

The puzzle of Surat al-Ahzab (Q 33):35 in English

Bruce B Lawrence

In my book, *The Koran in English: A Biography* (2017), I make reference to more than 100 renditions of the Noble Book, the Holy Qur'an into English. I would argue that nearly all of these Koran translations reflect a mixture of imitation and creativity. The translation process is at once imitative, dependent on prior choices made by others, and independent, requiring a decision by the individual—whether artist or scholar, believer or unbeliever—as to the preferred meaning for her or his rendition of each verse.

Nowhere does the complex intertwining of past choices with present options in Koran translation become more defiantly difficult than in consideration of Q 33:35. In the aftermath of detailed revelations about appropriate behavior for the Prophet's wives (v. 28-34), Surat al-Ahzab opens up a general register, listing desirable traits for *all* believers (v. 35), before returning to rules of deportment for the Prophet with his wives (v.50-52), for believers with his wives (v.53), and then for his wives in public (v. 59). The full text in Arabic reads:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ
وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ
وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّاتِمِينَ وَالصَّاتِمَاتِ
وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ
أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣٥﴾

Transliteration: 'inna l-muslimīna wa-l-muslimāti
wa-l-mu'minīna wa-l-mu'mināti
wa-l-qānitīna wa-l-qānitāti
wa-ṣ-ṣādiqīna wa-ṣ-ṣādiqāti
wa-ṣ-ṣābirīna wa-ṣ-ṣābirāti
wa-l-khāshi'īna wa-l-khāshi'āti
wa-l-mutaṣaddiqīna wa-l-mutaṣaddiqāti
wa-ṣ-ṣā'imīna wa-ṣ-ṣā'imāti
wa-l-ḥāfiẓīna furūjahum wa-l-ḥāfiẓāti
wa-dh-dhākirīna llāha kathīran wa-dh-dhākirāti
'a'adda llāhu lahum maghfiratan wa-'ajran 'aẓīma'

The crucial decisions for translating Q 33:35 are two-fold: 1) how to render *muslimun* and *muslimat* in English, and 2) how to list the other nine commendable groups, activities & practices linked to *muslimun* and *muslimat*?

While both choices reflect a genealogy of preference among translators going back to Muhammad Ali (1917) and Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934), only two major translators – Muhammad Asad (1980) and Tarif Khalidi (2008) – announce reasons for their choices on either of these decisions. Asad argues on the issue of *islam* and *muslim* that “when his (Muhammad’s) contemporaries heard the words *islam* and *muslim*, they understood them as denoting man’s self-surrender to God’ and ‘one who surrenders himself to God’, without limiting these terms to any specific community or denomination.” Khalidi, for his part, observes that “since the ‘register’ of the Qur’an constantly shifts”, the translated text “*had* to look different, a horizontal prose format contrasting with a vertical ‘poetic’ fashion.” (the italics is his)

The choices that Asad makes are epistemic, those of Khalidi aesthetic, yet both reflect strategies that are crucial for all translators, albeit too often unannounced or ignored in published renditions of the Koran in English. While this issue occupies me at length in my book, *The Koran in English – A Biography*, I will explore its importance in this presentation with attention to the choices made, and the results produced, in seeking to forge the best equivalent in English for those extolled in Q 33:35, those ten favored parties – men and women - “for whom God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.”

Here is how Asad reads:

VERILY, for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves [before God], and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for [all of] them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.

All ten are listed seriatim as equivalent, then in the rejoinder it is announced: “for [all of them] has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward”.

Khalidi, favoring the vertical presentation of this and other ‘lyrical’ verses, offers this rendition of Q 33:35

Muslim men and Muslim women,
Believing men and believing women,
Devout men and devout women,

Sincere men and sincere women,
Patient men and patient women,
Humble men and humble women,
Charitable men and charitable women,
Fasting men and fasting women,
Men who guard their chastity, and women who guard their
chastity,
Men who often remember God, and women who often
remember God,
To all of them God has made ready a pardon and a glorious
Reward.

And then there is Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2004), a giant among contemporary Koran translators. His rendition, with OUP, has enjoyed far greater commercial success than any other 21st century Koran translation. Abdel Haleem provides what seems like an original translation, but even he has a predecessor, at least partially, in Yusuf Ali. Yusuf Ali was the first to make the move that Abdel Haleem follows, even though Yusuf Ali, like Tarif Khalidi, renders *muslimun/muslimat* anachronistically as Muslim men/Muslim women.

Here is the original 1934 version of Yusuf Ali, not the later, doctored 1989 Saudi version of Yusuf Ali:

For Muslim men and women,- for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise,- for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward.

The benefit of his move is as follows: Abdel Haleem, like Yusuf Ali, takes the first ascription - *muslimun/muslimat* - to be an umbrella category including all who follow, so that "for men and women who are devoted to God..." encompasses all the nine other groups next cited:

For men and women who are devoted to God – believing men and women, obedient men and women, truthful men and women , steadfast men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, men and women who remember God often – God has prepared forgiveness and a rich reward.

Apart from reshaping the form of the verse, this punctuation, not in the original text but possible within a bold reading of its intent, allows Abdel Haleem, like Yusuf Ali, to use a huge indentation. In effect, the nine parallel terms become additional qualities or qualifications of those who, first of all and above all, are “men and women devoted to God”. This bold accent also has a performative value: it relieves the reader/reciter of tightly linked repetition, and in its place makes sense of the entire verse as a set of dependent conditions:

"For men and women who are devoted to God etc. etc. etc. etc.-----God has prepared forgiveness and a rich reward."

Yet there are awkward features in Haleem's rendition: devotion is not equivalent to submission, and what does 'preparation' mean when linked to both forgiveness and reward?

Here is an alternative rendition (Habib/Lawrence, forthcoming) – following Yusuf Ali and Abdel Haleem – but modifying the last declarative line:

35. For men and women who submit–
believing men and women,
obedient men and women,
truthful men and women,
patient men and women,
men and women with humility,
men and women who give in charity,
men and women who fast,
men and women who guard their chastity,
men and women who remember God often –
[for all of these] God has envisioned forgiveness
and a great reward.

To say that God has 'envisioned' is to move a register beyond the literal Arabic meaning. *A'adda Allahu lahum ma'ghfiratan waajran 'athiman*. To say that God has envisioned, is to assert that God has done more than prepare, He has promised **and** projected, that is to say, He has not only prepared but also promised and projected both forgiveness and a great reward.

At once edifying yet daunting is the task to render this magnificent verse into English. So great is the challenge that equally dedicated scholars, many of them justly renowned, have taken entirely different paths. To which I can only add, in conclusion, *Wallahu 'alam bissawaab*.