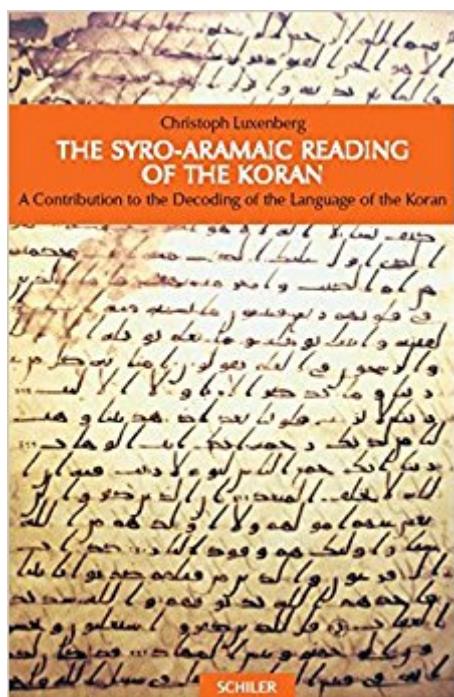


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The Syro-Aramaic Reading Of The Koran: A Contribution To The Decoding Of The Language Of The Koran



Synopsis

Throughout its history the Koran has presented problems of interpretation. Some scholars estimate that at least a quarter of the text is obscure in meaning, not only for Western translators but even native Arabic speakers, who struggle with the archaic vocabulary that is no longer used in modern Arabic. In this in-depth study of the language of the Koran, scholar Christoph Luxenberg dispels much of the mystery surrounding numerous hitherto unclear passages. The key, as Luxenberg shows exhaustively, is to understand that Aramaic--the language of most Middle Eastern Jews and Christians of the pre-Islamic era--had a pervasive influence on the development of the Arabic text of the Koran. For a thousand years preceding the advent of Islam, Aramaic (or Syriac as it was sometimes called) was the lingua franca of many parts of the Near East. It was the native language of the first Christian evangelists and the main liturgical language of the early Christian churches from Syria to Iran. Based on this historical context and a profound knowledge of Semitic languages, Luxenberg clarifies many thorny textual puzzles. Perhaps his most interesting argument is that the passage often translated as referring to the "virgins" that are believed to greet the departed faithful in paradise was long ago misunderstood. In fact, knowledge of ancient Christian hymns in Aramaic suggests that the word in question refers to "grapes" that the departed will enjoy in a paradisiacal garden. Luxenberg discusses many other similar fascinating instances where Aramaic vocabulary and concepts influenced the text of the Koran. This highly erudite work makes a significant contribution to the study of the Koran and the history of Islamic origins.

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Customer Reviews

Christoph Luxenberg is a German scholar and professor of ancient Semitic and Arabic languages.

Yes a perfect book to understand the variations in Quran readings and therefore explanations of the verses. Definitely the Quran had repeated many stories from the old and new testaments. Therefore the language of the Quran is very similar in many ways to Syriac and Aramaic. But this book is mainly suitable for scholars and people who know enough Arabic in order to be able to understand the material presented thoroughly.

this one of the most important documents that I have my hands on in regards of the subject.maybe dry to a lot of people but it is worth reading or at least having as a reference for the future.

I wish there was an Arabic edition for this book , so it would be more understandable for most Arabs.But anyway , This book is treasure and must have.

Very lucid explanation of readings which clarify, and simplify, the text.

The author presents an analysis of the Koran that in an enlightened world would not be expected to excite controversy of any sort. The tone of the book is one of benevolent calm and carefully balanced reasoning that could hardly be expected to offend any person capable of sentient reflection. Most of the passages analyzed by the author would not seem to be on the verge of overturning Islam and the authority of the Koran. One passage of interest is the one in which Mary gives birth to Jesus. In this account there is an Arabic phrase indicating the existence of a streamlet from which Mary was able to drink while in labor. It is argued by the author, however, the original Aramaic version of this phrase states that the birth is legitimate (pp.141-142; Sura 19:24) rather than that such a streamlet existed. Somewhat more controversial is the statement in the Koran that when rendered in Aramaic implies that its original language was indeed a foreign one and not Arabic (pp.123-124).The topic that brought this book to the attention of the news media, that it is white raisins rather than willing virgins that the devout Muslim will encounter in Paradise, is given ample space. Indeed, pages 247-283 are devoted to this topic. The author regards his efforts as helping "the Koran to achieve its original inner coherence" (p.264) so that the notion of Paradise depicted by Ephraem the Syrian is restored to its proper place. The chapter "Virgins in Paradise" is followed by the chapter "The Boys of Paradise" (pp.284-291). Although the author does not suggest that any interpretation of the role of "boys" in such a place might be salacious, devout Muslims

might take comfort in the author indicating that the Arabic word "walid" (i.e. boy or child), equivalent to the Aramaic word "yalda", is meant as a reference to "child of the vine"--that is, wine. The reader of this book must have, at the very least, some knowledge of Arabic for this book to be at all comprehensible. Such knowledge of Arabic should be at an intermediate level, allowing the reader to parse verses of the Koran with the aid of a dictionary and an interlinear translation. The Aramaic phrases are written using the beautiful Estrangelo Syriac alphabet that can easily be found on the web, and which in some ways resembles the Hebrew alphabet. As to the argument of the author that much of the Koran had originated from Aramaic texts, I must confess that I am not sufficiently expert in my knowledge of Arabic to make an independent assessment. As for my knowledge of Aramaic, it is quite rudimentary. Nevertheless, the book is sufficiently clearly argued for me to at least enjoy the discussion, and to imagine its import and relevance.

The details and analyses provided in this text are exceptional. You'll want to know a little Arabic and Aramaic to get the full value, but even without that knowledge, you will learn some incredible new perspectives on the "Decoding" of the language of the Koran.

Just a warning: don't pick this book up on an evening when you feel like an Agatha Christie mystery. I might even forewarn you that at least some knowledge of Aramaic/Syriac and Arabic will help things along. But the book is a concentrated argument which you will want to taste and digest slowly. An excellent companion book, by the way, is Jenkins' *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It Died*, which came as a complete surprise to me --- the fact that Christianity flourished in the EAST for a thousand years: in Syria, Iraq, Iran, India, China, and Japan. For that thousand years (longer than Protestantism) the church language was Syriac (which could be called "Christian Aramaic.") Syriac, Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew are all linguistic kissing cousins from the family of Semitic languages, so it would hardly be a difficult job to "borrow" some Syriac hymns or other items from the Syriac lectionary, and put them into Arabic to make a new holy book. A problem which arose was incomplete understanding of the Syriac, or a clumsy rendition into Arabic, which resulted in what was really an absurd idea --- that the Muslim Paradise was to be given over to orgies with 72 eternally young virgins. It turns out that those "virgins" (never actually mentioned in the Koran) are wrenched out of a terribly opaque Arabic phrase, apparently meaning "white eyes" but actually referring to "crystal-clear white grapes." A similar fate awaits the "eternally young boys," who turn out to be "chilled grapes as lovely as pearls." There is now good evidence that this book was just the

tip of the iceberg in revealing what German scholars have been discovering about Islam. You might want to take a look at The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History for a taste of the future of Islam. Virtually no one (aside from the completely incompetent mullahs) believes that the Angel Gabriel swooped down from Heaven to dictate the Koran word-by-sacred-word, to a Muhammad who may not have existed.

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