

CHAPTER 6

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN NEW TESTAMENT TEXTUAL CRITICISM:
THE EXAMPLE OF THE ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Introduction

The aim of this article is not only to discuss the role that Internet can play in relation to the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament, but also to explore some related issues raised by that role. At first, it must be said that the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament have suffered from a comparative neglect in New Testament textual criticism. This neglect has two main explanations: firstly, for a long time, New Testament textual criticism focused mainly or exclusively on finding the ‘original’ Greek text and indeed showed little interest in the ‘secondary’ versions of the New Testament. In this context, the Arabic manuscripts were discarded as useless, as is shown in Ewert’s comment: ‘Since the Arabic versions are so late, they are not useful as witnesses to the original text of New Testament.’¹ Secondly, the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament belongs to the general context of what we call today ‘orientalism’. This set of attitudes and prejudices was problematized by the scholar Edward Said in the 1970s and is discussed today in the field of cultural and postcolonial studies. The idea of the superiority of Western culture was also predominant in universities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and especially touched the Arabic language and Islamic traditions, with consequences for the study of Arabic Christianity and the Arabic versions of the Bible.

The fact is that since the extensive study by Georg Graf *Die Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*,² published at the Vatican in 1944,

¹ Ewert, *A General Introduction to the Bible: from Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*, p. 171.

² Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*.

nothing really important has been published until recent years.³ But this period of disinterest seems now to be over. Indeed, in recent years, there is a large number of publications in this field, marking a resurgence of interest in the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament. I mention first the thesis of Hikmat Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels*⁴ which is a huge work that classifies more than 200 manuscripts. Samir Arbache has already published *L'Évangile arabe selon saint Luc. Texte du VIIIe siècle, copié en 897. Édition et traduction*;⁵ the author has been working on this manuscript, the Sin. Ar. 72, for twenty years⁶ but it is the first time that a part of the manuscript is edited. Sydney Griffith will also publish on this topic, with a forthcoming volume *The Scriptures of the People of the Book in the Language of the Qur'an*.⁷ These are only a few examples. So we may ask: Why the resurgence? What does it mean? Does this have something to do with the Internet? Can we find some answers to such questions on the Internet?

1. Digitization and democratization

In general, we may affirm that New Testament textual criticism has been boosted by the rise of the digital era and the Internet. Claire Clivaz explains:

Viewed in the second part of the 20th century as a subsidiary task, textual criticism is today one of the most rapidly expanding fields in New Testament studies, thanks notably to the 'explosion' of new manuscripts discovered or published online. David Parker has already drawn attention to the significance of computers and the new tools they provide for the present 'dramatic change' in textual criticism and the editing of the New Testament, but the extent of this change is still currently underestimated.⁸

It is clear that the rediscovery of the Arabic versions participates in this renaissance of the textual criticism, a renaissance with several consequences. Digitizing the manuscripts and putting them online, but also

³ For a more complete state of the research, see Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels. The Manuscripts and their Families*, 9–33, or my article Schulthess, 'Die arabischen Handschriften des Neuen Testaments in der zeitgenössischen Forschung: ein Überblick'.

⁴ Kashouh, *The Arabic Versions of the Gospels*.

⁵ Arbache, *L'Évangile arabe selon saint Luc. Texte du VIIIe siècle, copié en 897. Édition et traduction*.

⁶ See his PhD thesis: Arbache, *Une version arabe des évangiles: Langue, texte et lexique* (PhD diss.).

⁷ Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam*.

⁸ Clivaz, 'Homer and the New Testament as "Multitexts" in the Digital Era?', 3.

enjoying an easier access to basic works of textual criticism in general, allows for a ‘democratization’ of the discipline: anyone interested can educate oneself and consult the manuscripts. This development can give a new dynamism to the research, especially in the field of the Arabic versions that has been discarded for too long. But it requires prudence. Indeed, we can note the phenomenon of ‘pseudoscholarship’, a term used by Ulrich Schmid: ‘The Internet is full of pseudoscholarship that exhibits images equipped with uneducated interpretations as if knowledge is easily culled from a quick glance at an image taken out of context.’⁹

For example, on the website <http://scholarly-faith.blogspot.com>, an Egyptian tour guide, who is fond of biblical textual criticism, offers a topic¹⁰ on an ancient Arabic manuscript of the New Testament.¹¹ On this webpage, he presents some divergent readings, including the omission of the famous episode of the adulterous woman in the Gospel of John (John 7:53–8:11). In a comment, a reader is surprised at this lack, wondering if the ancient Arabs could not understand the story. It is indeed not explained in the topic that the *Pericope Adulterae* follows a complicated textual history and is missing in some textual traditions. This is an ambivalent point: Of course, it is interesting to learn that the manuscript does not contain the *Pericope Adulterae*, because this gives us important clues about the translation that the manuscript contains. But we also see that Internet users can misunderstand the significance of this information, when it is given without further explanation.

2. *The collaborative work: an advantage for the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament*

The Internet also allows for the emergence of collaborative work, like the best-known example of the successful encyclopedia Wikipedia. This ‘wiki-culture’ has much to contribute to the field of New Testament textual criticism. A good example is the Yahoo forum *Textual Criticism*

⁹ Schmid, ‘Thoughts on a Digital Edition of the New Testament’, 302.

¹⁰ http://scholarly-faith.blogspot.com/2009/06/blog-post_03.html, last accessed 9 January 2013.

¹¹ The author does not give the name of the manuscript, but the description as ‘the oldest Arabic manuscript of the four Gospels’ seems to refer to the Sin. Ar. 72. However, in his description of the manuscript, Kashouh does not mention the absence of John 7:53–8:11, see Kashouh, *The Arabic Gospels of the Gospels*, 87.

of the Bible¹² moderated by Wieland Willker where very interesting topics and new findings may be found.¹³

This kind of collaborative work encouraged by the Internet is an important step also for the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament. Indeed, the study of the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament has always been a crossroad field, between 'East' and 'West', between biblical studies and Oriental studies. In the history of research, Biblical scholars seemed eager to delegate the work to the Orientalists. Important studies, such as those of Ignazio Guidi,¹⁴ Georg Graf, Anton Baumstark,¹⁵ etc., were works of Orientalists. We can also feel a certain reserve on the part of the Alands, when they write in their reference book: 'But unfortunately the arabists of today are hardly concerning themselves with the transmission of the New Testament, although there are many interesting problems here [...]'.¹⁶ This quotation illustrates some distance between researchers of different fields, a distance that the Internet can help to reduce, facilitating contacts and collaborations between scholars with different and complementary competences.

As mentioned before, the Yahoo Forum *Textual Criticism* is a significant place for discussions and exchanges, containing many interesting topics on the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament.¹⁷ An example of such collaborative work is found in this topic, where a user wonders about an Arabic writing in the Codex Sinaiticus: 'In Codex Sinaiticus, Revelation 7:12–9:5 (folio # 129a), at the bottom of the page there is some writing placed directly under the first three columns. It looks to me like it might be Arabic? Does anyone know what language this is? And, if so, what is the translation as well as the history behind this strange editorial insertion?'¹⁸ The scholar Jean Valentin, author of the article *Les*

¹² <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/textualcriticism>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

¹³ See the article in the present volume: Clivaz, 'Internet Networks and Academic Research: the Example of the New Testament Textual Criticism'.

¹⁴ Guidi, *Le Traduzioni degli Evangelii in arabo e in etiopico*.

¹⁵ Baumstark, 'Arabische Übersetzung eines altsyrischen Evangelientextes und die Sure 21:105 zitierte Psalmenübersetzung'; 'Das Problem eines vorislamischen christlich-kirchlichen Schrifttums in arabischer Sprache'; 'Eine altarabische Evangelienübersetzung aus dem Christlich-Palästinensischen'; 'Die sonntägliche Evangelienlesung im vorbyzantinischen Jerusalem'.

¹⁶ Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, 214.

¹⁷ See also the forum <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.ch>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

¹⁸ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/textualcriticism/messages/3097>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

évangéliques arabes de la bibliothèque du Monastère Ste-Catherine,¹⁹ with the help of other users, offers a translation of the Arabic comment.²⁰ It follows an interesting discussion on the possible origin of this comment and its dating. Although these questions remain unanswered so far, such a discussion can only nourish the aspiration to study the Arabic annotations on the Codex Sinaiticus more closely.

An example of collaborative work specific to the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament is the project started by a team of the University of Balamand in Lebanon: the elaboration of a platform for the study of the manuscripts of the New Testament, which is still in progress. Such a tool will encourage all interested parties to share information, with the possibility to complete the database progressively.²¹

3. *The point of view of some Islamic websites*

Related to these digital revolutions, to textual criticism and also to Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament, we can note this interesting phenomenon: the case of Islamic websites interested in textual criticism of the New Testament. These websites provide reference material and links to online manuscripts and encourage the readers to learn about textual criticism of the New Testament. The purpose is most apologetic and polemical: it is expected to show the inconsistencies of the Bible or its transmission. For example, on the website <http://www.sheekh-3arb.net/>, a user seeks to question the divinity of Christ by showing that mentions of divine attributes were simply substitutions or later additions. He gives twenty examples of such ‘substitutions’ or ‘additions’, reviewing different editions and then some papyri and codices, with the help of digitalized pictures.²² In the first example, he presents the case of John 6:69 ‘And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God’ (KJV), showing that the christological attribute is missing in the oldest manuscripts, as in the Codex Vaticanus (image below); a fact which implies a later human alteration.

¹⁹ Valentin, ‘Les Evangéliques arabes de la bibliothèque du Monastère Ste-Catherine (Mont Sinai): Essai de classification d’après l’étude d’un chapitre (Matth. 28). Traducteurs, réviseurs, types textuels’.

²⁰ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/textualcriticism/messages/3101>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

²¹ See the article of Elie Dannoui in the present volume, ‘Digital Arabic Gospels Corpus’.

²² <http://www.sheekh-3arb.net/vb/showthread.php?t=2127>, last accessed 9 January 2013. On this website, see my article: Schulthess, ‘Les manuscrits du Nouveau Testament, le monde arabe et le digital. L’émergence d’un discours hybride’.

وبالبحث في المخطوطة الفاتيكانية في القرن الرابع لم نجد بها جملة "المسيح ابن الله الحي".

إذا هي مضافة بعد ذلك القرن لأنها ليست موجودة في المخطوطة الفاتيكانية ولا السينائية



Figure 1: Codex Vaticanus (John 6.69) on the website *Sheek-3arb*²³

This way of proceeding evokes a long tradition of Islamic polemic, linked with the concept of the falsification of the Scriptures, *tahrif*. The issue of *tahrif* is already in the Quran,²⁴ but only as the idea of a falsification of meaning, *tahrif al-ma'na*, and that is to say, misinterpretation of the text.²⁵ The concept of textual falsification, *tahrif al-lafz*, comes much later in the Islamic tradition: 'It is only beginning with the time of Ibn Ḥazm in the eleventh century that the *tahrif* argument became something of a starting point in the Islāmic polemical discourse [...].'²⁶ This idea that Christians do not have the original text of the Bible has become an essential part of the anti-Christian polemic in the nineteenth century especially with the progress of biblical textual criticism in Western Universities. As Christine Schirmacher notes:

[Muslim apologists] feel confirmed in the traditional Muslim view that the Bible is corrupted just as the Qur'ān states. Muslim apologists have known

²³ Screenshot of <http://www.sheekh-3arb.net/vb/showthread.php?t=2127>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

²⁴ The verb *harrafa* occurs in Sura *Al-Baqara*, (2) 75, Sura *An-Nisā'* (4) 46, Sura *Al-Mā'idā* (5) 13 and 41.

²⁵ Accad, 'Corruption and/or Misinterpretation of the Bible, the Story of the Islāmic Usage of *Tahrif*'.

²⁶ Accad, 'Corruption and/or Misinterpretation of the Bible', 86.

this for centuries already, but now European theologians have confirmed it themselves through scientific studies in history, geology or archeology.²⁷

It is interesting to see that Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament are also used in some controversies on Islamic websites. In a topic of the website www.alta3b.wordpress.com, classified in the *tahrif* section, the author deals with the following question: should the end of John 1:1 be translated by ‘and the word was God’ (*allâh*) or ‘and the word was a god’ (*ilâh*)? The question connects two polemical issues: First, the questioning of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the debate against the trinity, both classical themes of the anti-Christian debate; second, the falsification or misinterpretation of the Scriptures, as seen previously.

A first page deals with the Greek text, browsing through biblical references and showing some pictures of manuscripts.²⁸ A second page presents some Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament.²⁹ The author uses an article of Hikmat Kashouh, who showed, among other things, that several Arabic translations found in ancient manuscripts have at the end of the verse the name *ilâh* and not *allâh*. Kashouh explained in the article that the scribes who translated John 1:1 followed different approaches, among them:

The literal-approach scribes who translated θεός by *ilâh* ([a] God) and ὁ θεός by *allâh* ([the] God). This differentiation may possibly have caused a misrepresentation belief that the Christianity firmly holds especially in an Islamic milieu. The earlier versions of the Gospels seem to prefer this translation.³⁰

But the author does not just copy Kashouh’s study: He completes it by adding the images of the manuscripts, not present in the article, which means he had to get the images and to extract the desired verse.

²⁷ Schirmacher, ‘The influence of German Biblical criticism on Muslim apologetics in the 19th century’.

²⁸ http://alta3b.wordpress.com/2009/04/06/translation_jn-1-1/, last accessed 9 January 2013.

²⁹ http://alta3b.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/jn1-1_arabic-mss/, last accessed 9 January 2013.

³⁰ Kashouh, ‘The Arabic Versions of the Gospels. A Case Study of John 1,1 and 1,18’.

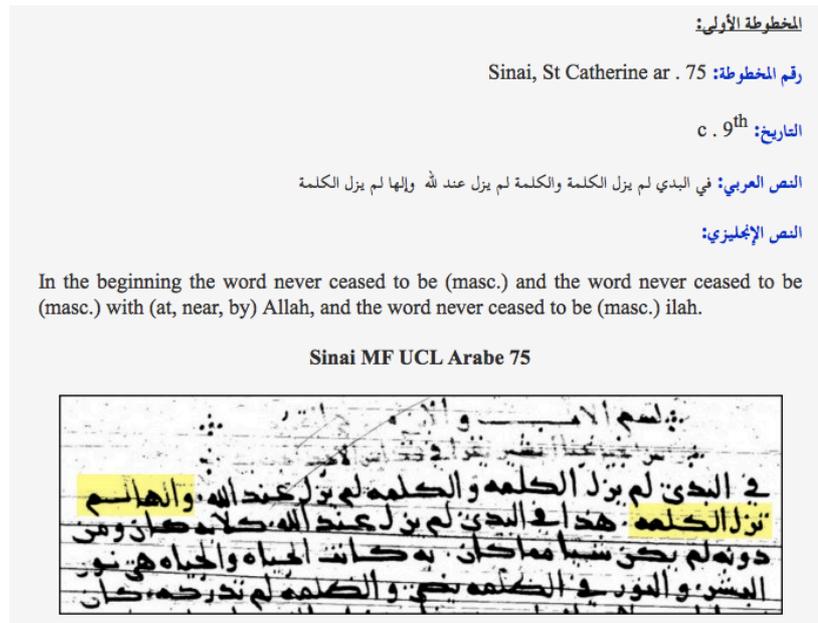


Figure 2: Sin. Ar. 75 (John 1:1) on the website *Alta3b*³¹

On another website, we can find the same topic, completed by other manuscripts and classed into the families of manuscripts according to Kashouh.³² We can often observe such appropriation: Globally, there is little sense, on these websites, that a given point has an individual author. Here, there is a kind of dissemination that defies the notion of a fixed authorship that the modernity knows.

At any rate these websites are not an insignificant phenomenon. In fact, we can see that the website of the *Center for the Study of the New Testament Manuscripts*, which put online many digitized manuscripts of the New Testament, offers an index of the Codex Vaticanus,³³ which was made by the previously cited Islamic website <http://www.sheekh-3arb.net>.³⁴

³¹ Screenshot of <http://alta3b.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/jn1-1-arabic-mss/>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

³² <http://www.hurras.org/vb/showthread.php?t=14868>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

³³ http://images.csntm.org/Manuscripts/GA_03/Vaticanus-Scripture-Index.pdf, last accessed 9 January 2013.

³⁴ <http://www.sheekh-3arb.net/vb/showthread.php?p=6346>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

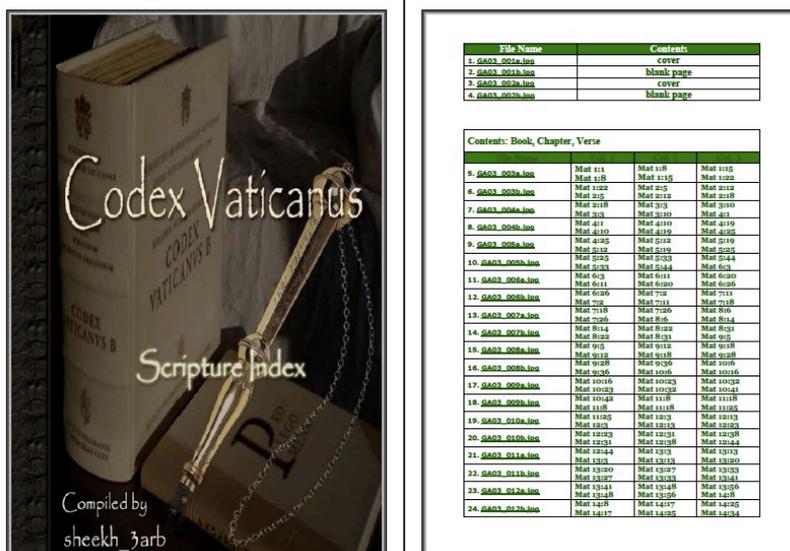


Figure 3: Title page of the Vaticanus Index³⁵

The CSNTM is an independent Christian Center led by professors of New Testament, wishing to provide the largest number of manuscripts for researchers and preserve them by digitalizing. The Salafist website *Sheekh_3arb's* mission is to study the New Testament for polemical and apologetic purposes. This raises questions about the status of each of these productions and their meeting produced what we can call a *hybrid scholarly discourse*.³⁶

Such ‘hybridization’ is also found on the Yahoo Forum, where users of such Islamic websites exchange freely with more traditional searchers in textual criticism. For instance in this topic, a user offers a comparison between Wieland Willker’s commentary on the Gospel of Matthew³⁷ and the Sinai Ar. 72.³⁸ The Internet address of the document goes back to the website *Sheekh-3arb* and the author presents himself as co-editor on an

³⁵ Screenshot of http://images.csntm.org/Manuscripts/GA_03/Vaticanus-Scripture-Index.pdf, last accessed 9 January 2013.

³⁶ Term developed by Clivaz, ‘Homer and the New Testament as ‘Multitexts’ in the Digital Age’.

³⁷ <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/TCG/index.html>, last accessed 9 January 2013. It is interesting to notice that Wieland Willker it is originally a chemist at the University of Bremen. This illustrates the changes of borders in the discipline.

³⁸ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/textualcriticism/messages/6127>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

Arabic Textual Criticism Journal,³⁹ a website connected to website *Sheekh-3arb* as well.

4. Conclusion

This hybridization can make us confused, but we should not misjudge too quickly. In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes the multiplicity of the forms of domination of the West over the East; one is the idea that only the West can produce a meaningful discourse on the Orient, which can not represent itself:

The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient.⁴⁰

This thinking is obvious in the next example: in 1865, a new translation of the Bible in Arabic was published on the initiative of the American Bible Society. This translation of the Bible, so-called Smith-Van Dyke, became very popular among Arab-speaking people. The committee describes so the aim of this project: ‘To give the Word of God to forty millions of perishing sinners [...]: in short, to give them a Christian literature, or that germinating commencement of one [...].’⁴¹

In this context, it is easy to understand the need of promoting a tradition, which existed in many forms long before the West provided one. The will to reaffirm a culture is illustrated by the resumption of publications in recent years. This view is also shared by the Islamic website that contains the topic on John 1:1, where we find the following remark:

We, Arabs, Muslims or Christians, should have an interest in our heritage, as the Latins are interested in their Latin heritage, the Syriacs in their Syriac heritage, etc. We must take care of this heritage written in Arabic to give it to the world rather than they provide us our heritage.⁴²

Perhaps, the rediscovery of a rich tradition that has been underestimated for too long comes to us from where we may expect it at least, but it is an encouraging sign for a recognition of the need to study the Arabic manuscripts of the New Testament.

³⁹ <http://tcjournal.sheekh-3arb.net>, last accessed 9 January 2013.

⁴⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

⁴¹ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, 68–69.

⁴² <http://www.hurras.org/vb/showthread.php?t=14868>. Last accessed 09.01.13.

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