

Syriac Liturgy and the “Mysterious Letters” in the Qur’ān:

A Comparative Liturgical Study

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The present article was first published in German in Markus Gross and Karl-Heinz-Ohlig, eds., Schlaglichter: Die Beiden Ersten Islamischen Jahrhunderte [Flashlights: The First Two Centuries of Islam] (Berlin, 2008). Because of its outstanding importance, this English version will appear simultaneously both in the present anthology and in the English translation of the original collection of essays. Unlike all other theories and views brought forward by Islamological “revisionists,” Luxenberg’s explanation of the mysterious letters in the Koran has no “traditional” alternative. If asked about the life of the prophet, the edition of the Koran and the meaning of most Koranic verses, Islamic scholars will adduce quotations from the Islamic traditional literature and agree at least about the main points. Not so about the mysterious letters: there is consensus neither among Islamic nor Islamological scholars about their meaning and origin. If any of Luxenberg’s theories should have a chance to be accepted or at least discussed in the Islamic world, it’s those expounded in the following article.

1. Introduction

The meaning of the letters that appear before twenty-nine Qur’ānic Surahs has perplexed scholars in both East and West since the beginning of the Qur’ānic exegetical tradition. For example, Ṭabarī (d. 923), considered in Islamic tradition as the most important and most prolific Qur’ānic commentator, discussed this enigma in an effort to explain the first set of letters *الم* / *alm*, found at the beginning of Surah 2 (“al-Baqara” [“The Cow”]).¹ After his stereotypical remarks by way of introduction—“there are different opinions among the Qur’ānic commentators concerning God’s word *الم* / *alm*”—he lists fourteen interpretations, generally supported by lists of transmitters. These meanings can be summarized thus:

- 1) The letters denote one of the names of the Qur’ān;
- 2) They are “introductory” letters (فواتح / *fawātiḥ*), with which God “introduces, opens” the Qur’ān (from this meaning comes the traditional Islamic term فواتح السور [“the introductory {letters} of the Surahs”]);
- 3) They denote the names of the Surahs;
- 4) They denote the names of the exalted God;

- 5) They denote oath-formulae, with which God swears and which allude to his name;
- 6) They are individual letters representing nouns and verbs, so that each letter has a different meaning;
- 7) They are specific letters of the alphabet (without further explanation);
- 8) They are letters, of which each one may have its own distinct meaning (as in 6 above);
- 9) They are letters that represent an entire sentence;
- 10) Every book contains a secret, and the secret of the Qurʾān is its introductory letters (hence the name “mysterious letters”);
- 11) A few Arabic philologists defend the position that they are letters which take the place of the twenty-eight letters (of the Arabic alphabet);
- 12) The Surahs begin with these letters in order to open the hearing (in order to focus attention upon the Surahs) of the *mušrikīn* (“the associators” = those who associate other gods with the one God);
- 13) They are letters with which God introduces his word;
- 14) If one inquires after the meaning of these letters, one learns that the Prophet supposedly interpreted these letters as representing numbers (following the Syro-Aramaic number-system of the alphabet). (If this is true, then the letters *الم* / *alm* (= *lm*)² would stand for the number 71 [$a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; 1+30+40=71$]. It is interesting in this regard that the Prophet asked his hearers whether they knew that the time of a prophet’s activity and the duration of his community supposedly lasts 71 years. The Prophet used ascending number-values to follow this number-symbolism, by means of the following groups of letters: *المص* / *almṣ* [$a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; ṣ = 90$] = 161 years; *الر* / *alr* [$a = 1; l = 30; r = 200$] = 231 years; *المر* / *almr* [$a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; r = 200$] = 271 years. Indeed, the sums agree with the respective roots, but the progressive order of the letters does not correspond to the degressive Aramaic number system, where the letter with the highest value appears first. Nonetheless, the hint at the possibility that specific letters represent numbers is not without interest, as the interpretation of the individual letters will attest. The Qurʾānic number-mysticism that developed in later Islam—possibly connected with Jewish traditions—can be traced back to these number-letters that were originally Aramaic but were taken over by the Arabs.)

Ṭabarī considers each of the Qurʾānic commentators’ various interpretive attempts, and he expends a great deal of effort assigning authority to each one. He concludes by defending the point of view that the letters in question do not represent words that are to be taken together, but rather should be seen as divided letters (hence the term *حروف مقطعة* / *hurūf muqattaʿa*) that can have different meanings. With this conclusion he justifies the opinions of the

Qur'ānic commentators that he describes, without committing himself to firm decisions. Ṭabarī is not unjustified in taking this tentative line, because these letters (and letter-combinations), as we will see, can in fact mean different things. Further, such a position leaves room for the later Islamic tradition to offer further attempts at explanation, as the literature shows, ample as it is even into our own day. We will not focus here on this later literature, as it rests entirely on speculations that would not bring us any closer to the solving of the mystery. Rather, we will first discuss briefly the Western Qur'ānic scholarship that has dealt with the question of the "mysterious letters."

2. The Current State of Western Qur'ānic Scholarship

In his collection of essays entitled *Der Koran*, Rudi Paret lists in section VI (pp. 330–385) the most important contributions to Western scholarship concerning the "mysterious letters." He provides this information "because the phenomenon has been only partially explained" and in order to spare someone who "wants to *continue to speculate*" a time-consuming search.³ In his introduction he discusses his sixth section on the mysterious letters with these words:

As I have already noted above, in section VI I attempt to gather together as fully as possible the new publications concerning the enigmatic letters that precede a few Surahs and should be understood as *sigla*, that is, signs (German: "Siglen"). However, I have omitted Arthur Jeffery's contribution in *The Moslem World* 14 (1924), pp. 247–260, because it only refers to the work of others, without offering anything original. I have also left out (for reasons of space and the age of the items in question) the works of Loth (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 35 [1881], pp. 603–610) and Hartwig Hirschfeld (*New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* [London, 1902], pp. 141–143), although these works are important in their own right. I should also mention another recently-published treatment, namely, James A. Bellamy's 'The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the Basmalah' from the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973), pp. 267–285, although Bellamy also fails to offer a convincing solution to the problem.⁴ In my opinion, the foundational work on this topic remains the results of Hans Bauer's investigations (published in 1921). According to Bauer the sigla appear to be very old and to function as pointers to collections of Surahs that already existed at the time of the production of 'Uṭmān's edition of the Qur'ān and that were, just like the edition itself, ordered according to the principle of declining length. Bauer also offers perceptive thoughts concerning the meaning of the individual letters and the combinations of letters.

However, he did not succeed in coming to a full explanation of this difficult complex of questions.⁵

In these observations we see Paret's correct understanding that the problem of the mysterious letters has not been solved despite their *acute insights*. A short review of the works mentioned by Paret will show us why their efforts could not lead to a conclusive result.

a) Hans Bauer, "Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Qoran" (1921)⁶ [*Concerning the Order of the Surahs and the Mysterious Letters of the Qur'an*]

Bauer's point of departure is his acceptance of the idea that "in four (or five) cases" the letters *ys* (Q⁷ 36), *ṣ* (Q38), *q* (Q 50), *ṭh* (Q 20), and (possibly) *n* (Q 68) played the same function as the titles by which we now know the Surahs, but this thesis contradicts the historical constitution of the Qur'anic text, in so far as Bauer overlooks the fact that the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts of which we are aware bear no Surah titles at all. Rather, these were added by later Qur'anic editors, largely according to arbitrary criteria. In the course of this editorial work, the letters we are considering here were made into titles, from which one can deduce that they stood at the heads of the Surahs in question from the very beginning. However, we should not exclude his suggestion that these sigla could have belonged to other texts. Bauer ends his treatment with a brief consideration of this last problem; his conclusion is as follows: "The explanation of these questions demands further investigations dedicated to individual aspects of the matter."⁸ He is surely mistaken, however, in accepting that "the meaning of the abbreviations is to be gained directly from the Surahs they precede" or that one can find "definite *internal or external relationships between these Surahs*" and the letters that precede them.⁹

b) Eduard Goossens, "Ursprung und Bedeutung der koranischen Siglen" (1923)¹⁰ [*Origin and Meaning of the Koranic Signs*]

Goossens' contribution is more extensive and is designed in the form of a doctoral thesis. Here he recognizes that these letters represent abbreviations that to some degree are of a *technical sort* and were once generally understood; however, he does not even approximately succeed in delineating their individual meanings. Nonetheless, he does conclude with the general statement that these "abbreviations" are "in these 29 Surahs to be set in parallel with the extant titles of the Surahs." One would not be unjustified, he says, in assuming "that the mysterious letters and groups of letters represent nothing other than *old titles*." In his introduction,¹¹ Goossens reproduces the following table of the data concerning these sigla, derived from Schwally's list:¹²

<u>Root</u>	<u>Surah(s)</u>
'lr	10, 11, 12, 14, 15
'lm	2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32
'lmr	13
'lmš	7
ħm	40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46
ħm'sq	42
š	38
ʔs	27
ʔsm	26, 28
ʔh	20
q	50
khy'š	19
n	68
ys	36

In section III (p. 344 in Paret's edition) Goossens attempts to interpret the individual signs. However, despite the effort he expends, his interpretations are based upon assumptions that do not lead to any plausible result because he does not recognize the actual function of these sigla.

c) Morris S. Seale, “The Mysterious Letters in the Qur'ān” (1957/59)¹³

In this essay Seale points rather interestingly to “one example of *memoria technica* from the Talmud” (Y'ALKGM). Also, his suggestion concerning the explanation of the letter-group KHY'Š at the beginning of the “Surah Maryam” (Q 19) is thought-provoking. However, in this as in his other suggestions, he does not distinguish himself from his erring predecessors Bauer and Goossens, in that he (like they) sees in the individual letters the roots of names or expressions, which he then seeks in the corresponding Surahs.

d) Alan Jones, “The Mystical Letters of the Qur'ān” (1962)¹⁴

Jones sees a purely mystical meaning in the Qur'ānic sigla. His closing remarks are as follows:

My own feeling is that the letters are intentionally mysterious and have no specific meaning.

He also appropriates an early opinion of Nöldeke (one that Nöldeke himself later abandoned), whom he then cites as follows:

The prophet himself can hardly have attached any particular meaning to these symbols; they served their purpose if they conveyed an impression of solemnity and enigmatical obscurity.¹⁵

e) James A. Bellamy, “Again the Mysterious Letters” (see above, n. 3)

In the afore-mentioned article by Bellamy, he again discusses our theme and strengthens his position that these unexplained letters actually concern other ways of writing an ancient *basmalah* (the shortened form of *bi-smi llāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm* / “in the name of God, the Gracious One, the Merciful One”). He traces the bold emendations that he suggests in order to justify his thesis back to mistakes made by copyists. He summarizes his argument with the following conclusion:

I am more than ever convinced that the *fawātih* are indeed old abbreviations of the *basmalah* that suffered corruption at the hands of later copyists. And after all, what can more properly stand before a Surah than the *basmalah*?

Even if Bellamy was thinking at least partially in the right direction, it is not possible that all the abbreviations, attested multiple times in the early Qur’ānic manuscripts, can be traced back to earlier mis-transcriptions.

These various attempts by western scholars to explain the problem of the “mysterious letters” in the Qur’ān are hardly distinct from the solutions proposed by the Qur’ānic commentators. They all fail to consider the Qur’ānic text in its context of the history of religions, a problem of historico-cultural relevance. Since these works were published, it has become a widely-accepted fact that the Qur’ān arose in a Syro-Aramaic context. The discussions that follow will seek to demonstrate consistently these historico-cultural connections and to make plausible the thesis that the so-called “mysterious letters” of the Qur’ān originally dealt with a tradition closely related to the Syrian (Syriac) Christian liturgy.

3. Terms Constituting the Framework of the Qur’ān

It seems important here to remind the reader that the three terms concerning the Qur’ān (*Qur’ān*, *Sūra*, and *Āya*) were all borrowed from the Syro-Aramaic language. I will now briefly discuss their etymology.

3.1 قرآن / *Qur’ān* < مَظْمُون / *Qeryān*

Western Qur’ānic scholars since Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) have recognized that قرآن / *Qur’ān*, as the name of the holy book of Islam, was taken over from the Syro-Aramaic ecclesiastical term مَظْمُون / *Qeryān* (“lectionary, reading”).¹⁶ The author has expounded upon this topic more fully in his study *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*.¹⁷ There the author argued that the loan-word *Qur’ān* / *Koran* (actually *Qeryān*) provides the key for understanding the Qur’ānic language. But two other expressions also arise in this discussion of the Qur’ānic text: the first of them, Surah (سورة / *sūra* [“Surah” = “chapter”]), indicates the individual chapters, and the second term, aya (آية) /

āya [“sign”]) refers to each individual “letter” of this text (and by extension, the written word of God), and not “verses” of the Koran as it was later falsely interpreted.

3.2 سورة / *sūra* < ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā*

The term “Surah” as a title above the individual chapters of the Qur’ān is clearly a later addition, because it does not appear in the earliest Qur’ānic manuscripts. There are ten Qur’ānic verses in which this word appears (Surahs 2:23; 9:64, 86, 124, 127; 10:38; 11:13; 24:1; 47:20 [2x]; nine of these occurrences are in the singular, one in the plural); from these texts it has been concluded that the Qur’ān refers by this word to the individual textual units, which were not at that time defined more distinctly. This understanding was justified by the introductory verse to Surah 24, and from this point the term was taken over into the later Islamic tradition with regard to all the Qur’ānic chapters, in connection with the names for the Surahs which were later derived from the individual texts themselves.

3.2.1 Concerning the Etymology of سورة / *sūra*

Before the term *sūra* (“Surah”) became a technical term indicating the individual chapters of the Qur’ān, well-known Arab philologists (and later western Qur’ānic scholars) had attempted to explain its etymology. While Ṭabarī supposed that this word was generally familiar, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (IV:386a f.) cited the lexicographer al-Ġawharī (d. 1005), who explained its basic meaning as كل منزلة من البناء (“any portion of a building”); with regard to the Qur’ān, then, it said that سورة / *sūra* means “partition, section” because it divides the textual portions of the Qur’ān from one another. This explanation gives *Lisān* an advantage over the other philologists’ explanations that are derived from folk etymologies.

In Paret’s commentary on Surah 24:1 (p. 358), he reproduces the important results of western Qur’ānic scholarship concerning the etymology of *sūra*:

The etymology of the word *sūra* is controversial. Nöldeke considers it a likely derivation from the Hebrew *šūrā* (“row”), while Bell thinks it comes from the Syriac *surtā* (*šūrtā*, *sūrtā*) (“writing, written text”). Cf. Nöldeke, *Neue Beiträge*, 26; *Geschichte des Qorans*, I:30 f; Horowitz, *Proper Names*, 211f.; Bell, *Origin of Islam*, 52; footnote and introduction, 51f., 131; Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 180–182.¹⁸

Among the authorities cited only Bell came close to the truth with his thesis that *sūra* could be a loan-word from the Syriac ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā*, not from ܣܘܪܬܐ / *surṭā*, as Jeffery had conjectured:

The most probable solution is that it is from the Syr. ܣܘܪܬܐ, a “writing” (n. 2 here: Bell, *Origin*, 52; the suggestion of derivation from ܣܘܪܬܐ, “preaching,” made by Margoliouth, *ERE*, x, 539, is not so near. Cf. Horovitz, *JPN*, 212, a word which occurs in a sense very like our English *lines* (*Psm*, 2738), and thus is closely parallel to Muḥammad’s use of قرآن and كتاب, both of which are likewise of Syriac origin.¹⁹

One could superficially consider the two Syriac written forms ܣܘܪܬܐ / *surtā* and ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā* to be merely emphatic variants, but in reality they are distinct from one another both in their forms and in their verbal roots. The masculine form ܣܘܪܬܐ / *surtā* is based on the root ܣܘܪܬܐ / *srṭ*, which corresponds to both the Arabic form with metathesis سطر / *saṭara* (“to draw, write, mark a line”) and the Syriac variant ܣܘܪܬܐ / *traṣ* (“to be straight, to make straight”).²⁰ The feminine form ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā*, however, derives from the verbal root ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šwar* (variants ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šyar* and ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šār*) (“to present, to depict, to draw, to note”) and leads to the Arabic forms صَوَّرَ / *ṣawwar* (“to present, to depict, to draw”), صَيَّرَ / *ṣayyar* (“to make, to do”), and صار / *šār* (“to become”). Consequently, the Syriac form has the meaning of “record” (literally: “drawing”); such a meaning is widely attested in the well-known expression ܣܘܪܬܐ ܕܟܬܒܐ / *šūrāṭ kṭāb* (“the “drawing” = writing of the book” = “the text of the Bible”).²¹

In the Qur’ān one finds the root *šwr* once in the nominal form (still current today) صورة / *šūra* (“picture, design”) (Q 82:8) and four times in the second verbal stem with the meaning “to form” (= “to make”) (Surahs 3:6; 7:11; 40:64; 64:3); in the latter two cases, the repetition of the Syro-Aramaic infinitive (or verbal substantive) ܣܘܪܬܐ / *šuwwārā* has been considered an Arabic plural form because of the Qur’anic defective written form (صوركم / *šwr-km*) and because this particular form of the infinitive is foreign to Arabic grammar. As a result, in both places the canonical text reads as follows: صوركم فاحسن صوركم / *wa-šawwara-kum fa-aḥsana šuwara-kum* (“He has formed you and made your images beautiful”); the second form should be *šuwwāra-kum*, according to the way the Syro-Aramaic builds its infinitives of the intensive stem *Pa’el*. According to Arabic verbal paradigms, the infinitive form should read صوركم فاحسن تصويركم / *wa-šawwara-kum fa-aḥsana ta-šwīra-kum* (literally: “He has formed you and made your forming [that is, the way in which he has formed you] beautiful”). This way of building infinitives in Syro-Aramaic is preserved in a few Arabic substantives, but the Arab philologists did not recognize this morphological phenomenon. Among such terms is the common word كتاب / *kuttāb* (“school,” especially a “Qur’anic school”); one would normally consider this form an Arabic plural of كاتب / *kātib* (“writer, author”), but it has actually preserved faithfully the Syro-Aramaic verbal noun *katteḥ* (= Arabic *kattaba*), which corresponds in Arabic to the form تكتب / *ta-ktīb* (= “to cause to write”). Understood from an

Aramaic point of view, *kuttāb* then means a school in which one learns not only reading but especially writing.

The Qur’ān offers a similar form in Q 108:1 titled al-Kawṭar ; here the readers of the Qur’ān have not been able to recognize in the spelling الكوثر an Aramaic nominal form from the intensive stem كٲٲ / *kattar* (“to await, to persist”). For this reason they also misread the medial ٲ / *w*, which in Aramaic orthography can serve as a *mater lectionis* for a short *u* in a closed syllable (ܟܘܬܪܐ / *kuttārā*), as the diphthong *aw* (*kawṭar*). If the morphologically identical form كٲٲ / *kuttāb* (written defectively) had indeed had a ٲ / *w* as a *mater lectionis* for short *u* (ڪوٲٲ), then the Arab readers would not have been able to read this strange written form other than as *kawtab* (instead of *kuttāb*) (and then also *kawṭar* instead of *kuttār*).²²

3.2.2 Excursus

Returning to the Qur’ānic usage of the Syro-Aramaic root *šwr / šyr*, we would no longer deprive the curious reader of the remarkable mis-reading and mis-interpretation of a Syro-Aramaic form in the Qur’ān that belongs to this root.

In terms of its topic, the term concerns the famous “satanic verses” (Q 53:19–20) that name the three goddesses *al-Lāt*, *al-‘Uzzā*, and *Manāt* (actually *Manwa*). In the canonical edition of the Qur’ān, the worshipers of these divinities are initially asked (v. 21) whether it is appropriate to attribute female natures to God when they themselves desire male children. The text continues in v. 22 thus:

تلك اذا قسمة ضيزى

(Canonical reading: *tilka iḍan qismatun dīzā*)

Paret (p. 53) translates the clause thus:

That would be an unjust division. [Das ware eine ungerechte Verteilung.]

Here Paret does not even question the underlined adjective in the way that he normally does with doubtful expressions; he and the other Qur’ānic scholars do not recognize that the phrase in question is in fact problematic. Indeed, Blachère and Bell cast no doubt upon this unusual word and translate it in same manner:

Blachère, p. 561: This, then, would be an unrighteous division! [Cela, alors, serait un partage inique!]

Bell, II:541: In that case it is a division unfair.

With such translations the most authoritative Western translators of the Qur’ān are following uncritically the philologically untenable explanations of the Arab commentators and lexicographers. It would be unnecessary to discuss the root *ḍa’aza / ḍayaza*, which does not even exist in Arabic, as

Ṭabarī (XXVII:60f.) does so doggedly in his efforts to explain this incomprehensible reading, calling as he does on the authorities of classical Arabic. A verse from (post-Qur’ānic) poetry becomes an incontrovertible argument for him; in the verse in question, the Qur’ānic word (in fact, misread word) appears in the presumed participial form مضئوز / *maḍ’ūz* (without further explanation), as Ṭabarī says at third-hand, reportedly from al-Aḥfaṣ.²³

The various readings from some “Arabs” that Ṭabarī wants to have examined are just as arbitrary as the meanings contrived for them. The putative “Arabs” disagree even as they approach the vocalization of this peculiar word; some apparently spoke the Qur’ānic word as *ḍayzā*, others as *ḍa’zā*, and still others as *ḍū’zā*. Because the Qur’ānic readers seem not to have known these “dialectal” variants, Ṭabarī prefers the traditional reading *ḍīzā*, which he considers morphologically to be a secondary form of the feminine adjective *ḍūzā*. The famous philologist al-Farrā’ (from Kūfā, d. 822) opposed this explanation, as Ṭabarī notes; according to the former, a feminine adjectival form could be *ḍayzā* or *ḍūzā*, and the pronunciation *ḍīzā* is possible only for noun forms. Of course, al-Farrā’ did not recognize that this form corresponds to the Syro-Aramaic passive participle of the form *p’īl / p’īlā*.

Ṭabarī then considers the meaning of this formally controversial word in the Qur’ānic expression *qismatun ḍīzā*, and he lists the following four definitions (supported by chains of tradition): 1) a twisted division; 2) an unjust division; 3) a faulty division; and 4) a disputed division. For the final meaning he cites Ibn Wahb, who has Ibn Zayd saying that *ad-ḍīzā* “in the spoken usage of the Arabs” means “opposition.” However, it should be noted that Ṭabarī introduces all the meanings listed here by assigning them to the “Arabs.”

Western Qur’ānic scholars seem to have come to a consensus on the definition “unfair division” (German: *ungerechte Teilung*; French: *partage inique*). Because no Western scholar had ever doubted the truthfulness of this conclusion, Hans Wehr believed in all earnestness that the expression in question, considered to be “classical,” could not be left out of his famous dictionary [*Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart / A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*]; he was clearly unaware of the fact that this Qur’ānic *hapax legomenon*, mis-read and mis-understood from the very beginning, never became established in the “spoken usage of the Arabs.” As a result, under the presumed (but not named) root *ḍyz*, he includes the expression قسمة ضيزى / *qisma ḍīzā* (“unjust division”), as though it had become a “winged word.” But it surprises every Arabic speaker to hear the word *ḍīzā*, as it does not sound Arabic at all; perhaps it merely elicits a shake of the head or a restrained smile because of the association that this word bears in connection with a similar term (“*ḥīz* – buttocks, *derrière*”) that sounds bawdy to contemporary Arabs.

Just like countless other mis-readings in the Qur’ān, this phrase reduces the traditional legend of an “oral tradition” of the Qur’ānic text (which functions as a dogma for some scholars of Arabic or Islamic studies) *ad absurdum*. Even the “variant readings” literature, (*qirā’āt*) documented in the Islamic tradition, is no argument for an oral transmission of the text, as some Qur’ān scholars tend to think, but rather a testimony to redactional diversity.

3.2.3 Deciphering the Enigmatic Term ضيزى / *ḏīzā*

With this example the *Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* will prove its efficiency in solving such problems. We must simply erase in our minds the two diacritical points above the term ضيزى, as these were added at a later date by an incompetent scribe and led to this mis-reading. When the term has been purified in this way, we are left with the written form صيرى; if we preserve the Qur’ānic vocalization, we have the term *ṣīrā*. In reality, the reading *ṣīrā* might sound no less strange to an Arab than *ḏīzā*, and rightly so. The reason is that at first glance he would not recognize the otherwise familiar verbal root *ṣwr* (“to depict, to draw”), because the orthography of صيرى would appear entirely unusual to him.

In actual fact, this orthography can only be explained with the aid of the Syro-Aramaic verbal paradigm. According to the latter, verbs with a medial *w* / *y* (just like the other trilateral verbs) build their passive participles on the first stem following the pattern *p’īl*.²⁴ The written form in the Qur’ān suggests that the Syro-Aramaic root *ṣwr* > *ṣār* (“to depict, to draw”) is the one in question; this root corresponds to the Arabic صور / *ṣwr*. However, because in Arabic the first verbal stem of this root is still current only in the contracted secondary form صار / *ṣāra* (basic meaning: “to become”), we cannot conclude with certainty that the root صور / *ṣwr* (basic meaning: “to depict”) is meant, especially because this root is only current in the second and fifth Arabic verbal stems (*ṣawwara* / *ta-ṣawwara* [“to depict, to draw” / “to visualize, to imagine”]).

Syro-Aramaic grammar turns out to be an indispensable key for deciphering this unusual Arabic spelling صيرى / *ṣīrā*.²⁵ Under the Syro-Aramaic participial form *ṣīrā* (in the *status emphaticus*), the *Thesaurus* (II:3384) gives as an Arabic correspondence the form مصور / *mu-ṣawwar*. For the semantics of the verb *ṣār*, Mannā (632b, under [4]) gives the Arabic meanings تصور / *ta-ṣawwara*), تخيل / *ta-ḥayyala* (“to visualize, to imagine”).

Conclusion:

In understanding the term ضيزى / *ḏīzā*, a Qur’ānic expression (Q 53:22) that has not even yet been recognized as problematic and that has nonetheless been mis-read and mis-understood, the Syro-Aramaic language has proven to

be an unavoidable prerequisite for explaining both its morphology and its semantics. This new understanding gives the following result:

Mis-transcribed Arabic: تلك اذا قسمة ضيزى
Canonical reading: tilka idan qismatun dīzā
Resulting meaning: “That would be an unjust division”

Corrected Syro-Arabic: تلك اذا قسمة صيرى
New reading: tilka idan qismatun širā²⁶
New meaning: “This is therefore a fictional attribution.”²⁷

If we were to bring this statement into contemporary Arabic, it would read thus:

تاك اذا قسمة مصورة = مخيلة = خيالية
 (tilka idan qismatun mu-šawwara = mu-ḥayyala = ḥayālīya)

3.2.4 On the Qur’ānic Spelling سورة / sūra

Our discussion of the semantic field of the root صور / šwr concludes with some comments on the Qur’ānic spelling سورة / sūra (with س / s), over against the Syro-Aramaic spelling ܫܘܪܬܐ / šūrtā (with the emphatic ص / š). The interchangeability of the voiceless sibilant س / s and the emphatic ص / š is hardly rare in Semitic languages. As just one example, one might think of the Syro-Aramaic ܫܘܒܪܐ / šaybar (“to undergo, to endure”) and the Arabic صبر / šabara (“to be patient, to persevere”); the two ways of writing the Qur’ānic form صراط / širāṭ (“line, way”) with ص / š or with س / s as سراط / sirāṭ, are also well-known (even though here there is no phonetic difference due to the emphatic ط / ṭ). In the case of sūra, Lisān (IV:387a) provides an interesting note concerning the inhabitants of Bašra (in what is now southern Iraq), who apparently built the plurals of سورة / sūra and صورة / šūra in precisely the same way; unfortunately, the text does not give any other information regarding a possible difference in meaning.

It is likely no accident, however, that we find the decisive evidence for writing sūra with س / s rather than with ص / š in southern Babylonia, namely, in Mandaean. The Mandaean lexicon offers us the following testimony:

Surah 2 for šura? in surḥ udmuṭḥ d-gabra Gy 391:6 the image (?) and likeness of a man.²⁸

The question marks are unnecessary, for the Qur’ān provides further evidence that the word sūra could be written in Mesopotamia either with س / s or with ص / š. This surprising testimony from Mandaean adds another detail in favor of the thesis that the Qur’ānic text emerged in the region of Eastern Syria/Mesopotamia.

Finally, from the perspective of the history of religions, we must ask how the Qur’ān came to describe its own text with the term *sūra*. I have already anticipated the answer above (n. 20):

unde ܫܘܪܬܐ (*šūrtā*) etiam sine ܟܬܒܐ (*kṭāb*) valet *textus Scripturarum*, B.O. iii. i. 87, 97, 153, 166, 174, 261; ܫܘܪܬܐ (*šūrtā*) “*Vetus et Novum Testamentum*,” Ass. C.B.V. iii. 280 ult.”

Following this evidence, in the Syrian Christian tradition, the word ܫܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā* (> Arabic صورة / *ṣūra* = سورة / *sūra* = “transcription”) meant the entire text of the Old and New Testaments, just as “Scripture” meant “Bible.” By using the term *sūra*, then, as it repeatedly expressed, the Qur’ān understood itself originally as a partial reproduction of the Syriac ܫܘܪܬܐ / *šūrtā*, that is, “Scripture” = the “Bible.” However, that the Qur’ān used the term to indicate its own individual chapters does not change its fundamental self-understanding, according to which it wanted to see itself as a part of the entire text of the Bible.

3.3 آية / *āya* < ܐܝܬܐ / *āṭā*

As the third and final term in this series of words concerning textual units, the word آية / *āya* means the smallest element of the Qur’ānic *sūra* (= “transcription, text, wording”), that is, the individual letters. When God speaks in the Qur’ān of his آيات / *āyāt* (in the plural), he means by this term the contents of the written signs that make up his recorded, transcribed words. As a result, the word *āya* (a word that in Syriac also meant “wondrous sign”) became a synonym for كلمة الله / *kalimat Allāh*, the “Word of God.” This is why one encounters repeatedly the phrase آيات الله / *āyāt Allāh* (“the written signs of God”) in the Qur’ān.²⁹

An innovation here is the use of آية / *āya* in the sense of “verse,” that is, to indicate units from the division of the Qur’ānic Surahs into individual sentences (or units thereof), a process that was introduced in the later Islamic tradition, following the example of the Bible. When the Qur’ān speaks of آيات محكمة / *āyāt muḥkamāt* and واخر متشبهت / *wa-uḥar mutašābihāt* in Q 3:7, however, it does not mean “distinct and ambiguous verses” in the modern sense, as Paret translates it (44), but rather “precise, faithful,” or (following Syro-Aramaic understanding) “well-known sections of the mother-text (i.e., corresponding to the Bible) and other (non-canonical sections) comparable (to these canonical parts, in content).”³⁰

3.3.1 On the Etymology of آية / *āya*

Arthur Jeffery, following Alphonse Mingana, considered it more likely that the Arabs took this strange word over from Syriac-speaking Christians than from the Hebrew word אורח / *ōṭ*.³¹ However, Mingana (himself an Eastern

Syrian) seems not to have recognized that the Syriac word ܐܬܐ / *ātā*, as a Qur’ānic *rasm*, must have read as اثة / *āta* rather than as اية / *āya* (following traditional pronunciation).³² But he could not have doubted his conclusion, because the Qur’ānic mis-reading had been taken over into Christian Arabic long ago in the past, namely, in the Arabic translation of the Bible. It is therefore no surprise that even famous German scholars of Semitics—men such as Theodor Nöldeke, Carl Brockelmann, Wilhelm Gesenius, as well as the *Thesaurus* (to name only a few) —saw no reason, in the case of the Qur’ānic mis-reading اية / *āya*, to suspect anything other than the etymologically adequate, classical Arabic expression corresponding to the Syro-Aramaic (or Hebrew) one.³³ However, the absence of this expression in the Arabic dialects makes its presence in the Qur’ān quite glaring, as an unmediated loan-word from Syro-Aramaic, as Jeffrey rightly noted.³⁴ But concerning what Jeffrey mentions in conclusion, namely, its appearance in the so-called “Old Arabic” poetry, we must conclude that either this poetry was post-Qur’ānic, or the word was just as mis-read when it was written down in the ninth or tenth century as it was in the Qur’ān; either possibility would contradict the theory of oral transmission.³⁵

In fact, the Qur’ān itself provides testimony for the pronunciation اثة / *ātā*. Qur’ānic scholars in both East and West up to the present day have overlooked the fact that the Qur’ān has preserved the etymologically-correct written form of the plural (following Syro-Aramaic pronunciation) in Surah 19:74. There the text reads (following the canonical reading):

وكم اهلكننا قبلهم من قرن هم احسن اثنا وربا

(wa-kam ahlaknā qablahum min qarnin hum aḥsanu atātan wa-ri’ya)

Paret, 252: But how many generations have we allowed to perish before them —generations who were better endowed and presented themselves better (than they)! [Aber wie viele Generationen haben wir vor ihnen zugrunde gehen lassen, die besser ausgestattet waren und mehr vorstellten (als sie)!]

The two expressions اثنا / *atātan* and ربا / *ri’yā* (read as *ru’yā* in contemporary and classical Arabic) are synonyms that explain one another. While اثنا / *atātan* reproduces the Syro-Aramaic plural form ܐܬܐܘܬܐ / *ātawātā* (after the disappearance of the unstressed medial semi-vowel *w* before the stressed, long *ā* > *ātātā*) in its contracted form³⁶, ربا / *ri’yā* (*ru’yā*) is a loan-translation from the Syro-Aramaic ܚܙܐܬܐ / *ḥzātā*. Mannā gives the following Arabic correspondences for the two expressions: a) (46a) ܐܬܐ / *ātā* (8): عيرة / *ibra* (“example, model”); b) (230b) ܚܙܐܬܐ / *ḥzātā* (4, besides the basic meaning of “seeing, sight, appearance”): عيرة. مثال. قدوة. / *qudwa, miṭāl, ‘ibra* (“example, model”).

Ṭabarī (XVI:117ff.) cites fourteen chains of transmission concerning these two Arabic expressions, and he then gives the explanations of the traditional commentators as follows: he says a) that اثنا / *atāt* means

“possession” or “furnishing” (hence the meaning of “furniture” in modern Arabic); and b) that ربا / *ri'yā* (*ru'yā*) means “appearance.” He reports that the Arab philologists do not agree with one another as to whether اثاث / *aṭāṭ* actually represents a singular or plural form. For example, while al-Aḥmar defends the position that it is a plural whose singular is اثائة / *aṭāṭa*, al-Farrā' saw it as a type of collective noun, so that there would be no corresponding singular form; the latter goes on to say that, if one were to build a plural form from اثاث / *aṭāṭ*, it would be either اثة / *āṭṭa* or ائث / *uṭuṭ*.

Due to the Qur'ān's authority, the *Lisān* (II:110f.) could not help seeing in this difficult word the verbal root ائث / *aṭāṭa* (which does not actually exist in Arabic). It sets this root with its homophone that bears the basic meaning of “to be plentiful” and then adduces expressions that have nothing whatsoever to do, phraseologically speaking, with this Qur'ānic loan-word.³⁷

Based on the conjectural and inconclusive explanations of the Arab commentators and philologists, Paret (as opposed to Blachère and Bell) recognized that the two expressions in question from Surah 19:74 are enigmatic.

Following Ṭabarī, the two latter translators give the verse under discussion as follows:

Blachère, 335: [Yet] how many generations before them have We destroyed—generations that were more impressive in goods and appearance? [Combien (pourtant), avant eux, avons-Nous fait périr de générations qui en imposaient davantage par les biens et l'apparence?)

Bell, I:290, 75: But how many a generation have We destroyed before them, better both in goods and in repute?

The preceding philological analysis has shown that these two enigmatic expressions can be explained in two different steps, thanks to the methodology demonstrated in *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*: a) اثاث / *aṭāṭ* can be explained morphologically as a secondary Aramaic plural form and semantically with the meaning “examples;” b) by means of back-translation into Syro-Aramaic, the meaning of the Arabic word ربا / *ri'yā* / *ru'yā* in its Qur'ānic context can be unlocked, showing the lexically corresponding Syro-Aramaic word to be a synonym of the preceding Qur'ānic word. Based on these conclusions, then, we should now read and understand Surah 19:74 in the following way:

وكم اهلكننا قبلهم من قرن هم احسن ائثنا وربا

wa-kam ahlaknā qablahum min qarnin hum aḥsanu aṭātā wa-ru'yā

How many generations before them have we allowed to perish, who (in comparison) were better examples and (quite) exemplary (lit. ‘example’)!”

(“I and ‘your being’” = “I and you” or “I with you”). However, the substantive آية / *āya* cannot be derived from this particle إيا / *īyā*.

A remnant of the Syriac secondary form ܝܬܐ / *yātā* (“essence, existence, being, presence”) (> Arabic *yāt*) still exists today in the contemporary colloquial Arabic of the Middle East, in connection with *kull* / *kall* (“entirety” = “all”), as follows: *kull* + *yāt* + *nā* = *kullyāt-nā* (literally, “the entirety of our being” = “we all”), *kull* + *yāt* + *kon* = *kullyāt-kon* (“you all”), *kull* + *yāt* + (*h*)*on* = *kullyāt(h)on* (“they all”). In north Mesopotamian dialects the forms are contracted: *kallāt-nā* (“we all”), *kallāt-kən* (“you all”), *kallāt-en* (“they all”). However, there is no trace whatsoever of this form *yāt* in Arabic literature. Consequently, it is hard to accept that the hypothetical Qur’ānic reading آية / *āya* could have been derived from the Syriac secondary form ܝܬܐ / *yātā*, or even from the dialectal Arabo-Aramaic *yāt*.

These considerations have allowed us to conclude that the diacritical points placed underneath the word آية / *āya* are incorrect in 382 places in the Qur’ān. In addition, though, an examination of the Qur’ānic usage of آية / *āya* shows that the various semantic nuances that appear (depending on the context) are exactly the same as those of the Syro-Aramaic ܐܝܬܐ / *ātā*.³⁹ So, for example, we see Q 3:41, where Zechariah asks God for a “sign” (آية / *āya*) of what God has announced to him, namely, the birth of John; there God announces to him as a “sign” that he will communicate with other people for three days by means of sign-language alone (رمزا / *ramzan* < Syro-Aramaic ܪܡܙܐ / *rmāzā*, *remzā* [Luke 1:22]). In the Peshitta (the Syriac version of the Bible), the angel gives the shepherds a “sign” (ܐܝܬܐ / *ātā*) as well, namely, that they will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

We also find a typical loan-translation in Q 17:12, with the expressions آية الليل / *āyat al-layl* and آية النهار / *āyat an-nahār*, which Paret (228) translates literally as “sign of the night” and “sign of the day” [Bell, Surah 17:13, translates in the same manner]. Although the sense of both expressions is clear, in themselves they remain foreign to the Arabic language. In the Syro-Aramaic language, however, ܐܝܬܐܘܪܐ / *āt-wātā* (“sign”) means, among other things, the heavenly bodies (cf. the English expression “signs of the zodiac”), including the “sun” and the “moon.”⁴⁰

Such loan-translations provide especially clear evidence that the Qur’ān transcribed the Syro-Aramaic orthography ܐܝܬܐ / *ātā* to mean the Arabic word آية / *āya* rather than the (at a later date) mis-read and mis-pointed آية / *āya*, especially as this word is not known in any Arabic dialect with this pronunciation. As a result, we can say that the correction of آية / *āya* into آية / *ātā* is well-founded from the perspectives of philology and historical linguistics. The plural here, then, should no longer read آيات / *āyāt* but rather

أثأت / *ātāt* or أثأت / *ātāt* (following the Aramaic spirantizing of the final-*t*, and corresponding to the correctly-transmitted form found in Surah 19:74).

We may adduce here two other Qur’ānic texts, where written forms have been mis-read in the same way. In Surah 44:36 we read:

فاتوا بائنا ان كنتم صدقين

(*fa-tū bi-ābā’inā in kuntum ṣādiqīn*)

This verse has been understood by the modern Qur’ānic translators just as Ṭabarī (XXV:128) explained it:

Paret, 414: But produce our (dead) fathers (again), if you speak the truth!

[Bringt doch unsere (verstorbenen) Väter (wieder) herbei, wenn (anders) ihr die Wahrheit sagt!]

Blachère, 527: Bring our fathers back, if you are truthful! [*Faites revenir* nos pères, si vous êtes véridiques!]

Bell, II:500, 35: Produce our fathers, if ye speak the truth.

The Qur’ānic context concerns people who doubt, those who demand for themselves proofs concerning the resurrection at the last day; they do not ask for the immediate return of their dead fathers, for there is no discussion of “fathers” here at all. The mis-read written form بائنا / *bi-ābā’inā* could be read as بائنا / *bi-āyātīnā* according to the current mis-reading, but it should now be read as بائنا / *bi-ātātīnā* (or, following the Aramaic, بائنا / *bi-ātātīnā*) and understood thus:

Then bring the proofs (that convince) us (lit.: “our proofs”), if you speak the truth!⁴¹

In a similar way, we should correct the written form found in Surah 45:25 that has been equally mis-pointed:

و اذ تتلى عليهم آياتنا بينت ما كان حجتهم الا ان قالوا
ايؤا بائنا ان كنتم صدقين

(*wa-īd tu-tlā ‘alayhim āyātunā bayyināt(in) mā kāna ḥujjatuhum illā an qālū aytū bi-ātātīnā in kuntum ṣādiqīn*⁴²)

It has been traditionally understood thus:

Paret (417): And when our verses (lit.: “signs”) are read out to them as clear proofs (*bayyināt*), they have no other argument (to introduce) than to say, “Produce our (dead) fathers (again), if you speak the truth!” [Und wenn ihnen unsere Verse (w.: Zeichen) als klare Beweise (*bayyināt*) verlesen werden, haben sie keinen anderen Beweisgrund (anzuführen), als daß sie sagen: “Bringt unsere (verstorbenen) Väter (wieder) herbei, wenn (anders) ihr die Wahrheit sagt!”]

Blachère (531): When our clear *aya* are communicated to them, they have no other argument than to object: “Bring our fathers back, if you are truthful!”

[Quand Nos claires *aya* leur sont communiquées, ils n'ont d'autre argument que d'objecter: "Ramenez-nous nos pères, si vous êtes véridiques!"]
Bell, II:505, 24: And when Our signs are recited to them as Evidences, their only argument is: "Produce our fathers, if ye speak the truth."

New understanding:

And when our written signs (i.e., our transcribed words) are recited to them (so that they are self-)evident⁴³, they have no other objection than to say, "Then bring the proofs (lit.: signs) (that convince) us (lit.: "bring our signs"), if you speak the truth!"

If we include these two emendations (Surahs 44:36; 45:25), then the total number of textual locations rises to 384 in which one single written form has been mis-read (in its plene and defective forms). However, because the Qur'ān, in the verse-numbering of the canonical Cairo edition, has approximately 6,236 verses, all of which are called by the mis-read word "*āya*," one can easily imagine how difficult it would be for the new reading of "*ātā*" to carry the day. If one takes this reality into account, then one will have to decide to live with the traditional mis-reading, all the while clarifying it as a historico-linguistic error. In a similar fashion, all historical linguists have resigned themselves to accept the arbitrary reading of the loan-word *Qur'ān* which should have been read as the original Syro-Aramaic word *Qeryān*. Once again, both misreadings are further proof against the "dogma" of the oral transmission of the Koran.

4. The Christian-Syriac Origin of Friday as Islam's Weekly Day of Prayer and Rest

4.1 Introductory Remarks

Even if we have already sufficiently shown the Syro-Aramaic origin of the three basic terms of the Qur'ān as an originally Christian-Syriac liturgical book, there still remains the question, relevant for the history of religions, of whether a Christian-Syriac background (in liturgical perspective) could lie behind Friday as the weekly day of prayer and rest in Islam. An easy conjecture is this: at its beginning Islam attempted to establish Friday as the weekly day of prayer and rest in order to distinguish itself from the Jews' Sabbath and the Christians' Sunday, and in order to underscore the growing self-confidence of a national religion that was expanding along with the political power of the newly-founded (Arabian) theocracy. Such a conjecture could seem at first glance to illuminate the situation, but it is not entirely satisfactory. A search for other reasons in the history of religions leads to the

subsequent question as to why such desires in early Islam did not lead to the choice of Monday, as that day would have made more chronological sense, as following on the Christians' Sunday, which in its turn followed on the Jews' Sabbath. In other words, why did they choose Friday, as this choice seems, so to speak, to go anti-clockwise? We shall now attempt to explain this religio-historical question, which hitherto was not even posed.

4.2 A Qur'ānic Hint

In the canonical edition of the Qur'ān, there is one single text in which Friday is mentioned, but without any context that gives more specific information. In Surah 62, which was later named the "Friday Surah" (سورة الجمعة), verse 9 reads thus:

يا ايها الذين امنوا اذا نودي للصلاة من يوم الجمعة
فاسعوا الى ذكر الله وذروا البيع ذلكم خير لكم ان كنتم تعلمون

Paret: O you who believe: when there is a call to prayer on Friday (lit.: "community day"), then hurry to the prayer (lit.: think of God), and let your business (lit.: "selling") be, for the former (brings) you better things if you only knew. [O ihr, die ihr glaubt, wenn am Freitag (wörtlich: *Gemeindetag*) zum Gebet aufgerufen wird, so begeben euch zum Gottesgedenken und lasst das Geschäft (wörtlich: das *Verkaufen*) sein, denn dies (bringt) euch Besseres (ein), wenn ihr wüsstet.]

Pickthall: O ye who believe! When the call is heard for the prayer of the day of congregation, haste unto remembrance of Allah and leave your trading. That is better for you if ye did but know.

Scholars have not drawn consistent conclusions concerning this late Surah, which is ascribed to the Medinan period. For his part, Ṭabarī (XXVIII:99ff.) does not mention the institution of Friday as the weekly day of prayer at all; of course, by his time (ninth/tenth century) Friday had long been the customary "congregation day" in Islam. One wishes that he had said something about the actual liturgical practices on this day that is so important for Islam.

Lisān is much more illuminating, for there, under the entry الجمعة / *al-ġum'a* (VIII:58b f.) (lit.: "[day of] assembly, congregation day" = "Friday"),⁴⁴ we learn that *al-jum'a* (Friday) has only been called *al-ġum'a* since the advent of Islam, and that earlier this day went by the name of يوم العروبة / *yawm al-'arūba* (< Syro-Aramaic ܝܘܡ ܥܪܘܒܐ / *yawm 'rubtā* = "day of the sunset"). Under the word عروبة / *'arūba*, *Lisān* (I:593) gives a similar explanation: عروبة / *'arūba* and العروبة / *al-'arūba* both mean الجمعة / *al-ġum'a* (Friday). After giving a *ḥadīṭ* (a statement of the Prophet) concerning Friday, it states:

كانت (الجمعة) تسمى عروبة ، هو اسم قديم لها ، وكأنه ليس بعربي . يقال : يوم عروبة ، ويوم العروبة ، والأفسح أن لا يدخلها الألف واللام

“Earlier Friday was called ‘*arūba*, a name which does not appear to be Arabic. This expression was current as *yawm ‘arūba* or *yawm al-‘arūba*, but the form ‘*arūba*, without the prefixed article *al-*, is more literary (i.e., more classical).”

The form *yawm ‘arūba* (i.e., without the Arabic article *al-*) corresponds exactly to the Syro-Aramaic form ܣܘܒܬܐ / *yawm ‘rubtā*, which means “day of the sunset,” or “Saturday Eve.”⁴⁵ This word originally meant the evening before the Sabbath, which Syrian Christians used as a name for Friday after taking it over from the Jewish tradition and re-interpreting it in the light of Christianity. According to this re-interpretation, the setting of the sun on Good Friday, that is, the darkening of the sun that occurred after Jesus’ crucifixion (Mt. 27:45; Mk. 15:33; Lk. 23:44-45), symbolizes the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New.⁴⁶ As a result, among Syrian Christians Friday is called ܣܘܒܬܐ / ‘*rubtā* (“setting of the sun” = “Friday”).

There still remains open the interesting question of whether the pre-Islamic Arabs learned this Syro-Aramaic name for Friday (‘*arūba*) from Jews or Christians. The fact that Jewish-Aramaic tradition gives the name ערובתה / ‘*robtā* (*status emphaticus*) or ערובה / ‘*rōbā* (*status absolutus*) not only to the evening before the Sabbath but also to the evening before other high holidays speaks in favor of a Christian origin.⁴⁷ In Christian Syrian tradition, though, Friday alone is called ܣܘܒܬܐ / ‘*rubtā*, while the evening before other holidays is called ܝܘܡܝܢ / *ramšā* (“evening[time]” = “vespers”). Incidentally, Heinrich Lewy long ago showed the etymology of the name “Europe” as deriving from the Aramaic ערובה / ‘*rōbā* (“setting of the sun” = “Occident” = “West”).⁴⁸

There is an apparently legendary report in *Lisān* (I:593a f.), according to which Ka’b b. Lu’ayy / لؤي (actually لوي = lwy = Levi), who was the purported grandfather of the Prophet, was the first one to re-name the (Aramaic name) يوم العروبة / *yawm al-‘arūba* (“day of the sunset”) as الجمعة / *al-ḡum‘ā* (“assembly-, congregation-day”). If one were to believe this story as true, then it would be ensured that Friday was called *al-ḡum‘ā* only after the advent of Islam; on the other hand, we could then not exclude a Jewish-Aramaic origin for the name.⁴⁹

However, it is in a testimony transmitted in the Arabic tradition that we find the explanation that truly settles the question in terms of the history of religions, specifically in the Qur’ānic “readings literature.” This particular text concerns the famous work كتاب المصاحف / *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (“The Book of the Qur’ānic Codices”), written by the Qur’ānic scholar as-Siḡistanī (d. 316 AH / 941 CE) and edited by Arthur Jeffery (1892–1959).⁵⁰ The readings transmitted in this work supposedly trace back to written witnesses that are older than the canonical Qur’ānic edition of ‘Uṭmān (Osman) that is known to us. Jeffery makes the following statement in the section entitled “The Old Codices”:

The Kitāb al-maṣāḥif of ibn abī Dāwūd together with a collection of the variant readings from the codices of ibn Mas‘ūd, Ubai, ‘Alī, ibn ‘Abbās, Anas, abū Mūsā and other early Qur’ānic authorities which present a type of text anterior to that of the canonical text of ‘Uthmān.

Jeffery seems to overlook an extremely important reading on Surah 62:9 from the codex of Ubai b. Ka‘b; alternatively, he may simply not have grasped its wide-ranging importance for the history of religions. In the Qur’ānic text in question, where the Cairo edition has يوم الجمعة / *yawm al-ġum‘a* (“assembly-, congregation-day”) for “Friday,” the Ubai codex (p. 170, Q 62:9) has the variant يوم العروبة الكبرى / *yawm al-‘arūba l-kubrā*. This corresponds to the Syro-Aramaic expression ܝܘܡ ܥܘܪܘܒܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ / *yawm ‘rubtā rabbtā* (“day of the great setting of the sun” = “day of the great Friday”).⁵¹ This in turn corresponds to the expression in contemporary Christian Arabic يوم الجمعة العظيمة / *yawm al-ġum‘a l-‘aẓīma* (“day of the great Friday” = “Good Friday”).

This authentic testimony provides us clear proof that the Syro-Aramaic Good Friday was the direct predecessor to the Islamic Friday. If one is aware that the Syriac liturgical office for every Friday commemorates Good Friday, then one will be able to understand why this day’s soteriological meaning causes it to receive more honor than the day of the Resurrection in some Christian congregations (and especially in the piety of the common people). This perspective casts an entirely new light on the emergence of Islam and on the pre-Islamic Arabo-Christian community whose trace seems to have become entirely blurred due to an understanding of history distorted by the lens of Islam. The meaning of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as a testimony to this pre-Islamic, Syro-Arabian Christianity, henceforward achieves a new liturgical confirmation of its importance as the grave of Christ (Arabic قبعة الصخرة / *qubbat aṣ-ṣaḥra* = “stone grave”) and as a pilgrimage site of the Christian Arabs under the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (685-705).⁵² We should here remember the only Qur’ānic text that concerns the crucifixion of Christ (Q 4:157), a text that has been completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Qur’ānic commentators; this text must be interpreted anew in concert with the other Qur’ānic texts that speak of the death and resurrection of Christ (Surahs 3:55; 5:117; 19:33; 72:19).⁵³

Now that we have shown the Christian Syrian origin of the basic terms of the Qur’ān as an originally Christian Syrian lectionary, this unexpected hint of a pre-Islamic, Christian Syrian liturgy leads us logically to the original topic of this essay: the mysterious letters in the Qur’ān. In what follows I will demonstrate how these “mysterious” abbreviations are connected to a Christian Syrian liturgy.

5. Concerning the Meaning of the Abbreviations in the Syriac Daily Office

The breviary for the liturgical year in the West Syrian (Antiochene) church’s liturgical tradition exists in seven volumes; one of these volumes, the one concerning the Advent and Christmas seasons, serves as the foundation for this presentation of the Syriac daily office.⁵⁴ The abbreviations in the Syriac breviary belong to the rubrics that contain specific information for each portion of the office. There is a technical term for these abbreviations that consist of one, two, or three letters, with a line above them: the word is either ܝܕܐ / *yad’ā* (lit., “recognized”) or ܝܕܕܐ / *yaddī’ā* (lit., “making known”), essentially meaning “clue” or “hint.”⁵⁵

These ܝܕܐ / *yad’ē* (“hint-signs”), which generally occur at the beginning of a liturgical text or section, serve to indicate the first words of a hymn that is to follow, as W. Wright surmised: “the word ܝܕܐ (*yad’ā*) seems to denote the first words, or catch-words of well-known hymns.”⁵⁶ In fact, depending on the abbreviation, they can indicate much more:

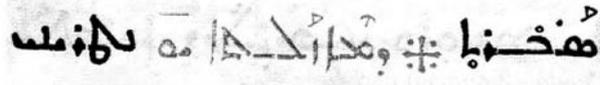
- a) Because the liturgy typically begins with a psalm, indicated by the abbreviation ܡܙܡ / *mzm* (=ܡܙܡܘܪܐ / *mazmōrā*), up to three letters can indicate the number of the psalm in question in the Psalter; these letters run from ܐ / *a* (= Ps. 1) to ܩܢ / *qn* (= Ps. 150).
- b) The letter ܩ / *q* stands for ܩܠܐ / *qālā* (“musical key, melody, tune”) and indicates the tone of the following chant (from the eight tones in Syrian hymnody); then follow the introductory words of the exemplary hymn (e.g., “to the tune of ‘Praise the Lord’”).
- c) The letters ܩܦ / *pt* mean ܩܦܩܡܐ / *petgāmā* (“responsorial”) and are followed by the corresponding responsorial lyrics.
- d) The abbreviations ܩܦ / *pu* (=ܩܦܩܡܐ / *punnāyā*) and ܩܦ / *’u* (=ܩܦܩܡܐ / *unnāyā*) both mean “antiphon” and are followed by the corresponding lyric.
- e) Occasionally one finds before a Gospel reading a chapter with the letters ܩܦ / *qf* (= ܩܦܩܡܐ < κεφαλαίον)
- f) The letters ܩܦ / *wšr* (=ܩܦܩܡܐ / *w-šarkā*) mean “etc.”
- g) Between the individual hymns one regularly finds the letters ܩܦ / *šū* (=ܩܦܩܡܐ / *šubhā*), representing the doxology “Gloria Patri” (“Glory be to the Father...”), sung by the priest; after this, one finds the word ܩܦ / *men* (“from [now and unto ages of ages]”), which the choir or congregation answers as the beginning of the stanza that follows. One sometimes sees a ܩܦ / *h*, which stands for *hallelujah*; in the dictionaries and other texts, one sees for the ܩܦ / *h* the meaning ܩܦ /

hānaw (“that is, i.e.”). There are also a number of other abbreviations in the Syriac literature.

The following selections from the Syriac breviary cited above are intended to serve as visual illustrations of a few of the abbreviations I have mentioned. These examples include a few pointers to individual psalms. On the scans they can easily be found as the only letters with a horizontal stroke above.

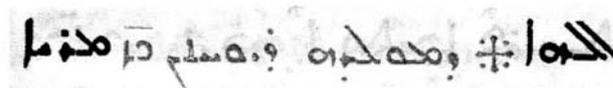
5.2 Individual Examples

Example 1



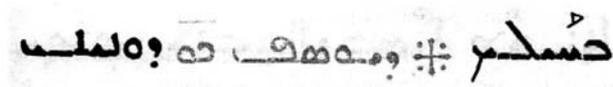
(p. 52) After the division marker in the middle of the line, we see *d-mezaltā YW naṭarayn(i)*. The first word means “(Advent Sunday) of the Visitation,” referring to Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. “YW” is a number marker, referring to Psalm 16. The following word *naṭarayn(i)* provides the beginning of the corresponding Psalm: “Protect me (Lord)!”

Example 2



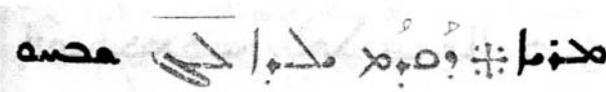
(p. 52) *d-mawlādeh d-Yohannān* = “(Advent Sunday) of the Birth of John”
 KZ = Psalm 27
Māryā = the beginning of the Psalm: “The Lord (is my light)”

Example 3



(p. 52) *d-Yawsef* = “(Advent Sunday) of Joseph’s Dream(-Vision)”
 KW = Psalm 26
dunayn = the beginning of the Psalm: “Vindicate me (Lord)”

Example 4

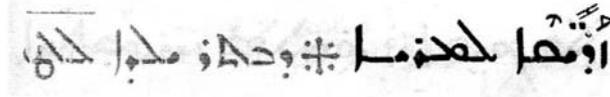


(p. 52) *da-qdām yaldā* = “(Advent Sunday) before the Nativity”

LG = Psalm 33

šabbah^w = the beginning of the Psalm: “Praise (the Lord, O you righteous ones)”

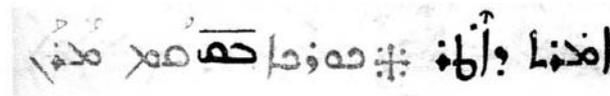
Example 5



(p. 52) *d-bātar yaldā* = “(Sunday) after the Nativity”

LṬ = Psalm 39

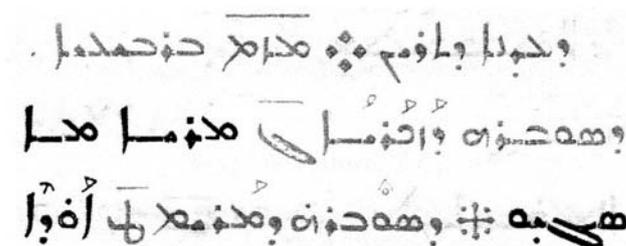
Example 6



(p. 52) After the division marker: *kurrākā* = “response”

BQ = *b-qālā*, meaning “according to the tune;” *qām Māran* are the first words of the tune: “Our Lord is risen”

Example 7



1st line: (p. 53) After the upper division marker: *MZM* = *mazmōrā* = “Psalm”
ba-rbī‘āyā = in the fourth tone

2nd line: *d-subbāreh da-Zkaryā* = “(Sunday) of the Annunciation to Zechariah” – *G* = Psalm 3; *Māryā mā sgīw* = the beginning of the Psalm: “Lord, how numerous are (my foes)”

3rd line: After the lower division marker: *d-subbārāh d-Maryam* = “(Sunday) of the Annunciation to Mary” – *Ṭ* = Psalm 9 – *awdē* = the beginning of the Psalm: “I will praise (the Lord with all my heart)”

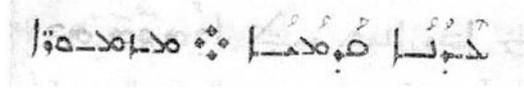
Example 8



(Q 61) Before the division marker: ŠW = *šubḥā lāk* = “Praise be to you”

After the division marker: *šubḥā leh l-ḥad ba-tlātā* = “Praise be to the One in Three (the Trinity)”

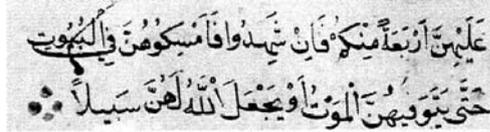
Example 9



The division marker in this Syriac edition consists of four points arranged in the form of a cross; it serves to divide stanzas, textual sections, and primary sentences. The marker by itself looks like this:



Compare the division marker for verses that one finds in a Qur’anic manuscript:



(detail:)



5.3 Summary

This analysis of the normal abbreviations found in the Syriac daily office edition has demonstrated their use to indicate the following categories: doxologies; psalms; responsorial texts, antiphons, and responses; tunes, melodies, and modes; and biblical readings. These results are certainly connected with the etymological analysis of the three Qur’anic expressions of literary scope, of whose Syro-Aramaic origin there is now no doubt. But the results are also confirmed liturgically through the explanation of the Christian Syriac Good Friday as the precursor to the Islamic Friday, as I have shown above. The reconstruction of these facts, relevant as they are to the history of religions, allow us to consider it well-founded to attempt to place the so-called “mysterious letters in the Qur’an” in their religio-historical setting and thus to interpret them anew in connection with the liturgical traditions of Syrian Christianity.

6. The “Mysterious Letters” in the Qur’ān

6.1 Introductory Remarks

In order to forestall overly optimistic expectations, I must initially note that the Qur’ān—despite the Syro-Aramaic origin of its name—should only be considered as partially connected with a Christian Syrian liturgy, in that this liturgy originally formed the foundation of the Qur’ān. We must leave it to future studies to show that this liturgy is to be found in the oldest portions of the so-called “Meccan” Surahs; such work will also show that there is far more Christian Syrian liturgy to be found in these earliest sections of the Qur’ān than scholars have thus far seen. However, this liturgy is not the same as those Eastern and Western Syrian liturgies with which scholars are familiar and whose roots stretch back into early Christianity. It is certain that the Qur’ānic liturgy is older in some parts than Islam; indeed, as we already know, it goes back to a pre-Nicene Christianity and is similar to an early Christian Syrian liturgy. However, its predecessors seem to have vanished in the mists of history; we have no written evidence for it whatsoever before the Qur’ān. If one adds to this recognition the confused circumstances under which laypeople apparently collected, edited, and sometimes misunderstood the Qur’ānic materials at a later date, one can begin to understand the scholarly discomfort with the efforts to disentangle and historically reconstruct this text.

Theodor Nöldeke’s *Geschichte des Qorans* ([History of the Qur’ān]1909–38; ed. Schwally, Bergsträsser, Pretzl) provided western Qur’ānic scholarship with a crucial recognition, namely, that the Islamic exegetes’ rough division of the Qur’ānic text into earlier Meccan and later Medinan Surahs must be chronologically sub-divided into a greater number of time periods. Analysis of the sigla (or “mysterious letters”) has led us to the further understanding that these letters are exclusively associated with the beginnings of Meccan Surahs (with the exception of Surahs 2 and 3, although their beginnings should in fact be assigned to the Meccan period). On the basis of this knowledge, and in interpreting the sigla, we will need to distinguish between the first and second Meccan periods. Naturally, the liturgical portions of the Qur’ān belong to the first period; there we will find sigla that have a relationship to the liturgy. We can assign the beginning of a sermon (cf. Q 75:17–19) to the second period; in that group are preserved portions whose beginning invokes the revealed “written text” (*kitāb*), of which the Qur’ān understands itself to be a part. Some scholars have already noted that some sigla stand at the beginning of such Surahs, a recognition that will make the meaning of a whole set of sigla comprehensible. Because these latter sigla are, generally speaking, not identical with those of the Syrian liturgy, and because

the pre-Qur'anic liturgical tradition was apparently irreparably lost by this point in time, it is possible that we have only interpretive proposals to make based on comparisons with liturgical texts; our hope, though, is that these will best allow for the unique ways in which the Qur'anic text was edited.

With all of this said, we can now proceed to the explanation of the individual sigla.

6.2 Concerning the Meaning of the Individual Sigla

Given that the Qur'an is a liturgical book (*qəryānā* ["lectionary"]), and corresponding to the tradition of the Syrian daily office, some Surahs begin with a Psalm verse. This is the case with Surahs 57, 59, 61, 62, and 64 (and possibly also Surahs 67 and 87). So, for example, in Surah 62:1, we read: *yusabbiḥ l(i)-Allāh mā fī s-samāwāt wa mā fī-l-'arḍ* ("Let all that is in heaven and on earth praise God"). The Hebrew reads: יְהוָה יְשַׁמְּחֵם וְיִצְרָח יַמִּים וְקַלְרִמֶּשׁ בָּם *yəhal' lū-hū šāmayim wā-'ārəš yammīm wə-kāl [=kəl] romēs* (Ps. 69:34: "Let heaven and earth praise him!").

Sigla 1–3: ص / Ṣ, ق / Q, ن / N (Surahs 38:1; 50:1; 68:1)

We should view the fact that the Qur'an mentions the Psalms on nine occasions as a pointer to the Psalter, which was a part of the pre-Qur'anic liturgy just as it was of the Syrian liturgy. Consequently, as in the Syrian daily office, individual letters in the Qur'an can serve as numbers, pointing to particular Psalms in the Psalter. Of course, the use of these Psalms disappeared in the later Islamic tradition. As a result, the following three letters in the Qur'an can possibly indicate three Psalms: 1) ص / Ṣ (Q 38:1) would refer to Psalm 90; 2) ق / Q (Q 50:1) would refer to Psalm 100; and 3) ن / N (Q 68:1) would refer to Psalm 50.⁵⁷ One could also interpret the ص / Ṣ as صِبْأوت / *ṣba'ūt* ("Lord of Hosts" = "the Powerful, the Almighty"), the ق / Q as قُدُوس / *quddūs* or قدوس / *quddūs* ("holy [is/be he]"). In fact, both expressions appear in the "Trisagion": "Holy (are you, God), (holy are you,) Strong...."

Siglum 4: يس / YS = بس / BS

At the beginning of Q 36, there are letters that are traditionally read as يس / *ys*, from which the Islamic tradition has developed a personal name (*Yāsīn*). However, reading the letters as بس / *bs* (because the diacritical points originally did not exist) appears to make more sense, as an abbreviation for the *basmala*, as a normal formula at the beginning of that liturgy. The Syro-Aramaic would have read بܫܡܘܫܝܢ / *b-šēm*, which would correspond to the Arabic بسم / *b-ism* = بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم / *b-ismi llāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm* ("in the name of the gracious and merciful God"). This siglum, then, would

huwa r-Rabb (“The Lord is alive!”), والله / *wa-llāh* (“in God[‘s name]!”). The Qur’ānic abbreviation حم / *ḥm*, then, is a formulaic intensification of the divine origin of the text that follows it.

Siglum 9: عسق / ‘SQ = حعم / ‘šQ

In Q 42:2, the siglum عسق / ‘šq follows logically upon the abbreviation حم / *ḥm*. If we transcribe it into Syro-Aramaic, we have the abbreviation حعم / ‘šq, which stands for חַעַם עֲמֵהּ מַדְבָּעַה / *ḥā šme-h qaddīšā*. This phrase, brought over into Arabic, is علا اسمه القدوس / *‘alā (i)smu-hu l-quddūs* (“High [= praised] be his holy name!”). In this case we can combine this abbreviation with the previous one into a coherent sentence, reading as follows in Syro-Aramaic and Arabic:

חַעַם עֲמֵהּ מַדְבָּעַה / *ḥayy(h)ū Māryā ‘lā šme-h qaddīšā*
 حي هو الرب علا اسمه القدوس / *ḥayy(un) huwa r-Rabb ‘alā (i)smu-hu l-quddūs*
 “As the Lord lives—praised be his holy name!”

Just as this formula emphasizes the divine origin of the revelatory text it precedes, so do the Surahs ascribed to the second Meccan period use the following four sigla for the same purpose: الم / *ALM*; الر / *ALR*; المر / *ALMR*; المص / *ALMṢ*.

Siglum 10: الم / *ALM* (*Surahs* 2:1; 3:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 32:1)

Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, in his 1979 study in Arabic entitled قس ونبي / *Qass wa-nabī* (“A Priest and a Prophet”), conjectured that this abbreviation, which appears six times in the Qur’ān, represents the Syro-Aramaic letters ܐܠܡ / *ALM*, standing for the Syro-Aramaic sentence ܐܡܪ ܠܝ ܡܪܝܬܝ / *emar lī Māryā* (= Arabic قال لي الرب / *qāla lī ar-Rabb* [“The Lord spoke to me”]).⁶⁰ This stereotypical sentence appears often in the Old Testament with regard to the prophets. This reading and explanation will be confirmed by the analysis of the next abbreviation.

Siglum 11: الر / *ALR* (*Surahs* 10:1; 11:1; 12:1; 14:1; 15:1)

As the afore-mentioned author rightly surmised, these letters, which appear five times in the Qur’ān, correspond to the Syro-Aramaic letters ܐܠܪ / *ALR*. Consequently, we should read these letters as an acronym for the following Syro-Aramaic words: ܐܡܪ ܠܝ ܪܒܒܐ / *emar lī Rabbā*, which would correspond (as above) to the Arabic قال لي الرب / *qāla lī ar-Rabb* (“The Great One [the Lord] spoke to me”).⁶¹ This interpretation has recently been assigned in Internet forums to the writers who go under the pseudonyms Haï Bar-Zeev

logical steps, which actually employ nothing other than the historico-critical method, that we could hope to come closer to an objective solution of this problem.

To the critical observer, the problem will by no means appear to be solved, in that the concrete proofs for the suggestions I have made here could not be provided. Unfortunately, given the state of affairs concerning the Qur'anic documentary materials, we can at the moment hardly meet this justified desire, which ultimately results in the demand to produce the "*Ur-Qur'ān*." Nonetheless, even if one were to discover the sought-after *Ur-Qur'ān* by means of an unexpected happenstance, we would still have this same problem of the "mysterious letters," because the creators of the Qur'anic sigla were well-schooled in the tradition and have once and for all exited this world. This, of course, explains the perplexity of the Qur'anic exegetes and most clearly illustrates the absence of the "unbroken" oral transmission of the text that has been claimed by Islamic tradition. Therefore, it would be unnecessary to speculate as to whether one or another of the letters in question could be interpreted in another way. Unfortunately, we cannot expect final certainty, given the conditions I have indicated. Therefore, the most important contribution of this analysis must remain a closer definition of the function that these sigla had in their Qur'anic contexts.

Concerning the Christian Syrian tradition, however, we are in a quite fortunate position, in that this tradition has continued unbroken into our own day, with the result that we can learn what these sigla mean individually. It might appear that adducing this tradition only serves as a makeshift aid when we attempt to solve the problem of the Qur'anic sigla; however, this attempt has never yet been made. After all, as we have shown, all the Qur'anic sigla were to be read originally as Aramaic. We must continue to wait to see if this approach and its results (including the expressions which constitute the framework of the Qur'ān, which all point, from the beginning, to a written Syro-Aramaic cultural tradition) will prove convincing.

A further problem that this study has made quite clear is the absolute necessity of the knowledge of Aramaic (alongside Arabic, of course), not only for understanding the language of the Qur'ān, but especially for the historico-linguistic reconstruction of a text that has been mis-read and mis-interpreted in innumerable places (despite the legend of an oral transmission). Without this prerequisite of understanding Aramaic, all efforts to overcome the manifold problems of the Qur'anic text will fall flat. The realization of ambitious and desirable projects, such as the *Corpus coranicum*, will not help to solve these problems alone.

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Notes

- 1 aṭ-Ṭabarī, Abū Ġaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmiʿ al bayān ʿan taʿwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (Qurʾānic commentary), 30 parts in 12 vols., 3rd ed. (Cairo: Shirkat Maktaba, 1968), I:86–96.
- 2 For better readability, the “” will be replaced by the letter “a” for “a(lif)” in the following.
- 3 Rudi Paret, ed., *Der Koran, Wege der Forschung*, no. 326 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), xiii.
- 4 NB: Bellamy has also produced a more recent article: “Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113 (1993), 562–573; cf. especially section 12, which bears the title “Again the Mysterious Letters.” This article has been reproduced in Ibn Warraq, ed. (with translations), *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), pp. 508–510.
- 5 Paret, *Koran*, xxi f.
- 6 *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 75 (1921), pp. 1–20; discussed in Paret, *Koran*, pp. 330–335.
- 7 Surahs will be indicated by the letter Q (for Qurʾān).
- 8 Paret, *Koran*, 335.
- 9 Paret, *Koran*, 333.
- 10 *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients* 13 (1923), pp. 191–226; discussed in Paret, *Koran*, pp. 336–373.
- 11 Paret, *Koran*, p. 336.
- 12 Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Korans*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, edited by F. Schwally (Berlin, 1919), 68f.
- 13 *Akten des 24. internationalen Orientalisten-Kongresses* (München, 28. August— 4. September 1957), ed. Herbert Franke (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag in Komm., 1959), pp. 276–279; discussed in Paret, *Koran*, pp. 374–378.
- 14 *Studia Islamica* 16 (1962), 5–11; discussed in Paret, *Koran*, pp. 379–385.
- 15 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 9th ed., s.v. “Koran.”
- 16 Cf. on this topic Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qurʾān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), p. 233f.
- 17 Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin): 1st ed. (Das Arabische Buch, 2001), pp. 54ff.; 2nd ed. (Hans Schiler, 2004), pp. 81ff.; 3rd ed. (Hans Schiler, 2007), pp. 83ff.
- 18 Paret, *Koran*, p. 358.
- 19 Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 182.
- 20 Cf. the English form “trace” as well as the German forms *Trasse* (*roadway, trail*) and *Trassee*, all of which come from the French word *tracer* (“to draw a line”), apparently from a vulgar Latin form, which itself derived from the classical Latin *tractum*. The aural similarity between the French *tracer* and the Syriac *traṣ* (with the same semantic contents) must be as much a coincidence as that between the Syro-Aramaic metathesis *ܣܪܩܬܐ* / *srāṭā* (“line”) > the Qurānic *صراط* / *ṣirāt* and *سراط* / *sirāṭ* and the Latin form *strata*. Cf. here the new etymological interpretation by the author in his English edition *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A*

Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007), pp. 226ff. Cf. also Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, pp. 195f.

- 21 Mannā, 633b; *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Thes.), II:3386, penult., Spec. ܫܘܪܬ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ (šūraṭ kṭāb) textus, ܫܘܪܬ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ (b-šūraṭ kṭāb), Eus. *Hist. Eccl.* iii.37(38); (3387) ܫܘܪܬ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ (kullāh šūraṭ kṭāb d-’attiqtā w-daḥdattā), totus textus Veteris et Novi Test. (“the whole text of the Old and the New Testament”), Chr. Eccl. § ii.215; ib. 481...; unde ܫܘܪܬܐ (šūrtā) etiam sine ܫܘܪܬܐ (kṭāb) valet textus Scripturarum, B.O. iii. i. 87, 97, 153, 166, 174, 261; ܫܘܪܬܐ (šūrtā) “Vetus et Novum Testamentum,” Ass. C.B.V. iii. 280 ult.; ܫܘܪܬܐ ܕܠܝܩܬܐ (šūrtā d-ewangelistē) textus evangeliorum [the text of the Evangelists], Syn. ii. Eph. 149. 2.
- 22 Cf. on this form *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, pp. 295f., especially n. 353.
- 23 Three different famous Arab philologists are known by this name; the earliest died in 793, the second in 830, and the most recent in 920.
- 24 The form فاعيل / fa’īl, attested by many Arabic adjectives and substantives, arose at an earlier period in a region in which Aramaic was spoken. We know this because the form belongs to the Aramaic verbal paradigm rather than the Arabic one. As is well-known, Arabic builds its passive participles on the first stem with an m-prefix according to the form مفعول / ma-fūl. Nonetheless, the Arab philologists occasionally recognized the corresponding meaning of the form فاعيل / fa’īl, but this recognition depended upon context. So, for example, *Lisān* often explains this form with فاعيل بمعنى مفعول (“fa’īl in the sense of ma-fūl”).
- 25 Cf. Carl Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik*, 8th ed. (Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1960), 142, for the paradigms of the verbs with medial w / y, especially their passive participles.
- 26 If al-Farrā’ wanted to think that such a form must be restricted to nouns, he may have had in mind an Arabic substantive like ميزة / mīza (“distinction, quality”). If this was the case, he did not recognize that this word as well is a substantivized passive participle according to the Syro-Aramaic verbal paradigms and that, consequently, it is not morphologically different from the Qur’ānic participial adjective صيرى / šīrā.
- 27 This understanding is proven by the following verse 23, which seems to be a commentary on vv. 19–22. The text there should be understood thus: “These are nothing but names that you and your fathers named, and concerning which God has sent down no authority at all (by means of a revealed writing). (In this) They (the people addressed) follow exclusively (their) speculation (الظن / az-zann) and whatever their souls (i.e., each one according to his own perception or sense) devise. In this they have preserved from their Lord the correct guidance (the correct teaching)” (literally: “In this the correct guidance has come to them”). The expression ما تهوى الانفس / mā tahwā l-anfus comes from Aramaic and traces back to the Syro-Aramaic terms ܐܗܘܐ / ahwā (“to create, to invent”) and ܢܦܫܐ / napšā (“soul”), with the meaning “that which one desires” = “desire, wish” (cf. Mannā, 460a, under ܢܦܫܐ / napšā, (5): شهوة / šahwa, raḡba). Following this meaning, the anonymous commentator (in verse 23) read and understood correctly the Syro-Aramaic word (šīrā) that was present in Q 53:22 at that time (in place of the later word صيرى / šīrā, as it was mis-read in the canonical edition of the Qur’ān), but Ṭabarī and the other “authorities” to which he appealed overlooked this fact.

- 28 E. S. Drower and R. Macuch, eds., *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 323b.
- 29 A. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 73, n. 1, cites a biblical text (Daniel 3:33) for the use of the biblical Aramaic word 𐤒𐤕 / *āt* in the sense of “a sign wrought by God,” but he is wrong. The double expression *ātōhī w-tīmhōhī* (Peshitta: *ātwāteh w-ṭēdmrāṭeh* [“his signs and his wonders”]) makes clear that, in the biblical context, the meaning of 𐤒𐤕 / *āt* is in the sense of “wondrous signs”
- 30 For more on this topic, cf. *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, pp. 106ff.
- 31 *Foreign Vocabulary*, pp. 72f.
- 32 A more recent diminutive form of 𐤒𐤕 / *āta* appears to be 𐤒𐤕𐤕 / *ātūtā* (“letter, symbol”); cf. here Nöldeke’s *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik*, 78, Diminutiva, §134: “Cf. also §112, as well as the diminutives at §122 formed by the repetition of the third radical.” 𐤒𐤕𐤕 / *ātūtā* would be an appropriate addition to the examples that Nöldeke offers; however, we should not exclude the possibility that this word is rather a more recent secondary form of the plural form 𐤒𐤕𐤕 / *ātṭwātā*.
- 33 The references, respectively, are to *Mandäische Grammatik*, 110; *Lexicon Syriacum*, 53b; *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch*, 19b; and *Thesaurus Syriacus*, I:412.
- 34 *Foreign Vocabulary*, 72: “The struggles of the early Muslim philologists to explain the word are interestingly set forth in LA, xviii, 66ff. The word has no root in Arabic, and is obviously, as von Kremer noted [n. 6: *Ideen*, 226 n.; see also Sprenger, *Leben*, ii, 419 n.; Cheikho, *Naṣrānīya*, 181; and Margoliouth, *ERE*, x, 539], a borrowing from Syr(iac) or Aram(aic).”
- 35 *Ibid.*, 73: “The word occurs in the old poetry, e.g., in Imrū’ul-Qais, lxx, 1 (Ahlwardt, *Divans*, 160), and so was in use before the time of Muḥammad.”
- 36 Franz Praetorius, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 56 (1902), 688f., has already given attention to plural forms like these in the Aramaic dialects, which arise from the contraction of “rising” diphthongs, as we see them in Arabic. This correct observation received negative criticism at the time from Nöldeke, who expressed the following opinion in his *Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1904), 55 (under “II”): “Praetorius will find little agreement concerning his identification of the (classical Arabic) رعاة (*ru’āt*), أساة (*’usāt*), سقاة (*suqāt*) with the (Syro-Aramaic) 𐤒𐤕𐤕𐤕 (*rā’awwātā*), 𐤒𐤕𐤕𐤕 (*āsawwātā*), 𐤒𐤕𐤕𐤕 (*šāqawwātā*) (‘shepherd,’ ‘healer/physician,’ ‘giving,’ respectively)...” With this critique Nöldeke demonstrates that he did not recognize this sound-shift through contraction, as the argumentation which follows also shows. However, he is correct to surmise a middle-stage between classical Syriac and the Arabic form, a stage that must have been the direct predecessor to the Arabic form. If one begins from the classical Syriac form, one can well imagine the three-stage sound-shift as follows (using the example of رعاة [*ru’āt*]: a) Syriac **rā’awwātā* > b) vernacular Aramaic *rā’wātā* > Arabic *ru’āt*. The change from the Syro-Aramaic 𐤒𐤕𐤕𐤕 / *ātṭwātā* (“symbols, letters”) to the Qur’anic-Arabic form (in pause) ائثث / *ātāt* (therefore: *ātṭwāt* > *ātāt*) also corresponds quite regularly to this last schema.
- 37 The verbal root ائثث / *atata*, which sounds odd in Arabic, apparently traces back to the Syro-Aramaic variant 𐤕𐤕 / *yatteṭ* (Mannā, 319a: اوجد. ابدع. كَوْن. / *kawwana*, *awḡada*, *abda’a* [“to build, to make, to produce”]). This term in turn seems to be a

Syro-Aramaic Afel form. Such vacillations between the Arabic and Syro-Aramaic verbal systems are by no means rare in the Qurʾān; a close investigation of Qurʾānic orthography would bring more of them to light.

- 43 The Arabic بَيَّنَّ / *bayyana*, as a loan-word from the Syro-Aramaic بַעַ / *bayyen*, has similar semantic nuances, as Mannā (56a) indicates: “to explain, to make clear, to make comprehensible, to teach.”
- 44 The Arabic expressions الجمعة / *al-ġumʿa* (“Friday”) and جامع / *ġāmiʿ* (“mosque”) both appear to be loan-translations from the Syro-Aramaic כַּנְשָׂא / *kenšā*, כְּנֻשְׂיָא / *knušyā* (“assembly, gathering of the community”) or כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂיָא / *bēt knušyā*, כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂתָּא / *bēt knuštā* (“house of assembly, community house”); cf. on this topic Mannā, 345a, and the Arabic expressions it gives as correspondences.
- 45 The original German gives another equivalent name, the German “Sonnabend,” which is one German name for “Saturday.” The suffix “-abend” means “evening,” so that the word itself literally means “Sunday Eve” (to use the parallel English structure from days like “Christmas Eve”), or “Saturday.”
- 46 Cf. *Thesaurus*, II:2984, 29: “כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂתָּא sic vocatur propterea quod propter Christum in ea crucifixum כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂתָּא (‘*rubtā* is called by this name because on the day on which Christ was crucified, the sun set and darkness reigned).”
- 47 Cf. Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, 2nd printing (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), pp. 418b f.
- 48 See the note in Gesenius, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch*, 615b, under IV: עֶרֶב, l. 9: Heinrich Lewy, *Die semitischen Fremdwörter im Griechischen* (Berlin: 1895; reprint: Hildesheim [Olms], 2004).
- 49 This legendary report goes on to say that the Qurayš gathered on this day (for prayer), and that this particular Luʾayy (= Levi) typically gave a sermon before them, in which he announced to the Qurayš the coming prophetic mission of his grandson and expressed the desire (in the cited verse) that he could enjoy this experience just once.
- 50 Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 1937) (362 pages); Arabic portion: Kitāb al-*maṣāḥif li-l-ḥāfiẓ abī Bakr ʿAbdallāh b. abī Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Aṣʿaṭ as-Siġistānī* (Cairo, 1936) (223 pages).
- 51 *Thesaurus*, II:2984, under כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂתָּא / *ʿrubtā*, l. 23: כְּבֵת כְּנֻשְׂתָּא / *ʿrubtā rabbtā* (along with other expressions for “Good Friday”).
- 52 On this topic cf. the new interpretation contained in the present author’s contribution to the volume edited by Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin, *The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), especially the section on the Christian symbolism of the Dome of the Rock. In addition to the argument presented there, we should add that there is actually a crypt under the stones themselves, a discovery that provides archaeological support for the idea of the Dome of the Rock (= “stone grave”) as the burial site of Christ. Further, there are two traditions that have survived from the prior, Christian period into contemporary Islam. First, the Dome of the Rock is the pilgrimage site recommended for Muslims, and this pilgrimage only “counts” as complete if one visits the crypt (parallel to the Christian visit to the grave in Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre). Second, there is a custom in which it is mainly Muslim women who give themselves to prayer in the Dome of the Rock; this may connect with the tradition attested in the Gospels, according to which the visitors to the grave of Christ on the morning of the Sunday of the

Resurrection were women (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1)—not, of course, that we should thereby exclude other traditions.

- 53 Again, see the essay in Ohlig and Puin, *The Hidden Origins of Islam*.
- 54 The edition in use is *Breviarium iuxta ritum Ecclesiae Antiochenaе Syrorum*. Pars autumnalis. Volumen secundum (Mausili: Typis Fratrum Praedicatorum, 1886).
- 55 C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*, 2nd ed. (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1928), 296b, ܡܚܬܐ (*yaḏ'ā*): "1. indicium ("index, specification"), 2. signum ("label"), 3. custos (in libro) ("mark"), 4. notitia ("notice"), 5. signum vocalis aut accentus ("vowel- or accent-mark").
- 56 *Thesaurus* (I:1559).
- 57 Following the Peshitta, the three Psalms begin as follows: "A Prayer of Moses: 'Lord, you have been for us a refuge for all eternity'" (Ps. 90); "Praise the Lord, all the earth; serve the Lord with joy!" (Ps. 100); "The Lord, the God of all gods, has spoken and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun unto its setting" (Ps. 50).
- 58 Ṭabarī (XXIV:39) also cites another tradition concerning this abbreviation that is closer to the truth and that supposedly traces back to Ibn 'Abbās, as the second of the four opinions he gives at the beginning of his commentary on Q 40.
- 59 Biblical testimonies to the phrase ܡܫܝܚܐ ܡܪܝܡܐ / ḥayy(h)ū Māryā: 1 Sam. 25:26 ("And now, my Lord, as YHWH lives and your soul lives") (וַעֲתָה אֲדַבְּרֵי חַי־יְהוָה וְחַי־נַפְשְׁךָ); 1 Sam. 26:16 ("This thing is not good that you have done, as Yahweh lives"); 1 Kings 18:10 ("As Yahweh, your God, lives"); Jer. 44:26 ("But hear the word of YHWH, all you Jews that live in the land of Egypt: 'See, I have sworn by my great name,' says YHWH, 'that no one from Judah living anywhere in Egypt will ever again invoke my name, in saying "As surely as the Lord YHWH lives!"') (לְכֵן שָׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה כְּלִי־הַיְהוּדָה הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הַנְּבִי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּשֵׁמִי הַגָּדוֹל אֲמַר יְהוָה אִם־יְהִי עוֹד שְׁמִי דְבַר־יְהוָה כְּלִי־הַיְהוּדָה הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם (נְקַרְא בְּפִי כְּלִי־אִישׁ יְהוּדָה אֲמַר חַי־אֲדַבְּרֵי יְהוָה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם).
- 60 A French translation of this work appeared under the title *Le Prêtre et le Prophète: aux sources du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose, 2001) and the author's real name, Joseph Azzi. An English translation entitled *The Priest and the Prophet* appeared in 2005 from The Pen Publishers in Los Angeles.
- 61 On this topic Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī notes (p. 26, n. 75):
 "الر" ، و "الم" وغيرها من الحروف السرية الواردة في أوائل السور ... يقول فيها المفسرون : " الله أعلم بمراده ". " الر " ترد هكذا خمس مرات و " الم " ست مرات وتبتدئ الآيات بعدها بأمر الهي في أهمية الكتاب ووحية الالهي مثل : " الر . تلك آيات الكتاب " ، و " الر . كتاب أحكمت آيته " ، و " الم . تنزِيل الكتاب " ... وقد تعني ما كان يرد عادة على لسان الأنبياء : " قال لي الرب " ، وفي الإرامية : أمر لي مرهو" (sic) (= مریم) : (أ . ل . م .) وذلك للدلالة على مصدر الكتاب الالهي.
 "Concerning the (abbreviations) 'ALR' and 'ALM,' as well as the other mysterious letters that stand at the beginning of Suras, the commentators have this to say: 'What he means by them, God himself knows best.' 'ALR' appears five times, and 'ALM' appears six times. After these abbreviations we find verses with a divine statement regarding the meaning of the text and its divine revelation, e.g., 'ALR; these are the written signs of the book,' and 'ALR; a book whose written signs were taught,' and 'ALM; the sending-down of the book' ... These could correspond to the statement commonly on the prophets' lips: 'The Lord spoke to me,' or in

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- Aramaic, ‘Emar lī Mōryō (= Māryā) (ALM), and thus serve as a pointer to the divine origin of the book.”
- 62 Haï Bar-Zeev, *Une lecture juive du Coran* (Paris: Editeurs Berg International, 2005), but he refers here to our other author, Hanna Zakarias, *De Moïse à Mohammed*, 2 vols (Cahors: privately published, 1955–56), who in turn points to Kurt Hruby’s work.
- 63 One notices here the agreement of Q 3:41 and the Peshitta version of Luke 1:22; the former uses the term *ramzan* (meaning “by sign” = “sign-language”), while the latter reads *w-hū mermaz rāmez (h)wā l-hōn* (“but he made signs to them,” that is, “he made his intentions known to them by sign language”).
- 64 Cf. Anton Baumstark, *Festbrevier und Kirchenjahr der syrischen Jakobiten* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1910), 169: “Between our Sunday for the dedication of churches and the Christmas feast, there developed completely what we might call the ‘Advent’ of the Jacobite liturgical year. We know that Antioch already had a season of preparation before the feast of Christ’s birth at the time of Severus [bishop from 512 to 518].... Correspondingly, the liturgical year of the Jacobites originally had two Sundays in preparation for Christmas, for both of which the Gospel pericope was taken from λ [Luke]; more specifically, the first celebrated the annunciation of the birth of John the Baptist, and the second that to Mary. The lectionary of the ninth century, in agreement with three of the earliest extant choral books, restricts itself in its pre-Christmas services to this “double annunciation” celebration....” Concerning the Nestorian liturgical year, cf. 170.
- 65 Cf. the new interpretation of Q 97 by the present author in the essay “Christmas in the Qur’ān” in the present anthology, a translation of “Weihnachten im Koran,” in Christoph Burgmer, ed., *Streit um den Koran: Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe* [Quarrel about the Koran: The Luxenberg Debate: Points of View and Backgrounds], 3rd rev. ed. (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007), pp. 62–68.
- 66 Concerning “Yah,” cf. Ex. XV.2; Thes. I:1563, *يه* / Yah: nomen Dei; possibly a Status absolutus from *يه* / *yaṭ* (“essence”); Thes. I:1840. Cf. also Mannā, 306a: “(Yah): الرب الأزلي (“the eternal God”). Concerning the possible translation of “to be greatly praised,” and the transitive usage of the Qur’ānic *كبر* / *kabbara* in the sense of the Latin meaning *magnifico* (“to praise greatly, to exalt”), cf. Surahs 2:185; 17:111; 22:37; 74:3.