



A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the "Koran" under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations by Günter Lüling

Review by: Diana Steigerwald

Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 124, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 2004), pp. 621-623

Published by: [American Oriental Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132303>

Accessed: 13/06/2014 18:46

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Oriental Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

namics Heck described in the substantive chapters. These concerns are, however, minor. Heck's work is both a thorough discussion of Qudāma's scholarship and a useful primer on the scribal genre. As such, it is a welcome contribution to the literature on Islamic administrative history.

STEVEN JUDD
SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations. By GÜNTER LÜLING. Delhi: MOTILAL BANARSIDASS, 2003. Pp. 580.

The Qurʾān was delivered, despite a long period of compilation (twenty-four years), in a fairly original format. A small part of the Qurʾān is hard to understand because its symbolic meanings are difficult to unravel. To disclose its meanings, we may rely on medieval exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) and a good knowledge of the grammar and lexicography of classical Arabic. Readers must be very careful because some verses have contextual meaning that cannot be easily generalized. The usual understanding depends greatly on medieval commentators who sometimes had not properly mastered the classical Arabic language. Some passages, which are believed to have been understood, probably need to be revised and understood in their original meanings. According to Lüling, the historical-critical textual analysis is a useful method but was not applied to the Qurʾān, as it was to the Bible or other old sacred texts. In the field of Qurʾānic text criticism, over the last decades only two scholars, Christoph Luxenberg and Günter Lüling, have used this method.

Lülings's original work was in German, published as *Über den Urkoran: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion der vorislamisch-christlichen Strophenlieder im Koran*, 2nd rev. ed. (Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung H. Lüling, 1993), first published in 1977. This work was initially a Ph.D. thesis (p. xviii) submitted in 1969. In 1970, one official of the university told him that "his results are unwelcome" to some elders of German academia (Islamic and Arabic Studies), and as a consequence he was dismissed from the University of Erlangen (Bavaria). The book's first edition was reviewed by Erhart Kahle in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 132 (1982): 182–84, who stated: "What Lüling is displaying in his work is pure paradigm-destroying research and will earn him all difficulty with his scholar colleagues" (cf. p. xvii).

In his very long preface (xi–lxvii) the author explains the genesis of his book and the amplification of the third edition in English. In the introduction (pp. 1–25) he elaborates four hypotheses: (1) "The text of the Qurʾān as transmitted by Muslim Orthodoxy contains, hidden behind it as a ground layer and considerably scattered throughout it (together about one-third of the whole Qurʾān text), an originally pre-Islamic Christian Text" (p. 1); (2) "According to the statement of thesis 1 the transmitted text of the Qurʾān contains four different kinds of layers of text" (p. 11); (3) "The transmitted Islamic Qurʾān text is the final result of several editorial revisions" (p. 20); (4) "The findings within the Qurʾān text are confirmed by an abundance of Muslim traditions and useful information apart from and beyond the Qurʾān text itself. These important traditions and information have hitherto either not been understood in their original meaning or they have remained unexamined" (p. 24). The author explains these four hypotheses in detail and describes what exactly he intends to do in his book: to analyze some *sūras* and try to discover modifications found in Qurʾānic verses. He gives the mirror-symmetrical representation with the ʿUthmānic codex and the reconstructed verses according to his own criteria, and translates selected verses within a Christian theological framework.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the Qurʾānic chapter (*sūra*) 96 (section 1, pp. 28–97) and *sūra* 80. The author provides a practical understanding of his theoretical method applied to the Qurʾān: "There is enough data to have conveyed the fact that these oldest text sections of the Qurʾān contained and still contain an unmistakable meaning different from the meaning pressed on the original Qurʾānic *rasm*-

text by orthodox Muslim Qurʾān redactors using an allegedly historical frame-narrative. Such frame narratives were not part of the Qurʾān and are without doubt wholly alien to that original ground layer (*rasm*) of the Qurʾān sections in question” (pp. 26–27).

The author projects his own vision (Protestant Christian) and thinks that Muhammad was an archangel-messenger, disguised on earth in the shape of a human being. He affirms: “First of all there can be no doubt that the Prophet considered himself to be, like Jesus Christ, an archangel having been pre-existent. . . . The archangel-messengers Jesus and Muhammad are disguised on earth in the shape of human beings as a trial to the unbelievers and believers” (pp. 28–29). Even Shiʿī Muslims, who criticize the Sunnī interpretation, as well as Sūfīs and Islamic philosophers, do not share this understanding.

In the second chapter, the author gives general comments on the composition’s rules of strophe applied in the pre-Islamic Christian hymnody contained in the Qurʾān (p. 151). Chapter 3 elaborates on Islamic reinterpretation of the Arabic term *al-Janna* (the Garden). In the first section the author reinterprets the word *thubūran* in *sūra* 84:11. In section 2, he discusses the possible change of wording. According to him, we should read *z-l-q* instead of *z-l-f* in the following verses (81:13; 67:27; 50:31; 34:37; 26:64; 26:90) and read especially 18:40 as “*husbānan min al-samāʾ fa-tusbiha saʿīdan zalaqā.*” In section 3, Lüling elaborates on the term *zalaqa*, the high place or “garden,” in the early Islamic period.

In chapter 4, the author distinguishes the pre-Islamic Christian groundlayer of the Qurʾān from its original Islamic text. Chapter 5 describes in detail *sūra* 74:1–30; Lüling thinks that these verses relate the “Hymn of Christ” where the Christ is *rabbānī* (an archangel) (see also pp. 72–88). According to him, these *sūras* are anti-trinitarian (p. 432), but he suggests, “this heresy is in reality and in fact the original truth of Christianity—and the victorious trinitarian creed its deplorable falsification” (p. 432). He compares this *sūra* with Philip 2:8; Isaiah 53:7; Hebrews 5:8f.

All four hypotheses presented in the introduction seem sound at first sight, but we soon notice that many major problems are not discussed explicitly: (1) that the Qurʾān was transmitted over twenty-four years and has two phases (Meccan and Medinan); (2) that it was not brought together into a single compilation (*mushaf*) and therefore had not been arranged in order (cf. Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, vol. 1, p. 41); (3) that in both Sunnī and Shiʿī traditions variants of some verses exist, and therefore there are seven modes of reading (*ahruf al-sabʿa*); (4) the Qurʾān contains abrogated verses, etc.

Moreover, Lüling himself points out the limits of his methodology: “On the other hand it might even be advantageous to cease working on Islamic matters altogether for a while, in order to turn instead to the study of the earliest Christian Arabic literature which has been so badly neglected even by Western Islamicists, especially during the twentieth century. And once this earliest Arabic and Garshuni [sic] Christian literature and the liturgical texts will have been gathered and processed and made accessible by computerized indices for comparison with the Qurʾān, one must also, for a better understanding of this early Christian Arabic literature and the liturgical texts, consult its Syriac, Aramaic, Coptic and Ethiopic congeners on which early Christian Arabic literature and liturgy fundamentally rely. In this connection also, the vast pre-Islamic and early Islamic classical poetry of the Arabs themselves would have to be sifted through once again, this time paying due regard to Christian ideas, topoi and phrases, and with the working hypothesis that such Christian sentiments originally contained in the pre-Islamic classical Arabic poetry have mostly been obscured by Islamic reworking and reinterpretation in a similar way to the Qurʾān. Achievements in this field would mean the piling up of immense comparative material for a further analysis and reconstruction of the originally pre-Islamic Christian texts of the Qurʾān. Future research on the Qurʾān would most probably be computerized research” (p. 431).

This book is problematic because the author wants to demonstrate that the ʿUthmānic codex is not the real Qurʾān as revealed to Muhammad. For him, the doctrine included in the real Qurʾān must have been closer to pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian texts. Unfortunately there are not enough Arabic, Syriac, or Aramaic published texts (or pre-Islamic Jewish and Christian manuscripts) to support and legitimate his thesis. Even if the author uses a well-known and critical method, he faces many problems because the Qurʾān we have in hand contains many abrogated verses and the *sūras* are not arranged in order. Further, many pre-Islamic Judaic and Christian texts are inaccessible, unknown, or not yet

edited in a scholarly manner, and thus their authenticity is not yet validated. Much preliminary research needs to be done in order to be able to compare rigorously the author's assumptions with other texts. At present this thesis is highly speculative, and the author's work seems to be premature.

As Mohammed Arkoun has remarked, modern historians have examined the chronological order of the 'Uthmānic Codex with critical rigor, principally because the Qur'ān was assembled in a troubled political climate. Theodore Nöldeke (1836–1930) carried out the first critical examination of the Qur'ān around 1860. Régis Blachère (1900–1973) refined this methodology by proposing a chronological order for the *sūras*, an issue that had preoccupied Muslim jurists (*fuqahā'*) seeking to identify which verses abrogated others (*al-nāsikh wa'l-manūkh*). Arkoun states, "It is unfortunate that philosophical critique of sacred texts—which has been applied to the Hebrew Bible and to the New Testament without thereby engendering negative consequences for the notion of revelation—continues to be rejected by some Muslim scholars" (*Rethinking Islam*, ed. Robert D. Lee [San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994] 35). The works of the German school continue to be ignored, and most Muslims do not rely upon such research, even though it could strengthen the scientific foundations of the history of the 'Uthmānic Codex and Islamic theology. In various verses the Qur'ān discloses its full message and reveals its different stages of transmission. Some linguistic and grammatical subtleties and semantics of the Qur'ān show its long elaboration and maturity. Unfortunately, Lüling does not follow rigorously the steps of the German school.

DIANA STEIGERWALD
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH
