

The English Translations of the Holy Qur'an: A Critique

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the need for translating the Qur'an in other languages, particularly English into meet today's needs. It points out the difficulties and pitfalls encountered in translating the Untranslatable Word of Allah – the Qur'an. The it reviews critically various version of the English translations of the Qur'an, both by non-Muslim and Muslims. While English translations of the Qur'an were embarked upon in Latin and French from the 16th century onwards, it was only in 1649 that the first English version from French appeared. It was followed by translations from the original Qur'anic text in the 18th and 19th century. However, Muslims embarked on translations only in the 20th century, and a number of versions have appeared so far. They have been critically examined, with concrete examples from the Qur'anic verses to show their strengths and weaknesses. In the final analysis no one meets the ideal translations and there is a need to take up the task afresh.

Introduction:

The Qur'an is the word of Allah and the need for its English translations arise from the fact that there are Muslim communities in foreign lands, where English is the *lingua franca*, interested in understanding the Qur'an besides the growing academic interest of non-Muslims in having an access to the Qur'anic knowledge. The Qur'an is in the classical Arabic language and yet the Prophet (PBUH) encouraged his Companions to learn foreign languages as is borne out by the following *hadith*¹:

عن زيد بن ثابت قال: أمرني رسول الله ﷺ أن أتعلم السريانية، قال: فما مرى نصف شهر حتى تعلمته له، قال: فلما تعلمته كان إذا كتب إلى يهود كتب إليهم، وإذا كتبوا إليه قرأت له كتابهم

Narrated by Zaid bin Thabit, who said: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ ordered me to learn Syrian, further said: Half of a month did not pass before I learned it for him. He said: After I learned it, when he (PBUH) wanted to write to the Jews I

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would write it to them, and when they wrote to him I would read their letters to him.

It establishes the learning of foreign languages which is much supported for propagation. However, sadly Muslim scholars of this age have disdained learning European languages, particularly English, as the result that they are in dark about the latest developments taking place globally, especially in the field of science and technology besides development of knowledge in their own field of interest, i.e. Islamic Studies.

The need for translation was established since the time of Prophet ﷺ when, after the *hijrah*, he wrote letters to the emperors of Persia, Rome, Egypt and Bahrain inviting them to Islam. Mention should be made of the incident when Muslims in Abyssinia, under the leadership of Ja'far ibn Abī Tālib, recited the first few verses of *Surah Maryam* to the Negus, which were translated to him, as a result of which he converted to Islam. This incident which occurred before the *hijrah* is probably the first incidence of the Qur'an being translated². Another incident was of Abū Sufyān translating to the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius (610 – 641 AD), the Prophet's ﷺ letter containing the Qur'anic verse 3:64. And yet another reference is of Salmān al-Fārsī translating *Surah al-Fātihah* for some Iranian converts to Islam³.

Translating the Untranslatable:

That the rhetorical beauty of the Arabic Qur'an, *i'jaz*, is inimitable is conceded by all and is well-documented⁴. Nevertheless, the translations of the Qur'an have been attempted in all foreign languages, including English, out of necessity. However, because of the inimitability of the Qur'an, it can only be interpreted rather than translated⁵, as pointed out by the eminent translators:

In the words of Professor Arberry:

In making the present attempt to . . . to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran, I have been at pains to study the intricate and richly varied rhythms which – apart from the message itself – constitute the Koran's undeniable claim to rank amongst the greatest literary masterpieces of mankind. . . For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both⁶.

Pickthall also remarks:

I made every effort to choose the befitting language, yet the result is not the Glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy . . . the Qur'an cannot be translated⁷.

Allama A. Yusuf Ali, reiterates:

Sometimes I have considered it too stupendous for me, – the double task of understanding the original, and reproducing its

nobility, its beauty, its poetry, its grandeur. . . what I wish to present to you is an English Interpretation⁸.

Ahmad Ali, a later translator of the Qur'an points out:

Qur'anic Arabic is distinguished by sublimity and excellencies of sound and eloquence, rhetoric and metaphor, assonance and alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhyme, ellipse and parallelism. Its cadences and sprung rhythm, pauses and stops, imply eloquent speech and duration. Some of its stylistic beauties are untranslatable⁹ ...

Problems and Pitfalls Encountered:

Problems of translating the Qur'an into English embrace the following kinds:

Lack of knowledge of the Arabic language:

Since the Qur'an is in classical Arabic language, knowledge of the Arabic language is essential to delve into its meanings besides to have access to the original sources of interpretation of the Qur'an, *tafsir*, without which understanding the meanings of the Qur'an is hardly possible. For translating and interpreting the Qur'an, therefore, the knowledge of the Arabic language is a pre-requisite.

Lack of knowledge of literary English:

English is the language of the English and for the people of sub-continent it is after all, being foreign, only a second language. Therefore, both for the people of the Arab world and the sub-continent, translating the Qur'an into the classical and rhetorical English is rather hard. For the sub-continent translators, it is doubly difficult as both Arabic and English are their foreign languages and they have to have mastery on both of them.

The sectarian biases:

The sectarian biases are deeply ingrained into the weft and warp of Muslim scholars of the sub-continent and it is difficult for them to rise above the biases and be neutral and objective to the Qur'anic knowledge, and do justice to the English translations of the Qur'an. This is obvious from the outcome of the translations of the Qur'an hailing from the sub-continent.

Distortions:

Besides the sectarian biases, the tendency of some Muslim scholars to project modern view of Islam, as opposed to its orthodox version, tempt them to distort the interpretations of certain verses of the Qur'an which relate to its basic beliefs of an orthodox Muslim.

Lack of scientific knowledge:

Some of the Qur'anic verses bears the scientific and natural phenomena require a scientific background for the Qur'an in interpretation – though not

essential. And obviously a great majority of the translators lacks it, with the result that they fail to portray the true colour of the Qur'anic text while interpreting into English certain verses of the Qur'an.

The Early Translations:

There is evidence¹⁰ that non-Muslims made Syriac translations in the 2nd part of the 1st *hijrah* century during the time of Hajjāj bin Yusuf (d. 95/713), besides a possibility of a Berber translation done in 124/741 and Persian translation by Mūsa ibn Sayyar al-Aswārī around 225/839. The first written Persian translation was done at the command of the King, Abū Sāleh Mansūr ibn Nūh (d. 364/974). Another earliest extant Turkish translation was completed in 734/1333.

Besides this, translations of the Qur'an were done in Latin in the 12th, 13th and 16th centuries as well as in Malay language, German, Dutch and French Language in the 17th century. One of the French translations by Andre du Ryer, *L'Alcoran de Mahomet* (1647) set the stage for English translations. This translation was, however, replete with distortion.

The English Translations:

Besides other reviews, Kidwai and Khalil Muhammad have lately done useful reviews of English translations¹¹. Based on the available information, I have classified the translations into those rendered by non-Muslims and Muslims, with their phases of developments.

Non-Muslims' rendering of the Qur'an in English:

The first English translation of the Qur'an was done by Alexander Ross in 1649, based on the French version of Andre' du Ryer. This translation, as was the original French, full of distortions, reflecting the missionary stance. This was followed by translations from the original the Qur'anic text, such as by:

- George Sale (1734) which was circulated widely and ran into many editions.
- John M. Rodwell, Rector of St. Ethelberga, London, entitled '*The Koran*' (1861),
- Edward Henry Palmer, a Cambridge scholar, *The Qur'an* (1880),
- Richard Bell, Reader of Arabic, University of Edinburgh, *The Qur'an translated with a critical rearrangement of the Surahs* (1937). Rodwell arranged *surahs* chronologically which later on Alan Jones of the oriental institute of Oxford reviewed it and rearranged *surahs* in traditional order.
- and finally by
- Arthur John Arberry, Professor of Arabic at the Universities of London and Cambridge, *The Koran Interpreted* (1955).

Then there is a translation by Jews: by N J Dawood, a native Iraqi Jew and a graduate from London University, *the Koran* (1956). It does not follow the traditional plan but a sequence, not strictly chronological but 'begins with the more Biblical and poetic revelations and ends with the much longer, and often topical, chapters'¹². However, a later edition has reverted to the traditional arrangement of Surahs¹³.

Then there are translations from the Qaidiani's perspective. Of them, Maulana Muhammad Ali's translations, a follower of the Lahori group of Qadianis, was the pioneer in producing an excellent English translation of *the Holy Qur'an, Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary*, first published in 1917¹⁴. Except the verses where the translator colours the translation with his Ahmadiyah beliefs besides his disbelief in miracles, and despite his obvious sectarian warp, his translation still ranks as one of the best, and has served as the basis for the subsequent translators. Besides, there are translations by Muhammad Ali Lahori, *The Holy Quran*, (1917) and by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, *The Quran*, (1971).

Of all these, only the translation by Professor Arberry is a scholarly endeavour, reflecting hardly any missionary bias.

Muslims' rendering of the Qur'an in English:

It was only during the 20th century that Muslims initiated translating the Qur'an in English. For convenience this can be grouped in three classes:

1. Early phase:

The following four translation works constitute the early phase, which, according to Kidwai, 'stemmed mainly from the pious enthusiasm on their part to refute the allegations leveled by the Christian missionaries against Islam in general and the Qur'an in particular:

1. Mohammad Abdul Hakim Khan, *The Holy Qur'an*: with short notes (Patiala, 1905).
2. Hairat Dehlawi, *The Koran Prepared*, by various Oriental learned scholars and edited by Mirza Hairat Dehlawi (Delhi, 1912).
3. Mirzal Abu'l Fadl, *Qur'an, Arabic Text and English Translation Arranged Chronologically with an Abstract* (Allahabad, 1912).
4. Ghulam Sarwar, *The Holy Quran, translated* (1920).

However, since none of these early translations was written by a reputed Islamic scholar, these works are of mere historic interest.

2. Classical phase:

This phase represents a mature and scholarly approach towards translating / interpreting the Qur'an. There is a long list including translations

such as Syed V. Mir Ahmed Ali, a Shi'ite scholar, Abdalhaqq Bewley and Aisha Bewley (Sufi-inspired work), M.A.S Abdel-Haleem. M.H Shakir (New York, 1982), Q. Arafat (Leicester, 1991), Ahmad and Dina Zidan (England, 1990), Ahmad Zaki Hammad of Egypt (Illinois 2007), Um Muhammad (Jeddah, 1997), Bashir Ahmad Mohyidin (2003) besides Justice Muhammad Taqi Usmani, Karchi, 2007. Zafar Ishaq Ansari – translation of Moudoodi's Tafheemul Quran (Islamic Foundation, UK) Adil Salahi and Ashur Shamis – translation of Syed Qutub's Fizilal, etc¹⁵. However, the following constitute the outstanding reference works:

1. Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an* (1930)¹⁶

Muhammad Mamaduke Pickthall (1875-1936), the son of an Anglican clergyman who embraced Islam has the distinction of bringing out a first-rate rendering of the Qur'an in English. Khalil Muhammad says that he was heavily influenced by the Qur'anic translation by Muhammad Ali, to whom he met in London. His translations are in archaic English prose which limits its popularity today, however, still it merits high consideration of translations faithfully following the Qur'anic text.

2. A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (1934)¹⁷

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1952), primarily an Indian civil servant, who studied classics at the Cambridge University, and graduated as lawyer from the Lincoln's Inn in London, though not an Islamic scholars in a formal sense, was a gifted scholar who rendered the Qur'an in an eloquent and vivid style which is still popular today and the Saudi's financing its publication has made it most popular. It faithfully reflects the meaning of the original text of the Qur'an, though in his footnotes he sometimes unnecessarily goes to explain the meanings of the Qur'anic text in the spiritual shade.

3. 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi, *The Holy Qur'an: with English translation and commentary* (Lahore, 1941)

'Abdul Majid Daryabadi (1892-1977) was basically a journalist of repute and was a Muslim scholar. His translation faithfully reflects the traditional viewpoint of Islam.

4. Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Qur'an in the English Language* (1972)¹⁸

Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, former a Moroccan Professor in the Islamic University and the latter a physician, originally from Pakistan, who worked as Director of the Islamic University Clinic at al-Madinah, have produced this translation with the attention to present the interpretation of the meaning of the Qur'an in its pristine form and not in the best English style. It carries the Saudi Government's approval.

5. **Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an: Translated and explained (1980, Gibraltar)***¹⁹

Muhammad Asad (1900-1952), the former Leopold Weiss and an Austrian Jewish journalist, has rendered the Qur'anic message into clear English. He has avoided unnecessary archaisms, which obscure the meaning of the Qur'an to the contemporary reader. However, his interpretation of certain verses goes against the traditional thought and has, thus, not become very popular.

6. **Mahmud Y. Zayid, *The Quran: An English Translation of the Meaning of the Quran (1980, Beirut)***²⁰

This translation, based on N.J. Dawood, rendered by Dr. Zayid of the American University of Beirut is the end-product of extensive efforts by a number of scholars . . . and approved by Muslim religious authorities: the Supreme Muslim Sunni and Syii Councils in the Republic of Lebanon. It claims to be the most accurate and readable rendering of the meaning of the Quran into the English language.

7. **Ahmad Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation (1984, Karachi)***²¹

Ahmad Ali (1910-1994) was a novelist, poet, and a diplomat and in rendering the Qur'an into English seeks to bring out the original rhythms of the Qur'anic language and the cadences. He unlike Yusuf Ali and Pickthall eschews the archaic prose. However, he departs from the traditional orthodox views and takes liberties with the textual explanations.

8. **T.B. Irving (Al-Hajj Ta'lim 'Ali), *The Qur'an, translated (1991)***²²

That there was a necessity, almost an urgency for an American version in contemporary English of the Qur'an, prompted Irving to accomplish this task over a period of 23 years. Not satisfied with the available translations of the Qur'an, he read the Qur'an carefully in Arabic 'at daybreak' (17:ix) with the aim of rendering it in the simplest and plain words and yet remain scrupulously faithful to the Arabic text, in the hope that it will live for a few decades longer.

9. **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *The Quran: A New Translation (2010, New Delhi)***²³

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan born in 1925 at Azamgarh in India is a spiritual scholar of Islam. His translation is the latest addition to the Qur'anic translations in English, representing traditional view and presented in plain English.

English Translations Critically Reviewed:

That all standard English translations of the Qur'an have strengths and weaknesses, are obvious from an evaluation of some selected verses, chosen in view of brevity rather than undertaking a more exhaustive review.

1. An example of the untranslatability of the Qur'an:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In this verse, the first of the Opening Chapter of the Qur'an (1:1), there are three key words: *Allah*, *Al-Rahmān* and *Al-Rahīm*. This is a typical example representing untranslatability of the Qur'an; various translators find it hard to properly interpret these three terms:

الله has been translated as such (*Allah*) by Pickhtall, Daryabadi and Ahmad Ali, Al-Hillali and Zayid, while others (Yusuf Ali, Asad and Wahiduddin, Irving) have translated it as "God".

الرحمن has been variously translated as given below:|

- *Most Gracious* (Yusuf Ali, Asad)
- *The Most Gracious* (Wahiduddin, al-Hillali)
- *The Beneficent* (Pickhtall)
- *most benevolent* (Ahmad Ali; note that he has used the lower case instead of the caps of the first letter of Allah's attributable names and this is contrary to accepted norm).
- *the Compassionate* (Daryabadi, Zayid, Dawood, Rodwell)
- *The Mercy-giving* (Irving)

الرحيم Likewise, there are various interpretations such as given below:

- *Most Merciful* (Yusuf Ali)
- *The Most Merciful* (Wahiduddin, al-Hillai)
- *The Merciful* (Pickhtall, Daryabadi, Irving, Zayid, Dawood, Rodwell)
- *The Dispenser of Grace* (Asad)
- *ever-merciful* (Ahmad Ali; note again the first lower case of Allah's name)

Further, while all translators are consistent in their use of their interpretation throughout the body of the text of the Qur'an where-ever the same word occurs, Ahmed Ali is not, as shown below:

- He translates *Allah* as *God* in the subsequent occurrences in the body of the Qur'anic text, eg. 2:7-8, 15, etc.
- He translates *Al-Rahman* as
 - 'Ar-Rahman' in verses 13:30²⁴, 17:110, 19:26, etc.,
 - 'God' in verses 19:88, 67:19
 - 'merciful' in 21:112,
 - 'the Merciful' in verse 19:18, 19:92,
 - 'the ever-merciful' in 20:5,
 - 'the benevolent' in 25:5, 9, 59:22, 67:29,
 - 'most benevolent' in 41:2, 78:37,
 - 'the compassionate' in verse 2:163

Likewise he translates *Al-Rahim* differently at different places, e.g:

- 'merciful' in 2:54, 2:128, 2:160, 2:182, 3:89,
- 'ever-merciful' in 1:3, 2:163,
- 'kind' in 2:37, 2:173, etc.
- 'full of grace' 2:143

A brief discussion of the connotations of *Allah* and His attributes is given below:

Allah – al-Qurtbi discusses at length the etymology of *Allah*²⁵, and it can be summarized in his words as below:

اسم الله الأعظم ولم يتسم به غيره، ولذلك لم يشن ولم يجمع

الرحمن: مشتق من الرحمة مبنى على المبالغة، ومعناه ذوالرحمة الذي لانظير له فيها، فلذلك لا يشن ولا يجمع كما يشن "الرحيم" ويجمع

الرحمن: أكثر العلماء على أن الرحمن مختص بالله عزوجل، لا يجوز أن يسمى به غيره، ألتراه قال: قُلِ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوْ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَنَ.

قال ابو على الفارسي: الرحمن: اسم عام في جميع أنواع الرحمة، يختص به الله - والرحيم، إنما هو في جهة المؤمنين، كما قال تعالى وَكَانَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحِيمًا

The forgoing explanation by Qurtbi, which is corroborated by others as well, boils to the following:

Allah – is the proper name of God, and as such it may not be translated.

Al-Rahman – signifies Allah's mercy to all beings, thus, it may be translated as *the Merciful*.

Al-Rahim – signifies a compassion for His believers, and thus it may be translated as *the Compassionate*.

The verse, thus, translated would be as follows:

*In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate*²⁶ (1:1)

2. Translating the Qur'anic words appropriately in line with the context and with the Arabs' usage.

السَّيْطَانُ يَعِدُكُمُ الْفَقْرَ وَيَأْمُرُكُم بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَاللَّهُ يَعِدُكُم مَّغْفِرَةً مِّنْهُ وَفَضْلًا وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

Satan threatens you with poverty and enjoins you to be niggardly, but Allah promises you His pardon and His bounty; and Allah is All-embracing, All-knowing. (2:268)

Of all translators of the Qur'an, only Asad and Muhammad Ali translate the word بِالْفَحْشَاءِ appropriately as *to be niggardly*, and all others interpret it as *indecent*.

In this verse (*Surah al-Baqarah* (2:268)) the key word is الفحشاء which merits for appropriate translation in English. This word occurs 24 times in the Qur'an, including its other derivatives: الفواحش and فاحشه. According to Makhluf²⁷, this word means *indecent* at all places except in this verse where it means *niggardly*:

3. Translating the Qur'an in its true spirit

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَّبُوهُ وَلَكِنَّ شُبُهَةَ لَهُمْ... وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا اتِّبَاعَ الظَّنِّ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا. بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

This verse read with the previous relates to Jesus, and is translated as below:

'and for their (Jews) saying, 'We killed the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah'; but they killed him not, nor did they crucify him, though it so appeared to them . . . and they killed him not for certain (4:157). Nay, Allah raised him up to Him; Allah is All-mighty, All wise (4:158).

In this verse *Allah raised him up to Him* lends to two different interpretations:

1. *Raised him up unto Himself* (Pickthall, Daryabadi, Yusuf Ali, Wahiduddin).
2. *Exalted him unto Himself* (Asad), *exalted him in His presence* (Muhammad Ali), and *raised him up (in position) and closer to Himself* (Ahmed Ali).

The latter interpretation (No. 2) is typical of Qadianis and runs counter to the Muslims established belief that Jesus was raised up ('*lifted up*' using Zayid, Dawood and Irving's phraseology) physically to Himself by Allah, e.g. according to al-Hillali and Makhlu²⁸:

بل رفعه الله إلى السماء

However, a further, and a full, discussion is outside the scope of this paper.

4. Translating a verse requiring subtlety of expression

مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَلَا تَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

In this verse *مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ* merit appropriate translation which is grammatically correct.

According to al-Shūkāni²⁹:

منيبين اليه، أى : راجعين اليه بالتوبة . . . قال الزجاج، تقديره : فأقم وجهك . . . وقيل : على أنه خير لكان محذوفة، أى : وكونوا منيبين اليه لدلالة : ولا تكونوا من المشركين. قال ابن زيد وابن جريج: أى راجعين اليه (ابن كثير)

Now look at the various versions of the English translation:

- *Turning unto Him (only); and be careful of your duty unto Him, . . .* Pickthall, p. 458
- *(Turn, then, away from all that is false,) turning unto Him (alone); and remain conscious of Him, . . .* Asad, p. 621.
- ***Turning to Him; and keep your duty to Him . . .***; Muhammad Ali, p. 780.

- Turn ye back in repentance to Him, and fear Him, Yusuf Ali, p. 1060.
- And remain turning penitently unto Him, and fear Him, . . . Daryabadi.
- Turn to Him and fear Him. . . Wahiduddin, p. 300.
- Turn towards Him and be dutiful to Him . . . , Ahmed Ali, p. 345.
- even as the turn towards Him. Heed Him, Irving, p. 224
- Turn to Allah and fear Him, Zayid, p. 298
- And be ye turned to Him, and fear Him, Rodwell, p. 270
- Turn to God and fear Him, Dawood, p. 406
- (And remain always) turning in repentance to Him (only), and be afraid and dutiful to Him, al-Hillali, p. 512.

All the aforesaid versions more or less boil to the same thing; however, strictly speaking only al-Hillali, Pickthall, Asad and Muhammad Ali are correct grammatically. That is where subtleties and niceties of the English translation can be judged, and that is only possible if the translator knows full well the Arabic language.

The appropriate translation of the verse cited is as given below:

Turning to Him (in repentance), and fear you Him and keep up prayer and be not of those who associate partners with Him (30:31).

5. Translating the Qur'an for its miracles:

اَفْتَرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانْشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ. وَإِنْ يَرَوْا آيَةً يُعْرِضُوا وَيَقُولُوا سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ

The Hour has drawn nigh; and the moon is rent asunder (split). Yet if they see a Sign, they turn away, and say 'a continuous magic'. (54:1-2)

All translators of the Qur'an more or less agree on the foregoing translations; however, سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ is translated variously as under:

- 'Continuous magic' – al-Hillai, p. 671.
- 'This is (But) transient magic' – Yusuf Ali, p. 1454.
- 'Prolonged illusion' – Pickhtall, p. 601.
- 'An ever-recurring delusion' – Asad, p. 818.
- 'Magic continous' – Daryabadi.
- 'Strong enchantment' – Muhammad Ali, p. 1007.
- Strong magic – Zayid, p. 395.
- 'This is the same old lie continuing' – Ahmed Ali, p. 458.
- Well-devised magic – Rodwell, p. 360.
- Ingenious sorcery – Dawood, p. 527.

While all agree that the 'rending asunder of the moon' is an undisputed fact: This phenomenon happened in the time of Prophet ﷺ, witnessed by several of Prophet's ﷺ contemporaries, and reported in *mashūr* (well known) and

mutawātir (successively repeated) narrations of *hadith*. However, Ahmed Ali is alone in his interpretation as given below³⁰:

The Quraish being the dominant tribe of Arabia, it (moon) was their emblem that represented the Arabs as a whole. After the advent of Islam there was a split among the Quraish, some accepting Islam, others remaining pagan as opposed to it. *Shaaq al-qamar*, therefore, stands in the metaphor of the Qur'an, for the split in the ranks of the Quraish.

Look at the disparaging explanation tantamount to rather a bold denial of this miracle by Ahmed Ali, amounting to an affront to the Muslims established belief.

6. Translating the Qur'an in the light of the modern knowledge:

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى الْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ. وَإِلَى السَّمَاءِ كَيْفَ رُفِعَتْ. وَإِلَى الْجِبَالِ كَيْفَ نُصِبَتْ. وَإِلَى الْأَرْضِ كَيْفَ سُطِحَتْ

What, do they not ponder on how the clouds are created? And the mountains, how they are raised high? And the land, how it is spread out? So remind them!

Thou art only a reminder: not charged to oversee them (88:17-20)

Of all the translators the word *الإبل* is translated as clouds by Asad, Ahmed Ali Muhammad Ali and Rodwell while others translate as camels.

These verses very aptly and succinctly allude to the water cycle, never perhaps been thought of before. Brief comments follow:

The meaning of الإبل in verses 88:17-22:

The word *الإبل* in verse 17 is generally interpreted as 'camels'. However, camels do not match the context: with the three verses that follow relate to sky, mountains and land – all natural phenomena. Camels do not fit into the phenomenon as it is not a universally extant animal and primarily belongs to the desert areas. The Qur'anic messages being universal, camel hardly is a sign to be reckoned with universally. On the other hand, its interpretation as clouds beautifully matches with the context – all components of natural phenomena, having appeal for all times and climes.

However, only some interpreters of the Qur'an have translated it as clouds³¹ and the majority takes it to mean camels. It is also because the concept of hydrological cycle had not yet emerged then. The word *الإبل* warrants an allegorical interpretation, and perhaps it constitutes among the ³²متشابهات.

Al-Qurtbi cites references for *إبل* denoting clouds³³:

وقيل: الإبل هنا القطع العظيمة من السحاب، قاله المبرد. قال التعلبي: وقيل في الإبل هنا: السحاب. . . ومن قرأها بالثقل فقال: الإبل، عني بما السحاب التي تحمل الماء والمطر (وهي قرأة أبي بن كعب وعائشة رضي الله عنهما). وقال الماوردي: وفي الإبل وجهان: احد هما – وهو أظهرهما وأشهرهما: أنها الإبل من النعم. الثاني – أنها السحاب، فإن كان المراد بما السحاب، فلما فيها من الآيات الدالة على قدرته، والمنافع العامة لجميع خلقه. (في البحر المحيط: قرأ. . . وعلى وأبن عباس بشد اللام – عني بما السحاب، ورويت عن أبي عمرو وأبي جعفر والكسائي، وقالوا إنها السحاب)

Al-Zamakshri says that إبل could metaphorically mean clouds as the then Arabs used it in their poetry:³⁴

وإنما رأى السحاب مشبها بالإبل كثيرا في أشعارهم فجوز أن يراد بما على طريق التشبيه والجاز

Al-Alūsi endorses what has been quoted above by Al-Qurtbi and Al-Zamakshri³⁵. Ibn Manzur also cites³⁶:

ومن قرأها بالثقل قال الإبل: السحاب التي تحمل الماء والمطر

7. All members plant kingdom follow the rules set by the Creator

وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ

And the herbs and the trees adore (Him) (55:6)

The word النجم is appropriately translated as herbs / grasses only by Yusuf Ali, Daryabadi, al-Hillali, Irving, Ahmed Ali, Muhammad Ali, and Dawood, Zayid and Rodwell translate as plants, and all others (Asad, Wahiduddin, Arberry) translate it as stars.

In this verse النجم has been interpreted variously as herbs / shrubs, and the stars. Generally the Urdu and English translations use 'the star' interpretation, whereas the Arabic exegeses interpret it as herbs and shrubs.

The word النجم has the meaning, as explained by al-Qurtbi, Makhluḥ and al-Zamakshri of what emerges or appears³⁷:

النجم من نجم الشيء ينجم بالضم نجوما ظهر وطلع.

النجم، النبات الذي ينجم من الأرض لاساق له

Those interpreting النجم as shrubs include Ibn Abbas, Saeed bin Jubair, al-Suddi Sufayan Thuri, etc. while Mujahid, Hassan and Qitadah interpret it as the stars³⁸.

Al-Alusi offers a very plausible interpretation i.e the sun and moon, in the preceding verse, and lower (herbs) and higher (trees) vegetation in this verse, read together would mean together: both sun and moon in the sky, and herbs and trees on the ground, obey God's laws³⁹:

(الشمس والقمر) علويان (والنجم والشجر) سفليان

Interpretation in scientific light:

This verse implies all plant kingdom – the lowest forms (members of *Thallophyta* and *Bryophyta*, such as algae, molds, mosses, and maybe ferns of *Pteridophyta*) and the higher forms (*Spermatophyta* trees and agricultural crops) – adore and obey Allah's laws endowed to them. Thus, the verse refers to that the entire plant kingdom, adores and obeys Allah.

8. Some examples of English translation of the Qur'an, of the verses with plain meanings but unnecessarily stretched, rather distorted, by Ahmad Ali:

Cited below are some examples of plain verses of the Qur'an which pose no problem to the translators. However, the English translation by Ahmed Ali it has been unnecessarily stretched, rather distorted by him. All other translators, except their own style of expression and use of phraseology, agree on the essential meanings of these verses. These are only a few examples which on a quick look came to the notice, otherwise maybe there are many more cases where Ahmed Ali may have gone beyond the established and accepted meanings of the Qur'an:

Example No. 1

قَوْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ. الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ. الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاؤُونَ

*So woe to those who pray,
Who are unmindful of their prayer,
To those who display (want to be seen) (107:4-6)*

There are two key words in these verses: سَاهُونَ and يُرَاؤُونَ. Various translations are as under:

- **Pickthall** translates them as *heedless* and *would be seen*.
- **Yusuf Ali** as *neglectful* and *want to be seen*.
- **Wahiduddin** as *whose hearts are not in their prayer, and only to be seen by others*.
- **Asad** as *whose hearts from their prayers are remote and want to be seen and praised*.
- **Muhammad Ali** as *unmindful of their prayer and do (good) to be seen*.
- **Daryabadi** as *heedless of their prayers and would be seen*.

But look at Ahmed Ali's translation, particularly of the verses 107:5-6, translation of which is not even remotely connected with the Qur'anic text:

*Woe to those who pray
But who are oblivious of their moral duties,
Who dissimulate?*

Not only this, Ahmed Ali translates the first part of the Qur'anic verse 2:3 as

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ

'Who believe in the Unknown and fulfil their devotional obligation'

الصَّلَاةُ is the basic tenet of Islam, with its prescribed format, and cannot be translated as *devotional obligation*; this tantamount to distortion.

Example No. 2

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

Glory be to Him, Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque (Ka'ba) to the Distant Mosque (at Jerusalem), whose precincts We blessed, that We might show him some of Our Signs. He is the All-hearing and All-seeing (17:1)

All translators agree (including Muhammad Ali of Lahori sect of Qadiyanis) that the verse relates to the night experience of the Prophet ﷺ (*Mi'raj*), and subsequent Ascension to the heaven. However, some differ on the nature of the experience, but there is no difference of opinion regarding the two Mosques referred to in this verse.

But Ahmed Ali translates it as given below:

Glory to Him who⁴⁰ took his votary to a wide and open land from the Sacred Mosque (al-Makkah) to the distant Mosque whose precincts We have blessed . . .

In his footnote⁴¹ Ahmed Ali interprets this night journey as migration at night from Makkah to Madinah 'where the Prophet's (ﷺ) mission spread out to its widest horizon'. According to him 'the Prophet's ascension to heaven, *me'raj*, starts some two to three hundred years later with the compilations of Hadith and Tafsir'. Ahmed Ali not only discredits and relegates the invaluable literature of *hadith* and *tafsir*, but also blatantly denies the experience of *Me'raj*.

Example No. 3

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنِّي قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ أَنِّي أَخْلُقُ لَكُمْ مِّنَ الطِّينِ كَهَيْئَةِ الطَّيْرِ فَأَنْفُخُ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طَيْرًا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ
And (make him, Jesus) a Messenger to the Children of Israel (saying): 'I have come to go with a Sign from your Lord that I create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird, and then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by the leave of Allah; and I heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead with Allah's permission. . . (3:49)

The life of Jesus, from birth and childhood to his ascension to heaven, is replete with miracles. In this verse three of his typical miracles (creation of bird out of clay, healing the blind and the leper, and brining to life the dead) are mentioned, and all exegetes and of translators the Qur'an agree on them (e.g. Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Wahiddudin, Daryabadi, etc.). However, Muhammad Ali, Asad and Ahmed Ali deem these three miracles metaphors and parables. Just look at the fanciful interpretation (rather distortion) of the first miracle of Jesus i.e. creating out of clay a bird, by Ahmed Ali.

'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.

Example No. 4

وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وِزْرَكَ. الَّذِي أَنقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ
And removed from thee (the Prophet (PBUH) thy burden that weighed down thy back (94:2-3)

These verses, read with 1 and 4 and subsequent ones, are plain to translate, however, Ahmed Ali translates the verse number 3 (*thy burden that weighed down thy back*) as '*which had left you devoid of hope*'. This is not the faithful rendering of the Qur'anic text into English translations, it is far-fetched.

Example No. 5

يَا أَيُّهَا الْمُدَّثِّرُ and يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَرْمَلُ

The exegetes and translators of the Qur'an take these two verses literally i.e. *O thou enwrapped in thy robes*, and *O thou shrouded in thy mantle*. However, Ahmed Ali adds within the parenthesis: (of prophethood) and (of reform) respectively which is extraneous to the context of these verses.

9. An example of comparative translation of Surah (108) al-Kauthar (Plenty):

English translations from the important versions have been placed below of *surah* al-Kauthar – 108th *surah* of the Qur'an. No comments are provided and readers may judge for themselves which translations meet the needs of today:

*We have given you plenty,
So pray to your Lord and sacrifice
Since your opponent is the one who will be lopped off* – Irving

*To thee have We granted the Fount (of Abundance).
Therefore to thy Lord turn in Prayer and Sacrifice.
For he who hateth thee – he will be cut off (from Future Hope).* – Yusuf Ali

*Lo! We have given thee abundance.
So pray unto thy Lord, and sacrifice,
Lo! It is thy insulter (and not thou) who is without posterity* – Pickthall

*Behold, We have bestowed upon thee good in abundance.
Hence, pray unto thy Sustainer (alone), and sacrifice (unto Him alone)
Verily, he that hates thee has indeed been cut off (from all that is good)* – Asad

*We have given you abundance.
Pray to your Lord and sacrifice to Him alone.
It is the one who hates you who has been cut off* – Wahiduddin

*We have surely given you pre-eminence (a numbers and following);
So serve your Lord with full dedication and sacrifice.
It is surely your opponents whose line will come to end* – Ahmed Ali

*We have given you abundance.
Pray to your Lord and sacrifice to Him.
He that hates you shall remain childless* – Zayid

Verily, We have granted you (O Muhammad ﷺ) al-Kauthar (a river in Paradise)

*Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only).
For he who hates you (O Muhammad ﷺ), he will be cut off (from posterity and
every good thing in this world and in the Hereafter) – al-Hillali and Muhsin
Khan*

*Verily We have bestowed on thee Kawthar
So pray thou to thy Lord and sacrifice
Truly it is thy traducer who shall be childless - 'Abdul Majid Daryabadi⁴²*

Conclusion and Recommendation:

The aforesaid discussion about the English translation of the Qur'an leads one to the conclusion, in the words of Kidwai,

Unlike, for instance, major Muslim languages such as Persian, Turkish and Urdu, which have thoroughly exhausted indigenous linguistic and literary resources to meet the scholarly and emotional demands of the task, the prolific resources of the universal medium of English have not been fully employed in the service of the Qur'an.

The Muslim Scripture is yet to find a dignified and faithful expression in the English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original. The currents of history, however, seem to be in favour of such a development. Even English is acquiring a native Muslim character and it is only a matter of time before we have a worthy translation of the Qur'an in that tongue.

Till then, the Muslim student should judiciously make use of Pickthall, A. Yusuf Ali, Asad and Irving, Even Arberry's stylistic qualities must not be ignored. Ultimately, of course, the Muslim should try to discover the original and not allow himself to be lost in a maze of translations and interpretations.

However, I would include in the recommended list of the translations of the Qur'an in English language those rendered by Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Daryabadi, Asad, Zayid and Wahiduddin. The ultimate goal should be to undertake this noble task afresh.

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End Notes:

- ¹ Muhammad bin 'Isa al-Tirmidhi: *Jamai-al-Tirmidhi, hadith 2715*, (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007), p. 103.
- ² Abū Ammār Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'aan*, (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999), p. 355.
- ³ Ahmad von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Quran'n*, (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1983), p.144.
- ⁴ See for example Muhammad Abdul Azim al-Zarqani, *Manahil Irfan fi Ulum-al-Quran* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, un), pp. 583-611.
- ⁵ See also Michael B. Schub, "That Which Gets Lost in Translation", (*Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2003, Vol. X:4), pp. 81-85.
- ⁶ Arthur J. Arberry,, *The Quran'n Interpreted*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 10 (Introduction).

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- ⁷ Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), p. Translator Foreword.
- ⁸ Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran 'n: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1983), p. iv (Preface to First Edition).
- ⁹ Ahmad Ali, *Al- Quran 'n: A Contemporary Translation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.7.
- ¹⁰ *World Bibliography*, pp.xxviii-xxxiv, cited by Qadhi, *Sciences of the Qur'aan*, p. 356.
- ¹¹ See 1) A R Kidwai, 'Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of the Quran'n', *The Muslim World Book Review*, Vol. 7:4 Summer 1987. (<http://www.soundvision.com/info/quran/english.asp>) and 2) Khaleel Muhammed, 'Assessing English Translations of the Quran'n', *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. XII:2, Spring 2005, pp. 58-71.
- ¹² N J Dawood, *The Koran* (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971), p. 11.
- ¹³ N J Dawood, *The Koran with parallel Arabic text* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1994).
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- ¹⁵ www.monthlycrescent.com
- ¹⁶ Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran 'n*.
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- ¹⁸ Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Quran 'n in the English Language* (1977) (Riyadh: Maktabbah Daruusalam, 1994).
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- ²¹ Ahmad Ali, *Al-Quran 'n: A Contemporary Translation*.
- ²² T.B. Irving (Al-Hajj Ta'lim 'Ali), *The Quran 'n, translated*, (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2009).
- ²³ Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, *The Quran: A New Translation* (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2010).
- ²⁴ Ahmad Ali, under footnote, p. 214, explains the connotation of *Allah* and *Ar-Rahman* as both proper names of God.
- ²⁵ See Al-Qurtbi, Muhammad Bin Ahmad Al-Ansāri, *al-Jameh le-Ahkam-ul-Quran 'n*, (Beirut: Dar-ul-Ahya al-Turth al-Arabi, 1985), vol. 1, pp. 102-106.
- ²⁶ This happens to be the translation rendered by Professor Arberry.
- ²⁷ Sheikh Hussain Muhammad Makhlūf, *Şafwat al-Bayān li- Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān (Şafwat al-Bayān)*, (Kuwait: Wazarat al-Awqaf wal-Shaūn al-Islamia, 1987), p. 66.
- ²⁸ Makhluf, p. 138; see also Şafī al-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri, *al-Misbah al-Munīr fī Tahzīb Tafsīr ibn Kathīr* (Riyadh: Darulasalam, 1999), p. 338-340, al-Qurtbi, *al-Ahkam*, vol 6, p. 10. For further information on the subject see particularly the Quran'nic verses: 3:55, 3:59 and 5:117.
- ²⁹ Al-Shūkanī, Muhammad bin Ali bin Muhammad, *Fateh-ul-Qadīr*, (Beirut: Dar-ul-Kitāb al-Arabi, 1422/2001), vol. 2 page. 450; also see Ibn-Kathir, *al-Misbah al-Munir*, p. 1055, citing al-Tabri.
- ³⁰ Ahmed Ali, *al-the Quran 'n*, p. 460.
- ³¹ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1999), also translates it as clouds; see, p. 11.
- ³² See verse 3:7.
- ³³ Al-Qurtbi, *Ahkam-ul-Quran 'n*, vol. 20, p. 35.
- ³⁴ Al-Zamakshri, Jar Allah Mehmood bin Umar al-Khawarzimi, *Al-Kashāf 'un-Haqāiq al-Tanzīl wa Ayun al-Aqāwīl fī Waju' al-Ta'wīl*, (Beirut: Dar-ul-Ma'Rafah, n.d), vol. 4, p. 247.

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- ³⁶ Al-Allama' abi-al-Fazal Jamal-ud-Din Muhammad bin Mukarram Ibn Manzur (603-711 AH), *Lisan-al-Arab*, Vols. 15 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1300 AH), Vol. 11, p. 6. See also Zain ud Din Abu Abdullah Muhammad Abi Bakr Bin Abdul Qadir al-Razi (d. 666 AH / 1267 AD), *Tafsir Gharib al-Quran'n al-Azeem* (Kuwiat: Wazarat al-Auqaf wal Shaun al-Islamiyah, 1421 AH), p. 379.
- ³⁷ Al-Qurtbi, *Ahkam-ul-Quran'n*, vol. 17, pp. 153-154; Makhluḥ, *Ṣafwat al-Bayān*, p 687; Al-Zamakhshri, *Al-Kashāf*, vol. 4, p. 43. Al-Shukani, *Fateh-ul-Qadīr*, vol. 2, p. 924.
- ³⁸ Al-Mubarrakpuri, *Al-Misbah al-Munīr*, p. 1342.
- ³⁹ Al-Ālūsī, *Tafsīr Rūh al-Ma'āni*, vol. 14, p. 100.
- ⁴⁰ Note use of small 'w' by Ahmed Ali, instead of capital, in Who for Allah.
- ⁴¹ See Ahmed Ali, p. 249.
- ⁴² <http://www.quran4theworld.com/translations/Majid/108.htm>