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Philological and Historical Contribution to an Unconventional Review of Early Islamic History

Abstract

The paper deals with the West European revisionist movement devoted to research on the initial history of Islam, conducted by a scientific research group called *Inārah* (Arab. ‘enlightenment’). The very unconventional results of their studies constitute a serious challenge to the traditional accounts of history, predominantly shaped by sources of the Arab-Muslim culture, today widely recognized and accepted as reliable and verified knowledge. The cornerstone and signpost of the revisionist research conducted over the past ten years (mainly in Germany) was the pioneer book of the linguist Christoph Luxenberg *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* (2000). Enhanced by his philological theory, parallel studies have been carried out in different areas, such as archeology, history of the pre-Islamic ages and early centuries of Islam, Christian and Muslim theology, history of art (relics of Arab material culture, including numismatics), Islamic studies, literature and other branches of human science.

West European studies devoted to the Middle East have in recent years witnessed an increasingly growing attention towards the so called *revisionist movement* of research on the initial history of Islam. A number of scholars of the Orient (Arabists, Semitists, philologists, historians, theologians, etc.) have joined the scientific research group called *Inārah*. The group is dedicated to an alternative perception and interpretation of the initial formation period of Islam. The very unconventional results of these studies constitute a serious challenge to the traditional accounts of history, predominantly shaped by sources of the Arab-Muslim culture, today widely recognized and accepted as reliable and verified knowledge.

The cornerstone and signpost of the revisionist research conducted over the past ten years (mainly in Germany) was the pioneer book of the linguist Christoph Luxenberg *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran – Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (*The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*) first published in German in 2000¹. Hiding behind a pseudonym², its author provoked with his publication a shower of criticism and an endless debate not only within the hermetic milieus of Western orientalists but also in the media around the world. Some scholars accepted Luxenberg's ideas considering them to be groundbreaking and to lay firm foundations for a new critical and historical linguistic analysis of the Qur'anic text, while others criticized him heavily for a biased attempt to review existing exegetical interpretation of the Qur'an. Without any doubt, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* marked the beginning of a lasting rift and initiated a new scientific approach to Middle East studies.

Luxenberg's main thesis stipulates the necessity to decipher the meaning of Qur'anic verses strictly from an angle of of Syriac (Syro-Aramaic) grammar³. This idea has been taken up by other scholars and has been at the root of many recent philological analyses of the Qur'an. So far, the knowledge on this subject has almost solely been acquired from the Islamic tradition, written accounts of which date back to the 8th–9th century AD or later, i.e. 150–200 years after the events in question⁴. Historical credibility of these sources has never been sufficiently confirmed by scientific research, least of all archaeology. Christoph Luxenberg's research sheds new critical light on the first period of Islam.

Philology is not the only field of knowledge influenced by Luxenberg's methodology. Guided by assumptions of his analytical linguistic theory and applying the methodology he has outlined, parallel studies have been carried out in different areas, such as archeology, history of the pre-Islamic ages and early centuries of Islam, Christian and Muslim theology, history of art (relics of Arab material culture, including numismatics), Islamic studies, literature and other branches of human science. Research carried out over the last decade in this context has led the revisionists to some far-reaching

¹ The book was also issued in English in 2004 by Verlag Hans Schiler, Germany.

² Christoph Luxenberg is the pseudonym of an Orientalist associated for years with the German Saarland University. Prior to the publication of *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* he was not known to a wider circle of researchers, not even in Germany. Over the past 10 years Christoph Luxenberg has systematically continued to publish numerous new works devoted to decrypting of the Qur'anic language. He keeps on publishing under the pseudonym, fearing reactions of traditional Muslims milieus.

³ The tradition of systematic research on the scope of impact of the Syriac language on the Qur'an dates back at least a hundred years. Studies have been conducted by A. Mingana (1881–1937) in *Syriac Influence on the style of the Kur'an*, S. Fraenkel (1855–1909) in *Die aramäischen Fremdwörter im Arabischen* and Th. Nöldeke (1836–1930) in *Zur Sprache des Qorans: Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft von Theodor Nöldeke*.

⁴ R. Nabielek, *Weintrauben statt Jungfrauen. Eine neue Lesart des Koran und ihr Stellenwert innerhalb der modernen Koranforschung in: Streit um den Koran*, Ch. Burgmer (ed.), Berlin 2004, pp. 39–61.

conclusions and daring observations. If they hold true, we would have to change radically the existing views on the first centuries of Islam.

The main methodological assumptions of Christoph Luxenberg rely on the analysis of the Qur'an text against the the cultural and historical background of its probable origins. The Syriac language, as the *lingua franca* of Middle Eastern peoples in the period of late antiquity and early Middle Ages, has been the language of liturgy and literature of Christianized Arabs⁵. Much of the Arab population living in the area between the Mediterranean coast in the west up to Iraq and the Persian Gulf in the east were probably able to communicate on an everyday basis by the means of the mixed Arab-Syriac language (the so-called *Mischsprache*), both in writing and speaking. Based on a detailed philological insight into the Qur'anic text through the Syriac syntax and morphology, Luxenberg argues that the Qur'anic surahs (especially those chronologically earlier – the Meccan ones) had been originally written down in a mixed Arab-Syriac language (with Syriac characters), and only some time later were they transcribed into the emerging at that time in its written form Arabic language (this argument does not change the fact that from the point of view of historical criticism the Qur'an is the first written monument of Arabic languages, except for single epigraphic inscriptions in Arabic from previous centuries⁶). Luxenberg proves his theory by listing and analyzing repeatedly occurring errors common in transcription, which indicate that the original source was Syriac and not Arabic⁷.

Luxenberg's philological method can be summarized in the following few points: the author investigates verses which are ambiguous in meaning (fairly numerous in the Qur'an) seeking clarification of their sense at first in the regular sources of the Muslim tradition, i.e. in the commentary of Aṭ-Ṭabarī (838–923 AD) and in the main lexicon of classical Arabic *Lisān al-'Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr (1232–1311 AD). Where that fails to explain sufficiently the meaning of the analyzed fragment, the author checks whether the Syriac does possess homonymous consonant root providing a better match within the context of the analyzed text. If still unsuccessful, Luxenberg modifies diacritical marks in search of an alternative reading of the text in Arabic (oldest fragmentally preserved records of Qur'anic surahs dating back to the end of the 7th and 8th century have yet no diacritics which were introduced at a later stage during the final normatisation of the Qur'anic text). Where this brings no results, the author is trying to find an Aramaic root in the

⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶ Luxenberg argues that besides the Qur'an and these few inscriptions, the oldest written evidence of Arabic literature date back to the mid-8th century AD, i.e. the biography of the prophet Muhammad by Ibn Hišām and *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Ibn al-Muqaffā'. Ch. Luxenberg, *Licht ins Dunkel. Der Koran als philologischer Steinbruch* in: *Streit um den Koran*, p. 24. Similarly, another well-known German Arabist and researcher of the oldest copies of the Qur'an found in the 70's in Yemen prof. G.-R. Puin (born 1940) acknowledges that poetry today commonly labeled as old Arabic (pre-Islamic) was written down no earlier than by the end of the 8th century. G.-R. Puin, art. *Die korruptierte Tradition? Zur religiösen Geschichtsbildung* in: *Streit um den Koran*, p. 105.

⁷ Ch. Burgmer, *Reaktionen und Reaktion. Christoph Luxenberg über die Rezeption seiner Forschungsergebnisse zum Koran*, in: *Streit um den Koran*, p. 199.

text stripped of diacritical marks. The last attempt (next to taking into consideration the phenomenon of metathesis which is quite frequent in Semitic languages) is to decipher the original meaning of the text by translating it back into Syriac, which often reveals the Syriac syntax of a given phrase or idiom, giving a new logical sense to the examined verse.

Admittedly, the simple methodology of Luxenberg requires a fluent command of both Arabic and Syriac languages, which is rather rare to find today among modern Semitists. His analysis leads to results considered groundbreaking by the *Inārah* group. To give an example – a verse of surah 19 (*Maryam*). Its understanding to date (based on traditional Islamic exegesis of the Qur'an originating from the 9th, 10th and later centuries) still remains vague and much enigmatic: "But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee"⁸ (with these words the new born Jesus child turns in consolation to His Mother who expressed worries in previous verses that people would not believe in her immaculate conception, 19:24). While Luxenberg translates this verse as follows: "Do not grieve! Your Lord has made your childbirth legitimate"⁹. A similar methodological analysis of the verse 44:54 (and, among others, 52:20) acquaints us with a description of Paradise completely different from the one popularly known from the Qur'an: Instead of the words "So; and We shall wed them to maidens with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes" Luxenberg reads the following meaning: "We will make them comfortable under white, crystal clear grapes"¹⁰. What is more, when re-read, verse 56, surah 17 reveals that in its description of the Paradise there is no word of "youths of perpetual freshness serving with goblets, beakers, and cups filled out of clear-flowing fountains" but the verse speaks of „fresh chilled nectars being served around in goblets, beakers, and cups"¹¹.

Luxenberg analyzes also these Qur'anic verses in which the Islamic scholars see the basis for the dictation to cover women's hair (24:31)¹². When translating these verses through the background of the Syriac language, instead of headscarves and veils, we learn about a dictate for women to tie straps around their hips¹³.

The logic and contextual coherence of the re-read text, reinforced by a solidly construed argumentation and a detailed grammatical deduction, are all strong points of Luxenberg's methodology, striking with simplicity. The author translates the word "Qur'an" through the prism of Syriac lexis and word-formation as "lectionary" which is a Christian liturgical book containing a collection of scripture readings appointed for worship on a given day

⁸ 19:24, *Al-Qur'an al-Karīm wa-tarğamat ma'ānīh wa-tafsīruhu ilā āl-luğa āl-iṅğlīziyya*, no date of edition (published in Saudi Arabia at king Fahd's reign).

⁹ Ch. Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran – Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, 3. Auflage Berlin 2007, p. 136–153.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 256–275.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 301.

¹² Ch. Luxenberg, *Der Koran zum „islamischen Kopftuch“ – Zu Sure 24:31*, Imprimatur Heft 2/2004, <http://www.phil.uni-sb.de/projekte/imprimatur/2004/imp040204.html>.

¹³ Ch. Luxenberg, *Der Koran zum „islamischen Kopftuch“*, in: *Streit um den Koran*, op. cit. pp. 83–89.

or occasion (Luxenbergs finds proof for his theory in reinterpreted fragments of surah 96, and others).

Additionally, Luxenberg employed his method in an attempt to decipher the meaning of the so called *hurūf muqattaʿa* – isolated mysterious letters of Arabic alphabet preceding 29 different Qurʾanic surahs. In spite of many speculations and hypotheses put forward by Eastern and Western scholars, no satisfactory explanation of their meaning has been formulated so far (e.g. Aṭ-Ṭabarī puts forward as many as 14 different hypotheses). Luxenberg in turn remarks that enigmatic letters in the Qurʾan may correspond to similar characters found in Syriac liturgical books and providing guidance on how to intone individual psalms from the psalter. Following this path, the German philologist attempts to decipher the sense of these abbreviations, which was entirely lost within the Islamic tradition as a result of continued arabization and declining influence of Syriac language, probably at the turn of the 8th and 9th¹⁴. It is worth mentioning here that before Luxenberg the convergence of the Qurʾanic symbolism and Christian hymns (marked by arianism) had been previously pointed to in the 70's of the 20th century by another German Arabist – Günter L ü l i n g¹⁵.

Results of research by the German Semitist have not remained without response in wide circles of Orientalists in Germany and abroad, including to a certain extent the Muslim world (among them reviews from Lebanon and Iran¹⁶). Luxenberg, together with a small group of similar-thinking (mostly German) philologists, historians, theologians (among them Volker Popp, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, Christoph Heger, Christoph Burger, Markus Gross, Mondher Sfar, Johannes Thomas, Ibn Warraq, Claude Gillot, J.M.F. Van Reeth, as well as to a certain degree Gerd-Rüdiger Puin and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and others) has been instantly hailed as a politically incorrect revisionist-dilettante. However, most allegations against him have not focused on criticizing the methodology of his philological work on the Qurʾanic text itself (considered an authority among Oriental scholars Patricia Crone described Luxenberg's performance as negligible¹⁷) – besides – there are only a few professionals in the world speaking fluently both Arabic and Syriac, who would be able to attempt a substantive critical review of Luxenberg's analysis. Yet, the criticism of his theory concentrated on the fact that Luxenberg's method amounts in fact to subjective trial and error guesses at the meaning of Qurʾanic verses, taking into account the cultural and historical context of Qurʾan's origins – and so in its very premises the method – in the opinion of its critics – is biased, lacks scientific objectivity and is charged with prejudice against the Muslim

¹⁴ Ch. Luxenberg, *Die syrische Liturgie und die „geheimnisvollen“ Buchstaben*, in: M. Gross, K.-H. Ohlig (ed.), *Schlaglichter. Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, Berlin p. 446.

¹⁵ G. L ü l i n g, *Über den Ur-qurʾan, Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qurʾan*, Erlangen 1974.

¹⁶ M. Marx, *Bahira Legende, Dante und Luxenberg. Von verschiedenen Koranwahrnehmungen in: Streit um den Koran*, op. cit., pp. 126–127.

¹⁷ P. Crone, *What do we actually know about Mohammed?*, www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp (31.08.2006).

tradition. The German scholar is reproached for having substantially overemphasized the impact of the Syriac language on the Qur'anic text. No wonder, after all L u x e n b e r g's analysis leads to the conclusion that the Qur'an had primarily been written in Syriac scripture, and only later was it re-transcribed into the Arabic alphabet gaining its final shape as known today no earlier than the 8th or 9th century.

L u x e n b e r g attempts to prove his theory about Syriac origins of the Qur'an by identifying numerous mistakes made by Arab scribes who subsequently worked on the text. Those mistakes can be seen clearly in early copies of the Qur'an written in the *Hiḡāzī* and *Kūfī* styles (two earliest styles of Arab Qur'anic scripts). In many places some letters of the Syriac script (in Garshuni system¹⁸) which are identical (or very similar) to the letters of the *Hiḡāzī* and *Kūfī* styles were incorrectly transcribed into the Arabic alphabet by the copyists. This erroneous transcription has introduced into the final Arabic text of the Qur'an (which we know today) hundreds of obscure words, unclear phrases and camouflaged aramaisms (syriacisms) that blur the original meaning of many verses and practically prevent their correct understanding. The sense of certain Qur'anic verses, discovered "anew" by Luxenberg, changes completely – as in the case of *hijab* or Paradise houris. Moreover, his philological discourse undermines the credibility of the theory of Islamic *isnād* – a chronological chain of oral transmitters of Qur'anic revelations and hadith, from the time of their uttering till when they were written down. Luxenberg points out that Muslim scholars codifying the Qur'an about 150–200 years after Muhammad's death were no longer able to fill in its diacritical marks correctly, because their mentality was no longer impregnated by a strong background of the Syriac language¹⁹. Hence L u x e n b e r g's conclusion that there was no continuity within the oral transmittance: had the transmittance really existed, so many glaring mistakes in transcription would have never been made in the course of Qur'an's normativisation. Thus, we encounter today in the Qur'an dozens of wrongly arabized aramaisms, the importance of which has been deliberated on for centuries by greatest Muslim scholars and Western Orientalists²⁰.

Over the past nine years L u x e n b e r g has been consequently continuing his research in the same vein, perfecting methodology and publishing articles along with brief commentaries to more Qur'anic passages. In the book, *Streit um den Koran* (2004) L u x e n b e r g analyzes surah 97 (*Al-Qadr*) which in his opinion appears to be an

¹⁸ Garshuni or Karshuni (ܝܠܝܬܝܢܝܐ) is a writing system in which Arabic is written down with Syriac alphabet, and was used by Assyrian Christians from the 7th century (and when Arabic began to be the dominant spoken language in the Fertile Crescent, texts were often written in Arabic with this Syriac script). The Garshuni system evolved before the final evolution of the Arabic alphabet; what is more: it is likely that Arabic diacritics (dots differentiating speech phones of many letters in the Arabic alphabet) originated from the Garshuni system.

¹⁹ This idea is mentioned by J. Wansbrough in *Quranic studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford 1977. Wansbrough estimates that the essential core of the canonical Qur'anic text (the one contemporary to us) was codified about the year 200 hijra. According to him, information about editing the Qur'an by the Caliph Uthman are not supported by historical facts.

²⁰ V. Popp, *Inchriftliche und numismatische Zeugnisse*, in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.), *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Berlin 2007, p. 114.

introduction into Christmas liturgy of Christian Arabs²¹. This allows, as L u x e n b e r g apprehends it, to shed new light on the origins of Islam, within the frames of joint Christian-Muslim roots²².

The author also sets out to reinterpret the Arabic inscription of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The lettering, stretching in monumental *Kūfī* style at the length of 240 meters, features on the inner walls of the octagonal structure of the temple house and dates back to the reign of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān (685–705 AD). L u x e n b e r g suggests that in order to understand this inscription correctly, one should embed it first in the cultural and historical context of its origins, saturated with Christian Syriac tradition²³.

L u x e n b e r g’s linguistic analysis indicates that the Arabic passive participle „*muḥammad*” (Arabic: ‘praised, glorified’) from the temple inscription refers to the person of the Messiah Son of God in terms of a theological description of one of his virtues, and does not refer to the name of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad²⁴. Similarly, ‘*abd Allāh*’ shall mean “a servant of God” and not Muhammad father’s name²⁵, *muslim*- “a supporter of traditional pre-Nicaean exegesis of the Holy Book (Bible)”²⁶, and *islām* meaning “compliance of faith dogmas with the message of *Al-Kitāb* – the Holy Book”²⁷. L u x e n b e r g seeks confirmation for his revisionist thesis by analyzing relevant fragments of the Qur’an (the word *muḥammad* appears in the Qur’an four times) and studies by Christian authors of that epoch²⁸. He construes the whole temple inscription as an enunciation of a Christian Syriac theological dogma preceding the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which is still common among Christianized Arabs of the 7th century. Supporters of this theology with a distinct shade of Antitrinitarianism have not accepted (fully or partially) for historical (and/or dogmatic) reasons the teachings of successive Latin councils

²¹ Ch. L u x e n b e r g, *Weihnachten im Koran*, in: *Streit um den Koran*, op. cit., pp. 62–68.

²² This clue was further taken up by J.M.F. V a n R e e t h in his article *Eucharistie im Koran*, in: *Schlaglichter...*, op. cit., pp. 457–460 as well as *Le vignoble du Paradis et le chemin qui y mène. La these de C. Luxenberg et les sources du Coran, Notes et documents*, “Arabica” 53.4, 2006, p. 517.

²³ Ch. L u x e n b e r g, *Neudeutung der arabischen Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem*, in: *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., pp. 124–147.

²⁴ A similar idea can be found in: V. P o p p, *Von Ugarit nach Sāmarrā*, in: *Der frühe Islam. Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen*, Berlin 2007, p. 81. Popp argues that the first written evidence of using the word *muḥammad* as a personal name dates to the year 67 of the Arab era from Herat referring to the name of an Arab emir. Earlier, it has been in use as an epithet only.

²⁵ See also: V. P o p p, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., p. 77, as well as R. G y s e l e n, *Arab-Sasanian Copper Coinage*, Wien 2000, p. 70.

²⁶ See also: V. P o p p, *Biblische Strukturen in der islamischen Geschichtsdarstellung*, in: *Schlaglichter...*, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

²⁷ C. G i l l o t writes in regard to the results of L u x e n b e r g’s research that together with A. Cheikh M o u s s a after long studies they were convinced that in the period preceding Islam the words *muḥammad* and ‘*abd Allāh*’ had not been used as personal names, but appeared only in a later period as theophoric names. C. G i l l o t, *Zur Herkunft der Gewährsmänner des Propheten*, in: *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., p. 166.

²⁸ Ch. L u x e n b e r g, *Die Arabische Inschrift im Felsendom zu Jerusalem*, in: *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., p. 130.

of bishops, increasingly separating themselves ideologically from the Christianity preached in Byzantium. However, in contrast to the Arians, initially they did not reject the dogma of Jesus Christ's divinity, only to do so later. Luxenberg depicts the thereby emerging theological thought of this specific group of Arab Christians. This thought, initially considered by the literature of the 7th and 8th century (including theological treatises and historical chronicles) to be an Arab Christian heresy, transformed gradually till the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries into a new religion – Islam as we know it today.

In this sense, *Muḥammad* is not a historical figure, but one of theological concepts of the said group of Arab-Syriac Christians. Around these concepts arouse the dogmatics of the new Arab church, using every opportunity to stress its distinctiveness from the faith of the Byzantine Emperors. It was only after the Abbasid dynasty had been established that a historic dimension was added to the concept of *muḥammad*, within the frame of reverse retrospection into Islam's history, done by Abbasids to make their dominion²⁹ legitimate. This was also the time when Muhammad's biography was written down. 'Abd al-Malik is, in Christoph Luxenberg's view, a Christian ruler who proclaimed his faith by placing a solemn creed on the walls of Jerusalem Temple. The Dome of the Rock was in his plan the rebuilt Temple of Solomon (in the architectural Byzantine-Persian style) – as a symbol of Arab heritage, spiritual heirs of Abraham's promise.

Luxenberg's philological and theological deliberations blend with similar ideas present in research carried out by another German Islamist (Turkologist and Iranist) – Volker Popp, a historian and numismatist by avocation. Along with Luxenberg, he is one of the main ideologists and causal agents of the German revisionist Semitist *Inārah* group. Popp undertook a review of Arab, Byzantine and Persian coins of early Islam, in parallel to Christoph Luxenberg's research.

Similarly, Volker Popp argues, based on examined numismatic evidence and knowledge of Middle Eastern traditions of minting coins in the 7th and 8th century, that the word *muḥammad* on Arab coins from this epoch (together with repeated motives of the cross, the sacrificial lamb, etc.) is one of epithets depicting Jesus Christ, and not the historical person of the Prophet Muhammad. The term *muḥammad* becomes for the new Arab Eastern church (breaking free religiously from the hegemony of the Patriarch of Constantinople and administratively from the rule of the Byzantine Emperor) the main motto and guiding maxim of "new Arab Christianity". This motto appears on the coins as the credo of the new Arab faith, going back to Old Testament roots³⁰. Depicting Jesus

²⁹ The thesis saying that Muhammad was not a historical figure was put parallelly by Y.D. Nevo and J. Koren in 2003. They point out that the biography of the Prophet of Islam by Ibn Hišām (d. 834 AD) who in turn was relying on the non-preserved biography by Ibn Ishāq (d. 768 AD) cannot in any way serve as historical evidence for the existence of Muhammad: "Non-contemporary literary sources are, in our opinion, inadmissible as historical evidence. If one has no source of knowledge of the 7th century except texts written in the 9th century or later, one cannot know anything about the 7th century: one can only know what people in the 9th century or later believed about the 7th." Y.D. Nevo, J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State*, Amherst New York 2003, p. 9.

³⁰ See also footnote 23.

as *muḥammad* refers symbolically to the belief that Arabs as sons of Ismā'īl had been chosen to be the heirs of Abraham's spiritual legacy. Jews as the originally chosen people – sons of Abraham and Sarah – had failed to fulfil the hope placed in them, betraying God, therefore the promise of salvation passes onto the descendants of Abraham and Hagar – the Arabs.

From the coins Volker Popp deciphers keynotes and leitmotif historical mentions of the new forming Arab empire, juxtaposing them with the data from archaeological finds and with other historical facts. In his view, if one puts aside the knowledge of early history of Islam as presented by the Muslim tradition (which was written down retrospectively not earlier than from the 9th century on), and if one had to rely only on hard evidence of archaeology, numismatics and literature of that period (foreign literature, for there was practically no Arab literature until the end of the 8th century), one should completely change the perception of the history of Islam's genesis. According to the German Islamist, traces of Islam's origins lead to central Mesopotamia and further east to Khorasan and Merv, i.e. Persian provinces, whereto Persians (the Sassanids) beginning from the 3rd century AD were forcibly deporting masses of Arab Christians of Antioch and other regions of Great Syria. Historical chronicles mention an essentially unspecified people inhabiting the region of Hatra (today in northern Iraq)³¹ during the period before Islam. Having been displaced to the western part of the Sassanid Empire (Mesopotamia) as well as to its eastern frontiers (including Khorasan, Merv), Christian communities did not compromise their faith, but kept on preserving it mindfully, and could have even taken on missionary activity to a limited extent. As a result of their actions, among other important factors, the influence of Christianity in Iran in the 7th century was so strong that – as the historian of religion Geo Widengren writes – at the dusk of the Sassanid dynasty Persia was making its way towards full Christianization³².

Volker Popp emphasizes that with time Persian Christianity began to differ increasingly from the western Byzantine faith. Deported 'Arabī communities, with little or no access to of the rulings of subsequent councils of the Latin Church, held on to the

³¹ As Popp writes, on inscriptions from the 7th century found in the region of Hatra the ruler describes himself as *the king of Hatra (mlk HDR) and the whole (a)R(a)B* which in the local language (from Semitic family) meant “west, the Western area” – as lying west of the river Tigris. This would mean that the land defined as Arabia was lying within the Al-Ğazīra in Mesopotamia. The Athenian historian and traveler Xenophon (430–355 BC) writes describing the march of the army of Cyrus the Younger (with several thousand Greek mercenaries) from Sardis to Babylon in 401 BC that soldiers “passed through Arabia, keeping the Euphrates to their right”. It means that the land referred to as “Arabia” was located in central Mesopotamia. Also, the Roman historian Pliny the Younger situates this land “east of the Euphrates and south of the Taurus mountains”. Hence, the 'Arabī people were inhabitants of the West-Sassanid province of Hatra, communicating – according to Volker Popp – in the language defined by the Qur'an as *lisān arabī mubīn* (surahs 16:103, 9:90). In the administrative letters of Darius (521–486 BC) and other Persian rulers, the land known as *Arabāya* stretches between Assyria and Egypt, which coincides with the description of Herodotus additionally including the Syrian Desert. For the Romans, the name *Arabāya* meant also Nabatean land. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit nach...*, op. cit., p. 15–16, including quotations from: R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, London 2001, p. 2–3.

³² V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., p. 50, quoting: G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart 1965, p. 283.

pillars of the pre-Nicaean theology (prior to the Council of Nicaea 325 AD), yielding at the same time to the influence of the Persian Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Monophysitism (rejected by the Council of Chalcedon 451 AD), Monothelitism, as well as pre-Arianism³³ (Arianism itself was condemned in 321 AD at the synod of Alexandria)³⁴. Christian communities, although largely iranized and loyal to their Sassanid sovereigns, still retained a strong desire of returning to their ancestral lands, motivated by faith.

The breakthrough date for the course of events in the Middle East was the year 622 AD when the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610–641 AD), prompted by dogmatic disputes and his desire to create a religious empire³⁵, formally renounced his administrative authority over the area of Great Syria and North-West Mesopotamia, inhabited mainly by Christianized Arab people subdued to vassals of Byzantium – the Ghassanids³⁶. From then on, Ghassanid regents became de facto autonomous rulers of the new Arab empire, independent of Constantinople³⁷. As pointed out by V. Popp, since that year (622) onwards Arab coins were minted with new dating based on the solar tax year of Byzantium (and not the lunar hijra year as reported by traditional Muslim sources³⁸), retaining at the same time all formerly used symbols of Christian rulers for yet about 150 years. Coins bear no records of hijra, but are dated according to the “era of Arabs”³⁹.

³³ K.-H. Ohlig, *Das syrische und arabische Christentum und der Koran*, in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.), *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., pp. 398–399.

³⁴ Among others, Saint John of Damascus (675–750 AD), the last of the great Fathers of the eastern Church, who worked in the Umayyad administration in Damascus, perceived the faith of „Ismail’s sons” as one of Christian heresies remaining under the influence of Arianism and Nestorianism. A.-L. de Premare, *Le Processus de Constitution du Coran*, in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.) *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., pp. 180–181.

³⁵ In the spirit of theocratic ideology of Heraclius’ “the Latin Church is where its Emperor is. Where there is no unity with the Latin Church, the Emperor can not reign”. Heraclius has repeatedly attempted to latinize the Eastern Christianity, including reconciliation with monophysites. The fiasco of the last ecthesis (638 AD), convened in the porch of the Hagia Sophia church, decided about the final loss of Syria and Egypt in favor of an autonomous Arab state. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., p. 51.

³⁶ About 502/3 AD the Ghassanids concluded a covenant (Latin: *foedus*) with the Byzantine Empire becoming official allies (*foederati*) of Constantinople, *qariša* in Aramaic (deriving from the Aramaic verb *qarama* – to collect). Later this term was arabized to the word *qurayš*. The Quraysh in the Muslim historiography are – according to Volker Popp – none others than Byzantine allies in Arabia and Syria. Ghassanids were monophysites. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., pp. 22, 31 and 48.

³⁷ V. Popp, *Inchriftliche und...*, op. cit., pp. 23–25.

³⁸ This is confirmed by recent archaeological discoveries from the village of Gadara in Israel. V. Popp, *Inchriftliche...*, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁹ The same scheme of dating by the Arab era appears in the recently discovered Greek inscriptions at Gadara baths (now Israel) belonging to Decapolis. The inscription from the year 42 of the Arab era (663 AD) has been placed there by Mu’awiya I who was – in V. Popp’s belief – “the first ruler of all Arabs”. The writing contains the same date according to three different calendars (by Emperor Constans II indiction, by the local calendar and Mu’awiya’s calendar). By juxtaposing these dates one can demonstrate that the years of the Arab era were counted from the year 622 AD by the secular solar calendar rather than the religious moon calendar (as it is being currently done in the Muslim world)! V. Popp finds evidence supporting this thesis by examining dates appearing on the old Arab, Byzantine and Persian coins, additionally quoting a number of numismatists and historians who before him had already pointed to the same error in reading of the calendar

In the 20's of the 7th century, as a result of a victorious military campaign of Emperor Heraclius against the Persians and the total defeat of the Sassanid Empire (including the fall of the Persian capital Ctesiphon⁴⁰), the 'Arabī people, displaced centuries earlier, set off on their return journey (*hijra*) from the enslavement back to the Promised Land and Jerusalem⁴¹ (in this regard, the Qur'an, and precisely its oldest surahs, constitute an eschatological poem of the spiritual struggle of the 'Arabī nation). Thus, Arab tribes ('Arabī) followed symbolically in the footsteps of the Chosen People of Israel returning after a long period of slavery to the Promised Land, the new Arab Jerusalem. History turns full circle in the fate of 'Arabī: the emperor Heraclius appears in the Qur'an (surah 18,83-97) personifying the great liberator Dū al-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great). He is presented as a ruler restoring Alexander the Great's feats – defeating Persians, and in contrast, the new fallen Pharaoh – oppressor is personified by the Persian king Khosrau II⁴².

The 'Arabī brought with them from the east to Syria the inspirational core of Qur'anic materials (east-Syriac hymns, fragments of liturgical texts in a spirit of the old pre-Nicaean theology etc.) which later became the nucleus of the process of Qur'an's edition. The east-Syriac regressive theology of the returning Arabs was gradually replacing the west-Syriac theology of Arabs (closer to the Latin Byzantium) becoming the dominant ideology of the Arab empire with its capital first in Jerusalem, and later in Damascus. Arabs did not have to conquer the Promised Land by force, because – as evidenced by archeological discoveries – Byzantium had already withdrawn militarily from Great Syria around 500 AD, leaving behind only a few garrisons⁴³. According to V. Popp, contrary to the stories about turbulent Muslim conquests of Syria, Egypt and southern Iraq, no 7th-s-century written sources nor archaeological excavations provide evidence that the Arab military campaigns actually took place. Volker Popp stresses that Arabs did not have to conquer these lands, since they had already lived there and had managed them

by the Muslim tradition. The Arab era was replaced by the *hijra* era at the turn of the 8th and 9th century. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., pp. 57–59.

⁴⁰ In 627 AD in the battle of Nineveh a 70-thousand army of Emperor Heraclius, with the support of Arab allies of Byzantium, routed the Persian army under the command of Razates who died at the hands of the emperor himself. Since Khosrau still refused to sign peace deal, Heraclius marched on towards the Persian capital Ctesiphon. Persian aristocracy deposed Khosrau. It was the greatest victory of the Romans over the Persians in the many hundred-year history of the conflict. Heraclius regarded his Arab allies as natural heirs to power in the east. Hence, after the death of Heraclius (641 AD) who was widely considered the restorer of the ancient empire of Alexander the Great, Arabs – following the example of Alexander's Diadochi – used their force to claim his legacy by repeatedly attacking Constantinople. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., p. 135.

⁴¹ In Popp's theory, the Qur'an deals with the fate of the 'Arabī deportees. The word *hijra* itself does not appear in the Qur'an, because it is only a later term. The Qur'an refers to the return journey e.g. in surahs 16:109-111, 4:97, 4:100, regulating the principles of life in exile (33:50). V. Popp, *Inschriftliche...*, op. cit., p. 80 and idem, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., pp. 146–147.

⁴² V. Popp, op. cit., pp. 35–39.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 47 quoting: J. Koren & Y.D. Nevo, *Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies*, "Der Islam" 68 (1991), pp. 100–102 and J. Jones, "Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient" 46,4, 2003, pp. 411–412.

since the 6th century⁴⁴. What changed was merely (or as much as) the administrative status of this region – Syria ceased to be the buffer zone administered by Arab vassals of Byzantium, but became an autonomous state organism⁴⁵.

‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwān was among the returning ‘*Arabī*’ deportees. By Muslim tradition, he was the fifth Umayyad caliph, and by V. Popp – the governor of the Persian Merv and Christian sovereign of the young Arab empire. Originally, his title *amīr al-mu’minīn* (modern Arabic: ‘prince of the faithful ones’) did not have a religious meaning, but, according to the old Arabic tradition⁴⁶, meant a ruler providing security (*amāna*) to his subjects. Ghassanids already used this title in the 6th century as Arab administrators of Syria in the name of Byzantium⁴⁷. A Spanish chronicle of 754 AD translates *amīr al-mu’minīn* with the secular title *omnia prospere gerens*⁴⁸. Only later, in the 9th century, the title became retrospectively Islamized as was the entire history of the displaced ‘*Arabī*’ people of the 7th and 8th centuries. Only the Abbasids started using the title of *caliph* in its present meaning. Prior to that, as Volker Popp writes, there is no historical evidence of different usage. An identical conclusion was reached by professor of history and Arab civilization at the Université d’Aix-en-Provence – Alfred-Louis de Pre mar – who emphasizes that the temple inscription in the Dome of the Rock does not include the title *ḥalīfa* but *amīr al-mu’minīn*⁴⁹.

Volker Popp also notes in his numerous daring articles that until today no numismatic or archeological evidence has been found from which to conclude that Islam is derived from the Arab Peninsula. The first historical mentions of Mecca and Medina as places lying in the Arab empire appear no earlier than by the end of the 2nd century of *hijra*⁵⁰. This thesis is similar to the one put forward by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook

⁴⁴ V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ The newly formed autonomous Arab state is described by Popp as “ephemeral”, for its permanent political power was to involve for a longer time only Jerusalem, Damascus and Merv (the latter was ‘Abd al-Malik’ homeland) where the ‘*Arabī*’ religious movement focused. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴⁶ V. Popp, *Inschriftliche...*, p. 32.

⁴⁷ V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ J. Thomas, *Frühe spanische Zeugnisse zum Islam*, in: M. Gross, K.-H. Ohlig (ed.), *Schlaglichter. Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte*, Verlag Hans Schiler, Berlin 2009, pp. 144–145 quoting: *Crónica mozárabe de 754. Ed. crítica y traducción por José Eduardo López Pereira*, Zaragoza 1980.

⁴⁹ A. de Pre mar, *Le processus...*, op. cit., p. 166. In this context Popp states in his article printed in *Von Ugarit...* (p. 149) that the word “caliphate” appears on the coins for the first time in reference to the Arab state in the year 127 of the Arab era. Similarly the title *imām* does not appear in writing in the first century of *hijra* although traditional Muslim literature uses it already to describe the Umayyad times.

⁵⁰ The oldest Arab-Muslim coin minted in Mecca bears the date 201 year of the Arab era (and was minted only once that year, without being resumed). The oldest (golden) coin struck in Al-Ḥiğāz dates to the year 105 of the Arab era (currently in the collection of the American Numismatic Society and the Israel Museum). This does not mean in any way that Mecca and Medina did not exist before this period, however – as argued by Volker Popp – they could have been of no crucial meaning to the acentral authorities of the early Arab state. Customarily in those times, a ruler began striking coins in new locations at the moment of seizing power over a given area (or if for some other reason a given place was beginning to play an important role for him). The oldest gold coin from Mecca comes from the year 249 of the Arab era and a silver one from the year 253 the Arab era. Over the following few decades these coins were minted in Mecca regularly. V. Popp infers from

in the 70s of the 20th century. Based on the analysis of non-Arab sources and using a critical-historical approach they both came to the conclusion that *hijra* could have actually been the exodus of the Judeo-Arabic community, led by Muhammad back to the Holy Land – Palestine, and not from Mecca to Medina⁵¹. Volker Popp is convinced that the historical region of Arabia, the geographical cradle of Islam, is not related with the Arab Peninsula, but it is to be looked for in Mesopotamia, on the Euphrates and Tigris.

Similarly, another German Orientalist associated with the *Inārah* group Michael Marx of the Freie Universität Berlin, author of publications devoted to Qur'anic exegesis, indicates that Christians and Jews living in the Arab Peninsula in the days of Muhammad left no written sources referring to the emergence of the third great monotheistic religion⁵².

An expert on religion and historian from the Saarland University Karl-Heinz Ohlig postulates that the new historical-critical exegesis of the holy book of Islam should be based on the oldest preserved fragmentary copies of the Qur'an found in the 70's of the 20th century in Sana'a, Yemen. So far, as professor Ohlig writes, the Muslim world and Western Orientalists have relied on the Cairo edition of the Qur'an (1925 AD.) differing in substance and style from the old Yemeni Qur'ans⁵³. He also stresses that the oldest entirely preserved copy of the Qur'an dates back to 870 AD. As for earlier times only single surahs or their fragments exist (usually dating to the second half of the 8th century, in *hiḡāzī* and *kūfī* script), but never all surahs together as in today's structure of the Qur'an as a whole⁵⁴. In Ohlig's opinion, a new exegesis of the Qur'an seen in the context of the Syriac language must account for the thesis that the Qur'anic materials, compiled into one complete holy book of Islam not earlier than in the 9th century, developed gradually, over a period of up to three hundred years. The oldest surahs are clearly marked with east-Syriac pre-Nicaean dogmatics of the Christian '*Arabī*', while the youngest ones are already characterized by the features of Islam as a new fully-fledged independent religion. According to the German scholar, juxtaposing archaeological facts, theological knowledge and numismatic finds one can conclude that the earliest foundations of the Qur'an must have had arisen within the Syro-aramaic community of deported Christians in the eastern areas of Iran. The primary purpose of collecting future Qur'anic materials might have been the desire to write down a new alternative commentary to the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospel (the *Diatessaron*), showing their internal compliance (*islām*) and consistency in the spirit of pre-Nicaean theology⁵⁵.

this that only then Mecca became the religious center of Islam. V. Popp, *Von Ugarit...*, op. cit., p. 202–203 and 213.

⁵¹ P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge 1977.

⁵² M. Marx, *Bahira Legende...*, op. cit., p. 114.

⁵³ K.H. Ohlig, *Wieso dunkle Anfänge des Islam?* in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.) *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁵⁴ K.-H. Ohlig, *Von Ostiran nach Jerusalem und Damaskus*, in: M. Gross, K.-H. Ohlig (ed.), *Schlaglichter...*, op. cit., pp. 30–31.

⁵⁵ Ohlig suggests that the first editors of the Qur'an-to-be materials could have been Persian east-Syriac monks. K.H. Ohlig, *ibid.*, p. 33.

Ohlig supports here the thesis of Volker Popp arguing that the youngest Qur'anic materials may be dated back to as late as the reign of the caliph Al-Ma'mūn (786–834) in Baghdad⁵⁶. The German scholar strongly rejects the fundamental assumption of the traditional Muslim history that Islam as a religion fully evolved into its final shape over a period of only 22 years from its unexpected emergence in the west of the Arab Peninsula, being fully expressed dogmatically in the form of the so called Uthman's Qur'an⁵⁷, while the same process took other great religions hundreds of years⁵⁸. Ohlig also notes that preserved original Arabic sources (coins, inscriptions) as well Christian sources (chronicles, theological and philosophical treatises, sermons, letters, hagiography, foundation charters of monasteries, etc.) from the 7th and 8th centuries report about Arabs, Saracenes, Ismaelites (sons of Ismail), Hagarenes, but not about any new religion⁵⁹. There is no mention of Islam, Muhammad, Muslims, invasions or life of Christians under the reign of Muslim rulers. In preserved correspondence of monasteries and bishoprics which sometimes give very detailed reports on the religious and political situation of the region there is no mention of a new religion threatening Christianity nor of Arab leaders spreading a new religion⁶⁰.

Research carried out by Volker Popp concludes that originally the word *Qur'an* itself could have had a different meaning than it does at present. Popp writes that till the year 135 of the Arab era, Arab inscriptions and written materials (documents of Arab rulers, correspondence, etc.) never contained the word *Al-Qur'an* while Christian chronicles mentioned only the existence of single shorter texts (surahs). In the year 135 of the Arab era, in an inscription in Medina there appears the expression *Kitāb Allāh* as the first possible allusion to the existence of the Qur'an as a complete uniform book⁶¹.

Karl-Heinz Ohlig as an active member of the *Inārah* group and a champion of Luxemburg's theory, has published in recent years in Germany a series of books on

⁵⁶ More on this by V. Popp in: *Inchriftliche...*, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁷ K.-H. Ohlig, *Licht ins Dunkel der Anfänge des Islam?*, in: K.-H. Ohlig (ed.), *Der frühe Islam...*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵⁸ The same idea was pointed out a century earlier by I. Goldziher, who said during his well-known speech at the Sorbonne congress in 1900 that "We have long been satisfied with this highly convenient assumption that Islam has appeared at once and already in its final form" Ignaz Goldziher, *Neu gelesen: Islam und Parsismus*, in German translation by Werner Müller, in: K.H. Ohlig (ed.) *Der frühe Islam...*, op. cit., pp. 415–439.

⁵⁹ K.-H. Ohlig, *Licht ins Dunkel...*, op. cit., p. 8.

⁶⁰ Alleged mentions of this kind appearing in some written sources from the 7th and 8th centuries have been critically examined in recent years by a number of Western historians (R.G. Hoyland, Y.D. Nevo, J. Koren and H. Suermann, H.J.W. Drijvers and G.J. Reinink) and recognized as later interpolations (additions, inclusions, corrections) of copyists. It was a common practice by then that copyists would update transcribed texts to their contemporary state of knowledge about the past events (in this case their source of information were usually Muslim historiographical works from the 9th and 10th centuries). In this way – as Ohlig emphasizes – e.g. in some Syriac chronicles of the 7th century one may find i.e. 9th century Muslim terminology or references to future events or ideas. Documents of this kind have been examined by R.G. Hoyland in his ample study (872 pages). Ohlig draws briefly the current state of research on this subject in his article (including documents of Syriac, Coptic, Greek, Jewish, Latin origin, and others): K.H. Ohlig, *Hinweise auf eine neue Religion*, in: K.-H. Ohlig (ed.) *Der frühe Islam...*, op. cit., pp. 223–325.

⁶¹ More to the same topic also in: A.L. de Premare in his article: *Le processus de...*, op. cit., p. 186.

philology, Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic history. These publications are all related to the Syro-Aramaic research carried out by Christoph Luxenberg.

The publication of *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* has also served some milieus of western Orientalists who snatched this opportunity to repeat their call for undertaking a critical study of the Qur'an, similar to the scientific criticism to which sacred books of other religions have been submitted. An American Orientalist hiding behind the pseudonym Ibn Warraq suggests rejecting a priori the Muslim hadith as materials historically much later than the 7th century and thus largely unreliable⁶². In his opinion, the oral chain of transmitters reaching the beginnings of Islam is a myth supported by Muslim tradition and not allowing a critical independent insight into the Qur'an as a historical text⁶³. What is more – argues Ibn Warraq – almost all of the information which we possess about Muhammad derives from his *sirah* (biography) and *hadith*. The American Orientalist agrees with V. Popp that Muhammad could have merely been a legendary founder of the Muslim religion, a character created subsequently to legitimize the authority of the Abbasid caliphs claiming to descend their lineage from the Prophet of Arabia⁶⁴. Ibn Warraq notes that although nowadays even the most conservative Orientalists admit the unreliability of traditional Islamic sources, they still rely on them in their work for lack of other alternatives⁶⁵. Here comes the paradox: the *sirah* of the Prophet and the hadith were written down for the purpose of explaining the Qur'an's message. Meanwhile, one tries to infer the reliability of the *hadith* and the *sirah* on the basis of the Qur'an.

In this context Ibn Warraq quotes the results of research by another modern Orientalist Fred Donner who believes that to some extent, if not wholly, Qur'anic materials are historically earlier than the appearance of Muhammad. These texts of liturgical character could have evolved in a monotheistic community of Judeo-Christians. The same idea is shared by the above mentioned Günter Lüling who argues that at least one third of the text of the holy book of Islam is older than commonly considered. The Qur'an could have been edited and commented 2–3 centuries later by Abbasid exegetes who failed to understand it properly in the spirit of its original message⁶⁶.

⁶² Ibn Warraq, *A personal Look at Some Aspects of the History of Koranic Criticism in 19th and 20th Centuries*, in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.), *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., p. 213.

⁶³ These arguments were repeatedly put forward in the past by Orientalists such as R. Stephen Humphreys in his *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry*, Princeton 1991, p. 83.

⁶⁴ M. Sfar, *Raison d'espérer*, in: K.-H. Ohlig, G.-R. Puin (ed.), *Die dunklen Anfänge...*, op. cit., p. 350.

⁶⁵ Ibn Warraq, *A personal Look...*, op. cit., p. 223. More on this also in the books of S. Bashear, such as *Introduction to other History* (in Arabic, 1984), and *Arabs and Others in Early Islam* (Princeton 1997). For spreading his views at the University of Nablus Bashear has been thrown out of a window from the first floor by his students. In his books he supports the thesis of John Wansbrough arguing that a retrospective redirection of early Islamic history towards the Al-Ḥiğāz and the Arab Peninsula took place in the Arab empire since the mid-second century of *hijra*. The same conclusion was also reached by Ignaz Goldziher in *Muslim Studies*, New York 1971, Vol. 2, pp. 279–281.

⁶⁶ Ibn Warraq, *A personal Look...*, op. cit., p. 236.

In L ü l i n g's opinion, one cannot take on an exegesis of the Qur'an without knowing both Hebrew and Syriac. Another scientific challenge is to assess the degree of Qur'an's arabization which took place in the process of its codification in the 8th and 9th century. Ibn Warraq suggests in turn that the new Qur'anic exegesis should be based on historical sources other than the records of the Muslim tradition which have laid the foundations of today's early Islamic history.

The difficulties with modern revision of the Qur'anic exegesis are also a subject of interest of another German professor and Semitist Gerd-Rüdiger P u i n dealing with the analysis of fragments of the oldest Qur'anic texts discovered in Yemen in the 70's of the 20th century. Prof. P u i n acknowledges that the differences between the variants of the text of early Qur'anic materials are so significant (different sequences of surahs, different sequences of verses in surahs, absence of some verses or insertions of additional verses, differences in phrases and words in the same verses, different diacritical marks and orthography, different vocalization, etc.) that it is impossible to determine one original version of the holy book of Islam on that basis⁶⁷. Establishing such a version seems in turn to be a precondition for the adoption of a Qur'anic new exegesis in the Syro-Aramaic footsteps of Christoph L u x e n b e r g.

In an interview for the magazine "Atlantic Monthly" (January 1999) prof. P u i n said that despite the fact that the Qur'an presents itself as *mubīn* (Arabic: "clear, transparent"), "its every fifth verse seems to give no logical sense and is incomprehensible"⁶⁸. According to him, the oldest manuscripts with Qur'anic materials may be dated at best to the first half of the 8th century. The analysis of the Yemeni manuscripts showed that a codified complete copy of the Qur'an including all 114 surahs probably did not exist until the beginning of the 9th century⁶⁹.

Karl-Heinz O h l i g concludes on the basis of P u i n's research that the Qur'an as a sacred book of a new religion might have been the end product of a long-term process consisting in collecting and editing older and younger text materials. This thesis finds its confirmation in parallel studies on Yemeni manuscripts carried out by prof. P u i n's wife – Elisabeth P u i n⁷⁰.

Christoph L u x e n b e r g has already published a series of works devoted to the exegesis of chosen Qur'anic surahs and their fragments. It is possible that in some time he will be willing to publish his original translation of the entire Qur'an with his "Syro-Aramaic" commentary.

⁶⁷ G-R. P u i n, *Die Utopie einer kritischen Koranedition. Ein Arbeitsbericht* in: M. G r o s s, K.-H. O h l i g (ed.), *Schlaglichter...*, op. cit., pp. 516–571.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Ibn Warraq, *A personal Look...*, op. cit., p. 236.

⁶⁹ K.-H. O h l i g, *Die Historisierung eines christologischen Prädikats*, in: idem (ed.) *Der frühe Islam...*, op. cit., p. 327–329.

⁷⁰ E. P u i n, *Ein früher Koranpalimpsest aus Ṣan'ā'*, in: M. G r o s s, K.-H. O h l i g (ed.), *Schlaglichter...*, op. cit., p. 463.