



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching Qur'anic Exegesis in English

Martin Nguyen, *Fairfield University*

Blog Series: Teaching Islam

February 15, 2017

Tags: teaching Qur'an | exegesis | translation | exegetical exercises

As anyone who takes on the task will appreciate, teaching the Qur'an is an incredibly challenging undertaking. The scripture bears out multiple layers of meaning and finds expression across a range of literary devices: parables, similitudes, hyperbole, sacred narratives, direct exhortations, and so on. Moreover, my students – like most that we encounter – rarely have the ability to access the Qur'an in its original Arabic, through which much of the scripture's polysemy is most evident. Adding to the difficulty of teaching the Qur'an is that there is a pedagogically valuable array of exegetical traditions that have emerged from the innumerable engagements Muslims have had with the scripture across history. While it is certainly possible to teach the Qur'an on its own in English, I have always felt compelled to draw my students' attention to these many interpretative communities and to expose them, at the very least, to some of the hermeneutic concerns held therein. In short, I want to teach my students something about Qur'anic exegesis alongside the Qur'an itself.

How, then, have I done this for my largely English-speaking undergraduates? I have expanded upon and adapted a set of "exegetical exercises" that Farid Esack used when I served as his teaching fellow over a decade ago. The point of these assignments was to expose students to different interpretative resources and techniques in graduated stages so that by the end of a

semester they were prepared to undertake a focused interpretative analysis of their own. What I'd like to do here is share some of those pedagogical techniques that I've used in different iterations of my Qur'an course.

Translation Comparison

One of the first tasks I assign is the reading of a short Qur'anic passage, usually Q. 96 or Q. 97, across multiple English translations. While I allow students to go out and find credible translations of their own, I also state that they must all reference specific translations in order to ensure a common starting point for everyone. At present I require the translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem published by Oxford, Michael Sell's *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, and the *Study Quran* from HarperCollins. Narrowing their attention to a small set of verses has proven ideal because it compels them to comb through a translation word-by-word. The assignment is essentially about attention to detail. In the short essay, I ask them to write on these verses, they identify noteworthy differences, comment upon how these small changes affect their understanding and then opine on why some choices are made over others. Why translate it this way over that?

For example, students often spend much of their time thinking through the interpretative implications of a keyword in Q. 96:2 that is variously translated as "clinging form," "blood clot," "embryo," and "congealed blood." When we discuss our findings in class, I make it a point to turn also to the translators themselves and situate each translation project by referencing the introductions of their respective translations to better understand their objectives and methods. While most of my students may lack familiarity with Arabic, this exercise impresses on them the nuances of language and word choice and introduces them to an important method of interpretative investigation.

Qur'an Commentaries in Translation

Another step that students take is to look at Muslim Qur'an commentaries or *tafsīr* in English translation. While the overwhelming majority of the extant corpus of Qur'an commentaries remains unavailable for my students, there are several works that offer students a window into this scholarly world. Two helpful compilations are *The Quran and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations* (Oneworld, 1996) by Helmut Gätje and *An Anthology of Qur'an Commentaries: Volume I - On the Nature of the Divine* (Oxford University Press, 2010) edited by Feras Hamza, Sajjad Rizvi, and Farhana Mayer. Both works allow students to see different commentators weigh in on the same topic or passage. A harder to find book, but one worth excerpting is J. Cooper's abridged translation of the beginning of the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) (*The Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Oxford University Press, 1987). This translation provides students with a sense of how a classical work of exegesis was structured and approached. There are, of course, many more translations of Qur'an commentaries emerging and the site <http://www.altafsir.com> furnishes online access to some of these.

Exegetical Reference Works

The end goal is to provide students with the resources and tools to undertake some preliminary exegesis for themselves. With that in mind, I find it worthwhile to introduce my students to the research and literature being produced by scholars of Islam in the Euro-American academy. Typically I arrange a library research session when – working with a librarian – we expose students to important reference works like English-language Qur'an concordances and Brill's *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* and *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. These reference works are often a good starting point for further research into topics and persons appearing in the Qur'an. Given the idiosyncrasies of all these works, students find the guided hands-on experience in the library invaluable. We also spend time familiarizing students with Arabic transliteration conventions (and variations) as well as how to successfully navigate the journal databases. While the secondary scholarship on the Qur'an is substantial and growing, it is often difficult for undergraduates to successfully find and identify the best that is out there. These library sessions are aimed at providing them with some grounding and guidance for their work.

While this is not an exhaustive look at the exegetical exercises I use, the above points represent what I believe to be some of the most helpful activities for preparing new students to do some preliminary exegesis of their own. I offer them models and tools so that they can explore their own lines of inquiry and raise their own questions in response to this incredibly dynamic and multi-layered text.

<https://wabash.center/2017/02/teaching-quranic-exegesis-in-english/>