

linguistic thought associated with Kufa and Basra played prominent roles in introducing and refining so many of the orthographical improvements that one associates with the development of the Arabic script and the functional and structural ornamentation used to aid the text's recitation.

6 Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, p. 171.

7 See David James 'Some Observations on the Calligrapher and Illuminators of the Koran of Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Jāshnagīr', *Muqarnas* 2 (1984), pp. 147–57.



The Holy Qur'ān: Translations of Selected Verses. By Martin Lings. Cambridge: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and The Islamic Texts Society, 2007. Pp. 237 + xvii. £29.99/£14.99.

In the Preface (pp. xiii–xvii), the publishers of this volume explain its genesis and *raison d'être*. The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (Jordan) commissioned Martin Lings (Shaykh Abū Bakr Sirāj al-Dīn) – then 95 years old – to produce a complete translation of the Qur'an into English, but Lings passed away the following year, not having made great headway. Lings' widow subsequently gave the Institute access to his unpublished papers, and 'permission to put together and publish a collection of all the translations that exist in Dr Lings' books, articles, lectures and private and unpublished papers'. The Institute had no doubt hoped to include the complete commissioned Lings translation in its online scholarly tool; indeed, the selections published in this volume do appear on the web site.¹ Aftab Ahmed of the American University in Sharjah, who culled and collated the translations, had recourse to almost seven decades' worth of Martin Lings' output. Use was made of ten of Lings' books, seven articles, and undated material that included six lectures, 'private talks' and 'unpublished material, 1938–2005', all listed in a 'List of Sources in Chronological Order with Abbreviations' (p. xi).

The result of these labours is this unusual, posthumous book. It is unusual for the fact that of the 114 suras in the Qur'an, only twelve are translated in their entirety (Q. 1, Q. 55, Q. 93, Q. 95, Q. 97, Q. 103, Q. 105, Q. 106, Q. 109, Q. 112, Q. 113 and Q. 114); and of the remaining 102, only 76 are represented (untranslated are Q. 45, Q. 58, Q. 62, Q. 64, Q. 65, Q. 67, Q. 69–71, Q. 79, Q. 81, Q. 82, Q. 84, Q. 87, Q. 90–2, Q. 98–100, Q. 102, Q. 104, Q. 107, Q. 108, Q. 110, Q. 111), many with as little as an aya or a fragment of one (e.g. Q. 44:38 (p. 136), Q. 34:9 (p. 118), or Q. 75:2 (p. 180)), and some without multiple translations of ayas (e.g. Q. 19, Q. 20), in spite of the fact that this is an explicit motivation for producing this work (see below). The inclusion of an Appendix of 'The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God' (pp. 205–11), 'with as many translations of the Names as could be found in the writings of Dr Lings' (p. xvi), is not in and of itself unusual – Kassis does a

similar thing in his concordance – but the inclusion of an ‘Insert by the Publishers, Being an Extract from al-Ghazālī on the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God’ (p. 212), is.

The English translations are accompanied by facing Arabic, but the layout gives the impression that the Arabic is continuous when in fact it is not. One wonders whether the design is not at cross-purposes with stated intentions for the volume as a whole –

We have deliberately cited the entire text of the Arabic verses translated here. For we believe that whilst it is one thing to quote parts of verses of the Holy Qur’ān – that is, parts of verses whose meaning can stand alone and which do not contradict the meanings of the complete verse – in the context of religious instruction or scholarship, *it is altogether another thing to publish a whole book full of incomplete verses of the Holy Qur’ān* (p. xv, emphasis mine)

– and whether publishing incomplete suras in this way is especially useful. In practice, this is less of a problem for the longer suras, where having 43 ayas out of 286 from Q. 2, or 12 ayas out of 176 from Q. 4, for example, may be illustrative of Lings’ skills. But having just one aya out of 118 from Q. 23 is frustrating and unsatisfying. These shortcomings are, of course, inevitable: one cannot use what Martin Lings did not translate. But the decision not to translate sura titles on the grounds that ‘we could not find translations for all of them in his writings’ (p. xiii), while defensible, goes against the publishers’ interest in showing Lings’ translatorly decisions – it would have been helpful to see what titles he *did* translate.

According to the publishers, this is ‘the first time ever that multiple translations of the same ayas from the Qur’ān have appeared together in one book’ (p. xiv).² The motivation for such a catalogue is to show the evolution of Lings’ linguistic choices: thus, when there are numerous translations of a single aya, they are listed chronologically. But the private talks and unpublished material are not reliably datable so that when a translation emanates from those sources, the relative placement of the translation of an aya appears to be an educated guess.

The best way to grasp this book’s conception, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, is to look at some examples. The translations of Q. 14:25 (alas, one of only four of this sura’s 52 ayas translated by Lings) are (p. 70):

- (a) *Giving its fruit at every season by the leave of its Lord. God citeth symbols for men that they may remember* [BC = 1952, rev. 1992];
- (b) *Giving its fruits at every due season by the leave of its Lord. And God coineth similitudes for men that they may remember* [QACI = 1976] [SQCI = 2005].

Lings would appear to have abandoned the 1952 *God citeth symbols* (for *wa-yaḍribu'llāhu'l-amthāl*) for the 1976 *and God coineth similitudes* (though he retains the former in the revised edition of the first work, even as he adopts the latter in his 2005 book). Another example of possible development (presuming the second translation to be later, because of its placement, even though it is undated) is the following progression in Q. 22:74 (p. 88):

- (a) *They esteem not God as He hath the right to be esteemed ...* [NOS = 1987];
- (b) *They have not rated God at His true worth ...* [L-PT = undated].

There is evolution also in Q. 27:43 (p. 102):

- (a) *And that which she had been wont to worship in the place of God was as a stumbling block before her. Verily she came of an infidel folk* [UM = undated];
- (b) *And she was barred from it by what she was wont to worship apart from God. Verily she was from a disbelieving people* [SA = 1991].

Since it is included as the final version of Q. 1:1, and is reproduced at the head of every one of the book's chapters (each of which represents a sura), Lings apparently settled on *In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the Ever-Merciful* for the *basmalah*: it would have been instructive to know how he did so – 'Infinitely Good' for *rahīmān* is poetic, but certainly unorthodox.

On occasion, a later translation by Lings is not an improvement on an earlier one, as in Q. 33:56 (p. 116):

- (a) *Verily God and His angels invoke blessings upon the Prophet. O ye who believe, invoke blessings upon him and greetings of peace* [SCR-SA = 1979];
- (b) *Verily God and His angels whelm in blessings the prophet. O ye who believe invoke blessings upon him and give him greetings of Peace* [M = 1983, revised 1991].

And sometimes, as in Q. 93:4 (p. 190), Lings appears to revert from an accurate interpretive translation to a literal one – and I would argue, in this particular case, an inaccurate and an unfortunately allusive one (*vide* Matthew 20:16):

- (a) *And certainly the hereafter is better for thee than the here-below* [UM = undated];
- (b) *And the hereafter is better for thee than this world* [UM = undated];

(c) *And the last shall be better for thee than the first* [M = 1983, revised 1991];

(unless, of course, the undated (b) translation in fact postdates the 1991 (c) translation).

Notwithstanding the very ambitious wish that for ‘all those wishing to learn about the Qur’an, for non-Arabic-speaking Muslims, for students of Arabic and translation, for scholars of Islamic studies, [this book] is a short and accessible introduction with the additional benefits of the profound learning of an eminent scholar and the beautiful language of a published poet’ (back cover), the publishers reveal their real (and laudable) motives when they write in the preface that ‘reading this book is sharing in the intimate life-long relationship of a saintly man with his Scripture, a relation in which there is no real repetition due to the depth and mystery of the sacred Text and where every instance of the same word has a uniqueness and utter unrepeatability deriving directly from the Divine Infinitude’ (p. xv). These are noble motives, to be sure; one only wishes that the corpus was all 6,236 of the Qur’an’s ayas, rather than the mere tenth that the 624 translated ayas (some fragmentary, and most non-contiguous) represent. (This would have also contributed toward making the index (pp. 213–37), conceived as ‘a short concordance’ (p. xvi), useful.)

Ultimately, this volume is less an aperçu into the evolution of Martin Lings’ aesthetic sensibilities and linguistic development than a tribute, a eulogy of sorts, as the closing line of the preface makes very clear (p. xvii):

Al-Hamduli’Llāh, therefore, for the Holy Qur’an; for all that helps in deepening our understanding of it; and for the life, example and writings of Shaykh Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn, *raḍiya Allāh ‘anhu*.

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DOI: 10.3366/E1465359109000618

NOTES

1 Also available at <www. altafsir. com> are full translations by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Arberry, Asad, Uthmani, and the ‘Royal Aal al-Bayt Translation’.

2 But cf. Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), who provides three versions of Q. 97 and Q. 112, and two versions of Q. 108; and Shawkat M. Toorawa, “‘The Inimitable Rose’, being Qur’anic *saj’* from *Sūrat al-Ḍuḥā* to *Sūrat al-Nās* (Q. 93–114) in English Rhyming Prose’, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8:2 (2006), pp. 143–53, who provides two versions each of Q. 97, Q. 103 and Q. 109.

