Christoph Burgmer

THE KORAN AS PHILOLOGICAL MINE

A Conversation with Christoph Luxenberg

Christoph Burgmer: *Mr Luxenberg, your book, for many laymen cryptically entitled* 'Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache' *('The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to Deciphering the Koranic Language'), has caused a major stir. Newspapers across the world reported on your research findings. There were some violent reactions and discussions, followed by congresses and seminars. All over the world scholars, lay-people, Muslims and non-Muslims are expressing their views, with the side-effect that research into the Koran, for years pursued only in the quiet study-rooms of a few Western and Arab scholars, is suddenly attracting worldwide public attention again, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.*

Your book is a best-seller, even though it was written and published in German, and even though it is extremely difficult to read and understand. Why did you decide to use linguistic methods to examine the Koran?

Christoph Luxenberg: It must first be said that Western scholars have known for a long time that many passages in the Koran are incomprehensible. That accords with the interpretations of Arab commentators. However, it is precisely these 'obscure passages' in the Koran that are the starting-point for my work.

Previous attempts at interpreting them were based on speculation rather than being philologically founded. But speculation can never be the basis for a scientific method. I am trying to use philological methods to elucidate and substantiate these passages. The Syro-Aramaic dictionary has turned out to be the best means of doing this.

Before we come to the Koran and the Koranic language itself, may I ask why you employ Syro-Aramaic as a way of explaining the Koran?

For over a thousand years Aramaic was the lingua franca and cultural language of the western Asian region that is today's Middle East. The Greeks called the Aramaic used there Syriac, deriving that from Assyria, the country of the Assyrians, but leaving out the initial 'A'. In the second century after Christ, Christian Aramaeans started calling themselves Syrians and their language Syriac, so as to distinguish themselves from the heathen Aramaeans. This Syriac became the dominant cultural and written language through the translation of both the Old and the New Testaments. Arabs call this form of Aramaic Syriac up to the present day.

Like Arabic, Syro-Aramaic is a Semitic language. Both languages are therefore closely related. Is that also true of the way the two languages were written down? What is the difference between written Syro-Aramaic and Arabic?

Written Syro-Aramaic and Arabic have many shared roots, as in their verbal system; they are sister languages. What is special about them is what is known as trilaterality, which means that the root of a word consists of three consonants, and those three consonants can be extended. That is a linking characteristic of these Semitic languages. Take, for instance, the word *kataba*. In both Syriac and Arabic it means '*write*' and consists of the root *k-t-b*.

These root consonants are usually also written. However, what are known as the semi-vowels or consonants were also used as *mater lectionis*, that is as vowel letters. That is because vowels were initially not written. At any rate, there were no vowels in early manuscripts of the Koran. They were only added later.

Understanding of the Arabic script is made even more difficult by the fact that the consonants are ambiguous. The Arabic alphabet actually possesses only 15 characters as opposed to

Aramaic's 22. Today's Arabic has 28 characters at its disposal, but only six of those are absolutely unambiguous. The other 22 have two or more meanings.

An example. Let's return to the letters *k-t-b*. Because of the ambiguity of the written form, I can read *kataba*, which means *to write*, but I could also read *kabata*, which means *to oppress*. Another example is the word *sharala (s-r-l)*, which means *to employ*, but could also be *shaala to ignite*.

There is a link between written Syro-Aramaic and written Arabic, but it is only a partial link. Unlike in Aramaic, the appearance of many letters in Arabic script is reduced to an identical character. Only when this sign is characterised with marks (known as diacritic signs) does it become unequivocal. Otherwise it stands for up to five different letters. One and the same character can be read as a *b*, an *f*, a *y*, or an *n*, depending on whether the marks are placed above or below the letter. However, they are not to be found in early Arabic writing. They were only developed later, creating a system that turned ambiguous signs into unambiguous ones. In Syro-Aramaic script, on the other hand, there are only two letters which are similar and are distinguished from one another by two dots: the *d* and the *r*. With *d* it is one dot below, and with *r* one dot above. So Syro-Aramaic is much clearer than Koranic Arabic.

Let's take ourselves back to the Middle East of the 7th century. What part did the Syro-Aramaic language and script play at that time? Was it a business language or even a lingua franca*, to be compared with, say, Persian in the India of the 17th to the 19th century, or with the English of today in which people with different mother tongues and dialects communicate?*

That is very probable. There were also Arabs, for instance the Nabataeans, who used Aramaic in written communication. In Palmyra too, where aramaicised Arabs originally lived, Aramaic was spoken and written. So it is assumed that educated Arabs in and around Syria made use of Aramaic. Further east, Persian was the dominant language, and in Syrian cities Greek. It is still uncertain what influence these languages had on the Hijaz, that part of the Arabian peninsula in today's Saudi Arabia where the Prophet Mohammed was most influential. But if the language of the Koran was the language of the Hijaz, then one must assume a high level of Aramaic influence.

After all, even the name Mecca is Aramaic, meaning a hollow. And Mecca does in fact lie in a valley, in a basin between two hills. That would indicate an Aramaic settlement. And the Prophet Mohammed was a trader and even travelled as far as Damascus. It is to be presumed that he must at least have known all these languages. After all, one can't imagine a trader who goes to another country on business without knowing at least something of the languages used there. So he must have understood at least some words in this language. On the other hand, Islamic tradition definitively rejects the idea that the Prophet could also write this language. It is clearly emphasised that Mohammed was illiterate. Yet one passage in the Koran runs: 'You could not have read this writing or been able to write it with your right hand'. So I assume the Koran means by that that the Prophet could read and write.

How was this language embedded, socially and politically, in Meccan affairs of the 7th century?

Mecca was an important staging-point on the trade route between Syria and the south of the Arabian peninsula. The Nabataeans, Aramaeans whose capital was Petra in today's Jordan, were particularly active as traders. Of course, as in any commercial centre there were many foreigners in Mecca too, especially Aramaeans. The Arabs themselves were mainly nomads, not settled in one place. This is even indicated by the name 'Arabs', which is the designation for people who lead nomadic lives. Nothing is known about the language the Prophet Mohammed spoke. All that has been handed down are his later utterances, known as the hadiths. They were collected in the Middle Ages and authenticated by questioning people who based their knowledge on earlier authorities who had done likewise. So a hadith is only viewed as being genuine if it can be traced back through an unbroken chain of authorities all the way to the Prophet.

Even though that was a cleverly devised scholarly approach for the time, the hadiths handed down to the present day should nevertheless be critically assessed. Many Muslims have in fact done so across the centuries. Al Buchari, the most important Muslim researcher into

hadiths, assembled around 60,000 such sayings in the 9th century. However, he classified only 2,000 as being 'probably genuine'. Of those many were later time and again called into question. All the same, on legal questions hadiths remain a very important amplification of the Koran up to the present day, even though they are only spoken declarations by the Prophet, and these spoken declarations were assembled at a fairly late stage, not by contemporaries. So it is not possible to be sure of either their age or their origins – unlike the oldest Koran manuscripts available to us, which date from the early 8th century.

What was the relationship between Arabic and Syro-Aramaic during the time of the Prophet and afterwards?

When Islam came into existence Syriac was for some time the official language, so that Syro-Aramaic existed alongside Arabic. Then Arabic script developed, taking Nabataean as its model. Even though Arabic was already used for writing during the first century of the Hijrah, which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, Syriac was only definitively replaced as the official written language under Caliph Abdel Malik Ibn Marwan. That was about 70 years after the death of the Prophet.

What were the historical sources of Arabic?

It has been assumed up to now that Arabic is one of the oldest Semitic languages, spoken 2,000 or even 3,000 years before Christ. So no scholarly attempt was ever made to elucidate the Koranic Arabic language in terms of later Semitic languages. Incomprehensible aspects of Koranic Arabic were instead investigated on the basis of Arabic itself.

Arab tradition also referred to the Arabic poetry presumed to be pre-Islamic, and thus older than the written language of the Koran. However, the antiquity of this poetry has frequently been called into question – for instance by Taha Hussain, a well-known 20th century Egyptian writer.

His thesis is that there was no written evidence whatsoever of ancient Arabic poetry, but that this was only produced during the Arab period. He explains this by the fact that this poetry was only collected in the 9th century. So Taha Hussain says that one must be permitted to ask how, and by whom, such quantities of Arabic poetry could suddenly have been assembled in the 9th century.

But at the time that question alone gave rise to considerable public unrest in Egypt. Taha Hussain had to publicly retract his statements, since according to Arab tradition ancient Arabic poetry is identical with the language of the Koran.

If one follows the Islamic tradition you mentioned, written codification of the Koran derives from Caliph 'Uthman, recognised by all believers as Mohammed's third successor as head of the Muslim community. He is said to have assembled, examined, and arranged in the now traditional form the various fragments of the Koran in the 7th century, a few years after the death of the Prophet.

That is what Islamic tradition maintains. But no Koranic form of writing exists from the early Islamic period. At least none has been found up to the present day. So the response to such a declaration must be a big question mark. Especially when one discovers that, astonishingly, no copy of the original Koran has been preserved even though the written form of the Koran is viewed as the first book in Arabic. There are no older Arabic texts apart from a few inscriptions. Leaving aside the Koran, the oldest Arabic books date only from the mid-8th century. These are a biography of the Prophet by Ibn Hisham and *The Book of Kalila wa Dimmna* by Ibn al Muqqaffa.

So one cannot help asking whether Arabs neither read nor wrote between the coming into existence of the Koran and the first book in Arabic literature. Who were these Arabs, and what was the education of the writers and copyists who wrote down the Koran? A number of Arabic inscriptions do exist which are considerably older than Koranic Arabic and go back to pre-Islamic times. But the Arabic used there, which definitely is Arabic, is mixed with Aramaic words – as is the case, for instance, with the celebrated Nemara inscription, dated 328 B.C., to be found around 120 kilometres south-east of Damascus. Even earlier inscriptions have been

discovered, suggestive of an Arabic language. Alongside Arabic inscriptions there are also lesser manuscripts and letters on papyrus from the time of Mohammed and his immediate followers. However, there are no books. Yet people at the time of the Prophet spoke the classical High Arabic of the Koran - at least that, once again, is what Arab tradition maintains. The aforementioned ancient Arabic poetry is put forward as evidence of this. This is indeed written in a classical form, but it cannot be ascertained whether this classical Arabic was ever spoken. In addition, we know that poetry is an art form. So it may well have been that there were poets who had mastered classical Arabic, and that their poems really were handed down and have thus survived up to the present day. However, that does not prove that this language was also used in everyday life. I am much more inclined to believe that classical Arabic was not spoken, but that people at the time of the Prophet employed various dialects.

For Muslim believers Arabic is a sacred language, the language of the Koran and thus also the language of God. They are convinced that God spoke Arabic or at least that His revelation was communicated in Arabic. So what is the relationship between the divine origin of language and its setting down in writing, that is, to the Arabic script?

No one maintains that God himself *wrote*. All that is said is that he *revealed*. And that this revelation was initially communicated orally, and the Prophet proclaimed it orally. It was the listeners who are said to have written it down.

At this point, at any rate, a human hand was at work. It was not the Prophet who wrote down the revelations; it was his contemporaries, and later writers. So the written text does not have the same significance as the spoken word. The emphasis is on 'spoken language' rather than on 'writings'. Of course the writing later took on sacred significance, especially when it was further developed calligraphically. Figurative representation is not allowed in Islam, so script – and particularly sayings from the Koran – was used for the adornment of sacred buildings. In Sufism it acquired additional mystical, almost divine importance. Yet the script only gives us an image of the Arabic language. Whether this written image was really also spoken in this way, as we maintain today, is unknown. People invoke the oral tradition as proof. But precisely because people repeatedly invoke the oral tradition, one cannot assume that there is a reliable text where the Koran is concerned, because the oral tradition turns out to be questionable precisely when something different is written in the Koran. And that is always the case when the 'obscure passages' in the Koran cannot be interpreted even by calling upon oral tradition. So it's not only these sections but the tradition as a whole that have to be called in question.

From the perspective of an expert in linguistics, what reasons can be put forward for doubting tradition?

The reason lies in the system of Arab script itself. It seems to have been only really understood by initiates. To find the reasons for that we must return to the diacritic signs in written Arabic. It is known that these marks were only added later. My thesis is that the lectors (as they might be called) no longer had a complete grasp of the Koranic language, simply no longer mastered it. So these lectors set about interpreting the Koranic script on the basis of their contemporary understanding of Arabic. In their time Aramaic had largely vanished – at any rate from their perception. So, consciously or unconsciously, they ignored the historically demonstrated linguistic relationship between Arabic and Aramaic. Yet this was absolutely necessary for understanding the text. After all, the written system used in the Koran is based on Aramaic. Another possible source of mistakes lies in the Arabic script system itself. As I've already explained, only six of the alphabet's 28 letters are unambiguous. 22 had to be interpreted.

The risk of misreading was surely considerable, and the frequent false readings could also be explained in this way. So it can be assumed that the people who originally wrote the Koran read and understood it correctly without marks and diacritic signs, but that later readers and scholars, who attempted to establish unambiguously how the Koran should be read and added the diacritic signs for that purpose, lacked cultural-historical knowledge. For that reason they could no longer explain many passages and were simply wrong in the way they established these marks.

So it is not the Koran which is incorrect; it was the human beings who read this text. This thesis is also backed by the historical fact that there was considerable resistance to adding the signs. The knowledge that the Koran was originally written down without these marks still exists up to the present day. The fact that Muslim believers considered the Koran to be a Holy Book meant that for a long time people were convinced that it should not have been supplemented by the addition of diacritic signs. That is why anyone can say that these marks were added by human hands. They never belonged to the original word of God.

In past centuries Arab scholars have also repeatedly established that there are considerable disparities in different versions of the Koran ...

That is correct. Considerable disparities exist in different versions of the Koran up to the present day. At Kuwait University there is an eight-volume work on such deviations. But these disparities are not taken into account when interpreting the Koran. At present the Cairo version is definitive and viewed as the canonical edition. Muslims read and learn the Koran on the basis of this edition. It seems that this version of the Koran accords with the one that Tabari, the great Muslim commentator on the Koran, edited at the end of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th.

That's how long the oral tradition has been in existence. Tabari himself is viewed within Islam as the most important commentator on the Koran. Yet he did not even comment on the Koran itself; instead, he collected and evaluated statements made about it. His scholarly method thus accords precisely with that of al Buchari, who was born in Buchara and had the reputation of being the most celebrated of all medieval scholars of the Koran. In this method what are called 'authorities' are first questioned, that is, persons viewed as outstanding on account of their reputation, their competence, their influence etc., to whom the sayings of the Prophet were handed down by preceding 'authorities'. Tabari names complete chains of those who handed down the tradition and argues that this or that passage must therefore be understood in this or that way. However, using this method he sometimes draws up as many as forty chains of tradition with regard to just one single passage. These can lead to different explanations but also sometimes to similar exegesis. In this way Tabari follows the established way of oral tradition and does not himself add any new way of reading these interpretations, although he does evaluate them and also says which he finds correct.

Tabari was certainly one of the most outstanding medieval scholars. He travelled throughout the Arab Islamic world, spoke to innumerable people, and left behind a monumental oeuvre. The material on the Koran alone amounts to over 3,000 pages. What importance does his work have today?

He really did comprehensively seek to discover the truth. But that was always done with reference to the oral rather than the written tradition. He doesn't mention a single written source in his thirty-volume oeuvre. His only written reference is to the – as already explained – highly questionable ancient Arabic poetry. He uses that to interpret an obscure word or expression in the Koran.

However, if you look more closely it turns out that Arabic poetry only used the Koranic expression very much later and even comprehended it wrongly. But if Tabari's erroneously comprehended expression is then in turn cited as proof of a correct way of reading, this becomes tautological reasoning. Tabari also mentions other commentators on the Koran but they can no longer be tracked down. So his commentaries also remain the most important source for these others. One has to assume that Tabari probably assembled everything in the way of Koranic knowledge that was to be found at his time.

You yourself propose another way of reading the Koran. What scholarly methods do you employ for elucidating what are called the obscure passages, the incomprehensible passages, in the Koran?

A language must express something. So from the written form I attempt to reconstruct a language that makes sense in the context. For that I first make use of the knowledge that the language of the Koran deals with spiritual themes, so also Biblical themes. It is thus clear that

this must entail a corresponding context of meaning. So the initial task is intuitively to read a logical coherence into the text. If Arabic does not provide that, I try with Aramaic. Even if a word sounds the same, even with synonyms, I check whether Arabic or Aramaic makes better sense.

For that of course you have to know Aramaic. Only through knowledge of the Syro-Aramaic version of the Bible is such a reconstruction possible. After all, this has been handed down reliably, and there are no problems about reading or understanding it. In addition, reliable scholarly apparatus such as dictionaries provide a solid basis for this venture.

Which parts of the Koran are you examining?

Islamic tradition says that the Koran was partly revealed in Mecca and partly in Medina. The suras revealed in Mecca are called Meccan suras, the others Medinan suras. However, the greater part of these suras came from Mecca. They mainly deal with religion and belief. The Medinan suras, by contrast, are more political. The reason for that is certainly the fact that the Prophet was first driven out by the people of Mecca and had to emigrate to Medina. What is known as the Hijrah, the emigration of the Prophet in 622 AD, marks the start of the Islamic calendar. However, Mohammed always intended to return to his home town.

Then there were several military clashes between the Prophet and his supporters and the people of Mecca. Understandably, such manifestations of *realpolitik* also received expression in the Medinan suras. However, I have mainly examined the Meccan suras. I first started to read the Koran slowly and systematically in 1993, gradually gaining insights into the complexity of the text. That takes time, since understanding of the Koran is made difficult by the fact that the written language is its own form of Arabic rather than the everyday language. Theodor Noeldeke, the great 19th century German orientalist and philologist, once even jokingly asserted that Arabs' healthy feel for language had prevented them from imitating the style of Koranic Arabic. In the Koranic style a particular language really does find its own form of expression.

Owusu-Ankomah: Mouvement No. 39, 2004.
From the exhibition Africa Remix*, Hayward Gallery, London.*
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What importance does the Koran have for you as a specialist in linguistics?

I believe that the Koran is the first attempt at self-expression in written Arabic. At that time there was no model for the written language. So the initiators of this written Arabic had to call on elements of the language they used for civilised discourse, and it can be assumed that this language was Aramaic, not Arabic. Koranic Arabic can thus be viewed as a mixture of Arabic and Aramaic. I wouldn't go so far as to see it as an experiment similar to Esperanto, but the objective was the same. Like the inventors of Esperanto, the writers of the Koran also wanted to make a common, comprehensible written language accessible to as many people as possible. Dialects were also incorporated and their use was recognised at an early stage by Arab scholars and commentators.

However, in my view what they believed to be dialect was in fact precisely the combination of Arabic and Aramaic elements, which were complemented by further borrowed words from, for example, Persian or Greek. However, these borrowings only make rare appearances in the Koran, whereas the mingling of Arabic and Aramaic elements decisively shape its language.

Has the historio-linguistic diversity characterising the Koran been taken into account in research?

Western research into the Koran first relied on Arab tradition. So scholars attempted to examine the Koran in accordance with that tradition. Beyond that it was of course an achievement that they discovered that many linguistic borrowings are employed in the Koran. There are even collections of these borrowed words and a large number are correctly derived. But there are also some which are wrongly read, misread, and require reinterpretation. However, to start with people sought etymological explanations of borrowed words they recognised. They did not call into question the meaning of passages in the text which had been interpreted in accordance with tradition. They could not imagine that the language employed in the Koran could be anything but consistent Ancient Arabic.

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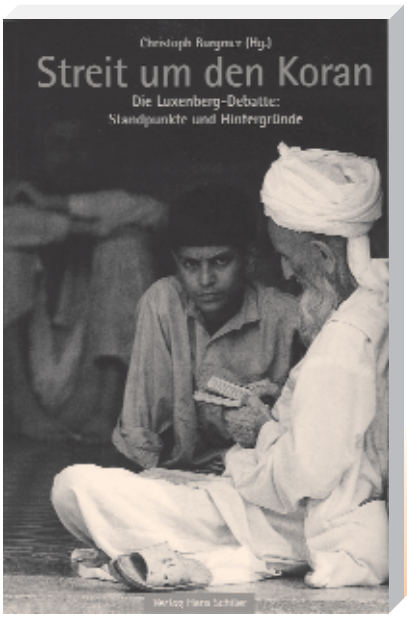
If a passage still remained incomprehensible even with new explanations of words, that was excused in terms of having to cope with Ancient Arabic which could no longer be understood today down to the last detail. So no one realised that this Arabic was based on Aramaic. People did not recognise the Aramaic elements or thought their influence to be of little importance. They wanted at all costs to view the language of the Koran as being classically Arabic. Doubts had to yield to that. Everything had to appear to be genuine Arabic. It was this absolute wish to see the classical form of Arabic in the Koran that concealed the existence of an Aramaic layer in the text. I hope that my research makes people aware of the relationship between the two languages; and that Semitic Studies once again devotes more attention to Aramaic so as to be able to investigate not only the linguistic but also the complex cultural connection between the two. I can imagine that this will certainly lead in future to some sensational research findings.

In your opinion, how large is the percentage of Aramaic in the Koran?

In terms of quantity, about 30% of the Koran will be different. But that figure doesn't really say very much. There'll be quite a few qualitative changes. By qualitative I mean that some theological content of the Koran will have to be rethought. This would of course lead to completely different findings. The precondition is Islamic theologians' readiness to read the Koran with fresh eyes, which means really understanding the Koran as it understood itself, and not as it was interpreted later. I make a clear-cut distinction here between the Koranic text and later Koranic exegesis, since the text of the Koran is a different thing from later interpretation.

A number of articles about your way of reading the Koran have already sparked off violent reactions in some countries. In Pakistan an entire issue of Newsweek *was pulped because the magazine printed an article about your research. What is your experience to date of Muslim reaction to the new research findings?*

My experience up to now is that devout Muslims were always ready to accept this new interpretation. This is with regard to the passages of text whose new reading differs from Islamic tradition. After all, I don't go so far as to assert that Mohammed or the Koran did not exist. The existence of the Koran is a historical fact. It is now a question of seeing this historical fact in its historical context, which also means seeing it historically and subjecting the text to critical examination from that point of view. But critically does not mean that I want to disparage the Koran. I only want to understand it correctly on the basis of historio-linguistic findings.



What people make of my interpretation is beyond my in-fluence. That depends entirely on Muslim theologians. In many passages the Koran is immut-able, and thus it is also the word of God. I never claim that it is not the word of God. Nevertheless, one must reach the conclusion that in the course of history this word of God was changed – particularly through misreadings and the wrongly-placed diacritic signs.

So it is not the word of God itself that was changed; it was erroneously interpreted by human beings.

Abridged version; taken from the book edited by Christoph Burgmer:
Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe (Dispute about the Koran. The Luxenberg Debate), *pp. 14 – 34.*