
PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT

A. Fedeli

MINGANA AND THE MANUSCRIPT OF MRS. AGNES SMITH LEWIS, ONE CENTURY LATER

Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'āns, Possibly Pre-'Uthmānic

While Cambridge University Press was printing one of many articles about Oriental studies — Horse Guards were manoeuvring in front of Buckingham Palace and Uhlans were parading through the streets of Berlin — who could even have the slightest suspicion that when the article was published, once again through the air of Europe the words of the Poet would be heard:

Di falangi un tumulto e un suon di tube
E un incalzar di cavalli accorrenti
Scalpitanti su gli elmi a' moribondi.

The article I am writing about is “Leaves from Three ancient Qur'āns, Possibly Pre-'Uthmānic, with a List of Their Variants”, edited by Alphonse Mingana and Agnes Smith Lewis [1]. In this article, in a preface by Agnes Lewis and an introduction by Alphonse Mingana, the authors were giving news about a palimpsest, whose *scriptio inferior*, containing part of the Qur'ānic text, was written with three principal kinds of script: Qur'ān A, Qur'ān B and Qur'ān C.

Mingana reported a list of the various readings, omissions and interpolations he found in comparison with the established *textus receptus* of the Qur'ān and the full transcription of the Qur'ānic text of the *scriptio inferior* of

the manuscript, with the parallel *textus receptus*, together with three pictures of the manuscript.

Some years later, in 1937, Arthur Jeffery in his work [2] collecting the variant readings of the Qur'ānic text, wrote that there was not any direct manuscript evidence of these variants. His “Materials” are only quotations, a reconstruction derived from the literature on the readings. The evidence of the manuscript belonging at that time to Agnes Lewis, seems to have been completely snubbed, except a small note:

“It was at first thought that Dr. Mingana's find in the palimpsest leaves published by him in 1914, ‘Leaves from three Ancient Qur'āns Possibly Pre-'Uthmānic, with a List of Their Variants’, might provide us with fragments of one of these earlier Codices. Closer examination, however, has shown that neither they nor the curious variants found by him in Syriac in a MS of Barṣalībī [3], have any relation to the text of these Old Codices with which we are here concerned” [4].

While the scholar complained about the absence of evidence of variant readings, at the same time he seems to be biased towards the palimpsest of Mrs. Lewis.

Why the variants that Mingana compared and noticed are “curious”?

From al-Mawṣil (Mosul) to Birmingham

It is necessary a flashback. In his youthful years, Mingana had wrecked his career and lost his reputation in scientific studies.

Born [5] of Chaldean parents in Iraq, he studied in a seminary in Mosul, from 1891 to 1902, following in the footsteps of his father. After eight years of teaching, he had to leave the seminary in 1910. The following period is totally obscure and, after having broken off relations with his Church, he left Mosul on January 1913. After travelling two months in Persia and the Ottoman Empire, on 17 March 1913 Alphonse Mingana left Iraq and a friend of his had given him a single address, that one of Rendel Harris [6] in Birmingham. He arrived at the end of the month and he was

a guest at Rendel Harris' place before going to live in Woodbrooke, the earliest of the Selly Oak Colleges.

Through the friendship of Rendel Harris, Mingana knew the sisters Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson [7], the two famous travellers and scholars, who lived in Cambridge. In their house in Cambridge, he spent two days, on 27 November 1913 and here, in an atmosphere of lively cultural exchange of information and discoveries in the common field, Mrs. Lewis showed Mingana her book about a palimpsest manuscript containing the Syriac text of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and *Transitus Mariae*, the No. XI of the *Series Studia Sinaitica* [8], with a few notes about “Leaves from Two Ancient MSS of the Qur'ān” [9],

the 44 leaves that contained an Arabic under script. The story goes on with the words of Mrs. Lewis:

“As he turned its pages I was suddenly startled by the question, ‘What are you doing with *sics* in the Qur’ān?’ ‘Because they are there,’ I replied, ‘and I can show you where I got them’” [10].

Mingana could see the manuscript, the famous “Leaves from Three Ancient Qur’āns” and afterwards they published their study. The preface of Mrs. Lewis is dated May 14th, the introduction of Mingana as well, about one year after his arrival in Great Britain. How could have to answer the Orientalist scholars to this new study about the finding of variant readings of the Qur’ānic text in a palimpsest?

One must go further back to the situation before the English period of Mingana, before publishing his study about the palimpsest.

In 1905 Mingana published the works of Narsai [11] in Syriac, whose purpose was to be a reading book for Chaldean priests. In the Latin preface Mingana included an account of the school of Nisibis by Bar Hadbeshabba. Jean-Baptiste Chabot translated this part in French with a commentary, observing a few contradiction in the text

itself. The reply of Mingana against Chabot and his notes about the authenticity of the text was terrible and vitriolic [12]. Two years later, in 1907, Addai Scher published the edition of the same text, but the part of the text that gave rise to the note of Chabot — the 25 lines more — was not found in any manuscript. The supposed forgery by Mingana aroused suspicion on his whole work.

Another supposed forgery caused general scandal among the scholars: the manuscript containing the Chronicle of Arbela, dated 20th century [13]. Mingana taught to the priest Abraham Shakwana of Alqosh to make the vellum older [14] by putting it in the oven.

These were the two serious and weighty episodes before 1914 and many people did not forget them.

The consequence was that no scholar [15] believed in the words that Mingana wrote in his introduction to “Leaves from Three Ancient Qur’āns”. How could it be possible to hold to be real the reading variants — “found” in the Qur’ānic text by Mingana? The suspicion of textual manipulation for his 38 variants, omissions and interpolations, was dreadful and the following step was that nobody believed in the manuscript and in the Qur’ānic text of the *scriptio inferior*.

The Story of the Manuscript

The manuscript bought by Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis from a commercial antiquary in Suez, during her third journey in Egypt in 1895, is a palimpsest. The manuscript contained 162 folios [16], bounded in 22 quires, in the first of them (the binion 1, 2 — 114, 115) were inserted the following 15 quires. In the *scriptio superior* Mrs. Lewis could read a few homilies of early Christian Fathers, written in Arabic, while the material recycled by the scribe came from different manuscripts [17].

When Mrs. Lewis realised that the *scriptio inferior* was hiding various texts, among which a Syriac writing, in which she was specialised, she took the old manuscript to pieces by cutting out the cord which held its several quires together and smoothed out the pages, with natural reluctance — she admitted — and bit by bit she unbound all the

codex. Mrs. Lewis brought the text up with a re-agent, hydro-sulphide of ammonia.

In the *scriptio inferior* she recognised a text of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and *Transitus Mariae* in two columns of Estrangelo Syriac and fragments of the Qur’ānic text. Her findings were published in *Studia Sinaitica*, No. XI in 1902.

After this date, Mrs. Lewis entrusted the smoothed and unbound pages into the hands of expert binders, Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, who restored the leaves. They did not rebind the original quires, but bound a new book in paper. The vellum leaves have been set within strong paper ones, 94 new pages among which 22 are our object in this study. The expert binders — it is possible to read their name on the last page of the book — mended the parchment with strips of transparent white gauze.

The Arabic quires [18] are:

Quire IV: fols. 13—20 of the upper Arabic writing. The quaternion is the equivalent of present-day pages set within strong paper ones 8—12. The under writing has been identified by Mingana as Qur’ān B. It contains the portion of the Qur’ānic text 13:18—43; 14:1—8; 15:85—99; 16:1—41/39.

Quire IX: fols. 53—60 of the upper Arabic writing. The quaternion is the equivalent of paper pages 32—35. The under writing has been identified by Mingana as Qur’ān C (paper pages 32—33, parchment folios 60—53, 59—54), containing 9:35—59, 7:139/143—158 and Qur’ān B (paper pages 34—35, parchment folios 58—55, 57—56), containing 16:80/79—117/116.

Quire XIV: fols. 95—102 of the upper Arabic writing. The quaternion is the equivalent of present-day paper pages 56—59. The under writing has been identified as

Qur’ān B. Its content is 16:117/116—128, 17:1—57/55. We can assume that the original leaves were ensuing the present paper pages 34—35.

One odd feuillet: fol. 103, between the two quires XIV and XV, equivalent to current paper page 60. The other half of the bifeuillet, i. e. of the original Qur’ānic leaf is missing. The *scriptio inferior* has been identified as Qur’ān C. It contains 7:158—168/169, originally ensuing paper page 33.

Quire XV: fols. 104—109 of the upper Arabic writing. The ternion is the equivalent of present-day paper pages 61—63. The under writing has been identified as Qur’ān C (paper pages 61—62, parchment folios 104—109, 105—108), containing 9:18—35 and 9:59—79/78 — originally following paper page 32, containing 9:35—59) and Qur’ān B (paper pages 63, parchment fols. 106—107), containing 11:20/17—39/37.

Part of quire XXI: the two middle bifeuillets (fols. 149—152) of the quaternion (fols. 147—154). The binion is the equivalent of present-day paper pages 89—90. The under writing has been identified as Qur’ān A, containing 40:78—85, 41:1—20/21 and 44:38—59, 45:1—20/21.

Part of quire XXII: the three middle bifeuillets (fols. 156—161) of the quaternion (fols. 155—162). The ternion is the equivalent of present-day paper pages 92—94. The under writing has been identified as Qur’ān A, containing: 24:17/18—29, 28:41—51, 29:17/18—30/31.

The leaves of the Qur’ānic text which had been erased and recycled, were re-written perpendicularly to the older script. The former leaves were assembled in new quires of a smaller size: they were folded in half and some of them were cut out (e. g. bifeuillet 152—149). The Qur’ānic leaves had not been reused in the Arabic Christian homilies in the same order as the original. For example the two new pages numbered as 32 and 61 on paper, in origin were in sequence one following the other, containing 9:18—35 and 9:35—59. Afterwards, when they were recycled for the Arabic Christian homilies, they got the place of

bifeuillets 104—109 and 60—53, in the quires XV and IX respectively. Furthermore, after the restoration, the leaves got another page number: 61 and 32.

Soon afterwards in 1914, the manuscript, duly rebound and restored, was sent to an international exhibition of books and manuscripts at Leipzig, but on the outbreak of the European War it disappeared. Its whereabouts was subsequently traced by Dr. Oman, of Westminster College in Cambridge, aided by Prof. Huene, of Tübingen, and finally in 1936 [19] (April 20) the manuscript was returned to the University Library of Cambridge [20] in accordance with the will of Mrs. A. S. Lewis [21], by then she had been dead for ten years since 1926.

There, in Cambridge, the manuscript remained buried and unknown to most people, even to those who did not remember the story of Mingana any more. It is known as Mingana palimpsest, even if it does not come neither from the “Mingana Collection” [22], nor from the three expeditions, financed by Dr. Edward Cadbury of Selly Oak, in search of manuscripts, in Lebanon, Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria and Egypt [23].

The Forgotten Manuscript

Most scholars did not trust the authenticity of the palimpsest named after Mingana and suspected that the text and the list of its variants could be a forgery and a manipulation, like Mingana had probably already done in the years of his youth.

In time the transcription of the text made by Mingana became the text itself and the manuscript — the palimpsest — with all its traces of an old Qur’ānic text, was forgotten by the scholars.

Recently in his book about the history of the Qur’ānic text, in the chapter dedicated to “Mingana’s Attempted Distortion of the Qur’ān”, Al-A‘zamī wrote:

“Prof. Rev. Mingana, held by some as ‘a great scholar of Arabic’, has in fact a shaky grasp of the subject at best” [24].

I have to suppose that the criticism towards Mingana is not supported by direct observation of the manuscript.

Last spring I made a trip to Cambridge where I was kindly allowed to study the manuscript. Even after a first examination it was possible to see that sometimes the critics to the reading of Mingana are unfounded.

Mingana lists the Qur’ānic variants and number 12 of the second group is *lā yahdā li-qawmi* instead of the standard text *lā yahdā al-qawma* (9:37; MS 60a, 1.8, p. 32a). The notes of Al-A‘zamī are:

“It is no secret that early scribes occasionally dropped vowels (ل, و and ؤ) in their copies, and here the writer dispensed with the final vowel in *yahdā* because it is silent. Once again Mingana takes advantage, this time through an absolutely ludicrous transposition. He separates the *alif* from *al-qawm* and places it after *lā yahdā*, creating a new ungrammatical phrase that is bereft of all meaning. This is

analogous to taking the phrase ‘tigers hunting’ and converting it to ‘tiger shunting’” [25].

The reading of Mingana is absolutely wrong, but it is not necessary to criticize “linguistic gymnastics” with more linguistic gymnastics. It is true that Mingana separates the *alif* from *al-qawm* and places it after *lā yahdā*, but the reason is not the Arabic orthography during the early centuries of Islam. Mingana simply did not see the *yā’* before *al-qawm*, therefore places the *alif* of the article of the following word instead of the *yā’*. In 2005, using an ultraviolet lamp, it is possible to read *lā yahdā al-qawma*, with no variants.

After a first examination of the variants reported by Mingana, sometimes we can confirm the readings of the scholar, sometimes the transcription is unfounded [26] and sometimes the manuscript is unreadable [27].

The inevitable and easy conclusion is that all the transcription can be suspected to be wrong [28], in the light of the simply means used by Mingana at the beginning of the last century to read the palimpsest. In regard to the variants of this palimpsest, it should be reminded the words written in 1938:

“auch sind einige ihrer Lesungen äußerst unwahrscheinlich. So bedarf die Ausgabe einer Nachprüfung von sachverständiger Seite” [29].

Scholar has never greeted this invitation. It is my intention to re-examine all the text and its transcription [30] and to let the manuscript itself to tell its story.

Nowadays, in our wasteful society, we have sadly lost the idea of use and recycle, but an object can tell us its story by means of the use, waste and reuse it has gone through in its life [31] and we have to listen to its story.

Notes

1. A. Mingana, A. Smith Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'āns, Possibly Pre-'Othmānic, with a List of Their Variants* (Cambridge, 1914) with a "Preface" by A. Smith Lewis, pp. V—X; an "Introduction" by A. Mingana, pp. XI—XLII and the transcription of the Qur'ānic text, pp. 1—75, containing 7: 139/143—168/169; 9: 18—79/78; 11: 20/17—39/37; 13: 18—43; 14: 1—8; 15: 85—99; 16: 1—41/39, 80/79—128; 17: 1—57/55; 24: 17/18—29; 28: 41—51; 29: 17/18—30/31; 40: 78—85; 41: 1—20/21; 44: 38—59; 45: 1—20/21.

2. A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān. The Old Codices* (Leiden, 1937).

3. Mingana, "An ancient Syriac Translation of the Qur'ān Exhibiting New Verses and Variants", *John Rylands Library Bulletin* IX (1925), pp. 188—235; also online in <http://www.bible.ca/islam/library/Mingana/Syriac/index.htm>. In the Syriac translation of Qur'ānic quotations, the scholar found some variants.

4. Jeffery, *op. cit.*, n. 1, pp. 14—5. Here Jeffery made reference to G. Bergsträßer, O. Pretzl, *Geschichte des Qorāns III. Die Geschichte des Korantexts* (Leipzig, 1938), pp. 53—7 and 97—102.

5. See Samīr K̄halīl Samīr, "Alphonse Mingana, 1878—1937, and His Contribution to Early Christian-Muslim Studies". A lecture delivered on 25 May 1990 to the *First Woodbrooke Mingana Symposium on "Christian Arabic Apologetic Texts During the 'Abbāsid Period 750—1258 CE* (Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, 1990), available online: www.mingana.bham.ac.uk/biog.pdf.

6. He was Lecturer in Palaeography to the University of Cambridge.

7. A. Whigham Price, *The Ladies of Callebrae* (London, 1964) and L. Deuel, *Testaments of Time* (New York, 1965).

8. *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae: with Texts from the Septuagint, the Coran, the Peshitta, and from a Syriac Hymn in a Syro-Arabic Palimpsest of the Fifth and Other Centuries: with an Appendix of Palestinian Syriac Texts from the Taylor-Schechter Collection*, ed. by A. Smith Lewis (London, 1902). This was the first announcement of the contents of the *scriptio inferior* of the palimpsest, i. e. the Qur'ānic text, but Mrs. Lewis wrote in 1914:

"I was also prepossessed by the belief that all copies of the Qur'ān are in duty bound to be exactly alike. The same causes must have influenced all my Arabist friends, and all Oriental readers of No. XI *Studia Sinaitica*; for no suggestion has ever been made to me, during the eleven years that have elapsed since that book was published, that the subject might possibly repay further investigation" (Mingana, Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. VI).

In the following years, for one century, there was the same approach, i. e. "no further investigation" to the text of the palimpsest.

9. The offprint "Leaves from Two Ancient MSS of the Coran", is also available online: http://answering-islam.org.uk/Books/AS_Lewis.

10. Mingana, Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. VI.

11. *Narsai doctoris syri homiliae et carmina prime edita, cura et studio D. Alphonsi Mingana, cum praefatione editoris* (Mosul, 1905).

12. Samīr, *op. cit.*, pp. 8—12.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 12—13.

14. On 21 October 1907, the Preussische Staatsbibliothek of Berlin bought and paid the manuscript, assuming that it was from the 10th century (*ibid.*, p. 12).

15. The other well-known review of the study of Mingana was written by R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (Paris, 1947) pp. 36—7:

"En réalité, ces fragments coraniques sont loin d'avoir l'importance exceptionnelle que leur accordent Mingana et Lewis. Certains déchiffrements, notamment celui qui aboutit à la variante de la sourate XLV, 18 [v. Mingana, *op. cit.*, p. XXXVII], sont sujets à caution vu l'état déplorable du texte. C'est seulement quand les variantes relevées par Mingana auront été confirmées par un nouvel examen du palimpseste et non retrouvées dans nos corans 'hedjaziens' qu'il sera permis de conclure que ces fragments représentent bien une autre tradition que notre Vulgate et par conséquent celle des *corpus* pré-'othmaniens".

16. At present the bifeuillet 37—44 is missing.

17. See Mingana and Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. V and for the Greek leaf (f. 11) see N. Tchernetska, "Greek Oriental Palimpsests in Cambridge: Problems and Prospects", *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond*, ed. by C. Holmes, J. Waring. *Medieval Mediterranean* XLII, (Leiden, 2002), pp. 243—56 and *idem*, *A Hand-List of the Greek Palimpsest in Cambridge Libraries* in <http://www.cus.cam.uk/~nt208/hand-list.htm>.

18. As regards the making of quires, see F. Déroche, *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe* (Paris, 2000), "Les cahiers des manuscrits", pp. 71—109.

19. Another disappearance lasted a longer time. The collection of Photostats of early manuscripts of the Qur'ān collected by Bergsträßer and Pretzl went missing (i. e. bombed out) in Munich during the Second World War (see Jeffery, *The Qur'ān as a Scripture* (New York, 1952), p. 103). They are now kept in the Freie Universität of Berlin.

20. It is still kept in the University Library of Cambridge (the present class-mark is Or. 1287).

21. The gripping story is handed down from the words handwritten on the first page of the book bound by Eyre and Spottiswoode.

22. http://www.mingana.bham.ac.uk/mingana_coll.htm; http://www.olrc.bham.ac.uk/special/collection_mingana.htm.

23. From 1924 to 1929 Mingana collected manuscripts in the Middle East. The other manuscripts' market was at that time, at the beginning of the 20th century, in Munich. See the buyout of Syriac manuscripts by Achille Ratti (Pio XI) from a commercial antiquary in Munich. The provenance of these manuscripts is the Monastery of Sinai and they were catalogued by J. B. Chabot. See E. Galbiati, "I fondi orientali minori (siriano, etiopico, armeno) dell'Ambrosiana", *Atti del Convegno di Studi su la Lombardia e l'Oriente. Milano, 11—15 giugno 1962* (Milan, 1963), pp. 190—9; P. F. Fumagalli, "The Arabic Manuscripts of the Ambrosiana and the 'Homiliarium' Ambr. X 198 sup.", *Arabic Homilies on the Nativity*, transl. by S. Noja Noseda (Milan, 2000), pp. 53—70. Two folios of this same codex, X 198 sup., consisting of 227 ff., is kept in the Mingana Collection in Birmingham (*ibid.*, p. 61).

24. M. M. Al-A'zamī, *History of the Qur'ānic Text from Revelation to Compilation* (Leicester, 2003), pp. 311—3. In the critique of Al-A'zamī to Mingana, it is possibly to listen for the echo of the words that Mingana wrote against Chabot, "un homme qui ne sait lire et

comprendre le syriaque qu'à coups de dictionnaire" (Samīr, *op. cit.*, pp. 8—12). Al-A'zamī speaks about blunders, incompetence, incredible dishonesty, inability to read, trick and creativity.

25. Al-A'zamī, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

26. Among the not verified variants we can note from the first group:

1. Not verified;
2. Not verified;
3. We can read the standard *wa-rahmat^m* (7:153) and not the reading of Mingana;
4. Not verified.

From the second group of variants:

1. Verified;
2. Verified;
3. Verified;
4. Verified;
5. Unreadable;
6. Unreadable;
7. Unreadable;
8. Unreadable;
9. Verified;
10. We can read the standard *fī-hinna* (9:36), not the reading of Mingana;
11. Not verified;
12. We can read the standard reading *lā yahdī al-qawma* (9:37);
13. Verified;
14. Unreadable;
15. Verified;
16. Unreadable;
17. Verified;
18. Verified;
19. Unreadable;
20. Verified (see on the contrary the critique of Al-A'zamī, *op. cit.*, p. 313, "the same trick is employed here, though with somewhat more sophistication". He wrote about transposing and creatively addition of Mingana);
21. Verified (probably the variant is not *fa-qīla*, i. e. the passive voice, but *fa-qāla* with the *scriptio* of long vowel *ā* with *yā*'; see A. Fedeli, "Early Evidences of Variant Reading in Qur'ānic Manuscripts", *Die dunklen Anfänge*, ed. by K. H. Ohlig and G. R. Puin (Berlin, 2005), pp. 293—316);
22. Unreadable;
23. Unreadable;
24. We can read the standard *la-ja'alakum* (16:93) and not the reading of Mingana;
25. Not verified;
26. Unreadable;
27. Verified;
28. Unreadable;
29. We can read the standard *balā* (16:28) and not the reading of Mingana;
30. Verified.

From the third group of variants, i. e. omission from the personal point of view of Mingana of the "pre-'Uthmānic Text": the reading is verified.

From the fourth group, i. e. interpolations — from the same point of view:

- A. Not verified;
- B. Not verified;
- C. We can read the standard text with *kāffat^m* repeated twice (9:36).

27. I am waiting for the digital photographs, hoping to see easily the under writing.

28. For example, while I was checking the variant number 17 (17:1) of the second group (Mingana, Smith Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. XXXVIII), I could notice the previous word *al-'aqṣā* with final *alif*, whereas Mingana transcribed it as *al-'aqṣā* with *alif maqṣūrah*.

29. G. Bergsträßer, O. Pretzl, *op. cit.*, p. 53, n. 3; (*Ta'rīkh al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 2004), pp. 491—5).

30. We trust that this manuscript will be published in the Series *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte coranique*. The first published volume is "Les manuscrits de style *ḥiḡāzī*. I: Le manuscrit arabe 328(a) de la Bibliothèque nationale de France" (Lesa, 1998) and the second one is "Les manuscrits de style *ḥiḡāzī*. II/1: Le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library" (Lesa, 2001).

31. In the same way marmalade preservation (see the story of Curzon about the finding of the manuscript dated 11th century, containing the Book of Revelation, used for covering marmalade preservations and cut off with a knife, L. Deuel, *op. cit.*) or slapped butter (about the discovery of the palimpsest of the Gospel of St. Mark in Syriac by Mrs. Agnes Lewis and the slab of butter slapped by the monks on a grubby old fragment of manuscript, see A. Whigham Price, *op. cit.*, pp. 8—9) can reveal great stories about vellums.