

Manifesto for a New Translation of the Qur'an : The Politics of "Respect" and the End(s) of Orientalism

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This paper begins where my book, *The Enlightenment Qur'an*, ends. There I argue that translation is the most political art, and make the case that if ever politics drove scholarship, it was precisely in the translation of the Qur'an. In what follows I will try to describe a recent trend in the translation of the Qur'an, one relating both to politics and translation—if by the latter we intend rendering meaning and representing culture—and plead for a kind of translation that moves in a slightly different, but very badly needed, direction.

First, the state of the field.¹ During the second half of the twentieth century there have been a number of translations into Western languages, all fuelled by decolonization and advances in Islamic studies. In the wake of the landmark translations of Arberry (1955) and Blachère (1949-57) in particular, we find a symphony of increasingly sympathetic voices coming from the West trying to find the best way of bringing the wonder of the Qur'an to the Western reader. One French translator, Jean Grosjean, speaks in his preface to Denise Masson's French translation of 1967 of the difficulty of translating a miracle: 'Le texte coranique fut un miracle. Est-ce qu'un traducteur peut refaire un miracle ? Il peut du moins, à force de respect pour ce texte, en livrer le reflet.'² Simultaneously there are a number of Muslim voices that translate the Qur'an into Western languages, but here

¹ In what follows, the treatment of the history of the recent translations of the Qur'an is taken from the last chapter of my *Enlightenment Qur'an*, 182-193. The assessment and critique of Ziauddin Sardar's arguments and the characteristics of a possible future translation of the Qur'an are presented here for the first time. References to translations of the Qur'anic text will be by verse number; references to paratexts (prefaces and notes) by page number. References to exegetical texts are taken from the website www.altafsir.com

² *Le Coran*, Masson trans., p. ix.

the translator's position is somewhat different. Muslims tend to translate the Qur'ān into Western languages in order to defend Islam against aggression by non-Muslims in addition to persuading the reader of the beauty and rightness of the Muslim faith. Cheikh Si Hamza Boubakeur's monumental translation of 1972, which combines a French translation of the text with a massive exegetical armature that relies on both Muslim and Western sources, clearly sets out to save the Qur'an from a "long-term defamation" and convince the non-Muslim reader of the coherence of its message.³

Most recent English translations of the Qur'an are dwarfed by the volume of their French counterparts, containing far less by way of notes, explanations and introduction to the text. Just why this is the case, and why translators and their publishers are reluctant to advertise their erudition, remains a mystery. Politically matters are downright explosive. For many years N.J Dawood's translation, first published by Penguin in 1956 (a year after Arberry's), was a best-seller, both because of the "contemporary" character of its idiom—no thees and thous here—but also, perhaps, because of the translator's and publisher's acumen. Five years ago, in a review of a more recent translation by Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2004), one of the sharpest minds in the UK, Ziauddin Sardar offered a serious critique of the Dawood translation in favour of Abdel Haleem's and, to a lesser extent, Arberry's.⁴ Sardar's was neither the first nor the only criticism of the Dawood translation, but it is well written, intelligent and a good diagnostic tool. Sardar takes Dawood to task on a number of points, some convincing, others less so. In particular, Sardar faults Dawood for translating the title of Q39, "Al-Zumar", as "The Hordes", and the title of Q61, "Al-Saff", as "Battle Array", seeing in both instances Dawood's putative tendency to "give an undertow of violence to the language of the Qur'an."

³ *Le Coran*, Boubakeur trans., p. 12.

⁴ "Lost in Translation," *The New Statesman*, 9/8/2004, 35.

Now, the trouble with this statement is that these are all instances in which the Dawood translation is not wholly inaccurate. In the 1990 edition of his translation (i.e. fourteen years before Sardar's reading), some of these inaccuracies were corrected: this edition shows Dawood using the word "throng" to translate "Zumar." The title of Q39, "Al-Zumar", which could be translated by "the crowds" (indeed, Arberry translates it as "The Companies", Abdel Haleem "The Throngs") but equally by "the hordes", refers to the detailed description of the Day of Resurrection that closes the chapter (Q39:71-75) in which believers and unbelievers will be driven to hell or paradise one group (crowd, horde, throng, zumar) after another:

وَسِيقَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِلَىٰ جَهَنَّمَ زُمَرًا ۖ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءُوهَا فَفُتِحَتْ
أَبْوَابُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَا أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ رُسُلٌ مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُونَ عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِ
رَبِّكُمْ وَيُنذِرُونَكُمْ لِقَاءَ يَوْمِكُمْ هَٰذَا قَالُوا بَلَىٰ وَلَكِنْ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَةُ الْعَذَابِ
عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ (71) قِيلَ ادْخُلُوا أَبْوَابَ جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا فَبئسَ
مَنَٰوَى الْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ (72) وَسِيقَ الَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا رَبَّهُمْ إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ زُمَرًا حَتَّىٰ
إِذَا جَاءُوهَا وَفُتِحَتْ أَبْوَابُهَا وَقَالَ لَهُمْ خَزَنَتُهَا سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ طِبْتُمْ
فَادْخُلُوهَا خَالِدِينَ (73)

Dawood translates the first pericope of Q39:71 and 73 "In throngs the unbelievers shall be led to Hell" and "But those who fear their Lord shall be led in throngs to Paradise." Abdel Haleem translates the first pericope of Q39:71 and 73 by: "Those who rejected the Truth will be led to Hell in their Throngs" and "Those who were mindful of their Lord will be led in Throngs to the Garden." Arberry translates these as "Then the unbelievers shall be driven in companies into Gehenna" and "Those that feared their Lord shall be driven in companies into Paradise." The use of the word "hordes" where Arberry uses "companies" and Abdel Haleem "throngs" might displease certain readers, but it does not really introduce

an undertow of violence, and, in any case, the word was changed to “Throngs” in 1990.

Now, violence is very much at the centre of the verse that gave Q61 its title, Al-Saff, which Dawood translates as “Battle Array”, Arberry translates as “The Ranks” and Abdel Haleem as “Solid Lines”. The verse that gives the sura its title is Q61:4: **إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُمْ بُيُوتٌ مَرْصُومٌ**. Dawood translates this as: “God loves those who fight for His cause in ranks a firm as a mighty edifice.” In the Arberry translation this reads: “God loves those who fight in His way in / ranks, as though they were a building/ well-compacted.” Similarly Abdel Haleem says, “God truly loves those who fight in solid lines for His cause, like a well-compacted wall.” The violent undertow is not Dawood’s invention; it is there in the content of the sura. Indeed, the preceding 2 verses refer to an incident in which a group of Muslims, having asked the Prophet about what God held most precious, and having been informed that it is fighting for His cause, failed to do so, and are reprimanded for their bad faith and hypocrisy in no uncertain terms.⁵

Sardar accuses Dawood of mistranslating the word “alaq” in Q96:2 by “clot of blood”, objecting rightly that a more accurate translation would have been “that which hangs”. And again, he sees in the use of the word blood a connotation of violence where none need exist. The trouble is that other translators, including Arberry, translate “alaq” by “blood-clot”, and Abdel Haleem, who uses the more accurate “The Clinging Form” adds in a footnote that “alaq” can refer to anything that clings: “a clot of blood, a leech or even a lump of mud.”⁶ Once again, the charge of adding a violent undertow is, so to speak, overblown.

⁵ **يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ (2) كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْ**
تَقُولُوا مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ (3) Cf. Tabari and Zamakhshari *ad loc.*

⁶ *The Qur’an*, Abdel Haleem trans., p. 428 note a.

In the one verse that Sardar cites (as opposed to chapter titles), he rightly points out that it is incorrect to translate Q2:217 [**وَالْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ**] as Dawood does:

In 2:217, for example, we read: "idolatry is worse than carnage". The word translated as "idolatry" is "*fitna*", which actually means persecution or oppression. Dawood's translation conveys an impression that the Qur'an will put up with carnage but not idolatry. In fact, the Qur'an is making persecution and oppression a crime greater than murder. The extract should read: "oppression is more awesome than killing".⁷

All of which is true, but two of the key exegetical authorities, Al-Zamakhshari and Al-Baydawi—both of which Dawood says he consulted-- explicitly say on this verse that "fitna" (which could mean a number of things, including oppression, persecution but also scandal, chaos, civil war, seduction, misguiding people) means "al-ikhraj aw al shirk"—i.e driving people out of their homes or polytheism, which is to say idolatry.⁸ "Qatl" does mean murder, but carnage is not too far away from murder, and in any case in the 1990 edition the word "bloodshed" is used instead of "carnage". This passage is a pericope from a much longer verse in which the Prophet has been asked to a specific question—about the legality of fighting during the truce period of the sacred months—and in which such fighting is justified on the grounds that the Muslims had been aggrieved and oppressed by the Meccans.⁹ In his

⁷ "Lost in Translation"

⁸ Cf. Zamakhshari and Baydawi *ad loc.*

**يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الشَّهْرِ الْحَرَامِ قِتَالٍ فِيهِ قُلْ قِتَالٌ فِيهِ كَبِيرٌ وَصَدٌّ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
وَكُفْرٌ بِهِ وَالْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ وَإِخْرَاجُ أَهْلِهِ مِنْهُ أَكْبَرُ عِندَ اللَّهِ وَالْفِتْنَةُ أَكْبَرُ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ
وَلَا يَزَالُونَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ حَتَّى يَرُدُّوكُمْ عَن دِينِكُمْ إِنِ اسْتِطَاعُوا وَمَنْ يَرْتَدِدْ مِنْكُمْ عَن
دِينِهِ فِيمَتٍ وَهُوَ كَافِرٌ فَأُولَئِكَ حَبِطَتِ أَعْمَالُهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَأُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ
النَّارِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ (217)**

Here is the *Tafsir Al-Muntakhab's* gloss on this verse (essentially a summary of arguments and traditions found in Tabari, Zamakhshari and Baydawi *ad loc.*):

translation of this verse, Abdel Haleem adds a lucid gloss making clear that, “To persecute people for believing in God is a worse offence than for the aggrieved party to fight back in the prohibited month.”¹⁰ In other words, the idolatry of the unbelievers, the Meccans who fought Muhammad, is a greater crime in the eyes of God than the act of killing or carnage in the sacred months. Once again, the Dawood translation is not as far off the mark as Sardar makes it sound.

So what is going on here? Why does Sardar see fit to evaluate a translation of the Qur’an, however problematic it might be, on such a shaky basis? He is best placed to answer this question, and I am sure that his answer would be a good one, but I think one indication might be gleaned from the argument of the review, namely that most English translations of the Qur’an are out to defame and denigrate Islam and its scripture. This defensive posture raises more questions than it answers, however. Sardar does not explain why, if Dawood really were out to denigrate Islam, he would actually bother to translate the Qur’an in full—a very arduous task if ever there was one—and do so in line with the most important mediaeval and early modern exegetes (Al-Jalalayn, Al-Baydawi and Al-Zamakhsari). Someone who really is out to denigrate Islam would probably take the easier and more spectacular route suggested by the likes of Geert Wilders or the now infamous Danish cartoonists. The link between Qur’anic translations that disrespect Islam and violence committed in the name of Islam is implied but never fully explored, (except at the point where

217- وقد كره المسلمون القتال في الشهر الحرام فسألوك عنه ، فقل لهم :
نعم إن القتال في الشهر الحرام إثم كبير ، ولكن أكبر منه ما حدث من أعدائكم
من صد عن سبيل الله وعن المسجد الحرام ، وإخراج المسلمين من مكة ، وقد
كان إيذاؤهم للمسلمين لإخراجهم من دينهم أكبر من كل قتل ، ولذلك أبيح
القتال في الشهر الحرام لقمع هذه الشرور ، فهو عمل كبير يتقى به ما هو أكبر
منه . واعلموا - أيها المسلمون - أن سبيل هؤلاء معكم سبيل التجنى والظلم ،
وأنهم لا يقبلون منكم العدل والمنطق ، ولا يزالون يقاتلونكم حتى يردوكم عن
دينكم إن استطاعوا ، ومن يضعف أمام هجماتهم ويرتد عن دينه حتى يموت على
الكفر فأولئك بطلت
أعمالهم الصالحة في الدنيا والآخرة ، وأولئك أهل النار هم فيها خالدون .

¹⁰ *The Qur’an*, p. 24 note a.

Abdel Haleem's translation of Q2:191 is praised for its explanation of the context and circumstances of that particular revelation.)¹¹ We are, in other words, still in the framework that sees the mis-translation of the Qur'an as an act of violent disrespect towards Islam.

The Abdel Haleem translation itself contains a preface that follows the language of respect and offence in the translation of the Qur'an, thereby bearing witness to the continued hegemony of the defensive position. Consider the frequency with which this binary opposition returns over the two pages in which he reviews the history of English translations of the Qur'an (those categories are applied mainly to non-Muslim translators of the Qur'an; Muslim translators are only faulted for being outdated and archaic):

وَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ حَيْثُ تَقِفْتُمُوهُمْ وَأَخْرِجُوهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَخْرَجْتُمُوهُمْ وَالْغَنَّةُ أَشَدُّ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ وَلَا تُقَاتِلُوهُمْ عِنْدَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ حَتَّى يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِيهِ فَإِنْ قَاتَلُوكُمْ قَاتِلُوهُمْ كَذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ

Abdel Haleem translates this verse thus: "Kill them wherever you encounter them [footnote d], and drive them out from wherever they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque. If they do fight you, kill them—this is what such disbelievers deserve."

Footnote d reads: "The Muslims were concerned as to whether it was permitted to retaliate when attacked within the sacred precincts in Mecca when on pilgrimage (see 2:196 and Razi's *Tafsir*). They are here given permission to fight back wherever they encounter their attackers, in the precinct or outside it." (*The Qur'an*, Abdel Haleem trans., p. 21)

In his introduction, Abdel Haleem has a long gloss on the first part of this verse in which he argues very strongly for reading such verses in their historical context—i.e. that in which the Muslims were the victims of aggression and were seeking revelations that would legitimize retaliation. (*The Qur'an*, Abdel Haleem trans., pp. xxii-xxvi) In this section of his translation he takes repeated aim at Dawood, but the charges are not always clear or well supported: "[T]he verse 'Slay them wherever you find them', thus translated by Dawood and taken out of context, has been interpreted to mean that Muslims may kill non-Muslims wherever they find them." (p. xxii) Now, the difference between "slay them wherever you find them" and "kill them wherever you encounter them" is small: neither version makes clear that the "them" refers to those who have attacked the Muslims. However, reading the Dawood translation, we find that the translation of the previous verse (Q2:218) ends with the word "aggressors." So by apposition, if nothing else, one could argue that the identification of the enemy against whom violence is legitimate as the aggressor is comprehensible, if not obvious. Furthermore, the problem that Abdel Haleem identifies is that there is an article by James Busuttill in the *Revue du droit penal militaire et de droit de la guerre*, published in 1991, entitled, " 'Slay them wherever you find them': Humanitarian Law in Islam." In other words, the difficulty seems to be that the Dawood translation is taken out of context, rather than the translation itself. Things would not be much better had the hapless Busuttill used the Abdel Haleem translation of this verse in his title, to yield " 'Kill them wherever you encounter them': Humanitarian Law in Islam."

In 1861 the Revd J.M. Rodwell undertook a translation of the Qur'an. His perspective on the Qur'an was a strongly biblical one. [note: In his notes he is over-eager to claim biblical sources for Qur'anic material, and quick to claim that there are contradictions between verses where none exists] One oddity is his disregard for the traditional Muslim arrangement of the suras, rearranging them into what he thought to be the chronological order; moreover some of his footnotes include material that is incorrect and offensive to Muslims...

The next translator of the Qur'an into English, E.H. Palmer (1840-62), is claimed to be the first who had direct and long-lasting contact with the Arabs and sought, in style, to retain some of the 'rude, fierce eloquence' of the Qur'an but without becoming 'too rude or familiar.' His translation appeared in 1880. He was the first to reflect, in his footnotes, some real respect for the text and the Prophet of Islam.

[...]

Arthur J. Arberry's translation, *The Koran Interpreted*, appeared in 1955 and is undoubtedly one of the most respected translations of the Qur'an in English. Arberry shows great respect towards the language of the Qur'an, particularly its musical effects.¹²

Questionable though Rodwell's translation might be, his re-arrangement of the Suras was based in part on research into the chronology of the Qur'an by Gustav Weil and, more significantly, Theodor Nöldeke's epoch-making *Geschichte des Qorans*. In addition to parallels between Qur'anic and Biblical material, Rodwell was especially sensitive to the form and oral character of the Qur'an. Whether or not there was an intention to offend behind Rodwell's translation, Abdel Haleem's

¹² *The Qur'an*, Abdel Haleem trans., pp. xxvii-xxviii.

comments convey the deep suspicion towards Orientalist scholarship that exists in the wake of the Imperialist age. The default working hypothesis seems to be that Western translators and students of the Qur'ān are automatically suspect; those who do show 'real respect' towards Islam and its scripture are the exception rather than the rule. Far from enlightening the reader, passages like these only confuse matters: instead of speaking of a translation that is or is not faithful to the original, Abdel Haleem refers to the attitude of the translators and their varying degrees of respect, as if respect and accuracy went hand in hand, and as if any inaccuracy could only be the result of a deliberate desire to betray and offend: *traduttore traditore*. As you might have guessed, I find this translation of fidelity into respect far from desirable: a faithful translation is probably, though not necessarily, more open to the possibilities of the original—transcendent possibilities in the case of a sacred original—than a translation that shows “respect”. Fidelity contains respect—we are always respectful of those to whom we are faithful, but we are not necessarily faithful to those to whom we show “respect.”

How, then, do we get out of this paranoid prison house and end the dialogue of the deaf?

We can begin by understanding where references to “respect” and accusations of “denigration” come from: not from the Qur'an and its translation, but from the stigma attached to being a Muslim in Britain. There is also the increasing ethnicization of religious groups, whereby the language and vocabulary once used to talk about race has now become the standard code for talking about Muslims, despite the mind-boggling diversities and very real divisions within the Muslim “community.” I am sorry to say that the slights, injuries and humiliations, real or imagined, that are felt across the barriers of race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity, will not be healed through a better translation of the Qur'an, any more

than anti-Semitism was stamped out through research into the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud during the C19th and first half of the twentieth century. Nor will the increasing excellence of the translations bring political violence to an end. So as we try to understand where Sardar's and Abdel Haleem's arguments come from, it would also be a good idea to recognize that no translation of the Qur'an can do all of the things that they seem to think necessary.

What, then, should future translations of the Qur'an do?

My question betrays a certain degree of arrogance: there already are several excellent, first rate translations of the Qur'an, including Abdel Haleem's (despite my misgivings) and the more recent one that came out from Penguin, Tarif Khalidi's. Still, rather than giving marks to individual translators, it might make more sense to reflect on the Qur'an as text and scripture, to see where the pitfalls lie, and how they might be avoided.

We could start by recognizing that any reader of the Qur'an, even a native speaker of Arabic, is involved in a process of translation. This is not only for reasons having to do with the relationship between scripture and exegesis, to which I will return below, but also for the obvious reason that nobody speaks Qur'anic Arabic any more. Even when we hear those who claim to come closest to the Arabic of the Qur'an—Azharite Sheikhs and news broadcasters—their Arabic is modern classical Arabic, not the seventh-century *koine* that we believe to be the language of the Qur'an. The act of translation is always already there.¹³

We would also do well to remember Wilfred Cantwell Smith's position about the Qur'an and/as scripture. Writing in a comparative religious context he argued that it would be a mistake to compare the Qur'an to the Bible, and not only because

¹³ This is the point of departure of an incisive new study of the linguistics of the Qur'an by Mustapha Bentaibi, *Le Coran comme texte adressé: Essai de lecture* (Forthcoming, Maisonneuve et Larose, 2009)

of the radically different textual histories of the two books.¹⁴ The place occupied by the Qur'an in Muslim belief and thought is, in fact, better compared to the person of Christ in Christianity: both are the word of God, made text-for-recitation in the Qur'an and incorporated as flesh in Christ. Both the Qur'an and Christ are the revelation itself. At one remove from the revelation comes the record of the revelation: the Bible in Christianity, the traditions (the hadith) in Islam. For this reason, Cantwell Smith argues, it is difficult if not impossible to apply to the Qur'an the categories of inquiry that are applied to the Bible: "The counterpart to Biblical criticism is hadith criticism. To look for historical criticism of the Qur'an is rather like looking for a psychoanalysis of Jesus."¹⁵ It is perhaps this that should be the opening gambit in any translation of the Qur'an, in addition to the description of its linguistic and cultural impact on and for believing Muslims. It would certainly go a long way towards conveying the sensitivities that surround the Qur'an in social and cultural dialogue. But the question of textual criticism should not end there.

Cantwell Smith does not know how right he is in his facetious statement comparing historical criticism of the Qur'an to a psychoanalysis of Jesus. Both are activities related to translation. In a lecture that he gave in the year 2000, Adam Phillips compared psychoanalysis to the translation of a person.¹⁶ A psychoanalysis of Jesus, or a translation of the revelation that he embodied, might not be too far removed from a historical criticism of the revealed text of the Qur'an. This historical criticism would aim not at re-building the Q as scripture, but understanding the text that is being translated, whether it is being translated into a language other than Arabic or whether it is being conveyed across a given exegetical apparatus.

In *What is Scripture?*, Cantwell Smith argued, somewhat controversially, that scriptures are not texts. Scripture is a human *activity*, usually conceived in relation

¹⁴ *Islam in Modern History*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁵ *Islam in Modern History*, p. 26 n. 17.

¹⁶ "On Translating a Person", *Promises, Promises*, pp. 125-147.

to a text.¹⁷ This is, of course, especially true of the Qur'an, whose name signifies "that which is to be recited", and whose exegesis—indeed the very knowledge of which—depends first and foremost on the "science of the readings" (*ilm al qira'at*). This is not to deny the textual dimension of the Qur'an, but it is to re-affirm that the text is a prolegomenon to the recitation (the true meaning of *qira'a*) during which the function of the scripture is fulfilled.

In the same volume Cantwell Smith made a very strong case for the historicity of the Qur'an. Regardless of the position one takes on the createdness or uncreatedness of the Qur'an, the historicity of its reception and interpretation has to be foregrounded in any translation worthy of the name. This is, probably, one reason for the series of translations that arranged Suras and even verses in chronological order during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Palmer, Bell). But as Cantwell Smith reminds us, it is important not to get lost in this search for origins, and to bring out what the Qur'an means, or could mean, to its readers here and now, as well as what it has meant to its readers there and then. As even a cursory glance will show, the Qur'an itself is full of instances where God is in dialogue with the Prophet and the Muslims, which is one reason why we have entire libraries of books dedicated to the circumstances of revelation (*asbab al nuzul*). "The real meaning of the Qur'an is not any one meaning, but a dynamic process of meanings in variegated and unending flow."¹⁸ This should, by the way, include a recognition of recent exegesis, such as Al-Manar, rather than stopping somewhere in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.

Needless to say a key part of the production of that meaning is the *tafsir*, or exegesis, of the Qur'an, a process that involves linguistic dismantling as much as it does a reconstruction and reconsideration of the circumstances of revelation. Here

¹⁷ *What Is Scripture?*, pp. 15-20, 212-227.

¹⁸ *What Is Scripture?*, p. 89.

I'd like to invoke the idea put forth by Auerbach over half a century ago in *Mimesis*, and renewed by Wansbrough three decades ago in *Qur'anic Studies*: the need for interpretation of scripture. Scripture, they argued, is always in a state of *Deutungsbedürftigkeit*.¹⁹ This does not simply mean that exegesis is something "soldered on" to scripture, but rather that scripture requires exegesis and interpretation in order to be itself. The message may come from a divine source, but its transmission to human ears, hearts and minds is a constant calling for this interpretation. As such no translation of the Qur'an worthy of the name should be produced without at least a minimal exegetical apparatus.

Nevertheless, *pace* Cantwell Smith, more attention must be paid to the textuality of the Qur'an, and the genesis of the text that we know today as the Qur'an. Something of the variety of variant readings (not just interpretations, but readings, wordings) and the complex history of its compilation really must be foregrounded. In dealing with the Qur'an we are at a distinct advantage vis-à-vis the Jewish and Christian scriptures insofar as the history of the establishment of the text is much more compressed and far better documented. Textual genesis operates both diachronically and synchronically, however. In a book that cost him his career and nearly cost him his life, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argued that we, as readers of the Qur'an, need to pay more attention to the text of the *Qur'an* rather than fetishizing the object known as the *mushaf*, taking into account that what we have is, as a result of the very historical forces that shaped the *mushaf*, only a portion of the entire *Qur'an*.²⁰ Just how much of the revelation is missing we shall probably never know, but it would at least be a good idea to acknowledge the historical sources and traditions, both Sunni and Shi'i, that make this claim. It is only through this obligatory passage through the textuality of the Qur'an that we can begin to fully

¹⁹ *Mimesis*, pp. 15-16; *Qur'anic Studies*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Mafhum Al-Nass*, pp. 11-13.

appreciate its status and operation as scripture, and start to convey that to the non-Arabic reader.

The last item that should go into this idealised future translation of the Qur'an is teamwork. The norm, to this day, consists of single translators and researchers working in splendid isolation over a number of years. Despite the glorious scholarly efforts that have gone into renewing our understanding of the Qur'an, we still have translators working alone. This can, and has, produced impressive results, most recently in the form of Tarif Khalidi's compelling new translation. It is time, however, that a team of scholars got together and produced the Qur'anic equivalent of the Jerusalem Bible: a thoroughly well researched translation that takes critical heed of the history of the text and delivers to the reader the immense variety of meaning, belief and spiritual transport that have accompanied the Qur'an from the seventh century to the present day.

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