

Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation

Ahmed Ali

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001. 572 pages.

Ahmed Ali's book is a much welcome addition to the multiple editions now available of Islam's holy book in English rendition. As the dust jacket informs us, this translation of the Qur'an's meaning was first published in the United States in 1988. Now reprinted and handsomely reproduced in a handy size, these factors and its esthetics and readability make this volume suitable for general and classroom use. Educators who wish to assign a good translation of the Qur'an's meaning, particularly for undergraduates, will find this work an obvious choice out of the plethora of choices currently available.

Ali's work avoids the linguistic archaism of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's otherwise excellent rendition, jarring to the ears of a typical 20-year-old today reared on television English. A. J. Arberry's translation, celebrated for its lyrical richness and its being supposedly (but not quite) evocative of the Arabic original, is stilted in parts and even inaccurate on occasion. When I assigned it for my undergraduate class on Islam a few years ago, at times I had to stop and disentangle the occasional fractured syntax for my students and reconstruct the original Arabic in my mind to extricate the literal meaning, sometimes sacrificed for literary effect.

My next choice was T. B. Irving's rendition of the Qur'an's meaning into what he called American English. Although largely accurate, the rendition's pedestrian nature, which bordered on the colloquial, was disappointingly inadequate to the task. Although the meaning was clear, the majesty of transcendental *verbum dei* was not evoked. N. J. Dawood's widely used rendition is certainly adequate, but the prose is occasionally limp and uninspiring, and thus unsatisfying at a deeper level.

Ali's work straddles a happy medium between contemporaneity in style and elegance of diction, both achieved without any sacrifice in clar-

ity of meaning. Famed scholar of Islam Fazlur Rahman is quoted on the back cover as saying: “This translation of the Qur’an aims at doing something new – it seeks to bring out the original rhythms of the Qur’anic language and the cadences. It also departs from traditional translations in that it gives more refined and differentiated shades of important concepts.” The reader will, on the whole, not quibble with this gracious assessment.

The Arabic on facing pages is definitely a beneficial accessory. For those who know the language, it is always helpful to be able to glance at the original text for a quick comparison with the English rendering. Those who do not know Arabic or have only a passing acquaintance with it also will appreciate, at the aesthetic level, having a visual manifestation of the original language. I know my students benefit from engaging with the Qur’an’s visual, oral, and aural aspects, thereby replicating to a large measure the Muslim’s engagement with the Qur’anic phenomenon in its various dimensions.

The translator’s decision to number each verse is further to be lauded. This is a feature notably lacking in both Arberry’s and Dawood’s translations, where only about every five or six verses are marked, making the precise tracing of a verse somewhat challenging.

One wishes, however, that the annotations were a bit more generous. The sparse notes actually whet the appetite for more. A gloss on ‘Imran (from *Surat Al-i ‘Imran*) would have been helpful, since the Qur’anic understanding of this religious personage differs from the biblical perspective and has occasioned some misunderstanding on the part of Orientalists. One realizes that the translator had to make difficult choices, for fulsome annotation would have led to a substantially bulkier volume (and consequently, a heftier price), which would have made it less attractive for classroom usage in particular. The producers made the right tradeoff in this case.

On a few occasions, the transliteration of Arabic words sometimes follows the Persian pronunciation (e.g., *vajha* instead of *wajha*, and *lahv al-hadith* instead of *lahw al-hadith*). Use of diacritics is occasionally inconsistent, for the emphatic consonants and the long vowels are not always indicated. Infrequently, this oversight occurs within one word containing more than one long vowel, such as on page 240, where “Isra’il” should be rendered as “Isra‘il.” The full title of the seventeenth chapter occurs on the same page as Bani Isra‘il, whereas the title should be given as Bana Isra‘il, indicating the nominative rather than the genitive inflection of Banu. In a future revised edition, these lapses should be corrected to conform to the standard rules of Arabic transcription.

But these are minor cavils. All in all, this is a fine addition to the corpus of English translations of the Qur'an's meaning and is highly recommended for a broad readership.

Asma Afsaruddin
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana