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Q 96 *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* Between Philology and Polemics: A (Very) Critical Assessment of Günter Lüling’s *Ur-Qur’ān*

Günter Lüling fits the description of an intellectual hero. He trod on despite severe criticism, without support within the academy, and perhaps most painfully of all, in the face of being simply ignored by so many of his contemporaries. Such heroism can be essential to advance a field, yet it can be also, or even equally, the result of obstinacy, of hurt pride, or of tragic misunderstandings. The organizer of the symposium and editor of the present volume must be thanked for recognizing how important it is to celebrate the learning, the creativeness, and the fearlessness of one of our late colleagues, at the same as seeking to bring clarity regarding the possible value of Lüling’s propositions.¹

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1 A good example of the importance of persistence in the face of excruciating criticism may be a case in the sciences, namely that of Dan Shechtman. Despite being accused of having misunderstood the basics of physics after claiming the existence of so-called “quasicrystals” in 1981, Shechtman continued his work over years before being vindicated by a number of international awards, culminating in a Nobel Prize in 2011. There are, however, three important differences between Schechtman and Lüling. The former recognized that he must work in a team and published his findings collaboratively, whereas the latter worked almost exclusively on his own. Schechtman, moreover, completed his PhD and worked in the academy for a decade before advancing his revolutionary concept, whereas Lüling’s unsuccessful revolution began with his PhD. While the first difference may indict the habits of the humanities more generally and the second one may contain but a cautionary tale, the third difference proves the most consequential. Schechtman defended a new finding with established and recognized methods, whereas Lüling tended to adopt methods to fit the needs of defending a construct largely conjured by intuition, as I will seek to establish in the following. While the fields of Shechtman and Lüling, physics and Islamic studies, diverge, the insights offered by both cases are transferable, and may even offer an unexpected disciplinary overlap in its material culture: it was mathematically sophisticated quasi-regular mosaic patterns known throughout the medieval Islamic world that reportedly led physicist to appreciate the design of quasicrystals in the first place, see Peter J. Lu and Paul J. Steinhardt, “Decagonal and Quasi-crystalline Tilings in Medieval Islamic Architecture,” *Science* 315 (2007): 1106–1110; and Dan Shechtman et al., “Metallic Phase with Long-Range Orientational Order and No Translational Symmetry,” *Physical Review Letters* 53 (1984): 1951–1953.

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Scholarly clarity can be painful to establish in case of far-reaching criticism of the sorts in which I am about to engage. In general, I believe that intellectual charity is the best initial guide to appreciate any scholar's work, and I will introduce this contribution by establishing a few positive aspects of Lüling's methods. Exceptional circumstances, however, can necessitate the curtailment of indulgences, and I believe that the state of the field of Qur'anic studies dictates a more forceful response than my comfort level (and my fear of chickens coming home to roost) would normally allow. The past ten or fifteen years have seen a burgeoning of scholarship in our field. We are, however, still in the midst of a precarious phase in our attempt to establish Qur'anic studies as an independent subject both within Islamic studies and within the humanities more broadly. The work towards a scholarly consensus on basic questions of the Qur'an's milieu and provenance is well underway, yet far from complete. I will thus not hesitate to dismiss the main ideas put forward by Dr. Lüling almost in their entirety, and invite scholars as well as the broader public to spend their energy on more mature approaches.

In short, in my view as well as in Lüling's, the Qur'an participates in a late ancient discourse informed by formal and ideological features we can reconstruct with the help of previous texts. Lüling, however, reduced the Qur'an to a hypothetical "Ur- Qur'an" somewhere behind the extant text and allegedly reconstructible with the help of the methods of formal criticism and historical theology that was *en vogue* in biblical studies of his time. Egregiously, he limited his interest mainly to this elusive poetic document, positing that it should conform in all ways to his understanding of some form of Jesus' true (i.e. Jewish) Christianity, the half millennium of intellectual history in between Jesus and Muhammad notwithstanding. Instead, he posited that the discrepancies between his Ur-Qur'an and the extant Qur'an all stem from the posited textual falsification of the former by the hands of its early Muslim audience – a sort of inverted *tahrif* argument that turns the accusation of textual falsification not only against Muslims but even against the document in which we first find this concept in its Arabic iteration.² In my view, by contrast, the Qur'an *responds* to previous discourses and appropriates them with literary integrity and ideological independence, covering a full spectrum of responsive modes ranging from the appreciative to the polemical. Pertinent previous discourses, moreover, should not be limited to Christian or "Jewish-Christian" traditions, as Lüling effectively did. In

² On the late antique context of the accusation of scriptural falsification see e.g. Gabriel Said Reynolds, "On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*tahrif*) and Christian anti-Jewish Polemic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130 (2010): 189–202.

stead, in addition to addressing its primary pagan audience, we should realize that the Qur'ān is engaged in a well-informed dialogue with both Christians and Jews, all the while translating their Aramaic traditions into a worldview informed by a uniquely Arabic and Arabian perspective.³

In the following, I will begin with a brief survey of the genuine value that marks many of the aspects of Lüling's methodology, and raise the question why there is such a stark discrepancy between his potential and his eventual results. In a second part I will then discuss the example of Lüling's formal analysis and "reconstruction" of Qur'ān Q 96 *Sūrat al-'Alaq* in order to illustrate how effectively his methodology of reconstructing a putative original text can be debunked. This part will illustrate how Lüling reconstructs one line of this specific Qur'ānic text, namely verse 15, based on his highly selective and idiosyncratic reading of the rules of Arabic poetry. (He suppresses verse 16 as a later addition to the text.) The final third part of this contribution will consider Lüling's contextualization of his rewritten verse 15 in an equally idiosyncratic and selective cultural context of Late Antique religiosity in general. I suggest that the chosen example is symptomatic for his work as a whole, offering an alternative approach to the same Qur'ānic passage in which I will broaden the methodological inquiry to include Qur'ānic, Christian, and Jewish materials ignored by Lüling. It is my overall thesis that the form of the Qur'ān as it is traditionally read, i.e. the extant *muṣṣhaf*, is much more closely related to the mainstream Jewish and Christian tradition as we know them than Lüling's reconstructions. There is then less need, and more importantly less reliable data, for any reconstruction of the Qur'ān if one only contextualizes it properly.

1 Günter Lüling's Inheritance: A Qualified Disclaimer

The extent to which Lüling's methodology pre-empted important developments in the field stands in tragic contrast to the dismissive ways in which his work is widely (and, in my view, justly) treated. Lüling, to begin with, avoided the cardinal sin of many of his orientalist or traditional predecessors: the cheap psycho-

³ On the Qur'ān's engagement of the Jewish and Christian tradition see now Holger Zellentin, "Triological Anthropology: The Qur'ān on Adam and Iblis in View of Rabbinic and Christian Discourse," in *The Quest for Humanity – Contemporary Approaches to Human Dignity in the Context of the Qur'ānic Anthropology* eds. Rüdiger Braun and Hüseyin Çiçek (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 54–125.

logical, or respectively overly pious, focus on the figure of Muhammad, usually bolstered by an uncritical reliance on the *sīra* literature. Instead, Lüling offered a reading focused on the Qur'ān's text as our primary evidence, pre-empting the "Qur'ānist" approach that has become ever more popular.⁴ Lüling equally recognized the importance of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry for the understanding of the Qur'ān, a trajectory which has in the meantime been further explored by Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai.⁵ Lüling's focus on the rhyme scheme and poetic structures in the Qur'ān was contemporary to the groundbreaking work by Friedrun Müller; apart from the ongoing contributions by Devin Stewart, Neuwirth, and Sinai, the topic has not found its true recognition to this day.⁶ Perhaps most importantly, Lüling saw the importance of the Qur'ān's polemics against Christianity, but sadly not so much of Syriac Christianity, a theme that has gained dramatic insights in the recent work of Gabriel Reynolds, Joseph Witztum, and Sidney Griffith.⁷ Lüling's evocation of pre-Qur'ānic Arabic Christian literature, however, finds at least a partial parallel in Griffith's own persuasive suggestion that parts of the Bible circulated orally in Arabic before the rise of Islam, and a

4 The volumes edited by Gabriel Reynolds and Angelika Neuwirth remain exemplary for the new directions in Qur'ānic studies, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context 2* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Angelika Neuwirth, Michael Marx and Nicolai Sinai, eds., *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu* (Brill: Leiden, 2010); and Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008).

5 See for example Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran. Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011); Nicolai Sinai, "Religious Poetry from the Qur'ānic Milieu: Umayya b. Abi ṣ-Ṣalt on the Fate of the Thamūd," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 74 (2011): 397–416; and Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2010); see also eadem, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren. Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients* 10 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), see also the previous note.

6 See e.g. Devin Stewart, "Rhymed Prose," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (2015: online resource); idem, "Saj' in the Qur'ān: Prosody and Structure," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990): 101–39; and Friedrun R. Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Reimprosa im Koran* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1969).

7 See e.g. Sidney H. Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, ed. Reynolds, 109–137; Joseph Witztum, *The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narratives* (PhD Dissertation, Princeton, NJ, 2011); Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010); and Sidney H. Griffith "Syriacisms in the 'Arabic Qur'ān': Who were those who said 'Allāh is third of three' according to al-Mā'ida 73?" in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān, Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. Meir M. Bar-Asher (Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute, 2007), 83*–110*.

fuller one in Robert Hoyland’s equally plausible hypothesis of the existence of written pre-Islamic Christian Arabic texts.⁸ Lastly, much of Lüling’s research is predicated on the idea that Islam, or at least the original version of the Qur’ān, offers us the last glimpse of “primitive” Jewish Christianity. The importance of Judaeo-Christian legal culture for an understanding of the Qur’ān is at the very centre of my own published work; the topic has also recently been pushed forward rather forcefully by Patricia Crone.⁹

More specifically, Lüling understood the use of the term *shirk* as a charge not of crude polytheism, but of what John of Damascus described as “heterism,” of associating another being with God. This idea was much more fully developed by Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone; it is in the view of many one of the keys to the Qur’ān’s late Meccan and Medinan engagement with Christianity and Judaism.¹⁰ Lüling’s other real contribution may be the emphasis on the precarious-

8 See Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: the Scriptures of the People of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Robert Hoyland, “Mount Nebo, Jabal Ramm, and the Status of Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Old Arabic in Late Roman Palestine and Arabia,” *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language*. Papers from the Special Session of the Seminar for Arabian Studies held on 24 July, 2009. Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies Vol. 40, Supplement (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2010), 29–45.

9 In my own work I conceptualize Judaeo-Christian legal culture as a discourse within mainstream Syriac Christianity, and focus on its iterations in the fifth through the seventh centuries C.E., see Holger Zellentin, “Judaeo-Christian Legal Culture and the Qur’ān: The Case of Ritual Slaughter and the Consumption of Animal Blood,” in *Jewish Christianity and the Origins of Islam* ed. Francisco del Río Sánchez (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 117–159; and idem, *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Patricia Crone argued for a more robust sense of an independent Jewish-Christian community, relying on inferential arguments from a broad number of topics, see eadem, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part Two),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 75 (2016): 1–21; and eadem, “Jewish Christianity and the Qur’ān (Part One),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 74 (2015): 225–253. See also note 18 below.

10 The useful expression coined, to the best of my knowledge, by John of Damascus, “heterists” (ἑταριστᾶς, *De Haeresibus* 100.60, cited according to P. Bonifatius Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos. Patristische Texte und Studien* 22 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), vol. 4, ad. loc.) and describing Christian “associators,” has regrettably been eclipsed in our language by the anthropological term for primitive promiscuity, “heterism,” which derives from the same root. On “associationism” and “associators” see Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), e.g. 84 on John’s term; see also Gerald Hawting, “Idolatry and Idolaters,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Missing here is Patricia Crone, “The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part II),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013): 1–20; eadem, “The Quranic *Mushrikūn* and the Resurrection (Part I),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75 (2012): 445–72; and eadem, “The Religion of the Qur’ānic Pa-

ness of the early and especially pre-ʿUthmānic transmission history of the Qurʾān, and the possibility of error in the vocal or even consonantal interpretation of the unmarked (a.k.a. “skeletal”) writing of the earliest Qurʾānic manuscripts, the *rasm* text. This aspect also informs the insistence of Christoph Luxenberg on an imaginary and allegedly reconstructible *Syriac* (i.e. Christian Aramaic) lectionary before, or better, at the real basis of the Qurʾān. Luxenberg’s argument parallels to that of Lüling, yet pushes the idea of an “Ur-Qurʾān” beyond the linguistic barrier of the Arabic language. While Luxenberg’s work has been dismissed as forcefully (and as rightly) as that of Lüling, there remain a few – indeed very few – adherents of the idea of accessing an earlier form of the Arabic Qurʾān that prove more philology sound than either Lüling or Luxenberg.¹¹ Among them we can for example count Munther Younes, who shares with Lüling the rather irrefutable idea that the Qurʾān offers quite a few grammatical difficulties.¹² Thus, as Sidney Griffith summarizes in the context of the present volume, Lüling already in the 1970s clearly tried to see the Qurʾān in its late Antique context, which puts him far ahead of his time.¹³ In a sense, we have to admit that even if their ideas prove untenable, the field has been pushed into gear by people such as Lüling and Luxenberg.

gans: God and the Lesser Deities,” *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200. Hartmut Bobzin, “Martin Werner und Albert Schweitzer und ihre Bedeutung für die Arbeiten von Günter Lüling,” 23–32 in the current volume.

11 For criticism of Luxenberg see e.g. Walid Saleh, “The Etymological Fallacy and Qurʾanic Studies: Muhammad, Paradise, and Late Antiquity,” in *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, eds. Michael Marx et al., 649–698 and, unfortunately *ad hominem*, François de Blois, “Review of ‘Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*,” *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 5 (2003): 92–97; one of the notable exceptions to a wholesale dismissal of Luxenberg is Cornelia B. Horn, whose contribution in the present volume is also one of the most charitable ones towards Lüling, see eadem and Robert R. Phenix Jr. “Review of “Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 6 (2003) and eadem, “Hermeneutische Dimensionen der Intertextualität und Interreligiöse Kontexte des Korans,” 111–128 in the current volume. For Luxenberg’s own publications see idem, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, 2nd edition (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007); translation of *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2000).

12 See Munther Younes, “Blessing, Clinging, Familiarity, Custom – or Ship? A New Reading of the Word *Īlāf* in Q 106,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 62 (2017): 181–189; and idem, “Angels, Stars, Death, the soul, horses, bows – or Women? The opening verses of Qurʾān 79,” in *New Perspectives on the Qurʾān*, ed. Reynolds, 264–278.

13 Sidney Griffith, “Late Antique Christology in Qurʾānic Perspective,” 33–68 in the current volume.

If Lüling has to be credited in so many instances with having his finger on the pulse of time, or rather twenty years ahead of his time, why then were his readings so disastrously unhinged? First of all, it has to be pointed out that nearly all the abovementioned enduring insights and impulses that Lüling channelled were widely available in the 1970s, and can in many cases be traced back to the foundational work by figures such as Theodor Nöldeke, Julius Wellhausen, Tor Andrae, and even Hans-Joachim Schoeps.¹⁴ Thus, Lüling stood on firm ground in so far as we should follow his lead. When it comes to his true innovations, it seems that his theses were driven by a theological agenda rather than by historical inquiry. For once, while Lüling was reasonably well-read in Christianity, he hardly considers the Jewish context of the Qurʾān more than incidentally.¹⁵ I will seek to illustrate the extent to which his dismissal of the Jewish record, hardly excusable in light of readily available studies such as those of Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Speyer, deprived Lüling of crucial comparative data.¹⁶ More fundamentally, Lüling understood the difference between the Qurʾān and those Christian sources and ideas he did consider squarely to be the result of an editing hand intervening *after* the Qurʾān's fixation as a *rasm* text. He then dedicated much of his considerable creativity and intelligence to proving what he had posited. It seems that it never occurred to him that the differences between the Qurʾān and Christianity may be the result of the fact that the Qurʾān may simply not be, and never have been, a Christian text. More specifically, Lüling did not consider how pervasively the Qurʾān, as an explicitly anti-Christological text, points to the vast chasm between its own views on Christ and that of the Christians of its time. Lüling, in other words, did not even come close to appreciating

14 See for example Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Geschichte und Theologie des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1949); Tor Andrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1926); Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums, gesammelt und erläutert von J. Wellhausen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1897); and Theodor Nöldeke, *Geschichte des Qorāns* (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1860); the latest edition of this fundamental study has now been translated, see idem, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträßer and Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qurʾān, Edited and Translated by Wolfgang H. Behn* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

15 Lüling explicates his view that Jews hardly mattered for the Qurʾān's (Meccan) prophet, claiming that “[d]ie mekkanischen Gegner des Propheten in der Hauptsache Christen waren, und zwar trinitarische Christen, die der Prophet im Gefolge judenchristlicher Tradition wegen dieser Trinitätslehre als Polytheisten bekämpfte,” see idem, *Der christliche Kult an der vorislamischen Kaaba als Problem der Islamwissenschaft und christlichen Theologie* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1977), 41.

16 See Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Gräfenhainichen: Schulze, 1931); and Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?* (Bonn: Baaden, 1833).

what Griffith so aptly calls the Qur'ān's "polemical corrective" of Judaism and Christianity.¹⁷ Instead of analysing the Qur'ān's own voice, which is what I would consider the basic task of the scholar, Lüling offered us the theology of an "Ur- Qur'ān" that unsurprisingly inclines towards "Jewish Christianity" as he understood it, relying rather eclectically on marginal scholarship of his time.¹⁸ As various contributions to this volume point out, Lüling uses philology

17 See e.g. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic*, 23 and esp. 27. Especially, but not exclusively in the Medinan surahs, the Qur'ān repeats previous Jewish and Christian traditions with a difference, and generates meaning for an audience that is familiar with previous iterations of a tradition and capable of grasping the significance of the often subtle differences between the known, previous version and the slightly different new one. It functions thus in a parallel way to the radical reinvention of tradition we see for example in the Babylonian Talmud, but, unlike rabbinic literature, the Qur'ān does not usually value the playful or even humorous ways of dealing with the audience's expectations we find in the Talmud. Moreover, while the Talmud shows clear awareness of the intellectual development of tradition and lauds limited human participation in this process, the Qur'ān constructs its innovations fully in terms of a return to the true origins and polemicalizes against any human intervention. Disregarding the intellectual history of both the Jewish and the nascent Islamic tradition, Lüling obliterates the differences between the Qur'ān and the Christian tradition as he imagines it, an action tantamount to the effective obliteration of the Qur'ān as a meaningful document of any literary or intellectual integrity. On the Talmud's use of the past see for example Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) and Holger Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

18 Lüling simply posits that "pre-Islamic Arabian Christianity, as far as dogma is concerned, had an archaic Jewish-Christian or quasi-Arianic character" (see Günter Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation: The Rediscovery and Reliable Reconstruction of a Comprehensive Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnal Hidden in the Koran under Earliest Islamic Reinterpretations* (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass Publishers, 2003), 67; and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qur'ān* (Erlangen: H. Lüling, 1993 [1974]), 66), without citing any evidence for such a claim. The contribution of von Stosch in the present volume discusses and dismisses as ahistorical the putative angelic Christology of Martin Werner on which Lüling builds his theories, see Klaus von Stosch, "Eine urchristliche Engelchristologie im Koran?," 69–90 in the current volume. Note that the English translation of Lüling's work obliterates the crucial difference between the German terms "jüdisch-christlich," designating the collective of the Jewish and the Christian tradition, and "judenchristlich," designating a fusion of Jewish and Christian elements; both German terms are translated as "Jewish-Christian;" see idem, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, e.g. 38, 49, 67–8, 168, 183, 206, 296 and 338; and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*, 41, 61, 97, 149, 165, 183, 198 and 355. At other times, the translation renders the German "wahrscheinlich Judenchristlich," i.e. "probably Jewish-Christian," as "early Christian," e.g. when claiming that "the Christian ground layer of the Koran, – at the lifetime of the Prophet most probably two hundred years old –, indisputably advocates an archaic ur-Christian ("wahrscheinlich Judenchristlich,") angel-Christology which had meanwhile been classified as heresy and therefore been condemned by all politically influential Christian confessions extant in Mecca," see idem, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 21 and idem, *Über den*

to polemicize against Christianity and Islam both in its reconstructable historical as well as in its practiced extant forms today.¹⁹ While I am deeply sympathetic to Lüling’s attempt to free the study of early Christianity and of the Qur’ān from the dictates of religious or academic orthodoxies, any attempt to do so must follow rigorous historical methods or be relegated to the footnotes of the history of scholarship, as I will now try to do.²⁰

2 Rhyme and Reason: Formal Aspects of Lüling’s Reconstructions

Lüling’s main work offers a detailed analysis of *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* 96, stretching over 69 pages.²¹ A refutation of any work must always summarize what it seeks to dismiss, and by its very nature tends to be longer than its object of criticism. It is thus difficult to discuss the entirety of Lüling’s many suggestions regarding surah Q 96 in the framework of one article; I will instead focus on his reconstruction of verse 15 and his dismissal of verse 16 as secondary addition. I will submit that, *pars pro toto*, the circularity of his specific suggestions regarding two verses translates into the fundamental fallaciousness of Lüling’s method and thereby of his work on Islamic origins as a whole. The chosen example illustrates one of Lüling’s central tools for identifying the alleged fallaciousness of the Qur’ān’s *muṣḥaf*. In the verse under consideration, as throughout his book, his main argu-

Ur-Qur’ān, 10. Yet even within the German original, Lüling’s use of the term “judenchristlich” is ill-defined and in my view historically vacuous, as von Stosch correctly points out, see also note eight above.

¹⁹ See for example, Bobzin, “Martin Werner und Albert Schweizer,” 23–32, Horn, “Hermeneutische Dimensionen,” 111–128, von Stosch, “Eine urchristliche Engelschristologie,” 69–90, and Marianus Hundhammer, “Qur’anic Studies between Revisionism and Reinvention,” 141–158, all in the current volume.

²⁰ The problems with Lüling’s work should be stated much more clearly than do for example the more “objective” summaries given e. g. by Reynolds, “Introduction: The Qur’anic Studies and its Controversies,” in *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context*, ed. idem, 11; and Harald Motzki, “Alternative Accounts of the Qur’ān’s Formation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65–7. One should also note that the current Wikipedia entries on Lüling, especially on the German site, goes very far indeed in seeking to argue for the rehabilitation of his theses, see <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Günter_Lüling> and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Günter_Lüling>, accessed September 3, 2018.

²¹ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 28–97 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 25–77.

ment is of a poetic nature and depends on a broken rhyme scheme.²² In order to prepare an assessment of Lüling’s ideas, I will thus very briefly present the short surah as a whole in its traditional reading, establishing the symmetry and coherence of its traditional rhyme scheme – the alleged *absence* of which forms the basis of Lüling’s reconstruction). The text of Qur’ān Q 96 *Sūrat al-‘Alaq* of ‘Āṣim as transmitted by Ḥafṣ (but omitting the *basmala*) can be transliterated as follows:²³

1. ‘iqra’ bi-smi rabbika llaḏī ḥalaqa	Read in the Name of your Lord who created;
2. ḥalaqa l-insāna min ‘alaq	created man from a clinging mass.
3. ‘iqra’ wa-rabbuka l-‘akram	Read, and your Lord is the most noble,
4. llaḏī ‘allama bi-l-qalam	who taught by the pen,
5. ‘allama l-insāna mā lam ya‘lam	taught man what he did not know.
6. kallā ‘inna l-‘insāna la-yaṭḡā	Indeed man becomes rebellious
7. ‘an ra‘āhu staḡnā	when he considers himself without need.
8. ‘inna ‘ilā rabbika r-ruḡ‘ā	Indeed to your Lord is the return.
9. a-ra‘aita llaḏī yanḥā	Tell me, he who forbids
10. ‘abdan ‘iḏā ṣallā	a servant when he prays,
11. a-ra‘aita ‘in kāna ‘alā l-hudā	tell me, should he be on guidance,
12. ‘au amara bi-t-taḡwā	or bid [others] to Godwariness,
13. a-ra‘aita ‘in kaḏḏaba wa-tawallā	tell me, should he impugn him and turn away
14. ‘a-lam ya‘lam bi-‘anna llāha yarā	– does he not know that God sees?
15. kallā la-‘in lam yantahi	No indeed! If he does not stop,
la-nasfa‘an bi-n-nāṣiyah	We shall seize him by the forelock,
16. nāṣiyatin kāḏibatīn ḥāṭiyah	a lying, sinful forelock!
17. fa-l-yad‘u nāḏiyah	Then let him call out his gang!
18. sa-nad‘u z-zabānīyah	We [too] shall call the keepers of hell.
19. kallā lā tuṭī‘hu wa-sḡud wa-qtarib	No indeed! Do not obey him, but prostrate and draw near [to God]!

22 Lüling makes pervasive use of “rhyme-criticism” in his analyses of all surahs of his volume; his chapter two, more specifically, is composed of and titled as “Comments on the Rules of Strophe Composition Applied in the Pre-Islamic Christian Hymnody as Contained in the Islamic Koran,” see idem, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 174–91, and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, esp. 139–61. The inadequacies of Lüling’s sense of Arabic rhyme will have to be dealt with elsewhere, but see note 33 and Lutz Edzard, “Chances and problems with the morpho-syntactic analysis of the Qur’ān, based on a colometric representation,” 187–198 in the current volume.

23 Arabic is transliterated according to the system of the ZDMG, i.e. DIN 31635 (1982). The suggested English translation follows that of Sayyid ‘Ali Quli Qara’ī, ed. and trans., *The Qur’an with an English Paraphrase* (Qom: Centre for Translation of the Holy Qur’ān, 2003) with very minor modifications. Syriac as well as Jewish Aramaic and Hebrew will be transliterated in accordance with the early defective (i.e. non-vocalized) tradition, as follows: ‘ b g d h w z ḥ ṭ y k l m n s ‘ p ṣ q r š t.

The topics of the surah are well known themes in the Qurʾān; the surah as a whole has been adequately dealt with in previous studies such as those of Angelika Neuwirth and Michel Cuypers.²⁴ Most western commentators on the surah, most recently Michel Cuypers and including Lüling, have divided it into three parts (as is common in the Qurʾān). Based on their understanding, the surah falls into an opening “hymn” focusing on scribal themes (verses 1–5), a “reprimand” against human beings forgetting their place (verses 6–8), and a “polemics” expressing a rebuke to an unnamed sinful yet socially powerful figure that apparently interferes with the worship of the Qurʾān’s prophetic addressee (verses 9–18).²⁵ While this division certainly has some merits, one should never read the Qurʾān, or any literary text, only based on one formal criterion. Complex texts overlay multiple structural layers on top of each other, engaging the audience in a myriad of ways. The scholarly three-partite division, for example, disregards the surah’s blatant rhyme scheme, which Devin Stewart and Angelika Neuwirth have duly noted.²⁶

In detail, the traditional reading of *ʿĀṣim* here adopted already sets apart verses 6–14 through their continuous rhyme scheme; these verses all end with a long *alif*. This major middle segment thereby sets apart verses 1–5 as an opening and verses 15–19 as a closing frame around it. The opening and closing segments are both composed in a balanced way, each containing five verses exactly. Moreover, if one reads the text not strictly according to *ʿĀṣim*, as Lüling had, but according to its traditional recitation, taking into account the pausal forms of the words in *fāṣila* (i. e. end of verse) position, more phonetic repetitions emerge: the opening part, verses one to five, contains two independent rhymes, *-alaq* for

24 See Neuwirth, *Der Koran*, 264–79, and Michel Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique face à la critique historique de J. Wansbrough et de G. Lüling. L’exemple de la sourate 96,” in *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom?, Studies on the Rise of Islam and Various Other Topics in Memory of John Wansbrough. Orientalia Judaica Christiana 3*, eds. Carlos A. Segovia and Lourie Basil (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 343–69. Note that Cuypers’ criticism of Lüling mainly consists of substituting what he calls his own “rhetorical analysis” for the “historical criticism” of Lüling; he hardly engages Lüling’s arguments directly.

25 See Cuypers, “L’analyse rhétorique,” 348–50 and Richard Bell, *The Qurʾān. Translation, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), 667; as noted by Cuypers (*ibid*), the Islamic tradition, which considers 96:1–5 the beginning of the Qurʾānic revelation, thereby effectively maintains a bipartite structure dividing the surah into verses 1–5 and 6–19.

26 See Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qurʾān,” 137 (see also 111); Stewart correctly identifies only the last syllable of the first rhyme as “-aq,” yet the fuller phonetic repetition extraordinarily extends over two syllables as *-alaq*. Neuwirth suggests a more elaborate tripartite structure based on rhyme scheme, i. e., verses 1–5, 6–18, and 19, with the first two units subdivided (as verses 1–2 and 3–5, and 6–8, 9–14 and 15–18, see eadem, *Der Koran*, 264–67), a reading upon which my own proposal below is partially based.

verses one and two, and *-am* for verses three, four and five.²⁷ The first four verses of the final part, verses 15–18, end with *-ah* (i.e. *āCiyah* according to Neuwirth), leading to the culminating exhortation in verse 19 that contains the only non-rhyming verse in the surah. The dominant rhyme of the final part (i.e. verses 15–18), *-ah*, thus offers only a minor, yet a consistent phonetic variation to the rhyme of the central part (i.e. verses 6–15), *-ā*. The “border” between these two nearly homophonous and remarkably persistent rhyme schemes of the middle and the closing part is located between verses 14 and 15. This brief consideration already offers at least a counterpoint to the division of the surah offered by Lüling, Cuypers and others: it corroborates the separation between their suggested “part one” and “part two,” yet separates their suggested “part one” into two units, it fuses their suggested “part two” with “part three,” and it divides their suggested “part three” into two sections. A division based on rhyme scheme, as proposed (slightly differently) by Neuwirth, along with a transliteration based on the pausal forms of a recitation, allows us to visualize this alternative segmentation of the surah:²⁸

27 The rules and complexities of Qur’ānic *Saj’* are well sketched by Stewart; while often translated as “rhyming prose,” his suggested translation of the term as “accent poetry” may be more astute; see Stewart, “Rhymed Prose;” idem, “Saj’ in the Qur’ān;” and Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren*. Note that the pausal forms in recited Qur’ānic Arabic constitute a formal parallel to the traditional recitation of the Hebrew Bible: in the Masoretic text, the pausal form causes the stress to recede to the penultimate syllable, in which short vowels are either lengthened or otherwise altered, see e.g. Edward Lipiński, *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 80 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 26:2 (191). On Lüling’s discussion of Arabic poetry see above, note 22 and below, note 30.

28 Note that Neuwirth considers verses 15–18 as part of the middle part of the surah, thereby eclipsing the symmetry of five verses each in parts one and three and fusing the clearly separate rhymes of *-ā* and *-ah* into one unit, see eadem, *Der Koran*, 264–6.

Division established
by Cuypers, Lüling, et al.

Division based on
rhyme scheme

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| 1. | <i>iqra' bi-smi rabbika llađi ħalaq</i> | } |
| 2. | <i>ħalaqa l-'insāna min 'alaq</i> | |
| 3. | <i>iqra' wa-rabbuka l-'akram</i> | |
| 4. | <i>llađi 'allama bi-l-qalam</i> | |
| 5. | <i>'allama l-'insāna mā lam ya'lam</i> | |
| 6. | <i>kallā 'inna l-'insāna la-yaṭğā</i> | } |
| 7. | <i>'an ra'āhu stağnā</i> | |
| 8. | <i>'inna 'ilā rabbika r-ruğ'ā</i> | |
| 9. | <i>'a-ra'aīta llađi yanhā</i> | |
| 10. | <i>'abdan 'idā şallā</i> | |
| 11. | <i>'a-ra'aīta 'in kāna 'ala l-hudā</i> | |
| 12. | <i>'au 'amara bi-t-taqwā</i> | |
| 13. | <i>'a-ra'aīta 'in kađđaba wa-tawallā</i> | |
| 14. | <i>'a-lam ya'lam bi-'anna llāha yarā</i> | |
| 15. | <i>kallā la-'in lam yantahi
la-nasfa'an bi-n-nāşiyah</i> | |
| 16. | <i>nāşiyatin kāđibatin ħāfi'ah</i> | |
| 17. | <i>fa-l-yad'u nādiyah</i> | |
| 18. | <i>sa-nad'u z-zabāniyah</i> | |
| 19. | <i>kallā lā tuṭi'hu wa-sğud wa-qtarib</i> | |

The literary structure that emerges when reading the surah based on rhyme neatly divides the surah in three parts, the first and third of which both have five verses; *all* verses but the last one rhyme.²⁹ Lüling, by contrast, states regarding this surah that “attention should be paid to the fact that the traditional Arabic text ... is a prose text steadily continuing through extended lines and nowhere interrupted by rhymes.”³⁰ This is of course as false as it is disingenuous, for

²⁹ The discrepancy between the two possible divisions, one based on content and one based on rhyme, should not be taken as a reason to substitute one division for the other. We should also refrain from simply discarding the helpful exercise of establishing such divisions. Yet the discrepancy between the two segmentations is quite real, and we should take the fact that we reach such different results based on two quite objective criteria as a warning not to rely on any such divisions alone in order to “criticize” the Qur’anic text, and certainly not to the extent of rewriting it. Yet this is of course exactly what Lüling did, based on considerations of both form and content, as we will now see.

³⁰ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 90 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’an*, 71.

Lüling seems quite aware of some of the rules of recitation of what he calls “strophic poetry,” including pausal forms.³¹ The traditionally recited text includes precisely the rhymes of the pausal forms, accentuated by the subsequent pauses (*awqāf*) throughout the surah. Instead of paying attention to the existing rhymes, Lüling posits their absence in light of which he proposes a completely new rhymed poem which he argues to be the original form of surah 96.³² While a full discussion of the proposed poem far exceeds the confines of this essay, one example should suffice to illustrate that the implementation of the method is as arbitrary as are its premises.

The speaker in the verses of the surah, according to the traditional reading, is God, who warns the sinful figure that should he not cease from his behaviour, then He, i. e., God, will “seize him” i. e. the human, “by the forelock.” This reading is in line with the sense of divine power and human submission we find throughout the Qur’ān, as well more generally in antiquity (as will be corroborated in part three below). Lüling challenges the simple reading. Instead, he strips the *rasm* text from its diacritical marks and in two steps reinterprets it according to his own understanding of Qur’ānic rhyme and reason. In his first re-interpretation, Lüling engages the verse’s rhyme scheme as follows:

Since we have already had four strophes with the rhyme on long *-ā* (96:6–14), one is not mistaken in assuming that the two words *nasfa’ā* (96:15b) “we shall grab or seize” and *nāṣiyah* (96:15c), “shock, forelock” establish the rhyme-endings on long *-ā* of the second and third strophe line of the complex 96,15abc. Thus the words *لا ين لم ينته* *la-in lam yantahi* “if he does not cease” of the traditional interpretation of 96,15a must at all events end in a long *-ā* to get the still missing rhyme on *-ā* for the first line-ending of the strophe. But to read the *rasm* *ينته* ending on an *-ā* is, according to the rules of Arabic, only possible if this word is read in the passive voice *yuntaha* (the grammatically short final *-a* becomes automatically a long *-ā* at the end of a verse because of metrical rules). This strophe-technically necessary passive voice can now be understood as an impersonal one: “If it (the praying) is not being stopped or ceased or given up”. Alternatively it can be taken for a personal passive implying the subject of this passive verb to be God: “If He (God) is not being ceased or stopped or given up (by prayer).”

A few of the imprecise grammatical claims in Lüling’s passage, such as the strange personal passive which is as incorrect in Arabic as it is in German, have already been dealt with adequately by one of the reviewers of Lüling’s dis-

³¹ See note 22 above.

³² This text is summarized in Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 91–7 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 70–7.

sertation, Anton Spitaler, and need not be repeated here.³³ A more interesting issue is that of the rhyme scheme. Lüling quite rightly points out that the rhyme scheme on *-ā* is dominant in verses 6–14; he divides this block into four subsections and thus speaks about “four strophes”³⁴. Highlighting the continuity of the rhyme scheme in verses 6–14 is reasonable and even helpful (albeit it in tension with Lüling’s own subdivision of the surah, as already pointed out). However, as Devin Stewart (based on *Ibn al-Athīr*) has clearly shown, *kallā la-in lam yantahi* should be considered an introductory phrase to verse 15, to which metrical constraints of the *saj’* colon proper do not apply. The phrase therefor does not have to rhyme with or be metrically parallel to the subsequent cola.³⁵ Lüling’s claim that the verb *yantahi* would therefore need to confirm to the rhyme scheme on *-ā*, which forms the basis of his subsequent textual intervention, is simply false.

The subsequent verb in the same verse fifteen suffers the same fate by Lüling’s hand. He again begins with a reasonable observation, yet then is carried away by his enthusiasm for rewriting the text. Lüling quite rightly points out that the Arabic verbal form transliterated as *la-nasfa’an*, translated as “We shall seize *him*,” offers a grammatical difficulty. The *rasm* text, *لننصفعا*, does not offer a clear indication of a suffix (or any other type of personal pronoun) that would explain who exactly is seized. Instead of offering a systematic inquiry into other cases in which the Qur’ān would elide a suffix, however, Lüling simply calls the omission a “serious mistake.”³⁶ Then, instead of considering the mild

33 Lüling had submitted his yet unfinished dissertation as a writing sample along with his application for a position in modern Arabic at the University of Göteborg. Anton Spitaler served as one of the external referents, and saw fit to dedicate three additional pages to his criticism of the ungrammatical nature of many of Lüling’s reconstructions and his idiosyncratic sense of Arabic poetry, see idem, “Besetzung des Lehrstuhls für die arabische Sprache, namentlich modernes Arabisch,” Munich, January 29, 1970, addendum “Lüling,” 2. Georges Tamer was kind enough to provide me with a copy of this document. On the academic and legal ramifications of Lüling’s dissertation and unsuccessful habilitation see Georges Tamer, “Günter Lüling: Leben, Werk und Fall,” 1–18 in the current volume. It should be mentioned that neither Lüling nor his *Doktorvater* saw Spitaler’s weighty reservations before the submission of the thesis; Lüling does respond *ad hominem* against Spitaler in the English translation of his main book, see Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, XVII–XIX and 117–9.

34 See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 46–7 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 42–3.

35 See Devin Stewart, “Saj’ in the Qur’an: Prosody and Structure,” esp. 116–18. See also Edward, “Chances and problems with the morpho-syntactic analysis of the Qur’ān,” 197.

36 See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 65; the argument is missing in the German first edition. Another case of the omission of a suffix (in Q 93:3) has been recorded by Ibn al-Ṣā’igh al-Ḥanafī, see Devin Stewart, “Poetic License in the Qur’an: Ibn al-Ṣā’igh al-Ḥanafī’s *Ihkām al-rāy fī aḥkām al-āy*,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 11 (2009): 36. Lüling does not note

textual ambiguity (resulting from the “missing” suffix) in its Qur’ānic context, Lüling again opts for a radical rereading, and proposes to change the verb (yet not the *rasm*) into another passive: *la-yusfa’ā*, “He,” that is God himself, “will be seized,” again for the simple reason that Lüling can then read the entire verse 15 three times as ending in *-ā*. There is, again, no reason to do so other than Lüling’s claim that the rhyme scheme established in verses 6–14 ought to continue in the way he sees fit – with *-ā* instead of *-ah* and with a triple internal rhyme in verse 15!³⁷ Yet perhaps even more startling than the missing grounds and guidelines for Lüling’s textual intervention is his result, which he transliterates and translates as follows:

15. <i>kallā la-in lam yuntahā</i>	Not at all! If He is not ceased (not given peace) (by prayer)
<i>la-yusfa’ā</i>	Truly He will be seized
<i>bi-n-nāṣiyati</i>	By the forelock

that the root *s-f-‘* is a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān even though this fact may have been marshalled to point to the verse’s peculiarity; such terms are often soft markers of Semitic intertextuality. See von Rippin, “Foreign Vocabulary,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Dammen McAuliffe.

37 Lüling’s full argument is perfectly circular, a fact which he remarkably admits in passing. It is worthwhile trying to consider his full wording: “This interpretation is now already an anticipation of our judgment on the traditional interpretation of 96,15b: the traditionally given first person plural *la-nasfa’ā* (of the first person pluralis) “truly we shall seize” has to be read (without a change of the *rasm*) as the passive of the third person singular *la-yusfa’ā* “truly He will be seized”. In Arabic script this alteration is from *ليسفعا* to *لنسفعا*. To corroborate this reading we have to pay attention, in the meantime, to two important aspects: Firstly we have to consider that the peculiar writing of this verb (no matter whether in its traditional or in its reconstructed shape) with a final *alif* ^١ can only be explained correctly as the indication for the long *-ā* required because of its position as final sound in the strophe line having to rhyme on long *-ā* (according to the metric rules of Arabic poetry, every vowel finishing as vowel of the rhyme of the strophe line becomes long): The early (Christian) composer of this pre-Islamic strophic hymn gave this indication for the long rhyming *-ā* and all subsequent Islamic text editors, in spite of their having converted what is a highly poetic text into dry prose, retained it, but now without purpose. This seems to be the only reasonable explanation and it corroborates our thesis that 96,15 is a three-line strophe, each line ending with the rhyme on long *-ā*. This exceptional spelling of the last word of strophe line 96,15b indicating its rhyme on long *-ā* proves, retroactively in a circulus hermeneutics, that, as we initially assumed, the vowel *-i* of the traditional interpretation at the end of the strophe line 96,15a must also be read as a long *-ā* and that means that the last word of this line has uncontestedly to be read as a passive voice on two accounts. We can therefore see that the arguments for our reconstructed interpretations grows [sic] more and more convincing,” see Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 64–5. In the first edition of the German version, Lüling promises to return to the issue of his passive rendering, but then fails to do so in as far as I can follow his argument, see idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 59.

The change in meaning is radical: God himself becomes the subject of the violent treatment of being seized by *His* forelock, so the worshipper threatens God. This, say, unusual statement would of course require the attribution of the “lying, sinful forelock” of the subsequent verse 16 to God Himself, which seems to violate even Lüling’s sense of Late Antique religiosity. Verse sixteen, then, must have been added as part of the rewriting of the original text, he argues, for the very simple reason that it contains no definitive pronoun:

If verse 96,15 and verse 96,16 had originally been a normal phraseological unit it would have been, – no matter whether in the traditional or in the reconstructed sense –, of the syntactically homogenous structure “We seize(d) by the forelock, the lying and sinful forelock”, that is, all the nouns would have been constructed as definite nouns. This leads us immediately to the conclusion that these undefined three words of 96,16 originally did not belong to the text verses 96,1–19, that is: they are a gloss or a commentary introduced into the text of the Islamic reinterpretation of Sura 96, according to the frame-narrative which had been pressed on the *rasm*-text of Sura 96.³⁸

Lüling does not specify what grammatical rule he is invoking, or where it may come from. He simply claims that the repetition of a noun that carries a definite article in the first instance must also carry one in the repetition, with no reference other cases in the Qur’ān where this would be the case. Yet even if one troubles oneself with considering such cases of repeated nouns (which do exist and point to the exceptional nature of the present one), I do not see any grammatical reason why the Qur’ān’s text should need to conform to Lüling’s sense of poetry and the use of definite articles, to his sense of the use of suffixes, or to his sense of the surah’s rhyme scheme.³⁹

In each of the three cases discussed so far, and in many others throughout his work, Lüling begins with a reasonable, even interesting observation, and in each case, he seeks to obliterate any perceived irregularity by rewriting the text. Yet not in a single one of the cases that Lüling brings, here or elsewhere in his work, is this necessary, let alone plausible, for irregularities are the stuff of literary production in general. Poetic licence, after all, is part of any literary text, and

³⁸ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 68 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 62.

³⁹ Repetitions of the same word are not uncommon in the Qur’ān. One example of a repeated noun whose definite article is repeated can be found in Q57:27: *wa-aṣḥābu l-yamīni mā aṣḥābu l-yamīni* literally means “the companions of the right, what are the companions of the right?” Here, the repetition of the definitive article prepares the specification of the group of sinners in the next verse 28; see the similar cases e.g. in Q69:1–3 and Q101:1–4. All these examples, however, differ from Q96:15–16 in as far as they do not *immediately* repeat a noun, moreover, the meaning in all these examples would slightly change if the second article were omitted, which is not the case in the passage under consideration.

traditional Islamic scholarship has long treated this phenomenon in the Qurʾān.⁴⁰ I have, thus, not found any formal or grammatical basis for and no objective transparent guideline to Lüling’s intuitive reconstruction of his Ur-Qurʾān, neither in this case nor in any other that I have studied. It may be a personal tragedy that he has not had any conversation partners that would have pointed out the insularity of his thought to him (a role at least his dissertation supervisor should have played), yet we need to disassociate any sympathy for the fate of the person from an assessment of his work. The result remains that nearly nothing of what Lüling published deserves further consideration, for any residual merit one could find in some of his initial observations is buried underneath a near impenetrable layer of arbitrary claims. We shall see that a similar case has to be made for his historical reconstructions in which he seeks to place his rewritten Qurʾān.

3 Normative Upheaval: Aspects of Lüling’s Historical Reconstructions

One of the aspects of Lüling’s suggestions that may have given them a slightly longer shelf life than they deserve is the fact that his methods mimic that of (mainly protestant) Biblical criticism as practiced in (mainly German) universities of his time. In line with this tradition, Lüling duly seeks to corroborate his “lower,” or textual criticism with the “higher” historical-critical studies of the surroundings of the Qurʾān. Such an approach, of course, is not at all unsound. With regards to his rewriting of verse 15 and deletion of verse 16, Lüling recognized himself that a certain tension may persist between the idea of grabbing God by the forelock and the Islamic tradition. And again, while his initial impulse as a historian also makes good sense, Lüling immediately veers off course, as in the following observation:

In the simile “to seize God by the forelock” there appears not only an anthropomorphism offensive to the Islamic understanding of God... but it expresses an attitude towards God which is foreign to the world of orthodox Islamic religious ideas.... It is however familiar in Jewish and Christian conceptions of God. This topos is one of the most central ideas car-

⁴⁰ See Devin J. Stewart, “Poetic License in the Qurʾān: Ibn al-Ṣāʿigh al-Ḥanafī’s *Iḥkām al-rāy fī aḥkām al-āy*,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 11 (2009): 1–56; see also idem, “Divine Epithets and the Dībachiūs: Clausulae and Qurʾānic Rhythm,” *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 15 (2013): 22–64; and cf. Friedrun R. Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Reimprosa im Koran*, which does not discuss the issue of poetic licence.

ried from the Old to the New Testament and into the basic of evangelical-protestant religious attitude.⁴¹

Lüling's claim that either the image of "seizing God by the forelock" or the alleged underlying "attitude" would be constitutive of, or even compatible with the Biblical or the Christian tradition is false. The image itself is as foreign to the Jewish and to the Christian tradition as it is to the Islamic one. To the best of my knowledge, the only deity ever to be seized by his forelock is Kairos, the Greek god of opportunity, whose image was indeed widespread throughout Late Antiquity. Yet the Greek god is but a personification of opportunity, whose very purpose it is to be seized – he has little relation to the fearsome monotheist deity whose very purpose it is to exercise His limitless power.⁴² Lüling's placement of the seizing of God at the centre of Jewish and Christian theology is thus utter nonsense. For the present purpose, however, we should still appreciate to what lengths Lüling went to defend his claim, how intensely he marshalled his broad training to do so, and how absurd his reasoning became the more intensely he defended his theses.

The examples Lüling adduced to corroborate his idea of a violent struggle with God are Genesis 32, Jacob's nocturnal fight with "a man" whom Jacob later associates with the "face of God," and various passages in the prophetic literature and the New Testament in which God is allegedly challenged.⁴³ While the Biblical image of Jacob's fight, survival, and thigh injury is a remarkable one indeed, it does not support the argument: in Genesis, it is not clear who attacks whom, and while the "man" emerges unscathed, Jacob does not. All other Biblical or New Testament examples given simply emphasize persistent

⁴¹ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 66 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*, 59. The citation is given in full, omitting three footnotes (indicated by ...) referencing Arabic poetry (Lüling's note 65, to be discussed below), medieval Islamic magic (his note 66), and Martin Luther (his note 67).

⁴² As the fourth century rhetorician Callistratus put it: "while the lock of hair on his (i.e. Kairos') forehead (τὴν δὲ κατὰ τοῦ μετώπου κόμη) indicated that he is easy to catch as he approaches, yet, when he has passed by, the moment of action has likely expired and that, if Kairos is neglected, it cannot be recovered," see Callistratus, *Descriptions* 6, text and translation by Arthur Fairbanks, *Elder Philostratus, Younger Philostratus, Callistratus, Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 256 (London: Harvard University Press, 1931), 398–99. On Kairos in Late Antique and medieval art see e.g. Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 199–244.

⁴³ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 66 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*, 59; the examples he lists are the book of Job; Isaiah 62:6; Matthew 11:12 and parallels; and Matthew 7:7–11 and parallels.

prayer as a means of interceding with God, or “pressing” into the kingdom of Christ.

Unfortunately, Lülting was uninterested in most post-biblical literature. In order to corroborate the idea of challenging God, Lülting could have marshalled certain monastic and rabbinic traditions. Both in the *Mishna* and in the *Apothtegmata Patrum*, we find holy men who literally compel God to send rain.⁴⁴ According to the Talmud, Titus challenged God after destroying the Temple, and, in a different story, the rabbinic sages even manage to vanquish Him in a Scriptural argument. Titus, of course, is severely punished for his impudence, and even the rabbis, who only won with God’s ultimate approval in the first place, have to pay dearly for their victory, almost bringing about utter destruction of the world.⁴⁵ These late antique traditions indeed discuss the issue of challenging God, but of course they are all quite different from threatening to seize God should he not listen to the prayer, as Lülting’s *Ur-Qur’ān* would have it. While Lülting could be forgiven for his disregard of Jewish and monastic sources since he had no respective training, he also seems uninterested in the fact that the *Qur’ān* itself, albeit in a Medinan passage, openly *polemicizes* against the idea of compelling God. It accuses the Jews of claiming that “God’s hand is tied,” a passage in tension with his imagery of an alleged challenge of God that Lülting equally does not consider.⁴⁶

44 See *Mishna Ta’anit* 3:8 and the *Apothtegmata Patrum* on Abba Moses 13 (*Patrologiae Graecae* 65:285); the *Apothtegmata* circulated as widely in Syriac as they did in Greek, see Michal Bar Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13–9.

45 The theme of challenging God is of course well-known from the Talmud, yet in a very different manner. In the famous episode in *Bavli Bava Metsi’a* 59, the rabbis overcome God’s monopoly on scriptural interpretation. In another famous story in *Bavli Gittin* 56b, the Roman Emperor challenges God to a duel, and painfully loses. See e.g. Jeffery Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Composition, and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 34–63; and Joshua Levinson, “‘Tragedies Naturally Performed’: Fatal Charades, Parodia Sacra, and the Death of Titus,” in *Jewish Culture and Society Under the Christian Roman Empire*, eds. Seth Schwartz and Richard Kalmin (Leuven: Peters, 2003), 349–82, see also the next note and note 52 below.

46 See *Q5:64*; the text rectifies this alleged Jewish claim by emphasizing that, to the contrary, it is the hands of the Jews that are tied, whereas God’s hand spends openly. The context here is thus most likely the question of community finances and the support of the poor, a common theme in the *Qur’ān*. It should be noted that the Hebrew Bible and the mystical as well as the rabbinic Jewish tradition evoke the imagery of God’s hand as possibly restrained. *Lamentation* 2:3 states that God has “drawn back his right hand (*hšyb ’hwr ymyrw*) from before the enemy;” *Sefer Hekhalot* understands this as God’s physical restraint of his hand after the destruction of the Temple, see Peter Schäfer et al., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen:

Lüling was of course aware of the historical tension his image evoked, and went out of his way to “Biblicize” it, again in a rather perverse manner, as follows:

.... Besides it should be remarked that our topos of Sura 96:15 “to seize God by his forelock” is at home in the sphere of the eschatologic-apocalyptic literature. This is corroborated by its appearance in Ezek. 8,3: “he took me by the lock of my head.”

Since the Hebrew for “lock” [שֵׁשׁ] used in this context also stands for a kind of ornament at the forehead of the Highpriest it is very likely that the “lock” of Ezek. 8,3 also has the positive meaning of “the seat of honour” as does the forelock in Sura 96,15.⁴⁷

The geminate Biblical Hebrew term *šyšt* (not *šyš*), along with its later Aramaic cognates *šwšyt'*, designates curled hair, specifically that of the front of the head. Lüling did not comment on the fact that it is lexically related to the doubly defective Hebrew root *nwš'* as well as to the Arabic term *nāšiya*, “forelock,” which we find in surah Q 96:15–16, even though this lexical link – to which we shall return – may have rendered the Biblical evidence somewhat more pertinent.⁴⁸ Instead, Lüling claimed that someone being grabbed by his forelock in the Bible would constitute a historical parallel to his reading. It is of course the prophet Ezekiel, and not God, who is lifted by his forehead in the Bible, so the claim Lüling makes, that “our topos of Surah 96:15 “to seize God by his forelock”

J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1981), 68. In the well-known Talmudic passage, Bavli *Menahot* 29b, finally, Moses asks God, in a peculiar formulation, “who prevents your hand (*my m'kb 'l ydk?*)?” i. e. from writing out later rabbinic law Himself, see Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 182–202. None of these sources, of course, share the specific financial context we find in *sūrat al-Mā'idah*, yet they still corroborate the potential pertinence of the Qur'ān's association of the Jewish tradition and the image of God's hand being somehow restrained. See also the previous note and note 52 below.

⁴⁷ See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 66 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur'ān*, 59. Lüling here confuses *šyšt*, which designates a forelock, and the admittedly related term *šyš*, which designates the high priest's “shining thing” or “plate of gold,” which can be found in Exodus 28:36 and 39:30 and in Leviticus 8:9.

⁴⁸ The underlying root *yš'* means to “go out,” and variants of the term *nwš'* as designating types of “hair” or “feather growth” are attested for example in Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Assyrian and Acadian, see L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexicon zum Alten Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1967–1990), 682; see also Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 955–6; idem, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake: Eisenbraun's, 2009); and Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: The Judaica Press, 1996 [1903]), 889 and notes 51 and 58 below.

is at home in the sphere of the eschatologic-apocalyptic literature” is again a false one. The image of the angelic figure taking Ezekiel on a tour “by a lock of my head (*bšyšyt r’šy*),” moreover, evokes the utter impotence of the prophet before God; the rabbis have understood the story accordingly.⁴⁹ Likewise, the marginal case of the headgear of the Israelite high priest, which indeed shares the same root in Biblical Hebrew as the term “forelock,” has no relationship at all to the imagery of seizing *anyone* by the forehead, leave alone God. The Biblical cases here discussed could thus be made relevant only in order to support the traditional reading, yet not that of Lüling.

In a marginally more helpful attempt to buttress his findings as historically plausible, Lüling again tried to make the case that “this figure of speech.... “he will be seized by the forelock” is not as objectionable as one might think.”⁵⁰ He recalls one instance in which an ancient Arabic poet spoke favourably about the “forelock” of a warhorse and cites Wellhausen’s observation that the forelock was indeed a sign of the freeborn in pre-Islamic societies, whereas slaves had it cut off.⁵¹ On the one hand, I do not think that evoking the forelocks of horses would do much to support the case that God should be imagined thus. The observation by Wellhausen, on the other hand, is very valuable, albeit again not for Lüling’s understanding of the verse. As we have seen, the opponent in *Surah 96 al-‘Alaq*, according to its traditional understanding, seems to be able to exercise some power over the Qur’ān’s prophet; it is “he who forbids” the prayer (Q 96:9). It makes thus perfect sense for God to threaten the socially high ranking opponent of grabbing him by his “seat of honour” in the eschatological judgment. Wellhausen’s observation thus buttresses the traditional reading of the verse, whereas Lüling did not bring a single case that would lend itself to support his claim that God had a forelock, or that one should attempt to seize Him by it.

To the contrary, there are several contemporary sources that further heighten the tension between Lüling’s imagery and late antique literature. For God in the Bible indeed does have hair, but it would be rather impractical to seize Him by it. In addition to the classical topics of God’s considerable size, His unknown or unreachable location, and the dangers of approaching Him in the first place, there

49 See for example the medieval midrash Exodus Rabbah 3:6, which paraphrase the incidence thus: “God said: When I so wish it, one of the angels who is a third of the world stretches out his hand from heaven and touches the earth, as it says: “And the form of a hand was put forth, and I was taken by a lock [*bšyšt*] of my head (Ezekiel VIII, 3),” see also Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 42a and *Yoma* 76b.

50 See Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 66, note 65 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 436, note 50.

51 See the previous note and Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, 197–9.

is the issue of the fire surrounding His throne, about which the Book of Daniel already informed us as follows:

While I looked, thrones were placed, and one who was ancient of days sat, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head (*ws' r r'sh*) was like pure wool; his throne was like a fiery flame, its wheels like burning fire.

In parts of the Bible and in the Jewish and Christian traditions that arose in dialogue with Daniel God may have hair, yet the image of anyone seizing this hair violates even the most rudimentary sense of the “eschatologic-apocalyptic” tradition Lüling invokes. In Jewish literature in greater proximity to the time of the Qur'ān, moreover, the image of seizing someone by the forelock is indeed as highly negative as it seems in the Qur'ān, as the following short excerpt from Bavli *Sanhedrin* 82a illustrates. In this narrative expanding on Numbers 25, Zimri ben Salu, an Israelite prince, drags Cozbi, a Medianite princess, in front of Moses, where both are ultimately slain by Phineas:

What did (Zimri) do? He arose and assembled twenty-four thousand Israelites and went unto Cozbi, and said unto her, “Surrender thyself unto me.” She replied, “I am a king’s daughter, and thus hath my father instructed me, ‘Thou shalt yield only to their greatest man’.” He said: “I too am the prince of a tribe; moreover, my tribe is greater than his [Moses’], for mine is second in birth, whilst his is third.” He then seized her by her forelock (*tpsh bblwryth*) and brought her before Moses.⁵²

Seizing a person by the forelock, thus, is degrading; forelocks, moreover, are now designated with a post-biblical term and associated with idolatry in rabbinic literature.⁵³ We can thus, from the point of view of the Jewish tradition, safely reject Lüling’s idea that seizing God by His forelock would be “not as objectionable as one might think.” To the contrary, doing so would invert the relationship of the eschatological judge-executioner on the one hand and of the convicted victim on the other. While aspects of normative upheaval and of the carnivalesque may be identifiable in certain late antique texts, none of them go as far

⁵² See Bavli *Sanhedrin* 82a–b. Note that Phineas then behaves “as though he argues with his maker” (*kbykwl š'sh plywt 'm qwnw*) about the severity of the punishment of the Israelites in the story, incidentally illustrating another instance of the Talmudic argument with God, see notes 45 and 46 above.

⁵³ See Christine Hayes, *Between the Babylonian & Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 84–91.

as challenging God in the heavens.⁵⁴ If Lüling's Ur-Qur'an appeals to certain post-modern sensitivities relating to the divine it is simply the result of the fact that his text is entirely a post-modern, more specifically late 20th century protestant fabrication.

In order to conclude the discussion, I want to shift away from the Late Antique to the Qur'an's own context, which is of course the place in which Lüling would and could have started his inquiry. Doing so may have spared him from making his argument in the first place, for the seizing of forelocks is nowhere as well attested as here. Q 11 *Sūrat Hūd* 56, thus, states in general terms that "there is no living being but He holds it by its forelock (*āḥidun bi-n'āṣiyatihā*).⁵⁵ The image here shows God sovereignly supporting, or perhaps more likely controlling all his creatures. More closely related to our passage is Q 55 *Sūrat ar-Rahmān* 41, where we learn that "the guilty will be recognized by their mark; so they will be held by the forelocks (*fa-yu'ḥaḍu bi-n-nawāṣi*) and the feet." The phrasing in *Surah* 96 *al-'Alaq* is thus fully in line with the Qur'an's usage elsewhere, as is the imagery of God holding, or seizing His creatures by their forelocks. Did Lüling not know these passages, or did he exclude them from consideration in order to push his case? A comparable case in the sequel of his study may suggest the former, since Lüling does not shy away from citing evidence contradicting his readings as if they supported it.⁵⁵ In either case, the re-

54 See for example Joshua Levinson, "עולם הפוך ראיתי—עיון בסיפור השיכור ובניו," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 14 (1993): 7–23; Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies* esp. 51–94; and cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

55 As a result of his textual interventions, Lüling would also need to read Q96:17 as attributed to God, so he sets out to ameliorate the verse's connotations. When contextualizing the term *nādiyāh* in Q96:17, Lüling claims that the same word in its one other occurrence in the Qur'an, in Q29:29, would have "the profane meaning 'assembly of councillors.'" This is not entirely untrue, yet Lüling withholds the crucial information from his audience that the word *nādiyāh* here describes the gatherings of the male inhabitants of Lot's city (i. e. Sodom) whom the Qur'an accuses of what it sees as the most outrageous forms of criminal and sexual misconduct: "... and you (pl.) commit outrages in your gatherings (*wa-ta'tūna fī nādīkumu l-munkara*)?" The context in Q29 must not, of course, necessarily guide our understanding of the same term in Q96, yet it is also not as innocent as Lüling makes the unsuspecting reader believe. Again, the attempt of following Lüling's argument in detail reveals his train of thought: "But meanwhile it has become quite clear that the second frame-narrative of Sura 96, the story of the intruder, is actually the compass of later Koran editors pointing the way ahead for their interpretation of the third part (96.15–19) of the erstwhile Christian strophic hymn 96.1–19. So it is not surprising that on account of this later reinterpretation a typical abnormality becomes apparent also in 96.17, namely the application as well as the meaning of the word *nādī* "council".... The Arabic word stem *n-d-w* has throughout an especially noble and elevated meaning both in the secular as well as in the religious sphere.... The word *nādin* "council" appears only once in the Koran

sult is that Qur’ānic scholars who deprive themselves of the Qur’ān as guideline to assess their suggestions in various other contexts in the same text effectively deprive themselves of the most valuable hermeneutical guideline in their possession – the Jewish and Christian tradition, no matter how relevant, will never suffice as a sole guide for a truly critical reading of the Qur’ān.

The best I can say about Lüling’s *Ur-Qur’ān*, then, is that Lüling has some residual respect for the Qur’ān as an Arabic document, unlike his contemporary successor Christoph Luxenberg. It may be astute in the present discussion to consider how Luxenberg deals with the term *nāṣiya*, “forelock,” in our passage:

It is astounding that, of our Koran translators, not one has objected to the expression “forelock” (Paret “Schopf,” Blachère “toupet”). Yet, what is meant here by the spelling ناصية (except for the secondarily inserted | / ā) is Syro-Aramaic ... *naṣṣāyā*.... For this, the *Theo.* (II 2435) first gives the meaning: *contentiosus, rixosus (contentious, quarrelsome)* (said of a woman, as in Prov. 21:9, 19; 25:34).⁵⁶

Here, Lüling’s tragedy becomes a Luxenbergian comedy that is well worth savouring in detail. In his search for Syriac cognates in Qur’ānic Arabic, Luxenberg identifies the Syriac and Arabic verb *nṣy*, “to quarrel,” as indicating the real meaning of the Qur’ānic term *nāṣiyat*, and insists that our verse Q 96:16 does not address the forelock after all, but the “adversary.” He ridicules the *Lisān* (XV 327) for tracing the etymology of “quarrelling” back to two women who grab each other’s hair, concluding that “it can be seen from this how little the later [i. e. medieval] Arabic philologists have understood the earlier Syriacisms and Aramaicisms.”⁵⁷ It is of course Luxenberg himself who, in his selective approach to Semitic languages, had not noted that the verb *nṣy* is not only attested in Syriac and Arabic but also in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic. He thereby missed the fact that it actually *does* etymologically relate to the widespread Semitic word for dishevelled each other’s *hair* – as noted above, the Qur’ānic Arabic term *nāṣiya* in our surah is actually a full cognate to the Hebrew term *nwṣ’* and its later Aramaic variants, designating any type of “growth,” and especially

apart from our reference 96.17 and that is Sura 29,29 where this word has the profane meaning “assembly of councillors,” see Lüling, *A Challenge to Islam for Reformation*, 69–70 and idem, *Über den Ur-Qur’ān*, 63–4.

56 See Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, 317 and idem, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, 325–6.

57 See Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, 317 and idem, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, 325–6. Like Lüling, Luxenberg does not attempt to reconcile his findings here with other occurrences of the same term elsewhere in the Qur’ān, i. e. Q 11:56 and Q 55:41, nor does he inform his readers about these parallels in the first place.

“feathers,” just as the *Lisān* has it.⁵⁸ The adversary in surah Q 96 is thus grabbed by his very human forelock, which may well evoke his cockscomb if one studies Semitic languages a little more carefully.

Unable as I am to conclude my considerations in any way on a positive note, I suggest instead concluding with the pensive remarks Munther Younes has attached to his own, linguistically much more rewarding wrestling with grammatical and lexical difficulties in the Qur’ān:

The strongest argument in support of my reconstruction is that as they stand now, the verses of Qur’ān 79:1–5 [discussed in his article] are highly problematic, and all the interpretations and commentaries that have been proposed have failed to address their problems. In the absence of an account that addresses these problems in a convincing manner, I believe that my proposed reconstruction brings us closer to an understanding of the original structure, meaning, and character of these verses.⁵⁹

I agree with Younes that there are several difficulties in the Qur’ān which “all the interpretations and commentaries” have indeed not explained. Younes’ own reconstructions are much more reasonable and sound, linguistically as well as culturally, than those of Lüling and Luxenberg. Yet not even Younes’ reconstructions add to our understanding of the text as long as we cannot verify or falsify them by outside means. Any attempt to reconstruct a text behind the text, in the absence of any objective tools such as manuscript variants, is by necessity circular. In the best of cases, such as that of Younes, the results of speculative philology are interesting; in the worst ones, such as those of Lüling and Luxenberg, they are vexing. Similar attempts have long been abandoned in cognate fields, such as biblical studies, and I suggest directing our attention to more feasible philological endeavours.⁶⁰ Instead of writing new texts, we should continue to

58 See notes 48 and 51 above.

59 Younes, “Angels, Stars, Death, the Soul, Horses, Bows – or Women?,” 277.

60 A good case of comparison in the field of biblical studies, equally involving issues such as the reconstruction of a speculative *Urtexts* based on philological considerations, is that of the putative original Aramaic language of some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels. Aramaic was the most likely vernacular of first century Palestine, yet those Gospels that became canonical were very likely written in the internationally more adequate *koine* Greek. They were later re-translated into Christian Aramaic, i.e. Syriac. Some astonishing rhymes and word plays that do not work in the Greek Gospels can be appreciated in the (roughly fifth-century) Syriac *Peshitta* text of the gospels, inviting scholarly speculations that the ancient re-translation into a closely related Semitic dialect may well mirror aspects of Jesus “original” sayings. While the insights are fascinating and intellectually most rewarding, the same problem arises that we see in the work of Younes: how are we to determine how much of the recreated “original” is part of the genius of the scholar who recreated it, and how much is actually related to

read the traditional text as we have it and establish the historical context of the nascent Muslim community, and especially of the role of Syriac Christians and rabbinic Jews in seventh century Arabia with which this community stood in multiform and intimate dialogue. One can always return to speculative philology once a more robust consensus has been achieved.

Jesus, or, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Qurʾān? It should be noted that even one of the most capable scholars pursuing such reconstructions about the gospels has long abandoned the project, see e.g. Jan Joosten, “La tradition syriaque des évangiles et la question du ‘substrat araméen,” *Revue d’Histoire de Philosophie Religieuse* 77 (1997): 257–72.

