

‘The Inimitable Rose’, being Qur’anic *saj*^c from *Sūrat al-Duḥā* to *Sūrat al-Nās* (Q. 93–114) in English Rhyming Prose*

There are some 60 translations of the Qur’an from Arabic into English, beginning with George Sale’s 1734 *The Koran*.¹ In the past ten years, at least seven new translations have appeared: by Colin Turner, Majid Fakhry, Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, Fazlollah Nikayin, Mirza Ab’ul Fazl, Thomas Cleary, and most recently M.A.S. Abdel Haleem; a translation by Alan Jones will appear this year (all, incidentally, published in the United Kingdom and the United States). There is also a growing body of translations of selections from the Qur’an. In general, however, in spite of the fact that all translators attempt to convey in one way or another the content and feel of the Qur’an – choosing, say, Victorian style, or King James diction, or poetic turns of phrase – precious few pay attention to *saj*^c, viz. Qur’anic rhymed or rhyming prose.² This disregard is curious indeed, as *saj*^c is one of the defining features of Qur’anic language, sound, aya-structure, and architecture.³ What follows, then, are my own attempts at translating the final 22 suras into English rhyming prose.

Suras 109, 112, 113 and 114 (here lightly revised) have previously been published in *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 4:2 (2002). I am deeply indebted to Bruce Lawrence for citing Sura 93 (here also lightly revised) so approvingly in *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 7:1 (2005). Suras 1, 36 and 93–114 also appear in a self-published gratis booklet in memory of my mother and maternal aunt. It is my intention to publish Suras 1, 36 and 76 in a subsequent issue of the *Journal*, where I shall also discuss the issues I have faced and the choices I have made as I grapple with rendering Qur’anic *saj*^c in English. I should, however, like to note here: (a) that I am more inclined to format Qur’anic passages as prose (*pace* the recent translation by Abdel Haleem); here, I have intentionally formatted as verse to allow the reader to experience the *saj*^c rhyme visually as well as aurally; (b) that I welcome feedback (smt24@cornell.edu); and (c) that this is submitted with humility.

93. Morning Light

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹By the morning light

²And by the darkening night,

³Your Lord has not forsaken you – there is no slight.

- ⁴The Hereafter is far better for you than this first life.
- ⁵Your Lord will lavish bounties upon you, and you will
know delight.
- ⁶Did he not find you an orphan, then give you respite?
- ⁷Find you unaware, then guide you aright?
- ⁸Find you wanting, and then provide?
- ⁹So, as for the orphan, do not oppress!
- ¹⁰And, as for the supplicant, do not suppress!
- ¹¹And as for the bounty of your Lord, proclaim it!

94. Consolation

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹Did We not your breast prise open?
- ²Did we not your back unburden
- ³Of the weight on it, and lighten?
- ⁴And did We not your good name strengthen?
- ⁵With all distress comes easiness,
- ⁶Yes, with all distress comes easiness.
- ⁷So, when you are free, concentrate,
- ⁸And upon your Lord contemplate.^a

^a This is the only sura (or passage, for that matter) with a consistent syllabic structure (eight per aya, except for aya 6 which has nine). I have replicated this.

95. The Fig

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹By the fig, by

The olive, ²by

The Mount of Sinai,

³By this land of security:

⁴Indeed, we created Humanity in the best of forms,

⁵And then reduced it to the most debile debility,

⁶Except those who believe and perform regular charity –

to them unfailing prosperity!

⁷So what, now, can deceive you about piety?

⁸Is not God's the sagest sagacity?

96. The Coagulate

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Recite in the name of your Lord, Who did create –

²Did create Humanity from coagulate.

³Recite for your Lord is Magnanimous,

⁴Who, through the use of the calamus,

⁵Has taught Humanity that of which it was ignorant.^a

⁶No, indeed! Humanity became transgressive and arrogant

⁷The instant it fancied itself self-sufficient.

⁸But truly, to God is the final Adjournment!

⁹Have you seen the one who would prevent

¹⁰The worshipper from prayer and sacrament?

¹¹Have you seen if he is on a path unbent,

¹²Calling to piety, reverent?

¹³Have you seen him turn away from Truth, dissent?

¹⁴Does he not know that God is Omniscient?

¹⁵No indeed! If he does not relent, then We shall seize him

by the forelock,

¹⁶Every deceitful, sinful forelock.

¹⁷Let him summon his bloc!

¹⁸We shall summon the Angels of Havoc!^b

¹⁹No – pay him no heed! Instead, prostrate, and come close.

^aThese five lines are widely held to be the very first lines of revelation.

^bGuardians of Hell.

97 (I). The Night of Puissance

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹We have revealed it on the 'Night of Puissance'.

²What will unmask for you the 'Night of Puissance'?

³The 'Night of Puissance' excels a thousand months.

⁴With the Lord's permission, the Spirit^a descends,

on that night, the angels too, on all errands,

⁵Until the break of day, peaceful silence.

97 (II). The Night of Decree

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹We have revealed it on the Night of Decree.

²What will unmask for you the Night of Decree?

³The Night of Decree is better than a century.^b

⁴On it, on their Lord's authority,

descend the angels and the Spirit^a on every duty,

⁵Until the break of day, Serenity.

^aWidely understood to be the archangel Gabriel.

^bReading 'a thousand months' figuratively.

98. Clear Evidence

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Those who disbelieve, from among the people of scripture and from among the idolaters both, could not change their ways until clear evidence was brought to their attention –

²A Messenger from God, engaged in the pure pages' recitation,

³Containing scripture of true devotion.

⁴Indeed, the people who received scripture were not divided until the clear evidence came to their attention.

⁵All they were commanded to do was to worship God, to sincerely devote their religion to Him, as people of true faith, and to establish regular prayer and give freely in charity. This is true religious devotion.

⁶Those who disbelieve, from among the people of scripture and from among the idolaters both, will abide forever in the Fire of Hell – those are the worst of Creation.

⁷Those who believe and perform righteous deeds – those are the best of Creation.

⁸Their reward from their Lord is the Garden of Eden wherein gently flow rivers, therein to abide forever. Their Lord is pleased with them and they with Him. This is vouchsafed to those who hold their Lord in awe.

99. The Convulsion

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹When the Earth is convulsed with convulsions,
²And the Earth has expelled its burdens,
³And everyone asks 'What ails it?' and questions –
⁴On that day shall the Earth recount its narrations,
⁵As compelled by your Lord's inspiration.
⁶On that day shall people appear, in separate batches,
and be shown their actions.
⁷And then, whosoever has done a fraction of good, shall see it,
⁸And whosoever has done a fraction of bad, shall see it.

100. The Charging Steeds

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹By flaring steeds charging,
²Their striking hooves sparking,
³The morning camps raiding –
⁴Dust clouds thereby thundering,
⁵Enemy crowds thereby sundering!
⁶Surely to its Lord, is Humanity utterly ungrateful,
⁷Surely of this fact, is it completely mindful,
⁸And yet for wealth, is it violently yearning!
⁹Do they not know – when graves are depleted of every inhabitant,
¹⁰And breasts are emptied of every content –
¹¹That, on that Day, their Lord will be, *about them*, fully Cognisant?

101. The Calamitous

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹‘The Calamitous’.

²What is ‘The Calamitous’?

³And what will unmask for you ‘The Calamitous’?

⁴A day when people will be like moths scattered,

⁵And when mountains will be like wool tattered.

⁶As for the ones with scales full laden,

⁷They shall know a life of bliss.

⁸But as for the ones with scales unladen,

⁹Their womb will be ‘The Abyss’.

¹⁰And what will unmask it for you? It is this:

¹¹ A Hellish Furnace.

102. Competitive Accumulation

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹You are distracted by competitive accumulation –

²But only till the graveyard is your destination!

³No indeed, you soon shall see.

⁴No indeed, you very soon shall see.

⁵No indeed, if only you could see with certainty:

⁶That you shall behold Hell most assuredly.

⁷Soon, you shall see it with the eye of certainty

⁸And on that day shall you surely be asked about your revelry.

103 (I). Time Endless

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹By Time, endless,

²Humanity is assuredly in a state of loss,

³Except for those who believe, perform righteous acts, mutually enjoin Truth
and mutually enjoin Steadfastness.

103 (II). The Evening

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹By the evening,

²Humanity is most assuredly in ruin

³Except for those who believe, perform righteous acts, and upon each other Truth
and Steadfastness enjoin.

104. Scandalmongers

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Woe to all the scandalmongering rumourmongers,

²Who count their every amassed belonging,

³Reckoning their wealth will make them everlasting!

⁴No indeed! They shall surely be abandoned to 'The Mortar'.

⁵And what will unmask for you 'The Mortar'?

⁶It is God's fiery kindling,

⁷On every heart encompassing,

⁸Upon them all, inclosing,

⁹In pillars proliferating!

105. The Elephants

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Did you not see how your Lord dealt with the people on elephantback?

²Did he not turn their ploy into an ineffectual attack?

³And cast upon them a celestial flock,

⁴That hurled upon them pebbles of *sijjīl* rock?^a

⁵And did he not make them like a field starvedstruck?

^a Clay pebbles baked in Hell, perhaps.

106. The Quraysh Tribe

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Given the pact of the Quraysh Tribe,^a

²Their pact for travel in the winter and summer time –

³Let them worship the Lord of this Shrine,^b

⁴Who feeds them in hunger and who protects them from fright.

^a Muḥammad's tribe, custodians of the Ka'ba in Mecca.

^b The Ka'ba.

107. Kindness

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Have you seen the one who rejects faith out of hand?

²That is the one who repels the orphaned,

³Who, for the feeding of the needy, makes no demand.

⁴Woe to the worshipful who bow and stand,

⁵Who wilfully miss prescribed prayers, and

⁶Who would be seen praying, and

⁷Yet, refuse the smallest kindness with a heavy hand.

108. Fount of Abundance

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Indeed, have We provided you a Fount of Favour abundant.^a

²Sacrifice to your Lord, then, and pray to Him, attestant;

³Your reviler is the one who is deficient.

^aA play on the name of a fountain in Paradise, *al-kawthar*, meaning 'abundance'.

109 (I). The Disbelievers

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Answer thus: O you who disbelieve!

²I do not believe in what you believe,

³And you aren't believers in my belief.

⁴I shall never believe in what you believe,

⁵And you aren't believers in my belief.

⁶I have my belief – You keep your beliefs.

109 (II). The Disbelievers

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Answer thus: O you disbelieving hypocrites!

²I do not submit to what you submit;

³And you are not heedful of what I heed.

⁴And I will never believe in what you believe!

⁵And you are not heedful of what I heed.

⁶You can have your creeds – I have my creed.

110. Victory^a

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹When God's victory and His triumph prevail,
²And you see people entering into God's religion,
³Then extol praises of your Lord, and seek forgiveness of Him: He is surely
 Ever-Forgiving.

^aThis sura is not in *saj*^c, though the end-words in ayas 2 and 3 are assonant.

111. Abu Lahab

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹Abu Lahab^a and his power both will expire.
²He will not be saved by wealth or the profits he may acquire.
³He will be plunged into *lahab*, a flaming fire!
⁴And his woman – that kindling-carrier –
⁵Will wear about her neck a halter of palm fibre!

^aAn uncle of Muḥammad's; his wife, mentioned in aya 5, was Umm Jamīl.

112. Purity of Faith

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

- ¹Affirm: He is God, Matchless
²God, Ceaseless,
³Unbegetting, Birthless,
⁴Without a single partner, Peerless.

113. The Dawn

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Repeat: I seek refuge in the Lord of the dawn,

²From the mischief of His Creation,

³And from the mischief of nightgloom when it blots,

⁴And from the mischief of sorceresses, spitting on knots,

⁵And from the mischief of the envious envier, when he plots.

114. Humanity

In the Name of God, Full of Compassion, Ever Compassionate

¹Repeat: I seek protection, with the Lord of Creation,

²Sovereign of Creation,

³God of Creation,

⁴From the malicious incantations

⁵Of the Accursed, whispering insinuations

In the hearts ⁶of Jinn and Humanity both, fabrications.

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NOTES

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1 For a bibliography of translations up to 1996, see A.R. Kidwai, *A Guide to English Translations of the Quran* (Port Louis: Hassam Toorawa Trust, 1997) (which Kidwai annotates).

2 On this question, see Bruce Lawrence, 'Approximating *saj'* in English Renditions of the Qur'an: A Close Reading of Sura 93 (*al-Duḥā*) and the *basmala*', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7:1 (2005), pp. 64–80. A notable exception is Reynold Nicholson in *A Literary History of the*

Arabs (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998 [1907]). There are also a handful of attempts by other translators of one or two suras, e.g. Richard Burton's translation of Sura 1 (*Sūrat al-Fātiha*).

3 On *sajʿ* in the Qur'an, see Devin Stewart, art. 'Rhymed Prose' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (5 vols, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), vol. 4, pp. 476–84; °A.M.M. Ṭabaq, *Dirāsa balāghiyya fī'l-sajʿ wa'l-fāṣila al-Qurʾāniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Arqam, 1993); Devin Stewart, 'Saj' in the Qur'an: Prosody and Stucture', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 21 (1990), pp. 101–39; Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1981); Muḥammad Ḥasnāwī, *al-Fāṣila fī'l-Qurʾān* (Aleppo: Dār al-Aṣīl, 1970, revised Amman: Dār °Ammār, 1986); Friedrun Müller, *Untersuchungen zur Reimprosa im Qur'an* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität, 1969).





Fig. 1: National Museum, Tehran, MS 4317. Pp. 208, 5 lines per page. Beginning Q. 15:1, ending Q. 16:128. This page Q. 15:98–9.



Fig. 2: National Museum, Tehran, MS 4253. Pp. 10, 10 lines per page. Beginning Q. 75:10, ending Q. 91:4–5. This page Q. 88:9–21.