



The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Qurʾān, Volume 1

Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī. Hamid Algar, Michael Schub and Ayman Abdel Haleem (Trans.)

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If one had to choose a single classical work on the Qurʾānic sciences to have in one’s library, it would undoubtedly be Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s (d.911/1505) *Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qurʾān*. Building on the encyclopedic efforts of his predecessors, particularly Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d.794) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 824), the Cairene al-Suyūṭī sought to produce a single authoritative guide to all the key disciplines of Qurʾānic studies. And, indeed, he did; throughout the centuries, the *Itqān* has remained an indispensable resource on the classical sciences of the *Qurʾān*, explaining its revelation and compilation, variant readings, rules of recitation, exegetical principles, and etiquette and handling of the *mushaf*, among others. Thus, this reviewer was pleased to learn of the translation of the first 35 chapters of this 80-chapter work into English. However, despite the significant and largely successful effort on the part of the translation and editing team, the final product falls short in serious ways.

The 35 chapters are translated by Hamid Algar (Chapters 1–14), Michael Schub (Chapters 15–32/33 and the end of Chapter 35), and Ayman ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm (Chapters 32/33 through the first part of Chapter 35). A brief Introduction is provided by Dr. Osman S. A. Isma‘īl al-Bīlī, in which he situates al-Suyūṭī’s life and work, and tells us that the translation is based on the Arabic edition edited by Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm. The volume includes sporadic endnotes (for Chapters 15–17 and 32–35 only) and an index. There is no bibliography or list of works consulted.

Al-Bīlī’s Introduction, brief as it is, exhibits a hurriedness or carelessness that is the unfortunate hallmark of this translation, for we read that the first translator is Hamid “Alger” and the second is Michael “Chop.” When the very names of the translators are misspelled, the rest of the editorial process becomes suspect. At the same time, the Introduction omits information critical to situating this translation effort. We do not learn why Ibrāhīm’s edition was chosen as the basis of translation or whether the translators consulted the other editions of this work. (The *Itqān* is available in several other editions, some of which correct errors in Ibrāhīm’s.)



Nor do we learn how this translation contributes to the field. (Several chapters of the *Itqān* have been translated by Muneer Fareed. The two translation efforts only overlap in a single chapter—that on *imāla*.) We are told nothing of the history of *‘ulūm al-Qur‘ān* that would enable the reader to appreciate al-Suyūṭī’s scholarly role. The Introduction, therefore, does not fulfill some of this reviewer’s key expectations.

As for the translation itself, we must look at the work of Algar, Schub, and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm separately. Of the three translations, this reviewer finds ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm’s the best. He has provided solid translations from the original, accurately capturing the content of the original and conveying it in lucid English that is coherent and scholarly. Furthermore, ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm’s transliterations contain the appropriate diacritical markers. In sum, only in reading ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm’s short contribution can the reader rest assured that she is encountering al-Suyūṭī.

Algar’s translation is fairly good. For the most part, he accurately and eloquently renders the substance of the original into English. He very helpfully provides citations for Qur‘anic verses, as well as quotes the entire verse so that readers may easily understand the author’s intent. However, the reliability of Algar’s translation is undermined because of two major flaws. These are inconsistent use of diacritics and inaccurate transliteration of some names, titles, and technical terms. While omitting some diacritics is acceptable, such omission must be consistent so that the words are spelled the same way throughout. Beyond indicating a lack of editorial attention, this orthographic inconsistency might be confusing to nonspecialist readers. For example, the Qur‘anic chapter *al-‘Arāf* is spelled both correctly and incorrectly (*al-Arāf*) in the space of four lines (p. 4); the tribal name al-Thaqīf is misspelled al-Thāqīf (p. 65); and the chapter *al-An‘ām* is routinely transliterated *al-An‘am* (p. 81). ‘Alam al-Dīn (“Banner of the Religion”) appears as Alam al-Dīn (“Pain of the World”), and we see variously “al-Bulqīnī” and “al-Bilqīnī” (p. xx). The famous Damascene biographer Yūsuf al-Mizzī (d.1342) is named al-Mazzi (p. 12); al-Nasā‘ī, of Nasā, is often called al-Nisā‘ī (“the feminist?”); and the *ḥadīth* specialist ‘Alī b. al-Madīnī is referred to as ‘Alī b. al-Midyānī (p. 55).

Even more surprising is the misspelling of *muṣḥaf* as *mishaf* (p. xxxii). These are in addition to minor typographical errors, such as leaving the “Abī” out of “Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān” (p. 51). In short, Algar’s translation is best utilized by either the specialist who knows what is intended or the nonspecialist who is interested in al-Suyūṭī’s content and does not seek correct and detailed information of names, titles, and so forth.

Most problematic is Schub’s section, which, aside from mistransliterations, contains some substantive problems. The translator frequently either misunderstands al-Suyūṭī or translates the author’s words into an English that is plagued with poor syntax and word choice, with the result that certain passages are simply incomprehensible—particularly unfortunate given al-Suyūṭī’s straightforward style. An example of this misreading and incomprehensibility is found on page 109, where,



regarding recitation in different *ahruf*, we read that “no one was asked to change from his own dialect to another, due to the extreme difficulty involved. When they were especially zealous, they would ask for a simplification to understand the meaning.” The correct translation of *li’lmashaqqa wa li-mā kāna fī-him min al-ḥamiya wa li-ṭalab tashīl fahm al-murād* would be “due to the extreme difficulty involved, and to their enthusiasm, and so as to facilitate understanding.” Schub’s misunderstanding manifests itself also in a passage on Ṣūfī approaches to the Qur’anic sciences, where particular spiritual qualities are grouped incorrectly (p. 111). His translation on the relationship between *imāla* and *tafkhīm*, and the *kasr* and the *fath*, is similarly prone to error; the student of *tajwīd* would be better served by reading Fareed’s translation of this chapter. Furthermore, Schub often leaves out portions of the original text without warning, or inserts glosses without clear marking. For example, on page 105, at the end of a discussion on whether the phrase “in seven *ahruf*” should be taken literally or figuratively, he leaves out the entire concluding sentence *Fa hādhā yadullu ‘alā irāda ḥaqīqīya al-‘adad wa inḥiṣāru-hu* (“So this indicates that the true intent was the precise number”). Where Schub does mark his glosses, he does so by putting them in parentheses rather than in square brackets or footnotes as dictated by convention, which makes his glosses indistinguishable from parenthetical remarks by al-Suyūṭī himself.

All of these substantive problems occur alongside the sorts of transliteration/diacritic inconsistency, spelling problems, and typographical errors that are found in Algar’s portion, except that in Schub’s portion, these are more severe and more frequent. For instance, in addition to alternating between *i* and *ī* for the letter *yā’*, Schub also at times uses the doubled *ii*, thus *‘ala taqdiir thubuuti-hi* for *‘alā taqdir thubūti-hi*. One oddity is spelling the prophet Ibrāhīm’s/Abraham’s name as neither the English “Abraham” nor the transliterated “Ibrāhīm,” but a conflated “Abrāhām” (p. 88). Even more strange is Schub’s translation of *hu*, when in reference to the prophets, with a capital “H” as in “Him,” as one would normally only write for references to God. We also see for *yudarru* and *yudarra*, “*yu Darra* or *yu Darra*” (p. 105). And then there are what appear to be typographical errors. Thus, for a prophetic ḥadīth, we read “Abū Ya’lā related in his *Musnad*: ‘I remember . . . a man heard the Prophet’” where the original reads “Abū Ya’lā related in his *Musnad* that ‘Uthmān said: ‘I remember . . .’” (p. 104, emphasis mine). Al-Bāqillānī’s name is mutilated to become “al-Baqalani,” Ibn Ma’in becomes “Ibn Mu’in,” and al-Bulqīnī is written “al-Bulgīnī.” The *mushaf* is called the *maṣḥaf*, and the martyred female companion of the Prophet, Umm Wāraqa, is called “the *Shāhida*” rather than “the *Shabīda*” (p. 173). In Chapter 31, the translator provides his own transliteration after each of al-Suyūṭī’s examples of *idghām*. Beyond the fact that these are unmarked insertions into the text, there are several typographical or diacritical errors: his suggested reading of Q 2:185 (*shabru ramaḍāna*) is *sharramaḍāna*, for Q 18:61 (*fa’t-takhdha sabīla-hu*) he proposes *fa-ttakkkhassabīla-hu*, and so on throughout the chapter. And then, the last words of the mnemonic device *ruḍ sa-nashuddu ḥujjataka bi-dhulli qutham* are transliterated



fa-nam (“So sleep!”). Given the seriousness of the subject matter within the classical Islamic sciences—that is, correct pronunciation of the scripture—this chapter exemplifies a particular carelessness on the part of the translator toward al-Suyūṭī’s authorial intent.

Beyond the body of the translation, a few remarks should be made about the notes. The endnotes, as mentioned, are uneven, being provided for only a few chapters. They are particularly difficult to use because the work does not have a proper bibliography, nor do the notes follow the alternate convention of providing complete bibliographic information for sources at first mention. Abbreviations for sources are used without a list of abbreviations to consult. In the end, this offering does not stand on its own as a reliable translation of these chapters of the *Itqān*. The entire work would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand and more exacting standards of translation and transliteration.



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