

The Untranslated Qur'an: Retelling the Surah of Joseph

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This chapter plays on the trope of the Qur'an's "untranslatability" to highlight aspects which are translatable, yet remain untranslated. Specifically, it concerns meanings and interpretations attested in the exegetical genre of *tafsīr* which have been overlooked by successive translators of the Qur'an. It is argued that exegesis comprises a rich resource which, though it has been used by many, has much more to give – even in terms of the meanings of words and constructions. Such works also provide further possibilities in the form of the canonical readings (*qirā'āt*), which remain largely unconsidered by translators. The Chapter of Joseph (Q 12) is taken as an extended case study, showing what the English translation corpus has overlooked both in *tafsīr* and the Arabic of the Qur'an itself. Translations analyzed include the very latest to be published, including the author's collaborative effort in the Bayyinah Translation.

Introduction

The trope of the "untranslatability" of the Qur'an has often been invoked on the basis of the scripture's miraculous inimitability (*i'jāz*), a doctrine which could be taken to render faithful translation an impossibility – and even the very attempt illicit. Scholars of this persuasion may cite its revelation as "an Arabic recital" (*qur'ānan 'arabiyyan*, Q 12:2) to deny that any other language could carry its message and impact. Some allowed grudgingly for "translation of the meanings" (*tarjamat al-ma'ānī*)¹ – a redundancy that, nevertheless, highlights the important reality that translation deals with meanings. On the other hand, the expression implies a stronger claim: that these translations have encompassed the many meanings within the Qur'an.

Translators themselves have invoked "untranslatability" by way of excuse after undergoing the hardship of rendering into another language "that inimitable symphony," as Marmaduke Pickthall put it, "the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy" (Pickthall 1930, vii). The shortfall may comprise things those translators observed in the source text, but failed to capture and convey in their own words. Even if not *untranslatable*, these aspects have been left *untranslated*. This includes things which the translator failed to see, and

¹ This is printed on translations issued by the King Fahd Complex in Medina. Cf. the Azhari scholar Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Zurqānī (d. 1948), who argued in *Manāhil al-'Irfān* (not without its own conceptual problems when it comes to translation) that *tarjamat ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* is incoherent because the term "translation" can only ascribed to the words, though necessarily it analyzes those words in terms of meaning (al-Zurqānī 2006, 2:484).

goes beyond eloquence and style to the very substance and meaning of the text, especially its polyvalent expressions.

The present chapter concerns meanings which have remained largely, or wholly, untranslated in the ever-growing corpus of English renditions of the Qur'an. It is clear that translators must work as interpreters, like exegetes (known in Arabic as *mufasssīrūn*), first deciding what they understand from the Arabic and then selecting words which express that meaning in the target language. In this task, they may depend upon some works of exegesis (the genre called *tafsīr*), or at least claim to; but translation by its nature cannot incorporate the diversity of interpretations found in the voluminous tradition. A translator has to choose a reading and rendering of the text, and any alternatives would, at best, be relegated to a footnote and likely overlooked by most.

The classical exegetes, of course, were readers of the Quranic text who attempted to convey their observations firstly in the same language, providing Arabic near-synonyms and grammatical terms to make the vocabulary and syntax clear to anyone schooled in that language and its structures. This aspect of their work is much the same as the translator attempts to achieve in a different language, albeit with those grammatical explanations replaced by – or used as a guide to construct – equivalent sentences. As such, a translator must possess the same skill as an exegete at least in these linguistic aspects; or they should be expected to depend upon those sources and be skillful in using them.

In reality, the translators have seldom been credentialed exegetes. Those who list the names of great Arabic works in their introductions display varying levels of conformity to their contents. The central issue for our consideration here is the diversity of meanings which exegetes have long noted in many Quranic verses, and the extent to which the plethora of English translations reflect and display that diversity. The fact is that there are many cases in which translators are unanimous in reading the verse in a particular way, while one or more plausible alternatives are present in Arabic exegetical works. While this can be explained in terms of each translator opting for the most obvious reading, the effect of imitation should not be overlooked as a factor: why fix what is not broken? Moreover, each translator presumably expects you to read his or her translation alone; they do not work collectively towards documenting the meanings of the Qur'an comprehensively.

In what follows, I will highlight just how much remains to be translated, with my focus squarely on substance (i.e. meanings) rather than style. I am looking at the text as though it “carries” these meanings, even several possibilities at once; but the reader need not agree with

this perspective to see the value in presenting in translation the various ways the scripture has been read and understood by great minds over the centuries. I will be looking back at the cumulative English corpus in order to look ahead; I will show how a *retranslation* of the Qur'an can bring out interpretations and even text variants (i.e. *qirā'āt*) which have, hitherto, been overlooked. This amounts to a demonstrable gap in the existing output: a finite gap observable by comparison with *tafsīr*, which can certainly be filled with a little effort; that is quite separate from the belief that it is impossible to exhaust the subtle meanings of the Qur'an.

To identify interpretations and possibilities, I draw mostly upon *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī* by the Ottoman Baghdadi exegete al-Ālūsī (d. 1854), who lays out a stunning proportion of the diversity and debate of the preceding millennium of scholarship.² I will quote from some translated works in order to highlight the value of translating *tafsīr*, in addition to the importance of translators consulting this genre to inform their deliberations (see Lucas 2014). Alongside that, I use a bespoke tool drawing upon a database of more than sixty translations which allows verse-by-verse comparison.³ Naturally, I cannot rule out that a meaning absent from my list was indeed translated by someone, somewhere, in some language. As such, my analysis of past translations should be taken as indicative and not conclusive.

This chapter also serves to showcase an ongoing collaborative project, the Bayyinah Translation, in which Nouman Ali Khan and I attempt to retranslate the Qur'an based on some of the observations presented here.⁴ We pay close attention to its linguistic structures and their subtle implications, and study carefully the possibilities discussed by classical and contemporary scholars. While fluency is a common goal of translators, we aim also for *freshness*, opting where possible for alternatives to well-worn terms and phrases. However, we are limited like those before us: the main translation must reflect our preferred reading of the text. At times, that turns out to be an exegetical possibility that has never before been adopted by a translator.

² The significance of this work is described in Saeed 2019, 657–661.

³ The tool was developed by Hamzah Hassan with translations extracted from Islamawakened.com, to which I added several more translations.

⁴ The Yūsuf translation is available in PDF format at the project website: Bayyinah-Translation.com.

The Best of Stories?

Alif Laam Raa! Those are the divine signs of the clear and clarifying Book. It is We Who brought it down as an Arabic Recital so that you might reason and understand. We are going to lay the story out for you (O Prophet) in the finest way, since We have already inspired you with this Recital; whereas before it you had certainly been one of the unaware.

Q 12:1-3, Bayyinah Translation

The Chapter of Joseph (Sūrat Yūsuf) was the first to be completed of this new rendition, and it provides highly instructive cases to study in the history of Qur'an translations. The opening itself invites several key observations and reflections on translation as a concept and practice. The first point of note is the opening letters, the meanings of which are commonly said by Muslim scholars to be inaccessible; on that basis, they must also be untranslatable, unless providing equally mysterious English letters ("A.L.R.") counts as translation.

Second, it is worth pondering the significance of the description of this Qur'an (the name translated above as "Recital") as an *Arabic* one. While this is sometimes taken as an anti-translation verse, its placement should not go unnoticed: at the opening of a *sūrah* unique in the Qur'an in being almost fully dedicated to a single, detailed story. Of course, the story of Joseph was well known to communities before the Quranic revelation, and comparisons with Genesis 37-50 can readily be made. The languages spoken by the figures within that story, and by the scriptural communities that circulated it, were certainly not Arabic. Therefore, the point may be to highlight the very fact that this is a retelling of the story, indeed a kind of *translation*: but one which does better than any which has preceded.

Next, we have two cases in which exegetes have noted complementary meanings, or alternative possibilities, for Quranic words or phrases – and we shall see how the translators dealt with these. First is the term *mubīn*, a form IV active participle which al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286) explains as either intransitive, hence "clear" in its message and miraculous eloquence; or transitive, hence it "makes clear" to anyone who studies it that it comes from God, or clarifies for the Jews the details of the story they asked the Prophet about (al-Bayḍāwī 2021, 7:444).⁵ In this case, each of the two basic meanings is well represented in the English corpus, with "clear" and its variations (such as "perspicuous", "manifest" and even "luminous") in the

⁵ Beeston renders the first set of explanations by al-Bayḍāwī: "obvious [*ẓāhir*] in incomparability" and "plain [*wāḍiḥ*] in meaning": the exegete's use of near-synonyms is evident. The second set he renders as "which makes plain [*mubayyinah*]" to the various groups (Beeston 1963, 1). One of the reasons I am quoting this particular *tafsīr* is that many translators include it in their list of references, starting with George Sale.

majority.⁶ Muhammad Asad is noteworthy for combining the two, as in the translation above: “clear in itself and clearly showing the truth” (Asad 1984, 336).⁷

With this mode of analysis established, let us consider the case of *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*, which is far more interesting from the perspective of “untranslated” meanings present in exegesis. If you survey the translations of 12:3, you will find a multitude of variations on the same expression: “the best/fairest of stories/narratives”. For exegetes such as al-Bayḏāwī, that is only the second of two possible ways of reading it:

3 aḥsana l-qaṣaṣi. ‘Either’ “the best sort of storytelling” because it is related in the finest of styles; or “the best kind of thing related” because it includes marvels and aphorisms and signs and instructive examples. (Beeston 1963, 1–2)

One might have reason to prefer this second interpretation (as if it said *aḥsan al-maqṣūṣ* as a direct object) and take it as highlighting the beauty and instructive power of Joseph’s story which is being told here one more time in Arabic. However, an argument can also be made for the other interpretation: that it is more powerful to understand this as an assertion that the story is now being told in the best way, as part of the miraculous eloquence of Quranic revelation. Crucially, however, the exegetes who listed these meanings treated them as equally plausible – while the same cannot be said for the translators. How many of them were even aware of the sense of *aḥsan al-iqtisāṣ* (as cognate accusative)? The only case I have found is Asad, who rendered it: “We explain it to thee in the best possible way,” slightly changing the sense of the verb.⁸ The clearly attested interpretation as “best storytelling” has therefore, it seems, remained untranslated until the Bayyinah Translation.⁹

⁶ The presence of what I call “outliers” (translations which do not seem to correspond to any identified exegetical opinion) can also be noted, such as “veritable” (N.J. Dawood), “profound” (Rashad Khalifa) and “immaculate” (Ahmed Ali). See Islamawakened.com.

⁷ His reasoning is explained in a footnote: “In the consensus of authoritative opinion, both these meanings are comprised in the above instance; consequently, a compound phrase is necessary in order to render the term appropriately.”

⁸ For this he cites al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143) and al-Rāzī (d. 1210), both of whom are sources for al-Bayḏāwī. Asad mistakenly implies that both exegetes indicated their preference for this interpretation. He defends his own verb choice by arguing that “the two opening verses...state, in effect, that the Qur’an is self-explanatory” (Asad 1984, 337): hence the continued revelation of the Qur’an constitutes that explanation. This is a clear case of a translator performing exegesis while drawing upon classical sources.

⁹ It may be that some translators have indicated this interpretation in a footnote, but it is notably absent from *The Study Quran* (Nasr et al. 2015, 591).

No Exaggeration

Next we consider an example which is less widely attested in *tafsīr*, and more comprehensively absent from translations of the Qur'an. In 12:65, al-Rāzī outlines the various possibilities in the phrase *mā nabghī*, which Joseph's brothers say to their father upon finding that what they had used to pay for food in Egypt had been restored to their bags. In my translation of the passage, square brackets provide an indicative translation of the verse according to the meaning described. While the explanations draw upon several senses of the root *b-gh-y*, the question is framed here around the particle *mā*:

It may be for **negation**, which gives rise to several possible meanings:

- a. ['We are not lying/exaggerating']: they had described Joseph's generosity and kindness, saying: 'We came to a man as generous as can be. He gave us lodgings and gave us a level of hospitality we could not have expected had he been from the Family of Jacob.' Thus they were denying that their description was exaggerated or contained anything other than truth.
- b. ['We want for nothing']: they meant that Joseph (peace be upon him) had been so generous that they would not seek anything beyond it.
- c. 'Since he returned our money to us, we do not want anything from you in terms of further payment. What we have is sufficient [for the next trip].'

It may also be the **interrogative** particle. When they saw that their money had been returned to them, they asked [rhetorically]: 'What more could we want?' After receiving food and its price over and above that, what else could they desire?¹⁰

From al-Rāzī's presentation, it is understood that the interrogative sense of the particle is merely one of the possibilities. From a survey of English translations of the verse, it is seen to be the clear preference of the translators, as there is near-consensus on a version of "What more could we want?" This raises the question of whether those translators considered the various options, and whether they consulted exegetical works before discarding the possibility of negation. An exception to the norm is M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, who renders it: "We need no more [goods to barter]" – what is more, he cites al-Rāzī for this meaning, which we have listed as (c) above. However, none of the translators – as far as I have seen – opted for the sense of lying or exaggeration which al-Rāzī describes here for *baghy*.¹¹

¹⁰ Al-Rāzī 2012, 9:364, and see al-Ālūsī 2010, 12:401. This translation is from my forthcoming volume of *Al-Rāzī's Great Exegesis* (Saeed 2023).

¹¹ In terms of outliers, Laleh Bakhtiar seems to take it as a relative *mā*: "This is what we desire."

A Tale of Two *Lawlās*

In the preceding examples, the translators have mostly opted for a plausible reading of the verse, while collectively neglecting other possibilities affirmed by the exegetes. Now we turn to cases where all or most translators have overlooked the clear explanations provided in *tafsīr* and written something which does not fit the language of the Qur'an. In such cases, it may be said that the specific verse has remained untranslated – in the sense that nobody has yet published an accurate translation of it.

In his 2020 paper on translating omission/ellipsis in the Qur'an, Ahmed Allaithy (2020, 2648–2656) provides a breakdown of how the English translations reproduced on Islamawakened.com dealt with the question of the apodosis (*jawāb*) of the conditional particle *lammā* in the following Quranic verse:

So when they finally took him away and gathered resolve to get him into the dark hole of the well–; Meanwhile, We communicated to him...

Q 12:15, Bayyinah Translation

The difficulty in this verse concerns two phrases which would be candidates for the apodosis, were it not for the conjunctive *wāw* preceding them. Most translators ignored this problem and read this to say: “When they took him...we inspired him,” or “When they took him, they resolved.” As Allaithy notes, this interpretation of the syntax exists in *tafsīr*, but has been criticized and dismissed. The question remains as to whether those translators drew upon the authority of those who permitted it, such as Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), or whether they drew their own conclusions. Some cancelled the conditional effect of *lammā* altogether.

Allaithy also criticizes two translations – Sale's and Usmani's – which clearly recognized the issue and supplied a parenthesis;¹² but it appears that his preferred strategy of merely noting the ellipsis was not implemented (at least in English) in a published translation until after Allaithy's paper, in *The Quran Beheld* by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, which draws upon his *tafsīr* discussions with the Jordanian scholar 'Alī Hānī al-'Aqrabāwī: “So when they took him away with them, and concerted to put him in the darkest depths of the cistern–. And We...” (Keller 2022, 237). The rhetorical effect of this ellipsis is not addressed by Allaithy, and the

¹² Muhammad Taqi Usmani has: “So, when they went away with him and were determined to put him in the bottom of a pit, (they did accordingly). And We...” (Usmani 2020, 327). Allaithy assumed that George Sale inserted words without parenthesis, as it appears on Islamawakened.com and indeed in some printed copies of the work. However, in the scan of the 1734 edition provided on quran-archive.org, it can be seen that the phrase here in italics was already thus in Sale's rendition, indicating parenthesis: “And when they had carried him with them, and agreed to set him at the bottom of the well, *they executed their design*: And We...” (Sale 1734, 188).

exegetes tended to provide a dry, grammatical apodosis. In our view, as expressed in the footnote to the Bayyinah Translation, the effect is to say: when the brothers got around to implementing their plan, the events that transpired are too shocking to express in words.¹³

With these issues in mind, we turn to the case of the conditional particle *lawlā* which appears twice in the Chapter of Joseph: 12:24 and 94. While the second of these is our actual case study, it is instructive to consider the first to illustrate the meaning and usage of *lawlā*, and how the translators understood it there. The primary denotation of this particle is “non-occurrence due to occurrence,” as though to say “*Lawlā* (were it not for) X, then Y.” There are two exegetical opinions concerning its position in 12:24; the first is that it begins a new sentence, after *hamm* (desire or intent) has been ascribed to Joseph. Muhammad Asad (1984, 340) is one of the few translators to opt for this:

And, indeed, she desired him, and he desired her; [and he would have succumbed] had he not seen [in this temptation] an evidence of his Sustainer’s truth.¹⁴

The meaning is clearer with a minor adjustment: “had he not seen, he would have succumbed” – where the latter phrase is the implied apodosis. The other opinion treats the preceding *hamma bihā* as the apodosis or as indicating its content. In that respect, the Bayyinah Translation is typical:

She wanted him for sure; and he would have wanted her, had he not already seen his Master’s convincing proof.

The difference between the two is not as great as it may appear at first, since those who affirmed Joseph’s *hamm* may simply explain it as a natural feeling of attraction with no ill intent.¹⁵

We may now examine 12:94, in which some translators attempted to read the clause preceding *lawlā* as its apodosis, despite the fact that this is unsustainable. A greater number make it seem they had forgotten what *lawlā* means altogether, as though they decided upon the verse’s meaning quite independent of its wording. The first type can be illustrated by Keller (2022, 246) whose rendering does not match the exegesis it is based on (in this instance, that of Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā‘ī, d. 1480):

¹³ Al-Ālūsī provides a similar explanation alongside the view that the omitted phrase is obvious (Al-Ālūsī 2010, 12:235).

¹⁴ Asad attributes this view to al-Zamakhsharī, but does not mention that the same exegete also permits the other view.

¹⁵ Another explanation found among exegetes is displayed in the translation of Malik Ghulam Farid (parentheses are his): “And she made up her mind with regard to him [to seduce him] and he made up his mind with regard to her [to resist her].”

And as the caravan left that land, their father said: ‘Verily I find the scent of Joseph, were you not to deem me witless with age.’¹⁶

Unlike with 12:15 above, there is no em-dash indicating an ellipsis, so the phrase preceding *lawlā* is being treated as the apodosis. Reconstructed, this is “Were you not to deem me witless, I find the scent of Joseph” – which is ungrammatical and incoherent: does Jacob smell Joseph’s shirt or not, according to this sentence? Recall that *lawlā* denotes the non-occurrence of Y, in this case smelling Joseph. The Arabic wording *innī la-ajidu rīḥa Yūsuf* – with its imperfect tense and emphatic particles – does not allow for this negation, or to make the smelling conditional upon what comes after *lawlā*.

The story in *tafsīr* is quite clear from al-Zamakhsharī onwards: the apodosis is to be read as implied: “Were it not for the fact that you consider me senile, you would have believed me,” or “I would have said that he is alive/nearby.”¹⁷ The only English translation I have seen to adopt this understanding from the exegetes is that by a team of American Muslim women – Emily Assami, Mary Kennedy and Amatullah Bantley – in which the apodosis is placed in parenthesis and brought forward (Saheeh International 1997, 323):

And when the caravan departed [from Egypt], their father said, ‘Indeed, I find the smell of Joseph [and would say that he was alive] if you did not think me weakened in mind.’

Inspired by Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ‘Āshūr’s (d. 1973) brief account of the implied apodosis,¹⁸ we presented another perspective in the Bayyinah Translation:

Then, as the riders made their way out, their father exclaimed: ‘I can actually pick up Joseph’s scent. If not for the fact that you call me senile, (you would realize)!’

The idea may be that Jacob was chastising those around him for their lack of faith, particularly in him, which prevented them from experiencing the miracle of Joseph’s scent being carried across that great distance. If only they would put their doubt aside for a moment and open their hearts and their noses, they might pick it up, too.

¹⁶ Keller’s team kindly shared with me the relevant audio in advance of it being edited and posted on quranbeheldtafsir.com, which allows researchers to hear the Arabic discussions that preceded the work of translation. The explanation provided by ‘Alī Hānī in this verse was that of al-Biqā‘ī, which could arguably give rise to a translation like Asad’s, or alternatively like Sale’s (see the table below). Directly translated, al-Biqā‘ī’s first account of the apodosis is: “I would have said this without shame or hesitation”; then he further glosses it: “I am saying this despite knowing that you won’t agree with me” (al-Biqā‘ī 2011, 4:96).

¹⁷ To survey published translations, I used the digital tool *al-Jāmi‘ al-Tārīkhī* at Mobdii.com.

¹⁸ He glosses it as *la-taḥaqqaqtum dhālika* (Ibn ‘Āshūr 2021, 6:38). It appears that Sayyid Quṭb had a similar view, though his wording is unclear.

In my survey of published *tafsīr* works, I noted a few exegetes who explained this verse contrary to the standard approach described above; some of these correspond somewhat to strategies adopted by various translators. I provide those references for transparency, even though I argue that these explanations are faulty, and I doubt that the translators based their renderings on those sources. Nevertheless, there may be overlap in how each has interpreted the wording, particularly the sense of *lawlā* in the verse. In the following table, I have grouped the approaches taken to the verse into several categories.

Table 1: Selected translations of 12:94

Translation	Interpretation/Strategy
Asad: ‘Behold, were it not that you might consider me a dotard, [I would say that] I truly feel the breath of Joseph [in the air]!’ ¹⁹	This implies doubt, or that he was sure but decided not to say. However, the Arabic word order makes clear that Jacob actually asserts that he detects his son’s fragrance before adding the <i>lawlā</i> sentence. ²⁰
Arberry: ‘Surely I perceive Joseph’s scent, unless you think me doting.’ Study Quran: ‘Truly I sense the scent of Joseph, if you think me not senile!’ ²¹	This makes the smelling conditional on them not thinking him senile; but this is contradicted by the emphasis. <i>Lawlā</i> is not an exception particle. ²²
Sale: ‘Verily I perceive the smell of Joseph: although ye think that I dote.’	This is to interpret <i>lawlā</i> as something like ‘despite’, which is not among its meanings. ²⁴

¹⁹ Asad 1984, 352. This is equivalent to inserting the word *la-qultu* before *innī la-ajidu*.

²⁰ The reading “were it not that you might” is reasonable, though in the Bayyinah Translation we have preferred to understand it as “were it not for the fact that you do.” Al-Ṭabrisī (d. 1153) and, much later, al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), imply that Jacob doubted his senses. As noted above, al-Biqā’ī proposes an apodosis *la-qultu* but with the crucial qualifier *ghayra mustahin wa-lā mutawaqqif*.

²¹ Arberry 1980, 1:264, and Nasr et al. 2015, 611; the lead *Study Quran* translator for Yūsuf was Maria Dakake. See also (e.g.) Muhammad Ali, Taqī Usmani, Ali Quli Qara’i, Laleh Bakhtiar.

²² Al-Māwardī (d. 1058) describes this clause as *i’tidhār*, perhaps intending “caveat” rather than the more obvious sense of “apology”. Later, al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) and Abū Zahrah (d. 1974) both use the word *illā*, but it seems they only intended it like *but*, as if to say: “You would believe me, except that you actually think me senile” – which is essentially the standard view. The Shi‘i commentaries of al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981) and al-Shīrāzī seem to be reading *lawlā an* as though it said *law an-lā*; the latter glosses the phrase as *idhā lam tattihimūnī bi-l-safāhah*. This may have influenced Sayyed Abbas Sadr-Ameli (“unless you think me doting”).

²⁴ Cf. *wa-law* in e.g. 12:17. As well as al-Biqā’ī’s second gloss (see note 16 above), a similar explanation is found with al-Qushayrī in his *Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*.

Abdel Haleem: ‘You may think I am senile but I can smell Joseph.’ ²³	
Yusuf Ali: ‘I do indeed scent the presence of Joseph: Nay, think me not a dotard.’ Hilali-Khan: ‘I do indeed feel the smell of Yûsuf (Joseph), if only you think me not a dotard.’ ²⁵	This is to take <i>lawlā</i> as forbidding, or hoping that they would not call him senile. Neither is among its meanings. ²⁶

In this case, it is the singular interpretation explained clearly by the famous exegetes which has gone almost untranslated in English; it would be instructive to compare with other languages. The bewilderment exhibited by the majority of translators could have been remedied by consulting the works they list in their introductions, from the *Kashshāf* to the *Jalālayn*. If they had any justification for their alternative readings, they did not provide such in their footnotes.

The *Bashīr* and the Shirt

So far in this study, we have noted the value of exegesis as a corpus, but also the role of a translator as an exegete. It is, therefore, not impossible that a translator posits a meaning in the text which he or she did not find documented in the tradition. Here I share an example of my own practice as an interpreter.

In this sequence of verses, Joseph has instructed his brothers to take his shirt and cast it over his father’s face, restoring him to sight (12:93). The shirt lingers in the background of the following verse, in which Jacob detects his son’s fragrance. It is only natural to assume that when the party arrived, they did as Joseph asked.

²³ Sale 1734, 198, and Abdel Haleem 2010, 151. See also (e.g.) Pickthall, A.Z. Hammad, Mustafa Khattab.

²⁵ Yusuf Ali 1938, 1:585, and al-Hilali & Khan 2000, 317; also al-Amri 2023, 735. If used in a different way, *if only* is viable: “If only you didn’t think me senile (you would...).”

²⁶ However, al-Māturīdī does claim that it could be for forbidding (*nahy*), i.e. *lā tufannidūni*. He then describes a second possibility as negation (*nahy*), citing 10:98 as a parallel (al-Māturīdī 2005, 7:359); this is particularly unclear, as it suggests that either their disbelief in Jacob is being negated, or his ability to smell Joseph. Perhaps he intended to say that the implied apodosis (which he does not mention) is negated. Negation is not a primary sense of *lawlā* but is entailed by its usages for urging or rebuke, where it is like *hallā*: see al-Suyūṭī’s *Select Chapters of Itqān* (Saeed 2023, 161).

So when the bearer of good news finally arrived, he cast it over his face and was restored to sight. He said, “Didn’t I tell you that I know from God things that you don’t know?”

Q 12:96, Bayyinah Translation

However, a few questions arise: who is this singular *bashīr* who casts the shirt over Jacob’s face? Exegetes state that one of his sons ran ahead of the others, possibly one who felt guilty for causing him pain with the shirt covered in fake blood (12:18). For translators, the question regards the pronoun in “cast it”: it must be for the shirt, but is that clear enough three verses since its last explicit mention? Some opted to add the word “shirt” in parenthesis or even without.²⁷

When pondering this verse for the Bayyinah Translation, we were struck by the difficulty of this guilty party (who had yet to apologize) being lauded as “bearers of good news.” The seeds of an alternative reading of this verse and incident were found in al-Rāzī’s commentary: “*Alqāhu ‘alā wajhihi* means that the bearer of good news cast the shirt over Jacob’s face; or it could be said that Jacob cast the shirt over his own face” (al-Rāzī 2012, 9:401; see also al-Ālūsī 2010, 12:491). It was only another step for me to wonder: what if the *bashīr* is not a person at all, but in fact a description of the shirt itself? After all, it was literally bearing the scent which gave Jacob the good news ahead of its arrival.²⁸

Look again at the translation above. Like numerous others, it is flexible enough to accommodate this interpretation: when the shirt arrived, Jacob took it and put it over his own face, enjoying that intimate moment with his lost beloved before turning to hear from his guilty sons. Despite our personal preference for this interpretation of the *bashīr*, we had to reckon with the lack of attestation in the *tafsīr* corpus – as far as available sources provide. This is why we have left the translation open, expressing our understanding in a footnote. In this way, our preferred meaning is both translated (implicitly) and untranslated (explicitly).²⁹

²⁷ Examples of parenthesis: Yusuf Ali, Asad, Hilali-Khan, Usmani. Examples without: Dawood, Sher Ali, Abdel Haleem, Khattab.

²⁸ More subtly: the word *bashīr* shares a root with the Arabic terms for ‘skin’ (*bashrah*) and ‘direct contact’ (*mubāsharah*). An even subtler connection (for which I thank Hussan Mahmood) might be made with the earlier appearances of this root within the *sūrah*. The first was the cry of the water scout *yā bushrā* (12:19), upon discovering Joseph in the well; he had been stripped of his shirt. The second was the Egyptian women’s exclamation *mā hādhā basharan* (12:31), at which point they sought to remove his clothing and dignity. While the running theme of the shirt(s) has often been noted, the appearance of the *b-sh-r* root at these junctures has not.

²⁹ Note that “and was restored” restricts the wording to our view that Jacob cast the shirt over his own face. The point that has not been spelled out is whether the *bashīr* is a son or the shirt.

Translating the *Qirā'āt*

The final frontier which this chapter will set out for Qur'an translation is a vast one, since diversity exists not only in the field of interpretation, but in a significant proportion of the words themselves. This is manifested today in ten variant reading traditions (*qirā'āt*) which are deemed canonical and authoritative, or more specifically their twenty sub-narrations (*riwāyāt*). The narration of Ḥafṣ from 'Āṣim has been dominant in most regions for the past several centuries, and written copies and translations of the Qur'an mostly adhere to it.

The story of this multiplicity begins in revelation and the Prophetic era, as described in the traditions of “seven letters (*ahruḥ*)”; while the exact nature of these letters is debated, it is fair to say they represented different vocalizations of the text, which were then limited – to an extent – by the standardization of the Quranic orthography at the instruction of the third Caliph 'Uthmān. Thereafter, any accepted reading would have to conform to the written copies: but these still allowed for variety in pronunciation and even how certain letters in the skeletal text (undotted and unvowelled) were interpreted. Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936) began another limiting process by identifying the most reliable readers and widely-attested readings of the main Muslim regions, resulting in seven key readings, which would incorporate three more via the work of Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 1429). These are now the Canonical Readings of the Qur'an, known as the *qirā'āt mutawātirah*, which Islamic scholarship assumes to be equally authoritative and relevant to interpreting the revealed text.³⁰

The vast majority of differences between Readings are solely about pronunciation, akin to dialectal variants. Alongside these recurrent issues (described as *uṣūl*, principles), works on the Readings provide a list (*farsh*) of individual word variants. Of these, many impact on meaning, and these semantic differences are often the kind to affect translation of those words. There is a genre of early works known as *tawjīh al-qirā'āt* (among other names) which analyze the variant readings in terms of grammar and meaning, and these matters are discussed in the more detailed works of *tafsīr*. However, in practice, there is a widespread phenomenon which I have described as ‘Ḥafṣonormativity’:³¹ not only is the Ḥafṣ sub-reading the only one known

³⁰ See Nasser 2012. The term *tawātur* can be understood here in terms of the broad acceptance of the Canonical Readings (Ibn 'Āshūr 2021, 1:62).

³¹ I first used this term at the 2020 conference of the American Academy of Religion; an extended version of my talk, “Towards a ‘Canonical Translation’ of the Qur'an” is available on the YouTube channel of the Global Qur'an project, Freiburg: <https://youtu.be/RLAWkmdnUuc>.

by most common people in the world today, but much modern analysis of the Qur'an assumes its specific vocalizations to represent the Quranic text wholly and exclusively.

When it comes to translating the Qur'an, most translators simply deal with the Ḥafṣ text without seeing a need to declare or justify that choice. A rare case of making the point explicit is Ahmad Zaki Hammad's introduction (Hammad 2007, 2:97):

SOURCE TEXT OF THE QURAN: The interpretation of the Quranic Text has depended upon the impeccable *Muṣḥaf al-Madīnah Al-Munawwarah* edition of the renowned Mujamma' Malik Fahd printing complex of Madinah, in accordance with the transmission of the Quran by the esteemed recitation experts universally known by the single names Ḥafṣ [sic] and, before him, 'Āṣim, as conveyed by the third Caliph of Islam, the illustrious Companion, 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān. This is the authenticated, undisputed, normative recitation of the Quran and the Prophet ﷺ read it publicly, had it transcribed, and taught it personally to thousands of his followers.³²

A **normative** approach to translating *qirā'āt* is certainly valid, and it is very justifiable to stick to the Reading which is dominant in a particular region or through most of the world. A rare diversion from Ḥafṣ in the English language is the translation by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, based on the Reading of Nāfi' of Medina which remains dominant in the Maghreb.

It is also possible to adopt a **critical** approach, which means to decide at each juncture which Reading will inform the translation. This resembles the practice of early exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, who would present the various readings and sometimes express a clear preference for one of them based on its wide attestation and/or linguistic clarity. I am not aware of a translator who has adopted this strategy throughout, but occasionally a translator will resort to an alternative if they find the primary text (i.e. Ḥafṣ) difficult to interpret. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, for example, did this twice in *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'*, 21:4 and 112, where he rendered the perfect verb *qāla* as the imperative "Say", citing the existence of the reading *qul*.³³ At 34:19, Abdel

³² The translator may simply have intended that 'Uthmān's text is the normative one, but the wording implies that the Prophet recited according to Ḥafṣ – which is absurd and ahistorical.

³³ The footnote has been altered in some later editions, so I reproduce the translator's note in full (Yusuf Ali 1938, 822) along with my comments. "Notice that in the usual Arabic texts printed in India the word *qāla* is here and in XXI. 112 below, as well as in XXIII. 112, spelt differently from the usual spelling of the word in other places (e.g., in XX. 125-126)." Comment: Yusuf Ali is noting that the orthography accommodates both readings. "*Qul* is the reading of the Baṣra Qirāat, meaning 'Say thou' in the imperative." Comment: it is actually the majority Reading, since *qāla* is only transmitted from the Kufans, excluding Shu'bah from 'Āṣim. "If we construe 'he says', the pronoun refers to 'this (one)' in the preceding verse, viz., the Prophet. But more than one Commentator understand the meaning in the imperative, and I agree with them. The point is merely one of verbal construction. The meaning is the same in either case." Comment: I doubt that the

Haleem takes the unusual step of translating according to the Reading of Ya‘qūb, hence: “Our Lord has made the distance between our staging points so long!” – taking the phrase as *rabbunā bā‘ada* (perfect tense) rather than the imperative *rabbānā bā‘id* with Ḥafṣ et al.³⁴ He remarks in the footnote: “This seems to make better sense than the other reading ‘Lord, make our journeys further apart’” (Abdel Haleem 2010, 273).³⁵

A translator’s strategy to account for the Readings is naturally affected by his or her conception of those Readings in terms of their origin, nature and purpose. The basic doctrine I have highlighted is that no one Reading (as a compiled tradition) has semantic priority over the others; but it is also the case that earlier scholars (including the Readers themselves) selected particular realizations of a word, and may have criticized others. One key question is the extent to which the divine plan for variation is emphasized vis-à-vis the scholarly process of criticism and canon construction. With this in mind, let us consider a final pair of approaches. The **inclusive** approach would be to consider the range of variants at every juncture, and choose (ambiguous) wording in the target language which incorporates all their meanings. This is in the spirit of the scholarly principle that Readings should be considered equivalent by default.³⁶ However, there are many junctures at which the meanings are irreducible, and a suitably broad target word is unavailable. The **pluralist** approach is to highlight divergent meanings as far as possible by presenting meanings and translations side by side: this is the basis of a Japanese multi-translation published in 2014, and another in English from 2020.³⁷ Contrary to traditional

commentators he refers to intended that the perfect verb should be read to denote the imperative; however, it is fair to say that the meanings are complementary.

³⁴ Along with this majority reading is one with Form II verb instead of Form III: *rabbānā ba‘id* (Ibn Kathīr, Abū ‘Amr, Hishām from Ibn ‘Āmir), with equivalent meaning (Khārūf 2002, 430).

³⁵ This is an unnecessarily dismissive remark against the majority readings. Abdel Haleem has not explained in his introductions how he sees the Readings, and how he means to interact with them as a translator. He has sometimes adopted an alternative to Ḥafṣ without explaining that it is deliberate, as we shall note concerning 12:110. Cf. his co-authored *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* which is “based upon the interpretations by classical Qur’anic commentators...according to the widespread reading of Ḥafṣ” (Badawi & Abdel Haleem 2020, xvi). This is despite the fact that early commentators and lexicographers were not limited to that Reading. Hence some explanations do appear based on others, such as *adraka* (in 27:66), a point which is acknowledged in the same work (ibid., 304).

³⁶ This principle is found with the likes of Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d. 987), a student of Ibn Mujāhid and a founder of the *tawjīh* genre. A contrary approach is advocated by the Andalusian exegete Abū Ḥayyān (d. 1344), who appears to be the forerunner of modern pluralistic approaches (Ibn ‘Āshūr 2021, 1:57).

³⁷ The appendix by Mujāhid Yōhei Matsuyama in *Nichi-A Taiyaku Kuruān* provides a scholarly background to the *qirā‘āt* and displays a high level of accuracy in rendering the Ten Readings in Japanese. Like the later *Bridges Translation* by Fadel Soliman and team, it maintains Ḥafṣ as the default, but unlike its English counterpart, the *Kuruān* also provides the Arabic variants (in transliteration) along with their translations. I am grateful to Marijn van Putten for his insights on the Japanese work and much besides, as part of our

scholarly methods of harmonization and reduction, some pluralist projects are built on the assumption that each word variant is intended by God in its own right, and that the collocation of variants at each juncture invites its own kind of reflection and explanation.³⁸

My own contention is simply that there is a plethora of meanings to be found in the Canonical Readings beyond Ḥafṣ which remain largely untranslated; and though some projects have attempted to address this gap, there is room for improvement based upon the *tafsīr* and *tawjīh* literature. I will demonstrate the gap with some examples from Sūrat Yūsuf, which contains as many as eighteen junctures at which the Readings arguably affect the translation. The table below displays the Reading according to Ḥafṣ (keeping in mind that there are usually others which agree with it) alongside the variant and how each could be translated. This is followed by some comments about existing translations of these verses.

Table 2: Selected *qirā'āt* in Q 12

Ḥafṣ (et al.)	Alternative Reading
12:12 – <i>yarta' wa-yal'ab</i> he will enjoy/eat and play	<i>narta'i wa-nal'ab</i> we will graze and play ³⁹
12:24 – <i>al-mukhlaṣīna</i> purified/chosen	<i>al-mukhliṣīna</i> sincere
12:49 – <i>ya'siruna</i> they will press	<i>ta'sirūna</i> you (pl.) will press
12:56 – <i>ḥaythu yashā'u</i>	<i>ḥaythu nashā'u</i>

collaborative paper: “Sources and Strategies in Translating the Canonical Readings.” A preliminary presentation is available on the YouTube channel of the Ibn ‘Ashur Centre: <https://youtu.be/mnX6suqbcls>.

³⁸ An example is 12:90, where the brothers exclaim “Is it really you, Joseph?” – the majority have *a-innaka*, while Ibn Kathīr and Abū Ja‘far have *innaka* without the interrogative particle. Following the principle of default agreement, the minority Reading can be understood in the same way, just as in English we may ask in this form: “It’s really you?” The *Bridges Translation* accentuates their divergence by rendering them, respectively: “Can it be that you really are Joseph?”/“You really are Joseph!” (Soliman 2020, 162). The pluralist approach is taken to its extreme in the book *Ittisā‘ al-Dalālāt* (Mihannā & Wādī 2017, 2:137), where it is suggested that the brothers first asked the question, then became fully sure of themselves and made it as a statement! They also mention an alternative view (previously mentioned but called unlikely by Abū Ḥayyān) to the effect that some of the brothers asked, and others declared.

³⁹ There are four permutations among the Canonical Readings, but I have selected just one alongside Ḥafṣ for maximal contrast. The Bewleys have “so he can enjoy himself and play about” (Bewley & Bewley 2013, 219), which is correct for Ḥafṣ but not for their chosen reading of Nāfi‘ which has *yarta'i* with final *kasrah* vowel. This is generally taken to be derived from the verb *irti‘ā* (Form VIII of *r-‘-y*) in contrast with the unvowelled ending, where the verb is Form I of *r-t-‘*. Bridges (Soliman 2020, 156) also ignores this well-attested distinction, rendering both as “eat well” (one interpretation of *r-t-‘*) and reducing the four permutations to two. While it is possible to interpret “grazing” in this way so that the two verbs reduce to one meaning (Ibn ‘Āshūr 2021, 5:650), that is contrary to Soliman’s overall methodology.

wherever he (Joseph) willed	wherever We (God) willed
12:109 – <i>nūḥī ilayhim</i> ⁴⁰ whom We inspire	<i>yūḥā ilayhim</i> who receive inspiration
12:109 – <i>a-fa-lā ta ‘qilūna</i> Won’t you understand?	<i>a-fa-lā ya ‘qilūna</i> Won’t they understand? ⁴¹
12:110 – <i>annahum qad kudhibū</i> that they had been lied to	<i>annahum qad kudhdhibū</i> that they had been belied/rejected
12:110 – <i>fa-nujjiya</i> whomever We will was saved	<i>fa-nunjī</i> We save whomever We will

The table above illustrates the potential variety that exists at nearly a thousand junctures in the Qur’an, stemming not only from the translators’ stylistic choices, or even from the substantive interpretations of the exegetes, but from flexibility within the text itself. The meanings in the left and right columns are mostly irreducible to a single translation, even though they are clearly complementary. For example, when Joseph delivers the instructions to survive the famine foretold in the king’s dream, it is natural enough that he says either “Then will come a year in which the people will be replenished with rain, and in which *they* will press” or “*you* will press” (12:49) – the latter in line with the preceding discourse. God says that Joseph could settle wherever he willed, but it is simultaneously true that this would be in accordance with His divine will (12:56). The messengers are described as men who received inspiration, and the sub-reading of Ḥafṣ makes the Inspirer explicit (12:109).

The column on the right presents meanings and renderings which are absent from the corpus of English translations. At least, that is the theory. In reality, a number of translations have “sincere” in 12:24, which may be justified by noting that sincerity is the outcome of being chosen by God to be purified (the passive participle of *akhlaṣa*). The active participle denotes making one’s religion purely for God, hence sincerity and devotion. However, there are some

⁴⁰ This is an example of a variant found only in one sub-reading, making it very much a minority in this particular way (the present-day ubiquity of Ḥafṣ notwithstanding).

⁴¹ Sale, Rodwell and Palmer have this pronoun. It should be noted that Orientalist translators before the ‘Cairo Edition’ of 1924 became the standard may well have adopted non-Ḥafṣ readings at various junctures. Their renderings would also be affected by the exegetical sources they consulted, such as al-Bayḍāwī and the Jalālayn, which are not based upon Ḥafṣ but largely upon Abū ‘Amr. The same explanation cannot be extended to the likes of Asad and Irving, who also have “they” in this verse. The most recently published translation renders it: “Do they heed not!” (al-Amri 2023, 742); this is particularly incongruous when presented alongside the Arabic text of Ḥafṣ.

popular translations which cannot be so easily reconciled with the Ḥafṣ text upon which they are supposedly based. This can be seen particularly clearly if we return to Hammad and his rendering of 12:110:

‘For’ when finally the messengers approached despair—and deemed that they had been resolutely belied ‘by their people’—Our help came to them...

This juncture is remarkable because very few translators have successfully conveyed the meaning of *kudhibū* as with Ḥafṣ et al. Exegetes explain that it means that the messengers thought that their own hopes had lied to them,⁴² or that the subject pronoun of “they deemed” (*zannū*) refers not to the messengers, but to their people. However, translators have mostly assumed that this Form I passive verb can be read as meaning “belied” etc., as though it were Form II. If they based their translation on the other Reading, they did not state as much. One wonders whether they consulted exegesis; the exegetes would have found the *kudhibū* reading much easier if it could simply be understood as *kudhhibū!*

The same verse is the site of another translation anomaly, albeit less widespread. Many⁴³ have rendered the passive *fa-nujjiya* as though it were an active verb with first person plural pronoun, “We saved” (which would require *anjaynā/najjaynā*). However, they could certainly opt to translate the other Reading, hence “We save”.⁴⁴ Ironically, this should have been found with the Bewleys in their translation of Nāfi’, but they rendered it according to Ḥafṣ: “and those We willed were saved” (Bewley & Bewley 2013, 228).

Conclusion

The preceding examples have shown, firstly, that there are meanings contained in the Qur’an, at least according to recognized exegetes, which have yet to appear in the corpus of Qur’an

⁴² Along these lines is the translation: “Until, when Our messengers gave over and thought they might be left unaided...” (Keller 2022, 248). This is a translation of the implication, as it contains no corresponding word to *kudhibū*. In the recording provided to me by Keller’s team, ‘Alī Hānī explains the *zann* as certainty, but then explains *kudhibū* as indicating that these messengers felt that they had been wrong in supposing (i.e. their own selves “lied to them”) that they were deserving of receiving God’s aid at that specific moment in time. He rules out the possibility (which could be inferred from this translation) that they supposed that God would not provide the aid He had promised.

⁴³ Such as Sale, Abdel Haleem, Khattab, Kaskas, W. Khan, Qara’i and Tahir-ul-Qadri. It is certainly possible that some or all of these translators simply preferred an active construction in English to a passive one, but this does impact on precision.

⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Āshūr provides an interesting explanation of the combination of past/present tense in the Ḥafṣ reading. This amounts to a condensed expression for: “Whoever We willed was saved, and whoever We will—in the future—will also be saved” (Ibn ‘Āshūr 2021, 6:51).

translations. These arise from the flexibility inherent to its Arabic vocabulary and ambiguity frequently present in its grammar and syntax – features embraced by Muslim scholars, who have tended to list multiple possibilities at such junctures in their commentaries. Neglect of this tradition has sometimes led translators to err in their interpretations and renderings, sometimes to a shocking extent. The usual lack of transparency about their methods and specific choices further disempowers the reader who depends on these translations to understand the Qur’an.

Underlying the analysis in this chapter is a call to move past tropes of “untranslatability” and focus on *translating the translatable*, specifically those possibilities which exist within the text and its Arabic commentaries. A key question any would-be retranslator of the Qur’an is: what can I add to all these preceding efforts and contributions? As a practitioner, I ask myself this question for the Bayyinah Translation. While I am confident that our attention to *tafsīr* and related disciplines and genres will provide much that has not been seen before, I also admit that this project will neither bring out the full range of exegetical readings, nor incorporate *qirā’āt* beyond the usual.

Therefore, I have further recommendations which I share with the reader, even as I work to implement them.⁴⁵ The first is to create a report for each juncture where Canonical Readings affect meaning, describing how they may be translated and perhaps harmonized, with reference to authoritative sources. The second is to create a systematic account of the translation possibilities provided by *tafsīr*, based upon at least one encyclopedic work. While these could conceivably be achieved in the printed book format, there is much more potential to create and display such detailed presentations through the latest digital and web technology. The third is to analyze translations and categorize them according to their correspondence with those exegetical options.

The bulk of this chapter has been about urging Qur’an translators to make best use of the exegetical literature, but the examples have also shown the value of surveying existing translations and being in effective scholarly dialogue with them. Sometimes, the meaning present in exegesis has been missed by most translators but documented by at least one; so, while there may be safety in following the crowd, it may be necessary to find and cite those who have brought greater clarity to particular verses.

⁴⁵ These are part of the work programme of the Ibn ‘Ashur Centre in partnership with Quran.com.

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