

BOOK REVIEW

QUR'ĀNIC ESSENCES INTERPRETED FOR WESTERN READERS

A review of James Kinnier Wilson's *The Wisdom and the Beauty: A Selection of short passages from the Qur'ān*, Shephard-Walwyn, London, 2006 (ISBN-13: 978-0-85683-247-5 & ISBN-10: 0-85683-247-2)

The challenge of interpreting the message of the Qur'ān to the world has always been monumental, both in the intensity of its effort and the reach of its promise. A string of names of classical and more modern interpreters dot and adorn the history of that endeavour. Whether receiving praise or censure by generations of Muslim scholars of the holy text, the contribution of these interpreters has been considerable. Since the first Arabs who heard the Prophet recite his revelations in Makkah and then in Madinah, the need to grasp the meaning and intent of the unusual verses and respond to their call has not abated. Strange and extraordinary, melodious and overpowering, terrifying and uplifting, lucid and enigmatic were the inimitable *āyāt*. They were so even to the pagan Arabs who were excessively proud of their own poetic tradition but were nonetheless baffled by Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) recitations. Some, of course, argued that Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) rhythms and images were just a different kind of poetry, a Jinn-inspired speech. Nonetheless, the early biographies recount anecdotes about big-headed and hard-hearted Arabs who, upon hearing few verses of the Qur'ān suddenly melted and declared their faith in the ministry of the unlettered Messenger.

But, despite the book's general claim for lucidity, the mystery of the verses continued to challenge one generation of Muslims after another. True to the nature of the book's often metaphoric and symbolic discourse, particularly in its Makkan *sūras*, many verses would not yield to just one definitive explanation. The journeys the text was making in time and space and culture added to the test of interpreters, who felt compelled to explain (increasingly to non-Arabs) the often-elusive Arabic as well as relate verses to occasions of their first revelation, a scholarly activity that developed as one of a number of evolving Qur'ānic "sciences" — *'ulūm al-Qur'ān*.

Inevitably, such scholars, though rarely setting themselves up as final or definitive interpreters of the holy text, nonetheless coloured it with their own personal, political, geographical, or ethnic priorities or those of their times. Still, the work of many of them has been nothing short of epic, dedicated to what they deemed to be a most noble and imperative enterprise. Names of *aṣḥāb al-tafāsīr* like those of Al-Tabari, Al-Zamakhshari, Ibn Kathir, al-Baydawi, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Abu al-A'la Maududi, 'Allamah Tabataba'i, Sayyid Qutb, and Muhammad Jawad Mughniyah, continue to evoke respect, admiration, controversy and debate. They do so even as

both enthusiasts and critics increasingly recognise that there are expanses and possibilities that lie or beckon beyond the interpretations offered.

The challenges and rewards of this calling were certainly not confined to Arabs and Muslims. Translators of the holy text into other languages approached their task with different intentions and various degrees of reverence but with no less intensity of dedication and durability of commitment. Between the widely known, though not first, Latin translation (and commentary) by Lud Maracci in the late seventeenth century and the annotated English translation by George Sale in 1734, a conviction had already settled in Europe that some knowledge of the sacred book of Muslims (Saracens, Moors, Turks, infidels) was essential. In England, Sale's translation was followed, most markedly, by J. M. Rodwell's in 1861 and, most beautifully, by Arthur Arbury's in 1962. Muslim scholars writing in English also produced translations of distinction. They include, most illustriously, those by Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Muhammad Asad, T. B. Irving, M. H. Shakir, and very recently and remarkably, Muhammad Abdel Haleem.

James Kinnier Wilson's offering needs to be placed in this historical and scholarly context, though not in order to compare it to the works cited above. A slim book of some seventy pages, its scope is not as vast as the aforementioned commentaries or translations. Nonetheless, it may have been designed and may be destined to reach, at a more popular level, a wider audience and explore uncharted territories of the intellect and the imagination.

The author, a retired professor of ancient Near Eastern languages, explains his aim and methodology in the "Preface". "This little book," he notes, "is for everyone." The "thoughts conveyed" are not the author's own, he stresses. Rather, "They come from on High, God's Love and Light for the human family as these have been brought to us by His Archangel, Gabriel." If there is any doubt about the veracity of that claim, he declares, investing in his expertise as a code-breaker of ancient texts, "when one sees the collected threads of an argument as a finished tapestry that is completely satisfying, then the truth becomes acceptable and the original doubt may be cast aside." He concludes, more confidently and ambitiously, addressing the reader:

What, therefore, I hope from this little book is that, adding verse to verse and page to page, you may come to believe that the claim of the Qur'ān to be a revelation from God is true, and that we may share together something of its wonder.

This sense of wonder and sharing, which animates the book, is derived, no doubt, from the Qur'ānic verses, purposely chosen and arranged under five headings or parts, each part containing five broad topics:

Part I: *The Setting* (*sūras* which relate to the beginning of the revelation, including the powerful *iqra'* verses enunciated in the cave of *ḥirā'*, the truth of the revelation, and the divine commandments)

Part II: *On the Greatness and Bounty of God* (which includes the majestic *āyat al-kursī*, or the Verse of the Throne, and the exquisite *āyat al-Nūr* on Allah's light, which subtly and manifestly pervades the universe)

Part III: *On the Justice and Mercy of God* (a selection of *sūras* which are

intended to draw attention to the balance and unity underlying the various divine attributes, highlighting the balance at the heart of the faith and its various injunctions)

Part IV: *Times and Occasions* (on the creation of Adam and later events in human history and the sending forth of Messengers, highlighting the basic oneness and salubrious diversity of that traffic. A selection of the verses on the birth of Jesus and the sanctity of his mother and the miraculous nature of his birth are also offered)

Part V: *Thoughts for Wonder and Contemplation* (a miscellany of *sūras* enumerating the marvels of the universe and the choices open to the human quest, emphasising the contemplative, searching, and progressive nature of the Islamic venture)

In his choice of verses, Mr Kinnier Wilson was clearly guided by personal preference. But it is a preference that is anchored in the rhythms and synergies of the Qur'ān and is informed by approval of and sympathy with them, as well as by a commitment to showcasing them in the best way possible. He invests in his very considerable knowledge of the ancient Near East and in his proficiency in the study of texts and skill in comparative religion and Semitic languages to offer some truly remarkable, at times bold and startling, comparisons and conclusions, chiefly in some sections of the generally erudite "Epilogue" and "Explanatory Notes". A conventional reader may take him to task on some of these extrapolations, in which he seems to be at pains to harmonise the teachings and pronouncements of the Qur'ān (e.g. on the death of Jesus and the story of Jonah and the whale) with modern science. But the arguments offered here, as well as in relation to the Qur'ānic accounts of the Last Day, thought-provoking or provocative as they may be viewed, seem to be designed to bring the topic to the attention, interest and curiosity of New Age Western readers and stimulate debate.

Less importantly, the author/editor may also be taken to task for not clearly identifying under each verse the exact source of the translation. One assumes that he did not wish to encumber or hinder the flow of the book, designed so fearlessly for a popular and long-ignored readership, with a clutter of footnotes, particularly as he clearly acknowledges in the "Preface" the origins of his chosen translations in five major English translations. These are marked with an asterisk in the "Selected Bibliography", which also includes a good selection of authoritative biographies of the Prophet, a brief life history of whom he offers in the "Introduction" along with a moving tribute. He also has a note on his own additions and interventions (placed, "with a light pen", in parenthesis), with the aim of clarifying possible ambiguities, his maxim being, "A blurred or diffuse light is not the sterling light of truth".

There is a great deal of humility and reverence throughout, a sense of youthful excitement and awe, guided by the Qur'ānic "Do you not see ... ?", at the glories of the creation, with much of the debate directed at atheists. Clearly, the sense of "wonder" and "sharing" mentioned earlier contributes to the charm and drama of the book. It comes, as suggested above, from the choice of the excerpts but also from the author/editor projecting himself as a fellow passenger, "one of you, one with you". We travel with him on a journey in which he expresses his own joy, discovery, and personal evaluation as he presents but also engages, dramatically, academically, and imaginatively, with the Qur'ānic verses and the feelings and thoughts they evoke, the vistas they open up.

Mr Kinnier Wilson's offering is a welcome and timely one. Under its apt title,

it is also a very attractive, elegant, dainty, and intelligent publication, with high quality paper and much care and attention lavished on the production, and with simple but effective floral illustrations. Its general educational value and global interfaith appeal, particularly to those Western readers who know very little, or the wrong things, about Islam, is incontestable. Highlighting the beauty and wisdom of a book sacred, and a daily companion and guide, to more than a billion Muslims and its message of peace, harmony, and civility, it is ideal as a present for friends, young and old, Muslims and non-Muslims. With the radiance of its message and style, it is also opportune for dipping in now and again in these desperate and often grim and conflict-ridden times. Perhaps the best and pithiest statement on the book is the one offered by Dr Shaikh Abdul Mabud, Director General of the Islamic Academy, Cambridge:

This book's brilliance lies in the deft manner in which the author interprets the divine revelations with his innovative and challenging thoughts.

Riad Nourallah