

# The Virgins and the Grapes: the Christian Origins of the Koran

by Sandro Magister

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A German scholar of ancient languages takes a new look at the sacred book of Islam. He maintains that it was created by Syro-Aramaic speaking Christians, in order to evangelize the Arabs. And he translates it in a new way

ROMA - That Aramaic was the lingua franca of a vast area of the ancient Middle East is a notion that is by now amply noted by a vast public, thanks to Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," which everyone watches in that language.

But that Syro-Aramaic was also the root of the Koran, and of the Koran of a primitive Christian system, is a more specialized notion, an almost clandestine one. And it's more than a little dangerous. The author of the most important book on the subject - a German professor of ancient Semitic and Arabic languages - preferred, out of prudence, to write under the pseudonym of Christoph Luxenberg. A few years ago, one of his colleagues at the University of Nablus in Palestine, Suliman Bashear, was thrown out of the window by his scandalized Muslim students.

In the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries, mangled by the wars of religion, scholars of the Bible also used to keep a safe distance with pseudonyms. But if, now, the ones doing so are the scholars of the Koran, this is a sign that, for the Muslim holy book as well, the era of historical, linguistic, and philological re-readings has begun.

This is a promising beginning for many reasons. Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, a professor at Saarland University in Germany and another Koran scholar on the philological level, maintains that this type of approach to Islam's holy book can help to defeat its fundamentalist and Manichean readings, and to bring into a better light its ties with Judaism and Christianity.

The book by "Christoph Luxenberg" came out in 2000 in Germany with the title "Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran" ("A Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran"), published in Berlin by Das Arabische Buch. It is out of print, and there are no translations in other languages. But a new, updated edition (again in German) is about to arrive in bookstores.

Here follows an interview with the author, published in Germany in the newspaper "Süddeutsche Zeitung" and in Italy in "L'Espresso," no. 11, March 12-18, 2004:

From the Gospel to Islam

An interview with "Christoph Luxenberg" by Alfred Hackensberger

**Q. - Professor, why did you think it useful to conduct this re-reading of the Koran?**

A. - "Because, in the Koran, there are many obscure points that, from the beginning, even the Arab commentators were not able to explain. Of these passages it is said that only God can comprehend them. Western research on the Koran, which has been conducted in a systematic manner only since about the middle of the 19th century, has always taken as its base the commentaries of the Arab scholars. But these have never gone beyond the etymological explanation of some terms of foreign origin."

**Q. - What makes your method different?**

A. - "I began from the idea that the language of the Koran must be studied from an historical-linguistic point of view. When the Koran was composed, Arabic did not exist as a written language; thus it seemed evident to me that it was necessary to take into consideration, above all, Aramaic, which at the time, between the 4th and 7th centuries, was not only the language of written communication, but also the lingua franca of that area of Western Asia."

**Q. - Tell us how you proceeded.**

A. - "At first I conducted a 'synchronous' reading. In other words, I kept in mind both Arabic and Aramaic. Thanks to this procedure, I was able to discover the extent of the previously unsuspected influence of Aramaic upon the language of the Koran: in point of fact, much of what now passes under the name of 'classical Arabic' is of Aramaic derivation."

**Q. - What do you say, then, about the idea, accepted until now, that the Koran was the first book written in Arabic?**

A. - "According to Islamic tradition, the Koran dates back to the 7th century, while the first examples of Arabic literature in the full sense of the phrase are found only two centuries later, at the time of the 'Biography of the Prophet'; that is, of the life of Mohammed as written by Ibn Hisham, who died in 828. We may thus establish that post-Koranic Arabic literature developed by degrees, in the period following the work of al-Khalil bin Ahmad, who died in 786, the founder of Arabic lexicography (kitab al-ayn), and of Sibawayh, who died in 796, to whom the grammar of classical Arabic is due. Now, if we assume that the composition of the Koran was brought to an end in the year of the Prophet Mohammed's death, in 632, we find before us an interval of 150 years, during which there is no trace of Arabic literature worthy of note."

**Q. - So at the time of Mohammed Arabic did not have precise rules, and was not used for written communication. Then how did the Koran come to be written?**

A. - "At that time, there were no Arab schools - except, perhaps, for the Christian centers of al-Anbar and al-Hira, in southern Mesopotamia, or what is now Iraq. The Arabs of that region had been Christianized and instructed by Syrian Christians. Their liturgical language was Syro-Aramaic. And this

was the vehicle of their culture, and more generally the language of written communication."

**Q. - What is the relationship between this language of culture and the origin of the Koran?**

A. - "Beginning in the third century, the Syrian Christians did not limit themselves to bringing their evangelical mission to nearby countries, like Armenia or Persia. They pressed on toward distant territories, all the way to the borders of China and the western coast of India, in addition to the entire Arabian peninsula all the way to Yemen and Ethiopia. It is thus rather probable that, in order to proclaim the Christian message to the Arabic peoples, they would have used (among others) the language of the Bedouins, or Arabic. In order to spread the Gospel, they necessarily made use of a mishmash of languages. But in an era in which Arabic was just an assembly of dialects and had no written form, the missionaries had no choice but to resort to their own literary language and their own culture; that is, to Syro-Aramaic. The result was that the language of the Koran was born as a written Arabic language, but one of Arab-Aramaic derivation."

**Q. - Do you mean that anyone who does not keep the Syro-Aramaic language in mind cannot translate and interpret the Koran correctly?**

A. - "Yes. Anyone who wants to make a thorough study of the Koran must have a background in the Syro-Aramaic grammar and literature of that period, the 7th century. Only thus can he identify the original meaning of Arabic expressions whose semantic interpretation can be established definitively only by retranslating them into Syro-Aramaic."

**Q. - Let's come to the misunderstandings. One of the most glaring errors you cite is that of the virgins promised, in the Islamic paradise, to the suicide bombers.**

A. - "We begin from the term 'huri,' for which the Arabic commentators could not find any meaning other than those heavenly virgins. But if one keeps in mind the derivations from Syro-Aramaic, that expression indicated 'white grapes,' which is one of the symbolic elements of the Christian paradise, recalled in the Last Supper of Jesus. There's another Koranic expression, falsely interpreted as 'the children' or 'the youths' of paradise: in Aramaic: it designates the fruit of the vine, which in the Koran is compared to pearls. As for the symbols of paradise, these interpretive errors are probably connected to the male monopoly in Koranic commentary and interpretation."

**Q. - By the way, what do you think about the Islamic veil?**

A. - "There is a passage in Sura 24, verse 31, which in Arabic reads, 'That they should beat their khumurs against their bags.' It is an incomprehensible phrase, for which the following interpretation has been sought: 'That they should extend their kerchiefs from their heads to their breasts.' But if this passage is read in the light of Syro-Aramaic, it simply means: 'They should fasten their belts around their waists.'"

**Q. - Does this mean the veil is really a chastity belt?**

A. - "Not exactly. It is true that, in the Christian tradition, the belt is associated with chastity: Mary is depicted with a belt fastened around her waist. But in the gospel account of the Last Supper, Christ also ties an apron around his waist before washing the Apostles' feet. There are clearly many parallels with the Christian faith."

**Q. - You have discovered that Sura 97 of the Koran mentions the Nativity. And in your translation of the famous Sura of Mary, her "birthgiving" is "made legitimate by the Lord." Moreover, the text contains the invitation to come to the sacred liturgy, to the Mass. Would the Koran, then, be nothing other than an Arabic version of the Christian Bible?**

A. - "In its origin, the Koran is a Syro-Aramaic liturgical book, with hymns and extracts from Scriptures which might have been used in sacred Christian services. In the second place, one may see in the Koran the beginning of a preaching directed toward transmitting the belief in the Sacred Scriptures to the pagans of Mecca, in the Arabic language. Its socio-political sections, which are not especially related to the original Koran, were added later in Medina. At its beginning, the Koran was not conceived as the foundation of a new religion. It presupposes belief in the Scriptures, and thus functioned merely as an inroad into Arabic society."

**Q. - To many Muslim believers, for whom the Koran is the holy book and the only truth, your conclusions could seem blasphemous. What reactions have you noticed up until now?**

A. - "In Pakistan, the sale of the edition of 'Newsweek' that contained an article on my book was banned. Otherwise, I must say that, in my encounters with Muslims, I have not noticed any hostile attitudes. On the contrary, they have appreciated the commitment of a non-Muslim to studies aimed at an objective comprehension of their sacred text. My work could be judged as blasphemous only by those who decide to cling to errors in the interpretation of the word of God. But in the Koran it is written, 'No one can bring to the right way those whom God induces to error.'"

**Q. - Aren't you afraid of a fatwa, a death sentence like the one pronounced against Salman Rushdie?**

A. - "I am not a Muslim, so I don't run that risk. Besides, I haven't offended against the Koran"

**Q. - But you still preferred to use a pseudonym.**

A. - "I did that on the advice of Muslim friends who were afraid that some enthusiastic fundamentalist would act of his own initiative, without waiting for a fatwa."