The Qur'ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, by Emran Iqbal El-Badawi (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān) (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), xx + 280 pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-82123-0, £95.00 (hb)

According to an early report attributed to Zayd ibn Thābit, Muḥammad once asked him, "'Do you know Syriac well? Some books have come to my attention.' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Learn it.' So I learned it in nineteen days'."[1] There is nothing implausible about the veracity of this report; Syriac was a widely spoken language among the Christians who lived on the Arabian periphery in the first third of the seventh century CE. What is more, on the evidence of the Qur'ān itself a good case can be made that contemporary Arabic-speaking Christians professed their faith in an idiom that often reveals its Syriac affinities. It is also plausible that the Prophet would have been interested in the contents of any Syriac books that could easily have come to his attention and that he would have turned to Zayd for help in learning about their contents. After all, as scholars both Muslim and non-Muslim have long pointed out, some seventy percent of the so-called 'foreign words' in Qur'ānic Arabic are Syriac in their etymologies, indicating that much of what the Qur'ān says especially about Christian beliefs and practices, and much of its recollection of biblical passages as well, unsurprisingly betrays a Syriac connection.

In recent years, and especially after the publication of the important work of Tor Andræ (1885-1947) in the last century,[2] scholars have become ever more aware of the importance of the Syriac language and its literature as a background for a better understanding of the full import of the Qur'ān's religious idiom, especially in regard to themes and narratives already familiar from Christian tradition. And ever since the publication of the first edition of Christoph Luxenberg's *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*,[3] researchers have outdone

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[1]   Abū Bakr ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sulaymān ibn Ashʿath al-Sijistānī Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Raḥmāniyya, 1936), 6.

[2]   See especially T. Andræ, *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1917) and *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926).

[3]   Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur*

themselves in the search for Syriac resonances both in the Arabic Qurʾān's language and in its discourse. As many reviewers have shown, the search has produced mixed results. While thanks to their discovery of comparable phraseology or whole passages in Syriac texts that shed interpretive light on the topical background of a number of recitations in the Qurʾān, some scholars have made important contributions to the effort to understand the Arabic scripture better than heretofore against the background of its Late Antique religious antecedents revealed in Syriac texts, other not so careful writers have been engaged in the unhelpful and reductive search for what they think of as the Syriac or Syro-Aramaic 'sources' of the Qurʾān.

Emran El-Badawi's new book is inspired with enthusiasm for the interpretive potential inherent in reading selected Qurʾān passages in the light of what he calls "the Aramaic Gospel traditions," by which he means primarily Syriac translations of the Gospels and of the Gospel according to Matthew in particular. His proposal is that in specific instances in the Qurʾānic text, in which, as he puts it, "general linguistic relationships are outwardly apparent … philological, grammatical, lexical, phonological, and orthographical correspondences, … the text is checked alongside earlier Biblical, Rabbinic, Apocryphal, Pseudepigriphal, homiletic, historical, and epigraphic literature to identify if it has a precedent, or echoes a source, outside of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions." (p. 49) Following this search, once El-Badawi has satisfied himself that a given Qurʾān text is in his opinion linked to the Aramaic Gospel traditions on the basis of the outward textual correspondences he has listed, he formulates a hypothesis concerning their relationship. He says, "The driving principle mediating the Qurʾān's use of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions is dogmatic re-articulation." (p. 49) By the term 'dogmatic re-articulation' El-Badawi seems to mean that in his view the Arabic Qurʾān can be seen intentionally to re-phrase in Arabic the very wording of selected Gospel or other biblical verses in order to re-interpret them or to correct them from the Qurʾān's perspective, or even from that of later Islamic teaching about God and creation, and to remove any 'Christological constructs' that might have been put upon them (cf. p. 5). In the conclusion, El-Badawi writes, "Concerning its dialogue with the Aramaic Gospel Traditions, this study has argued that 'dogmatic re-

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articulation' was the fundamental literary strategy on the part of the Qurʾān to promote a vision of 'strict monotheism'; to a sectarian Arabian audience." (p. 207) He concludes that "the Qurʾān is in close dialogue with the text and context of the Gospels through their transmission in the Syriac and Christian Palestinian dialects of Aramaic. We may also conclude that this dialogue was mediated through the literary and hermeneutical strategy dubbed 'dogmatic re-articulation'" (p. 212).

Throughout the book, the author regularly speaks of a Qurʾān verse or verses as being in dialogue, close dialogue (p. 212), even strong dialogue, with a particular Gospel verse or verses (p. 158); he speaks of the Qurʾān as emending a Gospel phrase (p. 156), as re-placing pronouns (p. 155), as affirming imagery (p. 153), and of course as re-articulating the wording of verses, according to what El-Badawi perceives to be the countervailing Qurʾānic or Islamic value or teaching. He even assigns percentages for the inter-scriptural dialogue he envisions: "Matthew demonstrates a 20 percent dialogue with the Qurʾān, … Mark with 12 percent, … Luke at 10 percent, … John … 2 percent, … 11 percent of the Qurʾān is in dialogue with the entirety of the Aramaic Gospel Traditions. Conversely, 12 percent of the Gospels are in dialogue with the whole Qurʾān." (p. 210) As for the topics of the selected verses in dialogue that are discussed in the book, chosen, as mentioned above, according to their perceived, outward congruence in topic, phraseology and choice of words, they include passages that address four categories that el-Badawi says "are salient to both scriptural traditions" (p. 207). He calls them: "the prophets and their righteous entourage; the evils of the clergy; the divine realm; and divine judgment and the apocalypse" (p. 207). In charts included as appendices at the end of the volume, the author provides what he calls: "a parallel index of verses and subjects," "data typology," and "raw data." (pp. 221-251) The charts convey a sense of objectivity that camouflages the subjective fact that all the 'data' are collected according to the author's own perceptions of their correspondence with a set of criteria of his own choosing. In this reviewer's judgment, no Qurʾān passage cited or closely examined in the course of the study gives any overt indication of an intended, inter-textual dialogue in writing with any verse or verses in any of the Gospels in any language.

One would get a better sense of El-Badawi's methodology by considering an extended instance of its application in a particular instance and in detail, in which he alleges that the Qurʾān is in dialogue with a particular Aramaic Gospel passage and dogmatically re-articulates it in accord with the Qurʾān's own message. Unfortunately, the brief compass of a book review does not offer one sufficient space to display the method fairly. Suffice it then to draw the reader's attention to the briefest of examples among the many more detailed ones in the book, in the hope that it will prompt one to read the book and make one's own judgment about the verisimilitude of the author's suggestions. An appropriately brief case in point is El-Badawi's discussion of 'greetings' in a passage that he headlines with the phrase, "Greeting the House." (pp. 112-113)

El-Badawi begins the discussion by recalling the fact that in 'the Aramaic Gospel Traditions' and in the Qurʾān the standard greeting is conveyed with the cognate terms, *shlāmā* and *salām* respectively. He then refers to the synoptic Gospel passage that reports Jesus' reference to the Scribes' and Pharisees' love of "greeting (*shlāmā*) in the marketplace" (Mt. 23:7; Mk. 12:38; Lk. 11:43; 20:46).[4] El-Badawi then remarks, "This somewhat negative portrayal of greetings is inherited by the Qurʾān as it advised its audience to both give greetings (*salām*) and shun the ignorant folk (*al-jāhilūn*; Q 25:63; 28:55)." (p. 112) He says that there is one exception in the Gospels to what he here somewhat implausibly claims is a "negative portrayal of greetings," and it is in Jesus' advice to those whom he sent on a preaching expedition, "When you enter a house, greet the household." (Mt. 10:12) "In relation to this passage," El-Badawi goes on to say, "Q 24 legislates to Muḥammad's early community of believers various aspects of everyday life." (p. 113) One such instance is an invitation to dinner and in this connection, El-Badawi translates Q 24:61 as follows: "So if you enter a household (*buyūt^(in)*), then greet yourselves (*sallimū ʿalā anfusikum*) – a greeting (*taḥiyyat^(in)*) from God, blessed and good." (p. 113) Puzzled by the apparent advice to "greet yourselves," El-Badawi proposes that one understand the matter "intertextually with Matthew 10:12-14," where Jesus is reported to have advised his disciples when entering an unworthy household, "Let your greeting return to you (*šlāmkūn ʿalaykūn nēfnê*)." (Mt. 10:13) El-Badawi then concludes:

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4   Note that El-Badawi's references are wrong for Mark and the first Luke citation.

> For in truth, the Qurʾān, conscious of the episode in Matthew, advises its audience to bypass the embarrassment of greeting an unworthy household by insisting on greeting oneself. Therefore, it is Jesus' words in the Gospel, "let your greeting return to you (*šlāmkūn ʿalaykūn nēfnē*)" that inspire the dogmatic re-articulation of the Qurʾān, "greet yourselves (*sallimū ʿalā anfusikum*)." (p. 113)

This small example, as brief and comparatively insignificant as it is among all the other instances, nevertheless well displays Emran El-Badawi's method throughout *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, in which he considers many lengthier passages. He italicizes the cognate words quoted in transcription from the Gospel and Qurʾān passages in order to show that they are linked on the basis of outward textual correspondence, for in his view the cognate terms themselves bespeak a linguistic as opposed to a merely notional relationship between the passages. Because El-Badawi assumes that the 'Aramaic Gospel Traditions' were textually well known in word-for-word detail both to Muḥammad and to the subsequent collectors and editors of the Qurʾān, textual correspondence itself signals for him a correlation between the texts, which is then supported by a perceived thematic relationship. In this instance, El-Badawi cites what he perceives to be a "somewhat negative portrayal of greetings" (p. 112) in the Gospels and correlates it with what he again perceives to be an awkward moment in the Qurʾān's text. But his perceptions in both instances are unusual. It is unusual to think that there is a general, negative portrayal of greetings in the Gospels; and the Qurʾān passage is usually interpreted to mean "greet one another." This state of affairs calls attention to the highly subjective aspect of El-Badawi's methodology; he is the one who perceives the thematic correlations between Gospel and Qurʾān, and his perceptions are very often idiosyncratic. Frequently they concern what he perceives to be sins, short-comings, or malapropisms on the Gospel side, which he then claims the Qurʾān is correcting or critiquing from an Islamic perspective by way of 'dogmatic re-articulation.' So it turns out that the tabulations displayed in the several charts in the book's appendices really do, as mentioned above, provide a mirage of objectivity that in fact camouflages the very subjective character of the method of data collection actually employed in the study.

From this reviewer's perspective, the net result of Emran El-Badawi's methodology in *The Qurʾān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* is that in the passages he studies in the book it is ironically the Aramaic/Syriac text of the Christian scripture that on his reckoning actually determines the wording of the Arabic Qurʾān's diction in that it is the Syriac Gospel text that the Qurʾān allegedly dogmatically re-articulates in Arabic. However, given the fact that with very few clear exceptions there is virtually no direct quotation from the Bible or from any other Jewish or Christian text in the Qurʾān generally, it seems unlikely that the Qurʾān was composed with such close atten-tion to the Syriac Gospel text as the re-articulation proposed here would require, even supposing that Muḥammad and Zayd ibn Thābit actually had the requisite Syriac texts readily available and were pre-pared knowingly to consult them in detail. There is no evidence of such close intertextual reading at the Qurʾān's origins save for the commonplace occurrence of cognate terms in Syriac and Arabic dic-tion coupled with the often questionable thematic constructions that El-Badawi imposes on the text. But this is not to say that the 'Aramaic Gospel Traditions' are irrelevant for a historical understanding of the Qurʾān in its origins.

It has become abundantly clear from the work of numerous schol-ars over the past half-century and more that Jewish and Christian Ar-amaic texts of Late Antiquity do provide an enormous archive from which the historian can helpfully retrieve a broad knowledge of the religious thought current especially in Syriac in the first half of the seventh century and especially in the intercourse between Jewish, Christian, and nascent Islamic thinking as one finds it expressed in the Arabic Qurʾān. But the crucial point to notice is that while much of the language and lore (especially the biblical) is thus familiar, in the Qurʾān the familiar material is presented in an unfamiliar, distinc-tive intellectual framework all its own that determines its significance in a new discourse. The Qurʾān in fact recasts the familiar in a dis-course that with respect to its predecessors is rhetorically often cor-rective, even polemical in its import. What is more, the Arabic Qurʾān remains textually aloof from earlier narratives; it virtually never quotes them verbally. It presumes the familiarity of their contents to its audience, it recollects them, comments on them, recalls their *dramatis personae*, and uses their story-lines for its own revelatory purposes. So the question arises, how is this different from Emran El-Badawi's proposal of dogmatic re-articulation? And the answer is that

for him it is a matter of close textual re-articulation, even re-structuring of the very diction of the non-Arabic language of earlier scripture passages, whereas for this reviewer the re-casting of bibli-cal, traditional, and doctrinal discourse, where it occurs in the Qurʾān, is on the supra-textual, thematic, and doctrinal level. In accordance with the Qurʾān's own general mode of discourse it is, in its origins, an oral and not a textual phenomenon, not a literal re-articulation, but an allusive recall of earlier or concurrent, usually liturgical recita-tions, proclaimed in Arabic, but retaining the tell-tale linguistic signs of their originally Aramaic or Syriac articulation. In other words, in this reviewer's opinion, the oral translation into Arabic of familiar Jewish or Christian Aramaic discourse occurred, at Jewish or Christian hands, well prior to the Qurʾān's subsequent oral reminiscence for its own purposes of biblical, apocryphal, or traditional Jewish or Chris-tian lore. There is no convincing evidence of any word for word, tex-tual re-articulation, orally or in writing having been involved in the Qurʾān's recall of the sayings and doings of the pre-Qurʾānic patri-archs and prophets.

In conclusion, the proposed 'dogmatic re-articulation' in the Qurʾān of the 'Aramaic Gospel Traditions' as Emran El-Badawi pre-sents it, seems to this reviewer to go too far in positing too close a textual relationship between the Gospels and the Qurʾān, so close that in the selected passages the Qurʾān is thought, at the moment of its first articulation, actually to have been attending to the very words of the Syriac Gospel text.

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