

*Review Essay*

## Recent Flowering of Classical Tafsir Translations

**‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ KĀSHĀNĪ: A SUFI COMMENTARY ON THE QUR’ĀN, TA’WĪLĀT AL-QUR’ĀN – VOLUME 1**, translated by Feras Hamza. Cambridge, UK: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and The Islamic Text Society, 2021, 592 pp. ISBN: 9781911141440.

**‘ABD AL-RAZZĀQ KĀSHĀNĪ: A SUFI COMMENTARY ON THE QUR’ĀN, TA’WĪLĀT AL-QUR’ĀN – VOLUME 2**, translated by Khalid Williams. Cambridge, UK: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and The Islamic Text Society. 2021. 690pp. ISBN: 9781911141457.

**FAKHRAL-DĪN AL-RĀZĪ, THE GREAT EXEGESIS, AL-TAFSĪR AL-KABĪR. VOLUME 1: THE FĀTIḤA**, translated by Sohaib Saeed. Cambridge, UK: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and The Islamic Text Society, 2020 (reprint 2020), 501pp. ISBN: 9781911141211.

**ṬABARĪ: SELECTIONS FROM THE COMPREHENSIVE EXPOSITION OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE VERSES OF THE QUR’ĀN (2 Volumes)**, translated by Scott C. Lucas. Cambridge, UK: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and The Islamic Text Society, 2017, 1196pp, ISBN: 9781911141273.

A unique development in the last two decades has transformed access to the classical scholarship on the Qur’ān: technological developments made it possible for individuals and institutions to upload hundreds of classical works to public-access platforms. This was done in a haphazard manner and mostly propelled by pious motives, but it made a vast range of the classical *Tafsīr* corpus available to readers and scholars alike. This unprecedented access, however, has not translated into a corresponding increase in readership—or even scholarly studies—on these tomes of reflection on the Book that remains at the heart of everything Islamic. Although the modern dis-inheritance of the Islamic scholarly tradition is a complex issue, it involves at base both contemporary

readers' inability to read classical Arabic and their lack of training in reading these works.

The first difficulty is being slowly overcome by a mini-translation movement to translate these works into English. The Amman-based Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT) is leading this effort. It commissioned translations of eight classical *Tafsirs* into English around 2005; seven of these have been published.<sup>1</sup> All four works being reviewed here were published by RABIIT in partnership with the Islamic Text Society.

The original texts of the one complete and two partial translations under review here were written over a span of five centuries (the late-3rd to early-8th). Together these works represent three distinct strands of the *Tafsir* tradition: (i) the two-volume *Selections from Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān* of Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (224-25/839-310/923), which preserved for all later generations three centuries of exegetical reflections an *isnād*-based encyclopaedic work wherein Ṭabarī cites reports from over 425 scholars; (ii) *The Great Exegesis*, the first volume of *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544-606/1149-1210), the largest pre-modern *Tafsir*, which combines transmitted reports with extensive forays into a wide range of subjects including philosophy, linguistics, various sciences, commentaries on previous *Tafsirs*, and so much more that it was caricatured as a *tafsir* containing everything but *tafsir* by more than one critic; and (iii) *A Sufi Commentary of the Qur'ān*, the complete translation of *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. between 729-735/1329-35), an Akbarian Sufi work which attempts to elucidate the Qur'ān so that the readers gain gnosis of Allah Most High through experiential knowledge.

### Common Challenges

The task of translating classical *Tafsirs* into English presents certain common challenges:

1. **Qur'ān translation:** Since each *Tafsir* interprets the Qur'ān with a distinct approach, should the translator of the *Tafsir* translate the text of the Qur'ān to represent that particular inclination or can the translator simply use an existing translation of the Qur'ān?<sup>2</sup> Since translating the Qur'ān is a formidable task in itself, all three works have relied on previous translations of the Qur'ān with some modifications.
2. **Technical Terminology:** Many *Tafsir* works use technical terminology from various branches of knowledge (ranging from linguistics to logic

and from Sufi terms to terms used in pre-modern physics). What can a translator do to render these terms? For any accurate translation, the translator must know the exact intent of the author when he is using technical terms and must render such terms into equivalent English. This requires mastery of several branches of knowledge.

3. **Annotations:** All pre-modern works need extensive annotations for contemporary English readers so that they know what is being said in that context. These annotations require not only the requisite qualifications in Arabic, but also a certain mastery of the various branches of knowledge from which the original writer has drawn his material. The translators of Kāshānī's *Tafsīr* have chosen to add only limited explanations, whereas Sohaib Saeed and Scott Lucas provide considerable annotations and engage with previous scholarly works; this adds richness to their translations.
4. **Translator's Signature:** The front matter in a scholarly *Tafsīr* translation provides space for placing the work and its author in a historical context. Translators can comment on the scholarly achievements of the author of the *Tafsīr* and add other signatures to their effort through annotations or they can choose to remain absent from their translation and let other scholars use their work to further scholarly discussions. There are merits and demerits in both approaches. Extensive introductions and annotations add academic value to the translation, but they also require the translator to be a seasoned scholar of *Tafsīr*. An excellent example of this type of work is Gibril Fouad Haddad's *The Lights of Revelation and the Secrets of Interpretation* (Beacon Books and Media Ltd and UBD Press, 2016)—a 5-in-1 work, presenting a critical edition of *ḥizb* I of *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl* of al-Qāḍī Nāṣir al-Dīn 'Abdullāh b. 'Umar b. Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/ 1319), its English translation, English translation of the selected comments from one dozen *ḥāshiyahs* on al-Bayḍāwī's *tafsīr*, notes and commentary on *Anwār* and on quoted passages from its *ḥāshiyahs*, and the English rendering of the Qur'ānic verses comprising the first *ḥizb* (Q1, Q 2:1-74).<sup>3</sup>

### Distinct Features

*Selections from the Comprehensive Exposition* contains thirty-two passages in two volumes; these were selected by the commissioning organization (RABIIT) and are mostly related to verses mentioned in *fadā'il al-Qur'ān Ḥadīth* texts. A 24-page "Translator's Introduction" provides brief insights into the text which occupied

Scott Lucas for almost a decade (2007-2017). This “Introduction” is repeated in both volumes, which makes them stand-alone works. Both volumes also contain four indices (Ṭabarī’s teachers, his Qur’ān interpreters, poets he cites, and a superfluous list containing the volume and page number of the original Arabic edition). Both volumes also contain bibliography, listing Ṭabarī’s own works as well as those used by the translator. For an unexplained reason, Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr* of Q 2:1, dealing with the disconnected letters (*muqatta‘āt*), has been placed at the end of the translation as Appendix A, instead of following the translation of the *tafsīr* of Q 1 in the main part of the text. Lucas does not extensively engage existing scholarship on Ṭabarī in his introduction, but it is a useful introduction for most readers. (See Ulrika Mårtensson’s review for some of its issues.)<sup>4</sup>

Ṭabarī’s own “Introduction” to his *Tafsīr*, translated in full in the *Selections* for the first time (pp. 1-110), covers eleven distinct aspects of interpreting the Qur’ān. It is a mini-*uṣūl* work in its own right, giving us a glimpse of Ṭabarī’s principles for the interpretation of the Divine text. The full translation of the “Introduction”, thus, opens a path for a deeper understanding of Ṭabarī’s keen mind. Lucas’s annotations in this part of his translation leave something to be desired: his bibliographic referencing of the cited *Ḥadīth* is limited, in most cases, to the work of Aḥmad Shākir (d. 1958), rather than to primary sources; sometimes he misunderstands Ṭabarī’s technical terminology (for example, at p. 18 n.1 the crucial technical term *ḥarf* is read only for its linguistic aspect).

Lucas characterizes Ṭabarī as someone who had a probing mind, but who was “constantly juggling thousands of fragments of the early Islamic tradition, and shaping them into a monumental text, several thousand pages long” (p. xxxiii). But this is not how Ṭabarī worked. And to conceive Ṭabarī’s Arabic as “an idiom of Arabic that had not yet emerged as the refined, classical language of learning and scholarship” (p. xxxiii) commits him to a scientific understanding that stands apart from the history of a language chosen by Allah Most High for His final revelation through a Prophet who was appointed with the most eloquent and most concise language and whose Companions learned how to refine and develop their linguistic abilities directly from him: “I have been appointed with the most concise and eloquent language (*bi-jawāmi‘ al-kalim*)”, said the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace.<sup>5</sup>

Lucas underrates Ṭabarī on other counts as well; from reading his introduction, one would not appreciate Ṭabarī’s stature in the Islamic scholarly tradition. He was, in fact, “one of the major *mujtabid* Imams, the founder of a school of Law which remained for 150 years after his death... the author of a massive commentary on the Qur’ān, an equally large universal history, a

biographical history entitled *Ta'rikh al-rijāl*, an encyclopaedia of jurisprudence entitled *al-Basīṭ* and a medium-sized work entitled *Latīf al-qawl fī ahkām Sharā'i' al-Islām*, which he abridged into a smaller work, a book on the dialects and sciences of the Qur'ān entitled *al-Qirā'āt wa'l-tanzīl wa'l-'adad*, the unfinished book of *al-Fadā'il* on the immense merits of the Companions; *al-Manāsik* on the rituals of Pilgrimage, *Sharḥ al-Sunnah* (“Explanation of the Sunnah”); *al-Musnad* (“Narrations With Uninterrupted Chains”), the unfinished *Tahdhīb al-āthār* (“Classification of Transmitted Reports”), *Ma'ālim al-Hudā* (“Sign-Posts of Guidance”), *Ikhtilāf al-Fuqahā'* (“The Differences Among the Jurists”), *Tartīb al-'Ulamā'* (“Classification of the Scholars of Knowledge”), and others which have been lost.”<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, Lucas' translation lacks the cadence and eloquence of the original text, or even what was achieved by Cooper in 1987. For instance, compare the latter:

Praise be to Allah, Whose incomparable wisdom intuitive minds are compelled to recognize, Whose subtle arguments triumph in disputes created by discursive minds, Whose work, which is the creation in all its splendour, reduces to nothing the justifications put forward by the tongues of atheists, Whose proofs [of His own Being] call out to men of learning the witness that: He is Allah, there is no other god but He. He has no peer equalling Him, nor anyone similar resembling Him, nor any partner assisting Him; He has no son, no father, no consort, not a single equal.<sup>7</sup>

With Lucas' translation:

All praise belongs to God, Whose exquisite decree overpowers all minds and Whose subtle arguments conquer all intellects. The wonders of His creation eviscerate the excuses of extreme heretics (*mulḥidīn*) and the languages of His indicators cry out in the ears of all creatures, testifying that He is God—there is no god save He, Who has no peer who is equal, no similitude that is similar, no partner, who aids Him, no child and no parent. He has no consort and nothing is equal to him.

While one can point out shortcomings in both translations (for example, Cooper ignores the all-important *al-* in *al-ḥamd*), Lucas translates *badā'i' al-ḥikmah* as “exquisite decree”, which is simply incorrect; *mulḥidīn* is translated

as “extreme heretics” (as if there can be moderate heretics); the harsh term “eviscerate” bears the dissonant sense of God’s wondrous creation disembowelling (!) the arguments of the heretics; the wonders (‘*ajā’ib*) are rendered “languages of His indicators”; the literal translation of *asmā’ al-‘ālamīn* (“ears of all creatures”) excludes creation without “ears” (for example, mountains, hymning His praise); and the translation of *shāhidatan* as “testifying” removes the experiential semantics of the act of witnessing, which is the primary meaning of the original term. Ṭabarī’s elegant and slightly elevated prose sometimes reaches the eloquence and beauty of poetry; it has a kinetic force that moves the reader along a certain trajectory of ideas couched in a diction inspired by the language of the Qur’ān itself. The introductory paragraphs of his *Tafsīr* are an excellent example of this accessible yet highly poetic style.

Another major problem stems from the decision of the commissioning agency to select isolated passages of the original for translation. Except for Q 1 and Q 36, the thirty remaining passages translated here are individual verses or clusters of verses, most chosen due to the merits of their recitations (*fadā’il*), but their out-of-context selection creates numerous problems for the translator as well as the reader. For instance, while translating Ṭabarī’s exegesis of Q 3:7, the translator first translates the verse (*He it is Who has sent down to you the Book wherein are clear signs—they are the Mother of the Book—and others (which are) ambiguous*), then repeats paraphrasing by Ṭabarī (*He it is Who has sent down to you the Book*), and—after translating what Ṭabarī says—leaves the reader with “We have already provided clarification as to the reasons why the Qur’ān is called ‘a Book’ sufficiently, such that its repetition is unnecessary at this place.” This is Ṭabarī’s routine practice—in fact, the routine practice of most exegetes, who only give the full commentary of key terms and concepts at the first or the first detailed Qur’ānic usage of the term to avoid repetition—but that commentary is not available to the readers of the *Selections*, who are referred to the original which they cannot read! This is not an isolated example.<sup>8</sup> More developed annotations in such cases or a fuller selection would give readers a conceptual grounding in this foundational text of the *Tafsīr* tradition.

*The Great Exegesis*, the translation by Sohaib Saeed of the first volume Rāzī’s 32-volume *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*,<sup>9</sup> comes without an extensive introduction to Rāzī or his works. Saeed explains his methodology (some notes on restructuring and numbering) and uses two of the six pages of the “Translator’s Introduction” to “describe *ḥadīth*-related challenges” and writes “a few words about the complex and subtle sciences of *ḥadīth* verification and referencing.” He ends the introduction with “plain advice to exercise caution when reading *ḥadīths*



in even the best scholarly works outside that field of specialism” (p. xvii). A 14-page Appendix provides very brief biographical notes on persons mentioned in the translated portion of the *Tafsīr*.

The printed editions of *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* do not contain any long introduction by Rāzī<sup>10</sup> and Saeed’s decision to follow suit immediately launches the reader into the subtleties of one of the most involved pre-modern *Tafsīr* works, whose author was not content with just his explanations of the verses of the Qur’ān; he was also deeply interested in a “conversation” with a whole range of scholars in various branches of the sciences of the Qur’ān, linguistics, philosophy, Kalām, and ‘*aqīdah*. The scholars who interested Rāzī were not only his contemporaries, but also those who lived before him during the first five centuries of Islam.

The readers of this translation are immediately given an initial taste of the richness of a unique mind who had

stated at various times that it is possible to extract as many as 10,000 enquiries (*mas’ala*) from the precious and subtle teachings of this noble Sūra. Yet this was considered fanciful by certain people harbouring envy, ignorance, delusion and obstinacy, who interpreted it in light of their own practice of making meaningless pronouncements. Therefore, I have prefaced this book with an introduction which makes clear that what I have claimed is indeed very possible; and so I begin, seeking success from God (footnote 2, p. 2).

As if to follow suit, Saeed launches his own foray into a “conversation” with contemporary “Rāzians” by adding a footnote about the reading of this statement by Tariq Jaffer. The questions being discussed here include the referents of Rāzī’s ire (“certain people harbouring envy...”) as well as his claim of deriving as many as 10,000 enquiries from the *Fātīḥah*. Jaffer reads Rāzī as claiming that he is going to depart from the tradition before him by dramatically altering the methodology that had been employed until then. Saeed chides Jaffer for misreading the sentence to construe it as a reference to earlier exegetes and for going “on to build upon this reading (which ignores the import of the phrase *alifūhu min anfusihim*) his argument for the novelty of Rāzī’s approach.”<sup>11</sup> Saeed then comments on the French translation of Rāzī’s *tafsīr* of *Sūrah al-Fātīḥah* by Alphousseyni Cissé,<sup>12</sup> who “takes the key phrase to refer to the critics’ own writings, perhaps mistaking *alifū* for *allafū*.” Dismissing both readings, Saeed adds: “Both have overlooked the fact that if the critics assumed that Rāzī was referring to the ‘words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification’ (per Jaffer) in existing works of exegesis, then they

would have little cause to object to his claim to gather 10,000 such items.” Saeed’s own statement about Rāzī’s intent (“a point about the psychology of projection”) is cryptic, but suggests that the reason Rāzī’s critics thought his claim was an empty boast is “because *they* frequently made unsupported claims like that!”<sup>13</sup>

Despite Jaffer’s misreading of Rāzī’s attitude toward the exegetical tradition,<sup>14</sup> his translation of the passage under consideration is worth comparing to Saeed’s translation:

Know that I have occasionally remarked that it is possible to derive one thousand points of investigation from the benefits and gems of this noble chapter (*al-fātiḥa*). Some people who were envious and others who were ignorant deemed this farfetched. They took this to mean that I would just make remarks that were familiar to them and [offer] words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification (*taḥqīq*). When I set out to compose this book I set forth this introduction as a directive (*tanbīh*) that [indicates that the goal] which we just mentioned is within reach.<sup>15</sup>

Jaffer here maintains a greater fidelity to the tone and phrasing of the original (“know that I have occasionally remarked that it is possible to derive one thousand points of investigation”), compared to Saeed’s (“it is possible to extract as many as 10,000 enquiries...”).<sup>16</sup> Saeed also leaves out part of the sentence, because of a misprinted word, which he discovered after the publication of his translation and explained the omission.<sup>17</sup> Rāzī’s claim that there are as many as 10,000 points of investigation in the teachings of this noble *Sūrah* is deemed to be “hyperbolic” by Jaffer, though he simultaneously notes that Rāzī “elicits hundreds of questions for research and investigation from one line of this verse that titles God, ‘the Master of the Day of Doom’” (*yawm al-dīn*).<sup>18</sup>

Let us note that Rāzī is not alone in pointing out the dense nature of *Sūrah Fātiḥah*, the Mother of the Book. A century before him, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058–1111) had demonstrated in his *Jawābir al-Qur’ān* certain mysteries (*asrār*) of *al-Fātiḥah* and how—despite its concision—it contains eight of the ten valuable teachings of the Qur’ān: (i) Divine essence (*al-dhāt*); (ii) His attributes; (iii) His actions; (iv) Resurrection; (v) the Straight Path along with its two aspects of purification and beautification [of the soul]; (vi) mention of Divine favours on His friends; (vii) His wrath on His enemies; and (viii) the Hereafter. Since the *Sūrah* has eight aspects, and the doors of Paradise are



eight, therefore, he said, this *Sūrah* is the Key to all the doors of Paradise. He had also suggested that those who cannot grasp such subtleties should busy themselves with the couplets of al-Mutanabbī, wonders of syntax in Sībawayh's grammar, Ibn Ḥaddād's forays into the rare matters of divorce, and nitty-gritty arguments of *Kalām*.<sup>19</sup>

*The Great Exegesis* is systematically organized, just as is the original; Saeed's careful numbering of the sections and subsections (using a variety of numbering techniques, including capital and lowercase Roman numerals, numbers, and letters) is important because even an experienced Rāzī reader can get lost in his text, which unveils layer after layer of the Book through enquiries within enquiries, leading initiates to hitherto unknown subtleties of the Divine text, a process that simultaneously nourishes the hearts and minds of those who reflect on the Book through the Light of the Book.

*Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān* of al-Kāshānī (variously named as Kāsānī, Qāshānī, Kāshī), translated as *A Sufi Commentary on the Qur'ān* by Feras Hamza (Volume I) and Khalid Williams (Volume II), comes with an "Editor's Introduction" (pp. ix-xxiv) which adds little to what is already widely known about Kāshānī in other secondary sources and does not substantially place this important *Tafsīr* within the broader framework of the exegetical tradition. It does not even tell us which edition of the original, or its manuscripts, were consulted or used for this translation. The Editor, who is not named on the title page of the work, is also cited as the person responsible for the Appendix (persons cited in the text), Bibliography, and the Index for both Volumes (p. vii). In the brief "Publishers' Acknowledgement" (p. vii), the "publishers wish to acknowledge the contribution of Andrew Booso to the completion of the translation of this volume of Kāshānī's *Ta'wilāt al-Qur'ān*." Large projects of this sort are frequently a collective effort, and there are allusions to multiple editorial hands: "the translation of the main text for this volume was produced by Feras Hamza, with me [Booso] giving the text a final edit... some of the terms in the original translation, such as the choice for *walāyya* and *awliyā'*, were amended in agreement with the publishers", but no transparent and clear indication of this on the title pages.

Any translation of Kāshānī's *Tafsīr* requires a mastery of Sufi vocabulary as well as precise English equivalents of technical terms used by him. For instance, in the very first sentence of his *tafsīr* of the *Basmalah*, Kāshānī addresses the issue of the Name and the Named by defining *ism* as "that by which a thing is known" and immediately plunges into the Akbarian understanding of *ism*. His text reads: "The Names of Allah Most High are the *ṣuwar naw'iyya*, which—by their *khaṣā'ṣ* and *hūwiyya*—guide to the Attributes and Essence of Allah (*ṣiffāt*

*Allāh wa dhātibi*) and by their sheer existence, [they guide] to His countenance (*wajh*) and through their designation (*ta'īnuha*), to His Unicity (*waḥdatuhu*)—these being the outward [indicators] through which He can be known.” While some terms in this *Tafsīr* have established conventions in English translations of Sufi texts, others require the translator to coin or modify existing terms to convey the intended meaning. For instance, *ṣuwar naw'iyah*, which has been translated as “the [arche]typal forms” by Feraz Hamza, in this context refers to a very specific Akbarian understanding of *ism*, whereas it is not clear what the translator means by [arche]typal”, especially when the first part is enclosed in square brackets. Archetype can refer to the Platonic concept of pure form, believed to embody the fundamental characteristics of a thing, or to a collectively-inherited unconscious idea that is universally present in individual psyches, as in Jungian psychology, or to constantly-recurring ideas sharing similar traits in various domains, such as poetry, novel, psychology, and history. Such terms and translations may be defensible but at least require further glossing for their import to be legible in a *Tafsīr* translation.

To take another example: *al-Raḥmān* is translated as the Compassionate (although this term in English entails suffering or feeling together); Kāshānī's own elucidation of *al-Raḥmān* is translated as “the One Who causes existence and perfection to flow upon all [things] in the measure that [divine] wisdom requires and to the capacity of the receiving entities (*qawābil*) from the outset [of their creation]” (p. 7). This translation leaves one without any understanding of the original and phrases like “flow upon all [things]” make little sense. In another such example, one can point to the misreading of the term *lisān al-ḥāl*, which is used by Kāshānī in accordance with its Sufi usage, which refers to what the seeker says or does in an actualized state in contradistinction to *lisān al-qāl* (the non-actualized state)—as demonstrated in sayings such as, *lisān al-ḥāl afṣaḥ min lisān al-qāl, wa aṣḍaq min kulli maqāl; li-anna lisān al-khabar yaḥtamil al-takdhīb wa'l-taṣḍīq, wa lisān al-ḥāl lā yanṭiqu illā bi'l-taḥqīq* (what one utters in an actualized state is more eloquent than an utterance in an unactualized state; it is the most truthful of all utterances, for the “tongue” of news (*lisān al-khabar*) may lie or be truthful, whereas the “tongue” of the *ḥāl* never speaks except the truth).

In his *tafsīr* of Q 1:2, Kāshānī explains that *al-ḥamd* (praise and gratitude) offered through deeds and the “tongue of *ḥāl*” is both a manifestation of perfections (*ḡubūr al-kamālāt*) and a means for the ends (*ḡuṣūl al-ghāyāt*), [this is so] because these opening laudations and accruing extolments are for the One Who truly deserves them, as all existent things—due to their specific qualities and attention to their end goals with regard to the attainment of perfections,

from potentiality to actualization—are proclaimers of praise for Him, as the Most High says, *and there is not a thing but proclaims His praise*. Feras’ translation of this verse does not do justice to the broader conceptual associations of the term and limits the phrase *lisān al-ḥāl* to “the utterances of the moment” (1:9).

In addition to the inherent difficulties of translating a Sufi text into English, Kāshānī’s penchant for obscurity becomes accentuated in this translation, especially when combined with the technical terms of *taṣawwuf*. For instance, see the awkwardness of the translation of *maqām al-sirr* as “station of the inner-heart” and *maqām al-sadr* as “station of the breast” in the following passage: “*And the David of the discursive intellect (al-‘aql al-naẓarī), which is the station of the inner-heart, and the Solomon of the cognitive intellect (al-‘aql al-‘ilmī), which is the station of the breast, when they gave judgement concerning the tillage: that is, concerning the perfections that were placed in the earth of preparedness, stored there in pre-eternity, planted in the innate disposition and destination to sprout at the emergence into manifestation and existence*” (2:53).

Despite these issues, the translations by Feras Hamza and Khalid Williams read well. Kāshānī’s commentary on “The Light Verse” (Q 24:35), a favourite of Sufi commentaries, is admirably translated by Williams as:

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth: light is that which is intrinsically visible, and makes all other things manifest. A poet said, ‘He is hidden by how intensely manifest He is, / So that the eyes of the blind folk strain to see Him. / To be graced with the light of His countenance / Is the greatest fortune for blurry eyes.’ So since they exist by His existence, and are manifested by His manifestation, He is the Light of the heavens and the earth: that is, the One Who makes manifest the heavens of the spirits and the earth of the bodies. He is absolute existence through which all beings are given existence and illuminated. (2:89)

The availability of these four volumes also provides English readers an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the Qur’ān as well as of the richness of *Tafsīr* tradition. For instance, comparison of even a single verse, say the opening verse of *al-Fātiḥah*, in all available *Tafsīr* translations in the series can lead to an enhanced understanding of the range of meanings in this short verse. Such a comparison can also blunt some of the issues arising due to the inadequacies of translations. For instance, Ṭabarī’s explanation of this verse (*All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds*) in eight pages (in the translation) includes elucidation of the “al-” before *ḥamd*, the meanings of *ḥamd* (“gratitude

and praise”), and ‘*ālamīn* (“worlds”) through his unique hermeneutic approach, involving distinct “Questions”, “Objections” and “Responses”. Rāzī derives 17 “Benefits” from just the *ḥamd* and an additional eight from the *Lord of the Worlds* in 20 pages, and Kāshānī highlights that the praise of the creatures as a manifestation of their derivative perfections and their being the loci of the manifestation of Divine Attributes of majesty and beauty, clarifying that the Divine Essence is singled out in this verse for praise on account of His being the Origin (*mabdaʿ*) of all things and on account of His lordship over all the worlds. Knowing this range of meaning is surely beneficial for the contemporary readers who do not have direct access to these works.

These four translations are a good starting point for the long-overdue effort of bringing the treasures of pre-modern scholarship to contemporary readers. One only wishes that RABIIT (or another princely organization) would undertake this much-needed task in an organized manner by setting up an authentic and rigorous mechanism which would ensure that translations so produced not only meet, but exceed, current academic standards, are faithful to the originals, and—most of all—are done from within the tradition, not from outside, using correct terminology and an Islamized English that is infused with the spirit of the Qurʾān. These translations also need a consistent scholarly apparatus in order to be placed within the matrix of fourteen hundred years of Muslim reflections on the Book. Such an apparatus would be a labour of scholarship of its own, incorporating bio-bibliographic and conceptual works from across the Islamic sciences, in order that English-speaking readers get an authentic taste of this most important branch of knowledge in Islam.

One can only suggest, in broad outlines, what such an undertaking could look like (a miniature model exists in the form of what was done for the 40-volume *History of Ṭabarī* published in the “SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies”): An organization with enough monetary resources should leave the task of mapping out the entire effort to scholars in the field. To begin with, this could involve establishing a no-strings-attached-fund for the project of producing English translations of ten major *Tafsīrs*, say those of (i) Ṭabarī’s *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, (ii) *Tafsīr Ibn Abī Ḥātim* (d. 327/938), (iii) *Baḥr al-ʿulūm* of Samarqandī (d. 373/983), (iv) *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān* of al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1036), (v) *Taʾwīlāt ahl al-Sunna* of Māwardī (d. 450/1058), (vi) *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* of Qushayrī (d. 465/1073), (vii) *al-Kashshāf* of Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), (viii) *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* of Rāzī, (ix) *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-taʾwīl* of al-Qāḍī Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/1319), and (x) *al-Tashīl fī ʿulūm al-Tanzīl* of Ibn Juzayy (d. 741/1341).

This will be a bouquet of lasting fragrance that will not only provide English readers with a valuable resource, but also re-orient the field of Qur'anic Studies in the right direction.

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## Notes

1. See <https://www.altafsir.com> for details and for free download of all translations. The fate of the eighth *Tafsir* translation of this project (al-Bayḍāwī's *Anwār al-tanzīl wa as-rār al-ta'wīl*) is unknown, but its first volume was translated by Gibril Fouad Haddad without the support of RABIIT (see footnote 3).
2. The commissioning agency specifies on its website that it does not ask the translators to use a specific translation.
3. This one-man effort is laudable despite certain reservations about its literalism and personal choices made by Haddad for his Qur'an translation. He is not only the translator, but also the editor of the original text, copy-editor, proof reader, indexer, and page-setter of this enormous effort (which nonetheless could have avoided some pitfalls by external reviews). In his "Introduction," Haddad places al-Bayḍāwī and his *tafsir* in the larger historical and scholarly context and adds an Arabic-English glossary of technical terms, as well as a glossary of persons and sects cited by al-Bayḍāwī. The last seventy-five pages consist of bibliography and four indices. The end result is a tour de force of scholarship, setting new standards for critical editions of pre-modern *Tafsirs*. None of the translations in the RABIIT series come close to this range of exactitude, they are, nevertheless, welcome additions to the meagre number of English translations of classical *Tafsirs*.
4. Ulrika Mårtensson, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 128-155.
5. The *ḥadīth* is in both Sound Collections.
6. See Gibril Haddad at: [https://damas-original.nur.nu/Texter/bionotes/bio\\_tabari-gfb.html](https://damas-original.nur.nu/Texter/bionotes/bio_tabari-gfb.html).
7. J. Cooper, *The Commentary on the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5.
8. In this case, Lucas adds in a footnote: "see above, in Ṭabarī's Introduction"—although the introduction is 110 pages long.
9. Also known as *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* ("Keys to the Unseen"); 32 volumes in the Dār al-Fikr, 1981 edition.
10. For Rāzī's other works on the Qur'an and its sciences, see Ṭahā Jābir al-'Alwānī, *al-Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa-muṣannafātuh*, Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2010.
11. *Great Exegesis*, p. 2, footnote 2.
12. Cissé is Lecturer in the Arabic Department of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at the Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar. His doctoral thesis at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Religieuses was on Rāzī's "Religious Thought" in his *Ma'ālim uṣūl al-dīn* and his State Doctorate thesis (2007) at the Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, was on Rāzī's *tafsir* of the *Fātiḥah*.
13. Personal communication with Saeed.
14. For example, he claims: "Rāzī maintains that if exegetes had had the benefit of his procedural method, they would not have simply interpreted the Qur'an in accordance with 'ideas that were familiar to them' or filled their commentaries with 'words whose kernels and foundations were empty of verification.'" See Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of*

*Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 33. For a similar assessment of Jaffer's work, see the review of his book by Nicolai Sinai, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 28:3 (2017) pp. 369–428, with thanks to Saeed for this reference.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
16. The original is: *i'lam annahu marra 'alā lisānī fī ba'd al-awqāt*.
17. See his explanation around at 20-24 minutes at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mkd8DiMjiXg&ab\\_channel=Ibn%E2%80%98AshurCentreforQuranicStudies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mkd8DiMjiXg&ab_channel=Ibn%E2%80%98AshurCentreforQuranicStudies).
18. “Day of Doom” is a mistranslation of *yawm al-dīn*, which is glossed by Rāzī as “Day of Resurrection and Recompense” (*al-ba'th wa'l-jazā'*), in line with Bayḍawī and scores of other exegetes, which illustrates that there is no dramatic break here, no sensational disavowal of the whole *Tafsīr* tradition, no disparaging of the giants upon whose shoulders Rāzī stood.
19. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā al-Qabbānī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, 1985), p. 52.