

QUR'ĀN TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY:
AN UNCHARTED RELATIONSHIP?

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Qur'ān translation, as of any text, necessarily involves exegetical interventions. Yet there remains a critical distinction between these two modes of textual engagement. This paper explores the relationship between the imitative act of translation and the explicatory act of exegesis. It investigates the extent to which translators graft their exegetical projects onto their translation attempts. The paper first addresses the issue of Qur'ān translatability, recognizes the often uncertain boundaries between translation and exegesis, and then provides an historical overview of Qur'ān translation-cum-exegesis.

Keywords: Qur'ān exegesis; Qur'ān translation; exegesis-translation conflation; Qur'ān translatability/untranslatability; polemic; history of Qur'ān translations; inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'ān.

Introduction

The Qur'ān is Islam's foundational text, encapsulating its message and being its foremost source of guidance and legislation. Muslims' lives are directed by it and their actions are legitimized by it. Muslims can and do dispute over any given Islamic text, but not over the Qur'ān. Many Muslims learn it by heart, and it is used as an alphabet book, a dictionary, a grammar book, and as an ethical guide for hundreds of millions. Its authenticity and the binding nature of its dictates are authoritative across sectarian divides. (Differences

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occur rather over how to *interpret* these dictates.¹) The relationship between the Qurʾān and its Arabic *tafsīr* (exegesis, pl. *tafāsīr*) is longstanding and complicated. The exegetical corpus is indeed enormous.² The *tafāsīr* attempt to explicate the Qurʾān for easier comprehension; they also manipulate its interpretation from a particular perspective, or take a certain scholarly approach to it. It is thus possible to differentiate, broadly speaking, between different genres of *tafsīr* (e.g. scientific exegesis, thematic exegesis, mystical exegesis). Echoing this is the relationship between Qurʾān translation and commentary, as this interpretive tradition is strongly reflected in other languages through translations.

Further complicating the picture is the oft-evoked ‘untranslatability’ of the Qurʾān, an issue which has caused much controversy.³ This paper does not deal with that problematic directly, but discusses only as much of it as would make clear the extent to which it has affected translation practice and made even more inextricable the relationship between Qurʾān translation and commentary. In order to organize the discussion to follow, claims of Qurʾān untranslatability can be schematized as three types: doctrinal, inherent and political.

Doctrinal untranslatability

The divine nature of the Qurʾānic text is taken to be a major argument against its translatability. For Muslims the Qurʾān is *kalimatuʾllāh*, the very Word of Allah, revealed verbatim to Prophet Muḥammad through the angel Jibrīl. This has weighty implications indeed for attempts at its translation. How is it possible to render the very materiality of Divine speech into another lan-

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1. For more details on how the Qurʾānic passages are interpreted differently, see Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wal-Mufasssīrūn (Exegesis and Exegetes)* (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, n.d.); for an Orientalist view, see Helmut Gätje, *The Qurʾān and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).
 2. For a comprehensive list of exegetical works, see Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qurʾāniyyah, *Fihrist Muṣannafāt Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm (Index of Qurʾān Exegetical Compilations)*, 3 vols. (Madina: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qurʾān, 2003). The *Fihrist* attempts a comprehensive list of all exegetical works on the Qurʾān up until the year 1422 AH/2002 CE. The number of listed compilations amount to 6124.
 3. For details, see Salah A. A. M. Almula, “The Question of the Translatability of the Qurʾān with Particular Reference to some English Versions” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1989), accessible online at <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1934/01/1989almullaphd.pdf>>; Mahmud Ayoub, “Translating the Meanings of the Qurʾān: Traditional Opinions and Modern Debates,” *Afkar Inquiry* 3 (1986), 34-39.

guage? The poetics of Qurʾānic discourse have long been a source of interest among classical and modern Muslim and non-Muslim scholars concerned with the notion of inimitability (*iʿjāz*), yielding a large body of linguistic and stylistic analysis devoted to the Qurʾānic embodiment of superior peculiarities of the Arabic language.⁴ More recently, it has attracted the interest of translation theorists who are concerned with Qurʾān translatability. Steiner comments laconically:

Here we flounder in deep waters. If the text is ‘revealed’, if its initial encoding is then transferred into mundane and fallible sign-systems, that of secular and post-Adamic speech, to what truth-functions, to what correspondent faithfulness can any translation aspire?⁵

Likewise, in the opening lines of his recent work, *Qurʾān Translation*, Hussein Abdul-Raof asserts:

The translation [of the Qurʾān]...should not be looked at as a replacement of the original version of the Qurʾān in Arabic, for we cannot produce a Latin Qurʾān, no matter how accurate or professional the translator attempts to be.... The ‘translation’ of the Qurʾān remains in limbo for the Word of God cannot be reproduced by the word of man.⁶

Thus the material form of the Qurʾān, its stylistic patterns and their semantically-oriented variations, are as critically important as its message. Cook quotes the Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) as saying “Non-Arabic isn’t Arabic; so its translation is not the Qurʾān.”⁷ Ibn Hazm’s unequivocal statement derives from the fact that there are some eleven *āyahs* expressly confirming the Arabic revelation of the Qurʾān (Q 12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 20:113, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 41:44, 42:7, 43:3, 46:12). To contextualize the importance of this statement we need to recognize that some religions may express their

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4. For a detailed discussion of the linguistic features of the Qurʾān at gradient levels and their relevance to translation, see Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001). Other facets of *iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* include scientific references, pedagogical insights, legislative directives, numerical symmetries, and psychological effects.
 5. Cited in Ahmed Abdel-Fattah Muhammad Ali, “Measuring and Weighing Terms in the Qurʾān: Their Meaning with Reference to Six English Translations” (PhD diss., Durham University, 1998), 174.
 6. Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001), 1.
 7. Michael A. Cook, *The Koran, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94.

message “with equal validity in all tongues,”⁸ while others identify the message with the language itself. In other words, some religions accept translations of their sacred text as authoritative (entitled to reverence, obedience, acceptance) and authentic (having a verifiable origin and authorship), giving the text a high degree of translatability. Others recognize neither the authority nor the authenticity of a translation, signifying a low degree of translatability. We proffer that the Protestant Bible and the Qurʾān represent archetypes of each extreme.⁹

This doctrinal reason, the belief that the Qurʾān is the actual Word of God, a miracle in itself which defies all forms of textual rivalry and imitation within the domain of Arabic (let alone in other languages), contributed to the notion of the untranslatability of the Qurʾān. Such beliefs in the linguistic miracle of the scripture were supported by textual challenges to the pagan Arabs at the time of revelation, who were acknowledged masters of the Arabic tongue. For example: *Say: if humans and jinn banded together to produce the like of this Qurʾān, they would never produce its like, even though they backed one another* (Q 17:88; similar challenges at 2:23, 10:38, 52:34). For Muslims, therefore, any text other than the Arabic original—no matter the translation’s professed adherence to the original ‘spirit’—will necessarily be a particular interpretation rather than a transparent representation. Any mimetic project on the Qurʾān is always already exhausted by the Divine force of revelation.

Inherent untranslatability

Besides this doctrinal reason there are other more tangible reasons that challenge the notion of the translatability of the Qurʾān. Meaning and form in the Qurʾān are intertwined and multi-layered. The language of the Qurʾān is extraordinarily vigorous. Its style reaches noteworthy heights, particularly in affirmations of the Oneness, Uniqueness, and Omnipotence of God, in forceful descriptions of the Day of Judgment, in moralizing passages, and in apostrophes against polytheism. It is, to a large measure, revealed in dense and highly allusive, elliptical speech. Prophet Muḥammad says of the Qurʾān: “It

8. Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, *Translators Through History* (Amsterdam, PA: John Benjamins Publishing, 1995), 159.

9. Nida’s “dynamic equivalence” translation approach, and the weaker “functional equivalence” version now highly espoused by Bible translation agencies such as SIL and United Bible Societies, demonstrates that the primary emphasis in Christianity is on the message of the text. Cf. Eugene Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1969). In Orthodox Judaism, on the other hand, the Hebrew Bible is regarded as having a similar ‘untranslatability’ as the Qurʾān. Explorations comparing the problem of translation in Islamic and Jewish traditions promise to be fruitful.

will not be worn out by repetition. Its wonders are never ending.”¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarī (d. 224-310/838-923) remarks in his commentary:

[I]t is obvious that there is no discourse more eloquent, no wisdom more profound, no speech more sublime, no form of expression more noble, than [this] clear discourse and speech with which a single man challenged a people at a time when they were acknowledged masters of the art of oratory and rhetoric, poetry and prose, rhyme and soothsaying. It reduced their fancy to folly and demonstrated the inadequacy of their logic... He let them know that the evidence of the truth of what he (Prophet Muḥammad) said, the proof of the genuineness of his Prophethood, was the *bayān* (Discourse), the *ḥikmah* (Wisdom), the *fuṣṣal* (Criterion), which he conveyed to them in a language like their language, in a speech whose meanings conformed to the meanings of their speech. Then he told them all that they were incapable of bringing anything comparable to [even] a part of [what he had brought], and that they lacked the power to do this...¹¹

Recently, the popular author on religions, Karen Armstrong, described the effect of the Qurʾān on its immediate receivers:

The early biographers of Muhammad constantly described the wonder and shock felt by the Arabs when they heard the Koran for the first time. Many were converted on the spot, believing that God alone could account for the extraordinary beauty of the language. Frequently a convert would describe the experience as a divine invasion that tapped buried yearnings and released a flood of feelings. Muslims like Umar seem to have experienced a similar unsettling of sensibility, an awakening and a disturbing sense of significance which enabled them to make the painful break with the traditional past. Even those Qurayshis who refused to accept Islam were disturbed by the Koran and found that it lay outside all their familiar categories: it was nothing like the inspiration of the *kahins* (soothsayers) or the poet; nor was it like the incantations of a magician. Some stories show powerful Qurayshis who remained steadfastly with the opposition being visibly shaken when they listened to a *sura*... Without this experience of the Koran, it is extremely unlikely that Islam would have taken root.¹²

In a self-referential assertion of its own uniqueness, the Qurʾān describes its effect on believers in the following manner: *God has revealed the most beauti-*

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10. Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1996), 29-30. No. 2906.
 11. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1408H), vol. 1, 10.
 12. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (London: Ballantine Books, 1994), 168.

ful Discourse—a Book, consistent with itself, (yet) repeating (its teaching in various aspects): the skins of those who fear their Lord tremble thereat; then their skins and their hearts do soften at the remembrance of God. Such is the guidance of God: He guides therewith whom He pleases, but such as God leaves to stray, can have none to guide (Q 39:23).

According to many an author, any translation of the Qurʾān not only betrays the meaning of the original, but also loses much of its poetic and affective force.

Anyone who has read it in the original is forced to admit that this caution seems justified; no translation, however faithful to the meaning, has ever been fully successful. Arabic, when expertly used, is a remarkably terse, rich and forceful language, and the Arabic Qurʾān is by turns striking, soaring, vivid, terrible, tender and breathtaking... It is meaningless to apply adjectives such as “beautiful” or “persuasive” to the Qurʾān; its flashing images and inexorable measures go directly to the brain and intoxicate it... It is not surprising, then, that a skilled reciter of the Qurʾān can reduce an Arabic-speaking audience to helpless tears, that for thirteen centuries it has been ceaselessly meditated upon, or that, for great portions of the human race, the “High Speech” of the seventh-century Arabia has become the true accent of the eternal.¹³

However, the inimitable nature of the Qurʾān does not stop at its language and style. There are also hermeneutical issues that pose serious questions to its translatability. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1372) begins his *tafsīr* with an account of the early Muslims’ discretion (including the most prominent Companions) with regard to interpreting the Qurʾān. Abū Bakr, for instance, when asked about the meaning of *and fruits and abba* (grass, pasture, fodder, herbage) (Q 80:31) instead replied: “What sky shades me, and what earth holds me, if I say about God’s Book that of which I have no knowledge?” ‘Umar’s laconic reply, in turn, was: “We were told not to be pedantic.”¹⁴ This pious generation remained extremely cautious about imposing any kind of external reading on the Qurʾān, demonstrating an acute awareness of the fraught relationship between text and supplementary text. The scripture itself, after all, was minimally accessible to its immediate community of revelation by virtue of linguistic and contextual proximity. The core message of the Qurʾān was available to them and its immediate historical referential and semantic field was familiar to them.¹⁵ On the other hand, instances of *tafsīr* by the Companions and even

13. John Alden Williams, *Islam* (<www.forgottenbooks.org>, 2008 [1962]), 3.

14. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīm* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ at-Ṭurāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.), vol. 1, 10.

15. Iconic of this generation’s grasp of the message of the Qurʾān is Ibn Masʿūd’s statement: “By Whom besides which there is no other god,

by the Prophet himself are well-documented.¹⁶ It remains that parts of the Qurʾān were not always transparent to everyone. Indeed, the honoured companion Ibn ʿAbbās, known as *tarjumān al-Qurʾān* (Interpreter of the Qurʾān), said: “The Qurʾān has four aspects (*awjuh*): *tafsīr* (exegesis), which the learned know; *al-ʿarabiyyah* (language) which the Arabs understand; *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* (permitted and forbidden things), of which no one is allowed to be ignorant; and *taʾwīl* (explanation), which only God knows.”¹⁷ Muqātil, an early Qurʾān commentator, further expounds what is at stake in understanding the Qurʾān:

The Qurʾān contains references to particular and general things (*khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm*), particular references to Muslims and particular references to polytheists, and general references to all people; it contains unequivocal and ambiguous passages (*muḥkam* and *mutashābih*), explained and unexplained passages (*mufassar* and *mubham*); it contains elisions and explicit utterances (*idhmār* and *tamām*); it contains cohesive devices; abrogating and abrogated verses (*nāsikh* and *mansūkh*); it contains changes in word order; it contains similar utterances with many different aspects (*ashbāh*); it contains passages that are continued in a different *sūrah*; it contains accounts of earlier generations and accounts of what there is in Paradise and Hell; it contains a reference to one particular polytheist; it contains commandments, laws, ordinances; it contains parables by which Allah Almighty refers to Himself, parables by which He refers to unbelievers and idols, and parables by which He refers to this world, to resurrection and to the world to come; it contains accounts of what is in the hearts of the believers, and accounts of what is in the hearts of the unbelievers, polemics against the Arabian polytheists; and it contains explanations, and for each explanation there is a [further] explanation.¹⁸

no *āyah* in Allah’s Book was revealed without me knowing regarding what matter it was revealed and the place it was revealed in; and had I known the whereabouts of one who knew the Book of Allah better than I [and they were] reachable by mount, I would have travelled to him.” Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 7. Of course, some Companions were more knowledgeable than others; see al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wal-Mufasssīrūn*, 26-27.

16. Yeshayahu Goldfeld, “The Development of Theory on Qurʾanic Exegesis in Islamic Scholarship,” *Studia Islamica* (1988) 67, 5-27.
17. Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 2003), vol. 1, 27. A variant on this statement of Ibn ʿAbbās is narrated in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1401/1981), vol. 7, 192: “Qurʾānic exegesis has four aspects: *tafsīr* which everyone may know; *tafsīr* which the Arabs know through their languages; *tafsīr* which the scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) know; [and] *tafsīr* which only the Almighty knows.”
18. Ibid.

The Qurʾān is, obviously, an intensely complex text. Anyone who is to truly understand it must be able to recognize these multiple levels of interpretation.¹⁹ Added to this is the exegetical overlay that has accumulated through the passage of time and the many conflicting schools of exegesis. Since its modest beginnings, the *tafsīr* corpus has evolved into a sea of writing that has been expanding for the last millennium and a half. On the one hand, the inexhaustibility of God’s Word was matched by the inexhaustibility commentators saw in its meaning. On the other hand, every group in the Muslim community has its own corpus of *tafsīr* supporting and justifying its reading. Thus sectarian and doctrinal *tafsīr* has evolved. It is not only the immense volume that makes this literature of interest, but also the pivotal role it has played in shaping and reflecting specific rationalities throughout Islamic history. This became more acute as the spatio-temporal gap separating the text receiver from its original context increased and more meaning-making agents became involved. Delisle and Woodsworth’s view of religious texts, that “[c]enturies of veneration have given them a thick overlay of meanings,” fully applies to the Qurʾān.²⁰ The text came to mean “all that it [could] be made to mean.”²¹ This is hyperbole, of course, but it is a widely accepted precept of cultural studies that the consumer of a text is also an active producer of meaning, and the encoding-decoding dynamic which necessarily comes into play supports at least the principle of the claim.²²

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19. Other types of *iʿjāz* (i.e. the miraculous nature) of the Qurʾān include passages about *al-ghayb* (the unseen), that which lies beyond the grasp of human senses—for instance, about past and future events remote from the community of revelation. The occasion of revelation (*sabab an-nuzūl*) of three past events as told in *sūrat al-Kahf* (the story of the denizens of the cave, of Moses and al-Khaḍir, and of Dhūʾl-Qarnayn), is widely documented in *tafsīr* references as being in reply to the Arab pagans’ questions to the Prophet on the behest of the Jews, who told them that if he answered these questions then he was truly a Prophet.
20. Delisle and Woodsworth, *Translators Through History*, 159.
21. Henry Smith, “The Apologetic Interpretation of Scripture in Islam and Christianity,” *The Journal of Religion* 4 (July 1924) 4, 361-371.
22. This is not to say that the core message of the Qurʾān is equivocal and that in its entirety it can be open for interpretation. Indeed the Qurʾān says about itself: “It is He Who sent this Scripture down to you. Some of its *āyahs* are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own” (3:7). ‘Abbas anticipates the emergence of those who bend the interpretation of the Book to their own aims. Muqātil records him exhorting his disciples: “Learn interpretation (taʾwīl) before people will come who

Having such a highly-regarded, hyper-sensitive text for a source makes the task of the translator all the more daunting. It is thus understandable that many a translator pays homage to the magnitude of his or her undertaking by introducing his work with a word about the untranslatability of the Qurʾān.²³ This could also be due to the degree of loss they feel their translation effects, the multiple ways in which the translation betrays the original text. This is indeed enormous in the case of Qurʾān translation.²⁴

Political untranslatability

In addition to the doctrinal and inherent grounds that contribute to the concept of the untranslatability of the Qurʾān, there are also political reasons. In the heat of debate, the untranslatability of the Qurʾān is often confused with the supposed inadmissibility of its translation. Opponents of translation have used theological, rational and linguistic means to stress their arguments.²⁵ These form an important part of the genealogy of modern Qurʾān translation discourse, so much so that, up to now, no unanimous, clear-cut definition of the usually-invoked three types of Qurʾān translation—i.e., literal (*ḥarfī*),

will interpret it in ways that it should not be” (*Tafsīr*, vol. 1, 26).

23. Cf. the following English translations: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: English Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1934-1937); Mohammad M. Khatib, *The Bounteous Quran* (London: MacMillan, 1984); T.B. Irving, *The Quran: First American Version* (Vermont: Amana, 1985); A. Daryabadi, *The Glorious Quran* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2002); M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Quran: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of its Meanings in English* (Norwich: Bookwork, 2005). For further discussion, see Hisham Khogali, “Can loss of meaning be reduced in the translation of the meanings of the Qurʾān?” (PhD diss., Washington International University, 1998).
24. For an earlier project on phonic loss in Qurʾān translation, see my “Qurʾān Translatability at the Phonic Level,” *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 15 (2007) 3.
25. For a summation of the arguments of opponents to Qurʾān-translation, see the argument forwarded by the most ardent of these, Muhammad Rashīd Ridā, in his introduction entitled *Tarjamāt al-Qurʾān wa mā fīhā min al-Mafāsīd wa Munāfāt al-Islām* (“Qurʾān Translation and the Evils it Entails and How it Clashes with Islam”) to his *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Maṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah lil-Kitāb, 1990). As for the supporting camp’s views, see the treatise by Muhammad Mustafā al-Marāghī, *Baḥṭh fī Tarjamāt al-Qurʾān al-Karīm wa Aḥkāmihā* (“A Paper on Qurʾān Translation and Its Rulings”), supplemented to al-Azhar journal (Shawwal 1433 AH).

meaning-centred (*ma' nawī*) and exegetical (*tafsīrī*)—has been put forward.²⁶ It is also helpful to know that this debate differs from earlier debates on Qurʾān translation in that precursors did not confuse the two. Those debates concentrated only on admissibility rather than translatability, and thus their arguments were mainly theological.²⁷

A nodal point in the history of Arab discourse on Qurʾān translation was spurred by the distribution of Muḥammad Ali's Qurʾān translation in the very sensitive late 1920s and early 1930s.²⁸ This translation, which was seen as seriously distorting the message of the Qurʾān to favour Qadyani interpretations, was distributed through Muslim territories including Egypt, which at the time was a site of influential Islamic scholarly centres that wielded great

26. For a thorough account of the debate over the translatability of the Qurʾān which raged in the Egypt of the 1920-30s, see Ramaḍān 'Abdul-Tawwāb, "Tarjamāt al-Qurʾān bayn al-Mu'arāḍah wal-Ta'yīd" ("Quran Translation: Opposition and Support"), *al-Risālah* 9-10 (1389 AH), 44-50. To get an idea of the effect of this debate on contemporary discourse on Qurʾān translation, see the proceedings of the symposium "Translation of the Meanings of the Glorious Qurʾān: Assessing the Past and Planning for the Future," held by the King Fahd Holy Qurʾān Printing Complex. Of these, particularly refer to: Muhammad S. al-Fawzān, "*Tarjamāt Ma'ānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm am Tafsīr al-ʿUlamā' lahu?*"; Ali S. al-'Ubaid, "*Tarjamāt Ma'ānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm: Haqīqatuhā wa Hukmuhā*"; Muhammad A. al-Shāyī, "*Ayyuhumā Awlā Ibtidā'un bi Ghayr al-'Arabīyyah aw Tarjamāt Ma'ānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm?*"; Fahd A. al-Rūmī, "*Naql Ma'ānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm ilā Luḡhatin Ukhrā: Tarjamātun am Tafsīr?*"; and 'Izziddīn M. Al-Bushaykhī, "*Naql Ma'ānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm ilā Luḡhatin Ukhrā bayn al-Tarjamah wal-Tafsīr.*"

27. For an account of the early debates on the translation of the Qurʾān, see Abdul Latif Tibawi, "Is the Qurʾān Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion," *Muslim World* 52 (1962), 4-16.

28. This time period saw the rise of the liberal Turks to power in the land which was the last of the Islamic Caliphates. The liberals' agenda included the replacement of the Qurʾān with its Turkish translation even in ritual practices such as recitation and *salāh*, and making the call for prayers in the local tongue. This decision reverberated across the Muslim world, sending shivers down its spine, as it was seen to be a daring first step to disowning Islam altogether, and was feared to be attempted elsewhere. Thus the timing of the distribution of the Qadyani translation was critical indeed. For more on this period, see Marmaduke Pickthall, "Arabs and Non-Arabs, and the Question of Translating the Qurʾān," *Islamic Culture* (July 1931), 422-433, and Ichwan Moch Nur, "Differing Responses to an Ahmadi Translation and Exegesis: The Holy Qurʾān in Egypt and Indonesia," *Archipel* (2001) no. 62, 143-161.

intellectual influence on other Muslim lands. In other parts of the Muslim world, local and immediate concerns similarly coloured the theoretical debate over Qurʾān translation. In South Asia, Bengali scholars saw translations as a move toward the ‘Hinduization’ of Islam and so opposed Qurʾān translation.²⁹ Translation debates in the Chinese and African debates, conversely, reached consensus on the imperative to translate the Qurʾān, in part to counter Christian missionary translations.³⁰

The distribution of the Qadyani translation marked a shift in the debate, and the dichotomy of *ḥarfīyyah* (literal) versus *maʿnawīyyah* (meaning-centred) types of Qurʾān translation came into sharp focus. Theologians favoured the *maʿnawīyyah* type of translation, by which they meant the translation of *tafsīr*—that is, the translation of exegesis.³¹ This was intended to quell the effects of partisan translations they viewed as distorting the meaning of the revelation, and also to counter those who propagated replacing the Qurʾān with its translations. For practical reasons this position was not held and was later moderated and replaced by the move towards translation of the “meanings” (*maʿānī*) of the Qurʾān.³² In theory, this is a compromise position between the earlier two, and the word “meanings” was intended to show read-

29. Cf. M. H. Khan, “A History of Bengali Translations of the Holy Qurʾān,” *Muslim World* (1982), 129-36.

30. See R. Israeli, *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics* (Lexington Books, 2007), 172-173; M. H. Khan, “Translations of the Holy Qurʾān in the African Languages,” *Muslim World* (1987), 251-252. Rev. M.S. Cole, who was the first to translate the Qurʾān for the Yoruba-speaking Muslims of Nigeria, states his purpose in the preface as: “...it [the translation] will help the cause of Christianity, and dispels the darkness of the ignorance that...prevails among Mohammedans in Yorubaland and they will be in a position to compare the Bible with the Koran and see which satisfies best the needs of humanity.” Quoted in Khan, “Translations of the Holy Qurʾān,” 252.

31. In his treatise on Qurʾān translation included as a prefatory note in his *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, one of the earliest and staunchest opponents to Qurʾān translation, includes the following footnote: “What is meant by ‘translation’ is the exegetical interpretative [translation] (*maʿnawīyyah tafsīriyyah*) not the literal [one] (*lafẓīyyah ḥarfīyyah*)” (p. 12). The English Qurʾān translator Marmaduke Pickthall, who came to live through the ordeal of this debate at its height when he came to Egypt in the 1930s to get his translation revised and authorized, clearly sets out the distinction between the two types as it was understood at that time—*ḥarfī* works are literal (word-for-word) translations and *maʿnawī* works are exegetical. See Pickthall, “Arabs and Non-Arabs.”

32. For more on this issue, see al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil al-ʿIrfān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: ʿIsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1999), vol. 2, 7-65.

ers that this is merely an attempt on the part of the translator to replicate the ever-Arabic original and further make them aware of its untranslatability. In practice, this compromise does little by way of settling the matter once and for all. The distinction between the three categories is very hazy indeed—due to the nature of translation itself, which is a long way from being reduced to a set of objective rules.³³

The history of the dispute over Qurʾān translation has deeply affected its practice. A translation of the Qurʾān is also widely considered an act of exegesis, no matter the efforts taken to achieve a one-to-one rendition of the text. How long can this paradoxical situation, whereby the Qurʾān is seen as untranslatable yet Qurʾānic “commentaries” and “interpretations” abound, endure? Is it merely that Islam is fundamentally doctrinally opposed to the translation of the Qurʾān, as some would hold? Or is it the semantically-oriented stylistic and linguistic coherence of the Qurʾān that makes it virtually untranslatable? The dialectic of Qurʾān untranslatability-translatability has a lot to bear on the practice of interpretive intervention in translation. It is an untranslatable text, received in translation neither as authentic nor authoritative; yet translations of it do exist under the guise of exegesis—just as exegeses exist under the guise of translation. The concept of translation as a theoretical problematic is more or less occluded by the indivisibility of the text’s spiritual message from its material language.

It is clear from this that a low level of translatability does not equal a low level of translational activity. As Abdur Rahim Kidwai explains, “the act of translation may logically be viewed as a natural part of the Muslim exegetical effort,”³⁴ and it is under the guise of exegesis that the Qurʾān is actually translated. The titles of renderings of the Qurʾān out of Arabic evoke the difficulties associated with translating the Scripture, doctrinal or otherwise. Translations are often called “commentaries” or “interpretations” of the “meanings” of the Qurʾān. On the grounds presented earlier, a translation can never claim perfectly to represent the Qurʾān,³⁵ and we must acknowledge the “complementary nature of the translation rather than its substitution for the sacred text.”³⁶

Qurʾān Translation and Exegesis: A Troubled History

33. The effect is that debates actually still rage on, although more on the theoretical side of things. For more on this, see the symposium proceedings referred to in note 27.

34. Abdur Rahim Kidwai, “Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the Quran,” *Muslim Word Book Review* 7/4, 66.

35. Hashim Amir Ali, *The Student’s Quran* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), xiii.

36. Delisle and Woodsworth, *Translators Through History*, 178.

It is not intended here provide a detailed account of the history of Qurʾān translation. Translation in general, and Qurʾān translation in particular, is a multilayered, multifaceted exercise of representation of a Text believed to stem essentially from God and involves meaning-constructing agents at all stages. What is meant by ‘agent’ is one principally creating the meaning of the Text. There are no ‘invisible’ translators, and interference through the translation process is a classic bone of contention in religious translation. ‘Who is speaking?’ is one way of thinking about this problem, and is especially consequential for religious texts. James Hankins, for example, has shown that, as a translator, Leonardo Bruni took the route of “selection, bowdlerization, and suppression” in order to make Plato seem more acceptable to Christian readers.³⁷ As will be shown below, the Qurʾān was controlled in similar ways by its presenters through translation. The aim of the survey below is to read diagonally through the history of Qurʾān translation in order to investigate the relationship of translation and exegesis. Broadly speaking, this history falls into two categories: translations by non-Muslims and translations by Muslims.

Translation and tafsīr in the non-Muslim milieu

Apart from the very early attempts made by Muslims to translate the Qurʾān into other languages, Persian in particular,³⁸ the most serious attempts were made by non-Muslims and this held true for a very long time. Sites of encounter and rivalry between Islam and Christendom were the hotbeds of this translation activity. There are three partial Syriac translations of the Qurʾān and four Latin translations, three complete and one partial. All of these tried, in one way or the other, to guide interpretation of the Qurʾān through its exegesis. As Thomas Burman puts it: “if we look at these Latin versions of the Qurʾān side by side with late medieval Castilian versions made by Iberian Muslims, we cannot help but notice that all these translators—both Christian and Muslim—freely turn to authoritative Muslim exegetical sources and interpolate words and phrases from them into their translation.”³⁹ The three Syriac translations

37. James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1994), 66.

38. Two reports are available that the Persians, when they converted to Islam, wrote to the Persian Companion Salmān al-Fārisī to write to them something of the Qurʾān, whereupon he translated *al-Fāṭihah* (the first chapter of the Qurʾān) (*Cf.* Tibawi, “Is the Qurʾān Translatable?” 4-5). However, besides fragmentary translations of this kind no concerted efforts were made by Muslims in this field until a much later date. This can be attributed, in no small measure, to the emphasis laid on reading the Qurʾān in its original Arabic.

39. Thomas Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 8.

are those of Timotheus I (seventh century), alias Timothy the Patriarch, in his argumentation with the Caliph Mahdi;⁴⁰ Dionysius Barsalibi (twelfth century), in his answer to the Muslims;⁴¹ and Bar Hebraeus (thirteenth century), in his *Manārat al-Aqdās* (*The Candelabrum of the Sanctuary*).⁴² General characteristics of these translations include that they were all carried out by members of the Syriac clergy who were normalized subjects of the dominant Muslim state and that they are all fragmentary. They concentrate on how Christian figures and doctrines are projected in the Qurʾān, thus at once refuting Muslim views and supporting the views of their minority faith communities. They took their place in the robust Syriac tradition of polemics.⁴³

In his *An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kurʾān*, Alfonso Mingana gives the following exposé of Barsalibi's work, which is divided into three discourses:

The last discourse, comprising chapters 25-30, is entirely composed of quotations from the Kurʾān translated into Syriac. These the author adduces for the purpose either of refutation or of illustration, and he divides his page in this part into two columns, the first of which contains the Kurʾānic quotations, and the second his own refutations or illustrations.... The aim of Barsalibi in making use of these quotations is threefold: to confirm a given Christian doctrine, to draw attention to some apparent contradictions of the Kurʾān, and to put before his readers the story of some Biblical incidents as narrated in it.⁴⁴

Barsalibi's two-column strategy is in principle exegetical. In the first column he presents a close translation of the Qurʾān and in the second he presents his interpretational views. His putative readers, who were Syriac Christians as well as Muslims, were not left to fend for themselves. Their reading is closely controlled and monitored by his ever-present (almost paternal!) guiding hand

40. Cf. Alfonso Migana, "The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi," *Journal of the John Rylands Library* (1928), 12.

41. Cf. P. Jager's 1978 "Intended Edition of a Disputation between a Monk of the Monastery of Bet Hale and One of the Tayoye," repr. in Drijvers et al. (eds.), *IV Symposium Syriacum - 1984* (Rome: Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 1987), 401-402; Alfonso Mingana, *An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kurʾān Exhibiting New Verses and Variants* (Manchester: The Manchester University Press, 1925).

42. Cf. Joseph Khoury, "Le candélabre du sanctuaire de Grégoire Aboulfaradj dit Barhebraeus," *Patrologia Orientalis* 31 (1985).

43. See Ishāq Armalah's index of Syriac manuscripts on inter-faith dialogue between Syriacs and Muslims from the thirteenth through the eighteenth centuries, *Al-Ṭurfah fī Makḥṭūtāt Dīr al-Shurfah* (Lebanon, 1936).

44. Mingana, *An Ancient Syriac Translation*, 3.

through contextualizing comments, such as: “Examine how your (or: their, as the case be) Prophet says about Christ,” and: “Look how your (or: their) Prophet was inconsistent.”⁴⁵ The other two translations were just as much couched in polemics, if not more.⁴⁶

In Christendom proper the situation was not much different. Although there were complete Latin translations, the motivations behind production were almost as polemic as their Syriac counterparts, but with notable differences. A recent addition to the corpus of studies of Latin Qurʾān translations is Thomas Burman’s meticulous *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*. In the introduction, he states “It is true, as this book will show in some detail, that these unexplored sources [manuscripts of Latin translations] testify to the ubiquity of polemical Qurʾān reading—Christian Europeans, it seems, were often thinking about polemic even when they were not actively writing.”⁴⁷ Commentary is one of the vehicles of this polemic drive. It is one of the “complex frames” in which these Latin translations were inserted in the manuscripts in which they were circulated. Control of the message of the Qurʾān was sustained mainly through extra-textual means. Burman writes:

It is here in the messages sent by other books with which the Qurʾān was typically bound, by the commentaries through which it was explicated, and by the illuminations that accompanied it, that we really see the deployment of a thoroughly polemical way of reading the text. Indeed, the Qurʾān rarely ever circulated in Western Europe without such a polemical frame hedging it in and instructing its readers on the properly Christian way to understand it.⁴⁸

These “frames” are supra-imposed on the Qurʾān translation rather than super-imposed on it. Burman goes to great lengths to prove that Latin Qurʾān translators did nothing by way of superimposing any particular reading through commentary or otherwise. He gives the example of 2:25, describing the joys of Paradise which are promised to the righteous, and which caught the eye of many a Christian polemicist. According to Burman, this is the first of many *āyahs* that described what medieval Christians disdainfully viewed as the carnal Islamic heaven, and was often the first *āyah* to which the Qurʾān readers added marginal notes. He goes on:

45. *Ibid.*, 4.

46. For a discussion of these translations, see S. M. Edris, “*Tarjamat Maʿānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm fī al-Adab al-Suryānī al-Masīhī: Tārīkhuhā wa Namādhij minhā wa Taqwīmuhā*” (“Qurʾān Translation in Christian Syriac Literature: An Historical Overview with Samples and Evaluation”), *Journal of Qurʾānic Research and Studies* 2 (2007) 3.

47. Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān*, 6.

48. *Ibid.*, 9.

The standard Latin gloss on Robert of Ketton's Latin Qurʾān called on Christian readers to "Note that he [i.e., Muḥammad] everywhere promises such a paradise, manifestly of carnal delights, which was another heresy earlier," and later polemical writers often gave their imaginations free rein on this subject, depicting the Islamic paradise in prurient and orgiastic images. The Latin translators will have none of this, however, all of them translating this verse rather soberly.⁴⁹

Of course, translators were not free agents. Widely documented is that Robert of Ketton's translation was carried out on the behest of his patron, the Abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, to be part of his polemical *Corpus Toletanum*. Mark of Toledo carried out his translation for his patron, the powerful archbishop of Toledo, Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada. Burman explains: "Rodrigo wanted to subject Iberian Muslims to his overarching authority; for this a Latin Qurʾān was necessary."⁵⁰ Both translators were enlisted to perform what was asked of them and once done returned to their more favoured subjects of interest, i.e. science and cosmology. It was the patrons who supra-imposed the frames that directed the reading. Comments and annotations were therefore strongly of an exegetical nature.

Having said that, one must concede that for intrinsic reasons the relationship between translation and exegesis cuts deeper than supra-imposed forced interpretations. In order to understand such a dense text as the Qurʾān, translators urgently needed recourse to certain aids. In his article "Le Coran et sa traductions occidentales,"⁵¹ François Déroche discusses the abbot of Cluny's formation of his work team, which comprised, in addition to Robert of Ketton and the Dalmatian (or Carinthian) Hermann, a certain Muḥammad:

This was just as well, for the language of the Koran is difficult and within Islam has given rise to a specialist literature of glossaries and commentaries, and this information was largely out of reach for Robert and for Hermann. Worse still, there were no dictionaries at that time, only the most meagre glossaries at best, while the *tafsīrs*—Muslim critical interpretations—were certainly easier to come by and were able to illuminate subtle passages with their explanations. No doubt it was to cope with these difficulties that the Abbot of Cluny engaged a Muslim to help the two translators.⁵²

49. Ibid. 26.

50. Ibid., 17.

51. François Déroche, "Le Coran et sa traductions occidentales," in *Civilizations: How we see others, How others see us*, Proceedings of the International Symposium, Paris, 13-14 December 2001 (UNESCO, 2003).

52. Déroche, "Le Coran," 3.

Just how closely interwoven were exegetical views in Latin translations is highlighted by Burman. For instance, the *al-furqān*, which is a name for the Qurʾān itself, is translated by Robert of Ketton as *boni malique discernum*, i.e., “the discerner between good and evil”, a verbatim representation of Muslim exegetical views as found in the tomes of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr. The controversial *ṣābiʿūn* (Sabeans) found in 2:62, who are defined by al-Ṭabarī according to the basic linguistic meaning of the word as “anyone who departs from the religion to which he had adhered and [then] joins another,” Robert glosses as follows: “All who live uprightly, the Jew or the Christian or *he who, having abandoned his [own] religion, proceeds into another. . . will doubtlessly obtain divine love.*” Of course, one cannot help but note the overtly Christian overtones given to *lahum ajruhum ʿinda Rabbihim* (*shall have their reward with their Lord*), which occurs towards the end of the *āyah*. Another interesting instance is Robert’s choice of an Ashʿarite interpretation of God’s Footstool (which is usually mistranslated as Throne), exhibiting the Ashʿarite exegete al-Bayḍāwī’s opinion that *al-Kursī* (Footstool) actually figuratively signifies “knowledge”. Robert’s translation reads “*cuius sapientia celum et terram comprehendes*”, that is, “Whose knowledge comprehends heaven and earth.”⁵³

Another Latin translator is the Franciscan Germain (Germanus) of Silesia, named the Apostolic Prefect of the Mission to Grand Tartary, and who stayed in Isfahan, Qum and Mashhad around the mid-seventeenth century. He therefore had the opportunity of going further into the interpretations of the Qurʾān:⁵⁴

I judged that I would not have spent my leisure and my study badly, if I will have attempted a translation of the Qurʾān, not from dictionaries and lexicons, but according to the opinion and declaration of the disciples of the author himself, or others contemporary with them or near to them in age, and of the native expositors of the Qurʾān itself.⁵⁵

As explained by Burman, Germanus’ translation exhibits his reliance on the *tafsīr* corpus more than that of Robert’s by going a step further and providing *asbāb al-muzūl*, or occasions of revelation. However, Marracci goes a step further by directly quoting from the Muslim exegetical corpus, first in Arabic and then translated into Latin. Often he provides more than one explanation. In Burman’s words, “This is thorough exegesis.”⁵⁶ Robert of Ketton’s five

53. Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān*, 39.

54. Cf. M. Devic, “Une traduction inédite du Coran,” *Journal Asiatique* (1883), 353-5.

55. Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān*, 54.

56. *Ibid.*, 57.

hundred year older version exhibited some reliance on exegesis, but it was certainly less pronounced. A notable difference in approach however is that Robert tried to superimpose exegetical views in the body of this translation, while Marracci opted for a literal translation supplemented by accompanying exegetical notes and comments.

The polemical tradition strongly permeated the early European translations of the Qurʾān. This is no more evident than in the pretentious title *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete—The Religion of Mahumet the Pseudo-prophet*, which is attached to Robert of Ketton's translation, or *Refutatio Alcorani—The Koran Refuted*, which is Marracci's title for his translation. Early European translations were often the verbatim or spiritual offspring of certain Latin translations particularly those of Robert of Ketton and Ludovico Marracci. The first translation into a modern European language, that of Andrea Arrivabene which appeared in 1547, was in fact an Italian version of Robert of Ketton's, despite the translator's claims to the contrary.⁵⁷

The 1616 German version of Salomon Schweigger was made from Arrivabene's text and was the basis for the anonymous Dutch translation that appeared in 1641. The 1641 first German translation of Salomon Schweigger, the 1647 first French translation of André Sieur du Ryer, the 1649 first English translation of Alexander Ross, and the 1716 first Russian translation of Piotr Vasil'yevich Postnikov all belonged to this pedigree, carrying the ubiquitous *The Koran of Mahumet* as their title.⁵⁸ The first Hungarian translation, which was brought out in 1831 by Buzitai Szedlmayer Imre and Gedeon György, carries the following title:

The Islamic creed of Mohammed, the false prophet, son of Abdalia, i.e. the al-Koran, that was written by Mohammed and that was translated from Arabic into Latin, by Marakczius Lajos [Ludovico Marracci], the father-confessor of Pope Innocentus XI. It was supplemented by his remarks and by the remarks of others and elucidated by their notes. It was supplemented by a short introduction, containing the whole faith-creed of Mohammedan religion, gathered from al-Koran... And it was supplemented by an explanation providing that the Islamic faith has deviated from the True Religion, presented by Reinekczius M. Keresztély. Translated into Hungarian and annotated by Buzitai Szedlmayer Imre and Gedeon György.⁵⁹

57. Déroche, "Le Coran," 4.

58. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (ed.), *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qurʾān. Printed Translations 1515-1980* (IRCICA: Istanbul 1406/1986), XXXVII.

59. Ahmad Okvath Csaba, "The Way Leading to the Translation of the Glorious Qurʾān into Hungarian: A Short Historical and Bibliographi-

This long title shows just how much the polemical framing culture loomed large well into the nineteenth century.⁶⁰ However a break with this tradition took place with the advent of Orientalist studies. This period, largely unlike its predecessor, is characterized by a systemic study of indigenous Islamic literature. A notable feature is that exemplars of this period, in no small measure, favoured either picking and choosing from the exegetical literature what was in line with their own preconceived views, not adhering to a certain exegetical school in particular, or that their own readings found their way into their translations, irrespective of it being supported by any particular Muslim exegete. Oddly, with the increased engagement with texts of Islamic tradition came a disinclination toward using these texts consistently in explaining its central text. Orientalists' stabs at explaining certain Qur^ʿanic issues themselves became a prominent source of exegesis. Symptomatic of this is Rodwell's translation of 20:85, which he translates as *Of a truth now have we proved thy people since thou didst leave them, and the Samiri had led them astray.* On "Samiri," Rodwell has the following comment:

That is, *the Samaritan*. This rendering, which is probably the true explanation of the word Samiri, involves a grievous ignorance of history on the part of Muḥammad. Seldon (de diis Syr.Syn. i. ch. 4) supposes that Samiri is Aaron himself, the *Shomeer*, or keeper of Israel during the absence of Moses. Many Arabians identify him with the Michä of Hudges xvii. who is said to have assisted in making the calf (Raschi, Sanhedr. 102, 2 Hottinger Hist. Orient. p. 84). Geiger suggests that Samiri may be a corruption of Samael... But it is probable that the name and its application in the present instance, is to be traced to the old national feud between the Jews and Samaritans. See De Sacy, Chrestom. i. p. 189, who quotes Abu Rihan Muḥammad as stating that the Samaritans were called *al-limsahsit*, the people who say, "Touch me not" (v. 97, below), and Juyonboll Chron. Sam. (Leid. 1848) p. 113. Sale also mentions a similar circumstance of a tribe of Samaritan Jews dwelling on one of the islands in the Red Sea.⁶¹

Additionally, according to the popular Orientalist view that the Qur^ʿān was derivative from earlier scriptures, translators took the Bible as a source for explaining the Qur^ʿān. Commenting on 10:92 in which God speaks to Pha-

cal Survey of the Attempts made by Hungarians," *Journal of Qur^ʿanic Research and Studies*, 2-4 (2007), 16-17.

60. For a thorough account of this period (1537-1857), see Hartmut Bobzin and August den Hollander, *Early Printed Qur^ʿāns: The Dissemination of the Koran in the West* (Leiden: ICD Publishers, 2004).

61. John Meadows Rodwell, *The Koran* (Dutton & New York: Everyman's Library, 1978 [1909]), 99.

raoh at the time of his drowning and tells him that his body will remain a sign to those who come after him, Rodwell says:

This is in accordance with the Talmudic legend. “Recognise the power of repentance, in the case of Pharaoh, King of Egypt, who rebelled excessively against the most High; *Who is the god I should hearken to his voice?* (Ex. V.2). But with the same tongue that he sinned he did penance: *Who is like thee, o Lord, among the Gods?* (xv. Ii). The Holy One, Blessed be He, delivered him from the dead...so that he should not die (ix. 15, 16).—For now have I stretched forth my hand, and verily thee have I raised up from among the dead, to proclaim my might”. Ex. Ix. 15, 16. A strange comment! Pirke R. Eliezer, 43. Comp. Midr. On Ps. Cvi. Midr. Jalkut, ch. 238.⁶²

Another methodological approach is that of N.J. Dawood, which is much more sparse and economical but no less elaborate. For instance, in 33:37, which tells the story of Zayd, the Prophet’s adopted son, and his wife Zaynab as their marriage was at the brink of breaking up, the Prophet tells Zayd to keep his wife, but the verse also goes on to say *You sought to hide in your heart what Allah was to reveal*. Muslim exegetes differed on the nature of what exactly the Prophet was hiding; however, Dawood jumps to conclusions, adding a footnote: “Your intention to marry Zeid’s wife”.⁶³ This particular example is not a far cry from the rest of Dawood’s interpretive notations, which, sparse as they are, are barbed and consistently depict Islam and the Prophet in a bloody hue. Some Spanish translations were equally manipulative in their approach. The incidents of Zaynab’s divorce from Zayd received more than passing attention from Julio Cortés and Verne Juan in their translations.⁶⁴ These translators also left no chance without utilizing it by imbuing their own exegetical views into the act of reading.

There are however European translations of this period notable for their familiarity with the Muslim exegetical corpus. Among these are those of the French Jacques Berque⁶⁵ and the German Rudi Paret.⁶⁶ The former’s annota-

62. Ibid., 283.

63. N.J. Dawood, *The Koran* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), 293 n.4.

64. Julio Cortés, *El Sagrado El Corán* (Barcelona: Herder, 1995); Juan Vernet, *El Corán* (Barcelona: Pleneta, 1996).

65. Jacques Berque, *Le Coran* (Paris: Sinbad, 1990). Berque’s penchant for exegesis is displayed in his sub-title, *Essai de traduction de l’arabe annoté et suivi d’une étude exégétique* (“An attempt at the translation of the Arabic original with annotations followed by an exegetical study”). He is on record as saying that he relied heavily on exegetical sources (*Cf. Arabies*, March 1990, 12; and *al-Qabas* (Kuwaiti Newspaper), January 26, 1989).

66. Rudi Paret, *Der Koran* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980). The book is

tions and comments in his footnotes and prefatory notes and the latter's heavy parenthetical exegetical insertions are conspicuous exegetical interventions which are not displayed by other translations. For instance, Thomas Cleary's translation is free from all interpolation and annotations. However, this does not mean that such translations exercised no exegetical influence.

This is not to say that the whole interpretive framework of this period is manipulative. In fact, this is the most prolific of all Qur'ān translation periods in Europe and any simplistic categorization of all these works which are the product of different schools, periods and languages would be an unwarranted overgeneralization. However, one can safely say that Qur'ān translation of the non-Muslim milieu, particularly in the post-Orientalist period, saw the rise of the exegete-translator. The reasons behind this are varied but notable among them are the imperative to a scientific scepticism and non-alignment with any certain Islamic school of thought; the translation was often the culmination of the translator's life-long scholarly pursuit.

Translation and *tafsīr* in the Muslim milieu

The relationship between Qur'ān translation and exegesis in the Muslim milieu was not as convoluted as that of its non-Muslim counterpart. The authoritative *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'ān* states that "The earliest extant translation of the Qur'ān is in Persian; it was done at the time of the Samanid Prince Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ in 345 AH/956 AD."⁶⁷ In fact this was a translation of al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, which testifies to the pious intentions of these non-Arabic speaking Muslims whose main interest lay in learning and understanding the Qur'ān,⁶⁸ unlike their Christian counterparts to whom it

divided in two volumes. One of them, carrying the sub-title *Kommen-tar und Konkordanz* ("Commentary and Concordance"), dedicated in its entirety to Paret's interpretative comments.

67. Mustafa N. Sefercioğlu and Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *World Bibliography of the Translations of the Holy Qur'ān in Manuscript Form* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2000), xxiii.
68. The introduction of this book, which came to be known as *Tarjamat Tafsīr Ṭabarī*, makes clear the intentions of the patron of this project, who gathered the scholars of Transoxiana and neighboring regions to reach a ruling regarding the permissibility of Qur'ān translation. The result of course was the translation of al-Ṭabarī's commentary. Some researchers have it that early Turkish translations were either copies of this or were greatly affected by it. This is a credible thesis, for both languages prevailed in Central Asia, which at the time was a hub of intellectual activity. See Zeki Velidi Togan, "The Earliest Translation of the Qur'ān into Turkish" in *İslam Tetkikleri Enstitüsü Dergisi* 4 (1964), 3. This translation exhibits the interlinear-exegesis technique.

mainly existed in the context of polemics. The pedagogical approach corresponding to this effort may be demonstrated by the employment of a double-pronged interpretative technique combining interlinear translation, to get the gist of the text and make it somehow accessible, with either oral⁶⁹ or less often written exegesis. This technique held sway for a long time.⁷⁰ Interpretive methods were likewise often explicitly spelled out. Ibn Taymiyyah, for instance, laid down a strict procedure for Qurʾān commentators to follow: a passage should be interpreted in light of other Qurʾānic passages; next, one should turn to the Sunnah as recorded in sound Traditions; if neither the Qurʾān nor the Sunnah are of any help, one should have recourse to interpretations attributed to the companions; failing that, the interpretations of the Successors should be taken as authoritative provided that they are in agreement; finally, in the case that the Successors disagree, or are silent on the matter, the meaning of the text should be determined on the basis of the Arabic language.⁷¹

Since their shy beginnings, Muslim translations of the Qurʾān have evolved beyond recognition. Nowadays one can find the scripture turned into feminist and modernist manifestos, and cults like that of the number 19, extreme asceticism and Qadyanism finding their way into Qurʾān translations. Translation in the modern sense of the word was to become a necessity particularly as Muslims came into increasing contact with non-Muslims. For

69. A famous case in point is Musā ibn Sayyār al-Āsurī (ca. 127AH) who is reported by al-Jahiz (*al-Bayān wal-Tabiyin* [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1998], vol. 1, 368) to have had a study circle in which he divided his students into two groups. To his right sat the Arabs and to his left the Persians. He used to read an *āyah*, explain it in Arabic to the Arabs and then in Persian to the Persians. Early Persian translations of this type and the turn to other types of translations are catalogued in Habib Allāh Diyāʾi, “*at-Tawkīd fī Tarjamat Maʿānī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm ilā al-Lughah al-Fārisiyyah: Dirāsah Taḥlīliyyah Taqābuliyyah*” (“Emphasis in the Translation of the Meanings of the Glorious Qurʾān into Persian: An Analytical Parallel Study”), PhD diss., Islamic University, Pakistan, 2001.

70. Malay speaking Muslims often call their translations ‘*tafsīr*’. Muslim translations in other languages will find it presumptuous, or downright sacrilegious, to call their translations “the Qurʾān”, as is the case with many non-Muslim translations. To get an idea of how deeply-seated this reservation is, and which gave rise to the coupled interlinear-exegesis interpretive technique, see Mustafa N. Sefercioğlu and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, *World Bibliography*; Glyn M. Meredith-Owens, “Notes on an Old Ottoman Translation of the Kurʾān,” *Oriens* 10 (1957), 258-276.

71. Ibn Taymiyyah, *An Introduction to the Principles of Tafsīr* (Birmingham: Al-Hidayah, 1993).

instance, the first English translation by a Muslim was undertaken by Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan and came out in 1905, a time near the apogee of missionary activity in India. In general, much as discussed in the polemical context above, the agendas to which the translators (or their patrons) subscribe define the works they draw on and cite as authoritative.⁷²

For example, under the patronage of the Qum-based Centre for the Translation of the Holy Qurʾān, Yahya Razawi produced a Qurʾān translation into French. The Shiite texture of this translation is unmistakable.⁷³ Translating 3:110, *You are the best ummah (nation) raised up for mankind*, Razawi goes to great lengths quoting many exegetical sources along the way to prove that “ummah” does not mean “nation” here, or, as he puts it in French, “communauté”, but, according to *Tafsīr al-Qummi* which quotes Imam Sadiq, it should have been “*aʾimmah*” (Imams). A Spanish translation sponsored by the same Centre for the Translation of the Holy Qurʾān was done by Raúl González Bórnez. The footnotes in that translation are heavily informed by Ṭabaṭabāʾī’s *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*. For instance, in a comment on 33:33, *God wishes to keep uncleanness away from you, People of the [Prophet’s] House, and to purify you thoroughly*, which in Sunni tradition is said to apply to all of the Prophet’s household, including his wives, the translator has it on the authority of *al-Mīzān* that what is meant here by the “Gente de la Casa” are exclusively the twelve Imams.⁷⁴

Other more independent translations bring new dimensions to the relation between translation and exegesis. It is with interest that one notes how two of the most recent English translations of the Qurʾān, written by two Azhar-related Sunni scholars, namely, Muhammad Abdel Haleem and Ahmad Zaki Hammad,⁷⁵ dealt with the word “Islam”. The word itself is mentioned four times in the Qurʾān, and how each of these scholars interpret it in 3:85 is para-

72. In 1997, biases in English Qurʾān translations by Muslims were highlighted in the oft-cited article by Neal Robinson, “Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qurʾān,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 8 (1997) 3, but new translations have since emerged, making the circle of such partisan translations even wider. Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Glorious Qurʾan into English: 1649-2002—A Critical Study* (Madinah: King Fahd Quran Printing Complex, 2007) brings a fresh update to this effort.

73. The translation of 3:1-115 and the translator’s copious annotations were published in *Tarjuman-e Wahy* 9 (Autumn-Winter 2006) 2, 143-214.

74. Excerpts of this Spanish translation is published in the same volume of *Tarjuman-e Wahy* as above. The comment on *āyah* 33:33 is to be found on 158.

75. Ahmad Zaki Hammad, *The Gracious Quran: A Modern-phrased Interpretation in English* (Lucent Interpretations, 2007).

digmatic of their more general approach. Abdel Haleem translates it thus: *If one seeks a religion other than complete devotion to God [islam], it will not be accepted from Him.* Dealing with this “problematic” item in such a manner, i.e. using a host of graphic indicators—square brackets, italics, not capitalizing the “i” at the beginning of the word—reveals a deliberate and conscious choice. The same thing occurs in the other places in which the word “Islam” occurs. The interpretation of almost all noteworthy exegetes of the tradition is that the term refers to the religion of Islam as practiced by Muslims—that is, to the specific dispensation of the Prophet Muḥammad. In his introduction under the subheading “Issues of Interpretation,” the translator explains:

One further cause for misinterpretation is the lack of awareness of the different meanings of a given term in different contexts.... Thus for example, in [N.J.] Dawood’s translation: ‘He that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him and in the world to come, he will be one of the lost’ (3:85), it has to be borne in mind that the word *islam* in the Arabic of the Qur’ān means complete devotion/submission to God, unmixed with worship of any other. All earlier prophets are thus described by the Qur’ān as *muslim*. Those who read this word *islam* in the sense of the religion of the Prophet Muḥammad will set up a barrier, illegitimately based on this verse, between Islam and other monotheistic religions.⁷⁶

The translation of this verse is thus made an occasion to deconstruct what the translator views as illegitimate barriers between religious traditions.

Ahmad Zaki Hammad’s translation runs in the same vein, being however more philosophical (or equivocal) about the matter. Reviewing earlier Quran translations into English, he describes al-Hilali and Khan’s *The Noble Qur’ān* as an “ultra-traditional interpretation” that “unnecessarily and detrimentally distracts one from the timeless message of the Qur’ān and the belief in the possibility of human harmony under God’s Oneness, which is the essential inspiration the Quran’s universal call seeks to instill in the human heart.”⁷⁷ As for 3:85, he translates it *And so, anyone [after this] who seeks [submission to God through] a religion other than Islam [as revealed to all the prophets]—never shall it be accepted from him!* It is made explicit by his interpolation that “Islam” does not mean the Islam of Prophet Muḥammad but the essential message of “total surrender” proposed by all Prophets. He further comments on his choice:

“Islam” includes the process of revelation from God, the rituals God has sanctified, the Law God has enshrined until the end of time, the education of the human spirit, and above all, the detailing of correct belief in God in all faith’s dimensions. Translating

76. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, xxiv. All italics are in the original.

77. Hammad, *The Gracious Quran*, vol. 2, 77.

this into an accurate phrase is such that it would not encompass these essential aspects. For this reason, the word “Islam” that names a religion as way of life remains untranslated in this text.⁷⁸

Thus when he comes to 5:3, he translates it, *And I am well-pleased for you with Islam—[The Peace]—as your religion!* Neither Abdel Haleem nor Hammad can be unaware of the more historically prevailing interpretation, as they retain the lexical item “[*islam*]” or “Islam” rather than giving the linguistic (non-technical) sense of it as did Muḥammad Asad (*[man’s] self-surrender to Him*)⁷⁹ and the Swedish translator Mohammed Knut Bernström⁸⁰ (*underkastelse under Guds vilja*, submission under the will of God). Unlike the latter two, whose commitment to a certain interpretation is left implicit, Abdel Haleem and Hammad explicitly prefer readings based on their own life-long studies and experiences. In Hammad’s words:

These are not new thoughts to me, born of out the spiralling crises of our intensifying times. They are deep-rooted intuitions formed in the humbling crucible of forty years of serious study of revelation and the sacred. They are the gathering insights that led me more than fifteen years ago now to begin a re-examination in my native Arabic, and re-interpretation into my adopted English, of the Quran.⁸¹

Laleh Bakhtiar also disregards *tafsīr* literature as she espouses her own (feminist) understanding. This is pronounced in, for instance, her translation of 4:34, particularly the word *idribūhunna* (lit. ‘hit them’ (wives), a disciplinary action taken as a last resort after a number of remedial steps against haughty, fractious wives). Bakhtiar chose to translate it as “go away from them”. This prompted some public debate among Muslims, as it was taken to be a far cry from prior exegetical and juristic views of the matter⁸²—so much so that *New York Times* reported the issue in its national copy.⁸³ The paper provides an

78. Ibid., vol. 2, 146.

79. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān: Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad*. Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980).

80. Who, incidentally, based his commentary on Asad’s: Mohammed Knut Bernström, *Koranens budskap: i svensk tolkning av Mohammed Knut Bernström, med kommentarer av Muhamms Adad* (Stockholm: Proprius Förlag, 1998).

81. Hammad, *The Gracious Quran*, vol. 2, 20.

82. This issue is strictly defined and demarcated in the writings of premodern Muslim jurists, who set the scope and limits of this corporal disciplinary procedure. In his Qurʾān translation Ahmad Zaki Hammad provides a detailed discussion of the issue.

83. *New York Times*, March 25, 2007, p. 23.

account of Bakhtiar's deliberation when she reached this *āyah* in her already two year old Qurʾān translation project: "I decided it either has to have a different meaning, or I can't keep translating... I couldn't believe that God would sanction harming another human being except in war." The report goes on to say that "Ms. Bakhtiar spent the next three months on 'daraba'... Her eureka moment came on roughly her tenth reading of the *Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane... Among the six pages of definitions of 'daraba' was 'go away from'". Having discovered this fragment, which comes as a constituent of the Arabic idiom *ḍaraba fil-ard* (lit. 'strike in the land,' i.e. to travel) but not independently as 'go away from', the translator says: "I said to myself, 'Oh, God, that is what the prophet meant'". The tale of how she found her exegesis, in an unlikely secondary source, is curiously fitting for the modernist idiosyncratic approach to tradition and historical method of which her translation is exemplary.

This word proved problematic for translators of different persuasions. Thomas Cleary opts for the kinky "spank them", Ahmed Ali for the fanciful "go to bed with them". Yet other translators found interpolations like "if necessary" or "lightly" a more befitting and agreeable solution to the interpretive intricacy of 4:34.⁸⁴ Hammad opts for *strike them [with a light hand]* and adds in a footnote: "In another rendition... the last part of the verse could read as follows: ...*And [should they persist], strike [a further distance from] them...*" He then adds a note "On the Meaning and Limits of 'strike' in Surat Al-Nisa', 4:34" which runs into nine pages.⁸⁵

The last three years have seen a spate of activity in English Qurʾān translations. Of the seven which have appeared, four openly address the issue of context and interpretation and how these bears on translation.⁸⁶ One such translation is produced by the US-based Syrian physician Mohamed K. Jasser.⁸⁷ It is produced, the cover announces, in a context of "mistrust, misunderstanding and hostility" between Islam and the West. The existing English translations, it says, are not genuine; they "mix cultural habits of various Moslem [sic] societies with commentary produced decades or centuries after the revelation". Another translation is produced by the Monotheist Group, which professes to belong to no denomination and instead comprise a group of peo-

84. Cf. Robinson, "Sectarian and Ideological Bias," 274.

85. Hammad, *The Gracious Quran*, vol. 2, 161-169.

86. The other three translations, namely, those of Abdul-Aziz al-Mubarak, Tarif Khalidi, and Alan Jones, are not dealt with here.

87. Mohamed K. Jasser, *The Holy Koran: An Interpretive Translation from Classical Arabic into Contemporary English* (Acacia Publishing, 2008).

ple seeking to live their lives focussing on God Alone.⁸⁸ The Group claims to provide a literal translation of the Qurʾān, eliminating any footnotes or comments about the text itself. The cover provides the following rationale:

With so many English translations of the Qurʾān available, it is inevitable that the reader would ask why make another one? The answer to this question lies in the current structure of the Islamic faith itself, and the fact that, for many centuries, Islam has been primarily sub-categorized as either Sunni or Shia or one of the many other denominations that have emerged over the years. As such, all translators have belonged to one school of thought or another which clearly comes across in the interpretation of and choice of translation for specific words or verses. *The Qurʾān* is the result of a group effort by people who do not belong to any denomination, and, for the first time in many centuries, are simply proud to call themselves Muslims as God had named centuries ago. Also, while many translators have been sincere in their rendering of the Arabic meaning of the words, they have been unable to refrain from adding comments in the form of parenthesis within the text of the translation or in the form of footnotes and appendices to reflect their views on certain verses or the views of the denomination they adhere to. *The Qurʾān* is unique in the fact that it uses neither footnotes nor comments letting the text speak for itself and delivering to the reader as close a rendition of the pure message of the Qurʾān as physically possible.

The Qurʾān thus celebrates its supposed transparency precisely by attempting to evacuate the text of its history of interpretation. But is it history that muddies the originary clarity of the revelation? Or does the text itself invite such multiple interpretations? These questions are addressed by the other two translations. Yuksel et al's translation explicitly rejects the entirety of the *tafsīr* corpus, calling Muslims past and present *mushriks* (associators/infidels [!]), favouring, in turn, their own interpretation of the Qurʾān.⁸⁹ Declarations as radical as the following are commonplace in the translation:

Belief in intercession is a mythology... We are instructed to glorify and praise God, not His Messengers who are only human beings like us. Uttering expressions containing *salli ala* after Muhammad's name... is based on a distortion... Sunni and Shiite clerics try hard to find an excuse to continue this form of Muhammad worship. A great majority of Sunni and Shiite *mushriks* declare their prayers, but immediately nullify that declaration twice while sitting down during Prayer by greeting the prophet in the second person,

88. The Monotheist Group, *The Qurʾān: A Pure and Literal Translation* (Brainbow Press: 2008).

89. Edip Yuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafey, *Quran: A Reformist Translation* (Brainbow Press, 2007).

“Peace be on you, o prophet (*as salamu alayka ayyahun nabiyyu*)”, as if he was another omnipotent and omniscient god. (al-Baqarah 2: n. 48)

Menstruating women should continue their prayers, fasting and studying the Quran. Commentaries based on *Hadith* and *sunna* not only mistranslate the word *tahāra* but also fabricate a list of prohibitions. (al-Baqarah 2. n.222)

Only three Prayers a day are mentioned by name in the Quran... There is no funeral *Sala* (Prayer)... Some of the sectarian innovations are: adding extra prayers such as *sunna* and *nawafil*, prohibiting women from leading the prayers, while sitting, reciting a prayer *at-Tahiyat*, adding Muḥammad’s name to *shahadah*... (p. 508)

Little wonder that such comments are found once we read that even the authority of the Prophet himself is denied. It is under the sway of this notion that they translate 44:16, which is followed by a note carrying this sub-heading: “Do we need Muḥammad to understand the Quran?” The translator’s “reformist” stance is affirmed early in the text:

Quran: A Reformist Translation...abandons the rigid preconceptions of all-male scholarly and political hierarchies that gave rise to a series of writings and teachings known as Hadith and Sunna, which, according to the Quran itself, carry no authority... It [this work] is a continuation of the Quranic prophecy based on number 19. (p. 10)

At the other end of the spectrum one finds Ali Ünal’s translation,⁹⁰ which provides extensive explanations and interpretations. He appears to be fully conversant with Qur’ānic scholarship, both classical and recent, and with the norms of writing *tafsīr*. Among his sources are al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, al-Razī, and al-Zamakhsharī, a host of recent Turkish Muslim scholars like Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Suat Yildirim and Fethullah Gulen, as well as Mawdudi’s *Tafhīm al-Quran*. However, his parenthetical exegetical interpolations, both inside the body of his translation and outside of it, are sometimes overwhelming:

(This is not all. They feel enmity towards Gabriel because he brings the Quran to you, not to one among them). Say (O Messenger, to them): “(The Lord of the worlds, my and your Lord, declares:) ‘Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel (should know that) it is he who brings down the Quran on your heart by the leave of God, (not of his own accord), confirming (the Divine origin of and the truths, still contained in) the Revelations prior to it, and (serving as) guid-

90. Ali Ünal, *The Qur’ān with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (New Jersey: Light, Inc., 2006).

ance and glad tidings for the believers. (2:97)

Conclusion

The Qurʾān is, by far, the Scripture most often translated by those outside its faith community. Within the faith community itself, Qurʾān translations are abundant. This surge of sustained activity carries no sign of waning. More often than not, new translations seek to provide, to the best judgement of their agents, new interpretive input that is seen to be lacking or inadequate in previous translations. Yet one would think that, with the passage of time, interpretations would have been fixed and thus that translations would not themselves have attempted to take on the exegetical mantle. This has not been the case.

Counter to this is the trend initiated by those Muslim quarters that deem this translation-exegesis convergence anarchical. These tend to be traditional centres of Muslim knowledge-production. They view the problem also as one of authority: do translators have the right to interpret the Qurʾān? Their response has been to produce and translate *tafāsīr* in an attempt to reduce the interpretive scope of translations. Al-Azhar's *al-Muntakhab* ("The Select") and The King Fahd Holy Qurʾān Printing Complex's *at-Tafsīr al-Muyassar* ("The Simplified *Tafsīr*") are examples of this countermeasure. But the chances of such efforts at slowing the flow of new interpretations upstream of this heaving human intellectual activity are slim indeed. The Qurʾān's centrality to one of the world's most loathed and loved religions, which defies translation poly-system theory's norms of centrality and peripherality,⁹¹ and the magnitude of its influence are too alluring for the host of parties who seek to make it speak what they think. The multiplicity of intersections between Qurʾān translation and *tafāsīr* is further obnubilated by the nature of translation itself. According to theorists, translation is a decision-making process. There are two types of decision: those related to the various interpretations of the original, and those related to the diverse possibilities of expression in the target language.⁹² This decision-making process takes on new dimensions when it is understood that translation agents are of course influenced by the contexts in which they live and are caught in a web of biases.⁹³

91. Cf. Kirsten Malmkjær, "Polysystem theory," in M. Baker, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998).

92. Raymond van den Broeck, "Translational interpretation: A complex strategic game" in A. Beylard-Ozeroff, J. Králová and B. Moser-Mercer (eds.), *Translators' Strategies and Creativity* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998).

93. For more on how bias influences translators, see Hasan Gazala, "The Translator's Dilemma with Bias," *Babel* 48 (2002) 2, 147-162.

All these, along with the doctrinal, inherent, and political reasons for Qurʾān “untranslatability” surveyed above, help in illuminating the closely implicated relationship between Qurʾān translation and exegesis. This is not to say that the two are better separated. Translation and exegesis are neither identical nor wholly different. The historical contexts into which they emerge make them share a homologous structure. And yet what is of ultimate import is a critical awareness of this mutual contamination.

The importance of translations is clear in an age of increasing populations of Muslims of varied languages and cultures. The critical importance of exegesis and explanation, too, is outlined by Iyās ibn Muʿāwiyah:

The example of those who read the Qurʾān without knowing its interpretation is that of a people to whom comes a letter from their sovereign at night and they have no source of light—a state of anxiety overtakes them as they know not what is in the letter. The example of he who knows interpretation is that of a man who brings them a source of light so that they are able to read what the letter says.⁹⁴

The letter has arrived from the sovereign, and we require light to understand it. Muslims and non-Muslims will therefore continue to turn to translations and exegeses, and we can only hope that Qurʾān translators and interpreters more fully admit their own ideological positions as they grapple with the ethical and spiritual questions of authority, the weight of tradition, and faithful representation.⁹⁵

94. Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li Ahkām al-Qurʾān* (Riyadh: Dār ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 2003), vol. 1, 26.

95. I would like to thank the following scholars for their insightful comments as they read the draft of this paper: Hussein Abdul-Raof, Abdur Rahim Kidwai, Ahmad Okvath Csaba, Ahmed Saleh Elimam and Mykhailo Jackubovych.