

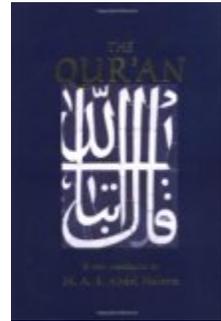
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Majid Fakhry. *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings*. New York: New York University Press, 2002. xi + 647 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-2724-9.

M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xliii + 464 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-280548-5.

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## Two New Translations of the Qur'an

The appearance of a new Qur'an translation in English must be recognized as a special event. For the translator, such a project can only be brought to fruition after years of work, consideration, consultation, editing, and revision. And it is an audacious act for anyone to take on, given the number of translations which already exist and the constant nagging question concerning whether there is a market (and thus a publisher) for a new version. So, it is with some surprise and, indeed, pleasure that these two new translations must be greeted.

Majid Fakhry's *An Interpretation of the Qur'an* comes with the impressive stamp of approval from al-Azhar. Fakhry himself is, of course, known better for his work in Islamic philosophy, but he provides no particular explanation of what brought him to this project other than stating that it started as a joint effort with the late Mahmud Zayid who was a professor of History and Archaeology at the American University of Beirut. Their aim was to be as faithful to the Arabic text as possible, to correct the errors of earlier translations (while profiting from their insights) and to use simple, readable English idiom. Some minimal notes are provided to the text, mainly to gloss words; there is also a basic index of topics and a very brief (four pages) introduction plus an index of *surahs*, which includes their Meccan/Medinan status. I like having a bilingual text. The Arabic is produced in a clean and easy-to-read typeface (although small) and appears to follow the Cairo text in all its details.

It is opportune, then, to be able to compare this translation to that of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem. First off, I praise the title: *The Qur'an: A New Translation*. There is no silliness of trying to say this "isn't really" the Qur'an, which is, after all, totally apparent to anyone when the title is in English and it is called a translation. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that Oxford published the translation when they already have a perfectly good translation in print, i.e., A. J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted*. As Abdel Haleem admits, Arberry "shows great respect towards the language of the Qur'an" and "it remains a popular version of the text, particularly in academic circles" (p. xxviii). Abdel Haleem's goal (and presumably, then, Oxford's as well) is to widen the appeal; the intention of this version, says the translator, is "to go further than previous works in accuracy, clarity, flow, and currency of language." Accessibility for all those who speak English is the goal. Beyond that, a useful introduction (including the life of Muhammad), a bibliography, a chronological chart, a map, and an eighteen-page index are provided. The index is analytical although I did not always find it easy to use due to the level of detail in the sub-entries.

Inevitably both translations have their peculiarities and reflect decisions on the part of the authors that can always be questioned and/or debated. Both translations are lightly annotated. Abdel Haleem often pays attention, in his notes, to grammar and literary figures, and frequently invokes the medieval exegete Fakhr al-Din al-

Razi to justify an interpretation; Fakhry's notes tend to be simply identifications or slight elaborations. Fakhry's translation, it must be said, is rather pedestrian, neither maintaining the accomplishments of the past nor creating its own poetic resonances. One might wonder what is to be gained by Fakhry translating the *basmala* as "in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful" when "in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" seems to me to have gained an immediate recognition factor in English. But then Abdel Haleem goes for "in the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy," which, while it has the merit of using "mercy" in both instances, does seem like rather a mouthful in comparison.

Translations of a book such as the Qur'an need to be worked with over a long period of time in order to come to a proper judgement of the entire accomplishment. The following passages (rather minor ones), which have been the focus of some of my recent work, have caught my attention. In dealing with Moses in Qur'an 28/29, Fakhry does some odd things such as translating al-Tur as "the Tur Mountain" and then providing a footnote which says "Sinai Mountain." Abdel Haleem appropriately translates the word simply as "mountain." In the next verse (Qur'an 28/30) *al-buqa' al-mubarak* is translated by Fakhry as "the sacred spot" and *al-wadi al-muqaddas* as "the holy valley" in Qur'an 20/12. However, *al-masjid al-haram* (e.g., in Qur'an 2/152) is then rendered "the sacred mosque," so the different connotations of the various Arabic words associated with "sacred" and "holy" become mixed. On the other hand, Abdel Haleem uses "blessed," "sacred" and "sacred" respectively, and so creates the same blended end result (although he does render *al-ruh al-muqaddas* as "Holy Spirit").

The account of the sacrifice of Abraham's son (Qur'an 37/102-111) also points to some differences between the translations. Abdel Haleem indexes the passage under "Ishmael." At the moment of sacrifice, Abraham is said to have "laid his son down on his face," which both misses the drama of "flinging" and removes "brow" (meaning that there is no distinction between the Arabic words *wajh* and *jabin*). Fakhry, meanwhile, indexes the passage under "Abraham: sacrifice of Isaac" and creates a rather

awkward English tense with "I have seen in sleep that I am slaughtering you." One related oddity in Fakhry is the spelling "Isma'il," whereas every other biblical figure (including Isaac) is spelled in the standard English biblical manner.

Both translations claim to "update" the English used; this may be seen in many ways. For example, Fakhry's "People of the Thicket" is rendered by Abdel Haleem as "Forest Dwellers" (Qur'an 26/176), which is more transparent in modern English. Surah 55, with its refrain in the dual, is rendered by Abdel Haleem and Fakhry as "you both." Neither translation attempts to differentiate between the singular and plural second person pronoun, thus avoiding the King James's English "thee" and "thou," but certainly missing one of the complexities of the Arabic text. Syntactical oddities get smoothed out too, as in Abdel Haleem's rendering of Qur'an 9/31, "they take their rabbis, their monks and Christ, the son of Mary, as lords beside God," for which Fakhry provides "they take their rabbis and monks as lords besides Allah, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary." Neither of these allows for the awkwardness of the Arabic, rendered by Arberry quite literally as "they have taken their rabbis and their monks as lords apart from God, and the Messiah, Mary's son."

Overall, I am impressed with Abdel Haleem's work and I will undoubtedly continue to work through it (with Arberry always close at hand). In part, simply because it is a pleasing book to work with physically, having been nicely designed and printed. Fakhry's version is certainly preferable to some other bilingual texts, such as the many of the prints of Yusuf Ali's *Holy Qur'an: English Translation and Commentary* or the recent Saudi production by Muhammad al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan's *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*; however, its shortcomings seem too significant for serious use, given the competition. And yet, as always, the more opinions about the meaning of the text that one can gather from various translations, the clearer one's understanding may be of any given Qur'anic passage, and that in itself is reason enough to have both of these new translations on one's desk.

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