Exegetical Qur'an Translation: Theoretical and Practical Considerations

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Abstract
Purpose: This paper assesses the ongoing practice of Qur'an translation based on Arabic exegetical works, and explores theoretical considerations and practical issues facing the various projects. It aims to inform the approach of individual translators as well as state and non-state institutions which intend to use exegesis as a basis for accuracy and consistency.
Methodology: The study contains analysis of primary texts (Qur'an and *tafsīr* translations, and their Arabic sources) with reference to secondary literature concerning the relationship between *tafsīr* and translation.
Findings: The study demonstrates the value of "instructive" exegesis over the commonly-used "paraphrastic" type. By identifying examples of error caused by misreading of exegetical works, it highlights the necessity of appointing translators who are qualified to engage both with the Quranic text and the genre of *tafsīr*.
Originality/value: The paper highlights problems not previously identified in the use of exegesis in translation, and provides practical solutions of value to subsequent projects on an individual or institutional level.
Keywords: Qur'an, translation, exegesis

Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, English translations of the Qur'an have been published at a startling rate. Major state institutions and non-governmental organizations in the Muslim world continue to develop projects to translate the Scripture into numerous languages. In many cases, the genre of *tafsīr* (exegesis) plays a significant role in the work of the translators: both traditional works and modern commentaries designed for the purpose. It is undoubtedly the case, as I argue below, that greater engagement with exegesis is to be welcomed and encouraged. However, there are conceptual and practical issues which are often overlooked by researchers, practitioners, and institutions.

This paper sets out to highlight these issues by addressing, first, the potential for error on the part of translators as they draw from *tafsīr*. Secondly, we raise the question of the nature of exegetical guides to translation, and the features they ought to display in order to perform their functions effectively. The purpose is to point the way to best practice not only for individuals, but for institutions that are seeking to use *tafsīr* to maximize accuracy and consistency in their translations of the Qur'an into the languages of the world.

The Role of *Tafsīr* in Translation

Let us begin by considering two propositions concerning the relationship between the disciplines of Qur'an translation (*tarjamah*) and exegesis (*tafsīr*). Each of these statements invites clarification and qualification:

    A. Translation is a form of exegesis or a stage that follows from it.

    B. Like exegesis in general, translation requires training and credentials.

Let us consider these concepts in turn. Exegesis as a process has two parts: the interpreter (*mufassir*) first considers the words and any other relevant information to reach understanding of the Quranic verse. Then they formulate an explanation using alternative words, which may be in the same language, Arabic. The translator, likewise, must first decide what they understand from the text, and then convey that surface meaning in their target language.[1] It is readily apparent that there is a strong resemblance between certain forms of exegesis – particularly the paraphrastic format variously described as *tafsīr ijmālī* (summary), *mukhtaṣar* (concise) or *muyassar* (simplified) – and translations in non-Arabic languages. This resemblance makes it tempting to think that one naturally leads to the other, such that a brief exegesis of this kind is ideal for producing translation; but this assumption will be challenged later in this paper.[2]

We said already that a translator must necessarily first understand something from the Quranic text: but is that understanding reached independently? Ibn ʿAbbās famously delineated four categories of verses: those which can and must be grasped by every Muslim; those whose meaning is accessible to any speaker of Arabic; those which are understood only by the learned scholars; and those which are known truly only to Almighty God.[3] Putting aside the issue of

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[1] Some, such as the King Fahd Complex in Madinah on the cover of their publications, have implied that the Qur'an is not itself translated; rather, what is produced is "translation of the meanings of the Qur'an". Aside from the redundancy in this expression (and the fact that it unintentionally implies that the translation has successfully captured all the Qur'an's meanings), what interests us here is the lack of a similar discomfort with the idea of "*tafsīr* of the Qur'an" even though it, too, deals with meanings and can never truly be as perfect as the Book itself. Indeed, I would argue that *tafsīr* is best conceived of as "answers to questions about meaning" so the direct ascription of *tafsīr al-Qurʾān* is a shorthand.

[2] A separate misconception is that a concise classical text like *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* is ideal for translation in full, for the general public (as it has been, twice in English). While I will argue below that this type of work is "instructive" for a translator of the Qur'an, this very feature makes much of its content meaningless for a reader unacquainted with the technicalities of Arabic grammar. The better option is to take an extended (*muṭawwal*) work of exegesis and abridge it in English, incorporating a tailored Qur'an translation, as we will explain in this paper.

[3] Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abū Bakr, *al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qurʾānīyah (in Arabic, 7 vols. Mujammaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat al-Muṣḥaf, 2005), vol. 6, p. 2299.

the last category (often known as the *mutashābih* verses),[1] this rubric implies that any translator who claims to access all the Qur'an's meanings directly is – or purports to be – a scholar. However, it is possible to lighten the translator's burden slightly: they can simply take the explanation from any exegete scholar and translate accordingly. Indeed, after this hermeneutical science and the cumulative tradition of explanations of the Qur'an has grown over fourteen centuries, it would be remiss of any translator to disregard that resource and rely upon his or her own impressions of the Quranic text.[2]

This leads us to the question of credentials. Muslim scholars, such as Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) in his compendium *al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, have listed some fifteen sciences which any interpreter of the Qur'an must master before offering an independent opinion.[3] While individual items on the list could be queried,[4] our point here is the seriousness with which stepping up to the role of *mufassir* was treated. It is not necessarily the case that Muslim communities had equivalent expectations of Qur'an translators, nor that the translators themselves always felt that they had to aspire to such a level or prove themselves worthy. We could make an argument that not all exegetes need to be of the same caliber: for those whose only purpose is to summarize or select from standard traditional explanations, there is a level of competency which need not be as advanced as for those who will delve into hermeneutical complexities and even advance novel interpretations. Therefore, a translator who decides to depend fully upon the authors of *tafsīr* could fulfill the task without presuming to be on their level. However, there is a type of competency which is rarely considered, let alone discussed in this context: the ability to read *tafsīr* correctly and effectively. We return to this point in the next section.

Waleed Al-Amri, a researcher and practitioner of Qur'an translation, has highlighted the potential problem of over-reliance on exegesis, such that the Revealed Text is obscured by a "middle layer" which is actually the thing being translated: "Thus the relation between the Qur'an and its supposed translations is that of an Original and a poor Replica – retaining only

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[1] See Saeed, Sohaib, "Intraquranic Hermeneutics" (PhD thesis, SOAS, 2018), p. 153.

[2] The consequences of this neglect are demonstrated by Saeed, Sohaib, "The Untranslated Qur'an: Retelling the Surah of Joseph" in Pieter Boulogne, Marijke de Lang and Joseph Verheyden (eds.), *Retranslating the Bible and the Qurʾan* (Leuven University Press, forthcoming). Even translators who claim to be depending upon *tafsīr* can be found to have gone against the consensus of the exegetes.

[3] Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, vol. 6, p. 2294.

[4] Ibn ʿĀshūr, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr* (in Arabic, 12 vols. Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2021), vol. 1, p. 27.

the shadow of the depth of the Original."[1] It should first be noted that every translation could, upon this logic, be dismissed as a shadow of the original: not least in the case of divine scripture and the Qur'an in particular. It is not the use of exegesis as an intermediary which creates this loss, but the nature of the Source Text and the differences between the languages. When the *tafsīr* work is sufficiently rich and detailed, it provides the translator with valuable insight concerning the meaning of individual words, phrases and sentences in the Qur'an, as explained by the greatest minds of Muslim tradition. Rather than loss, this is undoubtedly tremendous gain.

At the same time, there is, in principle, a limiting process in the use of *tafsīr*. While it is frequently the case that a Quranic expression appears to be open to numerous possibilities, the exegetes may rule out some of those, limiting the meaning to one possibility or more. However, it should be remembered that this process is not motivated by caprice, lack of imagination, or disrespect to the richness of Arabic! More often than not, the exegetes are relying upon context and other hermeneutical factors to specify which meaning is intended. This can save the translator some of the time it takes to ponder these factors, as well as the embarrassment of making an error from lack of reflection. Of course, a suitably qualified and confident translator might decide to overrule their judgment.

In my view, the danger of the "middle layer" applies most potently to the paraphrastic style of Arabic commentary which has sometimes been commissioned by state institutions to guide their projects of Qur'an translation. The instruction is sometimes made explicit: translate the exegesis, not the Qur'an itself! Then the task becomes to translate the words of human beings, and the work is one degree removed from its original purpose. If, instead, the intent is simply to be guided by that commentary while actually translating the Qur'an, then the "concise/simplified" text is not the suitable format because it lacks the required information to guide the translator – as I shall argue in more detail in a later section of this paper.

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[1] Al Amri, Waleed Bleyhesh, "Lower-Plane Qur'an Translation: Exegetical Inroads into Translation" in *al-Tarjamah wa-Ishkālāt al-Muṣṭalaḥ* 2 (2014): 23–38, p. 34. The examples touch on some of the core challenges in Qur'an translation, but it is not always convincing that the problem was "dependence on *tafsīr*" (see Q 79:14 on p. 30, and 81:17 on p. 32). Had the translators turned to appropriate *tafsīr* works, they would have found the linguistic information the author quotes from the likes of al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 502/1108); so it would have been appropriate to be more specific about the "certain *tafsīrs* which are not concerned with linguistic issues" (p. 33).

Case Studies: Translators Misunderstanding *Tafsīr*

If you peruse the introductions provided by many translators to their publications, you will often find them citing their reference works of Arabic exegesis. This applies to Orientalists[1] just as it does to translators working from and for the Muslim community, and a common motivation may be to assure the reader of the rigor and accuracy of the translation. It may also be to signal its alignment with a particular school of thought.[2] Our present focus is upon how exegesis informs the work of translation itself, though it may also play an important role in providing additional information which the translator incorporates in parenthesis or footnotes. A translator may well want readers to believe that he has direct understanding of the Quranic text, but the expectation in mainstream Muslim contexts is that such understanding must have been developed through reading works of *tafsīr*, which can then be cited whenever that translator feels the need to justify a particular point.[3] We will first discuss this category of translators who use exegesis according to free choice, before considering the more constrained approach of following a particular *mufassir*.

In what follows, I draw attention to a number of examples where a translator has erred while extracting information from a work of exegesis. The sole purpose in doing this is to demonstrate that referring to books of exegesis is not sufficient to guarantee sound understanding of the Quranic text, because – aside from the fallibility of *tafsīr* itself – nobody is automatically equipped to read that genre, nor is it simply a matter of fluency in the Arabic language. Like any branch of Islamic knowledge and other areas of the humanities and sciences, there are technicalities which require familiarity and training for a person to grasp them correctly. It may be ironic for a genre specifically designed to provide clarity on the meanings of the Qur'an, but it is not necessarily the case that the *tafsīr* is more transparent (to all readers) than the text being explained. Authors in the genre have different styles, draw upon a wide range of vocabulary and terminology foreign to the Qur'an, and may delve into depth on certain subjects from grammar to theology – all of which requires the reader to have the necessary background to understand and appreciate it.

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[1] The first edition of George Sale's translation was subtitled on the cover page: "Translated into English immediately from the Original Arabic; with Explanatory NOTES taken from the most approved COMMENTATORS": Sale, George (tr.), *The Koran* (London: J. Wilcox, 1734).

[2] The earliest editions of what was to become the famous *Noble Qur'an* by Khān and al-Hilālī were marketed as: "A summarized version of Ibn Kathir, supplemented by At-Tabari with comments from Sahih al-Bukhari." See: https://gloqur.de/quran-translation-of-the-week-102-interpretation-of-the-meanings-of-the-noble-quran-in-the-english-language-by-al-hilali-and-khan-the-story-behind-the-first-saud/

[3] Of course, translators also consult and cite other works, such as Arabic dictionaries and earlier translations.

With this background, the errors I highlight here should not be taken as disqualifying these translators completely, nor do I suggest that they outweigh the tremendous benefit of their works. I am simply raising fundamental questions about standards and expectations, with an eye to the future. Are references to exegesis taken at face value by readers, and should that be the case? What kind of training should we demand for those who translate Scripture for us, and what kind of review is necessary for such publications? Do we respect the *tafsīr* genre enough to look for specialists to engage with it, and is there enough trepidation on the part of translators that they would be held to account for errors, in this life before the Next? Should it be a basic expectation that translators "show their working" in the footnotes?

My first examples are drawn from *The Message of the Qurʾān* by Muhammad Asad (d. 1992), precisely because he displays a remarkable level of transparency concerning his sources and translation choices. This is alongside the overall quality and erudition of his work; although he did not graduate from an Islamic seminary or university, his deep learning and expertise cannot be denied.[1] In this light, the slips in reading *tafsīr* are all the more significant. I will restrict my comments to a few of Asad's citations of the classical commentator Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210). As translator of portions of al-Rāzī's *Great Exegesis,* I am always keen to observe how others are reading him; for some reason, this work is frequently subject to misunderstandings. Consider the following set of explanations, taken from my forthcoming translation of al-Rāzī's commentary on Sūrat al-Kahf, for the elliptical expression *kadhālika* ("thus") in 18:91, in the midst of the story of Dhū al-Qarnayn's journeys:

A. Thus did Dhū al-Qarnayn act: he traveled these courses and reached these places; and God knew his suitability for dominion and independent authority when He granted him all of that.
B. Thus did God make the condition of those people just as He described to His Messenger (on whom be peace) in this Revelation.
C. Thus did he act towards the people of the East as he did with the people of the West: he judged in the same way in terms of punishing the wrongdoers and showing benevolence to the believers.
D. The word *kadhālika* may be an independent sentence: 'Thus it was,' i.e. those people were just as Dhū l-Qarnayn found them; and God knew in advance that it was so.[2]

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[1] See Elkhatib, Abdallah, *Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an into English Language (From 1649 till 2013)* (in Arabic. Sharjah: University of Sharjah, 2014), p. 241, and Lawrence, Bruce, *The Koran in English: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 65–70. In his introduction, Asad expresses his particular regard for Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), and it may be assumed that the *Tafsīr al-Manār* based on the Egyptian reformist's teachings was a source for Asad's perspectives and even some of his citations.

[2] Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿUmar, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr / Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (in Arabic, 16 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2012), vol. 11, p. 174: *amru hāʾulāʾi al-qawm ka-mā wajadahum dhū al-qarnayn*. NB: the preceding explanations also make *kadhālika* independent, though semantically connected to various parts of the verse before it.)

Asad provides the following translation (square brackets are his): "thus [We had made them, and thus he left them]; and We did encompass with Our knowledge all that he had in mind." His footnote to the parenthesis states that "This is Rāzī's interpretation of the isolated expression *kadhālika*"[1] – even though that exegete listed four views, and none of them corresponds to what Asad has written concerning how Dhū al-Qarnayn left them. Presumably this is how he has understood the fourth opinion, for which al-Rāzī does not indicate any preference. It is beside the point to ask whether or not Asad's translation here is valid in its own right, or how serious or trivial the error might be. What concerns us is that it is based upon a direct attribution to an exegesis, where the relevant explanation cannot be found. If a straightforward point like this can be misread or misunderstood, it raises questions about more complex issues in *tafsīr*.

And so to our next example, which concerns a more controversial issue. In al-Nisāʾ 4:24, Asad advances an unusual gloss for the term "*mā malakat aymānukum*", seen here with his original parenthesis: "And [forbidden to you are] all married women other than those whom you rightfully possess [through wedlock]…"[2] In his lengthy footnote, he claims that al-Rāzī "points out that the reference to 'all married women' (*al-muḥsanāt min an-nisāʾ*), coming as it does after the enumeration of prohibited degrees of relationship, is meant to stress the prohibition of sexual relations with any woman other than one's lawful wife."[3] Again, these claims can be assessed on their own merits, but our immediate concern is whether or not this represents the cited authority accurately. In his fourth enquiry (*masʾalah*) under this verse, al-Rāzī describes how the term *al-muḥsanāt* has been explained either as "married women" or "free women", and provides two possible meanings of the exception *mā malakat aymānukum* in each case. He concludes by stating clearly his preference ("*huwa al-mukhtār*") for the first view, namely that it means that a married woman who is enslaved becomes lawful to her master. In support, he quotes 23:6 ("*azwājihim aw mā malakat aymānuhum*"), in which the two categories – wives and concubines – are more clearly demarcated, adding that "the present verse must certainly be explained in terms of that one, since explaining God's speech through

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[1] Asad, Muhammad (tr.), *The Message of the Qurʾān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1984), p. 453.

[2] Ibid., p. 180. Alongside al-Rāzī, Asad also cites "Ṭabarī in one of his alternative explanations (going back to ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, Mujāhid, and others)". However, that opinion would necessitate the translation "chaste women" and not "married women"; see al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad b. Jarīr, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān ʿan Taʾwīl Āy al-Qurʾān* (in Arabic, 10 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2012), vol. 3, pp. 2227–8.

[3] This is quoted via Asad in El Hamel, Chouki, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 25, with the additional, unsubstantiated claims that al-Rāzī "questioned the moral implications of such interpretations and practices" and "expressed doubts about the Hadith".

God's speech is the most assured route to verity."[1] In short, Asad has clearly misrepresented al-Rāzī's position and misconstrued his discussion.

Our third example concerns Āl ʿImrān 3:45, in which Asad provides an unusual translation without attributing it to any source. He may well have taken it from the influential translator and leading figure of the Lahore branch of the Ahmadiyya movement, Muhammad Ali (d. 1951), whom I quote here with original parenthesis: "…O Mary, surely Allāh gives thee good news with a word from Him (of one) whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary".[2] It is immediately obvious that this differs from the commonplace interpretation and translation, in which the Word is the *content* of that good news, not its conduit; the Word is then identified as being the Messiah Jesus – hence there is no need for that parenthetical insertion. Ali struggled with the masculine pronoun in *ismuhu* ("his name") referring back to the feminine *kalimah*, but this is straightforward since a male person was being described by that term – as attested elsewhere in the Qur'an (4:171).[3] In his detailed footnote, Ali quotes al-Rāzī's explanation[4] that Jesus (on whom be peace) was called "a word" because his coming fulfilled earlier prophecies; he then claims – wrongly – that "This explanation shows that *kalimah* really applies to the prophecy." It is noteworthy that Ali had, just prior in 3:39, translated the equivalent phrase "*yubashshiruka bi-Yaḥyá*" as "gives thee the good news of John"[5] (see also Maryam 19:7). The consistent usage of this verb in the Qur'an indicates that the genitive after the *bāʾ* particle is the thing being announced (*al-mubashshar bihi*).

This example allows us to broach the topic of pre-determined exegetical translation (PET), in which a translator follows a particular exegete in order to construct a translation of the Qur'an. The domain in which this is most to be expected is in translations of *tafsīr* works, in which the Qur'an translation should necessarily accord with the understanding and explanation of the *mufassir*.[6] Let us consider the case of the modern literary commentary *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* by Sayyid Quṭb, the translation of which was completed by Adil Salahi, *In the*

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[1] Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 5, p. 264; see also his commentary on al-Muʾminūn 23:5-6, where it is taken for granted that *milk al-yamīn* refers to concubines.

[2] Ali, Maulvi Muhammad (tr.), *The Holy Qur-án* (Woking: The Islamic Review, 1917), p. 142.

[3] Al-Ālūsī, Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAẓīm wa-al-Sabʿ al-Mathānī*, ed. Māhir Ḥabbūsh et al. (in Arabic, 30 vols. Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2010), vol. 4, p. 193.

[4] Al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 4, p. 250; see also al-Rāzī, *The Great Exegesis Volume I: The Fātiḥa*, tr. Sohaib Saeed (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2018), p. 19.

[5] Ali, *The Holy Qur-án*, p. 139.

[6] One might select an existing Qur'an translation, but without adaptation it would be unlikely to agree with the exegete's views consistently.

Shade of the Qur'an. Subsequently, the Qur'an translation featured within these volumes was published separately as Salahi's translation of the Qur'an.[1] In 3:45, Salahi, like Asad before him, has "through a word from Him" and in brackets: "[of a son]". However, in its original setting, this translation is completely at odds with the explanation provided by Quṭb. As Salahi himself translates him: "In the construction of the sentence, the name 'the Christ' is a substitute for the term 'a word'. Yet, he is indeed the 'Word'"[2] – a point Quṭb goes on to explain.

While not all translators of exegesis are necessarily conscious of their duty with respect to translating the Qur'an, and some may simply incorporate an existing translation, there is at least one project in which an explicit attempt has been made to translate the Qur'an according to a specific classical exegesis. Gibril Haddad's translation of *Anwār al-Tanzīl* (*The Lights of Revelation*) by Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), of which the first volume has so far been published, includes what he calls "A Baydawian Rendering in English". Unfortunately, Haddad does not elaborate on his methodology as a Qur'an translator beyond describing it as "prudent literalism" and citing a few translators whose work informed his own.[3]

There are two fundamental challenges affecting the process of crafting a "Baydawian" Qur'an translation: under-determination and polyvalence. The first concerns the fact that al-Bayḍāwī, like any exegete, glosses some words but not others, and does not express every aspect of his understanding of the text. What would he think of Haddad's rendering of the divine name *Allāh* as "the One God", given that al-Bayḍāwī did not explain it as meaning *al-ilāh al-wāḥid*?[4] The second challenge concerns the fact that this exegesis, like many others in the Muslim scholarly tradition, often provides several possible meanings without expressing preference for one of them. In that case, which of them should be selected for the "Baydawian Rendering", given that the linear book format makes this choice almost inevitable?[5] Despite these issues, it should be appreciated that an attempt has been made to make the translation do

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[1] The website Islamawakened.com, which has perhaps the widest collection of English translations aggregated per verse, includes a translation purportedly by Sayyid Quṭb! This is Adil Salahi's before it was published as *The Qur'an: A Translation for the 21ˢᵗ Century* (Markfield: Kube Publishing, 2020).

[2] Qutb, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur'an Vol. 2*, tr. Adil Salahi (Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 2000), p. 85. Salahi also erred by rendering Qutb's earlier sentence as "She receives the news *in* a word from God" (emphasis added), and the word "yet" has no place here: *al-masīḥ badal min al-kalimah fī al-ʿibārah wa-huwa al-kalimah fī al-ḥaqīqah*.

[3] Al-Bayḍāwī, Nāṣir al-Dīn ʿAbdullāh b. ʿUmar, *The Lights of Revelation & The Secrets of Interpretation: Ḥizb I*, tr. Gibril F. Haddad (Manchester: Beacon Books, 2016), p. 75.

[4] This is particularly incongruous in Haddad's rendering of 2:26, which has the polytheists utter this description. If they saw the name Allah like that, they would not have rejected "There is no god but Allah"!

[5] See for example ibid., pp. 250–255 for a variety of syntactical possibilities in al-Baqarah 2:1-2 which cannot be encompassed by a single translation.

the initial work of conveying the meaning as understood by the exegete, and then the more detailed commentary expands upon it.[1]

There are several earlier translations of sections from al-Bayḍāwī's exegesis; we will select one passage to illustrate the fact that misreadings occur likewise in the genre of *tafsīr* translation.[2] This only strengthens our point that there is a skill involved in accessing those sources, and the clarity of *tafsīr* to the Qur'an translator should not be taken for granted. The 1957 translation of al-Bayḍāwī's commentary on Sūrat Yūsuf by Eric Bishop and Mohamed Kaddal of the University of Glasgow is, as the Oxford academic A.F.L. Beeston put it, "in many places quite unintelligible in English"; more to the point, "the translators have occasionally seriously misunderstood Baiḍāwī".[3] Let us consider the example of 12:19, where Bishop and Kaddal have written, concerning the water scout who discovers the young Joseph (on whom be peace) in the well:

> he called out 'Good News' as an announcement to himself or to his company, as if he said, 'Come, this is your opportunity'.[4]

This is erroneous because al-Bayḍāwī and other exegetes explain the expression *yā bushrá* ("O good news") as a direct address to this abstract concept; it is as though "good news" is being called to be present.[5] It is not the water scout's company who are being told to "come". Unfortunately, while Beeston's own translation of the chapter is vastly superior to that of Bishop and Kaddal, in this verse he fell into much the same error (parentheses his):

> "he cried out 'Good luck'", ⸢either⸣ as congratulation to himself (or to his folk,) as much as to say, 'Come along, here is your opportunity'.

This is not an "opportunity" so much as it is the "moment" for the abstract concept of good news to be manifest. The fact that Beeston has misread this becomes clearer from his footnote:

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[1] In the first volume published so far, Haddad has presented the translation up to 2:74 in advance of the commentary, supplying page numbers to the *tafsīr* (pp. 123–139). It can be observed that several Quranic phrases were missed from his translation, *viz.* "they will not believe" (2:6) and "without realizing" (2:9).

[2] There are numerous other works which could have been cited in this context, as the standards in the field (with regard to both translators and publishers) is not as it should be.

[3] Al-Bayḍāwī, Nāṣir al-Dīn, *Baiḍāwī's Commentary on Sūrah 12 of the Qur'ān*, tr. A.F.L. Beeston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. vi.

[4] Al-Bayḍāwī, Nāṣir al-Dīn, *The Light of Inspiration and Secret of Interpretation*, tr. Eric Bishop & Mohamed Kaddal (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1957), p. 19.

[5] Al-Bayḍāwī, Nāṣir al-Dīn, *Tafsīr al-Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī wa-maʿahu Ḥāshiyat al-ʿAllāmah al-Suyūṭī*, ed. Māhir Ḥabbūsh (in Arabic, 12 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Lubāb and Maktabat al-Irshād, 2021), vol. 7, p. 466.

"The feminine forms here refer to the feminine word *nafsihi*."[1] He means the feminine suffixes in *taʿālay* and *awānuki*, which are actually due to the word *bushrá*. The water scout was not calling himself!

Specifications for a Guide *Tafsīr*

The previous section emphasized the need for translators working individually, or as part of a coordinated project, to attain the skills necessary to access exegesis and incorporate its insights into translations of the Qur'an. We also encountered some of the conceptual issues connected to the use of *tafsīr* in translation, particularly those of under-determination and polyvalence. In this section, I outline the key considerations in using exegesis to guide a translation project, while addressing some misconceptions which may have affected earlier projects. Here is a summary of my propositions, before we elaborate with some examples.

A. **Translate the Qur'an itself (looking at its meanings), not an intermediary text.**

B. **The more detailed an exegesis is on linguistic matters, the more useful it is for a translator.**

C. **A translator must possess the training to follow these exegetical "do's and don'ts".**

We must first make clear that there is nothing to be gained by instructing a translator to ignore the Quranic text itself, and translate a commentary instead. In principle, this is only distancing them from the original task.[2] If they are capable of translating that explanatory text, then what would prevent them from translating the Qur'an directly?[3] It is obvious enough that all translation is based on analyzing the meaning of the source text, so the concept of "translation of the meanings" is a tautology.[4] No single explanation of the Qur'an can claim to

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[1] Beeston (tr.), *Baiḍāwī's Commentary*, pp. 11, 61. Strangely, Beeston successfully conveyed al-Bayḍāwī's point at the comparable expression in 12:84, *yā asafá*: "Oh grief, come on, for this is thy time" (p. 43). The same is true of Bishop and Kaddal (*The Light of Inspiration*, p. 49).

[2] It is worth recalling what was written by scholars in Egyptian newspapers upon Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's arrival in the country to complete what was to become *The Meaning of the Koran*. In his own words, as reproduced in Fremantle, Anne, *Loyal Enemy* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1938), p. 411: "I was solemnly advised to give up my nefarious work and translate instead (of all imaginable substitutes) the commentary of Tabari! Now the commentary of Tabari is of enormous bulk…and would besides require another commentary of equal length to make its methods and mentality intelligible to English people who had never studied a Qur'an commentary." Moreover, that *tafsīr* translation would also have necessarily included a Qur'an translation, whether in a coherent or fragmented way.

[3] It is well known that many aspects of the Qur'an (and other texts), from meaning to rhetorical eloquence (*balāghah*) are "lost in translation", but it is less acknowledged that they are also "lost in exegesis" – particularly when it is nearly as concise as the original.

[4] See al-Zurqānī, Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm, *Manāhil al-ʿIrfān fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (in Arabic, 2 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2006), vol. 2, p. 484.

be "the meaning" of the Qur'an, but it serves two functions: to clarify and specify meanings. Clarification is where a vocabulary item is relatively obscure to a modern Arabic speaker, and a near-synonym is provided to indicate what that Quranic word means.[1] Specification is where the Quranic word has several possibilities – which may all be attested in the *tafsīr* tradition – but the translator is being asked to adopt one of those meanings to the exclusion of the others. For institutions designing translation projects, there are two reasons to specify meanings for their translators: (a) to adhere to a particular position, e.g. in doctrinal matters; (b) to ensure consistency as the Qur'an is being translated into multiple languages.

The second point is that, for an exegesis to serve as a guide to translation, it must contain sufficient linguistic detail.[2] While it is desirable for the commentary to be concise enough that the translator can access the relevant points quickly and understand them clearly, the *tafsīr ijmālī* style – a paraphrase of the Quranic wording with a few additional points – lacks some necessary information. Aside from prior qualifications, there are two main things which a Qur'an translator needs in order to perform his task: (a) the meaning of any words which require clarification or specification; (b) the syntactical analysis (*iʿrāb*) of the verse and its sentences. Without these, the translation is under-determined, which means that the translator will exercise free choice in these matters. If the whole purpose of creating a guide commentary is to ensure adherence and consistency, why go to such effort if these results are not guaranteed? A separate point is whether there is ongoing communication, or the translators are left to work independently – in this case, quality review before publishing is particularly important.

Let us return to the aforementioned challenge of polyvalence. A translator looking at a Quranic verse would first ask him/herself: "How could I understand this?" If they are independently using *tafsīr*, they should then consider "What are the accepted ways of

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[1] The genre of *gharīb al-Qurʾān*, originally concerned with the more obscure terms, expanded to incorporate Quranic vocabulary as a whole. The method of explaining with alternative Arabic terms, which goes back to the earliest authorities such as Ibn ʿAbbās, implies either that there is synonymy in the Arabic language, or that it is legitimate to explain the Qur'an with linguistic approximations; this opens the door to translations in other languages. See the introduction to al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Select Chapters of Itqān on the Language of the Qur'an*, tr. Sohaib Saeed (Glasgow: Ibn ʿAshur Centre, 2023), p. v.

[2] See in this connection Muhammad Abdel Haleem's preference of al-Rāzī's exegesis, in *The Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxxvi: "Razi must be singled out as the most useful tool in understanding the Qur'an. He is an all-round linguist *par excellence*, noting and discussing linguistic questions missed by perhaps all the others, and opening up areas for discussion where others do not. He is always aware of the context and the position of the verse in the whole structure of the sura. His mind is mathematical, analytical, as he spells out the linguistic function of each verse or statement..." See also Abdel Haleem's foreword to Saeed, (tr.), *The Great Exegesis Vol. I*.

understanding this?" However, in a guided project, or one based upon a specific exegete, the question becomes: "How did this exegete understand it, and how am I being asked to understand it?" With this purpose of a guide exegesis in mind, there is one more element which will minimize the problem of under-determination: namely, to contrast the desired interpretation with *other* possibilities which are being ruled out or cast aside.[1] I describe this as a "Do and Don't" format, which can also prevent common errors. In short, the translator is told to translate in a certain way *as opposed to* that other way, as it is said that "things are known by their opposites". While this kind of detailed format may seem impossible to achieve at scale, the case study at the end of this paper will point the way to a solution.

Consider the examples we cited above. Al-Rāzī's four possible interpretations of *kadhālika* in 18:91 could be quoted in Arabic, and the translator instructed to use one in particular. That way, they will not mistakenly follow one of the other possibilities. Under 3:45, it could be stated that the *bāʾ* in "*bi-kalimah*" is for attachment (*ilṣāq*) and transitivity (*taʿdiyah*), not instrumentalization (*istiʿānah*).[2] Another brief way of clarifying the point is to gloss the *kalimah* as being a reference to the child.[3] Needless to say, the success of this approach depends upon selecting translators who possess sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language and their target language, such that they can perceive the subtle distinctions between these possibilities and select the wording which best reflects the chosen interpretation in the guide exegesis.

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[1] If the exegete did not himself state a preference (*tarjīḥ*), someone else must do so.

[2] Cf. Saeed (tr.), *Select Chapters of Itqān*, p. 116. This example highlights the need to construct a lexicon as part of any translation project. The exegetes may leave a particular detail unstated under one verse because it was covered elsewhere (typically the first occurrence of that word or expression), or because it is so common. To find al-Ālūsī's clarification that *bishārah* normally connects to the content with the *bāʾ*, I had to look under al-Baqarah 2:25, where, ironically, the particle is elided! According to al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, vol. 2, p. 48: *arāda subḥānahu "bi-anna la-hum" li-taʿaddī al-bishārah bi-al-bāʾ*, by which he may intend that the verb *bashshara* has a second object along the lines of *aʿlama*, as it is a more specific sense of "inform". In any case, this point about *taʿdiyah* should not be confused with its other sense, by which *dhahaba bihi* is considered equivalent to *adhhaba* (i.e. to make something go away). Works of Quranic syntax (*iʿrāb*) which I consulted re: 3:45 only stated that *bi-kalimah* is a prepositional phrase connected to *yubashshir*: this limited explanation could mislead the likes of Muhammad Ali.

[3] As in al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, tr. Feras Hamza (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), p. 53. This precludes the other reading as "through a word". The *Muyassar* and *Mukhtaṣar* commentaries, discussed later in this paper, do the same, with additional information about why the boy is called "a word". The latter is translated: "O Mary, Allah gives you good news of a child who will be created without a father: merely by a word from Allah, such as 'Be', and he will become a child by Allah's will. The name of this child will be the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary…" – see *English Translation of A Concise Commentary of the Noble Quran* (1st edn. Makkah: Dār al-Mukhtaṣar, 2020), p. 55. As we note below, this translation makes no distinction between the Quranic words and additional commentary.

Evaluating Paraphrastic Commentaries

With the above points in mind, let us turn to a brief evaluation of the exegetical translation projects which I call "The Three M's": the Egyptian *al-Muntakhab fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, the official Saudi *al-Tafsīr al-Muyassar lil-Qurʾān al-Karīm*, and the more recent, non-state project from Saudi Arabia *al-Mukhtaṣar fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm*. Each of these concise Arabic commentaries was intended to be translated as an intermediary: it fills the space of a Qur'an translation instead of being published alongside a translation as additional commentary. In all cases, the text contains non-linguistic details drawn from exegetical sources, which are incorporated without parenthesis. Their defining feature is the paraphrastic approach through which these works function in Arabic much like a translation, hence their popularity among Arabic-speaking publics. They lack the technical features of exegesis, including the linguistic apparatus that is crucial to a translator.

The first of these projects was conceived in the wake of fierce debates in Egypt over Qur'an translation; eventually the Sheikhdom of al-Azhar announced their intention for a specialist committee to produce a simplified Arabic commentary, which would then be translated by further specialist committees.[1] The *Muntakhab* ("Select Commentary") was published as early as 1961, but the first translation – which was to English – was only to appear in 1993. Stefan Wild has highlighted the problems in the conception and execution of this first edition, which was undertaken by a physician named Abdel Khalek Himmat. One example should suffice: the opening of the Fātiḥah was given (apparently inspired by Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*) as "Bosoms peep forth and answer thanks to God, the Creator of the universe"![2] This overly creative rendering – to put it kindly – was not prevented by the guide exegesis, nor was it caught and corrected by the reviewers and the Islamic Research Academy before publication. There is much to reflect on in this fact. However, the matter was resolved by a second committee led by the Azharite professor Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ghālī, and a corrected English *Muntakhab* was published in 2006 ("Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds").[3] The work has been issued in numerous languages, most recently Hebrew in 2022.

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[1] See See al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-ʿIrfān*, vol. 2, p. 51, which reproduces a decree issued in *Majallat al-Azhar*, Issue 7, p. 648.

[2] Wild, Stefan, "Muslim Translations and Translations of the Qurʾan into English" in *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 17.3 (2015): 158–182, p. 170.

[3] I have sourced the 2006 *Muntakhab* translation from Islamawakened.com. NB: Ghālī and his colleagues earlier published *Towards Understanding The Ever-Glorious Qurʾan* (Cairo: Dār al-Wafāʾ, 1997).

The King Fahd Complex in Madinah is responsible for the KSA's projects to distribute the Qur'an and its translations in a wide range of languages. Their approach in some languages has been to adapt existing translations: in English, they experimented with Abdullah Yusuf Ali's[1] before turning to that by Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali. They have since published their *Muyassar* ("Simplified Commentary"), another committee production which is widely distributed in the Arabic language, and has begun to serve its purpose as the basis for translation into other languages. As Mykhaylo Yakubovych has documented with reference to outputs in the Tajik, Swahili, Ukrainian and English languages, the same problem of under-determination affects this project. For example, the verb *makkana* is generally reproduced in the commentary, but in 7:10 it is glossed as "*jaʿalnāhā qarāran la-kum*", describing how people have been granted the earth as a home. It would have been appropriate to indicate the divergent meaning in 18:81, where it describes the power granted to Dhū al-Qarnayn; nevertheless, the Tajik translation successfully differentiates these meanings.[2] This shows the importance of competent translators who appreciate the Quranic text in its own right; and that the guide exegesis, in addition to being insufficient at times, may be unnecessary at others.

The most recent of these projects is the *Mukhtaṣar* ("Concise Commentary") undertaken by another committee under the auspices of the Riyadh-based Tafsir Center for Qur'anic Studies. The introduction states that the commentary was specifically designed to be "suitable as the basis for translation to other global languages, avoiding the errors and impediments which have afflicted many earlier published translations of the meanings of the Qur'an"[3] – which implies that the translation of this intermediary text is intended to be used just as direct translations of the Qur'an have been. However, much like its two predecessors, the *Mukhtaṣar* contains additional phrases not marked by parenthesis; the resultant translations are, therefore, somewhat disorienting to the English (etc.) reader who cannot discern which words are present in the Qur'an, and which are extra information and matters of interpretation.[4]

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[1] See Saeed, Sohaib, "Fights and Flights: Two Underrated 'Alternatives' to Dominant Readings in *tafsīr*" in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 24.1 (2022): 46–88, p. 63 for an example of the changes made posthumously to Yusuf Ali's translation and footnotes.

[2] See Yakubovych, Mykhaylo, *The Kingdom and the Qur'an* (Open Book Publishers, forthcoming). I thank the author for allowing me to see a draft of his section on the *Muyassar*.

[3] Various authors, *al-Mukhtaṣar fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (6th edn. Riyadh: Tafsir Centre, 2020).

[4] I have heard from colleagues at Tafsir Center that there is to be a fully revised edition of the English translation. However, without reviewing the core issues, the result will likely be similar. NB: the first edition of the translation has appeared on some websites (such as Quran.com) as "Abridged Explanation of the Quran".

Again, the logic of the Arabic publication does not carry over automatically to a foreign audience which is fairly accustomed to Qur'an translations, some of which contain more details in their footnotes than this purported *tafsīr* work.

Let us illustrate how these texts function, both in their own right and as the basis for English translations, by selecting one of the shortest chapters, Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112). In the following table, the "Three M's" are presented in Arabic alongside their published translations, in order to assess their efficacy as guide translations. I share some observations below, followed by a demonstration of the alternative approach I have outlined in the preceding section.

Figure 1: Concise Exegeses and their Translations

Al-Muntakhab (2nd ed. 2006)	المنتخب في تفسير القرآن الكريم
1. Say O Muhammad: "He is Allah and He is One", 2. "He is Infinite, Absolute, and all creatures, spiritual, animate and inanimate, are in need of Him while He is in need of no one", 3. "He did not beget nor was He begotten", 4. "And like unto Him there is none".	قل - يا محمد - لمن قالوا مستهزئين :صف لنا ربك: هو الله أحد لا سواه، ولا شريك له. الله المقصود - وحده - فى الحوائجُ والمطالب. لم يتخذ ولدا، ولم يولد من أب أو أم، ولم يكن له أحد شبيها أو نظيرا، وليس كمثله شئء.
Al-Muyassar[1]	التفسير الميسر للقرآن الكريم
1. Say - O Messenger -, "He is Allāh, [Who is] alone in possessing Divinity, Lordship and Divine Names and Attributes. Nobody has a share in these with Him. 2. [He is] Allāh, Who is perfect in attributes of honor, distinction and greatness; He Whom mankind seeks out to fulfill their needs and desires. 3. He neither has a son, nor a father, nor a wife. 4. Nor is there any comparison to Him or match from among His creation, not in His Names, nor in His Attributes, nor in His Actions. Blessed, Exalted and Sanctified is He."	قل -أيها الرسول-: هو الله المتفرد بالألوهية والربوبية والأسماء والصفات، لا يشاركه أحد فيها. الله وحده المقصود في قضاء الحوائجُ والرغائب. ليس له ولد ولا والد ولا صاحبة. ولم يكن له ماثلا ولا مشابهًا أحد من خلقه، لا في أسمائه ولا في صفاته، ولا في أفعاله، تبارك وتعالى وتقدَّس.
Al-Mukhtaṣar (1st ed. 2020)	المختصر في تفسير القرآن الكريم
1. Say, O Messenger: He is Allah who is alone in being a deity. There is no deity except Him. 2. He is the master to whom belongs all sovereignty and perfect, beautiful qualities. The one to whom all creation turn to. 3. The one who did not give birth to anyone, nor did anyone give birth to Him. So He has no offspring - may He be glorified - nor any parent. 4. Nor does He have any equal from His creation.	قل - أيها الرسول :- هو الله المنفرد بالألوهية، لا إله غيـره. هو السيد الذي انتهى إليه السؤدد في صفات الكمال والجمال، الذي تصمد إليه الخلائق. الذي لم يلد أحدا، ولم يلده أحد، فلا ولد له - سبحانه - ولا والد. ولم يكن له ماثل في خلقه.

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[1] The *Muyassar* translation is found in the *al-ʿUshr al-Akhīr* publications of the independent Saudi organization known as the Communities Awareness Bureau (www.tafseer.info). See *An Explanation of the Last Tenth of the Noble Qur'an*, p. 88, where the English commentary is presented alongside the Saheeh International translation of the Qur'an (by American converts Emily Assami, Mary Kennedy and Amatullah Bantley).

It is immediately clear that the three paraphrastic commentaries resemble each other to a large degree, which is due in part to later committees making use of the earlier publications. In verse 1, all have specified that the person being told to "Say" is the Prophet (on whom be peace): a point which could be deemed obvious.[1] The *Muntakhab* goes further by referring to the revelatory context (*sabab al-nuzūl*) within the text. What is missing here is any clarification of the syntax of "*Huwa Allāhu aḥadun*": the translators (along with the vast majority of Qur'an translators to English) have assumed that the pronoun is the nominal subject (*mubtadaʾ*), with the divine name Allah as its predicate (*khabar*); then the word meaning "one" is a second predicate. This is an acceptable reading, but not the most accepted among the exegetes, as we will discuss below. The issue here is that the Arabic paraphrases above do not make it clear either way.

Further, it is seen that the word *aḥad* has been glossed quite extensively, and this is retained in the *Muyassar* translation: but is it truly the case that "alone in possessing Divinity, Lordship and Divine Names and Attributes" is a *translation* of the word, rather than an exegesis (drawing upon Taymīyan theological categories)? Similar can be said about the name *al-Ṣamad* in verse 2, which is difficult to encapsulate in a single English word; but a reader of these translations could hardly perceive that the verse itself comprises just two Arabic words! Note also that the Arabic paraphrase "*Allāhu al-maqṣūd*" in the *Muyassar* was not clear enough for the translator, who assumed that the divine name here is a predicate to an implied pronoun: "[He is] Allāh"; in contrast, the detailed works of exegesis seem to be in agreement that the divine name here is the subject.

I will allow these brief points to stand in place of more extensive analysis within this *sūrah* and beyond. We have established that, while these paraphrastic commentaries provide a great service to Arabic readers by clarifying Quranic vocabulary and elucidating some of its phrasing, they are not fulfilling their purpose as facilitation (*taysīr*) for translators. Here I am disagreeing slightly with a remark made by a respected professor during a meeting, in which I was present, with the religious ministry of a Muslim state currently planning a major translation project. He said that "Anyone who needs this kind of *muyassar* commentary should not be asked to translate the Qur'an!" While that statement is true, it should be kept in mind that the

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[1] However, in some cases the addressee can be understood more broadly, and that has been suggested in this case: see al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, vol. 29, p. 442. We may prefer a translation by which the reader is likely to grasp the most obvious reading (address to the Prophet) while maintaining the possibility that each believer is, likewise, enjoined to declare these words. One complication is the lack of distinction in English between the singular and plural "you".

purpose is not simply to help translators to understand the Qur'an, which they can do by referring to any *tafsīr* they wish. Rather, the purpose is to specify their translation choices, which is best achieved through "instructive exegesis" as we will now discuss.

Instructive Exegesis: An Illustration

The basic description of this category of exegesis is any *tafsīr* which provides instructions to a translator in terms of how the words and structures of the Quranic text are to be understood and translated. This could be said concerning many works which existed before the age of translation, since they contain the necessary information; however, this would often require sifting through details irrelevant to translation, and facing the issue of polyvalence discussed previously. Therefore, modern translation projects could construct guide exegesis by extracting favored interpretations from one of these encyclopedic works; and this would be made easier if there is a prior stage (which need only be done once for all such projects in future) which I call the "master-guide" approach.

Rūḥ al-Maʿānī by Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1854) is arguably the most comprehensive and thorough of all *tafsīr* works,[1] and any translator – assuming the necessary training to benefit from it – would do well to take it as a constant companion. This exegetical encyclopedia provides necessary details, accompanied by discussions of alternative views and debates, both linguistic and otherwise. A translator can check his own reading of the text, and may even select an option which al-Ālūsī alludes to or criticizes; but he should be extremely cautious if that view is dismissed by the author and/or his predecessors.[2] That being said, the very fact of gathering so many interpretations – not to mention its complexity and extraneous details – prevents *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī* from fulfilling the role of guide exegesis as we have described it above. It may be argued, instead, that this work is ideal for "master-guide exegesis": a bank of exegetical options (*awjuh*, sing. *wajh*) which any institution can use to create a tailored guide

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[1] See Saeed, Sohaib, "The Digital Mufassir: Re-imagining the Tafsir of al-Alusi for a New Era" in *Osmanlı'da İlm- i Tefsir*, ed. M. Taha Boyalık & Harun Abacı (Istanbul: İSAR Publications, 2019): 657–680.

[2] I will share one example from a recent publication. The beginning of 2:97 is generally translated "Say: 'Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel…'", but a very small number have understood "*man kāna ʿaduwwan*" to be interrogative rather than conditional. Thus it is translated as "Ask: 'Who is the enemy of Jibreel?'" in Hussain, Musharraf (tr.), *The Majestic Qur'an: A Plain English Translation* (Nottingham: Invitation Publishing, 2018), p. 28. This reading has been noted in traditional works, but al-Ālūsī (*Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, vol. 2, p. 333) dismisses it in the strongest terms: "the kind of thing that should never be committed (*lā yanbaghī an yurtakab*) when it comes to the Qur'an." There is no space here to explore in more detail various attempts to "simplify" English translations, and the infelicities that are introduced in the process.

exegesis. In this way, all such bespoke commentaries fall clearly within the *tafsīr* tradition and the pedigree of each interpretive choice can be investigated.

To illustrate, I have summarized the key points from al-Ālūsī's commentary on al-Ikhlāṣ, which spans 24 pages in the Risālah edition (after 13 pages on introductory matters).[1] By restricting the comments to those of direct importance to a translator, it can be seen that the Arabic text is reasonably concise, albeit not nearly as concise as the paraphrastic commentaries above. Importantly, the master-guide exegesis includes points of divergence and multiple possibilities in translation. I have complemented this with a set of English translations in the left-hand column. Since this polyvalent guide translation further clarifies what each of the options means, and how it would be translated distinctly from the others, it would be of enormous help to any translator who knows English as well as Arabic.

Figure 2: al-Ālūsī as Master-Guide

English	Arabic
(1) Say: The fact is: Allah is One. Say: He is Allah, (He is) One. Say: He, Allah, is One.	المَشْهُورُ أَنَّ (هو) ضَمِيرُ الشَّأْنِ وَمَحَلُّهُ الرَّفْعُ عَلَى الِابْتِداءِ، خَبَرُهُ الجُمْلَةُ بَعْدَهُ ... والنِّتِرُ في تَصْدِيرِها بِهِ التَّنْبِيهُ مِن أَوَّلِ الأَمْرِ عَلى فَخامَةِ مَضْمُونِها مَعَ ما فِيهِ مِن زِيادَةِ التَّحْقِيقِ والتَّقْرِيرِ... وجَوَّزُوا أَنْ يَكُونَ هو ضَمِيرَ المَسْؤُولِ عَنْهُ أَوِ المَطْلُوبِ صِفَتُهُ أَوْ نِسْبَتُهُ ... و(هُوَ) عَلَيْهِ مُبْتَدَأٌ، والِاسْمُ الجَلِيلُ خَبَرُهُ، و(أَحَدٌ) خَبَرٌ بَعْدَ خَبَرٍ؛ وأَجازَ الزَّمَخْشَرِيُّ أَنْ يَكُونَ بَدَلًا مِنَ الِاسْمِ الجَلِيلِ... وأَنْ يَكُونَ خَبَرَ مُبْتَدَأٍ مَحْذُوفٍ أَيْ هو أَحَدٌ. وأَجازَ أَبُو البَقاءِ أَنْ يَكُونَ الِاسْمُ الأَعْظَمُ بَدَلًا مِن (هُوَ) و(أَحَدٌ) خَبَرُهُ.
(2) Allāh is the Ṣamad (Supreme Necessity). Allāh is the Ṣamad: He did not… Allāh the Ṣamad did not… X	﴿اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ﴾ مُبْتَدَأٌ وخَبَرٌ. وعَنْ طائِفَةٍ مِنهم أُبَيِّ بْنِ كَعْبٍ والرَّبِيعِ بْنِ أَنَسٍ أَنَّهُ الَّذِي لَمْ يَلِدْ ولَمْ يُولَدْ كَأَنَّهم جَعَلُوا ما بَعْدَهُ تَفْسِيراً لَه. وقِيلَ: ﴿الصَّمَدُ﴾ نَعْتٌ والخَبَرُ ما بَعْدَهُ ولَيْسَ بِشَيْءٍ. ...المُعَوَّلُ عَلَيْهِ تَفْسِيرِه بِالسَّيِّدِ الَّذِي يَصْمُدُ إِلَيْهِ الخَلْقُ في الحَوائِجِ والمَطالِبِ، وتَفْسِيرُهُ بِالَّذِي لا جَوْفَ لَهُ وما عَداهُما إِمّا راجِعٌ إِلَيْهِما أَوْ هو مِمّا لا تُساعِدُ عَلَيْهِ اللُّغَةُ...
(3) He has not begotten He does not beget and He was not begotten,	يَجُوزُ أَنْ يَكُونَ المُرادُ اسْتِمْرارَ النَّفْيِ، وعَبَّرَ بِالماضِي لِمُشاكَلَةِ قَوْلِهِ تَعالى : ﴿ولَمْ يُولَدْ﴾ وهو لا بُدَّ أَنْ يَكُونَ بِصِيغَةِ الماضِي...
(4) And there has never been to Him any equal.	﴿ولَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ﴾ أَيْ: لَمْ يُكافِئْهُ أَحَدٌ ولَمْ يُماثِلْهُ ولَمْ يُشاكِلْهُ مِن صاحِبَةٍ وغَيْرِها (لَهُ) صِلَةُ (كُفُوًا) عَلى ما ذَهَبَ إِلَيْهِ المُبَرِّدُ وغَيْرُهُ، والأَصْلُ أَنْ يُؤَخَّرَ إِلّا أَنَّهُ قُدِّمَ لِلِاهْتِمامِ...

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[1] Al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī*, vol. 29, p. 432 ff. It would be helpful for the translator to look more deeply into some of the options, and discussion around them, to understand the linguistic nuances and translate effectively.

Let us compare what is provided here under verse 1 with what we saw previously with "the Three M's". Al-Ālūsī expresses a clear preference for reading *huwa* as the pronoun of situation (*ḍamīr al-shaʾn*),[1] while mentioning other views.[2] A guide exegesis based on this could select a different opinion as preponderant (*rājiḥ*), but – crucially – listing the depreciated (*marjūḥ*) alternatives allows the translator to ensure adherence to the guide. This is particularly important when there is a reading that has existed in tradition but has been criticized by the experts as untenable: this applies to the view that *al-Ṣamad* is adjectival (*naʿt*), which al-Ālūsī dismisses as "*laysa bi-shayʾ*" – hence it is marked in the translation with "X". Any guide exegesis which seeks to improve the accuracy of English Qur'an translations must also correct and rule out the common errors that translators have fallen into with respect to the syntax of the Arabic text.

In the above presentation, I left certain terms in transliteration, particularly *al-Ṣamad*, in order to allow the focus to be on the various sentence structures. As for the meanings of such terms: these can be specified through the creation of a translator's lexicon. This may be based upon a particular exegete, which involves sourcing his explanations under whichever verse they may appear (typically the first occurrence of the word). It is also essential at this point to factor in the various meanings (*wujūh*) that a single word has in different Quranic passages and contexts.[3]

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[1] See Saeed (tr.), *Select Chapters of Itqān*, p. 199. I have only located one translation which is based on *ḍamīr al-shaʾn*, namely: Usmani, Muhammad Taqi (tr.), *The Noble Qur'an* (London: Turath Publishing, 2020), p. 843. The problem of translators collectively neglecting explanations in *tafsīr*, and sometimes the preference of the majority of exegetes, is addressed in Saeed, "The Untranslated Qur'an".

[2] The majority of translators have treated *aḥad* as an adjective to mean "the One" – they should be asked to explain how the indefinite became definite! A number have adopted some version of the second opinion, e.g. "He is God, One" in Arberry, Arthur J. (tr.) *The Koran Interpreted* (2 vols. in 1. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 361. An example of following the third opinion, in which *Allāh* is appositive (*badal*) to *huwa* is Nasr, Seyyed Hossein et al. (eds.), *The Study Quran* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), p. 1579, where the translation is: "He, God, is One". Related to our earlier discussion of misreadings and mistranslations of *tafsīr* sources, the next page quotes al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143) as saying: "*Al-Ṣamad* is a verb taking the meaning of the passive participle, the One to Whom one betakes oneself (*man ṣumida ilayhi*) when one seeks Him". This sentence alone contains three misread words; most seriously, they mistook *faʿal* (standing for the word form) for *fiʿl* and attributed to the master exegete the absurd view that "*al-Ṣamad* is a verb"! At least in such cases it can be seen clearly how the translator has (mis)read the text, but when faulty conclusions are built upon these premises, it can be much harder to trace the problem. See Sheikh, Nabeel Nisar, *Tarjamat wa-Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-Karīm bil-Lughah al-Injlīzīyah al-Musammá The Study Quran: Dirāsah Taḥlīlīyah Naqdīyah Muqāranah* (PhD thesis, Umm al-Qurá, 2021), p. 300.

[3] See Abdel Haleem, M.A.S., "The Role of Context in Interpreting and Translating the Qur'an" in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20.1 (2018): 47–66, and Saeed (tr.), *Select Chapters of Itqān*, p. 68 ff.

Exegetical Translation: A Way Forward

We previously saw the example of Haddad's translation based on al-Bayḍāwī's exegesis. There is great potential for other such projects, which may or may not accompany translations of the exegetical texts themselves. We could see a Ṭabarian translation, and a Rāzian translation, for example, made easy by the above master-guide exegesis from al-Ālūsī, since the relevant options will almost always be found within its scope.

One such project is being undertaken by the Ibn ʿAshur Centre for Quranic Studies, based in the UK.[1] With the goal to produce a summarized presentation of the magisterial *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr* by the Tunisian scholar Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿĀshūr (d. 1973), the project proceeds from an analysis of the range of options captured in al-Ālūsī's commentary of a century earlier. Then the specific exegetical choices of Ibn ʿĀshūr are crafted into a translation that reflects, as far as possible, his explanations of the terminology and rhetorical features of Quranic discourse.

An additional feature adopted in this project is "layering",[2] in which explanatory text is placed around the Qur'an translation to aid the reader, but this is clearly distinguished from the core text. These extra notes, also derived from the guide exegesis (in this case *al-Taḥrīr wa-al-Tanwīr*), provide essential context, linkages between verses, and alternative readings. When this is provided in a digital format,[3] a reader will be able to toggle between displaying the additional layers, and a translation-only mode. The following is a basic representation of this format:

Figure 3: Layered Translation Based on Ibn ʿĀshūr

[In answer to them asking "Where did your Lord come from?"]

Say, *O Prophet:* **The fact is: Allah is One.**

<or> He is Allah, Unique (Divinity).

Allah is the Supreme Necessity.

He has not begotten and He was not begotten,

And there has never been to Him any equal.

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[1] See for details: www.ibnashur.com/light-of-assurance.

[2] A similar approach has previously been developed by Basil Q. Muhammad for his ongoing translation project.

[3] It is intended that this output will eventually appear at Quran.com, a leading website.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted two key areas which require attention in any future translation projects undertaken by individuals and/or guided by states and institutions. The first is the importance of drawing upon the rich resources of Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an, in which the translator ought to be trained. Shortcomings in personal qualifications have led to errors in reading comprehension, which we have highlighted with selected examples.

The second area is how exegesis should be utilized in such projects – we have strongly recommended that *tafsīr* is not adopted as an intermediary which is translated in place of the Qur'an itself. However, it can play an important role in guiding the translator and ensuring consistency across a multilingual project. A guide exegesis ought to be grammatically informative, not paraphrastic as various earlier projects have been: from the *Muntakhab* to the *Mukhtaṣar*. By selecting or creating a guide exegesis based on the criteria and illustrations provided in this paper, and by seeking out – and investing in – suitably qualified translators, future projects to translate the Qur'an into the languages of the world can maximize their success and contribute new levels of clarity and understanding of the Scripture.

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