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Book Review

English Translations of the Qur'ān

A Descriptive Comparative Study in their Aspects of Disagreement

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BOOK REVIEW: *ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE QUR'ĀN: A DESCRIPTIVE COMPARATIVE STUDY IN THEIR ASPECTS OF DISAGREEMENT*

Abbas Brashi*

Aldahesh, Ali Yunis. *al-Tarjamātu al-Ingilīziyyatu li-Ma'ānī al-Qur'āni al-Karīm: Dirāsatur fī Maḍāhiri al-'Ikhtilāf* [English Translations of the Qur'ān: A Descriptive Comparative Study in their Aspects of Disagreement]. Cairo: Hala Publishing Company, 2020, pp. 264, AUD 50, 978-9773-56-592-3.

In *English Translations of the Qur'ān: A Descriptive Comparative Study in their Aspects of Disagreement*, Dr. Ali Yunis Aldahesh, a lecturer at the University of Sydney, researcher in the field of Qur'ānic studies and professional translator, amply and profoundly investigates crucial issues pertinent to aspects of disagreement among English translators of the Qur'ān.

Given that the Muslims' scripture has been translated into English by several translators from a range of religious, dogmatic, linguistic, cultural, ideological, political and sectarian backgrounds, this book is a unique scholarly work in this field and the first of its kind in Arabic. It introduces this evolving sub-discipline of Qur'ānic studies into the Arabic-speaking audience in general and to Qur'ānic studies stakeholders in particular. The book demonstrates that English translators of the Qur'ān vary significantly in the manners by which they deal with such a sacred and highly eloquent text. These variations are presented in different aspects of disagreement among the translators, including formal, stylistic, dogmatic and methodological aspects.

English Translations of the Qur'ān comprises five self-contained chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, the author discusses essential topics such as: translating sacred scriptures; the Qur'ān as a linguistic miracle; a historical presentation of the translation of the Qur'ān; the different English translations of the Qur'ān; and a jurisprudential approach to the translation of the Qur'ān. He maintains that translating the Qur'ān into other languages is a controversial issue among religious scholars, jurists and intellectuals. Those who are against translation of the meanings of the Qur'ān argue the scripture contains specific divine, linguistic and cultural characteristics; thus, it is untranslatable. Other scholars who support translating the meanings of the Qur'ān argue it is the final divine word of Allah sent to mankind; therefore, the message must reach all humanity despite their religious, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Aldahesh presents the two opposing views sustained by evidence from the Qur'ān and prophetic tradition justifying their arguments. He draws a conclusion that translating the Qur'ān into other

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languages is a necessary evil Muslim scholars must undertake in order to get its divine message across. It is a necessary evil because conveying the intended meanings of the Qur'ānic verses is something far beyond the human faculty. Therefore, translational inaccuracies, pitfalls and shortcomings are expected by-products of which no Qur'ān translation is free.

The second chapter sheds light on formal aspects of disagreement among translators of the meanings of the Qur'ān into English. Elaborating on the major characteristics of the disagreement aspects and the factors that motivate translators to implement them, Aldahesh provides ample detail on translating the title of the Qur'ān and its attributes, the arrangement of the *ayas* (verses) and *surahs* (chapters); numbering the Qur'ānic verses; employing the punctuation marks and paragraphing system used in English; presenting the original Arabic text along with the English translation; using italics; and, finally, the methods employed by different translators to introduce their translations. In terms of arrangement of the Qur'ānic *ayas* and *surahs*, for instance, Aldahesh asserts that translators of the Qur'ān should adhere to the traditional ordering as in the Uthmanic codex. This is because it is the *tawqīfī* (i.e. revealed by God) order approved by Prophet Muhammad and adopted by all Muslims throughout the previous 14 centuries. Translators who deviated from this order and set the Qur'ānic *ayas* and *surahs* chronologically (e.g. John Medows Rodwell (1808–1900) and Richard Bell (1876–1952)) did not do justice to the thematic unity of the scripture.

In the third chapter Aldahesh examines the stylistic aspects of disagreement among the English translators of the Qur'ān. He scrutinises three issues: the use of archaic English, the use of poetic and/or prose language, and consistency in employing vocabulary. In terms of using poetic language, for example, Aldahesh asserts that translators of the Qur'ān should employ prose rather than a poetic language for two reasons. First, any translation is by no means the Qur'ān; it is an attempt to convey its meanings into other languages to help people who cannot read the original text in Arabic to understand it. Therefore, there is no need for translators to waste their time and energy imitating the musical, poetic and other Qur'ān-specific eloquent characteristics. Second, any attempt to imitate such characteristics will be at the expense of accuracy in meaning, which must be given priority over other factors. Translators of the Qur'ān would be blamed for any meaning inaccuracies that occur in their translations, but they would not be criticised for not imitating the musical and other poetic or eloquent features of such a complex and multi-layered text as the Qur'ān.

Chapter four investigates the dogmatic aspects of disagreement among English translators of the Qur'ān. It emphasises the major features of those aspects and the factors that motivate translators to endorse them. The chapter comprises four sections. The first section presents an overview of translations of the Qur'ān into English by Orientalists and the main features evident in them. The second section offers an outline of translations of the Qur'ān into English by the *Qadianī* movement followers and the observed features of those translations. The third section gives an overview of translations of the Qur'ān into English by Shi'ite Muslims followed by a presentation of their main features. The fourth section discusses a translation of the Qur'ān into English by Muhammad Asad (2011), a follower of the *Mu'tazilah* movement, and the important features of his translation. In terms of Orientalists' translations of the Qur'ān,

for instance, Aldahesh maintains the majority of non-Muslim translators of the Qur'ān have approached it with ill intention of distorting its sublime imports. Their purpose-oriented approach is manifested in their polemical trend, their attempt to question the Qur'ān's authorship, their allusion to its Biblical origin, their bias and prejudiced comments and footnotes, and their missionary way of presenting their translations. However, Aldahesh alludes there are several non-Muslim translators (e.g., Arthur John Arberry) who constitute the exception. They approach the Qur'ān with a great deal of respect and admiration to produce high quality scholarly works.

Chapter five, which is the last and most important chapter of the book, provides an analysis of the methodological and strategical aspects of disagreement among translators of the Qur'ān into English. Aldahesh then highlights the significant features of each aspect and explains the reasons behind the different translators adopting these methods. The chapter comprises six sections. The first section discusses the disagreement among the translators of the Qur'ān in relation to the adoption of the two translation methods – literal and semantic. The second section explores the disagreement over the employment of formal and dynamic equivalences in their translations. The third section examines the disagreement over the implementation of domestication and foreignisation strategies of translation. The fourth section studies the disagreement over adopting the strategy of paraphrasing. The fifth section looks at the disagreement over the application of the strategy of using explanatory footnotes and commentaries. Finally, the sixth section investigates disagreement among the translators of the Qur'ān over the use of the transliteration strategy. In terms of adopting the domestication approach, for example, Aldahesh declares this approach must not be attempted in the translation of the Qur'ān for two reasons. First, despite its success in dealing with other text types and genres, the domestication approach involves sacrificing a great deal of meaning accuracy for the sake of accommodating the target text culture. Second, when it comes to translating the Qur'ān, meaning accuracy must be given priority over any other aspects no matter how important they are in the realm of translation theory. Therefore, translators of the Qur'ān should not refrain from foreignising specific terms and structures (e.g. *'umrah*, *tayammum*, etc.) by transliterating them first then explaining in footnotes. They always need to make the target readers aware of the fact they are reading a translation of a text with unique socio-culture idiosyncrasies.

The main contribution of the book is that it provides fruitful insights into several translation difficulties that may result in misinterpretation of some parts of the Muslims' scripture. Therefore, Aldahesh promotes the idea of producing an exemplary translation of the Qur'ān that may be carefully developed by a team of scholars from relevant fields of study.

The outstanding feature of this book is the beauty and intelligibility of Aldahesh's Arabic prose, which makes the work well put together and user-friendly. Another exceptional feature is the huge effort exerted by Aldahesh in reviewing such a large scale of relevant literature in his attempt to investigate the aspects of disagreement among translators of the Qur'ān into English.

Given the scope of the book, however, one might detect two justifiable shortfalls. First, although there are more than 50 printed English translations of the Qur'ān, this book does not cover some quite important ones. Such important translations as *The Qur'an: A New Translation* by Tarif Khalidi, *The Holy Qur'an English Translation with Commentary* by Tahereh Saffarzadeh and the *Qur'an Translated into English* by Alan Jones have been overlooked. Second, the book stops short of mentioning one of the most important Islamic schools of thought – Islamic mysticism – which is manifested in the Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān and in turn has impacted its translation.

This being said, *English Translations of the Qur'ān Qur'an: A Descriptive Comparative Study in their Aspects of Disagreement* is of great value, is highly recommended to scholars and makes a significant contribution to scholars and students specialising in the field of Qur'ānic studies in general and the field of Qur'ānic translation in particular.