

CHAPTER 7

Translation as Contemporary Qur'anic Exegesis: Ahmed Ali and Muslim Modernism in India

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Translating the Qur'an seems, for some scholars in Islamic Studies, to be the crowning achievement of their career.¹ Ahmed Ali (born in New Delhi, India in 1910 and died in Karachi, Pakistan in 1994), while a noted Pakistani novelist and not a professional Islamicist, appears to be no different. The popularity of his English translation of the Qur'an is attested to in its publication history: First appearing in print in 1984,² subsequently in a second edition in 1986, a '[r]evised definitive edition' in 1988,³ 'a [f]inal revised definitive edition' in 1994, and finally in a posthumous ninth paperback printing 'newly comprising revisions last made by the translator in 2001.'⁴ While a comparative study of the various editions of his translation(s) would shed light on the translator's method or theory of translation, his translation(s) of key Qur'anic theological terms, and his use of earlier English translations of the Qur'an⁵ as well as classical Arabic sources, such an investigation would be beyond the scope of this article.

In this article, my analysis of Ali's translation will be based on the aforementioned 2001 edition, wherein I examine the following themes: first, Ali's translation of the Qur'an as a form of modern exegesis (*tafsir*), as it particularly relates to the Islamic theological dogma of the inimitability of the Qur'an (*i'jaz al-Qur'an*), and his notion of a 'contemporary translation'; the second, the intellectual background and the Indian modernist context of Ali's

translation, specifically looking at the influences of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) in British India, regarding the question of reconciling modern science and reform with Islamic tradition; and third, an analysis of selected Qur'anic verses translated by Ali which reflect a form of Muslim scientism, or scientific exegesis (*al-tafsir al-'ilmi*), and modernist social reform, where translation and modern commentary become inextricably linked.

Translation as Contemporary Exegesis

The historical question of the Qur'an's Arabic inimitability is touched upon by Ali in his preface to the translation. Anticipating the theological and linguistic difficulties in translating the Qur'an into English, he writes, 'Qur'anic Arabic is distinguished by sublimity and excellences of sound and eloquence, rhetoric and metaphor, assonance and alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhyme, ellipse (*sic* ellipses) and parallelism. Its cadences and sprung rhythm, pauses and stops, imply eloquent speech and duration. Some of its stylistic beauties are untranslatable and can only be suggested [in the target language].'⁶

Within many modern Islamic theological circles the question of treating the Qur'an as literature, like a novel, or any other text *qua* text, which is analysed with all the tools of literary critical method and theory,⁷ is often rejected as blasphemous.⁸ This rejection of treating Islam's scripture, the Qur'an and also the *hadith*, as a product or creation of human culture and experience, is largely premised on the medieval Muslim theological arguments about the literary inimitability or miraculous nature of the Qur'anic text.⁹ The inimitability argument arose partly in the context of Muhammad's challenge to the pagan Arabs to produce a text, or even a verse, resembling that of the Qur'an,¹⁰ and later within the early medieval inter-religious, mainly Christian-Muslim, polemics over the question of whether Muhammad, Islam's prophet, like Jesus before him, had any miracles of his own.¹¹ The Muslim theological response was that as an 'illiterate man' (*ummi*),¹² Muhammad, through God's power, revealed an eternally present textual miracle, the Arabic Qur'an, while Jesus, whom Muslims believe to be a prophet of God but not his son, produced (temporal) miracles, to be witnessed only by his contemporaries. Thus, the question of temporality versus eternity of miracles was, at least for some Muslim theologians, settled in favor of the eternity of miracles. As for the Qur'an's literary quality, the miracle lies in the text's unmatched eloquence (*balagha*), rhetoric (*bayan*), and excellence of style, as Muslim theologians argued, which could not be imitated by the combined efforts of all of mankind and *Jinn*-kind¹³ (the two Islamically recognized sentient

beings, created by God, who inhabit the terrestrial world), or if they could imitate the Qur'an's style, then God himself has, through his volition (*irada*), miraculously prevented them from doing so.

Whether the Qur'an's literary style can be emulated in translation or even if a translation of the Qur'an itself is possible are questions with which many translators, Muslim and non-Muslim, have had to struggle. As to the latter question, the issue is a theological one having to do with the identity of the Qur'an in another language; that is, unlike the Christian Bible, which when translated into any language theologically retains its identity as the Bible,¹⁴ is a translated Qur'an a Qur'an, or merely an *interpretation* of the Arabic text (as, for example, Arthur J. Arberry titled his own translation, *The Koran Interpreted*)? While apparently respecting the theological notion of the inimitability of the Qur'an, Ali does not mince words when calling his translation a translation; that is, he believed he could convey the meaning of the Arabic text into the semantics of his target language, English. As one who appears to have been keenly aware of the nuances and shades of meaning in language (he himself translated literary works into English from Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Indonesian, and Chinese¹⁵), Ali says, '[m]y attempt [in translating the Qur'an] has been to give rendering [of the Arabic text] as faithfully as is possible within the limits of another language wholly divergent in syntax, structure and scriptural development.'¹⁶ Moreover, as a translator Ali believed that he should strive to reproduce, for his English reading audience, a sense of the Qur'an's literary style, its rhymed prose (*saja*)¹⁷ and poetics. Ali says, '[t]he form of metrical lines has, therefore, been adopted in this translation to convey through accent, sprung rhythm and tonal structure the sonority and rhythmic patterns of the Qur'anic language.'¹⁸ That is, Ali seeks to translate into English the very same stylistic, literary features of the Arabic language of the Qur'an which, albeit in a target language, are so often the focus of the theological and philological discourses in Islamic works on Qur'anic inimitability.

As a novelist, Ali appears to have accepted the notion of the Qur'an as literature, or at least as divine literature. He says, the Qur'anic text recasts 'the rich poetic traditions of the Pagan Arabs [who] did not deal in abstraction and pure thought ... [but in] concrete, almost physical objects [into] the metaphorical mold through allegory, paralleling it as a rhythmical unit with the conceptual language of transcendence which acquired primary authority and universal persuasive power to conform to its conceptual standards.'¹⁹

This responsiveness to how language, or more to the point literature, transposes and appropriates the words and objects of a culture as its own is central to understanding Ali's approach to translating the Qur'anic text as a *contemporary* commentary on the Qur'an itself. For Ali, the task of the

translator is not merely one of a mechanical, *ad litteram* translation but a creative act where translation is primarily *ad sensum*,²⁰ appropriating as much of the 'intended' meaning of the source text (ST) for a target text (TT) whose audience and context is contemporary and modern—a context, historically and theologically, far removed from the environment of the ST, but one within which the translator locates himself and the TT.²¹ While there have been critical reviews of Ali's translation of the Qur'an—of it being too 'liberal' in its agenda or 'ahistorical' in its rendering of the Arabic text—the point that is often overlooked (except perhaps by Robinson and Conrad) is that Ali is engaged in a modernist project whose purpose, through the craft of translation, is to make the Qur'anic 'message' relevant to a contemporary, global audience. In this respect, Ali's translation is a contemporary exegesis of the Qur'an.²²

Indian Muslim Modernism, Scientism, and Social Reform

The context of Ali's translation of the Qur'an can be traced to the modernist thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in British India,²³ the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh (M.O.A. College),²⁴ one of the first modern universities in the modern world, which in 1920 became Aligarh Muslim University (where Ali received his Bachelor of Arts in English in 1930). Having resigned himself to the decline and end of the Mughal Empire (r. 1526–1858) and the rise of British colonial power in India, Sir Sayyid forcefully argued that the way forward for India's Muslim communities would be through modern, Western-style education and science, coupled with loyalty to the British Empire.²⁵ In promoting modern education in India, he believed that the primary educational focus of the M.O.A. College should be the modern natural and applied sciences as well as a scientific approach to Islamic scriptural sources and history. Sir Sayyid himself studied the Islamic sciences in his youth, but considered certain aspects of traditional Muslim belief, particularly in folklore and superstition, to be obstacles to modernizing India's Muslim communities and contributing to their rejection of modern science. The reconciliation of modern science with the Islamic religion was a foremost intellectual preoccupation of Sir Sayyid, leading him to a kind of scientism where (properly modern) religious belief would either be confirmed by the discoveries of science or at the minimum not be contradicted by them; that is, if Islam was to become modern, Muslims must shed those beliefs that are not, or cannot be, substantiated by 'reason', the 'scientific method', and the 'laws of nature', including, for example, the Islamic belief in the existence of the *Jinn*, who are attested to in the Qur'an and *hadith*.²⁶ Western science is, therefore, taken to be a panacea for the political and social ills facing the

Muslim world, and to be synonymous with a positivistic form of rationality that constitutes the most correct path to becoming modern.

Sir Sayyid's Muslim modernism and reform in certain respects represent a kind of 'Protestant turn' within the Islamic tradition where faith is reduced to the most fundamental of religious tenets,²⁷ which are based on the earliest Islamic scriptural source, the Qur'an, and to some extent only on the *hadith* that are corroborated by it or have widely attested narrations (*mutawatir*),²⁸ Sir Sayyid rejected much of the medieval Muslim intellectual and theological traditions as irrelevant to meeting the needs of the modern world. Revival and reform of Islam is then based on a purging of supererogatory facets of historical Islam which are not only associated with the traditional Islamic sciences of the Qur'an and *hadith*, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), but also with the popular practices of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, associated with shrine saint-worship. Thus the question of the relationship between modern science and Islam would, as conceived by Sir Sayyid, be central to how Muslims were going to construct their (new) identity and define their place in the modern world—a world that at least in terms of political power and prestige, much of it believed to be based on scientific, technological, and military progress, was slowly moving towards a Western trajectory. The question, for Muslim modernists in India (and also for Salafi modernists, like Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani' al-Asadabadi [d. 1897] and his disciple Muhammad 'Abduh [d. 1905] in Egypt²⁹) was how were Muslims going to reclaim their rightful place in the (modern) world. The resounding answer to which they gave was through modern science, educational reform, and by adopting Western political institutions.

This form of scientism and Islamic reform, associated with Sir Sayyid's modernist Muslim thought, is clearly evinced in Ali's translation of those Qur'anic verses addressing the supernatural and those that, he believes, portend some form of modern scientific proof or discovery; and, as he saw them, those belonging to the category of superstitious belief and of gender rights (see below). As a genre modern scientific exegesis approaches the Qur'anic text with an eye to interpreting the verses that in some way have to do with modern scientific problems or discoveries in such disciplines as biology, astronomy, cosmology, and physics,³⁰ The intellectual background to scientific exegesis goes as far back as Islam's medieval period to such figures as Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who argued that while the Qur'an does not encompass knowledge of all the sciences, it nevertheless does encompass the keys to the Arab or Islamic sciences and to some of those of the ancient Greeks (*'ulum al-Arab wa-l-awā'il*); and Nizam al-Din al-Nisaburi (d. 1330), an astronomer whose scientific theories influenced his exegesis of the Qur'an, who appears to have argued for the compatibility of science and religion.³¹

More modern scientific exegetes of the Qur'an include Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Iskandarani (d. 1880), who saw the total convergence of the natural sciences and the Qur'an;³² Sir Sayyid who wrote a six volume Qur'anic exegesis, titled *The Exegesis of the Qur'an, That is the Guide and Criterion [for Discerning Truth]*, the earliest exegetical work of its kind to address the modern sciences, ethics and society, explicating the Qur'an according to the contemporary, modern context of India's Muslim communities,³³ additionally, he composed a work on the principles of Qur'anic exegesis;³⁴ the Egyptian Tantawi Jawhari (d. 1940), considered to be the founder of modern scientific exegesis, composed a twenty-six volume scientific commentary, which includes photographs, scientific charts and illustrations, making the case that the chapters (*suras*) of the Qur'an accord with, if not confirm, much of the discoveries of the modern natural and astronomical sciences;³⁵ the Syrian modernist Salafi 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1902) regarded the Muslim 'abandonment' of science and reliance on 'superstition' as inevitably leading to the decline of 'Islamic civilization' and to its subjugation to the (modern scientific) West;³⁶ and finally, the Egyptian Ahmad Hanafi (d. 1968) wrote an exegesis attempting to reconcile modern astronomy with Qur'anic cosmology.³⁷ While Ali may have been familiar with some of these authors, their methods of scientific exegesis, and their critiques of Muslim culture, his formative influence appears to have been Sir Sayyid's modernist works, most likely encountered during his undergraduate years at Aligarh Muslim University and possibly later at Lucknow University, where he was awarded an M.A. in 1931, also, in English.

Ahmed Ali and the Art of Modernist Translation

What follows is a selection of Qur'anic verses translated by Ali that reflect the influence of modernist Muslim thought and scientism, where translation and exegesis become inextricably linked, and in which the following modern themes are addressed: the natural sciences, miracles, superstition and folklore, as well as women and gender rights.³⁸

Scientism

In commenting on Surat al-Qamar, 54.1, which begins with the spectral image of 'the splitting of the moon' (*inshaqqa l-qamar*) on judgment day, Ali provides an allegorical interpretation of this verse saying, '[t]he moon was the emblem of [Muhammad's tribe,] the Quraish. ... [and] that the flag of the Arabs consisted of the moon. ... [Its splitting,] therefore, stands, in the metaphor of the Qur'an, for the split in the ranks of the Quraish.'³⁹ While the image of the moon's splitting appears to have been (literally) intended,

among other similar verses in the Qur'an,⁴⁰ as a sign of the judgment hour, to strike fear in the hearts of Muhammad's enemies and awe in the hearts of the believers, Ali goes to great lengths, contrary to the medieval Qur'anic exegetical tradition, to show that this verse has to be metaphorically understood and is in no way miraculous,⁴¹ nor a breach of the laws of nature. Another example of Ali's scientism is in his translation of the *rawasi*, mentioned in Surat al-Nahl, 16.15. He translates this word with the geological term 'stabilisers', commenting that these 'are actually mountains in the interior of the earth made evident by modern geophysicists who mapped the earth's interior.'⁴²

16.15. He placed *stabilisers* in the earth so that while it *revolves* you live undisturbed, and the rivers and tracks so that you may find your way; 16.16. As well as many other signs, as by the stars (you) find direction [Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, 229; emphasis added].

16.15. He cast on the earth *firm mountains*, so that it does not sway with you, and rivers and roads so that you may be guided. 16.16. And landmarks. And [men] can guide themselves by the stars [Jones, *Al-Qur'an*, 250-251; emphasis added].

The idea that the Qur'an contains scientific knowledge which only now is being discovered, or confirmed, is evidenced by Ali's translation and commentary (also see below),⁴³ clearly reflecting Sir Sayyid's scientific rationalism and rejection of miracles.

Rejection of Folklore, Miracles, and Superstition

Surat al-Nahl has a well-known reference to Solomon learning 'the speech of birds (*tayr*)' and ants,⁴⁴ 27.16, and describes him as being amused with his comprehension of these languages, 27.18:

27.16. Solomon was heir to David, and he said: 'O people, we have been taught the language of Tair, and have been given of everything. This is clear favour indeed.' 27.17. His Armies of jinns and men and Tair assembled, formed into ranks, (and marched) 27.18. Till they reached the Valley of Naml. Said the lady of Naml: 'O Naml, go into your dwellings lest Solomon and his

27.16. Solomon was David's heir. He said, 'O mankind we have been taught the speech of birds, and we have been given [some] of everything. This is clear preference.' 27.17. The hosts of Solomon were rounded up for him: *jinn*, men and birds; and they were urged on. 27.18. Then where they came to the valley of ants, an ant said, 'O ants, enter your dwellings and Solomon and his

hordes should crush you unawares.' 27.19. (Solomon) smiled, amused at her speech, and said: 'O Lord grant me that I should be grateful for the favours You have bestowed on me and my parents' [Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, 322].

hosts will not crush you when they do not see [you].' 27.19. He smiled, laughing at its speech, and said, 'My Lord, press me to be thankful for Your blessings, which You bestowed on me and my parents' [Jones, *Al-Qur'an*, 346].

To Ali's modern scientific sensibility, the notion of God teaching Solomon—or for that matter any man—to speak 'the language[s]' of the birds and the ants is an outright fiction or fabrication, whose (re)interpretation appears to be based on a rejection of the *Isra'iliyyat* or *Isra'ili* based exegesis; that is, traditions and materials mainly dealing with cosmogony and the stories of the lives of the patriarchs and prophets (*qisas al-anbiya'*), whose origins, in the medieval Islamic exegetical tradition, are reputed to be Jewish or Biblical and thus deemed alien to the Qur'an, *hadith*, and Islam itself.⁴⁵ In the context of modernist Muslim reform, the *Isra'iliyyat* are often derided for being a major source of the superstitious beliefs and folklore associated with 'Muslim backwardness',—the purging of which from the Qur'anic exegetical tradition is a condition for either modernizing Islam or returning it to its 'pristine' origin.⁴⁶ Ali identifies the languages of the 'Tair' and the 'Naml'—transliterated by him—as ones spoken by South Yemeni men who 'were often named after their tribes as well as [after] birds. ... [and that] knowledge of the language of *tair* implies that [the] Tair were a conquered tribe or race and David and Solomon had knowledge of their language,' and likewise the 'Naml' as 'a tribe from Syria'.⁴⁷ And, similarly, that the *Jinn* 'implies nomadic tribes many of whom were recruited by the king of Tyre for Solomon[,]'⁴⁸ and not the mythic creatures whom God fashioned out of 'smokeless fire'.

And, in Surat al-Fil where God (miraculously) defeats the military expedition of Abraha, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen, against Mecca, ca. 571 C.E., the traditional year of Muhammad's birth, employing the *tayran ababil* and *hijaratim min sijil*⁴⁹:

105.1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? 105.2. Did He not make their plan go wrong, 105.3. And sent *hordes of chargers* flying against them, 105.4. (While) you were pelting them with stones of *porphyritic*

105.1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the men with elephants? 105.2. Did He not cause their mischief to go astray? 105.3. He sent on them *birds in swarms*, 105.4. Which pelted them with *stones of baked clay*. 105.5. And made them

lava,⁴⁸ 105.5. And turned them like devoured ears of corn [Jones, *Al-into pastured fields of corn* [Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, 589; emphasis added]? *Qur'an*, 552; emphasis added]?

In a long, detailed footnote on this Sura, Ali provides a description of Abraha's elephant army and of the pursuing battle with the Meccans who were mounted on 'chargers' or 'swift-footed horse[s]', historically comparing it to 'those [battles] of Porus⁵¹ and Ibrahim Lodi⁵² had done under the charge of cavalries of Alexander and Barbur [where] ... the elephants would go amuck in such an attack.'⁵³ This historical excursus into military animals and campaigns is the basis for his translation of the *tayran ababil* as 'herds of chargers'—and not the mythical porphyritic lava-throwing birds—who through no miracle of God defeated Abraha's advance on the Ka'ba in the 'year of the elephant'.⁵⁴

Ali metaphorically translates the Qur'anic miracle story,⁵⁵ in Surat al-'Imran, 3.49, of Jesus fashioning out of clay the likeness of a bird (*tayr*), which he (Ali) suggests could also mean 'omen',⁵⁶ as follows:

3.49. And [Jesus] will be Apostle to the children of Israel, (saying:) 'I have come to you with a prodigy from your Lord that I will fashion the state of *destiny* [(*tayr*)] out of mire for you, and breathe (a new spirit) into it, and (you) will rise by the will of God. I will heal the blind and the leper, and infuse life into the dead, by the leave of God' [Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, 56; emphasis and gloss added].

3.49. And [make Jesus] a messenger of the Children of Israel, saying, 'I have brought to you a sign from your Lord. I shall create for you out of clay [a shape] like that of a *bird*, and I shall breathe into it, and it shall become a *bird* by God's permission; and I shall cure the blind and the leper and give life to the dead by God's permission' [Jones, *Al-Qur'an*, 69-70; emphasis added].

As to Jesus' healing of the blind and the leper, Ali notes that, here, 'leprosy means to have one misfortune added to another[;]' and that, here, the Qur'an compares blindness to 'moral crimes ... and calls those guilty of them "deaf, dumb, and blind" as in 2:18, and "diseased of heart" as in 2:10, and even "dead" as in 27:80. That is why the Scripture is called "a healing" as in 41:44. The meanings of blind, leper, and dead have, therefore, to be taken in their metaphorical sense and not the literal'.⁵⁷

Women in the Qur'an

Finally, in translating the well-known verse, 4.34, covering corporeal punishment of women in Surat al-Nisa',—the so-called 'beating verse'—over which much modernist Muslim apologetic ink has been spilt, Ali reflects his modernist disposition and even, perhaps, his uneasiness with the literal meaning of the text:

4.34. *Men are the support of women* as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them). So women who are virtuous are obedient to God and guard the hidden as God has guarded it. As for women you feel are averse, *talk to them* sausively; then leave them alone in bed (*without molesting them*) and go to bed with them (*when they are willing*). If they open out (*sic*) to you, do not seek an excuse for blaming them. Surely God is sublime and great [Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, 78; emphasis added].

4.34. *Men are overseers of women* (*al-rijalu qawwamuna 'ala l-nisa'*) because God has granted some of them bounty in preference to others and because of the possessions which they spend. Righteous women are obedient, guarding the invisible, because God has guarded [them]. *Admonish those women* (*'izu-hunna*) whose rebelliousness you fear, *shun them* (*ahjuru-hunna*) in [their] resting places and *hit them* (*adribu-hunna*). If they obey you, do not seek a [further] way against them. God is Exalted and Great [Jones, *Al-Qur'an*, 92; emphasis and glosses added].

The issue, here, for Ali is clearly how can God sanction the beating of women—such an act would, for many modernist Muslims, appear to compromise the notion of God's justice (*'adala*) and also possibly their own rationalism about the (relative) equality of genders. In arguing for his metaphorical translation of the above italicized text, Ali relies on a number of medieval lexicons,⁵⁸ on the Mu'tazilite al-Zamakhshari's (d. 1144) *al-Kashshaf*, mainly a philological exegesis of the Qur'an,⁵⁹ and on a canonical *hadith* attributed to Muhammad; namely, 'Could any of you beat your wife as he would a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?'⁶⁰ Leaving aside the question of beating a slave, Ali, in making the case for his translation, relies, not only and mainly, on his modernist, liberal sensibilities, but also (and, perhaps, more importantly for some in his Muslim audience) attempts to marshal all of the available traditional textual evidence for a metaphorical and non-literal, contemporary reading of the Qur'an—a reading which he believed ought to be foundational for reconciling Islam, the Muslim world, and modernity.

Notes

1. See for example, M. Fakhry (trs.), *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version* (Reading: Garnet Publishers, 1996); A. Jones (trs.), *The Qur'an* (Cambridge: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007); and T. Khalidi (trs.), *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, New York: Penguin Books, 2009). All comparative translations of the Qur'anic text, to follow, are quoted from Jones' scholarly translation of the Arabic text; this translation will very likely supersede what has been considered as the standard Western academic translation of A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955).
2. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Karachi: Akrash, 1984); reviewed by E.K. Keck, *Acta Orientalia* 47–8 (1986), pp. 174–6; and reviewed, with T.B. Irving (trs.), *The Qur'an: The First American Version* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1995), by I.K. Poonawala, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, 1, (1990), pp. 166–7.
3. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, second revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); reviewed by F. Rahman, 'Translating the Qur'an,' *Religion and Literature* 20, 1 (1988), pp. 22–30; and reviewed, among other English translations, by N. Robinson, 'Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qur'an,' *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8, 3 (1997), pp. 261–78.
4. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, ninth paperback printing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); reviewed by Kh. Mohammed, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 36, 47 (2002); A. Afsaruddin, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 20, 1 (2003), pp. 158–60; and by L.I. Conrad, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (Third Series)* 13, 2 (2003), pp. 250–3.
5. Most notably M.W. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation* (Lahore: Accurate Printers, s.a.); A.Y. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1938); M. Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andaus, 1980); and Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*. For a conspectus of English translations of the Qur'an, see J.D. Pearson, 'Bibliography of Translations of the Qur'an into European Languages,' A.F.L. Beeston et al. (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 507–12; and H. Bobzin, 'Translations of the Qur'an,' J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an (EQ)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002–9), 5, pp. 340–58.
6. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 7 [This and the below bracketed text are mine].
7. In the field of Qur'anic Studies, a major contribution to the literary study of the Qur'anic text is by A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Sureen: Die literarische Form des Koran - ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, second revised edition (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007); id., 'Structural, Linguistic and Literary Features,' J.D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97–114; id., 'Rhetoric and the Qur'an,' *EQ*, 4, pp. 461–75; and more generally the contributions edited by I.J. Boullata, *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (London: Routledge, 2000). Cf., R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Collins, 1987) on the Bible as literature [I thank Professor Kevin Hart for this reference].
8. See for example, al-Azhar University's widely-publicized ex-communication of Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd (d. 2010), *Maḥmūl al-nass: dirāsa fī 'ulūm al-Qur'an*, (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyya al-'amma lil-Kitāb, 1990); S. Wild's discussion of the incident in the preface to his edited volume, *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. ix–xi; a collection of reprinted articles from Arabic periodicals covering the confrontation between the 'Islamists' and Abu-Zayd, *al-Islamiyyun wa-Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd* (Cairo: al-Mahrusa lil-Nashir wa-l-Khadamat al-Suhufiyya wa-l-Ma'lumat, 1995); and more generally Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd et al., *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
9. On the development of this theological concept, see G.E. von Grunebaum, 'I'jaz,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam (EP)*, C.E. Bosworth et al. (eds), (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2009), 2, pp. 1018–20; and R.C. Martin, 'Inimitability,' *EQ*, 2, pp. 526–35.
10. The so-called 'challenge verses' (*ayat al-tahaddi*), Q:17.88: 'Say, "If Man and Jinn were to assemble to produce the like of this Recitation, they could not produce its like, even though they supported one another", [Jones, *The Qur'an*, 268].
11. S.H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 96–7; and D. Gril, 'Miracles,' *EQ*, 3, pp. 392–9.
12. On the possible meanings of *ummi*, see R. Paret, 'Ummi,' *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers (eds) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), p. 604; E. Geoffroy, 'Ummi,' *EP*, 10, pp. 863–4; and S. Gunther, 'Illiteracy,' *EQ*, 2, pp. 492–9.
13. On the *Jinn* in the Indo-Muslim context, see K.A. Nizami, 'Djinn,' *EP*, 2, p. 549; and J. Chabbi, 'Jinn,' *EQ*, 3, pp. 43–9.
14. On the history and theories of translating the Bible, see E.A. Naida and Ch.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969).
15. A. Hashmi, 'Ahmed Ali and the Transition to a Postcolonial Mode in the Pakistani Novel in English,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 17, 1 (Summer 1990), p. 178. A notable example of Ali's translation work is *The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
16. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, p. 8.
17. D.J. Stewart, 'Rhymed Prose,' *EQ*, 4, pp. 476–83.
18. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, p. 7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
20. J. Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 19–23.

21. On the theory and practice of literary translation, see W. Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, H. Arendt (ed.) and H. Zohn (trs.) (New York: Schocken Books, 1968); and Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies*, pp. 169–70.
22. For a modern Shi'i exegetical translation of the Qur'an, which the author/translator describes as 'a combination of translation and exegesis—*tafsir*—in which the verses of the Holy Book have been "opened up" to reveal some of the layers of meaning expounded by the Prophet [Muhammad] and transmitted through the ages by the Prophet's family and companions,' see Muhammad Baqir Behbudi and C. Turner (trs.), *The Quran: A New Interpretation* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), p. xvi.
23. See J.H.S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1949); C. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Delhi: Vikas, 1978); and for biographical survey of his work, see K.A. Nizami, 'Syed Ahmed Khan, Sir,' *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992); and 'Sir Ahmad Khan,' the *Oxford Bibliographies Online Research Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1–9 [http://www.oup.com/online (consulted on 30 August 2011)].
24. The Scottish Orientalist Sir H.A.R. Gibb (d. 1971) is often quoted with some pride in Indian publications as having said that the M.A.O. College was 'the first modernist institution in Islam' [quoted on Aligarh Muslim University's website, <http://www.amu.ac.in/aboutamu.htm> (consulted on 11 August 2011)]; I could not locate the original source of the quote; and in Sh.K. Bhatnagar, *History of the M.A.O. College, Aligarh* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. v.
25. On the history of the Aligarh College, see Sir H.V. Lovett, 'The Growth of Educational Policy, 1858–1918,' *The Cambridge History of India, Volume VI: The Indian Empire, 1858–1918*, H.H. Dodwell (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp. 344–5.
26. To this end Sir Sayyid wrote a treatise arguing that the *Jinn* represent what pagan Arabs believed to be 'savages who live far from the civilized world in blind corners in forests, mountains and deserts ...'; that is, they are not the fictional smokeless fiery beings imagined by the Islamic tradition; see *Tafsir al-Jinn wa-l-jann 'ala ma fi l-Qur'an* (n.p., 1892), as quoted in Baljon, *Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid*, p. 57. It is worth noting that Sir Sayyid titles many of his works, particularly those on religious themes, using Arabic rhymed prose.
27. Sir Sayyid composed, in Urdu with English translation and Hebrew text, one of the first modern Muslim exegesis of the Bible, where he argued for Islam's religious affinity with Christianity and the possibility of its reform, namely, *Tab'in [sic] Tabyin al-kalam fi tafsir al-Tawrat wa-l-Injil 'ala milat al-Islam; The Mohamedan Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Ghazeeapore: Ahmad Khan, 1862 and 1865).
28. On Sir Sayyid's exchanges with the Orientalist William Muir and the evolution of his views (also those in the *Tab'in [sic] al-kalam*) on the authenticity of *hadith*, see Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 35–7.
29. 'Abduh did not, however, promote a science-based exegesis of the Qur'an, see J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 18–34.
30. M. Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, C. Higgitt (trs.) (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 34; and Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, pp. 27–34.
31. See R.G. Morrison, *The Intellectual Career of Nizam al-Din al-Nisaburi* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2007). On the history of science and religion in Islam, see A. Dallal, *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); on the relationship between science and religion in the Christian West cf., J.H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
32. *Tafsir al-Qur'an wa-huwa l-huda wa-l-furqan* (Lahore: Gulzar Muhammadi, 1891).
33. There are numerous editions of this work, including a Persian translation, but its first installment appears to have been published in Aligarh by the Instityut Press in 1882; see Nizami, 'Syed Ahmad Khan,' 5, p. 4264.
34. *Tahrir fi usul al-tafsir* (Lahore: Nawal Kishor Steam Press, 1913); for selected translations of this work, see D. Rahbar, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Principles of Exegesis. Translated from His *Tahrir fi usul al-tafsir*,' *The Muslim World* 46 (1956), pp. 104–112; pp. 324–335.
35. *Al-Jawahir fi tafsir al-Qur'an al-karim, al-mushtamil 'ala 'aja'ib* (Cairo: Mustafa l-Babi l-Halabi, 1932).
36. See Mahir Sharif and Salam Kawakibi, *Tayyar al-islam al-dini wa-masa'iruhu fi l-mujtamat al-'Arabiyya, awraq muqaddama fi nadwat Halab bi-munasabat murur 100 'am 'ala wafat 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, 31 Ayyar – 1 Haziran 2002/Le courant réformiste musulman et sa réception dans les sociétés arabes: actes du colloque d'Alep à l'occasion du centenaire de la disparition du cheikh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakabi, 31 mai – 1^{er} juin 2002*, Damas: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2003.
37. *Al-Tafsir al-'ilmi lil-ayat al-kawuniyya fi l-Qur'an*, second edition (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1960).
38. Many of these examples are cited in the reviews by Robinson and Conrad.
39. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 460.
40. Cf., the similar images of 'the sky splitting' in the Meccan Surat al-Infitar and Surat al-Inshiqaq, 82.1 and 84.1, respectively, on which Ali does not comment.
41. See for example, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'azim*, 6 (Beirut: Dar wa-Maktabat al-Hilal, 1986), p. 38, reports that the 'the splitting of the moon' is one of Muhammad's miracles (*mu'jizat*). Ali is familiar with Ibn Kathir's exegesis and quotes it in a number of footnotes in his translation.
42. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 239n* (for this reading Ali cites: *Reader's Digest*, May 1987).
43. It is worth noting that while appearing to accept much of the findings of modern science, Ali rejects Darwinism, arguing for a form of creationism where man 'did not evolve from the ape but was created as an independent species like the

- apes themselves and all other creatures [*Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 239n*].
44. Jones, *The Qur'an*, p. 346.
 45. J.D. McAuliffe, 'Assessing the *Isra'iliyyat*: An Exegetical Conundrum', *Story-Telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature*, S. Leder (ed.) (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1998), pp. 345–69; and R. Tottoli, 'Origin and Use of the Term *Isra'iliyyat* in Muslim Literature,' *Arabica*, 46, 2 (1999), pp. 193–210.
 46. R. Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002), pp. 175–94; and R.L. Netler, 'Early Islam, Modern Islam and Judaism: The *Isra'iliyyat* in Modern Islamic Thought,' *Muslim-Jewish Encounters: Intellectual Traditions and Modern Politics*, R.L. Netler and S. Taji-Farouki (eds) (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 1–14.
 47. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, p. 322n.
 48. *Ibid.*, pp. 322n–323n.
 49. On the meanings of these terms, see E.M. Badawi and M.A. Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), pp. 6, 423, respectively.
 50. This form of lava-rock consists primarily of melted volcanic material, see H. Watts, *A Dictionary of Chemistry and the Allied Branches of Other Sciences*, 2, new edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882), p. 832; Ali's translation of *hijaratīn min sijjil* as porphyritic lava, a technical geological term, is suggestive of his attempt to show the modern scientific nature of the Qur'anic text.
 51. Porus (d. 318 BCE), an eponymous Indian ruler of the Pauravas who organized a futile defense against the onslaught of Alexander 'the Great,' see A.B. Bosworth, 'Porus,' *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition, S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1230.
 52. On Khan Jahan Lodi (ca. 1587–1631), a military commander under the Mughals of India, see S.M. Haq, 'Khan Djahan Lodi,' *EP*, 4, pp. 1017–19.
 53. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 552n.
 54. L.I. Conrad, 'Abraha and Muhammad: Some Observations Apropos of Chronology and Literary *Topoi* in the Early Arabic Historical Tradition,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 50, 2 (1987), pp. 225–40.
 55. Cf., the Coptic Christian apocryphon on this story, 'The Gospel of Thomas (II,2),' Th. O. Lambdin (trs.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, revised edition, J.M. Robinson (ed.) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 126–7.
 56. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*, 56n.
 57. *Ibid.*, 56n.
 58. These sources are listed in the Acknowledgements, *ibid.*, p. 6.
 59. See A.J. Lane, *A Traditional Mu'azilite Qur'an Commentary: The Kashshaf of Jar Allah al-Zamakshari (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006).
 60. *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, 79n; for the Arabic of this *hadith*, see A.J. Wensinck (ed.), *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, 6 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936–69), p. 194.