

TOWARD AN ENGLISH RHYMED PROSE TRANSLATION
OF SURAT AL-RAHMAN

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I. PREFATORY REMARKS

Q In 1411/1990, after hearing a particularly moving recitation of INSAN 76, I consulted several English translations to see how translators had rendered it and was disappointed to discover that none had attempted to convey the *saj'* (cadenced rhyming prose). I found this oversight (and decision) curious, as *saj'* is such an important feature of the Qur'an (see Müller 1969, Ḥasnāwī 1986, Stewart 1990, and Stewart 2005). I consequently decided to try and translate INSAN 76, and other suras, into rhyming English prose (see Toorawa 1996, Toorawa 2002, Lawrence 2005, Toorawa 2006a, Toorawa 2006b, Toorawa 2007a [forthcoming]), all into *musajja'* English. These efforts have benefited from kind patronage in many quarters, especially from and in the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, for which I am very grateful. In all cases, I attempt to convey, to the extent possible, the sound and form of the Arabic *saj'*. *Saj'* is such an integral part of Qur'anic language and sura structure that no justification, it seems to me, is needed, although there is, to be sure, considerable discussion in the classical exegetical tradition about whether God is constrained by rhyme or simply the best of rhymers (to oversimplify the positions) (see Stewart 1990).

A This translation of RAHMAN 55 has its origins in 1413/1992, when my friend and colleague Devin Stewart and I produced a draft of the first thirteen ayas. Daunted by both the monorhyme and the refrain, we did not get any further. In 1427/2006, I resolved to tackle the sura anew, in large part because it seemed to me that if a project to render Qur'anic *saj'* in English were to be successful, it would have to work with RAHMAN 55. I present the fruits of that effort below and welcome scholarly feedback and comment (smt24@cornell.edu).

II. THE TRANSLATION

THE COMPASSIONATE ONE (RAHMAN 55:1-78⁸)

*In the name of God, Full of compassion,
Ever compassionate*

⁽¹⁾ ¹The Compassionate One,_a
²Taught 'The Recitation',
³Brought Humans_b into creation,
⁴Taught them clear expression.
⁵The Sun and Moon follow a fixed rotation,
⁶The plants and trees prostrate in adoration.
⁷He raised the skies and has balanced all in true
proportion, ⁸That you not unbalance that proportion. ⁹So be
fair in your allocation and do not skew any proportion.
¹⁰He rendered the earth for the sake of His creation:
¹¹Upon it are fruit and fronded palms, and ¹²Aromatics
and huskèd grain—¹³Which, then, of your Lord's wonders,
do you both deny in vain?
¹⁴He fashioned Humans from clay, like an earthenware
jar, ¹⁵And fashioned the Jinn from the fire's ashless char—
¹⁶Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in
vain?
¹⁷Lord of the sun's risings and settings twain_d—¹⁸Which,
then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?
¹⁹Fresh water and salt water meet in concursion, ²⁰But
they cannot overrun: between them is a separation—
²¹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in
vain?
²²Both of them pearls and corals contain—²³Which, then,
of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?
²⁴The mountainlike ships in the sea are His domain—
²⁵Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in
vain?
⁽²⁾ ²⁶Everything on the Earth shall wane, ²⁷But not the
countenance of your Lord, Full of Majesty, Magnanimous,
which alone shall remain—²⁸Which, then, of your Lord's
wonders do you both deny in vain?
²⁹Everyone on earth and in the heavens beseeches Him;
daily all matters does He ordain—³⁰Which, then, of your
Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

³¹We shall soon have dealings with both you wearisome legions—³²Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

³³O assembly of Jinn and Humans: If you are able to venture beyond the regions of the Heavens and the Earth, then do so; but you shall not venture except by Divine power and permission—³⁴Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

³⁵Smokeless flames and flaming smoke will descend upon you, and you will have no protection—³⁶Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

³⁷And when the skies are torn apart and become like a hide scorched crimson—³⁸Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

³⁹On that day, neither Jinn nor Humans will need to be asked about their transgression—⁴⁰Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁴¹The guilty shall be known by distinguishing marks, and then seized by forelock and feet twain—⁴²Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁴³This will be the very Hell-Fire denied by the guilty, those to blame, ⁴⁴Running back and forth, between it and a Cauldron boiling aflame—⁴⁵Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁴⁶But for the one who fears standing before his Lord, are Gardens twain—⁴⁷Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁴⁸Which myriad trees contain—⁴⁹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁵⁰Two springs flowing in each domain—⁵¹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁵²And in each place two of every fruit, and of every description—⁵³Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁵⁴Both Gardens' fruits within reach of the righteous, reclining upon divans of silk brocade confection—⁵⁵Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁵⁶Residing there are companions of modest gaze, virginal, untouched before by Jinn or Human passion—⁵⁷Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁵⁸Like rubies or coral gems of perfection—⁵⁹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁶⁰Can the reward for Right Action be aught but Right Action?—⁶¹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁶²And beyond these two Gardens, Gardens twain—⁶³Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁶⁴Dense with dark vegetation—⁶⁵Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁶⁶With two springs that surge, that naught can constrain—⁶⁷Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁶⁸Abundant in them are pomegranate, date palm, and fruit of the heavens—⁶⁹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁷⁰And in them virtuous and lovely companions—⁷¹Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁷²Dark-eyed beauties secluded in pavilions—⁷³Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁷⁴Virginal, untouched before by Jinn or Human passions—⁷⁵Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁷⁶The righteous recline there on mottled carpets, on green cushions—⁷⁷Which, then, of your Lord's wonders do you both deny in vain?

⁷⁸Your Lord, Full of Majesty, Magnanimous—blessèd be His name.

III. CURSORY NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION

Notation. There is as yet no uniform way of referring to Qur'anic passages, and no standardized notation for translations. My RAHMAN 55:1-78^s incorporates both the 'Uthmānī compilational number and the Romanized name, and uses a § to denote the final aya of a sura. Ayas are numbered using opening superscripted Arabic numerals, and *rukū*'s using boldfacing Arabic numerals in braces. I describe this notation (and other features) in Toorawa 2007^h (forthcoming). Because of possible confusion (with aya number), I use a subscripted, italicized, Roman letter to footnote a word or phrase.

¹⁻³ These opening ayas may be translated as follows if one wishes to retain use of the Arabic words *al-Rahmān* and *al-Qur'ān*: "Ar-Rahman

/ Taught the Qur'an / Created Man." My decision to render *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Qur'ān* in English, and my desire to render *insān* in a gender-neutral way, rests precisely on the decision to *translate*.

^a In the *basmala*, where *al-Raḥmān* is an epithet and attribute of God, I render it "Full of Compassion." When *al-Raḥmān* is used as a proper noun as in aya 1, I use "The Compassionate One."

^b I use the word "Humans" to renders *insān* (and *ins*). Together with *jinn* (also *jānn*), these are the two addressees in this very dual sura, most notably in the refrain: see the note to aya 13 below.

¹¹ This sura is monorhyme in /-ān/ /-ām/ with the exception of ay. 14-15. I have chosen to replicate the /n/ and /m/ rhyme sounds in English by using the clusters: /-sion/ /-tion/ /-on/, /ions/ /-ens/, /-ain/ /-ane/, and /-ame/.

^c For a discussion of "wonders" as a translation of *ālā'*, and much else besides regarding translation of the Qur'^{ān} into English (though not the (non)translation of its *saj'*), see Azmi 2007.

¹³ This is the first occurrence of this sura's celebrated refrain, *fa-bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbi-kumā tukadhdhibān*, one that is subsequently repeated (almost) every other aya, viz. thirty-one times in the space of sixty-five ayas. Note that I read, and therefore place, the refrain after an initial statement of wonder. As for my choice of "deny in vain," I take note of one anonymous referee's preference for a single-word translation—I did consider "disdain"—and I appreciate what Joe Lowry (and others) term the Qur'^{ān}'s "economy of diction." But I stand by "deny in vain" because it both conveys what I think *kadhdhaba* here means, and because I think it contributes to the cadence of the English: "Which, then, of your Lord's bounties do you both deny in vain?"

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Although—or because?—the ay. 14-15 couplet immediately follows the refrain, these two ayas constitute the only deviation from the sura's rhyme scheme: /-ār/ instead of /-ān/ /-ām/, I replicate this /r/ sound in the English. (Note that the /-ayn/ of *maghribayn* at aya 17, and the /-ūn/ in *mujrimūn* at aya 43 are tolerated rhymes).

There is no consensus among exegetes about the meaning of *mārij*, hence my liberty in rendering it "the fire's ashless char." Many translators opt for something along the lines of "smokeless fire."

^d I have used “twain” four times as a rhyme word. I also repeat as rhyme words twice each, “creation,” “contain,” and “domain.” I take the sura’s tolerance of repeated rhyme (see the list of rhyme words below) as license to do so. In the case of “twain,” that seems to me an apposite word to repeat in this particular sura. It is archaic (as is “concurcion”) but not, I think, out of place. Below is a complete list of the Arabic rhyme-words, followed by a list of the English ones:

fān

/-ān/ /-ayn/ /-ūn/ *rahmān, qur’ān, insān, bayān, ḥusbān, yasjudān, mīzān* (x 3), *rayḥān, tukadhhibān* (x 31), *yaltaqiyān, yabghiyān, marjān* (x 2), *ḥsha’n, thaqalān, sulṭān, tantaṣirān, dihān, jānn* (x 3), *ān, jannatān* (x 2), *afnān, tajriyān, zawjān, dān, ḥisān* (x 2), *hāmmatān, naḍḍajātān, rummān, maghribayn, mujrimūn*
 /-ām/ *anām, akmām, a’lām, jān, ikrām* (x 2), *aqdām, khiyām.*
 /-ār/ *fajjār, nār*

/-un/ One, overrun, crimson

/-uns/ legions, Humans, heavens, companions, pavilions, passions, cushions

/-shun/ Recitation, creation (x 2), expression, rotation, adoration, proportion (x3), concurcion, separation, permission, protection, transgression, description, confection, passion, perfection, Action, vegetation

/-ane/ grain, vain (x 31), twain (x 4), contain (x 2), domain (x 2), wane, remain, ordain, constrain

m

/-ayfe/ blame, aflame, name

/-ar/ jar, char

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Sūrat al-Duhā to
Sūrat al-Nās
(Q.93-114)

with illustrative
translations and discussions

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