

LUXENBERG CHRISTOPH, *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*. (The Syro-Aramaic Way of Reading the Qur'an. A Contribution towards Decoding the Language of the Qur'an), Berlin. Das Arabische Buch, 2000, ix + 311 pp.

This book may look fairly traditional at first sight, but as one begins to read this impression soon changes. The book has in fact the merit of taking a clear stand as regards Qur'an exegesis, a stand which will not satisfy some, which may not please others, and which will leave still others disappointed or annoyed.

Let us start with the word "Lesart" in the title which must, I supposed, be understood in the sense it has in ch. 7 which speaks about the "seven ways of reading the Qur'an (pp. 22 ff.). The A. here refers to the tradition that up to seven ways of reading the text of the Qur'an were permitted in consideration of the variety of Arabic dialects spoken among the first followers of the Prophet. Before that he had referred, in a very summary manner, to the Arabic script (ch. 3. pp. 15 ff.) and the initial oral way of transmitting the Qur'an (ch. 5. pp.), all this to situate some of the principal reasons for the difficulty in understanding certain words or passages in the Qur'an. However, in ch. 9, entitled "The language of the Qur'an", the A. reaches the conclusion that this language cannot have been one of the Arabic dialects spoken (but not yet written) at the time of its origin. Hence his thesis, announced already in the preface (pp. vii-ix) that the Qur'an must, so to speak, be read in a Syro-Aramaic key. His approach is, in his own words, "philological", (cf. already *Introduction*, p. 1), i.e. an effort to clarify obscure passages in the Qur'an by proposing a different reading of these passages, which in practice means a reading against a Syro-Aramaic background.

The A. accepts the Cairo Qur'an edition as basic text, and he accepts the philological principle of the "lectio difficilior". However, when there still remain problems of understanding or interpretation he applies the following methodological steps (ch. 3, pp. 10-15): verify whether (1) Tabarī, or (2) the *Lisan al-'Arab*, do not contain alternative meanings to provide a clearer reading; if not (3) try to find a homonymous Syro-Aramaic root with a different meaning which suits the context better; next (4) check whether changing the diacritics produces a meaning which makes more sense, or could even (5) show up an Aramaic root which would provide a meaningful reading. If all this remains without result (6) he proposes to make a translation backwards from Arabic into Aramaic to discover the (Syro-Aramaic) meaning of what is thus identified as an aramaism in Arabic. A final step (7) would be to try to trace helpful indications in the Syriac-Arabic lexicons of the 10th century or in the early christian arabic literature, on the assumption that Arabic has been influenced considerably by Syro-Aramaic. Over and above all this (8) there may be cases when a word is perfectly good Arabic as far as orthography is concerned, but is in reality a syro-aramaic word with its own meaning.

The greater part of the book under review consists of applications of this method, to start with ch. 7 which introduces the syro-aramaic "way of reading". Ch. 10 (pp. 54-83) begins by discussing the word *Qur'an*. proposing at one point the meaning "lectionary" (p. 79). Ch. 11 (pp. 53-101), a kind of transition, wants to show that historical research has been following a wrong track in assuming that the Arabic language codified by the grammarians 200 years later is the Arabic of the Qur'an. This is elaborated in great detail in the following chapters. Ch 12 (pp. 102-202) analyses difficult passages (words or longer phrases) occurring in verses of different suras. Ch. 13 (pp. 202-216) looks into several underlying syro-aramaic structures in the language of the Qur'an. Ch. 14 (pp. 216-221) looks at some cases of misread Arabic expressions, while ch. 15 (pp. 221-260) deals with supposed misinterpretations of the theological content. Ch. 16 (pp. 260-269) then "corrects" the reading of a perfectly straightforward verse to make it fit in with the theological content proposed in ch. 15. In ch. 17 (pp. 269-298) the A. proposes a re-reading of two complete suras (sura 108 *Abundance* and sura 96 *Clotted blood*) linking them with pre-Qur'anic christian texts. The final ch. 18 (pp. 299-306) summarizes the A.'s position on the crucial issues: the language of the Qur'an, oral tradition, arabic philology (better perhaps: grammar), the erroneous view on the history of the Qur'an, and the new way of reading the Qur'an.

The A. shows remarkable erudition and a great facility in handling an impressive amount of data. I must admit nevertheless that I am not at ease with a number of points. I take note of the remark in the preface that this study does not pretend to solve all the problems concerning the language of the Qur'an (p. viii). It is also said that this book represents only a part of a more extensive research project, and that there should be an *Index* of words which hopefully will see the light later on, together with other material. In fact, the absence of any index makes the perusal of the book difficult.

There is, however, in the preface a remark I cannot let pass without comment where it is said that, in this work, the A. did not go into the totality of the literature on the topic "as it hardly contributes anything to the newly proposed method" (p. ix). Yet there are a number of issues on which it would be good to take position explicitly so that one knows what the A.'s presuppositions are. I am thinking for instance of the semitic languages group. so different, it would seem, in its structure (or lack of it?) from the Indo-European group: how does the A. assess the implications of the different theories on this question for his research? Apart from this aspect of the "genetic" relationship, one could ask a similar question about the way the contact between the languages concerned is seen

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When the A. enumerates the steps of his method he adds quite rightly: «unter Berücksichtigung objektiver Kriterien» (p. 11), with due consideration of objective criteria. It would have been helpful if he had spelled out in detail which criteria he has in mind, and whether they are linguistic/philological ones or extra-linguistic ones. At present one gets at times an impression of a form of circular reasoning if not of arbitrariness. Given the delicate nature of the topic treated this should be avoided at all cost. Such criteria will make the verification of his arguments easier. Verification will also be helped by providing indexes and similar aids, by spelling out clearly how the A. sees the general linguistic and social framework within which his research field is situated, and by providing more extensive analytical data so as not to deal with words in isolation or in restricted contexts but to do justice to the full complexity of the subject matter.

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