

Christmas in the Koran, Or, What is Left of Islam?

a review by Rebecca Bynum (December 2014)



[Christmas in the Koran: Luxenberg, Syriac, and the Near Eastern and Judeo-Christian Background of Islam](#)

Edited by Ibn Warraq

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With this volume, Ibn Warraq has succeeded in proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Koran is a human document, with a human history. These studies will go a long way toward breaking through the fantastic fairy-tale claims Muslims make about the Koran: as perfect and “uncreated,” revealed by an angel to an illiterate Arab in the Hijaz, memorized and passed down by an unbroken oral tradition, and never edited or altered by human hands.

Anyone having read the Koran’s “turgid, verbose and shapeless”¹ prose can instantly imagine it to be full of transcription and/or translation errors. For decades, a few brave philological scholars have toiled diligently to unravel the knotty strands of the language of the Koran and what they have found will astound the world if the world will take a moment away from its chronic, superficial obsessions to actually listen and to let it sink in.

The entire Islamic edifice rests on the story of its origins and that story has utterly collapsed under scientific scrutiny.

Christmas in the Koran contains a complete, compelling and methodical argument, showcasing the work of sixteen prominent scholars in the field of Koranic philology, which demolishes the standard Islamic narrative. I will attempt to summarize a few key questions their work has illuminated.

Claim: The Koran originated in the area around Mecca in the Hijaz.

False. Not only the Koran, but Classical Arabic itself arose in Syrio-Palestine or *Arabia Petraea*. The Arabs of south-central Arabia or *Arabia Deserta* at that time used the south Arabian script which does not require the diacritical marks to differentiate the sounds of the Arabic language. Around the time of the Koran's origin, this script had been in use for over twelve hundred years. On the other hand, the northern Arabian areas evolved a writing tradition using Aramaic script and then added diacritical marks in order to produce the correct Arabic phonemes or sounds, which is how the Koran is written. Furthermore, the Koran exhibits numerous Syrian Aramaic, or Syriac, words. Couple that with the fact that there is no archaeological evidence for an Arab conquest of Syria (as there is none for an Arab conquest of Persia or for the grand Islamic cities that were supposed to have existed in southern Spain for that matter), and one cannot escape the conclusion that the line between history and stories has been blurred in the Arab mind for a long time. The Koran simply could not have originated in the Hijaz or it would have been written in the script used in that area, a script much better suited to the language. In the present volume, Robert Kerr makes this compelling case.

Claim: The Koran came from a largely pagan area and its clear-cut monotheism was a great advance over paganism.

False. The area, especially the north, was heavily Christianized by the seventh century with grand churches found as far south as the Yemen. The preponderance of the evidence also suggests that the Koranic understanding of the Old Testament comes not from Jewish sources, as has been supposed in the past, but from Christian Monophysite, Ebionite and Nestorian sources. John Bowman argues that the Koran was also greatly influenced by an innovation from that period called the Diatessaron which combined all the Gospels into one.

Middle East Christians also exhibited a marked tendency to favor an increasing literal interpretation of the bible along with a gradual abandonment of the Trinity concept. There were also groups who revered Jesus as a prophet, but not as divine, and kept to the laws of Moses – the so-called Judeo-Christians. There were also many austere groups of monks who chanted and prayed head to floor several times a day. Furthermore there were two prior claimants to the status of "Paraclete in human form" who lived before the time of Muhammad. "Paraclete" is the Greek word denoting the Spirit of Truth or The Comforter – the spiritual presence of Jesus he promised to send after his ascension. The Comforter was interpreted by these same literal-minded Christians to denote a person, not a spirit. "Muhammad" is the Syriac word for Paraclete, also meaning "The Praised One."

Claim: The Koran has not been altered by human hands.

False. Not only is there abundant evidence for numerous layers of editing, but also transcription errors, additions and mistranslations. The Koran did not spring forth fully formed, but is more likely the result of a centuries-long process, built up layer upon layer.

Through the painstaking work of these scholars, at the bottom of these layers is glimpsed what seems to be Christian liturgical literature written in Syrio-Aramaic (Syriac). In other words, a Christian book has been shown to form the foundation of the Koran. The same conclusion has been reached by numerous scholars using different methods going back decades.

To make matters even more complicated, though this original book had been translated from Syriac into Arabic, there was great resistance to using the diacritical marking system as a phonetic guide (possibly because the original "sacred book" was written in Syrio-Aramaic and required no marks), so the Koran was transcribed without these marks for a long period. This is the equivalent to writing in English without vowels. When the diacritical marks were finally reintroduced, many words were ambiguous and subject to interpretation. Again, this militates against the notion of a long oral tradition which would have preserved the meaning where the script was unclear.

As demonstrated by Munther Younes, the traditional Koranic passage, "By the runners (assumed to be horses) snorting / And lighting a spark (with their hooves) / And raiding in the morning (a possible addition) / And they stirred up dust in it / And they went with it into the middle of a gathering," is revealed instead to be "(And) those (maidens) going out early in the morning / And kindling a flame / By which they chose to do a good deed / Which they extended to the multitudes." This was found simply by changing the diacritical marks. In this way the passage makes better syntactical as well as meaningful sense. As it stands now, as much as one fifth of the Koran makes no sense at all and Muslim Koranic exegetes disagree on the meaning of many passages.

The main thrust of this collection, however, centers on the important work of Christoph Luxenberg. The method Luxenberg uses is to translate problematic parts of the Koran back into Syriac and then to look for words (and syntax, etc.) which are likely to have been mistranslated (most words have more than one meaning) and then to translate it back using the translation which better fits the context.

Here is the traditional Sura 108 with the problem words underlined: "Verily, we have given you abundance / so pray to thy Lord and sacrifice. / Verily, it is he who hateth thee who is the docked one (referring to the devil's tail)."

After Luxenberg's careful analysis it is revealed to be a verse reminiscent of St. Peter's First Epistle: "We have given you the virtue of constancy / so pray to your Lord and persevere in prayer / Your adversary (the devil) is (then) the loser."

In this volume, Luxenberg discusses many aspects of the life of Jesus found in the Koran including the Last Supper (Surah 5: The Table), Mary and the miraculous birth (Surah 19: Mary) and the night of the Nativity (Surah 97: The Night of Destiny or Power). As Luxenberg points out:

This linguistic aspect of the Qur'ān being confirmed historically as of Syriac origin leads the author henceforth to conclude that not only the form, but the substance of the Qur'ān is of Syrio-Aramaic origin, or at least the latter constitutes the foundation. The latter more so because the word "Qur'ān" itself is nothing other than a phonetic Arabic distortion of the Syriac term *Qeryān*, designating a Syriac liturgical book corresponding to the Lectionary (Lectionarium) of the Roman liturgy, from which the Readings, constituting extracts of the Old and New Testament, are read in the Christian liturgical service. It is thus not surprising that Jesus ('Isa) is cited twenty-five times in the Qur'ān and that he is there referred to as the Messiah (*al-Masḥ*) eleven times. Thus it is only logical to see other Syro-Christian passages being a part of this foundation which constitutes the origin of the Qur'ān...

Luxenberg also shows convincingly that the so called "mysterious letters" in the Koran are notations on the pages of this foundational Lectionary indicating which Psalms to read and which hymns to sing during service. These must have been reverently transcribed by the early Koranic scribes without their understanding the letters' significance.

Of course the elephant in the room, which is not specifically tackled in this collection, is the fact that if the foundation of the Koran is a Christian Lectionary, then the text came *before* Muhammad. And since the Koran cannot be understood except with the aid of the Sira (the life of Muhammad), this prompts the question as to whether the life of Muhammad and the Traditions (Hadiths) were all fabricated in order to make sense of the mistranslated Koran. Each would have then reinforced the other so that the "authoritative" Sira we have today by Ibn Ishaq (which appeared in its final form in the ninth century – two hundred years after the events it supposedly records) could well be a combination of legend, myth, the need to explain the Koran and possibly the need to create an Arab national religion, distinct from and opposed to, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism – all three of which contributed to the development of Islam.

What will eventually loosen the bonds of Islam over the minds of men, and allow them to begin to view it dispassionately, is exactly what loosened the bonds of the Church in the 16th and 17th centuries – intelligent, scholarly criticism of its foundational texts. This is the task Ibn Warraq has set himself – to help create the conditions for an Islamic Enlightenment.

In traditional Islam, the man created the book, but it looks increasingly as though it was the other way around; the book created the “man.” As Ibn Warraq says in his introduction on Luxenberg:

For Luxenberg, philology helps or can help to recover the historical truth, in the same way archeology does. Thus his skepticism is hardly surprising for a scholar who feels he has managed to destroy the conventional historical interpretation of various terms in the Koran: *Muhammad* is a title, and it does not refer to the Prophet of the Arabs; ‘*Abd Allah*’ is not the putative name of the father of the Prophet, but also a title derived from the inscriptions at the Dome of the Rock; Bakka is not the alternative name for the city of Mecca; the so-called Battle of *Badr* never took place, and the term *badr* has been misread; the term *quraysh* in the Koran has nothing to do with a tribe called *Quraysh*