Syriac Liturgy and the “Mysterious Letters” in the Qur’an:
A Comparative Liturgical Study

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The present article was first published in German in Markus Gross and Karl-Heinz-Ohlig, eds., Schlaglichter: Die Beiden Ersten Islamischen Jahrhunderte [Flashlights: The First Two Centuries of Islam] (Berlin, 2008). Because of its outstanding importance, this English version will appear simultaneously both in the present anthology and in the English translation of the original collection of essays. Unlike all other theories and views brought forward by Islamological “revisionists,” Luxenberg’s explanation of the mysterious letters in the Koran has no “traditional” alternative. If asked about the life of the prophet, the edition of the Koran and the meaning of most Koranic verses, Islamic scholars will adduce quotations from the Islamic traditional literature and agree at least about the main points. Not so about the mysterious letters: there is consensus neither among Islamic nor Islamological scholars about their meaning and origin. If any of Luxenberg’s theories should have a chance to be accepted or at least discussed in the Islamic world, it’s those expounded in the following article.

1. Introduction

The meaning of the letters that appear before twenty-nine Qur’anic Surahs has perplexed scholars in both East and West since the beginning of the Qur’anic exegetical tradition. For example, Ṭabarī (d. 923), considered in Islamic tradition as the most important and most prolific Qur’anic commentator, discussed this enigma in an effort to explain the first set of letters الم / alm, found at the beginning of Surah 2 (“al-Baqara” [“The Cow”]). After his stereotypical remarks by way of introduction—“there are different opinions concerning God’s word الم / alm”—he lists fourteen interpretations, generally supported by lists of transmitters. These meanings can be summarized thus:

1) The letters denote one of the names of the Qur’ān;
2) They are “introductory” letters (فواتح / fawātīḥ), with which God “introduces, opens” the Qur’ān (from this meaning comes the traditional Islamic term فواتح السور [“the introductory [letters] of the Surahs”]);
3) They denote the names of the Surahs;
4) They denote the names of the exalted God.
5) They denote oath-formulae, with which God swears and which allude to his name;
6) They are individual letters representing nouns and verbs, so that each letter has a different meaning;
7) They are specific letters of the alphabet (without further explanation);
8) They are letters, of which each one may have its own distinct meaning (as in 6 above);
9) They are letters that represent an entire sentence;
10) Every book contains a secret, and the secret of the Qur’ān is its introductory letters (hence the name “mysterious letters”);
11) A few Arabic philologists defend the position that they are letters which take the place of the twenty-eight letters (of the Arabic alphabet);
12) The Surahs begin with these letters in order to open the hearing (in order to focus attention upon the Surahs) of the mušrikīn (“the associators” = those who associate other gods with the one God);
13) They are letters with which God introduces his word;
14) If one inquires after the meaning of these letters, one learns that the Prophet supposedly interpreted these letters as representing numbers (following the Syro-Aramaic number-system of the alphabet). (If this is true, then the letters الم/alm (=ʾlm) would stand for the number 71 [a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; 1+30+40=71].) It is interesting in this regard that the Prophet asked his hearers whether they knew that the time of a prophet’s activity and the duration of his community supposedly lasts 71 years. The Prophet used ascending number-values to follow this number-symbolism, by means of the following groups of letters: المص/almṣ [a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; 30; 30+40=71] = 161 years; الر/alr [a = 1; l = 30; r = 200] = 231 years; المر/almr [a = 1; l = 30; m = 40; r = 200] = 271 years. Indeed, the sums agree with the respective roots, but the progressive order of the letters does not correspond to the degressive Aramaic number system, where the letter with the highest value appears first. Nonetheless, the hint at the possibility that specific letters represent numbers is not without interest, as the interpretation of the individual letters will attest. The Qur’ānic number-mysticism that developed in later Islam—possibly connected with Jewish traditions—can be traced back to these number-letters that were originally Aramaic but were taken over by the Arabs.)

Ṭabarī considers each of the Qur’ānic commentators’ various interpretive attempts, and he expends a great deal of effort assigning authority to each one. He concludes by defending the point of view that the letters in question do not represent words that are to be taken together, but rather should be seen as divided letters (hence the term حروف مقطعه/huruf muqatta’a) that can have different meanings. With this conclusion he justifies the opinions of the
Qur’anic commentators that he describes, without committing himself to firm decisions. Ṭabarī is not unjustified in taking this tentative line, because these letters (and letter-combinations), as we will see, can in fact mean different things. Further, such a position leaves room for the later Islamic tradition to offer further attempts at explanation, as the literature shows, ample as it is even into our own day. We will not focus here on this later literature, as it rests entirely on speculations that would not bring us any closer to the solving of the mystery. Rather, we will first discuss briefly the Western Qur’anic scholarship that has dealt with the question of the “mysterious letters.”

2. The Current State of Western Qur’anic Scholarship

In his collection of essays entitled Der Koran, Rudi Paret lists in section VI (pp. 330–385) the most important contributions to Western scholarship concerning the “mysterious letters.” He provides this information “because the phenomenon has been only partially explained” and in order to spare someone who “wants to continue to speculate” a time-consuming search. In his introduction he discusses his sixth section on the mysterious letters with these words:

As I have already noted above, in section VI I attempt to gather together as fully as possible the new publications concerning the enigmatic letters that precede a few Surahs and should be understood as sigla, that is, signs (German: "Siglen"). However, I have omitted Arthur Jeffery’s contribution in The Moslem World 14 (1924), pp. 247–260, because it only refers to the work of others, without offering anything original. I have also left out (for reasons of space and the age of the items in question) the works of Loth (Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 35 [1881], pp. 603–610) and Hartwig Hirschfeld (New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran [London, 1902], pp. 141–143), although these works are important in their own right. I should also mention another recently-published treatment, namely, James A. Bellamy’s ‘The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the Basmalah’ from the Journal of the American Oriental Society 93 (1973), pp. 267–285, although Bellamy also fails to offer a convincing solution to the problem. In my opinion, the foundational work on this topic remains the results of Hans Bauer’s investigations (published in 1921). According to Bauer the sigla appear to be very old and to function as pointers to collections of Surahs that already existed at the time of the production of ‘Uṯmān’s edition of the Qur’ān and that were, just like the edition itself, ordered according to the principle of declining length. Bauer also offers perceptive thoughts concerning the meaning of the individual letters and the combinations of letters.
However, he did not succeed in coming to a full explanation of this difficult complex of questions.\(^5\)

In these observations we see Paret’s correct understanding that the problem of the mysterious letters has not been solved despite their acute insights. A short review of the works mentioned by Paret will show us why their efforts could not lead to a conclusive result.

\(a\) Hans Bauer, “Über die Anordnung der Suren und über die geheimnisvollen Buchstaben im Quran” (1921)\(^6\) [Concerning the Order of the Surahs and the Mysterious Letters of the Qur’an]

Bauer’s point of departure is his acceptance of the idea that “in four (or five) cases” the letters \(\text{ys (Q7 36), } \text{ṣ (Q38), } \text{q (Q 50), } \text{ṭh (Q 20), and (possibly) } \text{n (Q 68)}\) played the same function as the titles by which we now know the Surahs, but this thesis contradicts the historical constitution of the Qur’ānic text, in so far as Bauer overlooks the fact that the earliest Qur’ānic manuscripts of which we are aware bear no Surah titles at all. Rather, these were added by later Qur’ānic editors, largely according to arbitrary criteria. In the course of this editorial work, the letters we are considering here were made into titles, from which one can deduce that they stood at the heads of the Surahs in question from the very beginning. However, we should not exclude his suggestion that these sigla could have belonged to other texts. Bauer ends his treatment with a brief consideration of this last problem; his conclusion is as follows: “The explanation of these questions demands further investigations dedicated to individual aspects of the matter.”\(^8\) He is surely mistaken, however, in accepting that “the meaning of the abbreviations is to be gained directly from the Surahs they precede” or that one can find “definite internal or external relationships between these Surahs’ and the letters that precede them.\(^9\)

\(b\) Eduard Goossens, “Ursprung und Bedeutung der koranischen Siglen” (1923)\(^10\) [Origin and Meaning of the Koranic Signs]

Goossens’ contribution is more extensive and is designed in the form of a doctoral thesis. Here he recognizes that these letters represent abbreviations that to some degree are of a technical sort and were once generally understood; however, he does not even approximately succeed in delineating their individual meanings. Nonetheless, he does conclude with the general statement that these “abbreviations” are “in these 29 Surahs to be set in parallel with the extant titles of the Surahs.” One would not be unjustified, he says, in assuming “that the mysterious letters and groups of letters represent nothing other than old titles.” In his introduction,\(^11\) Goossens reproduces the following table of the data concerning these sigla, derived from Schwally’s list:\(^12\)
In section III (p. 344 in Paret’s edition) Goossens attempts to interpret the individual signs. However, despite the effort he expends, his interpretations are based upon assumptions that do not lead to any plausible result because he does not recognize the actual function of these sigla.

c) Morris S. Seale, “The Mysterious Letters in the Qur’an” (1957/59)
In this essay Seale points rather interestingly to “one example of memoria technica from the Talmud” (Y’ALKGM). Also, his suggestion concerning the explanation of the letter-group KHY’S at the beginning of the “Surah Maryam” (Q 19) is thought-provoking. However, in this as in his other suggestions, he does not distinguish himself from his erring predecessors Bauer and Goossens, in that he (like they) sees in the individual letters the roots of names or expressions, which he then seeks in the corresponding Surahs.

Jones sees a purely mystical meaning in the Qur’anic sigla. His closing remarks are as follows:

   My own feeling is that the letters are intentionally mysterious and have no specific meaning.

He also appropriates an early opinion of Nöldeke (one that Nöldeke himself later abandoned), whom he then cites as follows:

   The prophet himself can hardly have attached any particular meaning to these symbols; they served their purpose if they conveyed an impression of solemnity and enigmatical obscurity.
e) James A. Bellamy, “Again the Mysterious Letters” (see above, n. 3)
In the afore-mentioned article by Bellamy, he again discusses our theme and strengthens his position that these unexplained letters actually concern other ways of writing an ancient basmalah (the shortened form of bi-smi llāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm / “in the name of God, the Gracious One, the Merciful One”). He traces the bold emendations that he suggests in order to justify his thesis back to mistakes made by copyists. He summarizes his argument with the following conclusion:

I am more than ever convinced that the fawātih are indeed old abbreviations of the basmalah that suffered corruption at the hands of later copyists. And after all, what can more properly stand before a Surah than the basmalah?

Even if Bellamy was thinking at least partially in the right direction, it is not possible that all the abbreviations, attested multiple times in the early Qur’ānic manuscripts, can be traced back to earlier mis-transcriptions.

These various attempts by western scholars to explain the problem of the “mysterious letters” in the Qur’ān are hardly distinct from the solutions proposed by the Qur’ānic commentators. They all fail to consider the Qur’ānic text in its context of the history of religions, a problem of historico-cultural relevance. Since these works were published, it has become a widely-accepted fact that the Qur’ān arose in a Syro-Aramaic context. The discussions that follow will seek to demonstrate consistently these historico-cultural connections and to make plausible the thesis that the so-called “mysterious letters” of the Qur’ān originally dealt with a tradition closely related to the Syrian (Syriac) Christian liturgy.

3. Terms Constituting the Framework of the Qur’ān
It seems important here to remind the reader that the three terms concerning the Qur’ān (Qur’ān, Sūra, and Āya) were all borrowed from the Syro-Aramaic language. I will now briefly discuss their etymology.

3.1 قرآن / Qur’ān < مالي / Qeryān
Western Qur’ānic scholars since Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) have recognized that قرآن / Qur’ān, as the name of the holy book of Islam, was taken over from the Syro-Aramaic ecclesiastical term مالي / Qeryān (“lectionary, reading”). The author has expounded upon this topic more fully in his study Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. There the author argued that the loan-word Qur’ān / Koran (actually Qeryān) provides the key for understanding the Qur’ānic language. But two other expressions also arise in this discussion of the Qur’ānic text: the first of them, Sūra (سورة / sūra [“Surah” = “chapter”]), indicates the individual chapters, and the second term, Āya, (آية /
āya ["sign"] refers to each individual “letter” of this text (and by extension, the written word of God), and not “verses” of the Koran as it was later falsely interpreted.

3.2 سورة / sūra < السورية / šūrtā

The term “Surah” as a title above the individual chapters of the Qur’ān is clearly a later addition, because it does not appear in the earliest Qur’ānic manuscripts. There are ten Qur’ānic verses in which this word appears (Surahs 2:23; 9:64, 86, 124, 127; 10:38; 11:13; 24:1; 47:20 [2x]; nine of these occurrences are in the singular, one in the plural); from these texts it has been concluded that the Qur’ān refers by this word to the individual textual units, which were not at that time defined more distinctly. This understanding was justified by the introductory verse to Surah 24, and from this point the term was taken over into the later Islamic tradition with regard to all the Qur’ānic chapters, in connection with the names for the Surahs which were later derived from the individual texts themselves.

3.2.1 Concerning the Etymology of سورة / sūra

Before the term sūra (“Surah”) became a technical term indicating the individual chapters of the Qur’ān, well-known Arab philologists (and later western Qur’ānic scholars) had attempted to explain its etymology. While Ṭabarī supposed that this word was generally familiar, Lisân al-‘Arab (IV:386a f.) cited the lexicographer al-Ǧawharī (d. 1005), who explained its basic meaning as كل منزلة من البناء (“any portion of a building”); with regard to the Qur’ān, then, it said that سورة / sūra means “partition, section” because it divides the textual portions of the Qur’ān from one another. This explanation gives Lisân an advantage over the other philologists’ explanations that are derived from folk etymologies.

In Paret’s commentary on Surah 24:1 (p. 358), he reproduces the important results of western Qur’ānic scholarship concerning the etymology of sūra:

The etymology of the word sūra is controversial. Nöldeke considers it a likely derivation from the Hebrew šūrā (“row”), while Bell thinks it comes from the Syriac šurtā (šūrtā, šurtā) (“writing, written text”). Cf. Nöldeke, Neue Beiträge, 26; Geschichte des Qurans, I:30 f; Horovitz, Proper Names, 211f.; Bell, Origin of Islam, 52; footnote and introduction, 51f., 131; Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 180–182.18

Among the authorities cited only Bell came close to the truth with his thesis that sūra could be a loan-word from the Syriac السورية / šurtā, not from سورية / surṭā, as Jeffery had conjectured:
One could superficially consider the two Syriac written forms ܡܫܬܐ / surṭā and ܡܫܬܐ / şurtā to be merely emphatic variants, but in reality they are distinct from one another both in their forms and in their verbal roots. The masculine form ܡܫܬܐ / surṭā is based on the root ܫܪܐ / saṭara (“to draw, write, mark a line”) and the Syriac variant ܗܬܐ / traṣ (“to be straight, to make straight”).20 The feminine form ܡܫܬܐ / şurtā, however, derives from the verbal root ܫܘܪ / swār (variants ܫܝܪ / syar and ܒܝܪ / bār) (“to present, to depict, to draw, to note”) and leads to the Arabic forms صوّر / sawwar (“to present, to depict, to draw”), صيّر / syyār (“to make, to do”), and صار / sār (“to become”). Consequently, the Syriac form has the meaning of “record” (literally: “drawing”); such a meaning is widely attested in the well-known expression ܣܘܪܬܒܝܬ / ṣūrāṯ bīṯ (“the “drawing” = writing of the book” = “the text of the Bible”).21

In the Qur’ān one finds the root swr once in the nominal form (still current today) صورة / ṣūra (“picture, design”) (Q 82:8) and four times in the second verbal stem with the meaning “to form” (= “to make”) (Surahs 3:6; 7:11; 40:64; 64:3); in the latter two cases, the repetition of the Syro-Aramaic infinitive (or verbal substantive) ܣܘܘܪܬܐ / suwwārā has been considered an Arabic plural form because of the Qurānic defective written form (صوركم / ṣwr-km) and because this particular form of the infinitive is foreign to Arabic grammar. As a result, in both places the canonical text reads as follows: سوركم فاحسن وصوركم / wa-ṣawwara-kum fa-aḥsana ṣuwara-kum (“He has formed you and made your images beautiful”); the second form should be suwwāra-kum, according to the way the Syro-Aramaic builds its infinitives of the intensive stem Pa’el. According to Arabic verbal paradigms, the infinitive form should read صوركم فاحسن وصوركم / wa-ṣawwara-kum fa-aḥsana ta-ṣwīra-kum (literally: “He has formed you and made your forming [that is, the way in which he has formed you] beautiful”). This way of building infinitives in Syro-Aramaic is preserved in a few Arabic substantives, but the Arab philologists did not recognize this morphological phenomenon. Among such terms is the common word كتاب / kuttāb (“school,” especially a “Qur’anic school”); one would normally consider this form an Arabic plural of كتاب / kātib (“writer, author”), but it has actually preserved faithfully the Syro-Aramaic verbal noun κατταβ (= Arabic kattaba), which corresponds in Arabic to the form كتابه / ta-kīb (= “to cause to write”). Understood from an
Aramaic point of view, *kuttāb* then means a school in which one learns not only reading but especially writing.

The Qur’ān offers a similar form in Q 108:1 titled al-Kawṭar; here the readers of the Qur’ān have not been able to recognize in the spelling of the Aramaic nominal form from the intensive stem *kattar* (“to await, to persist”). For this reason they also misread the medial *w* / w, which in Aramaic orthography can serve as a mater lectionis for a short *u* in a closed syllable (َور / *kuttār*), as the diphthong *aw* (kawṭar). If the morphologically identical form *كتّب* / *kuttāb* (written defectively) had indeed had a *w* / w as a mater lectionis for short *u* (َور / *kuttār*), then the Arab readers would not have been able to read this strange written form other than as *kawtab* (instead of *kuttāb*) (and then also kawṯar instead of kuttār).

3.2.2 Excursus

Returning to the Qur’ānic usage of the Syro-Aramaic root *ṣwr* / *syr*, we would no longer deprive the curious reader of the remarkable mis-reading and mis-interpretation of a Syro-Aramaic form in the Qur’ān that belongs to this root.

In terms of its topic, the term concerns the famous “satanic verses” (Q 53:19–20) that name the three goddesses al-Lāt, al-’Uzzā, and Manāt (actually Manwa). In the canonical edition of the Qur’ān, the worshipers of these divinities are initially asked (v. 21) whether it is appropriate to attribute female natures to God when they themselves desire male children. The text continues in v. 22 thus:

(Canonical reading: *tilka iḍan qismatun ḍīzā*)

Paret (p. 53) translates the clause thus:

That would be an unjust division. [Das ware eine ungerechte Verteilung.]

Here Paret does not even question the underlined adjective in the way that he normally does with doubtful expressions; he and the other Qur’ānic scholars do not recognize that the phrase in question is in fact problematic. Indeed, Blachère and Bell cast no doubt upon this unusual word and translate it in same manner:

*Blachère*, p. 561: This, then, would be an unrighteous division! [Cela, alors, serait un partage inique!]

*Bell*, II:541: In that case it is a division unfair.

With such translations the most authoritative Western translators of the Qur’ān are following uncritically the philologically untenable explanations of the Arab commentators and lexicographers. It would be unnecessary to discuss the root *da’aza* / *dayaza*, which does not even exist in Arabic, as
Ṭabarī (XXVII:60f.) does so doggedly in his efforts to explain this incomprehensible reading, calling as he does on the authorities of classical Arabic. A verse from (post-Qur’ānic) poetry becomes an incontrovertible argument for him; in the verse in question, the Qur’ānic word (in fact, misread word) appears in the presumed participial form مضاف / md̄āz (without further explanation), as Ṭabarī says at third-hand, reportedly from al-Aḫfaš.23

The various readings from some “Arabs” that Ṭabarī wants to have examined are just as arbitrary as the meanings contrived for them. The putative “Arabs” disagree even as they approach the vocalization of this peculiar word; some apparently spoke the Qur’ānic word as dayzā, others as daʿzā, and still others as dūʿzā. Because the Qur’ānic readers seem not to have known these “dialectal” variants, Ṭabarī prefers the traditional reading ḍīzā, which he considers morphologically to be a secondary form of the feminine adjective ḍūzā. The famous philologist al-Farrā’ (from Kūfā, d. 822) opposed this explanation, as Ṭabarī notes; according to the former, a feminine adjectival form could be ḍayzā or ḍūzā, and the pronunciation ḍīzā is possible only for noun forms. Of course, al-Farrā’ did not recognize that this form corresponds to the Syro-Aramaic passive participle of the form p’īl / p’ilā.

Ṭabarī then considers the meaning of this formally controversial word in the Qur’ānic expression qismatun ḍīzā, and he lists the following four definitions (supported by chains of tradition): 1) a twisted division; 2) an unjust division; 3) a faulty division; and 4) a disputed division. For the final meaning he cites Ibn Wahb, who has Ibn Zayd saying that ad-ḍīzā “in the spoken usage of the Arabs” means “opposition.” However, it should be noted that Ṭabarī introduces all the meanings listed here by assigning them to the “Arabs.”

Western Qur’ānic scholars seem to have come to a consensus on the definition “unfair division” (German: ungerechte Teilung; French: partage inique). Because no Western scholar had ever doubted the truthfulness of this conclusion, Hans Wehr believed in all earnestness that the expression in question, considered to be “classical,” could not be left out of his famous dictionary [Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart / A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic]; he was clearly unaware of the fact that this Qur’ānic hapax legomenon, mis-read and mis-understood from the very beginning, never became established in the “spoken usage of the Arabs.” As a result, under the presumed (but not named) root ḍyz, he includes the expression قسمة ضيزي / qisma ḍīzā (“unjust division”), as though it had become a “winged word.” But it surprises every Arabic speaker to hear the word ḍīzā, as it does not sound Arabic at all; perhaps it merely elicits a shake of the head or a restrained smile because of the association that this word bears in connection with a similar term (“ṭīz – buttocks, derrière”) that sounds bawdy to contemporary Arabs.
Just like countless other mis-readings in the Qur’ān, this phrase reduces the traditional legend of an “oral tradition” of the Qur’ānic text (which functions as a dogma for some scholars of Arabic or Islamic studies) ad absur- dum. Even the “variant readings” literature, (qirā’āt) documented in the Islamic tradition, is no argument for an oral transmission of the text, as some Qur’ān scholars tend to think, but rather a testimony to redactional diversity.

3.2.3 Deciphering the Enigmatic Term ضيزى / dizā

With this example the Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran will prove its efficiency in solving such problems. We must simply erase in our minds the two diacritical points above the term ضيزى as these were added at a later date by an incompetent scribe and led to this mis-reading. When the term has been purified in this way, we are left with the written form ضيزى, if we preserve the Qur’ānic vocalization, we have the term ẓīra. In reality, the reading ẓīra might sound no less strange to an Arab than dizā, and rightly so. The reason is that at first glance he would not recognize the otherwise familiar verbal root ẓwr (“to depict, to draw”), because the orthography of ضيزى would appear entirely unusual to him.

In actual fact, this orthography can only be explained with the aid of the Syro-Aramaic verbal paradigm. According to the latter, verbs with a medial w / y (just like the other triliteral verbs) build their passive participles on the first stem following the pattern p’īl.24 The written form in the Qur’ān suggests that the Syro-Aramaic root ضيزى / ẓwr > ضير / sär (“to depict, to draw”) is the one in question; this root corresponds to the Arabic ضيء / żwrr. However, because in Arabic the first verbal stem of this root is still current only in the contracted secondary form ضيء / żwrr (basic meaning: “to become”), we cannot conclude with certainty that the root ضيء / żwrr (basic meaning: “to depict”) is meant, especially because this root is only current in the second and fifth Arabic verbal stems (ṣawwara / ta-ṣawwara [“to depict, to draw” / “to visualize, to imagine”]).

Syro-Aramaic grammar turns out to be an indispensable key for deciphering this unusual Arabic spelling ضيزى / dizā.25 Under the Syro-Aramaic participial form ضيء / ẓīra (in the status emphaticus), the Thesaurus (II:3384) gives as an Arabic correspondence the form ضيء / mu-ṣawwar. For the semantics of the verb ضيء / ẓīr, Mannā (632b, under [4]) gives the Arabic meanings تصور / ta-ṣawwara, تصور / ta-ḥayyala (“to visualize, to imagine”).

Conclusion:

In understanding the term ضيزى / dizā, a Qur’ānic expression (Q 53:22) that has not even yet been recognized as problematic and that has nonetheless been mis-read and mis-understood, the Syro-Aramaic language has proven to
be an unavoidable prerequisite for explaining both its morphology and its semantics. This new understanding gives the following result:

**Mis-transcribed Arabic:**

\[
\text{ضيزى} \quad \text{قسمة} \quad \text{اذا} \quad \text{تلك}
\]

**Canonical reading:**

\[
\text{tilka iḏan qismatun ḍīzā}
\]

**Resulting meaning:**

“That would be an unjust division”

**Corrected Syro-Arabic:**

\[
\text{صيرى} \quad \text{قسمة} \quad \text{اذا} \quad \text{تلك}
\]

**New reading:**

\[
\text{tilka iḏan qismatun śīrā}
\]

**New meaning:**

“This is therefore a fictional attribution.”

If we were to bring this statement into contemporary Arabic, it would read thus:

\[
\text{تاك إذا قسمة مصوّرة = مخيّلة = خيالية}
\]

\[
\text{(tilka iḏan qismatun mu-ṣawwara = mu-ḫayyala = ḥayāliya)}
\]

### 3.2.4 On the Qur’ānic Spelling

Our discussion of the semantic field of the root صور / ṣwr concludes with some comments on the Qur’ānic spelling سورة / sūra (with ص / ṣ, 而非 / s), over against the Syro-Aramaic spelling صورا / ṣūrā (with the emphatic ص / ṣ and ص / ṣ). The interchangeability of the voiceless sibilant ص / ṣ and the emphatic ص / ṣ is hardly rare in Semitic languages. As just one example, one might think of the Syro-Aramaic صمت / saybar (“to undergo, to endure”) and the Arabic صبر / ṣabara (“to be patient, to persevere”); the two ways of writing the Qur’ānic form صراط / ṣirāṭ (“line, way”) with ص / ṣ or ص / ṣ as سراط / sirāṭ, are also well-known (even though here there is no phonetic difference due to the emphatic ط / ṭ). In the case of سورة, Lisān (IV:387a) provides an interesting note concerning the inhabitants of Баšra (in what is now southern Iraq), who apparently built the plurals of سورة / sūra and صورة / ṣūrā in precisely the same way; unfortunately, the text does not give any other information regarding a possible difference in meaning.

It is likely no accident, however, that we find the decisive evidence for writing سورة with ص / ṣ rather than with ص / ṣ in southern Babylonia, namely, in Mandaeans. The Mandaeans lexicon offers us the following testimony:

**Surah 2 for sūra? in surẖ udmutẖ ʤ-gabra Gy 391:6 the image (?) and likeness of a man.**

The question marks are unnecessary, for the Qur’ān provides further evidence that the word سورة could be written in Mesopotamia either with ص / ṣ or ص / ṣ. This surprising testimony from Mandaeans adds another detail in favor of the thesis that the Qur’ānic text emerged in the region of Eastern Syria/Mesopotamia.
Finally, from the perspective of the history of religions, we must ask how the Qur’ān came to describe its own text with the term sūra. I have already anticipated the answer above (n. 20):

unde ܦܫܘܪܬ (ṣūrtā) etiam sine ܦܫܐ (kṯāb) valet textus Scripturarum, B.O. iii. i. 87, 97, 153, 166, 174, 261; ܦܫܘܪܬ (ṣūrtā) “Vetus et Novum Testamentum,” Ass. C.B.V. iii. 280 ult."

Following this evidence, in the Syrian Christian tradition, the word ܦܫܘܪܬ / ܳܨܘܪܬ / ܨܘܪܬ (ṣūrtā) meant the entire text of the Old and New Testaments, just as “Scripture” meant “Bible.” By using the term sūra, then, as it repeatedly expressed, the Qur’ān understood itself originally as a partial reproduction of the Syriac ܦܫܘܪܬ / ܳܨܘܪܬ / ܨܘܪܬ, that is, “Scripture” = the “Bible.” However, that the Qur’ān used the term to indicate its own individual chapters does not change its fundamental self-understanding, according to which it wanted to see itself as a part of the entire text of the Bible.

3.3 ܥܝܬ / āya < ܫܐ / āṯā

As the third and final term in this series of words concerning textual units, the word ܥܝܬ / āya means the smallest element of the Qur’ānic sūra (= “transcription, text, wording”), that is, the individual letters. When God speaks in the Qur’ān of his ܥܝܬ / āyāt (in the plural), he means by this term the contents of the written signs that make up his recorded, transcribed words. As a result, the word āya (a word that in Syriac also meant “wondrous sign”) became a synonym for كلمة الله / kalimat Allāh, the “Word of God.” This is why one encounters repeatedly the phrase كلمة الله / āyāt Allāh (“the written signs of God”) in the Qur’ān.29

An innovation here is the use of ܥܝܬ / āya in the sense of “verse,” that is, to indicate units from the division of the Qur’ānic Surahs into individual sentences (or units thereof), a process that was introduced in the later Islamic tradition, following the example of the Bible. When the Qur’ān speaks of ܥܠܕ / āyāt muḥkamāt and ܡܐܕ / wa-uḫar mutašābihāt in Q 3:7, however, it does not mean “distinct and ambiguous verses” in the modern sense, as Paret translates it (44), but rather “precise, faithful,” or (following Syro-Aramaic understanding) “well-known sections of the mother-text (i.e., corresponding to the Bible) and other (non-canonical sections) comparable (to these canonical parts, in content).”30

3.3.1 On the Etymology of ܥܝܬ / āya

Arthur Jeffery, following Alphonse Mingana, considered it more likely that the Arabs took this strange word over from Syriac-speaking Christians than from the Hebrew word מִשָּׁמַר / ʤt.31 However, Mingana (himself an Eastern
Syrian) seems not to have recognized that the Syriac word ܐܬ / āṯā, as a Qur’ānic rasm, must have read as ܕ / ḏā rather than as ܐ / āya (following traditional pronunciation). But he could not have doubted his conclusion, because the Qur’ānic mis-reading had been taken over into Christian Arabic long ago in the past, namely, in the Arabic translation of the Bible. It is therefore no surprise that even famous German scholars of Semitics—men such as Theodor Nöldeke, Carl Brockelmann, Wilhelm Gesenius, as well as the Theaurus (to name only a few)—saw no reason, in the case of the Qur’ānic mis-reading ܐ / āya, to suspect anything other than the etymologically adequate, classical Arabic expression corresponding to the Syro-Aramaic (or Hebrew) one. However, the absence of this expression in the Arabic dialects makes its presence in the Qur’ān quite glaring, as an unmediated loan-word from Syro-Aramaic, as Jeffrey rightly noted. But concerning what Jeffrey mentions in conclusion, namely, its appearance in the so-called “Old Arabic” poetry, we must conclude that either this poetry was post-Qur’ānic, or the word was just as mis-read when it was written down in the ninth or tenth century as it was in the Qur’ān; either possibility would contradict the theory of oral transmission.

In fact, the Qur’ān itself provides testimony for the pronunciation ܐ / āta. Qur’ānic scholars in both East and West up to the present day have overlooked the fact that the Qur’ān has preserved the etymologically-correct written form of the plural (following Syro-Aramaic pronunciation) in Surah 19:74. There the text reads (following the canonical reading):

وكم اهلكنا قبلهم من قرن هم أحسن أثاث وا ريا

(wa-kam ahlaknā qablahum min qarnin hum aḥsanu aṯāṯan wa-ri’ya)
Paret, 252: But how many generations have we allowed to perish before them—generations who were better endowed and presented themselves better (than they)! [Aber wie viele Generationen haben wir vor ihnen zugrunde gehen lassen, die besser ausgestattet waren und mehr vorstellen (als sie)!]

The two expressions ܢ / atātan and ܝ / ri’ya (read as ru’yā in contemporary and classical Arabic) are synonyms that explain one another. While ܢ / atātan reproduces the Syro-Aramaic plural form ܢ / āṯwāṯā (after the disappearance of the unstressed medial semi-vowel w before the stressed, long ҙ > ʿtādā) in its contracted form, ܝ / ri’ya (ru’yā) is a loan-translation from the Syro-Aramaic ܢ / ḥzāṯā. Mannā gives the following Arabic correspondences for the two expressions: a) (46a) ܢ / āibra ("example, model"); b) (230b) ܢ / ḥzāṯā (4, besides the basic meaning of "seeing, sight, appearance"): qudwa, miṭāl, 'ibra ("example, model").

Ṭabarī (XVI:117ff.) cites fourteen chains of transmission concerning these two Arabic expressions, and he then gives the explanations of the traditional commentators as follows: he says a) that أثل / atāt means...
“possession” or “furnishing” (hence the meaning of “furniture” in modern Arabic); and b) that ٌرأى / ri’yā (ru’yā) means “appearance.” He reports that the Arab philologists do not agree with one another as to whether ٌاثاث / atāṭ actually represents a singular or plural form. For example, while al-Aḥmar defends the position that it is a plural whose singular is ٌاثاثة / atāṭa, al-Farrā’ saw it as a type of collective noun, so that there would be no corresponding singular form; the latter goes on to say that, if one were to build a plural form from ٌاثاث / atāṭ, it would be either ٌاثث / āṯṯa or ٌاثث / uṯuṯ.

Due to the Qur’ān’s authority, the Lisān (II:110f.) could not help seeing in this difficult word the verbal root ٌاثث / aṯaṯa (which does not actually exist in Arabic). It sets this root with its homophone that bears the basic meaning of “to be plentiful” and then adduces expressions that have nothing whatsoever to do, phraseologically speaking, with this Qur’ānic loan-word.37

Based on the conjectural and inconclusive explanations of the Arab commentators and philologists, Paret (as opposed to Blachère and Bell) recognized that the two expressions in question from Surah 19:74 are enigmatic.

Following Tabari, the two latter translators give the verse under discussion as follows:

Blachère, 335: [Yet] how many generations before them have We destroyed—generations that were more impressive in goods and appearance? (Combien (pourtant), avant eux, avons-Nous fait périr de générations qui en impo-
suient avantage par les biens et l’apparence?)

Bell, I:290, 75: But how many a generation have We destroyed before them, better both in goods and in repute?

The preceding philological analysis has shown that these two enigmatic expressions can be explained in two different steps, thanks to the methodology demonstrated in The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: a) ٌاثاث / aṯāṯ can be explained morphologically as a secondary Aramaic plural form and semantically with the meaning “examples;” b) by means of back-translation into Syro-Aramaic, the meaning of the Arabic word ٌرأى / ri’yā / ru’yā in its Qur’ānic context can be unlocked, showing the lexically corresponding Syro-Aramaic word to be a synonym of the preceding Qur’ānic word. Based on these conclusions, then, we should now read and understand Surah 19:74 in the following way:

ٌوكم اهلکنا قبلكم من فرن هم احسناثاث وريا

How many generations before them have we allowed to perish, who (in comparison) were better examples and (quite) exemplary (lit. ‘example’)!“
3.3.2 Correction of اية / āya into اثة / āṯa

At first glance it may appear too daring to make the Syro-Aramaic hapax legomenon اثثا / āṯāṯā (< אֲתָתוֹת / āṯāṯāt), transmitted correctly in the Qur’ān at Q 19:74, the justification for changing the reading اية / āya to اثة / āṯa, especially since the former appears in at least 382 places in the Qur’ān (in the singular and the plural, with and without a personal suffix) and has become standard over the centuries, even beyond the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the fact that this word has no real Arabic root, just like the many other Qur’ānic mis-readings that I have demonstrated (among them real Arabic words), should not exclude the possibility of a later, incompetent setting of diacritical points to this foreign (Syriac) word. Still, we should not proceed too hastily to conclude that we have here a mis-reading before we have carefully analyzed the Syro-Aramaic semantic field.

If we assume that the Qur’ānic plural form اثثا / āṯāṯā (< אֲתָתוֹת / āṯāṯāt) is the correct reading, then the corresponding Syro-Aramaic singular form would be اثة / āṯā, which would equal the Arabic اثة / āṯa, not اية / āya. Someone might suggest that the plural form اثثا / āṯāṯā is a mis-reading, but we can exclude this possibility on morphological grounds, because external (i.e., regular) feminine plurals in Arabic cannot take a final-ālif (ا). Or, if one wanted to see here an Arabic accusative of specification (tamyīz) in the Qur’ānic written form اثثا (reading it as اياتا / āyātan instead of āṯāṯā), then the final-ā would not be permissible. In other words, the Qur’ānic orthography faithfully reproduces the Syro-Aramaic plural form with its final-ā.

If we adduce other Syro-Aramaic variants that derive from the verb underlying our term (אָתו / hwā ["to be"]), then we find the following primary nominal constructions (Thesaurus, 1:987f.): אָתו / hwāyā ("existence, birth, generation, creation"); אָתוֹת / hwāyāṯā, אָתוֹתֵנוּ / hawāyānūṯā ("creation, bringing into existence"). The form אָתו / hwāyā ("creation, formation") makes it impossible to posit a related (but unattested) form אָתוֹת / hwāyāṯā (Arabic هو / huwāya, or dialectically, hawīya ["nature, identity"]). From this Syriac form, and by means of sound-shift, comes the expression of existence אָתו / hwāyā and אָתוֹת / hwāyūṯā, which must go back to an Imperial Aramaic form, which in the status absolutus must have been אָתו (אָתוֹת / hwāyāṯā). This form entered Arabic as إيا / īyā and was used alone as a particle in connection with the personal suffix as a sign of the accusative (mostly), e.g., in Q 1:5: إيا / īyāka نستعين و/ياء ي / īyāka na’budu wa-īyāka nasta‘īn ("It is you we worship and your assistance we request"). In the dialects إيا / īyā is also used in connection with the personal suffix, but prepositionally (after the conjunction و / w), in the sense of “and” or “with,” e.g., إنا و/ياء ي / anā w-īyā-k
("I and ‘your being’" = "I and you" or "I with you"). However, the substantive "I and 'your being'" cannot be derived from this particle "I / īyā.

A remnant of the Syriac secondary form ܐܝܬ / yāṯā ("essence, existence, being, presence") (> Arabic yāt) still exists today in the contemporary colloquial Arabic of the Middle East, in connection with kull / koll ("entirety" = "all"), as follows: kull + yāt + nā = kullyātnā (literally, "the entirety of our being" = "we all"), kull + yāt + kon = kullyātkon ("you all"), kull + yāt + (h)on = kullyāth(h)on ("they all"). In north Mesopotamian dialects the forms are contracted: kəllnā ("we all"), kəllton ("you all"), kəllton ("they all"). However, there is no trace whatsoever of this form yāt in Arabic literature. Consequently, it is hard to accept that the hypothetical Qur'ānic reading ܐܝܬ / āyat could have been derived from the Syriac secondary form ܐܝܬ / yāṯā, or even from the dialectal Arabo-Aramaic yāt.

These considerations have allowed us to conclude that the diacritical points placed underneath the word ܐܝܬ / āyat are incorrect in 382 places in the Qur'ān. In addition, though, an examination of the Qur'ānic usage of ܐܝܬ / āyat shows that the various semantic nuances that appear (depending on the context) are exactly the same as those of the Syro-Aramaic ܐܝܬ / āṯā. So, for example, we see Q 3:41, where Zechariah asks God for a “sign” (ܐܝܬ / āyat) of what God has announced to him, namely, the birth of John; there God announces to him as a “sign” that he will communicate with other people for three days by means of sign-language alone (ܐܝܬ / āṯā < Syro-Aramaic ܐܬ / rmāzā, remzā [Luke 1:22]). In the Peshitta (the Syriac version of the Bible), the angel gives the shepherds a “sign” (ܐܝܬ / āṯā) as well, namely, that they will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12).

We also find a typical loan-translation in Q 17:12, with the expressions ܐܝܬ / āyat al-layl and ܐܝܬ / āyat an-nahār, which Paret (228) translates literally as “sign of the night” and “sign of the day” [Bell, Surah 17:13, translates in the same manner]. Although the sense of both expressions is clear, in themselves they remain foreign to the Arabic language. In the Syro-Aramaic language, however, ܐܝܬ / āṯā means, among other things, the heavenly bodies (cf. the English expression “signs of the zodiac”), including the "sun" and the "moon."40

Such loan-translations provide especially clear evidence that the Qur'ān transcribed the Syro-Aramaic orthography ܐܝܬ / āṯā to mean the Arabic word ٱتا / āta rather than the (at a later date) mis-read and mis-pointed ٱتا / āta, especially as this word is not known in any Arabic dialect with this pronunciation. As a result, we can say that the correction of ܐܝتا / āyat into ܐܝتا / āṯā is well-founded from the perspectives of philology and historical linguistics. The plural here, then, should no longer read ٱتا / āyat but rather
آثاث / āṯāt or / āṯāt (following the Aramaic spirantizing of the final-t, and
corresponding to the correctly-transmitted form found in Surah 19:74).

We may adduce here two other Qur’anic texts, where written forms have
been mis-read in the same way. In Surah 44:36 we read:

فاواتا بابائنا ان كنتم صدقين

(fa-‘tū bi-ābā’inā in kuntum ṣādiqīn)

This verse has been understood by the modern Qur’anic translators just as
Ṭabarī (XXV:128) explained it:

Paret, 414: But produce our (dead) fathers (again), if you speak the truth!

[Bringt doch unsere (verstorbenen) Väter (wieder) herbei, wenn (anders) ihr
die Wahrheit sagt!]

Blachère, 527: Bring our fathers back, if you are truthful!

[Faites revenir nos pères, si vous êtes véridiques!]

Bell, II:500, 35: Produce our fathers, if ye speak the truth.

The Qur’anic context concerns people who doubt, those who demand for
themselves proofs concerning the resurrection at the last day; they do not ask
for the immediate return of their dead fathers, for there is no discussion of
“fathers” here at all. The mis-read written form بابائنا / bi-ābā’inā could be
read بآیتائنا / bi-āyātinā according to the current mis-reading, but it should now
be read as بآیتانآ / bi-āyātinā (or, following the Aramaic، بآیتانآ / bi-āyātinā) and
understood thus:

Then bring the proofs (that convince) us (lit.: “our proofs”), if you speak the
truth!41

In a similar way, we should correct the written form found in Surah 45:25
that has been equally mis-pointed:

 قالوا ان الحجتھم كان ما بينت اثتتنا عليھم تتلى اذ وصدقين

(wa-iḏ tu-tlā ‘alayhim āṯātunā bayyināt( in) mā kāna ḥujjatuhum illā an qālū
aytū bi-āyātinā in kuntum ṣādiqīn42)

It has been traditionally understood thus:

Paret (417): And when our verses (lit.: “signs”) are read out to them as clear
proofs (baiyināt), they have no other argument (to introduce) than to say,
"Produce our (dead) fathers (again), if you speak the truth!" [Und wenn
ihnen unsere Verse (w.: Zeichen) als klare Beweise (baiyināt) verlesen
warden, haben sie keinen anderen Beweisgrund (anzuführen), als daß sie
sagen: "Bringt unsere (verstorbenen) Väter (wieder) herbei, wenn (anders)
ich die Wahrheit sagt!"]

Blachère (531): When our clear aya are communicated to them, they have no
other argument than to object: "Bring our fathers back, if you are truthful!"
New understanding:

And when our written signs (i.e., our transcribed words) are recited to them (so that they are self-evident), they have no other objection than to say, “Then bring the proofs (lit.: signs) (that convince) us (lit.: “bring our signs”), if you speak the truth!”

If we include these two emendations (Surahs 44:36; 45:25), then the total number of textual locations rises to 384 in which one single written form has been mis-read (in its plene and defective forms). However, because the Qur’ān, in the verse-numbering of the canonical Cairo edition, has approximately 6,236 verses, all of which are called by the mis-read word “āya,” one can easily imagine how difficult it would be for the new reading of “āṯā” to carry the day. If one takes this reality into account, then one will have to decide to live with the traditional mis-reading, all the while clarifying it as a historico-linguistic error. In a similar fashion, all historical linguists have resigned themselves to accept the arbitrary reading of the loan-word Qur’ān which should have been read as the original Syro-Aramaic word Qeryān. Once again, both misreadings are further proof against the “dogma” of the oral transmission of the Koran.

4. The Christian-Syriac Origin of Friday as Islam’s Weekly Day of Prayer and Rest

4.1 Introductory Remarks

Even if we have already sufficiently shown the Syro-Aramaic origin of the three basic terms of the Qur’ān as an originally Christian-Syriac liturgical book, there still remains the question, relevant for the history of religions, of whether a Christian-Syriac background (in liturgical perspective) could lie behind Friday as the weekly day of prayer and rest in Islam. An easy conjecture is this: at its beginning Islam attempted to establish Friday as the weekly day of prayer and rest in order to distinguish itself from the Jews’ Sabbath and the Christians’ Sunday, and in order to underscore the growing self-confidence of a national religion that was expanding along with the political power of the newly-founded (Arabian) theocracy. Such a conjecture could seem at first glance to illuminate the situation, but it is not entirely satisfactory. A search for other reasons in the history of religions leads to the
subsequent question as to why such desires in early Islam did not lead to the choice of Monday, as that day would have made more chronological sense, as following on the Christians’ Sunday, which in its turn followed on the Jews’ Sabbath. In other words, why did they choose Friday, as this choice seems, so to speak, to go anti-clockwise? We shall now attempt to explain this religio-historical question, which hitherto was not even posed.

4.2 A Qur’anic Hint

In the canonical edition of the Qur’an, there is one single text in which Friday is mentioned, but without any context that gives more specific information. In Surah 62, which was later named the “Friday Surah” (سورة الجمعة), verse 9 reads thus:

Paret: O you who believe: when there is a call to prayer on Friday (lit.: “community day”), then hurry to the prayer (lit.: think of God), and let your business (lit.: “selling”) be, for the former (bring s) you better things if you only knew. [O ihr, die ihr glaubt, wenn am Freitag (wörtlich: Gemeindetag) zum Gebet aufgerufen wird, so begebt euch zum Gottesgedenken und lasst das Geschäft (wörtlich: das Verkaufen) sein, denn dies (bringt) euch Besseres (ein), wenn ihr wüsstet.]

Pickthall: O ye who believe! When the call is heard for the prayer of the day of congregation, haste unto remembrance of Allah and leave your trading. That is better for you if ye did but know.

Scholars have not drawn consistent conclusions concerning this late Surah, which is ascribed to the Medinan period. For his part, Ṭabarī (XXVIII:99ff.) does not mention the institution of Friday as the weekly day of prayer at all; of course, by his time (ninth/tenth century) Friday had long been the customary “congregation day” in Islam. One wishes that he had said something about the actual liturgical practices on this day that is so important for Islam.

Lisān is much more illuminating, for there, under the entry الجمعة / al-ǧum’a (VIII:58b f.) (lit.: “[day of] assembly, congregation day” = “Friday”), we learn that al-jum’a (Friday) has only been called al-ǧum’a since the advent of Islam, and that earlier this day went by the name of يوم العربية / yawn al-‘arūba (<= Syro-Aramaic مارا / yawn ‘ruhtā = “day of the sunset”). Under the word العربية / ‘arūba, Lisān (I:593) gives a similar explanation: العربية / ‘arūba and العربية / al-‘arūba both mean الجمعة / al-ǧum’a (Friday). After giving a hadīth (a statement of the Prophet) concerning Friday, it states:

كانت (ال الجمعة) تسمى العربية، هو اسم قديم لها، وكان له ليس يعربي. يقال: يوم العربية، يوم العربية، والأخص أن لا يخلقها الألف واللام.
"Earlier Friday was called 'arūba, a name which does not appear to be Arabic. This expression was current as yəwəm 'arūba or yəwəm al-'arūba, but the form 'arūba, without the prefixed article al-, is more literary (i.e., more classical)."

The form yəwəm 'arūba (i.e., without the Arabic article al-) corresponds exactly to the Syro-Aramaic form ܡܪܐ ܐܒܐ / yəwəm ruḇtā, which means "day of the sunset," or "Saturday Eve." This word originally meant the evening before the Sabbath, which Syrian Christians used as a name for Friday after taking it over from the Jewish tradition and re-interpreting it in the light of Christianity. According to this re-interpretation, the setting of the sun on Good Friday, that is, the darkening of the sun that occurred after Jesus' crucifixion (Mt. 27:45; Mk. 15:33; Lk. 23:44-45), symbolizes the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New.46 As a result, among Syrian Christians Friday is called ܡܪܐ ܐܒܐ / ruḇtā ("setting of the sun" = "Friday").

There still remains open the interesting question of whether the pre-Islamic Arabs learned this Syro-Aramaic name for Friday ( 'arūba) from Jews or Christians. The fact that Jewish-Aramaic tradition gives the name ܐܒܐ / ruḇtā (status emphaticus) or ܐܒܐ / ruḇā (status absolutus) not only to the evening before the Sabbath but also to the evening before other high holidays speaks in favor of a Christian origin.47 In Christian Syrian tradition, though, Friday alone is called ܡܪܐ ܐܒܐ / ruḇtā, while the evening before other holidays is called ܐܒܐ / ramštā ("evening[time]" = "vespers"). Incidentally, Heinrich Lewy long ago showed the etymology of the name "Europe" as deriving from the Aramaic ܐܒܐ ܒ ܩ / ruḇā ("setting of the sun" = "Occident" = "West").48

There is an apparently legendary report in Lisān (I:593a f.), according to which Ka'āb b. Lu'ayy / لؤي (actually لوي = lwy = Levi), who was the purported grandfather of the Prophet, was the first one to re-name the (Aramaic name) ܒ ܩ / yəwəm al-'arūba ("day of the sunset") as ݨܩ / al-ǧum’ā ("assembly-, congregation-day"). If one were to believe this story as true, then it would be ensured that Friday was called al-ǧum’ā only after the advent of Islam; on the other hand, we could then not exclude a Jewish-Aramaic origin for the name.49

However, it is in a testimony transmitted in the Arabic tradition that we find the explanation that truly settles the question in terms of the history of religions, specifically in the Qur'ānic "readings literature." This particular text concerns the famous work كتاب المصاحف / Kitāb al-maṣāḥif ("The Book of the Qur'ānic Codices"), written by the Qur'ānic scholar as-Siǧistanī (d. 316 AH / 941 CE) and edited by Arthur Jeffery (1892–1959).50 The readings transmitted in this work supposedly trace back to written witnesses that are older than the canonical Qur'ānic edition of 'Uṯmān (Osman) that is known to us. Jeffery makes the following statement in the section entitled "The Old Codices": 
The Kitāb al-maṣāḥif of ibn abi Dāwūd together with a collection of the variant readings from the codices of ibn Masʿūd, Ubai, ‘All, ibn ‘Abbās, Anas, abi Mūsā and other early Qur’ānic authorities which present a type of text anterior to that of the canonical text of ‘Uthmān.

Jeffery seems to overlook an extremely important reading on Surah 62:9 from the codex of Ubai b. Ka'b; alternatively, he may simply not have grasped its wide-ranging importance for the history of religions. In the Qur’ānic text in question, where the Cairo edition has يَوْمُ الْجَمِيعَةُ / yawm al-ǧum'a ("assembly-, congregation-day") for "Friday," the Ubai codex (p. 170, Q 62:9) has the variant يَوْمُ الْأَرُوبَةِ الْكُبْرَىَ / yawm al-ʿarūba l-kubrā. This corresponds to the Syro-Aramaic expression 穰�ץעמש "day of the great setting of the sun" = "day of the great Friday"). This in turn corresponds to the expression in contemporary Christian Arabic يَوْمُ الْجَمِيعَةُ الْعَظِيمَةِ / yawm al-ǧum'a l-ʿaẓīma ("day of the great Friday" = "Good Friday").

This authentic testimony provides us clear proof that the Syro-Aramaic Good Friday was the direct predecessor to the Islamic Friday. If one is aware that the Syriac liturgical office for every Friday commemorates Good Friday, then one will be able to understand why this day’s soteriological meaning causes it to receive more honor than the day of the Resurrection in some Christian congregations (and especially in the piety of the common people). This perspective casts an entirely new light on the emergence of Islam and on the pre-Islamic Arabo-Christian community whose trace seems to have become entirely blurred due to an understanding of history distorted by the lens of Islam. The meaning of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as a testimony to this pre-Islamic, Syro-Arabian Christianity, henceforward achieves a new liturgical confirmation of its importance as the grave of Christ (Arabic قبة الصخرة / qubbat aṣ-ṣaḫra = "stone grave") and as a pilgrimage site of the Christian Arabs under the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (685-705). We should here remember the only Qur’ānic text that concerns the crucifixion of Christ (Q 4:157), a text that has been completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Qur’ānic commentators; this text must be interpreted anew in concert with the other Qur’ānic texts that speak of the death and resurrection of Christ (Surahs 3:55; 5:117; 19:33; 72:19).

Now that we have shown the Christian Syrian origin of the basic terms of the Qur’ān as an originally Christian Syrian lectionary, this unexpected hint of a pre-Islamic, Christian Syrian liturgy leads us logically to the original topic of this essay: the mysterious letters in the Qur’ān. In what follows I will demonstrate how these “mysterious” abbreviations are connected to a Christian Syrian liturgy.
5. Concerning the Meaning of the Abbreviations in the Syriac Daily Office

The breviary for the liturgical year in the West Syrian (Antiochene) church’s liturgical tradition exists in seven volumes; one of these volumes, the one concerning the Advent and Christmas seasons, serves as the foundation for this presentation of the Syriac daily office. The abbreviations in the Syriac breviary belong to the rubrics that contain specific information for each portion of the office. There is a technical term for these abbreviations that consist of one, two, or three letters, with a line above them: the word is either / yaḏ’ā (lit., “recognized”) or / yaddī’ā (lit., “making known”), essentially meaning “clue” or “hint.”

These / yad’ē ("hint-signs"), which generally occur at the beginning of a liturgical text or section, serve to indicate the first words of a hymn that is to follow, as W. Wright surmised: “the word / yaddī’ā (yaḏ’ā) seems to denote the first words, or catch-words of well-known hymns.” In fact, depending on the abbreviation, they can indicate much more:

a) Because the liturgy typically begins with a psalm, indicated by the abbreviation / mzm (= / mazmōrā), up to three letters can indicate the number of the psalm in question in the Psalter; these letters run from / a (= Ps. 1) to / qu (= Ps. 150).

b) The letter / q stands for / qālā ("musical key, melody, tune") and indicates the tone of the following chant (from the eight tones in Syrian hymnody); then follow the introductory words of the exemplary hymn (e.g., “to the tune of ‘Praise the Lord’”).

c) The letters / pt mean / petgāmā ("responsorial") and are followed by the corresponding responsorial lyrics.

d) The abbreviations / pu (= / punnāyā) and / ‘u (= / ‘unnāyā) both mean “antiphon” and are followed by the corresponding antiphonal lyrics.

e) Occasionally one finds before a Gospel reading a chapter with the letters / af (= < κεφαλαῖον)

f) The letters / wšr (= / w-šarkā) mean “etc.”

g) Between the individual hymns one regularly finds the letters / šu (= / šubhā), representing the doxology “Gloria Patri” (“Glory be to the Father…”), sung by the priest; after this, one finds the word / men (“from [now and unto ages of ages]”), which the choir or congregation answers as the beginning of the stanza that follows. One sometimes sees / h, which stands for hallelujah; in the dictionaries and other texts, one sees for the / h the meaning / hāmā /
hānaw (“that is, i.e.”). There are also a number of other abbreviations in the Syriac literature.
The following selections from the Syriac breviary cited above are intended to serve as visual illustrations of a few of the abbreviations I have mentioned. These examples include a few pointers to individual psalms. On the scans they can easily be found as the only letters with a horizontal stroke above.

5.2 Individual Examples

Example 1

(p. 52) After the division marker in the middle of the line, we see d-mezaltâ YW naṭaryn(i). The first word means “(Advent Sunday) of the Visitation,” referring to Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth. “YW” is a number marker, referring to Psalm 16. The following word naṭaryn(i) provides the beginning of the corresponding Psalm: “Protect me (Lord)?”

Example 2

(p. 52) d-mawlāḏeh d-Yoḥannān = “(Advent Sunday) of the Birth of John”
KZ = Psalm 27
Māryā = the beginning of the Psalm: “The Lord (is my light)”

Example 3

(p. 52) d-Yawsep̵ = “(Advent Sunday) of Joseph’s Dream(-Vision)”
KW = Psalm 26
dunāyn̵ = the beginning of the Psalm: “Vindicate me (Lord)”

Example 4
(p. 52) da-qḏām yaldā = “(Advent Sunday) before the Nativity”  
LG = Psalm 33

šabbahʷ = the beginning of the Psalm: “Praise (the Lord, O you righteous ones)”

Example 5

(p. 52) d-bāṭar yaldā = “(Sunday) after the Nativity”  
LṬ = Psalm 39

Example 6

(p. 52) After the division marker: kurrāḵā = “response”  
BQ = b-qālā, meaning “according to the tune;” qām Māran are the first words of the tune: “Our Lord is risen”

Example 7

1st line: (p. 53) After the upper division marker: MZM = mazmōrā = “Psalm” ba-rbīʿāyā = in the fourth tone

2nd line: d-subbāreh da-Zḵaryā = “(Sunday) of the Annunciation to Zechariah” – G = Psalm 3; Māryā mā sḡīw = the beginning of the Psalm: “Lord, how numerous are (my foes)”

3rd line: After the lower division marker: d-subbārāh d-Maryam = “(Sunday) of the Annunciation to Mary” – Ṭ = Psalm 9 – awdē = the beginning of the Psalm: “I will praise (the Lord with all my heart)”
Example 8

(Q 61) Before the division marker: ŠW = šuḫhā lāḵ = “Praise be to you”
After the division marker: šuḫhā leh l-ḥaḏ ba-ṯlāṯā = “Praise be to the One in Three (the Trinity)”

Example 9

The division marker in this Syriac edition consists of four points arranged in the form of a cross; it serves to divide stanzas, textual sections, and primary sentences. The marker by itself looks like this:

Compare the division marker for verses that one finds in a Qur’ānic manuscript:

5.3 Summary

This analysis of the normal abbreviations found in the Syriac daily office edition has demonstrated their use to indicate the following categories: doxologies; psalms; responsorial texts, antiphons, and responses; tunes, melodies, and modes; and biblical readings. These results are certainly connected with the etymological analysis of the three Qur’ānic expressions of literary scope, of whose Syro-Aramaic origin there is now no doubt. But the results are also confirmed liturgically through the explanation of the Christian Syriac Good Friday as the precursor to the Islamic Friday, as I have shown above. The reconstruction of these facts, relevant as they are to the history of religions, allow us to consider it well-founded to attempt to place the so-called “mysterious letters in the Qur’ān” in their religio-historical setting and thus to interpret them anew in connection with the liturgical traditions of Syrian Christianity.
6. The “Mysterious Letters” in the Qurʾān

6.1 Introductory Remarks

In order to forestall overly optimistic expectations, I must initially note that the Qurʾān—despite the Syro-Aramaic origin of its name—should only be considered as partially connected with a Christian Syrian liturgy, in that this liturgy originally formed the foundation of the Qurʾān. We must leave it to future studies to show that this liturgy is to be found in the oldest portions of the so-called “Meccan” Surahs; such work will also show that there is far more Christian Syrian liturgy to be found in these earliest sections of the Qurʾān than scholars have thus far seen. However, this liturgy is not the same as those Eastern and Western Syrian liturgies with which scholars are familiar and whose roots stretch back into early Christianity. It is certain that the Qurʾānic liturgy is older in some parts than Islam; indeed, as we already know, it goes back to a pre-Nicene Christianity and is similar to an early Christian Syrian liturgy. However, its predecessors seem to have vanished in the mists of history; we have no written evidence for it whatsoever before the Qurʾān. If one adds to this recognition the confused circumstances under which laypeople apparently collected, edited, and sometimes misunderstood the Qurʾānic materials at a later date, one can begin to understand the scholarly discomfort with the efforts to disentangle and historically reconstruct this text.

Theodor Nöldeke’s Geschichte des Qorans ([History of the Qurʾān] 1909–38; ed. Schwally, Bergsträßer, Pretzl) provided western Qurʾānic scholarship with a crucial recognition, namely, that the Islamic exegetes’ rough division of the Qurʾānic text into earlier Meccan and later Medinan Surahs must be chronologically sub-divided into a greater number of time periods. Analysis of the sigla (or “mysterious letters”) has led us to the further understanding that these letters are exclusively associated with the beginnings of Meccan Surahs (with the exception of Surahs 2 and 3, although their beginnings should in fact be assigned to the Meccan period). On the basis of this knowledge, and in interpreting the sigla, we will need to distinguish between the first and second Meccan periods. Naturally, the liturgical portions of the Qurʾān belong to the first period; there we will find sigla that have a relationship to the liturgy. We can assign the beginning of a sermon (cf. Q 75:17–19) to the second period; in that group are preserved portions whose beginning invokes the revealed “written text” (kitāb), of which the Qurʾān understands itself to be a part. Some scholars have already noted that some sigla stand at the beginning of such Surahs, a recognition that will make the meaning of a whole set of sigla comprehensible. Because these latter sigla are, generally speaking, not identical with those of the Syrian liturgy, and because
the pre-Qur’ānic liturgical tradition was apparently irreparably lost by this point in time, it is possible that we have only interpretive proposals to make based on comparisons with liturgical texts; our hope, though, is that these will best allow for the unique ways in which the Qur’ānic text was edited.

With all of this said, we can now proceed to the explanation of the individual sigla.

6.2 Concerning the Meaning of the Individual Sigla

Given that the Qur’ān is a liturgical book (qur’ānāyānā [“lectionary”]), and corresponding to the tradition of the Syrian daily office, some Surahs begin with a Psalm verse. This is the case with Surahs 57, 59, 61, 62, and 64 (and possibly also Surahs 67 and 87). So, for example, in Surah 62:1, we read: *yusabbiḥ l(i)-Allāh mā fī s-samāwāt wa mā fī-l-‘arḍ* (“Let all that is in heaven and on earth praise God”). The Hebrew reads: *וָאָרֶשֶׁם בָּםיְהַלְלוּהוּ וְכָל־רֹמֵשׂ יַמִּים* (Ps. 69:34: “Let heaven and earth praise him!”).

**Sigla 1–3:** ص/Ṣ، ق/Q، ن/N (Surahs 38:1; 50:1; 68:1)

We should view the fact that the Qur’ān mentions the Psalms on nine occasions as a pointer to the Psalter, which was a part of the pre-Qur’ānic liturgy just as it was of the Syrian liturgy. Consequently, as in the Syrian daily office, individual letters in the Qur’ān can serve as numbers, pointing to particular Psalms in the Psalter. Of course, the use of these Psalms disappeared in the later Islamic tradition. As a result, the following three letters in the Qur’ān can possibly indicate three Psalms: 1) ص/Ṣ (Q 38:1) would refer to Psalm 90; 2) ق/Q (Q 50:1) would refer to Psalm 100; and 3) ن/N (Q 68:1) would refer to Psalm 50. One could also interpret the ص/Ṣ as /šabā‘ūt or “Lord of Hosts” = “the Powerful, the Almighty”), the ق/Q as /qaddīš or “holy [is/be he]”). In fact, both expressions appear in the “Trisagion”: “Holy (are you, God), (holy are you,) Strong….”

**Siglum 4:** يس/YS = بس/BS

At the beginning of Q 36, there are letters that are traditionally read as بس/bs, from which the Islamic tradition has developed a personal name (Yāsīn). However, reading the letters as بس/bs (because the diacritical points originally did not exist) appears to make more sense, as an abbreviation for the *basmala*, as a normal formula at the beginning of that liturgy. The Syro-Aramaic would have read /b-šem, which would correspond to the Arabic بس/bs = بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم ("in the name of the gracious and merciful God"). This siglum, then, would
correspond to the Syriac abbreviation Íü / šu (= ܥܫܘܡܬܐ / šuẖā) as the doxology “Gloria Patri.”

A further group of sigla that can refer to individual Psalm verses and have as their content the praise of God are the following:

**Siglum 5:** Ù / ÒH (Q 20:1)

This abbreviation has also been made in the later Islamic tradition into a personal name: Ṭähāh. However, it seems to make much more sense to read in it the Syro-Aramaic Óä / tāb hū, which would correspond to the Arabic طيب هو / tāyib(un) huwa (“he [the Lord] is good”). This also fits well with the following two sigla.

**Siglum 6:** Ù / ÒSM (Surahs 26:1; 28:1)

This abbreviation represents the Syro-Aramaic Óä / Ï / ÒSM = Óä / tāb šem Māryā, which would correspond to the Arabic طيب هو اسم الله / tāyib(un) huwa (i)sm(u) r-Rabb (“the name of the Lord is good”).

**Siglum 7:** Ù / ÒS (Q 27:1)

This abbreviation represents the Syro-Aramaic Òä / Ï / ÒS = Óä / tāb šemeh, which would correspond to the Arabic طيب هو اسمه / tāyib(un) huwa (i)sm(u)-(hu) (“[his] name is good”).

**Siglum 8:** Ù / Óm (Surahs 40:1; 41:1; 42:1; 43:1; 44:1; 45:1; 46:1)

The seven Surahs that start with the abbreviation Ù / Óm also all begin with a text of revelation. As such, this abbreviation has as its content a well-known formula that should be understood as both a praise of God and also an intensifying oath-formula (functioning to emphasize the following text’s character as revelatory). Here we should see a correspondence with the fifth proposal of some commentators that Ṭabarī mentioned, according to which some scholars thought that some of these abbreviations did indeed concern oath-formulas that belong to the name of God without stating it explicitly. This conjecture, which has been ignored by Western Qur’ānic scholars, will now be confirmed and concretized with the following analysis.

The Qur’ānic abbreviation Ù / Óm corresponds to the Syro-Aramaic Òä / Óm, which is short for Û / Õ / hayy(h)u Māryā, which in turn corresponds to the Arabic حي هو الرب / hayy(un) huwa r-Rabb (“The Lord is alive!” or “As the Lord lives!”). Mannā (235b) reproduces this formula in Arabic, but as following the Syro-Aramaic written form, as follows: حي هو الرب / hayy(un)
huwa r-Rabb ("The Lord is alive!") and wa-lāh ("in God’s name!"). The Qur’ānic abbreviation ḥm, then, is a formulaic intensification of the divine origin of the text that follows it.

Siglum 9: عم / SQ = ḥm / ṢQ

In Q 42:2, the siglum عسق / ṣq follows logically upon the abbreviation حم / ḥm. If we transcribe it into Syro-Aramaic, we have the abbreviation ḫayy(h)ū Māryā 'lā ūsmu-hu l-quddūs ("As the Lord lives—praised be his holy name!")

Just as this formula emphasizes the divine origin of the revelatory text it precedes, so do the Surahs ascribed to the second Meccan period use the following four sigla for the same purpose: الم / ALM; الر / ALR; المصر / ALMṢ.

Siglum 10: الم / ALM (Surahs 2:1; 3:1; 29:1; 30:1; 31:1; 32:1)

Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī, in his 1979 study in Arabic entitled فتى ونبي / Qass wa-nabī ("A Priest and a Prophet"), conjectured that this abbreviation, which appears six times in the Qur’ān, represents the Syro-Aramaic letters ل / ALM, standing for the Syro-Aramaic sentence لع القديس "(The Lord spoke to me""). This stereotypical sentence appears often in the Old Testament with regard to the prophets. This reading and explanation will be confirmed by the analysis of the next abbreviation.

Siglum 11: الر / ALR (Surahs 10:1; 11:1; 12:1; 14:1; 15:1)

As the afore-mentioned author rightly surmised, these letters, which appear five times in the Qur’ān, correspond to the Syro-Aramaic letters عل / ALR. Consequently, we should read these letters as an acronym for the following Syro-Aramaic words: لع القديس "(The Great One [the Lord] spoke to me""). This interpretation has recently been assigned in Internet forums to the writers who go under the pseudonyms Hai Bar-Zeev
and Hanna Zakarias (alias Gabriel Théry). The interpretation I have cited from Abû Mûsâ al-Ḥarîrî has in its favor the plausibility of the Qur’ânic context.

The wavy horizontal line that appears over the abbreviation الم / ALM (as above the other sigla) means (as is the case in the Syriac scribal tradition, see the Syriac scans above) that the letters are an abbreviation. We can see this in the following selection (in the second line, on the right side), along with the detail:

This wavy line has been interpreted in the Islamic tradition as a madda [i.e., a sign for a long ā in the Arabic alphabet], but in the case of Koranic recitation it is considered as a sign of prolongation of each individual letter while reciting (as follows: aliiif...laaam...miim...).

**Siglum 12: الم / ALMR (Q 13:1)**

This siglum appears but one time and is a combination of the two previously mentioned. Thus, it should be read as follows: Syro-Aramaic emar lī Māryā rabbā, corresponding to the Arabic القل لى الرب العظيم / qāla lī ar-Rabb al-‘aẓīm, meaning “The great (almighty) Lord spoke to me.”

**Siglum 13: المص / ALMṢ (Q 7:1)**

This siglum also appears once and should be read as follows: Syro-Aramaic emar lī Māryā ṣbā‘ūt, corresponding to the Arabic القل لى الرب الصباوت / qāla lī ar-Rabb aṣ-ṣaba‘ūt, meaning “The strong (almighty) Lord spoke to me.”

**Siglum 14: كھيعص / KHYṢ (Surah 19:1)**

We should first note that, unlike the other previously mentioned Surahs, whose sigla indicate a revealed text, the Surah Maryam begins with a liturgical text that one can ascribe to the Advent season of the Christian Syrian liturgy. The first Sunday of Advent in the Syrian daily office has as its theme, just as we find in the Qur’ân, the announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist. This theme corresponds to the Gospel pericope Luke 1:5–23; the Qur’ân summarizes this story in verses 2–11 in a free and succinct form.

In the Syrian liturgical tradition, the second Sunday of Advent is devoted to the annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:27–38). The Qur’ân reproduces this report
also, in verses 16–21, with a version that summarizes the story (albeit from a Qur’ānic perspective). The report of the birth of Christ found in verses 22–33, however, diverges quite a bit from Luke 2:1–20 and suggests a non-canonical Qur’ānic Vorlage [model or original].

What is important for our purposes, however, is that the two “annunciation sequences” that precede the Christmas story in the Qur’ān agree exactly with the corresponding Advent Sundays in the Syrian liturgical year. This is relevant for historical studies of liturgy because in this way the Qur’ān follows a West Syrian tradition that can be traced back at least as far as the early sixth century, while the Eastern Syrians had four Advent Sundays (or “Sundays of Annunciation”) long before the middle of the seventh century. By means of its structure, in concert as it is with the Gospel of Luke, the Surah Maryam testifies to a pre-Islamic, Christian Syrian tradition with two Advent Sundays before the Christmas celebration, for which Surah 97, as a “Christmas Surah,” has preserved a historical memory.

Because we can now say that Surah 19 belongs to the liturgical texts in the Qur’ān, the siglum that introduces it must naturally have as its content the praise of God, in a way corresponding to the Syrian liturgy. This is also an indicator that the Surah Maryam does not belong to the second Meccan period, which distinguishes itself by texts that present a sermon supported by revelation; rather, it is a liturgical text (at least up to verse 33) that belongs to that earlier portion of the Qur’ān that serves as its foundation as originally a lectionary, that is, as a liturgical book.

This longest siglum in the Qur’ān can therefore be decoded according to the Syrian liturgy and in the following way: كھيعص / KHY’S represents the Syro-Aramaic letters حعصم. These latter stand for the words

"كبير هو "الرب العليم الصاباو" / kabīr huwa r-Rabb al-'alī aṣ-saba'āt, meaning “Great is [= Praise be] the Lord (Yah), the Exalted, the Sabaoth (= 'the Powerful').”

7. Summary and Prospects

At first glance the most important result of this essay may appear to be the solution to the question of the so-called “mysterious letters.” This question, which has functioned as the “Gordian knot” of the Qur’ān for approximately 1300 years, serves merely to indicate the deficiencies in eastern and western Qur’ānic scholarship, having failed to place the Qur’ān in its cultural and historical contexts. All attempts up to this point to solve this problem could not have succeeded because they proceeded from a faulty starting point. The preceding analysis, therefore, has attempted to explain methodologically the origins of some basic expressions of the Qur’ān from the perspectives of the histories of linguistics and cultures. It was only by means of these small,
logical steps, which actually employ nothing other than the historico-critical method, that we could hope to come closer to an objective solution of this problem.

To the critical observer, the problem will by no means appear to be solved, in that the concrete proofs for the suggestions I have made here could not be provided. Unfortunately, given the state of affairs concerning the Qur’ānic documentary materials, we can at the moment hardly meet this justified desire, which ultimately results in the demand to produce the “Ur-Qur’ān.” Nonetheless, even if one were to discover the sought-after Ur-Qur’ān by means of an unexpected happenstance, we would still have this same problem of the “mysterious letters,” because the creators of the Qur’ānic sigla were well-schooled in the tradition and have once and for all exited this world. This, of course, explains the perplexity of the Qur’ānic exegetes and most clearly illustrates the absence of the “unbroken” oral transmission of the text that has been claimed by Islamic tradition. Therefore, it would be unnecessary to speculate as to whether one or another of the letters in question could be interpreted in another way. Unfortunately, we cannot expect final certainty, given the conditions I have indicated. Therefore, the most important contribution of this analysis must remain a closer definition of the function that these sigla had in their Qur’ānic contexts.

Concerning the Christian Syrian tradition, however, we are in a quite fortunate position, in that this tradition has continued unbroken into our own day, with the result that we can learn what these sigla mean individually. It might appear that adducing this tradition only serves as a makeshift aid when we attempt to solve the problem of the Qur’ānic sigla; however, this attempt has never yet been made. After all, as we have shown, all the Qur’ānic sigla were to be read originally as Aramaic. We must continue to wait to see if this approach and its results (including the expressions which constitute the framework of the Qur’ān, which all point, from the beginning, to a written Syro-Aramaic cultural tradition) will prove convincing.

A further problem that this study has made quite clear is the absolute necessity of the knowledge of Aramaic (alongside Arabic, of course), not only for understanding the language of the Qur’ān, but especially for the historico-linguistic reconstruction of a text that has been mis-read and mis-interpreted in innumerable places (despite the legend of an oral transmission). Without this prerequisite of understanding Aramaic, all efforts to overcome the manifold problems of the Qur’ānic text will fall flat. The realization of ambitious and desirable projects, such as the Corpus coranicum, will not help to solve these problems alone.
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Id., *Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1904).


Qur’ān karīm (Cairo, 1972).


Internet source: http://www.unbound.biola.edu (biblical text in Hebrew, with numerous translations)
Notes


2  For better readability, the “ʾ” will be replaced by the letter “a” for “a(lif)” in the following.


4  NB: Bellamy has also produced a more recent article: “Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 113 (1993), 562–573; cf. especially section 12, which bears the title “Again the Mysterious Letters.” This article has been reproduced in Ibn Warraq, ed. (with translations), What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), pp. 508–510.

5  Paret, Koran, xxi f.


7  Surahs will be indicated by the letter Q (for Qur’ān).

8  Paret, Koran, 335.

9  Paret, Koran, 333.


11  Paret, Koran, p. 336.


18  Paret, Koran, p. 358.

19  Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, p. 182.

20  Cf. the English form “trace” as well as the German forms Trasse (roadway, trail) and Trassee, all of which come from the French word tracer (“to draw a line”), apparently from a vulgar Latin form, which itself derived from the classical Latin tractum. The aural similarity between the French tracer and the Syriac tracs (with the same semantic contents) must be as much a coincidence as that between the Syro-Aramaic metathesis ُ\textasciitilde{ṣ}rāṭ / ṣirāt (“line”) > the Qurānic ُ\textasciitilde{sīrāṭ} and ُ\textasciitilde{sīrāṭ} and the Latin form strata. Cf. here the new etymological interpretation by the author in his English edition The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A

Mannà, 633b; Thesaurus Syriacus (Thes.), II:3386, penult., Spec. ベース (ṣūraṯ kṯā) textus, تحرير (b-ṣūraṯ kṯā), Eus. Hist. Eccl. iii.37(38); (3387) تحرير (kullāḥ ṣūraṯ kṯā d-‘attiqtā w-daḥḍattā), totus textus Veteris et Novi Test. (“the whole text of the Old and the New Testament”), Chr. Eccl. § ii.215; ib. 481... unde ベース (ṣūrāh) etiam sine تحرير (kṯā) valet textus Scripturarum, B.O. iii. i. 87, 97, 153, 166, 174, 261; bases (ṣūrāh) “Vetus et Novum Testamentum,” Ass. C.B.V. iii. 280 ult.; bases (ṣūrā) textus evangeliorum [the text of the Evangelists], Syn. ii. Eph. 149. 2.

Cf. on this form The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran, pp. 295f., especially n. 353.

Three different famous Arab philologists are known by this name; the earliest died in 793, the second in 830, and the most recent in 920.

The form تحرير / fa’ll, attested by many Arabic adjectives and substantives, arose at an earlier period in a region in which Aramaic was spoken. We know this because the form belongs to the Aramaic verbal paradigm rather than the Arabic one. As is well-known, Arabic builds its passive participles on the first stem with an m-prefix according to the form مفعول / ma-f'ūl. Nonetheless, the Arab philologists occasionally recognized the corresponding meaning of the form تحرير / fa’ll, but this recognition depended upon context. So, for example, Lisān often explains this form with تحرير “(fa’ll in the sense of ma-f’ūl”).

Cf. Carl Brockelmann, Syrische Grammatik, 8th ed. (Leipzig: Verlag Enzyklopädie, 1960), 142, for the paradigms of the verbs with medial w / y, especially their passive participles.

If al-Farrā’ wanted to think that such a form must be restricted to nouns, he may have had in mind an Arabic substantive like ميزة (“distinction, quality”). If this was the case, he did not recognize that this word as well is a substantivized passive participle according to the Syro-Aramaic verbal paradigms and that, consequently, it is not morphologically different from the Qur’ānic participial adjective صيرى / sirā.

This understanding is proven by the following verse 23, which seems to be a commentary on vv. 19–22. The text there should be understood thus: “These are nothing but names that you and your fathers named, and concerning which God has sent down no authority at all (by means of a revealed writing). (In this) They (the people addressed) follow exclusively (their) speculation (الظن / aẓ-ẓann) and whatever their souls (i.e., each one according to his own perception or sense) devise. In this they have preserved from their Lord the correct guidance (the correct teaching)” (literally: “In this the correct guidance has come to them”). The expression ما تھوى لانفسا / mā tahwā l-anfus comes from Aramaic and traces back to the Syro-Aramaic terms  مجاني (to create, to invent) and ميزة / mīza (“distinction, quality”). Following this meaning, the anonymous commentator (in verse 23) read and understood correctly the Syro-Aramaic word صيرى / sirā that was present in Q 53:22 at that time (in place of the later word ضيزى / ḍīzā, as it was mis-read in the canonical edition of the Qur’ān), but Ṭabarī and the other “authorities” to which he appealed overlooked this fact.
29 A. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 73, n. 1, cites a biblical text (Daniel 3:33) for the use of the biblical Aramaic word יָת / āṯ in the sense of “a sign wrought by God,” but he is wrong. The double expression āṭōhī w-ṭimhōhī (Peshitta: āṯwāṭeh w-ṭeḏmrāṭeh [“his signs and his wonders”]) makes clear that, in the biblical context, the meaning of יָת / āṯ is in the sense of “wondrous signs”
30 For more on this topic, cf. *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, pp. 106ff.
31 *Foreign Vocabulary*, pp. 72f.
32 A more recent diminutive form of אתן / āṯa appears to be אתןא / āṯūṯā (“letter, symbol”); cf. here Nöldeke’s *Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik*, 78, Diminutiva, §134: “Cf. also §112, as well as the diminutives at §122 formed by the repetition of the third radical.” אתןא / āṯūṯā would be an appropriate addition to the examples that Nöldeke offers; however, we should not exclude the possibility that this word is rather a more recent secondary form of the plural form אתותא / āṯwāṯā.
33 The references, respectively, are to *Mandäische Grammatik*, 110; *Lexicon Syriacum*, 53b; *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch*, 19b; and *Thesaurus Syriacus*, I:412.
34 *Foreign Vocabulary*, 72: “The struggles of the early Muslim philologers to explain the word are interestingly set forth in LA, xviii, 66ff. The word has no root in Arabic, and is obviously, as von Kremer noted [n. 6: Ideen, 226 n.; see also Sprenger, *Leben*, ii, 419 n.; Cheikho, *Naṣrānīya*, 181; and Margoliouth, ERE, x, 539], a borrowing from Syr(iac) or Aram(aic).”
35 Ibid., 73: “The word occurs in the old poetry, e.g., in Imrū’ul-Qais, lxv, 1 (Ahlwardt, Divans, 160), and so was in use before the time of Muḥammad.”
36 Franz Praetorius, *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 56 (1902), 688ff., has already given attention to plural forms like these in the Aramaic dialects, which arise from the contraction of “rising” diphthongs, as we see them in Arabic. This correct observation received negative criticism at the time from Nöldeke, who expressed the following opinion in his *Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft* (Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1904), 55 (under “II”): “Praetorius will find little agreement concerning his identification of the (classical Arabic) رعث (ruʿāṭ), (usāṭ), (suqāt) with the (Syro-Aramaic) אסרעוויתא (rāʾawwāṯā), אסערעוויתא (āsawwāṯā), אסרערעוויתא (šāqawwāṯā) (‘shepherd,’ ‘healer/physician,’ ‘giving,’ respectively)….” With this critique Nöldeke demonstrates that he did not recognize this sound-shift through contraction, as the argumentation which follows also shows. However, he is correct to surmise a middle-stage between classical Syriac and the Arabic form, a stage that must have been the direct predecessor to the Arabic form. If one begins from the classical Syriac form, one can well imagine the three-stage sound-shift as follows (using the example of אסרעוויתא [ruʿāṭ]: a) Syriac רעוויתא > b) vernacular Aramaic רעוויתא > Arabic رعث. The change from the Syro-Aramaic אסרעוויתא / āṯwāṯa (“symbols, letters”) to the Qur’ānic-Arabic form (in pause) אṯא / āṯā (therefore: āṯwāṯ > āṯā) also corresponds quite regularly to this last schema.
37 The verbal root אתח / āṭaḥa, which sounds odd in Arabic, apparently traces back to the Syro-Aramaic variant אתחא / yattaṭ (Mannā, 319a: קון אתחא אתחא / kawwana, awg̣ada, abda’a [“to build, to make, to produce”]). This term in turn seems to be a
secondary denominative construction from the “expression of being” / āṯ or āṯā; an entry in Lisān (II:110b) speaks in favor of this possibility concerning “luxuriant, thick” vegetation, as a verse from Imru’ al-Qays testifies (أثيث / āṯīṯ), which would correspond exactly to the Syro-Aramaic adjective āṯīṯā or āṯīṯā (“luxuriant”) as cited in Mannā (319a). The further examples that Lisān cites confirm the origin of this root as from Syro-Aramaic and testify once more that the so-called “Old Arabic” stood much closer to Aramaic than some contemporary scholars of Arabic want to allow.

38 Lisān (XIV:61b–f.) cites Abū Manṣūr, who says the following on the topic: “Regarding the meaning and origin of āṯā / āṯā, I have heard nothing.” Regarding an attempted definition based on folk etymology, the same source says, “In reality this word is cryptic (مْبَھم / mubham); it serves to indicate the accusative (يَکْنَى / yāḵnā, عن / ‘an).” This word corresponds to the Hebrew particle ēṯ / ēṯ, which seems to be a contracted secondary form of the Aramaic ēṯ / ēṯ (cf. W. Gesenius, Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch, 17th ed. [Berlin, Göttingen, and Heidelberg: Springer, 1959], 76a, “1. Zeichen des determinierten acc.” [sign of the determinated accusative]).

39 Even Lisān (XIV:62a–f.) recognizes the meaning of the mis-read āyā – “signal,” “example,” “model,” or “wondrous sign,” depending on the Qur’ānic context—without explaining its origin. Here Lisān’s anonymous citation is interesting, in that it claims that āyā is named “āyā” because it means a “sum of the letters [or individual words] of the Qur’ān” (لاِنَّھَا جَمَاعةٌ مِنْ حُرُوفِ الْقُرآن).”

40 Thesaurus, I:413, meaning 4: constellatio, ܐܬܘܬ(āṯwāṯā ḏa-šmayyā) constellationes coeli, Jer. X.2, Did. Ap. 87.16. It. signa quibus sol, luna, et planetae ab astronomis designantur, quae omnia descripta inveniantur ap. Laud. cxxiii. 245 v.[Signs, designated by astronomers as sun, moon, and planets, as described at Laud. cxxiii.245 v.]

41 Concerning this meaning of the Syriac āṯā / āṯā, cf. Thesaurus, I:413, under β: indicium, argumentum, āṯā ḏa-qyāmā (“sign” = “proof of the resurrection”), Gen. ix. 12, 2 Cor. xii. 12. With this note, the Thesaurus gives us at one time the proof for the correct understanding of the mis-readings at Surahs 44:36 and 45:25.

42 The Qur’ānic written form āṯā here reproduces clearly the Syro-Aramaic Afel form (אָתָּה / āṯā, unlike the written form væṭāt / fa-tū (first Arabic verbal stem) in the parallel text at Q 44:36; as a result, the former should be read in Arabic as aytū. However, the Cairo edition of the Qur’ān neutralizes the prefixed Alif of the Afel form by means of a waṣla, places an inadmissible hamza over the following y-carrier, and reads the verb as though it belongs in the first Arabic verbal stem: (qālū) væṭū. The Arabic grammarians call such a mis-assignment of written forms by the name تَضِيِّف (tashifi); there are many examples cited in Lisān, because this phenomenon can also be found in post-Qur’ānic Arabic. So, for example, “to bring” is represented in classical Arabic by یَتَبِع (in the first verbal stem), but in Syro-Aramaic one uses the Afel form (which corresponds to the fourth Arabic verbal stem; cf. Mannā, 45b: āṯā tawā / aytū; āṯā tawā / atā bi-). Apart from the fact that the Arabic āṯā is a loan from Syro-Aramaic, the imperative of the fourth verbal stem in the second person plural would be āṯā / atā (or væṭū / væṭ).
Syro-Aramaic Afel form. Such vacillations between the Arabic and Syro-Aramaic verbal systems are by no means rare in the Qur’ān; a close investigation of Qur’ānic orthography would bring more of them to light.

43 The Arabic بیّن / bayyana, as a loan-word from the Syro-Aramaic بیّن / bayyen, has similar semantic nuances, as Mannā (56a) indicates: “to explain, to make clear, to make comprehensible, to teach.”

44 The Arabic expressions جمعة / al-ǧum’a (“Friday”) and جامع / ǧāmi’ (“mosque”) both appear to be loan-translations from the Syro-Aramaic جمع / ǧamah / knuštā (“assembly, gathering of the community”) or جمع / ǧami’a / bēṯ knuštā (“house of assembly, community house”); cf. on this topic Mannā, 345a, and the Arabic expressions it gives as correspondences.

45 The original German gives another equivalent name, the German “Sonnabend,” which is one German name for “Saturday.” The suffix “-abend” means “evening,” so that the word itself literally means “Sunday Eve” (to use the parallel English structure from days like “Christmas Eve”), or “Saturday.”

46 Cf. Thesaurus, II:2984, 29: "(Book is called by this name because on the day on which Christ was crucified, the sun set and darkness reigned)."


48 See the note in Gesenius, Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch, 615b, under IV: ܐܘܢܐ, l. 9: Heinrich Lewy, Die semitischen Fremdwörter im Griechischen (Berlin: 1895; reprint: Hildesheim [Olms], 2004).

49 This legendary report goes on to say that the Qurayš gathered on this day (for prayer), and that this particular Lu’ayy (= Levi) typically gave a sermon before them, in which he announced to the Qurayš the coming prophetic mission of his grandson and expressed the desire (in the cited verse) that he could enjoy this experience just once.


51 Thesaurus, II:2984, under ܪܒܬܐ / ܕܪܒܬܐ, l. 23: ܐܘܢܐ / ܕܪܒܬܐ (along with other expressions for “Good Friday”).

52 On this topic cf. the new interpretation contained in the present author’s contribution to the volume edited by Karl-Heinz Ohlig and Gerd-R. Puin, The Hidden Origins of Islam: New Research into Its Early History (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008), especially the section on the Christian symbolism of the Dome of the Rock. In addition to the argument presented there, we should add that there is actually a crypt under the stones themselves, a discovery that provides archaeological support for the idea of the Dome of the Rock (= “stone grave”) as the burial site of Christ. Further, there are two traditions that have survived from the prior, Christian period into contemporary Islam. First, the Dome of the Rock is the pilgrimage site recommended for Muslims, and this pilgrimage only “counts” as complete if one visits the crypt (parallel to the Christian visit to the grave in Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre). Second, there is a custom in which it is mainly Muslim women who give themselves to prayer in the Dome of the Rock; this may connect with the tradition attested in the Gospels, according to which the visitors to the grave of Christ on the morning of the Sunday of the
Resurrection were women (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1)—not, of course, that we should thereby exclude other traditions.

53 Again, see the essay in Ohlig and Puin, The Hidden Origins of Islam.


55 C. Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum, 2nd ed. (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1928), 296b, μαθηματικά: 1. indicium ("index, specification"), 2. signum ("label"), 3. custos (in libro) ("mark"), 4. notitia ("notice"), 5. signum vocalis aut accentus ("vowel- or accent-mark").

56 Thesaurus (I:1559).

57 Following the Peshitta, the three Psalms begin as follows: "A Prayer of Moses: 'Lord, you have been for us a refuge for all eternity'" (Ps. 90); "Praise the Lord, all the earth; serve the Lord with joy!" (Ps. 100); "The Lord, the God of all gods, has spoken and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun unto its setting" (Ps. 50).

58 Ṭabarī (XXIV:39) also cites another tradition concerning this abbreviation that is closer to the truth and that supposedly traces back to Ibn 'Abbās, as the second of the four opinions he gives at the beginning of his commentary on Q 40.

59 Biblical testimonies to the phrase Ḥayy(h)ū Māryā: 1 Sam. 25:26 ("Now, my Lord, as YHWH lives and your soul lives") (וְעַתָּה אֲדֹנִי חַי־יְהוָה שְךָוְחֵי־נַפְֹ); 1 Sam. 26:16 ("This thing is not good that you have done, as Yahweh lives") (לָכֵן שִׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה כָּל־יְהוּדָה היֹּשְבִים בְּאֶרֶץ مִצְרָיִם.);


61 On this topic Abū Mūsā al-Ḥarīrī notes (p. 26, n. 75): "لِبَآَمِهَا، وَلِلْأَرْبَاءِ، وَلِلْجُرْحِ الْإِلَهِيِّ مِنْ حُرُوفِ الْسَّرِيرَةِ الْقَبْلَیَةِ الْوَارِدَةِ فِي أُوْلِئِكَ الْسُّورَ، يُقُولُنَّ فِيهَا المُفْسِرُونُ: "الله أَعَمَّ."

" алкоголِهَا، وَلِلْأَرْبَاءِ، وَلِلْجُرْحِ الْإِلَهِيِّ مِنْ حُرُوفِ الْسَّرِيرَةِ الْقَبْلَیَةِ الْوَارِدَةِ فِي أُوْلِئِكَ الْسُّورَ، يُقُولُنَّ فِيهَا المُفْسِرُونُ: "الله أَعَمَّ."

Concerning the (abbreviations) 'ALR' and 'ALM,' as well as the other mysterious letters that stand at the beginning of Suras, the commentators have this to say: 'What he means by them, God himself knows best.' 'ALR' appears five times, and 'ALM' appears six times. After these abbreviations we find verses with a divine statement regarding the meaning of the text and its divine revelation, e.g., 'ALR; these are the written signs of the book,' and 'ALR, a book whose written signs were taught,' and 'ALM; the sending-down of the book.' These could correspond to the statement commonly on the prophets' lips: 'The Lord spoke to me,' or in
Aramaic, 'Emar lī Mōryō (= Māryā) (ALM), and thus serve as a pointer to the divine origin of the book.”


63 One notices here the agreement of Q 3:41 and the Peshitta version of Luke 1:22; the former uses the term ramzan (meaning “by sign” = “sign-language”), while the latter reads w-hā mermaz rāmez (h)wā l-hōn (“but he made signs to them,” that is, “he made his intentions known to them by sign language”).

64 Cf. Anton Baumstark, Festbrevier und Kirchenjahr der syrischen Jakobiten (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1910), 169: “Between our Sunday for the dedication of churches and the Christmas feast, there developed completely what we might call the ‘Advent’ of the Jacobite liturgical year. We know that Antioch already had a season of preparation before the feast of Christ’s birth at the time of Severus [bishop from 512 to 518]…. Correspondingly, the liturgical year of the Jacobites originally had two Sundays in preparation for Christmas, for both of which the Gospel pericope was taken from λ [Luke]; more specifically, the first celebrated the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, and the second that to Mary. The lectionary of the ninth century, in agreement with three of the earliest extant choral books, restricts itself in its pre-Christmas services to this “double announcement” celebration…” Concerning the Nestorian liturgical year, cf. 170.
