

**Studies in Qur'anic Etymology and Philology**

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# ON NON-ARABIC WORDS IN THE QUR'ĀN<sup>1</sup>

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There are two differing madhhabs in this issue:

## THE FIRST MADHHAB AND ITS PROOFS

He stated<sup>2</sup>:

Chapter: al-Qādī said: “There are no non-Arabic words within the Qur'ān, because Allāh said:

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْءَانًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ  
ءَ أَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ

“And if We had made it a non-Arabic Qur'ān, they would have said, “Why are its verses not explained in detail [in our language]? Is it a foreign [recitation] and an Arab [messenger]?””

{*Fussilat* (41): 44}

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<sup>1</sup> Dr 'AbdulKareem bin 'Ali bin Muhammad an-Namlah (Professor, Sharee'ah College, Department of Usūl ul-Fiqh, Imām Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University, Riyadh), *It-hāf Dhawi'l-Basā'ir bi'sh-Sharh Rawdat an-Nādhir fī Usūl il-Fiqh 'ala Madhhab al-Imām Ahmad bin Hanbal* (Riyadh, KSA: Maktabat ar-Rushd, 1428AH/2007 CE), vol.2, pp.638-642.

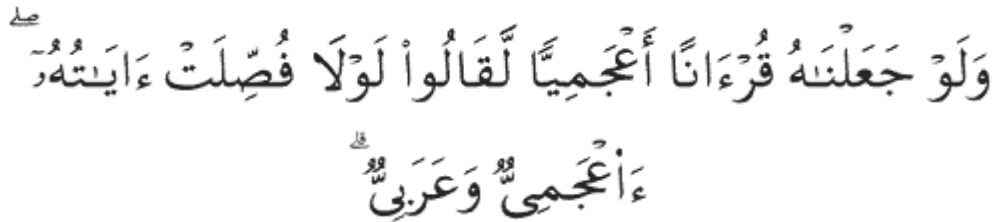
<sup>2</sup> **Translator's note ('AbdulHaq al-Ashanti):** i.e. Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (*rahimahullāh*).

If there were non-Arabic words in it then it would not be pure Arabic and there are many āyāt which state that the Qur'ān is pure Arabic and on account of this Allāh challenged the people to try to bring even a Sūrah the like of it, Allāh did not challenge them with what was not on their tongues and that which they did not pronounce.

**Explanation:** the first madhhab: there are no non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān

Al-Qādī Abū Ya'lā al-Hanbalī held this view as noted in *al-'Uddah* as did al-Qādī Abū Bakr al-Bāqilānī, Ibn Jareer at-Tabarī, Abū 'Ubaydah Ma'mar bin al-Muthanā, Abu'l-Khattāb in *at-Tambeed*, al-Majd bin Taymiyyah in *al-Musanwadah*, Abu'l-Waleed al-Bājī in *al-Ihkām* and al-Qādī Abū Ya'lā in *al-'Uddah* ascribed this view to most of the *Fuqahā* and Mutakallimeen. They used a number of proofs for this such as:

**First proof:** the saying of Allāh,

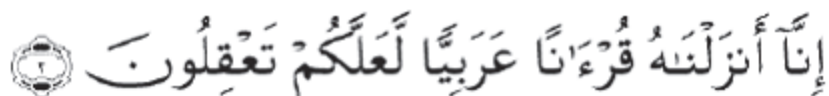


“And if We had made it a non-Arabic Qur'ān, they would have said, “Why are its verses not explained in detail [in our language]? Is it a foreign [recitation] and an Arab [messenger]?””

{*Fussilat* (41): 44}

How they used a proof from this: the *ayah* is clear that there are no non-Arabic words within the Qur'ān for the *ayah* mentions: We made the Qur'ān Arabic and if We made it non-Arabic then the kuffār would have established a proof against us and they would have said: “how can the Qur'ān be non-Arabic and the Prophet is Arab?!” (So Allāh is saying): For that reason We revealed it in pure Arabic in order to sever their argument. So it is verified that the Qur'ān is pure Arabic in order for it to establish a proof and so that they could not reject it.

**Second proof:** Allāh described the Qur'ān as being pure Arabic in many verses, such as when Allāh says,



“Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān that you might understand.”

{*Yūsuf* (12): 2}

And Allāh says,

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ لِّسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا وَدُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

“And this is a confirming Book in an Arabic tongue to warn those who have wronged and as good tidings to the doers of good.”

{*al-Abqāf* (46): 12}

And Allāh says,

بِلِسَانٍ عَرَبِيٍّ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩٥﴾

“In a clear Arabic language.”

{*ash-Shu'arā* (26): 195}

And Allāh says,

قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيْرَ ذِي عِوَجٍ لَّعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

“[It is] an Arabic Qur'ān, without any deviance...”

{*az-Zumar* (39): 28}

And there are further other ayahs and all of these ayat indicate that the Qur'ān was revealed in pure Arabic, so if it had some non-Arabic words in it then it would not have been described as being in pure Arabic.

**Third proof:** Allāh revealed this Qur'ān in order to explain the Sharee'ah rulings for the creation and as a miraculous sign for them to try and come with the likes of it or with ten Sūrahs like it or a Sūrah like it, Allāh says,

قُلْ لِّئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْءَانِ

لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ ۚ وَلَوْ كَانَتْ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا ﴿٨٨﴾

“Say, “If mankind and the jinn gathered in order to produce the like of this Qur'ān, they could not produce the like of it...”

{*al-Isrā* (17): 88}

And Allāh says

قُلْ فَآتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُورٍ مِّثْلِهِ، مُفْتَرِيَةٍ

“Say, “Then bring ten sūrahs like it...”

{*Hūd* (11): 13}

And Allāh says

قُلْ فَآتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ،

“Say, “Then bring forth a sūrah like it...”

{*Yūnus* (10): 38}

Allāh challenged them with that and with what is even less than that, as has been explained prior. Allāh did not challenge them with what they did not have on their tongues and could not pronounce. In the same way it is not possible to say to a non-Arab: “Bring the likes of the *Mu’allaqāt us-Saba*”<sup>3</sup> and the likes. Also it is worth mentioning here that: it is not possible that

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<sup>3</sup> [TN]: The *Mu’allaqāt* [Suspended Odes] is the name of seven long classical Arabic poems which date back to the pre-Islamic era and it is said that they were hung at the Ka’bah in Makkah hence the name, but many have argued that this is not authentic. The name ‘*Mu’allaqāt*’ is just one of several names applied to this collection, other names include *as-Sumut* [The Strings of a Necklace] and *al-Mudhahhabāt* [The Gilded Ones]. Hammād ar-Rāwiyah (d.155 AH/772 CE) is considered the main compiler of the *Mu’allaqāt* yet he may have drawn upon earlier compilations. The poems within the collection have varying styles, contents and structures and the most widespread tradition of the collection, as represented by Abū Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328 AH/940 CE) in *Sharh al-Qasā’id as-Saba’ at-Tiwāl al-Jāhiliyāt* (Cairo, 1963, ‘AbdusSalām Muhammad Hārūn), contains the following poems:

- ✓ ‘Imru al-Qays – the most famous of these poems
- ✓ Tarafa – the longest poem in the collection and at the end the poet states that wine and women and other worldly pleasures have to be seized before death.
- ✓ Zuhayr – the shortest poem of the seven, it is mainly a panegyric of two men who had ended the War of Dāhis (which occurred at the end of the sixth century CE) and helped to make peace between the tribes of ‘Abs and Dhubyan
- ✓ ‘Antara (who was of mixed heritage, his mother being East African) – this is another famous poem from the collection and was composed during the War of Dāhis, in the poem ‘Antara is depicted as participating in combat scenes from the war.

there would have been a challenge for them if there were non-Arabic words in the Qur'ān for they would have said “it is not in our language so we are unable to bring the like of it, so this neither indicates a miracle nor the truthfulness of your Prophet”. So it is affirmed that the Qur'ān is pure Arabic and there are no non-Arabic words in it and if this was the case then the challenge would not be correct.

## THE SECOND MADHHAB AND ITS PROOFS

He stated:<sup>4</sup>

It has been reported from Ibn 'Abbās and 'Ikrimah (radi Allāhu 'anhumā) that they both said: “within the Qur'ān are non-Arabic terms”, for they said: “Nāshī'at al-Layl – is Habashī [Ethiopic/Ge'ez]”<sup>5</sup> and that “Mishkāt – is Indian” and that “Istabraq – is Persian”. Those who support this position say: “The Qur'ān including two words or the like which are non-Arabic does not expel the Qur'ān from being Arabic and from the name of 'Arabic' to be applied to it, and so this is

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- ✓ 'Amr ibn Kulthum – there is a short wine drinking scene in the poem and then the poem goes on to extol the virtues of the tribe of Taghlib which 'Amr ibn Kulthum belongs to. In the poem 'Amr boasts of the tribe's prowess, boldness and ruthlessness in battle, the tribe's ancestors and their glory. It also threatens the tribe of Bakr and the Lakhmid king 'Amr ibn Hind (554-70) saying that the tribe will never be subjects of his.
  - ✓ Al-Hārith ibn Hilliza – the main part of this poem contains a refutation of accusations made by the Taghlib tribe against Bakr and a praise of the tribe of Bakr, recalling its honour and glory. This was more than likely included by the Compiler of the collection so as to balance out the praise of Taghlib within other poems of the collection.
  - ✓ Labeed – the poet talks about his value to society and the reliability of his tribe, the poem deals with how to overcome pessimism caused by worldly transience.

The tradition of the collection by al-Qurashī omits the fifth and sixth poem and instead includes a poem by al-A'sha bin Maymūn , which is a long tribal glorification, and a poem by an-Nābigha ad-Dhubayānī which contains a section praising the Lakhmid king an-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir (580-602 CE). The famous grammarian Ahmad bin Muhammad an-Nahhās (d.338 AH/950CE) in *Sharh al-Qasā'id at-Tis' al-Mashhūrāt* (Bahdad, 1973, 2 vols., Ahmad al-Khattāb ed.) integrated both poems into the collection and gave a commentary on all nine poems. Al-Khateeb at-Tibrīzī (d. 509AH/1109 CE) in *Sharh al-Qasā'id al-'Ashr* (Calcutta, 1894, Charles Lyall, ed.) added a very famous poem by 'Ābid ibn al-Abras in order to yield the collection to ten poems in total.

The *Mu'allaqāt* has been translated into English by AJ Arberry in 1957 as *The Seven Odes*.

<sup>4</sup> [TN]: i.e. Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (*rahimahullāh*).

<sup>5</sup> [TN]: The ancient Ethiopic language was *Ge'ez* while its modern form is Amharic, it is a Semitic language.

**not a proof for the Arabs. This is because Persian poetry is still named 'Persian' even though it contains words which are Arabic.”<sup>6</sup>**

**Explanation:** this is the second madhhab in the issue that: the Qur'ān does contain non-arabic terms.

This was stated by Ibn 'Abbās and 'Ikrimah (*radi Allāhu 'anhumā*) as ascribed to them both by Abū Ya'lā in *al-'Uddah*; Abu'l-Khattāb in *at-Tamheed*; Ibn al-Hājjib in his *Mukhtasar* and at-Tabarī in his tafseer who just ascribed it to Ibn 'Abbās, as Mujāhid, Sa'eed ibn Jubayr and 'Atā'<sup>7</sup> just ascribed it to Ibn 'Abbās. This is also the madhhab of Ibn ul-Hājjib in his *Mukhtasar* and also that of Ibn 'AbdusShakūr in *Musallam utb-Thabūt*. Those of this madhhab use a number of proofs as mentioned by Ibn Qudāmah, such as:

The fact that it is found, those of this view thus stated: **“we have found non-Arabic words within the Qur'ān such as 'Nāshī'at ul-Layl' – which is Habashī [Ethiopic/Ge'ez] and that 'Mishkāt' – which is Indian”<sup>8</sup> and 'Istabraq' – which is Persian and other examples.”**

This is reported from some of the companions and successors such as Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ikrimah, Sa'eed ibn Jubayr, Mujāhid, 'Atā' – and these are all Ahl ut-Tafseer especially Ibn 'Abbās (*radi Allāhu 'anhu*) so this has to be traversed.

So a verification of what is sought-after here is that: there are non-Arabic terms in the Qur'ān.

## **OBJECTIONS TO THIS**

**It is possible that there be objection to this and one could say:** “some of those words from the Qur'ān that you have mentioned as being non-Arabic words are in fact Arabic words as many 'Ulama have mentioned. So you saying that **“Nāshī'at ul-Layl' – which is Habashī [Ethiopic/Ge'ez]”** is not a proof for you because it is rather an Arabic word! For the 'Ulama have stated, as al-Qurtubī transmits in his tafseer, that: 'Nāshī'at ul-Layl' is: the nights times and hours, because its times begin, so it is firstly said 'Nashā' ash-Shay' [the thing came into being] and 'yanshā' (it originates/comes into existence/it arose)' when it starts; the thing which begins (yanshā) and to accept something after something else is 'Nāshī'; 'Ansha'ahu Allāh fanasha' (Allāh brought him into existence and then he (the person) grew); Nashī'at as-Sahābah (the clouds emerged); Nāshī'ah

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<sup>6</sup> [TN]: this is also the case in any other language, for the English poetry and literature of writers such as William Shakespeare is still well-known as being “English” even though 'English' contains loan words from French, Latin and Arabic.

<sup>7</sup> [TN]: 'Atā' ibn Abī Rabāh (*rahimahullāh*)

<sup>8</sup> [TN]: When the books of the past mention 'Hindi' they are more than likely referring to the language of Sanskrit which was a language which had a literary tradition.

is the doer which things stem from. So the intent [of Nāshi'at al-Layl] is: the hours of the night, so it suffices with a description [wasf] of the noun which is the feminine 'Sa'ah' [hour] because every hour begins happens. It was also said that 'an-Nāshi'ah' is a verbal noun [masdar] which means Qiyām ul-Layl and the beginning times of the night is **“are more effective for concurrence [of heart and tongue] and more suitable for words.”** Ibn Mas'ūd stated: “The Ethiopians say 'Nasha' meaning: 'to rise'.” So it was more than likely the Arabic word which was however widespread in the language of the Ethiopians.”<sup>9</sup>

**[One could object and also say]:** “As for your saying that **“Mishkāt is Indian”** is not a proof for you, because the word is Arabic and Ibn Mandhūr in *Lisān ul-'Arab* mentions it transmitting from *at-Tabdheeb* from az-Zujjāj who mentioned al-Mishkāt which means *al-Kumwab* (an opening/small window/aperture). It was also said “this is from Arabic” and Mishkāt is Arabic. What indicates this is that al-Ansārī, who was an Indian, rejected al-Mishkāt being an Indian word, he stated in his book *Fawātih ar-Rahmūt*:<sup>10</sup>

**It is not apparent that the word al-Mishkāt is of Indian origin because the Brahmins within India do not know of the term. Yes, it is true that 'al-Musukāt', with a dhammah on the meem, means 'smile' in Indian yet in the Qur'ān it does not carry this meaning.**

And if this is not acceptable to you, then those words came in the Arabic language and the only agreement is in the Arab's words resembling that of non-Arabic words, as agreement is found in many languages. So for example, the Arabs say “Sirāj” while the Persians say “Jirā”, the Arabs say “Sirwāl” and in Persian it is “Shirwāl”, the Arabs say “as-Samā” while in Hebrew it is said “Shamā” and there are many other examples of resemblance, so there is agreement between two languages in some cases.”

<sup>9</sup> [TN]: the *tafseer* of Ibn Katheer (*rahimahullāh*) states in regards to this *ayah* in *al-Muzammil*:

**(Verily, rising (Nashi'ah) at night is better for understanding and more suitable for speech (recitation).) 'Umar, Ibn 'Abbas and Ibn Zubayr, all said, “The entire night is Nashi'ah.” Mujahid and others said the same. It is said 'Nasha'a' when a person stands at night to pray. In one narration from Mujahid he said, “(It is) after 'Isha' (prayer).” This was also said by Abu Mijlaz, Qatadah, Salim, Abu Hazim and Muhammad bin Al-Munkadir. The point is that Nashi'ah of the night refers to its hours and its times, every hour of it is called Nashi'ah, so it refers to the periods of time. The purpose of this is that standing at night (for prayer) is better for training the heart and the tongue, and more conducive to recitation.**

<sup>10</sup> [TN]: Muhammad bin Nidhām ad-Deen al-Ansārī, *Fawātih ar-Rahmūt* (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-Amiriyyah, 1324/1906), 2 vols., printed with Ghazālī's *Mustasfa*,

**So if you object and say:** The entire Qur'ān including two or three words which are non-Arabic does not expel the Qur'ān from being Arabic and does not distance the ascription of 'Arabic' from it. This is also not an avenue that one could use to say about the Qur'ān's challenge "this is not in our language" because a Persian poem recited by a Persian is still Persian even if it may have a word or two which Arabic. The presence of these Arabic words and terms do not affect the ascription of 'Persian' being applied to the poem and likewise here, the presence of these non-Arabic words and terms do not affect the ascription of 'Arabic' to the Noble Qur'ān."

We say to this: Rather, those non-Arabic words and terms affect the description of the Qur'ān as being "pure Arabic" and change the name. So if the likes of these non-Arabic words are found then it cannot be pure Arabic, rather it would be both Arabic and non-Arabic, and this opposes what the aforementioned verses indicate about the Qur'ān being purely Arabic and the kuffār, who were challenged to bring the like of the Qur'ān or a Sūrah or ten Sūrahs like it, would use this as a proof and say: "we are not amazed by the Arabic but we are amazed by the non-Arabic" but Allāh challenged with the entire Qur'ān."

## COMBINING BETWEEN THE TWO MADHHABS

He stated:<sup>11</sup>

**It is possible to combine between the two views: that these words are originally non-Arabic and then became Arabized by the Arabs and used which led to these words being part of their tongue and used in Arabic, even though the origins (of these words) were non-Arabic.**

**Explanation:** I say: it is possible to combine between the two madhhabs by saying: these words which were mentioned by the second madhhab are originally non-Arabic however these words were assumed by the Arabs and used and Arabized by their tongues and transformed from the non-Arabic words into their own terms and thus the words became Arabic. Then the Qur'ān was revealed and these words had already become mixed into Arabic speech. So whoever says [about these specific words] that "it is Arabic" is truthful and his statement is correct, and whoever says "it is non-Arabic" then he is also truthful and his statement is correct. This is what was stated by Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim bin Sallām al-Baghdādī as mentioned in *as-Sahābi, Mu'tarak al-Aqrān, al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm il-Qur'ān* and *al-Mazhar*.

This is the correct view and what was mentioned by Ibn 'Atiyah, as transmitted from him by al-Qurtubī in his *Tafseer*, also supports this and that the correct expression about these words is

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<sup>11</sup> [TN]: i.e. Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (*rahimahullāh*).



that “they are originally non-Arabic however they were used by the Arabs and Arabicised and so are Arabic from this angle. The Arabs to whom the Qur'ān was revealed in their tongue had mixed to some extent with other languages due to the trade and travels that the Quraysh had, and also due to the journeys that some of them made to non-Arabic lands. The Arabs appended these phrases to their language and used them in their poetry and conversations until they came to be included within authentic Arabic. With this came eloquence and in this the Qur'ān was revealed, even if an Arab is ignorant of this then it is out of ignorance of what is within other languages.”

**Attention:** the previous difference was in regards to words and terms. But are such words to be found in the Qur'ān as non-Arabic or not?

As for compounded speech in a non-Arabic form then there is an agreement of the 'Ulama that this is not present in the Qur'ān.<sup>12</sup> As for names then the 'Ulama are agreed that these are present in the Qur'ān such as 'Isrā'īl', 'Jibreel', 'Imrān', 'Lūt' and 'Nūh'.

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<sup>12</sup> [TN]: This refutes the arguments of the fringe de-mythologiser revisionist-Orientalists such as Alphonse Mingana and Christoph Luxenberg, the latter even claiming that Arabic grammar is based on that of the “Aramaean”!? Refer to a thorough and extensive refutation of this by MSM Saifullah, Mohammad Ghoniem & Shibli Zaman here: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/vowel.html>

It turns out as no surprise that Mingana was a Christian Reverend! The main arguments that Mingana and Luxenberg (in blindly following Mingana) come with are:

- ✓ The claim that that the Qur'aan has strong imprints of ancient Syriac and therefore Syriac grammar should be used to understand it.
- ✓ That Christianity influenced Islam – this in fact is the main impetus for their “studies”
- ✓ That Arabic was not written down by Arabs in Makkah and Madeenah during the pre-Islamic period (!) – this is even though there are loads of Arabic inscriptions which Saifullah, Ghoniem and Zaman superbly refer to: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/History/Islam/Inscriptions/>
- ✓ Mingana thus claims that Syriac and Hebrew were the only languages which were written down during the pre-Islamic period.
- ✓ The claim that a hybrid Arabic-Aramaic language was a main language of the Hijaz during the pre-Islamic time (!) – even though the reality is that Aramaic was not as widespread as Luxenberg thought.
- ✓ Luxenberg makes the ridiculous assertion that the language of the Qur'aan is in fact Aramaic hence the early Muslims did not understand it!?
- ✓ That the Arabs borrowed the *tashkeelat* from Syriac.
- ✓ Luxenberg claims that the Qur'aan was not orally transmitted via memory – even though Whelan's study of the Qur'anic inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock and the literary sources mentioning the Qur'anic inscriptions in the Prophet's mosque in Madeenah and the presence

of professional copyists of the Qur'an has already demonstrated the evidence of codification of the Qur'an in the 7th century or the first century of *hijra*.

Funnily enough, the Syriac sources that Luxenberg refers to in much of his theorems are even later than the Arabic! Most of their arguments resulted from their insufficient level of Arabic language specialisation coupled with a Missionary and fringe Orientalist agenda. Such poor scholarship is inadequate for a huge topic such as Qur'anic etymology and philology, and their lack of referral to the Islamic scholars works is a proof of this as they have totally disregarded an entire corpus of Islamic tradition! It also further demonstrates that much of Western research into Islam is based on making up new theories not matter how bizarre all in order to gain fame and to disregard the entire Islamic tradition and throw doubt on its sources. Saifullah et al thus conclude in their devastating refutation of the work of Mingana and Luxenberg:

**In the last thirty years or so, many revisionistic theories have been proposed as to how the Qur'an/Islam came about. According to these various revisionistic schools of thought, Islam was originally a Jewish sect (*pace* Hagarism); the Qur'an was contemporaneous with the *sira* (*pace* Wansbrough); Islam arose in the Negev desert somehow allegedly validating Wansbrough's hypothesis (*pace* Nevo); the Qur'an came after the *sira* and *hadith* (*pace* Rubin); the Qur'an was an Iraqi product and predates the *sira* (*pace* Hawting) and, recently, the Qur'an is a product of Syriac Christianity (*pace* Luxenberg).**

**It seems that these revisionistic schools often follow methodologies that do not agree with each other (whether in whole or in part) and none of them seem to agree on any one particular scenario, be it historical, social, cultural, political, economic or religious. Something that appears to be more fundamental in their analysis is that the revisionists are willing to formulate any theory to lend verisimilitude to their opinions concerning the Qur'an/Islam, no matter how much it contradicts all of the available well-established evidence, documentary or otherwise. In this regard we discover that Luxenberg is no different.**

Dr Robert Hoyland also stated:

**Firstly, we do have a number of bodies of evidence - especially non-Muslim sources, papyri, inscriptions and archaeological excavations - that can serve as a useful external referent and whose riches are only just beginning to be exploited in a systematic manner. Secondly, the historical memory of the Muslim community is more robust than some have claimed. For example, many of the deities, kings and tribes of the pre-Islamic Arabs that are depicted by ninth-century Muslim historians also feature in the epigraphic record, as do many of the rulers and governors of the early Islamic state.**

**This makes it difficult to see how historical scenarios that require for their acceptance a total discontinuity in the historical memory of the Muslim**

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**community - such as that Muhammad did not exist, the Qur'an was not written in Arabic, Mecca was originally in a different place etc. - can really be justified. Many of these scenarios rely on absence of evidence, but it seems a shame to make such a recourse when there are so many very vocal forms of material evidence still waiting to be studied.**

Refer to the research of Saifullah et al: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/vowel.html>