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# Luxenberg & Puin: Origins & Revisions Responding to Dispatches

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On Monday 14th July 2008, the British Television Channel, 'Channel 4' broadcast a Dispatches documentary entitled "The Qur'an". As a result of showing this two hour long documentary many Muslims are now confused and non-Muslims misinformed.

While searching the internet for a review, response or rebuttal, I have come across many individuals who have sincere questions and unfortunately doubts about the origins and nature of the Islamic way of life. Consequently I have decided to explain, contextualise and refute some of the deliberate accusations against the Qur'an.

Firstly, I will write about the ideas expressed concerning the history and textual integrity of the Qur'an. Before I go into the counter arguments and responses I would like to highlight the efforts to avoid engaging in a sincere, 'positive' dialogue by Dispatches. Using Dr Puin's and Christoph Luxenberg's arguments on the Qur'an's preservation and origins is enough evidence to indicate Channel 4's deliberate attempt to misinform.

Luxenberg's argument that the Qur'an has Syro-Aramaic origins has been widely discredited by the academic community. His attempts to identify an underlying Syro-Aramaic reading of the Qur'an have been viewed with great suspicion by other scholars. His methodology has been described by Angelika Neuwirth as "presupposing its very results". D.J. Stewart describes Luxenberg's attempts to reconstruct the Qur'an from an Aramaic reading as being "implausible and often demonstrably wrong". Even Scholars, such as Gerald Hawting, who have questioned Orthodox Muslim understanding has described Luxenberg's work as "arbitrary".

Regarding Dr Puin's work on the so called "revisions" of the Qur'an, why didn't Channel 4 quote Arberry, Brockett or Taylor when discussing the static and preserved nature of the Qur'anic text? Adrian Brockett says (See his article "The Value of Hafs And Warsh Transmissions For The Textual History Of The Qur'an"):

"The transmission of the Qur'an after the death of Muhammad was essentially static, rather than organic. There was a single text, and nothing significant, not even allegedly abrogated material, could be taken out nor could anything be put in."

In my opinion this highlights the lack of sincere enquiry of Dispatches, as they did not cater for the majority academic opinions for the origin and history of the Qur'anic text. Thus indicating their eagerness to create media hype and popular TV viewing rather than inform, educate and provide a platform for honest debate.

The argument that the Qur'an is a text manipulated from Syro-Aramaic will be dealt with first.

### **Argument 1: The Qur'an is a manipulated text borrowed from Syro-Aramaic Christian Documents**

Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym) claims that the Qur'an or parts of the Qur'an are derived from pre-existing Christian Syro-Aramaic texts that were manipulated to create the Qur'an we know of today. This regurgitated and outdated argument falls on its face due to the baseless assumptions this study rests upon. Below are a list of Luxenberg's assumptions and the counter arguments exposing their lack of evidence.

#### **Assumptions & Counter Arguments**

<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Counter Arguments</b>
The region of Mecca at the time of revelation (approximately 1400 years ago) was an initial Aramaic settlement.	There is an absence of historical Syriac-Christian works prevalent in Mecca at that period.
The language of the Meccans was a hybrid language of Arabic and Syriac.	No manuscript evidence or 5th /6th century inscriptions indicate this.
No presence of an Arab oral tradition and culture.	Historical information indicates that there was an adequate and thorough transmission of an oral culture.
The Arabs during the Prophet's time forgot the Syriac language and lapsed into what is now known as classical Arabic.	This would entail that a mass loss of memory had plagued the Arabs during that time.
The Prophet could read and write fluently (knowing many dialects).	An assumption (or speculation) that is no stronger than the argument (or assumption) that he was illiterate.
Various scribes wrote the Qur'an from the Meccan hybrid ('mutant') language.	No analysis given that indicates different influences and linguistic sensitivities that arise out of multiple authors.
Employment of an exclusively philological approach.	This enables freedom to stretch interpretations as well as emend the Qur'anic text in order to make it correspond to the desired Syro-Aramaic texts.

Even though that Luxenberg's study is based upon weak assumptions he attempts to substantiate his conspiratorial claims by re-interpreting single words in the Qur'an by using corresponding Syro-Aramaic words. As a result of finding similarities in words – which can be done with all the Semitic languages – he concludes that the Qur'anic text must then be borrowed from Syro-Aramaic Christian texts. This is equivalent of saying that Shakespeare was originally Homers work because many English words have Greek origins!

### **Marrying 'White Grapes'!**

Luxenberg's re-interpretation of the word for "hur", meaning 'chaste beautiful girls' in Arabic exposes his fundamentally flawed approach to studying the Qur'an. In Syro-Aramaic "hur" means 'white' or 'white grapes' however Qur'anic commentators say that "hur" is the plural of the Arabic word "houri" meaning 'chaste and beautiful girl'.

The word "hur" occurs in the Quran four times at 44:54, 52:20, 55:72 and 56:22. At each of these places the word "hur" is mentioned the context of marriage and paradise. For example in 44:54,

"...and We shall marry them with hur, having attractively wide eyes"

And at 55:72,

"They are hur, guarded in pavilions"

If anyone was to take Luxenberg's view that this word means 'white' or 'white grapes', how could anyone fit this re-interpretation of the word in the Qur'anic context? Have you known or seen anyone marry 'white grapes' before?

How can Luxenberg show the link between the Qur'an and a supposedly Syro-Aramaic text when only one word has been provided as a link and the context of the verse and its literary structure have been ignored?

There are many more examples that demonstrate Luxenberg's insistence that the Qur'an must be a manipulated text whose origins are a variety of Syro-Aramaic Christian sources. This persistence has blinded Luxenberg's academic judgement as the Syro-Aramaic texts he accuses the Qur'an of 'borrowing' from are in fact post Quranic (dated after the written text of the Qur'an!).

So what came first? The Qur'an or the text that is supposedly borrowed by the Qur'an, but yet emerged after the Qur'an? Confused? I don't blame you.

Just by discussing Luxenberg's assumptions and the above example he uses, it can be easily pointed out that the evidence he provides is based upon weak assumptions and lacks historical evidence.

### **Argument 2: The Yemeni Parchments and Dr Puins Research provides evidence that the Qur'an has been 'revised'**

Dr Gerd. R. Puin wrote an article under the title of "Observations on early Qur'an manuscripts in Sana". This article concludes that:

1. In a number of manuscripts the letter alif is written in an incorrect way
2. There are some differences in the numbering of verses in some surah's (chapters of the Qur'an)
3. In 2 or 3 sheets he has found the surahs are written in an alternative order to that of the standard Quran

Before I start to discuss his claims, it must be noted that Dr Puin himself mentions that these discrepancies are minor and they would not probably lead to any sudden and significant advances in the field of Qur'anic studies.

### **A Note on Recurrent Oral Tradition**

The Qur'an is preserved historical document. There are two intellectual traditions regarding the preservation of the Qur'an, an oral tradition and a textual tradition. I will not detail the textual tradition here, but it will suffice to mention that we have many manuscripts of the Qur'an dated back to the first century after the hijra. These can be compared to the current copies we have today, and it can be seen that nothing has been altered.

The oral tradition of the Qur'an is a phenomenon unique to Islam. There is an estimate of over 20 Million hufadh (people who have memorised the Qur'an) in the world, and millions of these hufadh have learnt the Qur'an via a direct transmission starting from the Prophet (s) himself. The implications of this are astonishing. If millions of people who have memorised the Qur'an can trace their oral memorisation of the Qur'an down the centuries of teachers and scholars all the way back to the Prophet himself, who could doubt the authenticity of this oral tradition? Especially if these millions of hufadh live in different places in the world and have learnt the Qur'an via different teachers and scholars. The

amount of varying oral transmissions and the amount of people who have learnt the Qur'an – in addition to there being no discrepancy in what they have memorised – is not a historical accident. The conclusion can only be that the Qur'an memorised today is the one that was taught 1400 years ago. There is no other rational explanation for this unique oral phenomenon.

Arguments that attempt to undermine the oral tradition can only be described as conspiratorial and absurd. Unless someone argues that all of these hufadh throughout the ages - at different points in time and different places in the world - somehow came together to ensure that they all memorised and recited the exact same Qur'an, then there is no alternative explanation. To pose such an argument is irrational.

### **Refuting the claims**

1. The incorrect writing of the alif at some places does not in any way effect the integrity of the text as a whole. This is due to the fact that the oral recurrent reporting of the Quranic text has always been used as the standard reference. The skeletal form or the representation of the text in the Arabic language has always been used as a secondary reference. Hence when a hafidh (someone who has memorised the Quran) refers to a copy of the Qur'an with a small mistake such as an incorrect alif, he will easily understand the word and make the correction. Take for example the word 'understanding' in English. If read the following way: "understndng" anyone could comprehend the meaning, especially if the incorrectly spelt word was placed in a sentence.

2. Differences in the numbering of verses have never been a cause for concern with regards to the textual integrity of the Qur'anic text. Classical Muslim scholarship has debated many opinions on the where a verse starts and where one should finish, hence difference in numbering. This difference in numbering doesn't affect the text as a whole. Even Flugel, a famous Orientalist, numbered the Qur'an differently from the standard text. It must be noted that Dr Puin doesn't mention changes to the text, only in the numbering of the verses, which has no impact on the text as a whole.

3. It is well known that for academic and other purposes the Qur'an has been published from time to time with surahs arranged according to the order of their revelation. Thus for instance, A. Rodwell published an English translation of the Qur'an in 1861 rearranging the surahs according to their order of publication. And early in the twentieth century a Muslim of Bengal, Mirza Abul Fazl, issued a new translation arranging the surahs according to the order of their revelation. Similarly Richard Bell made another translation in the early thirties with what he called a "critical rearrangement of the surahs."

Moreover, it has been reported that the companions of the Prophet Muhammed used to keep copies whose arrangement of surahs was different though there were no differences in the verse arrangement.

The existence of a Qur'an with a different arrangement of the surahs or with what is called "revisions" – even though they are irrelevant and minor – is not evidence for a revised Qur'an. The oral tradition of the Qur'an is so well established that any minor textual "error" can be easily rectified. The arrangement of the surahs and verses do not effect the text but are arbitrary methods to counting and splitting the text up; which has no bearing on the textual integrity of the Qur'an.

## **Conclusion**

This brief article has highlighted the inconsistencies in Christoph Luxenberg's and Dr Gerd Puin's study of the Qur'an. In light of the above Dispatches can be accused of creating unnecessary hype and controversy, as they refused to provide a balanced view that reflects current Western and Eastern scholarship.

The Quran, the book of the Muslims, is a preserved text which has a unique oral and textual history. It is a linguistic and literary miracle sent by God to his final Prophet Muhammad (s). It is no wonder that Dispatches did not mention its miracle or even what western scholarship has to make of it. Prof. Bruce Lawrence states:

"Qur'anic verses are expressive of an inexhaustible truth; they signify meaning layered within meaning, light upon light, miracle after miracle"

For more information on the Qur'an's literary and linguistic miracle please go to [www.theinimitablequran.com](http://www.theinimitablequran.com).

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