

ash-Shāfi'ī, لا يحيط باللغة الأنبي "None but a Prophet thoroughly comprehends a language".¹

The authority of the great philologists, however, carried much weight, and many were fain to admit that Ibn 'Abbās and his successors must have been right in stating that certain words were Abyssinian, or Persian, or Nabataean, and yet they were very unwilling to grant that Arabic was thus confessedly imperfect.² To meet the difficulty they came forward with the suggestion that these were odd cases of coincidence where Arabic and these other tongues happened to use the same word for the same thing, but which in the case of Arabic happened to be used for the first time in the Qur'ān. This, curiously enough, is the position taken by at-Ṭabarī in his *Tafsīr*,³ and is even seriously defended at the present day by the ultra-orthodox in spite of the overwhelming weight of the probabilities against such a series of coincidences, not to speak of the definite linguistic evidence of borrowing on the part of Arabic.

This line of argument was not one which was likely to commend itself to many of the more instructed Muslim savants, so we are not surprised to find others taking up a more likely-looking position and claiming that in cases where the two languages agree, it is the Abyssinian or Nabataean, or Syriac, or Persian which has borrowed from Arabic. Since Arabic is the most perfect and richest of all languages, they argued, it is much more likely that the surrounding peoples would have borrowed vocabulary from the Arabs than that the Arabs took over words from them. This, as-Suyūṭī tells us, was the

¹ The reference is to ash-Shāfi'ī's *Risāla* (Cairo, 1312), p. 13. See further on this point, Dvořák, *Fremdw.* 10, with his references to Goldziher, *ZDMG*, xxvi, 768. There are several traditions as to Muhammad's great linguistic attainments, and he is said to have been particularly skilled in Ethiopic; cf. Goldziher, op. cit., 770. Perhaps the most curious of these traditions is that in *Kanz*, ii, 41, that the language of Ishmael was a lost tongue but that Gabriel came and instructed Muhammad therein.

² This jealousy for the perfection of their language is characteristically Oriental. An interesting example of it from a Syriac writer will be found in Budge's *Cave of Treasures*, 1928, p. 132.

³ Cairo ed. of 1323, vol. i, pp. 6-9, on which see Loth in *ZDMG*, xxxv, 595. as-Suyūṭī, *Itq*, 315, summarized his view: "Said Ibn Jarīr—What is handed down from Ibn 'Abbās and others on the interpretation of words of the Qur'ān to the effect that they are Persian or Abyssinian or Nabataean, etc., only represents cases where there is coincidence among the languages, so that the Arabs, Persians, and Abyssinians happen to use the same word." There is an excellent example of this line of argument in as-Sijistānī, 111.