Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an

by Khaleel Mohammed

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Multiple English translations of the Qur'an, Islam's scripture, line shelves at bookstores. Amazon.com sells more than a dozen. Because of the growing Muslim communities in English-speaking countries, as well as greater academic interest in Islam, there has been a blossoming in recent years of English translations. Muslims view the Qur'an as God's direct words revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). Because the Qur'an stresses its Arabic nature, Muslim scholars believe that any translation cannot be more than an approximate interpretation, intended only as a tool for the study and understanding of the original Arabic text. Since fewer than 20 percent of Muslims speak Arabic, this means that most Muslims study the text only in translation. So how accurate are the Qur'an's renderings into English? The record is mixed. Some are simply poor translations. Others adopt sectarian biases, and those that are funded by Saudi Arabia often insert political annotation. Since translators seek to convey not only text but also meaning, many rely on the interpretation (tafsir) of medieval scholars in order to conform to an "orthodox" reading.

Contextualizing the Qur'an

No serious researcher denies that Muhammad came to a milieu that was highly influenced by Judeo-Christian ideas. Indeed, the Qur'an presupposes familiarity with Judeo-Christian ideas to the extent that it often does not give the full version of a narrative; there is no need to identify what is supposed to be common knowledge. A typical example is in the verse that was only partially cited by Muslims commenting on news programs in the wake of the 9-11 terror attacks: "Whoever has killed a single human without just cause, it is as if he has killed the entire humankind." In fact, the full verse is: "And for this reason, we ordained for the children of Israel that whoever has killed a single human without just cause, it is as if he has killed the entire humankind." Significantly, the complete verse refers to a divine edict not found in the Torah, but rather in the Mishnah, part of the Jewish oral tradition.

Evidence of Muhammad's familiarity with Judaism is present in the Qur'an. One verse suggests that his contemporaries accused him of having a Jewish teacher. When some Arabs challenged Muhammad's claim to be a prophet based on his mortality, he suggested that they consult Jewish scholars about history. Early Muslims resorted to Jewish lore so heavily that they produced a genre of literature: the Isra'il'iyat, loosely translated as the Judaic traditions.
even attributed to Muhammad wherein he supposedly said, "Relate from the people of Israel, and there is no objection," thereby enabling Islamic scholars to cite precedents from Jewish scholarship.

By the ninth century, this began to change. Muslim jurists, increasingly opposed to reliance upon Jewish lore, created new sayings from the Prophet and his companions that contradicted the original allowances. In one of these apocryphal traditions, Muhammad's face changes color when he sees his follower Umar reading the Torah. Muhammad declares that had Moses been their contemporary, he, too, would have followed the Muslim prophet. An alternate version claims that the Prophet asked Umar, "Do you wish to rush to perdition as did the Jews and Christians? I have brought you white and clean hadiths [oral traditions]."

Despite the unreliability of this hadith, it has evolved into a position that any Muslim who questions it could be accused of heresy.

Since Muslims could no longer seek support from Jewish sources, successive generations of scholars lost understanding of Qur'anic references. From the tenth century on, the result has been that voices of the medieval scholars have trumped the vox-dei. Without a serious reexamination, it is uncertain whether Muslims will be able to get to the essence of their religion's main document. The inaccuracies and artifices of medieval biases remain, unfortunately, pervasively present in English translations by Muslim scholars.

**Early Translations**

The first translations to English were not undertaken by Muslims but by Christians who sought to debunk Islam and aid in the conversion of Muslims to Christianity. Alexander Ross, chaplain to Charles I (r. 1625-49) and the first to embark on the translation process, subtitled his 1649 work as "newly Englished for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities." Interestingly, Ross did not speak Arabic and relied on secondarily translating from the French, a language in which he was not well-schooled. He, therefore, based his interpretation on a problematic rendition by Andrew Du Ryer. According to George Sale (1697-1736), "[Du Ryer's] performance ... is far from being a just translation; there being mistakes in every page, besides frequent transpositions, omissions and additions, faults."

Most eighteenth and nineteenth century translations were undertaken by authors without strong background in Islam. As they were goaded by the urge to answer Christian polemic, their forgettable works do not reflect any intellectual depth; as such, copies are extremely rare. Among the best known, albeit pejorative, English-language analyses of Islam during this time were those by Christian authors such as George Sale, John Rodwell (1808-1900), Edward Palmer (1840-1882), and Sir William Muir (1819-1905). Of these, Sale was probably the most important because he wrote a detailed critique about earlier translations. His work became the standard reference for all English readers until almost the end of the nineteenth century. However, his work was limited by his lack of access to public libraries forcing him to rely only upon material in his personal collection. While Sale gave the impression that he based his translation on the Arabic text, others have suggested that he relied on an earlier Latin translation. Sale did not insert verse numbers into his work, nor did he insert footnotes or other explanations. The result, therefore, is a work that is extremely difficult to comprehend.

Indian Muslims were the first from within the faith to translate the Qur'an to English according to Abdur Rahim Kidwai, professor of English at Aligarh University, India. All wrote at a time of British colonialism and intense missionary
activity. Kidwai noted works by Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan (Patiala, 1905), Mirza Hairat Dehlawi (Delhi, 1912), and Mirza Abu'l Fazl (Allahabad, 1912).[21] Dehlawi was motivated consciously by a desire to give "a complete and exhaustive reply to the manifold criticisms of the Koran by various Christian authors such as Drs. Sale, Rodwell, Palmer, and Sir W. Muir."

The early twentieth century reaction spurred a lasting translation trend. There have been successive new English translations, ranging from mediocre to reservedly commendable. Western university presses have undertaken publication of renditions: Princeton has published Ahmed ‘Ali’s rendition, and Oxford University Press has published the work of M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem. These productions are among the most widespread translations that are analyzed below.

Twentieth Century Classics


In 1917, an Ahmadi scholar, Muhammad ‘Ali (1875–1951), who later would become the leader of the Lahori subgroup, published his translation.[22] He constantly updated his work and had published four revisions by his death in 1951. Contemporary reviewers praised Muhammad ‘Ali both for his excellent English and explanatory notes.[24] Importantly, the Muhammad ‘Ali translation became the version adopted by the Nation of Islam, both under the stewardship of Elijah Muhammad and current leader Louis Farrakhan.

Muhammad ‘Ali’s biases show through, however. Consistent with his Lahori-Ahmadi creed, Muhammad ‘Ali sought to eschew any reference to miracles. He sometimes departed from a faithful rendering of the original Arabic, as in the second chapter[25] in which the Qur’an replicates the Biblical story of Moses striking the rock for water,[26] and states "idrib bi asaka al-hajr," literally, "strike the rock with your staff." Muhammad ‘Ali, however, changed the text to "March on to the rock with your staff," an interpretation for which the Arabic construction does not allow.

Both Muhammad ‘Ali’s disbelief in the miraculous and his disdain for Judaism and Christianity undercut his work in other ways. The Qur’an makes frequent mention of jinn (spirits), from which the English word "genie" is derived. Muhammad ‘Ali, curiously, argues that the Qur’an equates jinn with Jews and Christians.[27] While the Qur’an supports the story of Jesus’ virgin birth,[28] Muhammad ‘Ali denies it, providing a footnote to deny that the Qur’an was referring to anything miraculous.[29]

Despite its blatant sectarian warp, Muhammad ‘Ali’s translation—now in its seventh edition[30]—has formed the basis for many later works, even if the majority of both Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims avoid directly acknowledging or using an Ahmadi translation. Nevertheless, among the Lahori Ahmadis, many of whom live in the United States, Muhammad ‘Ali’s work remains the definitive translation.


Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936) was the son of an Anglican clergyman who traveled to the East and acquired fluency in Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu. He was a novelist, traveler, and educator who converted to Islam in 1917. In 1920, he traveled to India and became a journalist for Muslim newspapers as well as headmaster of a Muslim boys’ school.[31] While teaching in Hyderabad, Pickthall took a two-year sabbatical to complete his translation[32] and was aided by several notables, among
them, Mustafa al-Maraghi, then-rector of Al-Azhar, one of Sunni Islam's top institutions of Islamic studies, and the nizam of Hyderabad to whom the work is dedicated. Pickthall was aware of the problems of the Christian missionaries' translations and sought to remedy the defects since "some of the translations include commendation offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which Muslims at once recognize as unworthy." He first endorsed the position of Muslim scholars that the Qur'an was untranslatable but maintained that the general meaning of the text could still be conveyed to English speakers. Aware that heavily annotated works detracted from focus on the actual text, Pickthall provided few explanatory notes and tried to let the text speak for itself.

As much as Pickthall strove to maintain the spirit of the Qur'an, he was, nonetheless, heavily influenced by Muhammad 'Ali, whom he had met in London. He adopted Muhammad 'Ali's bias against descriptions of miracles and argued, for example, that the Qur'anic description of Muhammad's night voyage to the heavens was just a vision, even though most Muslim theologians argue that it should be taken literally. While Pickthall's work was popular in the first half of the twentieth century and, therefore, historically important, its current demand is limited by its archaic prose and lack of annotation. Perhaps the death knell for the Pickthall translation's use has been the Saudi government's decision to distribute other translations free of charge.

The Koran Interpreted. By Arthur Arberry.

The 1955 translation of Arthur Arberry (1905-69) was the first English translation by a bona fide scholar of Arabic and Islam. A Cambridge University graduate, he spent several years in the Middle East perfecting his Arabic and Persian language skills. For a short while, he served as professor of classics at Cairo University; in 1946, he was professor of Persian at University of London, and the next year transferred to Cambridge to become professor of Arabic, serving there until his death in 1969. His title, The Koran Interpreted, acknowledged the orthodox Muslim view that the Qu'ran cannot be translated, but only interpreted. He rendered the Qur'an into understandable English and separated text from tradition. The translation is without prejudice and is probably the best around. The Arberry version has earned the admiration of intellectuals worldwide, and having been reprinted several times, remains the reference of choice for most academics. It seems destined to maintain that position for the foreseeable future.

Saudi-endorsed Translations


Among those Qur'an translations which found Saudi favor and, therefore, wide distribution, was the Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (1872-1952) rendition that, from its first appearance in 1934 until very recently, was the most popular English version among Muslims. While not an Islamic scholar in any formal sense, Yusuf 'Ali, an Indian civil servant, had studied classics at Cambridge University, graduated as a lawyer from Lincoln's Inn in London, and was gifted with an eloquent, vivid writing style. He sought to convey the music and richness of the Arabic with poetic English versification. While his rendering of the text is not bad, there are serious problems in his copious footnotes; in many cases, he reproduces the exegetical material from medieval texts without making any effort at contextualization. Writing at a time both of growing Arab animosity toward Zionism and in a milieu that condoned anti-Semitism, Yusuf 'Ali constructed his oeuvre as a polemic against Jews. Several Muslim scholars have built upon the Yusuf 'Ali translation. In 1989,
Saudi Arabia's Ar-Rajhi banking company financed the U.S.-based Amana Corporation's project to revise the translation to reflect an interpretation more in conjunction with the line of Islamic thought followed in Saudi Arabia. Ar-Rahji offered the resulting version for free to mosques, schools, and libraries throughout the world. The footnoted commentary about Jews remained so egregious that, in April 2002, the Los Angeles school district banned its use at local schools.[40] While the Yusuf 'Ali translation still remains in publication, it has lost influence because of its dated language and the appearance of more recent works whose publication and distribution the Saudi government has also sought to subsidize.

The Noble Qur’an in the English Language. By Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan.

Now the most widely disseminated Qur'an in most Islamic bookstores and Sunni mosques throughout the English-speaking world, this new translation[41] is meant to replace the Yusuf 'Ali edition and comes with a seal of approval from both the University of Medina and the Saudi Dar al-Ifta.[42] Whereas most other translators have tried to render the Qur'an applicable to a modern readership, this Saudi-financed venture tries to impose the commentaries of Tabari (d. 923 C.E.), Qurtubi (d. 1273 C.E.), and Ibn Kathir (d. 1372 C.E.), medievalists who knew nothing of modern concepts of pluralism. The numerous interpolations make this translation particularly problematic, especially for American Muslims who, in the aftermath of 9-11, are struggling to show that Islam is a religion of tolerance.

From the beginning, the Hilali and Muhsin Khan translation reads more like a supremacist Muslim, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian polemic than a rendition of the Islamic scripture. In the first sura, for example, verses which are universally accepted as, "Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have favored, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray"[43] become, "Guide us to the Straight Way, the way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who have earned Your anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians)."[44] What is particularly egregious about this interpolation is that it is followed by an extremely long footnote to justify its hate based on traditions from medieval texts.

Contemporary political disputes also pollute the translation, marring what should be a reflection of timeless religion. Whereas the Qur'an reports Moses's address to the Israelites as "O my people! Enter the Holy Land that God has assigned unto you,"[45] this Saudi version twists the verse with modern politics, writing, "O my people! Enter the holy land (Palestine)."

The appendix includes a polemical comparison of Jesus and Muhammad, reporting that the former had no claim to divinity.[46] From a Muslim perspective, what Jesus did or did not do should be drawn from the Qur'anic text, not an appendix, and certainly not by Muslim readings of the gospels. In fact, while the Qur'an does take issue with the Christian claims of divinity for Jesus, it views him, along with his mother Mary, as being truly blessed and peaceful, much in concordance with the general Christian belief.[47] Although this Saudi-sponsored effort, undertaken before 9-11, is a serious liability for American Muslims in particular, it still remains present in Sunni mosques, probably because of its free distribution by the Saudi government.

Bucking the Saudi Orthodoxy

The Message of the Qur’an. By Muhammad Asad.
Not every translation preaches the Saudi line. Muhammad Asad, for example, presents a rendering that is simple and straightforward. A Jewish convert to Islam, the former Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) sought to depart from the traditional exegetic approaches and reflect independent thought. Asad, an Austrian journalist, was well-versed in the Jewish and Christian scriptures and brought this knowledge to bear in the form of erudite footnotes. Strangely, though, he chose to interpolate material in his translation of chapter 37 to show that the sacrificial son was Ishmael and not Isaac. This is rather unusual, for while most contemporary Muslims opine that Ishmael was the sacrificial son, early exegetes differed on his identity, and as is well known, the Bible clearly states that it was Isaac (Genesis 22:9).

Indicative of the desire and drive of Saudi Arabia to impose a Salafi interpretation upon the Muslim world, the kingdom has banned Muhammad's work over some creedal issues. Because the Saudi government subsidizes the publication and distribution of so many translations, the ban has in effect made Asad's translation both expensive and difficult to obtain. Nevertheless, it remains one of the best translations available, both in terms of its comprehensible English and generally knowledgeable annotations.


Other translations have bucked the Saudi orthodoxy. Ahmad 'Ali, noted Pakistani poet and diplomat, has put aside the sometimes archaic prose of Yusuf 'Ali and Marmaduke Pickthall in order to present the Qur'an in contemporary English. While 'Ali writes that he seeks to present "a translation, not an interpretation, theological or otherwise," he, like Muhammad 'Ali, seeks to downplay any report that may seem far-fetched, and in so doing, denies certain Biblical, Midrashic, and Talmudic antecedents. In dealing, for example, with the Qur'anic version of Moses's anger at the Jews for worshipping the golden calf, he translates the 'aqtulu anfusakum as "kill your pride" rather than the literal "kill yourselves" which is how it also appears in Exodus 32:27. The Qur'anic retelling and reliance on the Biblical narrative to demonstrate the seriousness of idol worship is thus lost. 'Ali also seeks to downplay Christian parallels within the Qur'an. He translates Jesus's speech in 3:49 as, "I will fashion the state of destiny out of mire for you, and breathe (a new spirit) into it, and (you) will rise by the will of God." The literal translation is, "I will fashion from you, from clay, the likeness of a bird, and will breathe unto it; and by God's will it will fly." 'Ali's footnote does not acknowledge that the Qur'anic view parallels the Gospel of Thomas. These departures from the literal portrayal of events from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament are important because they might lead lay readers to miss the Qur'anic imperative to seek the history of the prophets from the earlier scriptures. The influence of its flaws may be short-lived, though. Despite its accessibility to non-Muslim and academic readers due to its recent Princeton University Press publication, many Muslim scholars have criticized the translation because of the liberties it takes with the text. Future editions are unlikely.


Just as Ahmad 'Ali sought to produce a contemporary translation, so did Thomas Irving, an American convert to Islam who changed his name to Ta'lim 'Ali. While Irving provides a useful introduction to the Qur'an, its language, and previous translation history, his own translation is fundamentally flawed. While seeking to stick to linguistic accuracy, Irving makes some basic linguistic errors. Arabic words are built from three-letter roots to which are added prefixes, infixes, suffixes, and vowels, and their context can lead to a wide range of meanings. For
example, Irving translated *ahl ad-dhikr* both as "people of the reminder" and "people of long memories" instead of "people of remembrance."[59] In the latter example, he misses the fact that the Qur'an is referring to Jewish scholars who, based on the Biblical command of *zakhor* (to remember) were at the time of Muhammad referred to as "the people of remembrance."[60]

Many Muslims reject the subtitle, "The First American Version," because it sounds too much as if the Qur'an is being put into a paradigm of the various versions of the Bible—an idea not welcome to Muslim scholars who feel that multiple versions lead to corruption of the text. The translation has never been in great demand, and since Irving's death in 2002, there can be no revision; so, it is likely that, without the interest and subsidy from Islamic institutions, the version will simply be another forgettable effort.

**Sectarian Translations**

**The Holy Qur'an. By Syed V. Mir Ahmed 'Ali.**

While the Saudis may seek to monopolize Qur'anic interpretation among the Sunni community, many Shi'ites reject their annotation. Syed V. Mir Ahmed 'Ali, an Indian scholar of Arabic and Persian, has produced a translation that has become the standard Shi'ite translation.[61] The copious instructions on Shi'ite doctrine and ritual observances ensure that the audience remains almost exclusively Shi'ite. Mir Ahmed 'Ali's translation relies strongly on the commentary of his spiritual advisor, Ayatollah Mirza Mahdi Pooya Yazdi, an Iranian scholar noted for his focus on mysticism. While the latest 2002 version is marred by typographical errors, more serious for the general reader is its heavy sectarian bias and its disparagement of several figures that are revered by Sunni Muslims. Yazdi states in his introduction, for example, that neither of the first two caliphs was an authority on the Qur'an and that there are "authentic evidences of their ignorance of it."[62] The ayatollah also makes the dubious claim that Zaid bin Thabit, deemed by many to be Muhammad's scribe, had no "academic" qualifications for the compiling of the Quran.[63]

Stylistically, too, the most recent edition is unwieldy for the general reader. The translation is published in Arabic reading style, so that the pages are arranged from right to left; the first page therefore appears as the last page. This peculiarity, combined with the ungainliness and heaviness of the large tome, makes Mir Ahmed 'Ali's work more suited for mosque ritual reading than scholarly consultation. Yet, the translation carries gravitas that the previous Shi'ite rendition[64] did not have, since it is written, as the term 'Syed' (or sayyid) indicates, by a descendant of Muhammad and because it includes commentary by one of the highest-ranking authorities in contemporary Shi'ism. A paperback edition, printed in the more conventional left-right format, is widely found in Shi'ite institutions in North America.[65]

**The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of Its Meaning in English. By Abdalhaqq Bewley and Aisha Bewley.**

The Shi'ites have their translation, and so, too, do the Sufis.[66] The creedal bias of the Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewleys' Sufi-inspired work is evident in the translators' preface: "Acknowledging the complete impossibility of adequately conveying the meanings of the Qur'an in English or indeed in any other language, Allah, may He be exalted, chose pure, classical Arabic as the linguistic vehicle for His final Revelation to mankind because of its unique capacity of retaining and conveying great depth of meaning in a multi-faceted way which is beyond the scope of any other language, particularly in the debased form which they have arrived in at the time in which we
live."[67] This creedal statement is not supported by the Qur'an, which holds that the revelation was in Arabic simply because, had it been in another language, the Arabs would have questioned why Muhammad, who was Arab, was issuing them a revelation in a foreign tongue.[68] For all this obvious bias on the part of the translators, the work is in excellent, readable English, rendered in a manner that is neither flowery nor prosaic. The translators seem to have fulfilled their "main objective in presenting this new rendering: to allow the meaning of the original, as far as possible, to come straight through."[69] The lack of footnotes allows the reader to see the text as it is, and despite the creedal issue mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, there is little evidence of sectarian bias in the actual translation. Because of their Sufi leanings, the translators are not likely to be endorsed by the mainstream Islamic religious trusts and most definitely not by the Saudi religious foundations. The result is that an excellent work will most probably remain expensive and unavailable at most libraries and mosques.

**Falling Short**

*An Interpretation of the Qur'an. By Majid Fakhry.*

Many new translations seek to improve upon past translations. Sometimes they fall short. This is the case with Majid Fakhry's translation.[70] A professor emeritus of philosophy at the American University of Beirut, Fakhry seeks to present the Qur'an in comprehensible English, correcting "the errors or lapses" of previous translations.[71] For someone versed in Islamic philosophy, and therefore presumably aware of the focus on the linguistic uniqueness of the Qur'an, Fakhry's prosaic rendition never comes close to communicating to the reader the powerful rhetoric of Islam's main document. His inattention to verb structure results, as noted by one reviewer in an academic journal, in the "tendency to translate an active Arabic verb into an English passive and vice versa. This undercuts both theological clarity and rhetorical effectiveness."[72] While the publisher claimed that Al-Azhar University had approved the translation, the facsimile Arabic document included with the book simply notes that "there is nothing in the translation that goes counter to the Islamic Faith, and that there is no objection to its printing and distribution."[73] This is an appropriate formula for any book containing Qur'anic verse and does not confer special status. Since this work does not contribute in any specific way to what is already available in a crowded market, Fakhry's work will lack staying power. Its absence in mosques indicates its lack of status among Muslims. The unflattering academic reviews[74] also indicate that, although produced by a Western university press, it is likely to be overlooked by the academic world as well.

**The Qur'an, A New Translation. By M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem.**

The most recent mass-market attempt to publish an English translation of the Qur'an is the result of a seven-year effort by a University of London professor.[75] Consistent with his traditional Egyptian training, M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem has memorized the Qur'an. As a believer, he writes an introduction to his work that reflects the age-old Muslim tradition, and therefore, simply reports the Muslim stories without any question as to their reliability. He feels that Gabriel instructed Muhammad on how to design the final corpus and that there are indeed "records" to show that there were twenty-two scribes for writing the text of the document.[76] Considering that the translator is a professor of Islamic studies at a secular university and ought to be aware of the haziness of early Islamic history, he should have adopted a more cautious approach to presenting such information as fact. Revisionist theories advanced by John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael
Cook, and others would not have commanded scholarly attention if the reports that Abdel-Haleem seeks to pass as reliable were indeed so.[77]

He does provide an excellent analysis of the context of certain verses and points out a fact that is still unknown to many scholars: that the terms Islam and Muslim in the Qur'an refer not to the reified constructs of later Islam but to devotion to God, and that as such, earlier prophets are described as Muslim.[78] The translator makes it clear that he intends to "go further than previous works in accuracy, clarity, flow, and currency of language."[79] The preciseness of English is certainly commendable, but there are problems that show that Abdel-Haleem has incorporated his doctrinal bias into his translation. As Fazlur Rahman, former professor of Islamic Studies at University of Chicago, has shown, the Qur'an contains no evidence of the corpus-soul dualism of later Islam, and so the word nafs as used in the Qur'an is not representative of "soul" as understood in Greek philosophy, Christianity, or post-Biblical Judaism.[80] Yet, Abdel-Haleem translates nafs as "soul" throughout his work.[81] By comparison, the Bewleys render the word in the more linguistically correct "self."[82]

Footnotes and commentary are kept to an absolute minimum, supplied only when there is absolute need. An excellent example is where in rendering the word ummi as "unlettered," Abdel-Haleem provides a note to show that it could also be translated as "gentile."[83] This allowance for difference of opinion is particularly noteworthy since most traditional Muslim approaches do not wish to consider the "gentile" interpretation, although in the context of the entire Qur'an, that certainly seems the more correct version.

The Abdel-Haleem translation comes without accompanying Arabic text. This can actually be a positive factor since it allows Muslims to take this version anywhere without having to worry about ritual protections for a sacred document that the Arabic version would mandate. The lack of footnotes and commentary promote research and a reading of the actual text.

Noteworthy also is the fact that throughout, the translator renders the Arabic Allah as God, an astute choice, since the question of why many Muslims refuse to use the word God as a functional translation has created the misconception for many that Muslims worship a different deity than the Judeo-Christian creator. Abdel-Haleem has done a good job. If any Qur'anic English-language translation might stand to compete with the Saudi-financed translations, this Oxford University Press version is it.

Nevertheless, the field remains open for future attempts to reflect the true meaning of the Qur'an because this mandates not only translation but also a better understanding of context. The revisionist works of scholars such as John Wansbrough, Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, Christoph Luxenberg, Gerd-Rudiger Puin, and Andrew Rippin, while opposed by many, indicate that there is much that is unclear about the early history and interpretation of the Qur'an. Their theories about such key elements as the influence of contemporary politics should be addressed in any work seeking to elucidate Islam's main document.[84]

**Conclusion**

Even for native Arabic speakers, the Qur'an is a difficult document. Its archaic language and verse structure are difficult hurdles to cross. Translation only accentuates the complexity. The fact that translators and theologians have, over time, lost much of the Judeo-Christian cultural references rife in the Qur'an is just one more impediment.
Medieval Muslim scholars sought to abandon consideration of the Jewish and Christian testaments as sources of understanding the Qur'an; they largely succeeded. Most religious authorities in Islamic countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Iran, oppose any attempt to reinterpret the Qur'an without relying on medieval scholarship. For most Muslims unaware of the evolution of Islamic scholarship, the Qur'an is immutable and uncreated, even though the Qur'an never makes such a proclamation, and theologians reached such a conclusion only after much debate. Immutability means that the seventh century values of some Qur’anic verses, rather than being placed in their seventh century Arabian context, are portrayed as the eternal divine mandate, giving rise, for example, to an argument that females must inherit half as much as males. The failure of Muslim scholars to place the Qur'an into historical or spatial context has lead to generalizations that have harmed Islam, a trend accentuated by the fact that most Quranic translators are now Muslims. Such a failure facilitates the use of the Qur'an by governments that support chauvinism and incite hate and by terrorists such as those who brought down the World Trade Centers.

In order to make itself acceptable to a world torn by Islamist terrorism, Islam faces more than just the hurdle of a proper English translation of its main document. Until Muslims learn to question the reliability of the Muslim oral traditions, or divorce themselves from medieval exegetical constructs, they will be living in a world much apart from the Judeo-Christian entity that has known reformation and enlightenment. Perhaps this is the reason why, for most academics, the translation of choice still seems to be that of Arthur Arberry.

The urge among many translators—especially now that many adhere to the religion itself—is to produce a functional and relatively accurate English rendition. Many of these believers fail to take an academic approach to the history and the Judeo-Christian references in Islam’s main document. Polished English prose should not substitute for poor scholarship. In addition, sectarian differences within Islam have undercut any Muslim consensus on a translated version. Increasingly, it looks like the quest for the perfect rendition will be endless.

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[1] This is based several verses of the Qur’an, among them, Qur. 15:9, 26:195, 97:1.
[6] Qur. 16:103: "We know well that they say, 'A mortal teaches him.' But the language of the one to whom they allude is foreign, and this is the clear Arabic tongue." Abrahamic teachings could come only from Christianity or Judaism. Because the local Christian community spoke Arabic and the local Jewish community Judeo-Arabic, then contemporary context would suggest a teacher with a foreign tongue to be Jewish.


Closing the door on Jewish sources did not prevent adaptation of Christian traditions.


Sale, The Koran Commonly Called the Al-Koran of Mohammed, pp. vii-xii.


Sale, The Koran Commonly Called the Al-Koran of Mohammed, pp. vii-xii.

A following of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), who claimed to be the reviver of Islam. Mainstream Islam opposed his beliefs, and his sect bifurcated into the Qadiani and Lahori subgroups after his death. His followers are severely persecuted in Pakistan, which has declared them as non-Muslims.


Qur. 2:60.

Exodus 17:1-6.


Qur. 3:46.


An honorific title given to the ruler of Hyderabad in British India.


Qur. 17: 60.


Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, The Noble Qur'an in the English Language: A Summarized Version of At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathir with Comments from Sahih al-Bukhari (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers,


Qur. 5:21.


Qur. 37:100; Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, p. 688.


A term meaning "predecessors" and applied to the ideology that seeks to recreate a lifestyle and world based on the practice of the earliest Muslims.


Qur. 2:54.


Ibid., p. 30a-b.


Qur. 41:44.

Bewley and Bewley, The Noble Qur'an, p. iii.


Ibid., p. 4.


Ibid.


Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.
[79] Ibid., p. xxix.
Editor's note: Readers often ask us to recommend English translations of the Holy Qur'an. In this informative essay Dr. Khaleel Mohammed of San Diego University, California, assesses numerous popular as well as lesser known translations of the Qur'an which have appeared in print over the last several decades, upto 2005 when this essay first appeared.... With a focus on the artistic, intellectual and textual expressions of the Ismailis and other related Muslim traditions. Main menu. Skip to content. Translations of the Quran are essentially the interpretations of the scripture of Islam by renowned Muslim scholars such as Ali[17] in English, Hatta[18] in Bahasa Melayu, and Ma Jian[19] in Chinese. However, reading the translations alone may not be easily understood without knowledge sharing from the scholars or experts. ... These scores were then compared to determine whether the different translations captured the meaning of the Qur'an in terms of its cognitive complexity in the same way. The results of the exercise showed no statistically significant difference in IC scores among the three translations. In other words, they were essentially equivalent in terms of cognitive complexity.