PRESENTING THE MANUSCRIPT

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

Leaves from Three Ancient Qur’āns, Possibly Pre-‘Uṯmānīc

While Cambridge University Press was printing one of many articles about Oriental studies — Horse Guards were manoeuvring in front of Buckingham Palace and Uhlan 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 tupe
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-‘Uṯmānīc, 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 Qurʾānic text, was written with three principal kinds of script: Qurʾān A, Qurʾān B and Qurʾān C.

Mingana reported a list of the various readings, omissions and interpolations he found in comparison with the established textus receptus of the Qurʾān and the full transcription of the Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾāns Possibly Pre-‘Uṯmānīc, 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 Barṣātīī [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 Sinaica [8], with a few notes about “Leaves from Two Ancient MSS of the Qurʾān” [9],

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