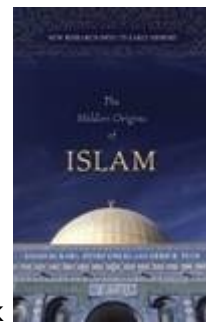


The Hidden Origins of Islam: Research + Dead-End?

Early in 2010, a collective book directed by Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-Rudiger Puin was published in New York under the rather ambitious title: *The Hidden Origins of Islam. New Research into Its Early History* (Prometheus Books, 2010, 405 pages // trad. *Die dunklen Anfänge. Neue Forschungen zur Entstehung und frühen Geschichte des Islam*, Verlag Hans Schiler, 2005).

There is no need to present Puin. He is well-known for directing the research around the pictures of fragmentary pieces of « Koranic texts » he was able to bring back from Sanaa (Yemen) – these pictures, and Puin's related investigations, have yet to be made available in a published work. As for Karl-Heinz Ohlig, he began to take interest in Islam since 2000. He is a New Testament scholar strongly influenced by the theology of liberal Protestantism. His positions are shared by two essential contributors of the book, namely Volker Popp and, to a lesser extent, Professor Christoph Luxenberg.



In accord with the specific outlook of its three authors, the book develops a precisely delineated thesis relative to the origins of Islam. They contend that for close to two centuries, Muslims may not have been « Muslims, » but rather Christians having retained a more authentic vision of the faith (similar to the view in which Islam, still today, sees Jesus). But the question raised here is not one of designations. Certainly, until the 8th century A.D., the terms « *islam* » and « *muslimun* » simply meant « submission » and « submitted. » Back then, « Muslims » called themselves « *muhajirun*, » literally « those who made the Hegira » (to Medina in 622 with Mohammed, but historically not from Mecca – *hajr*, root *hjr*, to migrate). Interestingly enough, Volker Popp seems to be ignoring precisely that point of self-naming (see p. 40). The question rather focuses on the alleged existence of a primitive Christian movement the authors referred to as « pre-Nicaea Arabic Christianity, » that is, predating the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. According to the three authors, who rally themselves to the manner of thoughts developed during the *Aufklärung* under Voltaire and others, today's Christian faith would simply be the fabrication of that 4th century Council, while a pre-Nicaea Arabic movement would have propagated throughout the centuries the vision Islam will precisely have regarding Jesus – their premise being that Islam could only have been born in an exclusively Arabic setting. One might immediately retort to the face of such a shaky hank of postulates that, way back then, there should be no reason to find the name of Jesus in Arabic altered or misspelled in the Koran (yet, one always finds 'Īssa instead of Yassû'). Let us then proceed by considering their arguments.

The Argument Contended by Christoph Luxenberg

Of this supposed Arabic heterodox Christianity, one finds no concrete indications whatsoever – except for the ones the authors want to see in a note inscribed upon the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It is here that Christoph Luxenberg kicks in. Known for his book *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran* (published in 2004), this Syriac scholar (he took a pen name) wanted to show that the texts in which consists what is known today as the Koran are in fact the translation of original writings in Aramaic (or Syriac). Admittedly, some obscure verses can be made better sense of once stripped from their diacritics (which the most ancient Koranic texts are bereft of), the bare letters that can be read in a variety of ways, thus allowing a reading in meaningful accord with Aramaic. Half of the examples put forward by Luxenberg are genuinely

persuasive; the other half are not. In effect, what he actually demonstrates is not the existence of a pre-dating Koranic text in Aramaic, but simply the fact that the author of the folios of the future Koran (or the authors among whom a preacher emerges) was infused with Aramaic culture. He sure expresses himself in Arabic to win Arabs, but he thinks in Aramaic.

This analysis actually leads us astray from the postulate of an exclusively Arabic birth setting for *Islam* (or *first Islam*). Yet, Luxenberg's subsequent investigations take on another direction on account of a graffito, found on the Dome of the Rock (inward side), which makes mention of the word « *muhammad*. » However, this should not be read, according to Luxenberg, as a proper name (*Mohammed* in English). Rather, it should be understood as a verbal form signifying « praised » and addressed to... Jesus. This Jesus would only be recognized to be a « prophet » and « messenger, » as the inscription indicates (*see below*), obviously agreeing with the Koranic text itself. However, this thesis implies the neglect of a small detail: the Koran refers to Jesus eleven times as *Messiah*, a title whose meaning significantly differs from the function and definition of a *messenger* or a *prophet*. Why then omit to mention it? Is it because it actually turns out to be impossible to explain such a title in the reconstructed framework of a « primitive Arabic Christianity »?

Here is how Luxenberg translates the inscription "**Muhammad**_[un] 'abdu Llahi wa-rasuluhu": "**Praised** be the Servant of God [= Jesus] and [= he also is] His messenger" (p. 127). However, this rendition is hardly patent – the expression "*wa-rasuluhu*" sort of gets in the way. The usual rendering simply goes as: "Mohammed is the servant of God and His messenger." The fact that « Servant of God » happens to be a biblical expression applicable to Jesus (owing to its signification in Isaiah 52-53) is not an argument in favor of the first interpretation. This title was in no way a novelty for Christian Arabs. It has inspired the Christian name 'Abdallah, which was very common among them before Islam.

Admittedly, to read « *muhammad* » as a participle may quite well agree with what may have been its customary use in Arabic before it became a proper name. But from there, to push back the creation of this name to more than a century, is to take too far of a step! All the more if one considers the fact that contemporary non-Muslim sources already make mention of it, which begs the question: where do they hold that « Mahmet » was a leader of Arabic war from? The noteworthy absence of that name in Islamic milieus until the years 680 actually turns out to make perfect sense without resort to the hypothesis of a creation: obvious reasons led the first Caliphs to « forget » the period of their dependence to Judeo-Nazarenes and with it, the memory of their war leader who died in 632.

Besides, how could the hypothesis of a pre-Nicaea **Arabic** Christianity not be in evident contradiction with the many indications pointing to connections with the **Aramaic** Christian world, elements of which Professor Luxenberg gives himself credentials? And there is another major difficulty, relative to the Dome of the Rock itself, which Alfred-Louis de Prémare († 2006) actually addresses and lays open in his own contribution to the book. On page 191, without appearing to do so and with his usual kindness and erudition, he calls attention to another inscription of the Dome along the outward side by the northern door:

"We believe in God and in what has come down upon *muhammad*, and in that which the prophets have received from their Lord;
we make no distinction, and to Him, we are indebted."

In this text (which appears today as a compound of verses 136 and 185 in sura 2, *Al-Baqarah*), the term « *muhammad* » can only be made sense of as a proper name. Henceforth, we can reasonably wonder about the actual credibility of a different meaning attributed to the same term (« *muhammad* ») as found in the other inscription on the inward face of the same Dome! Are there any credible reasons to think that the inscriptions found along the outward face of the same Dome may have been altered (except for the name of 'Abd al-Malik, which really was replaced with that of a successor, Al-Mamun)?

The Other Arguments

In the face of these major objections, how much is actually left to support the thesis of a « primitive Arabic Christianity »? One might wish to appeal to the theological discussions debated prior to the 7th century, and which dealt with the definitions of canonical formulations and ways of expressing (in various languages) the Mystery of Jesus the Christ and Savior amidst the rising, on the one hand, of « Monophysite » tendencies (minimizing the reality of Christ's human nature); and, on the other, of « Diophysite » or « Nestorian » tendencies (insisting on the two « natures / Hypostases » without knowing how they coexist in Christ). However, never did these debates put in question the general recognition of the historical figure of Jesus as Savior evincing God's visit and revelation to His people. To see therein antagonistic conceptions of the Christian faith is as fruitless as conceiving of the many juridical schools in Islam as though they resulted in various Islamic « faiths » or antagonistic interpretations of the Koran.

Are the few other arguments more convincing? Appeal is made to the fact that Arab invaders were decently welcomed in Egypt, where the Byzantines had, for a variety of reasons, brought enmity upon themselves. The deficiency of the argument appears all the more upon considering other key historical facts, starting way back to year 640 A.D. (during which the first fortified Arabo-Muslim military posts settled in the region), as does Magdi Zaki in his *Histoire des Coptes* (Paris, 2005). He remarks that: "According to John, bishop of Nikiou and witness of the Arab invasion, 'Amr perpetuated the slaughter of a large number of people in Behnasa, Fayum, Alexandria... including civilians who did not take part in any combat." The savage killings of many people by Muslim troops and subsequent anti-Arab uprisings that colored in blood the first centuries of Islamic occupation do not quite support the book's thesis.

In a similar fashion, Popp tries to avoid the objection of the recurrent campaigns against Byzantium commissioned by the first Caliphs: why would supposed *Christians* go and attack other Christians? To justify the determination (for him inexplicable) to destroy Byzantium, he appeals several times to the desire for revenge "borrowed from the Persians" by the new Arab masters of the Near-East.

In the same way, the Arab-driven characteristic of Islam comes as a problem in so far as it asserted itself very early on (at least, since the end of 'Umar's reign). Our German authors do not seem to understand why did the project of an **Arab** supremacy appear so early and therefore take as a late factor the coming into play of this ethnic dimension. But, have they recognized the Messianic idea of a « people chosen to rule the world in the name of God, » which is fundamental in the Koran? It is true that at the time of the Koranic predications, the Arabs were not yet designated as the ones chosen by God in view of the fulfillment of such an end. They were then only assigned to assist the true « sons of Israel » as their cousins, the « sons of Ishmael. »

Inescapable Dead-Ends

Finally, again according to Volker Popp, the numismatic would support his thesis. Some African 8th century currencies indicate the following: *Non est Deus nisi unus cui non socius alius similis*. For him, such an inscription would be the sign of « the presence of Monophysites, Monarchians [a variation of the former], Nestorians [who share in the Trinitarian faith of both formers] and Arians [who deny the Trinity and stand in opposition to all others] among the inhabitants of [northern roman] Africa » (p.80). No less! And why not a couple extraterrestrial aliens too? Certainly, the word « trinity » is not found in the New Testament. It comes about as a conceptualized and, by definition, later expression. But, even so, expressions of Trinitarian faith are plentiful therein. And this same New Testament, common to all Christians, has never been the object of dissensions between diverse ecclesial communities. Arians, on the other hand, do not accept faith in the Trinity.

As for the text above quoted from the mentioned coinage (*there is no God but one and He has no associate*), it clearly stands as the *primitive* version of the Islamic Shahadah, that is, *before* it incorporated the affirmation of Mohammed as God's prophet in place of « *He has no associate.* » The former was rid of to avoid giving the « Islamic creed » a trinitarian (= 3 terms) flavor. Various archeological evidence of these primitive and binary creeds have been found – one of which

actually ternary, with the mention of Mohammed as God's prophet occurring as the third term (« *There is no God but one and He has no associate and Muhammad is His messenger* » – see *Le messie et son prophète*, 2005, t. I, p. 489-500).

Moreover, to ignore (or at least to avoid mentioning) what the Fathers of the Church actually have to say about the « Nazarenes /Ebionites » is another serious lack of insight on the part of scholars who should truly know better. If one knows these texts, the idea of a « primitive Arabic Christianity » becomes pointless. And so it is, if one analyses what is said of these « Nazarenes » in the Koranic text, where some manipulations in their respect cannot be concealed (an article was published on this subject in a German journal [1]). With reason (see p. 191), Alfred-Louis de Prémare recalls that (according to the original meaning in the Koran), the designation of Christians is that of « associates » (*mushrikun*).

It is also necessary to mention the contribution of Sergio Nosedá relative to the Sassanid influence on the Arabic writing system. At one point, he makes mention of the first four verses of sura 30 *ar-Rûm* (p. 288), but does so from a non-exegetical perspective. More than fifty years ago in his translation of the Koran, Régis Blachère had already shed light upon the defective and intentional vowelization of these verses in order to divert the attention from Mohammed's real history centered on Jerusalem, and redirect it towards Mecca and its forged origins of Islam [2]. As for Sergio Nosedá, he is focalized on South Arabia where the Islamic fiction locates Islam's origins, which is quite problematical. Why would Muslims have abandoned their (supposed to have been) South-Arabic script and switched it with the one we know to be North-Arabic from ancient copies of the Koran? He postulates the action of “a self-proclaimed committee of sages met with the intention of creating a truly Arabic script, and with much goodwill, to provide their own people and language with a different script to that of nearby peoples.” (p. 301)

Except that this Arabic script was not invented: it already existed! Examples (engravings and graffiti) have been found in northern Arabia (Syria, Negev, etc.). And these archeological documents clearly predate the Islamic era. Why then should we keep pretending, against a plethora of overwhelming evidence at hand, that the Arabs behind the rising of proto-Islam (or at least associated with it) came from southern Arabia? Why so, when everything clearly indicates that their genuine life setting belongs in northern Arabia, which intersects the Syrian region and squeezes itself in to the Aramaic world?

In the end, with the exception of a couple of remarkable contributions (in particular, that of A.-L. de Prémare – see here [a review](#) coming up soon), this collective work gives the impression of developing what may sound like scientific hypotheses, while, in fact, it fails to rationally account for them. This state of affairs is all the more bothersome that the calling in question of Islamic rhetorical talks regarding the origins of Islam and of the Koran needs to be stressed on even more, and so along the lines of the remarkable scholarly effort pushed forwards by several authors. The promises are not kept. The worst of all would be to bring discredit thereby upon the scholarly value of serious islamologic research. Let us simply hope that this work will not contribute in creating such a counterproductive effect in American academic circles.

As a whole, one may draw the following two conclusions:

- Even if the « Arabic » hallmark of the internationalist claims put forward in the name of what is not yet known as « Islam » at the time appear very early (as early as the end of 'Umar's reign), this « proto-Islam » turns out to have no Arabic origins.
- Never could this so-called « proto-Islam » have set itself in South Arabia before circumstances actually compelled it to find refuge in Yathrib-Medina in 622.

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Translated by Sébastien Renault

[1] « *Gens du Livre* » et Nazaréens dans le Coran : *qui sont les premiers et à quel titre les seconds en font-ils partie ?*, in *Oriens Christianus*, Band 92, 2008 z. 174-186. See also [here](#) [coming up soon].

[2] Blachère Régis, *Le Coran*, Paris, 1957, p. 429-430. The question is discussed [here](#) [coming up soon].