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The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran

A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran

Verlag Hans Schiler

4. THE ARABIC SCRIPT

Except for a few pre-Islamic 4th–6th century A.D. inscriptions stemming from northern Ḥiǧāz and Syria,¹⁹ the Koran is considered to be the first book ever written in Arabic script. The early form of the Arabic letters and the type of ligatures employed suggest that the Syro-Aramaic cursive script served as a model for the Arabic script.²⁰

Both scripts have the following in common with the earlier Aramaic (and Hebrew) script: the writing runs from right to left; in principle the letters designate the consonants with only two letters serving to reproduce the semi-long and long vowels *w/ū* و and *y/i* ي as so-called *matres lectionis*.

Later on, the *alif* / ا, which in Aramaic only serves in certain cases as a long *ā*, mainly when final, but occasionally also as a short *a*, was introduced by the Arabs as a third *mater lectionis* for a long *ā*, in general and also in context.

To the extent that this writing reform was also carried out in the text of the Koran,²¹ the consequences for certain readings were inevitable.²² An initial marking of the short vowels *a*, *u* and *i* by points, likewise modeled upon the earlier Syro-Aramaic vocalization systems – according to which the more lightly pronounced vowel (*a*) is indicated by a point

19 Cf. Adolf Grohmann, *Arabische Paläographie* [*Arabic Paleography*], vol. I (Vienna, 1967), vol. II (Vienna, 1971) 16 f., and Nāǧī Zayn ad-Dīn, مصور الخط العربي (*Muṣawwar al-ḥaṭṭ al-ʿarabī*) [*Illustrated Presentation of the Arabic Script*] (Baghdad, 1968) 3 f.

20 As to this still discussed thesis see John F. Healy, *The Early History of the Syriac Script. A Reassessment*. In: *Journal of Semitic Studies* XLV/1 Spring 2000, p. 55-67. The question whether the Arabic script is of Syriac or Nabatean origin (p. 64 f.) – or a combination of both – is ultimately of minor relevancy, since a next study will prove that the prototype of the Koran, as mentioned above, was originally written in *Garshuni* (or *Katshuni*), i.e. Arabic with Syriac letters.

21 According to R. Blachère the exact time at which this writing reform took place cannot be established (*Introduction au Coran*, 1st edition, 93 f.).

22 The examination of single words will show that the incorrect insertion of the *alif* ا (for long *ā*) has on occasion resulted in a distortion of the meaning.

above and the more darkly pronounced vowel (*e/i*) by a point below the consonant, to which was added in Arabic a middle point to mark the *u* – is said to have been introduced as the first reading aid under °Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (685–705).²³

The real problem in the early Arabic script, however, was in the consonants, only six of which are clearly distinguishable by their form, whereas the remaining 22, due to their formal similarities (usually in pairs), were only distinguishable from each other by the context. This deficiency was only gradually removed by the addition of so-called *diacritical dots*. The letters to be differentiated by points together with their variants depending on their position at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a word, connected or unconnected (and accompanied by their Latin transcription), appear as follows (whereby it should be noted that six letters are connected with the preceding letters on the right, but not with the letters following them on the left):

ٲ ثثث ث *t* / تتت ت *b* / ببب ب
 ځ خخخ خ *h* / ححح ح *ǧ* / ججج ج
 ذذذ *d* / دد د
 زرز *r* / رر ر
 شششش ش *s* / سسس س
 ضضض ض *ḡ* / ظظظ ظ
 ڄ ظظظ ظ / ططط ط
 ڄ غغغ غ / ععع ع
 ققق ق *f* / ففف ف
 ڄ ی ی (final) *ā* / ی ی *y* / ی ی *ī* / ن نن ن

By taking into account the last letter as a final *ā* as opposed to the variant *ī* and if one imagines that all of the diacritical points above and below the letters are non-existent, we would even have 23 varieties that could occasion misreadings. Added to this are the possibilities of mixing up the optically similar groups of letters *د/d, ذ/ḍ*, and *ر/r, ز/z* as well as of confusing those of the latter group with the *و/w/ū*, further,

23 R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* 78 ff.

of confusing the phonetically proximate phonemes هه / *h* and حح / *ḥ* and mistaking the guttural عع / ^ʿ*a* / ^ʿ*u* / ^ʿ*i* for the stop (*hamza*) ء / ^ʾ*a* / ^ʾ*u* / ^ʾ*i* that was introduced later on as a special symbol.

Occasionally the voiceless س / *s* has been mistaken for the corresponding emphatic sound ص / *ṣ*, something which, though trivial when considered in purely phonetic terms, is nonetheless significant etymologically and semantically. In individual cases, a confusion has also occurred between the final ه / *-h* as the personal suffix of the third person masculine and the same special symbol accompanied by two dots ّ / *-t* used to mark the feminine ending (*a^{tun}*), as well as between the connected final ن / *n*, the connected ي / *y* with a final *a* and even the connected final ر / *r*. In one case, the three initial peaks in the voiceless س / *s* were even taken to be the carriers of three different letters and were – regrettably for the context – provided with three different diacritical points (e.g., س / *s* = نبتـ / *n-b-t*).²⁴

In comparing the letters that are distinguishable by means of diacritical points with those that are unambiguous due to their basic form – these are the letters:

ا (as *ā* or as the so-called *hamza* bearer اُ اُ اُ / ^ʾ*a* / ^ʾ*u* / ^ʾ*i*)
 ككك / *k*, للل / *l*
 ممم / *m*, ههه / *h*, و و / *w* or *ū*

– one would have, considered purely in mathematical terms, a ratio even worse than 22 to 6 if one takes into account further sources of error, the extent of which can not yet be entirely assessed.

Compared to the Aramaic / Hebrew and the Syro-Aramaic alphabet, whose letters are unambiguous (except for the د / *d* and ر / *r*, which because of their formal similarity are distinguished from each other by a point below or above the letter, which may in turn have served as a model for the subsequently introduced and further developed punctuation system of the Arabic script), the early Arabic script was thus a kind

24 On the transcription of Aramaic loan words, see Siegmund Fraenkel, *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen* [*The Foreign Words of Aramaic Origin in Arabic*] (Leiden, 1886; rpt., Hildesheim, New York, 1982) xvii ff.

of shorthand that may have served the initiates as a mnemonic aid. More, it would seem, was also not required at the beginning, since reliable *lectors* or *readers* (قراء / *qurrā'*) were said to have heard the proclamation of the Koran directly from the Prophet and learned it by heart.

5. THE ORAL TRADITION

According to Islamic tradition, the Koran was handed down by an unbroken chain of *lectors*, in part by notable contemporaries of the Prophet, such as Ibn ʿAbbās (d. at 73 in 692 A.D.) and early authorities, such as Anas Ibn Mālik (d. at 91 in 709 A.D.). They are also said to have contributed considerably to the fixing of the Koranic text and to have retained their authority as Koran specialists even long afterwards.²⁵

This is contradicted, though, by the report that ʿUṭmān had gotten the “sheets”²⁶ (of the Koran) from Ḥafṣa, the Prophet’s widow, and used them as the basis of his recension. This was the “fixed point backwards from which we must orient ourselves.”²⁷

In any case the Islamic tradition is unable to provide any date for the final fixing of the reading of the Koran by means of the introduction of the diacritical points, so that one is dependent on the general assertion that this process stretched out over about three hundred years.²⁸

Only the long overdue study and collation of the oldest Koran manuscripts can be expected to give us more insight into the development of the Koranic text up to its present-day form. In this regard Koran scholars will always regret that the historical order issued by Caliph ʿUṭmān, conditioned as it was by the political circumstances at the time, has resulted in the irretrievable loss of earlier copies of the Koran.²⁹

25 Blachère 102 ff.

26 *Ṭabarī* reports of *one* sheet, however, on which ʿUmar had written down the notes collected by the companions of the Prophet: وكان عمر كتب ذلك في صحيفة واحدة (cf. *Ṭabarī* I 26 f.).

27 Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorāns* [History of the Koran] II 21.

28 Blachère 71.

29 *Ṭabarī* I 27 f.

6. THE ARABIC EXEGESIS OF THE KORAN

In the history of Koran exegesis there has been no lack of attempts to provide ever new interpretations of the irregular and occasionally rhythmical rhyming prose of the Koran text. In his *Geschichte des Qorāns* [*History of the Koran*] cited at the beginning, Theodor Nöldeke gives an overview both of the creators of the Arabic exegesis, with Ibn ʿAbbās³⁰ (cousin of the Prophet, d. 68 H./687 A.D.) and his disciples, and of the extant Arabic commentaries of Ibn Ishāq (d. 151/786) and Wāqidi (d. 207/822), of Ibn Hišām (d. 213/828), of Buḥārī (d. 256/870) and of Tirmidī (d. 279/829).³¹

Although the Islamic exegesis refers to Ibn ʿAbbās as its earliest authority, he himself appears never to have written a commentary, considering that he was only twelve years old at the death of the Prophet.³² This seems all the more to be the case since the Prophet himself – according to Islamic tradition – is said to have responded with silence to the questions of his contemporaries on the meaning of particular verses of the Koran. Thus, among other things, it was reported of some who were in disagreement over the reading of a Koran Sura:

“We thereupon sought out the messenger of God – God bless him and grant him salvation – and met him just as ʿAlī was conversing with him. We said: ‘We are in disagreement over a reading.’ Whereupon the messenger of God blushed – God bless him and grant him salvation – and spoke: ‘Those who have preceded you went to ruin because they were in disagreement with each other.’ Then he whispered something to ʿAlī, whereupon the latter spoke to us: ‘The messenger of God – God bless him and grant him salvation – commands you to read as you have been instructed’; (the version following this adds): ‘Each (reading) is good and right’.”³³

30 *GdQ* II 163.

31 *GdQ* II 170 f.

32 Régis Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (Paris, 1947) 225 f.

33 *Ṭabarī* I 12 f.

In the introduction to his Koran commentary, *Ṭabarī* (224/25–310 H./ 839–923 A.D.) lists a series of variant statements concerning the confusion of the first readers of the Koran, all of which at bottom agree with each other. Thus, among other statements, he gives the following, which is traceable back to Ubayy:

“Two men were arguing over a verse of the Koran, whereby each maintained that the Prophet – God bless him and grant him salvation – had taught him to read it so and so. Thereupon they sought out Ubayy in order for him to mediate between them. However, he contradicted both of them. Whereupon they sought out the Prophet together. Ubayy spoke: ‘Prophet of God, we are in disagreement over a verse of the Koran and each of us maintains that you taught him to read it so and so.’ Whereupon he spoke to one of them: ‘Read it out to me,’ and this one read it out to him. Whereupon the Prophet said: ‘Correct!’ Then he asked the other to read it out to him, and this one read it out differently than his friend had read it out. To this one too the Prophet said: ‘Correct!’ Then he spoke to Ubayy: ‘Read it out yourself as well,’ and Ubayy read it out, but differently than both. Yet to him too the Prophet said: ‘Correct!’ Ubayy reported: ‘This gave rise to such a doubt in me with regard to the messenger of God – God bless him and grant him salvation – as that of heathens!’ And he continued: ‘However, because the messenger of God – God bless him and grant him salvation– noticed from my face what was occurring in me, he raised his hand and struck me on the breast and said: ‘Pray to God for protection from the accursed Satan!’ To this Ubayy said: ‘Then I broke into a sweat’.”³⁴

34 *Ṭabarī* I 18.

7. THE SEVEN READINGS

This evidenced embarrassment on the part of the Prophet, which, as reported, evinced considerable doubts about his mission among some of his contemporaries, is explained in the Islamic tradition by the following sequence:

Gabriel had at first commanded the Prophet to read the Koran in *one reading*, but upon the Prophet's imploring indulgence for his people and Michael's support, Gabriel, in consideration of the variety of Arabic dialects, had granted the Prophet *two*, then according to different reports *three, five, six* and finally *seven readings*, all of them valid as long as verses dealing (for example) with God's mercy did not end, say, with His meting out divine judgment – and vice versa – that is, as long as a given reading did not result in an obvious contradiction.³⁵ Finally, at the behest of Caliph ʿUṭmān and for the preservation of dogmatic unity among the Muslims, the controversy over the actual meaning of the disputed *seven readings* was resolved once and for all in favor of *one* reading by means of the fixing of the Koran in writing.³⁶ Ṭabarī, however, seems not in the least to have been concerned that in the establishment of the canonic version of the Koran the lack of any diacritical points or other vowel signs made *one* reading a fiction. By his time (the 10th century A.D.) the consonant text of the Koran already appears to have been fixed by the diacritical points introduced in the meantime (or by the oral interpretation that had prevailed in the meantime).

But when and according to what criteria or according to what tradition these points were introduced, and to what extent the originators disposed of the necessary philological and also, considering the biblical content of the Koran, of the necessary theological competence, for such questions the historical critique of Ṭabarī, though he was considered a scholar in his day, do not seem to have been adequate. He begins as a matter of course from the premise that there had been nothing to critici-

35 Ṭabarī I 18-26.

36 Ṭabarī I 26-29.

ze to that point about the established reading of the Koran and does not allow any other variant readings – at least where the original consonant text is concerned. He does, to be sure, permit divergent readings, but only when vocalic indicators are lacking in the original text and only if the variants in question are supported in the Islamic tradition by a majority or minority of commentators, in which case he usually gives precedence to the majority interpretation.

What exactly, though, is to be understood by what *Ṭabarī* calls the سبعة أحرف (*sabʿat aḥruf*) (*seven letters*), whether by that the consonants are meant, or the vowels, or both at the same time, on this subject *Ṭabarī* says nothing, especially considering the fact that Ubayy does not identify the disputed reading. However, because there are twenty-two consonants in the Arabic alphabet distinguishable by diacritical points (in a given case either with or without points), these can scarcely be meant. On the other hand, if one understands أحرف (*aḥruf*) simply as *book-marks*, then it would be more plausible to understand them as the missing *vowel signs*. This all the more so since the *Theo.* (I 419), for ܐܘܝܬܐ / ܐܘܝܬܐܐ (*āiṭū / āiṭūṭā*), although it cites حرف (*ḥarf*) under (2) *particula*, lists among other things under (3) *litera alphabeti*, ܐܘܝܬܐܐ ܕܐܘܝܬܐܐ (*āiṭū-ṭā da-nqaštā*) (= *accentuation mark*) *vocalis* (BHGr. 351v).

Though one could argue against this that this late piece of evidence from the Syriac grammar of Bar Hebraeus³⁷ (1225/6–1286), likely modeled on the Arabic grammar of *Zamaḥṣārī* (1075–1144), is poorly suited to explain حرف (*ḥarf*) in the sense of *vowel sign*, it is still permitted to see in the number *seven* a reference to the *seven vowels* of the Eastern Syrians mentioned by Jacob of Edessa (c. 640–708) in his Syriac grammar ܬܘܪܐܫ ܡܡܠܠܐ ܢܗܪܝܐ (*turrāš mamllā nahrāyā*) (*The Rectification of the Mesopotamian Language*).³⁸

These seven vowels were collected by Jacob of Edessa in the model sentence ܒܢܝܗܘܩܬܗܝܢ ܘܪܗܝܝܢ ܐܡܡܢܐ ³⁹ (*b-nīḥū teḥēn Ōrhāy emman*) =

37 Cf. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* [*History of Syrian Literature*] (Bonn, 1922) 317.

38 Baumstark 254.

39 *Mannā* 13.

(ī / ū / e / ē / ō / ā / a) (“*May you rest in peace, Edessa, our Mother!*”).⁴⁰

Insofar as *Ṭabarī* also mentions the variant reading خمسة أحرف (*ḥamsat aḥruf*) (*five letters*), a corresponding allusion may thereby be given to the five Greek vowels introduced by the Western Syrians.⁴¹ This would be important, at least in terms of Koranic pronunciation, to answer the question as to whether it was not arbitrary that the post-Koranic Classical Arabic system of vowels was fixed at the three basic vowels *a, u, i* (for short and long).

In terms of comparison, the at least five vowels of the modern-day Arabic dialects of the Near East in the former Aramaic language area provide a better lead than the uncertain pronunciation of the so-called Old Arabic poetry, from which, moreover, for whatever reason, the Koran distances itself (Sura 26:224; 36:69; 69:41). In this connection, Theodor Nöldeke also remarks:

“We don’t even have the right to assume that in Proto-Semitic there were always only three dynamically distinct vowels or vocal spheres.”⁴²

Final ى (yāʾ) as a Marker for final ē

In any case, the Arabic tradition documents the existence of the vowel *e* to the extent that it designates by the term إمالة (*imāla*) the modification of *ā* to *ē* as a peculiarity of the Arabic dialect of Mecca. However, from

40 I.e. “*our capital*” or the “*city in which we grew up*” (cf. *Thes.* I 222).

41 Cf. Baumstark, *GSL* 255. On the vowel system of the Eastern and Western Syrians, see also Carl Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik* [*Syriac Grammar*] (Leipzig, 1960) 9, as well as Theodor Nöldeke, *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik* [*Compendious Syriac Grammar*], 2nd edition, Leipzig, 1898 (reprint, Darmstadt, 1977) 7 f. On the five vowels in Lihyanite, see A. J. Drewes, *The Phonemes of Lihyanite*, in: *Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Maxime Rodinson* (Supplément 12 aux comptes rendus du groupe linguistique d’études chamito-sémitiques), (offprint, Paris, n.d.) 165 ff.

42 Theodor Nöldeke, *Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* [*Essays on Semitic Linguistics*], Strasbourg, 1904, 33.

(hence when he was still a *heathen*). Through this he is said to have become the father of all those who as the *uncircumcised* (and thus as *heathens*) believe.

Koranic Arabic and Koranic Aramaic

As someone thoroughly familiar with Syro-Aramaic, Nöldeke ought surely to have been able to recognize the nature of the Koranic language, had he only not expressed himself as follows, during the controversy over the language of the Koran initiated by Karl Vollers, on the side of the advocates of the *ʿArabīya* (the classical Arabic language):

“And thus it remains that the Koran was written in the *ʿArabīja*, a language whose area was broad and which naturally exhibited many dialectal dissimilarities. Such are also reflected in the Koranic readings, and such have also been preserved, unchanged or transformed, in modern dialects.” (*ibid.* 5)

The fact, however, that in the case of these dissimilarities it is a question not only of dialectal variants of the Arabic language, but in particular of borrowings from the civilized Aramaic language nearby, is evidenced by many further features in the Koran. Precisely this final \bar{a} , which evoked surprise in Nöldeke, is especially striking. So, for example, in Sura 2:26 and 74:31 it says مثلا *ماذا اراد الله بهذا* “(But) what does God aim at with this parable.” According to the Arabic understanding “parable” is in the accusative of specification demanded by its final \bar{a} . Accordingly the verse is then understood: “(But) what does God aim at with that *as* parable.”

It should no longer come as a surprise that the Koran frequently combines grammatical forms of Arabic and Syro-Aramaic, since at the time the Koran originated Syro-Aramaic was the most widespread written language of a civilized people in the Orient, and there was still no Arabic grammar. The extent to which the Koran follows different rules than those of the subsequent grammar of so-called Classical Arabic is demonstrated by another example in which the number twelve is not fol-

lowed by a singular – as it would normally be according to the rules of Arabic – but by a plural. For example, it is said in Sura 7:160: وقطعناهم اثنتي عشرة اسباطا (wa-qaṭṭa nāhum iṭnatay ʿašrata ʿasbātan) “And we divided them into twelve *tribes*”, instead of the Arabic اثني عشر سبطا (iṭnay ʿašara sibtan) twelve *tribe*. This, too, would be characterized as false according to the rules of Arabic, but as fully correct according to the rules of Syro-Aramaic.⁶⁷

Moreover, this raises the question as to whether in this case the *|-an* ending, explained as a kind of *accusative of specification* according to the rules of Arabic, does not come instead from a Syro-Aramaic plural ending in *ē*. This, because the Arabic rule, according to which the nouns following numbers between eleven and ninety-nine must be (a) in the *singular* and (b) in the *accusative*, is not exactly logical. A more logical explanation would be that such a phenomenon interpreted formally in Arabic as a *singular* with an *accusative ending* was originally a Syro-Aramaic *plural ending*. This, in turn, would mean that the Arabic explanation is *secondary* and not at all *classical*. A similar case would be the *singular* prescribed in Arabic after the number one hundred, which is contradicted by the plural following the number three hundred in Sura 18:25 (ثلاث مائة سنين) “three hundred *years*”), although an attempt has been made with the current Koran reading *talāta miʿatīn sinīna* to uncouple the number three hundred from “*years*” and to suggest the reading “*in years*” in order to cover up this Arabic *irregularity*, which in reality is perfectly correct Syro-Aramaic.

The same is true for the phoneme *ō*, which is lacking in Classical Arabic, but documented in the Koran. On this Nöldeke remarks:

“This spelling of the *ā* with ى is opposed to another, limited to a few specific words, with و. Since the grammarians expressly remark that the pronunciation of the Ḥiğāz (Hijaz) in these words is broader (تفخيم ، تغليظ) and tends toward the و (*imāla nahw al-wāw*), we have to assume that the vowel here was pronounced

67 See Th. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik* [*Compendious Syriac Grammar*], with an appendix prepared by Anton Schall (Darmstadt, 1977), 95, §§ 151, 152.

[long] *ā* or *ō*. These words are: *صَلوة* ، *زكوة* [Footnote 2: In both these words the vowel is probably influenced by the vowel of the Aramaic original forms *צלוחא זכותא* (Schwally); cf. Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge (New Essays)* 25, 29]; *مشكوة* ، *حياة* Sura 24:35 [Footnote 3: Ethiopic *maskōt* (actually *maškōt* is more likely), Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge (New Essays)* 51]; *نجوة* Sura 40:44 and *منوة* Sura 53:20 [Footnote 4: Also Nabatean *מנותרו* (Schwally)], as well as *ربأ* [Footnote 5: Sura 30:38 has transmitted many a *ربأ* (the only passage with nunation, cf. p. 38 above)]. Here the spelling with *و* applies only if the word is without a suffix, whereas with the addition of a suffix the vowel is indicated by *ا* or is written defectively.⁶⁸

As cited here by Nöldeke, these words, in which the *و* according to Arabic tradition was probably originally pronounced as *ō*, do not exhaust the other examples that occur in the Koran. To be mentioned would be formations based on the Syro-Aramaic type *pā'ōlā*, which Nöldeke himself defines as follows in his *Syriac grammar* (*op. cit.*, 68, § 107):

“The *nomina agentis* can be formed with *ā* on the basis of the 2nd root from any active participle of the simple verbal stem (Peal): *مهلده* (*qā'ōlā*) “murderer,” *مهدمه* (*qāyōmā*), *مهلده* (*gālō-yā*), etc.”

Accordingly, *سجود*, which in four passages is intended as an infinitive (Sura 48:29, 50:40, and 68:42,43), should in two other passages be understood as a rendering of the plural form of the Syro-Aramaic *nomen agentis* *مهلهده* (*sāgōdē*) (without the emphatic ending) (Sura 2:125: *للطائفين والقائمين والركع السجود* and Sura 22:26: *للطائفين والقائمين والركع السجود*). The meaning “*those who prostrate themselves*” for *السجود* is

68 Th. Nöldeke, *GdQ* III 41. On the same subject, see A. Spitaler, “*Die Schreibung des Typus صَلوة im Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Erklärung der koranischen Orthographie* [The Writing of the Type صَلوة in the Koran: A Contribution to the Clarification of Koranic Orthography],” in the *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* [Viennese Journal of Oriental Studies], vol. 56, Festschrift for W. Duda (Vienna, 1960) 212-226.

clear from the context of the two passages. The fact that the *Lisān* (III 204a) gives for the active participle ساجد (*sāǧīd*) (= ܣܘܓܝܕ / *sāḡdā*) both سجد (*suǧūd*) (= ܣܘܓܘܕ / *sāḡōdē*) and سجّد (*suǧǧad*) (= ܣܘܓܘܕ / *sāḡdē*) as plural forms is with certainty traceable to these unrecognized Koranic Syriacisms. These uncommon, arbitrarily vocalized and odd-sounding plural formations have also never been accepted in Arabic usage. The plural form سجدًا (*suǧadda*) occurring in eleven passages in the Koran is obviously the transliteration of ܣܘܓܘܕ (*sāḡdē*), which again gives us an indication of the pronunciation *ē* for certain ܐ endings that come from Syro-Aramaic plural forms. By comparison, in eleven other passages the Koran uses the correct and today still common Arabic plural forms, الساجدون (*as-sāǧīdūn*) (once) and الساجدين (*as-sāǧīdīn*) (ten times).

Another expression corresponding to the ܩܝܘܡܐ (*qāyōmā*) cited above by Nöldeke as an example of the type *pā'ōlā* is القيوم (Sura 2:255, 3:2 and 20:111), vocalized *al-qayyūm* in the modern Koran, but in Syro-Aramaic *qāyōmā*⁶⁹ and thus to be read *al-qāyōm* in Arabic.

To these *nomina agentis* Nöldeke (*op. cit.* §107) adds a few substantives such as ܝܪܘܪܐ (*yārōrā*) “jackal” and ܩܝܘܡܐ (*pā'ōrā* / *pā'ū-rā*) “table.” This, in turn, gives us a clue towards clarifying a substantive, heretofore considered a puzzle, which occurs in the Koran in Sura 74:51, قسورة, and which in the modern Koran is read *qaswara*.

69 Karl Ahrens, *Christliches im Qoran* [Christian Elements in the Koran], ZDMG 84, new series, vol. 9 (1930): 44, refers here to Dan. 6:27. In the corresponding passage of the *Pšīttā*, ܩܝܘܡܐ / *qayyām* is in the *status absolutus* and is used verbally, ܩܝܘܡܐ ܠܠܚܝܡ (*qayyām l-ālmīn*): “(he is) existent = he exists for ever.” In the Koran passage in question, القيوم is attributive and corresponds orthographically to the form ܩܝܘܡܐ / *qāyōmā*. Although this expression is usually used as a substantive (in the sense of *head, administrator*), the *Theo.* (II 3532) also refers to the Eastern Syrian lexicographers, who, among other things, cite as its Arabic equivalent ثابت, قائم, *(qā'im, tabīṭ)*. Whence the meaning “*he who is living, he who is constant*” (i.e. *he who is constantly living*) for الحي القيوم (*al-ḥayy al-qayyūm* / *al-qāyōm*).

8. WESTERN KORANIC STUDIES

Without intending to go into a detailed history of the origins of Western Koran studies, which emerged around the middle of the 19th century, some indication will be given here of the actual results of this Koranic research as represented by the translations of Western Koran scholars. August Fischer provides an overview of the subject in his essay, “*Der Wert der vorhandenen Koran-Übersetzungen und Sura 111 [The Value of the Existing Koran Translations and Sura 111]*.”⁷⁶ On dealing with the task of translating the Koran, Fischer remarks:

“A Koran translation is no easy task. The renowned Arabists, scholars such as Reiske, Sacy, Fleischer, De Goeje, Nöldeke, and Goldziher, among others, have avoided it, at least partially because they knew of its great difficulties. Most of the previous Koran translators have been second-, indeed even third- and fourth-rate Arabists.”⁷⁷

This was August Fischer’s opinion in 1937. However, with the more recent Koran translations by the Briton Richard Bell,⁷⁸ the Frenchman Régis Blachère,⁷⁹ and the German Rudi Paret,⁸⁰ we in the meantime have translations by Arabists of the first rank. Yet despite their scholarly meticulousness, these translations have also contributed little to an essential improvement of our understanding of the Koran. With their *ap-*

76 *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig. Philolog.-histor. Klasse [Records of the Proceedings of the Saxon Academy of Sciences at Leipzig: Philological-Historical Division]*, vol 89, no. 2 (1937) 3-9.

77 Cited from Rudi Paret, ed., *Der Koran, Wege der Forschung [Directions of Research]*, vol. 326 (Darmstadt, 1975) 7.

78 Richard Bell, trans., *The Qur’ān: Translated, with a critical rearrangement of the Surahs*, vol. I (Edinburgh, 1937), vol. II (Edinburgh, 1939).

79 Régis Blachère, trans., *Le Coran, traduit de l’arabe [The Koran Translated from Arabic]*, (1st ed. 1947/50, 2nd ed. 1957; Paris, 1966).

80 Rudi Paret, trans., *Der Koran, Übersetzung von Rudi Paret [The Koran: Translation by Rudi Paret]*, (1962; Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, Mainz, 1982).

paratus criticus they have merely confirmed the problems identified by August Fischer. He summarizes the major difficulties a Koran translator has to cope with as follows:

1. A considerable number of words and sentences in the Koran are obscure and ambiguous.
2. The numerous allusions in the Koran are hard to interpret and their clarification in the Arabic tradition is contradictory and inadequate, so that in such cases only internal criteria can be of further assistance.
3. There is no systematic or chronological ordering of the Suras.
4. There is a lack of a real *textus receptus* with secure bookmarks. The imperfection of the script in the old Koran manuscripts permits numerous variant readings. The Arabic commentaries on the Koran differ considerably one from the other and not infrequently provide more than half a dozen⁸¹ possible interpretations for one obscure passage in the Koran. All the same, one can by no means do without these commentaries.

The result is that one is never able to be sure of understanding the Koran in all of its details. A conscientious translator of the Koran will instead always have to work with numerous question marks and lists of the various possible interpretations.⁸²

The Koran translators, and in particular Rudi Paret, have fulfilled these requirements and at the same time revealed the limits of Koran studies. Yet it must be granted to Western scholarship that, thanks to its historical-critical methods, it has released the study of the Koran from its inflexibility and made considerable advances, more so from a theological-historical than from a philological perspective. The works of principal interest to this study were cited at the outset.

81 According to Régis Blachère, *sometimes up to a dozen* (see his *Introduction au Coran* [Paris, 1947] xxxii).

82 *Der Koran*, ed. Rudi Paret (Darmstadt, 1975) 7 f.

9. THE LANGUAGE OF THE KORAN

Although justifiable doubts have been entertained concerning the reliability of the oral transmission, considering the fact that, as mentioned above, *Ṭabarī* reports several times that the Prophet was not accustomed to expressing himself either on disputed readings or on the meaning of individual verses or Suras in the Koran, there has nevertheless until now been no doubt among the specialists about the language of the Koran, since after all it is said in ten passages in the Koran itself that it was sent down, i.e. revealed, in *Arabic* (Suras 12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 20:113, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 42:7, 43:3 and 46:12).

However, since Arabic at the time at which the Koran originated still possessed no standardized written language, but instead consisted of spoken dialects, it was naturally assumed that the language of the Koran was identical with the dialect of the Prophet and his sib, the Qurayš in Mecca. In *Ṭabarī*⁸³ this view is grounded on the following verse of the Koran (Sura 14:4):

وما أرسلنا من رسول إلا بلسان قومه ليبين لهم

“We have never sent a messenger but in the language (i.e., speaking the language) of his people, that he may explain (the message) to them.”

Given this statement it must come as a surprise that the Prophet – as reported in *Ṭabarī* – was supposedly unable to explain this language to his contemporaries. Also concerning Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyab, one of the seven scholars of Medina (d. 712), *Ṭabarī* reports that in response to questions about a Koranic verse he “kept quiet as if he had heard nothing” (سكت كأن لم يسمع). To another such knowledge-hungry individual he responded: “Do not ask me about a verse of the Koran; rather ask him who maintains that nothing of it remains concealed from him,” by which he was referring to ʿIkrima⁸⁴ (a companion of the Prophet who

83 *Ibid.* 29.

84 *Ibid.* 28.

died in 634). The fact that even after the Prophet nobody has succeeded in penetrating the final mystery of this language for as long as the Koran has existed has led in the Islamic tradition to the belief that the language of the Koran is of heavenly origin and thus finally unfathomable for mortals. With the term إعجاز (i'gāz) (on the basis of Suras 2:23, 10:38, 11:13) the Islamic tradition does indeed characterize the Koran as a *miracle* that cannot be imitated by mortals, but this may refer in general to the human inability to understand the Koran completely into its last detail.

Yet when the Koran speaks of the “*Arabic language*,” one can well ask what language it was talking about at the time of its origin. Faithful to Islamic tradition, which has always encouraged the *search for knowledge* (طلب العلم), and keeping in mind the well-known sayings of the Prophet نور العلم “*Knowledge is light*” and اطلبوا العلم ولو في الصين “*Seek knowledge, and be it in China*,” *Ṭabarī* takes the view that philologists (أهل اللسان) are fundamentally authorized to explain the language in which the Koran was sent down (اللسان الذي نزل به القرآن) because outside of them nobody else is capable of acquiring a knowledge of it (لا إلا من قبلهم (توصل إلى علم ذلك إلا من قبلهم), in so far as they are able to provide irrefutable and philologically verifiable arguments for the explanation and interpretation of this language (وأوضحهم برهانا فيما ترجم وبيّن من ذلك (مما كان مدركا علمه من جهة اللسان and regardless of who the interpreters in question may have been (كائننا من كان ذلك والمفسر المتأول).⁸⁵

In the sense of *Ṭabarī* we therefore intend in the following – by taking a philologically prior linguistic phase as a starting-point – to undertake the experiment of reading the text of the Koran differently than the Arabic commentators of the Koran have done it, partially according to an understanding of the Arabic of their time and partially with recourse to Old Arabic poetry. Only on the basis of the results of this linguistic analysis may one judge whether it actually also leads to a better understanding of the Koranic text or not.

85 *Ibid.* 41.