remain speculative. The search thus is not for the 'origin' of the text of the Qur'ān: the text of the Qur'ān as we have it is what we must deal with, but that must be viewed as one element within the Jewish and Christian midrash of the Near East, a trend which continues down until today as we participate in the very process ourselves. Surely here is the significance of Luxenberg: what does he tell us about who he is, about his times, about his religious perspective in relationship to the Qur'ān? Surely those are the most interesting questions." (:260).

It seems that all Rippon can offer is a counsel of despair: we cannot know what happened in the past; all we can discover is something about ourselves! I for one do not find that a particularly interesting question!

Conclusion by the Reviewer:

On the whole, these different essays do not reflect the outright condemnation of Luxenberg's work one finds in the foreword by David Madigan. Madigan writes, Luxenberg "shows little appreciation of the notion that the meaning of a text is [to be found] in the complex relationship between the text and its readers in their context. He seems to espouse the reconstructionist critique made by a Schleiermacher or a Dilthey, leaving unexamined the important critique made by Gadamer and the vast amount of reflection on hermeneutical issues that has taken place in the last century." (xi) That reflection includes some very cogent criticisms of Gadamer's approach. Hermeneutics has moved on, and while a reader's suppositions may be important, the text still has an objective existence of its own, and it is that self-understanding that we wish to interrogate, not how one thinks a reader ought to read it.

Many of the scholars in this collection find value in the suggestions that Luxenberg makes. But, as several contributors had pointed out, a purely linguistic approach to the text is unlikely to resolve the questions in Donner's article. There is a need for an interdisciplinary approach. But as yet there is no agreement about the pre-history of the Qur'ān. It may be that sometime in the near future some archaeologist digging in Arabia will find something that decisively points to one rather than another of the options before us. But until then - at it may not happen at all - a variety of conflicting theories are set before us. In which case I think we should be wary of approaches to apologetics that build too much on one or other of the various theories presented either here or elsewhere. The Qur'ān remains an enigmatic document.