

Where does the term «*surah*» come from?

It is common knowledge that a chapter of the Koranic text is called a «*surah*» (سورة).

But where did we get the term?

If we are to believe assertions frequently penned in the West, its origin is unknown. In *The Messiah and his Prophet* (vol. II p.184-185), we evidenced a certain similarity with biblical Hebrew, but one that is still too distant; another similarity, found with the rabbinical Hebrew term *šura'* (שורה i.e. a *paragraph* or a *margin note*) seems more convincing. We are coming closer to the meaning of «*writing*» or «*chapter*», but not yet in a fully satisfying way.

If we turn to the Aramean language however, we begin to approach the answer. Many are a priori opposed to this examination, as Islamic rhetoricians hold that the origins of Islam owe nothing to the Aramean culture and are instead rooted in the other side of the Arabian peninsula – but of course the same tell us that Muḥammad often travelled in the direction of Syria, where he met Bahîra the monk, for example...

So, what do we find in Aramean? A word, *širtâ* (transposed in Hebrew writing: סרטא), means line, but more essentially, writing¹! The word seems to derive from the old Aramean root *šfr*, to write, which became in Hebrew *šôfer* (סופר, the *one who writes*, found in the Koran in 80:15, *safarat*, *scribes*). However, in certain Aramaic formulations, the «*f*» changes into «*w*», and *writing* is expressed by the word *šûrat*².

This time again, we had to turn to the north of the Arab cradle of the time to find an answer to the question of the origins³.

[Home Page](#)

1 See for example *Köbert's Vocabularium Syriacum*, 1956, p.133 which provides as an illustration: «the Jacobite writings.» As a general rule, the Köbert explains that ܐ in Aramean corresponds to ܐ in Arabic (whereas ܐ corresponds to ܐ).

2 The question was brought up by Christoph Luxenberg at the March 13-16, 2008 Inarah Otzenhauzen Conference on "The Early History Of Islam And The Koran" (Saarland).

3 Aramean, a very ancient oral and written language, has a lot more to teach us, particularly in regard to our knowledge of the first centuries of our era. Doesn't the same Aramean word reappear in the word «*soutra*», also meaning "writing"? Research finds a stimulus in questions that are posed and in what appears to be coincidences. Several Pali and Chinese manuscripts from the first centuries of our age suggest a total of «*42 soutra-s*.» No one can say for sure what this number represents. But it could very well refer to the -as yet- little known collection of Aramean-Christian holy scriptures in existence during the first century. The word we use today to designate the text of the Gospel only applied to its content then (literally, it meant: the Proclamation). Moreover, today's «*gospels*» didn't exist as such: no specific term designated the memory aids or transcriptions of the twelve Apostles' preaching, whose only prescriptive value rested on oral teaching. According to the Judeo-Aramean way of counting, what we call today the «*Old Testament*» consisted of thirty books (the «*other writings*» being left aside), namely: the five books of the Torah, the Psalms (=1 book), the six «*major prophets*» (i.e. Joshua, who is believed to have written the book of Joshua; Samuel, the presumed author of the books of Judges and Samuel; Jeremiah, the presumed author of the books of Kings and Jeremiah; Isaiah; Ezekiel, and the twelve «*minor prophets*», from Hosea to Malachi), giving a total of 30. If one adds the twelve «*Memoirs of the Apostles*» mentioned by Papias and several oral Eastern traditions, one arrives at 42 texts. All these «*books*» must have been referred to as «*writings*» / *širtâ*-s in first-century Aramean. To be continued.