

The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary by ‘Abdullah Yusuf‘Ali (A Critical Review)

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Among the English Commentaries of the Holy Qur’ān rendered by the Muslims, *The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and Commentary* by ‘Abdullāh Yūsuf Alī, published in 1934 by Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf Publishers, Lahore (United India)(1) is widely known and popular. Its printing was subsidized by Saudi Government and was distributed all over the world free of cost till 2002. With some changes it has now being published by Amana Publications, USA. In the following lines a review of this work is being presented.

About the Author:

‘Abdullāh Ibn Khan Bahadur Yūsuf Alī, Hafiz ‘Abdullāh Yūsuf Alī (14 April 1872 – 10 December 1953)(2) was a South Asian Islamic scholar who translated the Qur’ān into English. His translation of the Qur’ān ranks alongside the translation of Marmaduke Pickthall as the most widely-known and used in the world.

Birth

He was born in Bombay on 14 April, 1872, in India to a wealthy merchant family.

Family

His father ‘Yūsuf Alī Allahbuksh (a Dawoodi Bohra from Saurat in Gujrat) who abandoned the traditional occupation of Family (business), joined the police force and on retirement was granted the title of Khan Bahadur.

Education

Alī received religious education as a child. He could recite the entire Qur’ān from memory. He studied in Bombay University, St. John’s College, Cambridge and Lincoln’s Inn. He also studied English literature and studied at several European universities, including the University of Leeds. He spoke both Arabic and English fluently.

Employment

He remained in Indian Civil Service (ICS), Principal of Islamia College Lahore, Member of Punjab University Enquiry Committee, and Chairman of World Congress of Faiths.(3)

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Works

He had excellent abilities of writing. His first literary expression came with the publication of “A Monograph on Silk Fabrics Produced in the North Western Provinces and Oudh” The work contained cultural, technical and industrial information. It included a justification of Islamic position: ‘A man in a warrior race has no business with effeminate luxuries such as silk or gold.’ In this work he mentioned different Ahadith on the subject provided derived from Sunni and Shi’i sources.(4)

He concentrated his efforts on the Qur’ān and studied the Qur’ānic commentaries beginning with those written in the early days of Islamic history. Yūsuf Alī's best-known work is his book *The Holy Qur’ān: Text, Translation and Commentary*, begun in 1934 and published in 1938 by Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers Lahore in India (later Pakistan). While on tour to promote his translation, Alī helped to open the Al-Rashid Mosque, the first mosque in North America, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in December 1938.(5)

His translation is in blank verse. He used biblical language. He was well versed in English language yet he was not a religious scholar that is why there is a lot of criticism about his work. He used English word ‘God’ for Arabic word الله and ‘Apostle’ for the Arabic word رسول. Later on Saudi Govt. had arranged for the revision of his work. A committee was formed that looked into the translation and commentary and recommended some changes. Therefore modern editions of ‘Abdullāh Yūsuf’s work are revised accordingly and then published by Amana Publications USA and by King Fahd Holy Qur’ān Printing Complex. Dr. A.F.M. KhAlīd Hussain in his article "Profile of a Versatile Scholar" says,

“King Fahd Ibn Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia in 1400H had set out to produce a reliable translation and exegesis of the Holy Qur’ān in English language free from personal bias and prejudices and entrusted the General Presidency of the Department of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and Guidance to undertake the responsibility of revising a particular translation. Four high level committees were formed in order to accomplish this enormous task comprising well-qualified scholars both in Islamic Shari’ah and English language. Finally, Abdulla Yūsuf Alī's scholarly translation and commentary was selected because of its authenticity for the re-printing by King Fahd Holy Qur’ān Printing Complex of Saudi Arabia in 1405H, according to Royal Decree No. 12412. This Translation was finally published by the Ministry of Hajj and Auqaf of Saudi Arabia in 1401H and was distributed worldwide free of cost.” (6)

No doubt this translation and commentary both are widely known and popular among Muslims and English reader yet there is a lot of criticism also.

Death

This renowned Muslim Commentator died in London in December, 1953. He is buried in England at the Muslim cemetery at Brookwood, Surrey, near Woking, not far from the burial place of Pickthall.(7)

Features and Reviews:

The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation and Commentary written by 'Abdullāh Yūsuf Alī, is in traditional style. The Arabic text and English translation are printed in parallel columns, series of notes are arranged as commentary on the lower half of the page, and each individual Surah starts with a poetical summary. The book starts with a general introduction, poetical introduction and a table of contents. Each Surah is divided into sections (Ruḳū). Each section starts with an introduction in a verse style could be confused with the translation of the text of the Qur'ān. There is a brief subject index at the end. Both translation and commentary are devotional and practical. The translation is in blank verse. It is in biblical English. In fact he wanted to make English an Islamic language that's why he did this work. He himself knew that there is no possibility to substitute Arabic words so he tried to give the fullest meaning of the Arabic text as he expressed in the Preface to the First Edition,

“Gentle and discerning reader! What I wish to present to you is an English Interpretation, side by side with the Arabic Text. The English shall be, not a mere substitution of one word for another, but the best expression I can give to the fullest meaning which I can understand from the Arabic Text. The rhythm, music, and exalted tone of the original should be reflected in the English interpretation. It may be but a faint reflection, but such beauty and power as my pen can command shall be brought to its service. I want to make English itself an Islamic language, if such a person as I can do it, and I must give you all the accessory aid which I can.”(8)

No doubt he followed the traditional style and mentioned the old works for his exegesis yet in the case of contradiction among the early commentators he followed the most reasonable opinion according to his own state of mind as he mentioned in the preface to Lahore Edition.(9)

He did not follow any of the early commentators as authority. Despite he adopted general sense of accepted commentaries. The early works, he referred time and again in his commentary are:

- Jaami‘ al-Bayaan fee Tafseer al-Qur’aan by Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Tabari
- Al Mufradat, Abu Al Qasim Husayn Al Raghīb Al Isfahani
- Al Kashshaf by Abu Al Qasim Mahmud ibn Umar Al Zamakhshari
- Al Tafsīr Al Kabir by Abu Al Fadl Muhammad Fakhr Al Din Al Razi
- Anwar Al Tanzil by Quadi Nasir Al Din Abu Said Abd Allah ibn Umar Al Baydawi
- The Tafsīr of Abu Al Fida Ismail ibn Kathir
- Al Itqan fi Ulum Al Qur’ān by Jalal al Din Al Suyuti
- Tafsīr Al Jalalayn by Jalal Al Din Al Suyuti and Jalal Al Din Al Mahalli

In addition to these he also got inspiration from Tafsīr Rahmani by Shaykh Alī ibn Ahmad Mahaymi of Mahim near Bombay, Shah Walīullah, Shah Abd Al Qadir, Abd Al Aziz and Tafsīr Haqqani by Mawlvi Abd Al Haqq. (10)

‘Abdullāh Yūsuf Alī got guidance from these works yet he was careful about the particular schools of thoughts of the commentators so his work is not so affected by the typical point of views yet he tried to give his own point of view.

In case of words he did not provide any grammatical comprehension. He tried to translate the word in literal meanings only. As in verse 104 of Al Baqarah: He translated the meaning of the word رَاعِنَا and أَنْظَرْنَا in his own explanatory style:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقُولُوا رَاعِنَا وَ قُولُوا انْظُرْنَا وَ اسْمِعُوا ۚ وَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ (11)

O ye of Faith! Say not (to the Messenger. words of ambiguous import, but words of respect; and hearken (to him): to those without Faith is a grievous punishment.

While most of the other commentators did not translate the word instead they used the same words as a term as we can see in the translation of Daryabadi,

O ye who believe! Say not: *Ra’ina*, but say: *Unzurna*, and hearken; and unto the infidel shall be a torment afflictive.(12)

And in Surah Al Baqrah Verse: 26

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا ۚ

A. Yūsuf Alī: Allah disdains not to use the similitude of things, lowest As well As highest.(13)

Daryabadi: Verily Allah is not ashamed to propound a similitude, be it of a Gnad or of aught above it.(14)

Mohsin Khan: Verily, Allâh is not ashamed to set forth a parable even of a mosquito or so much more when it is bigger (or less when it is smaller) than it.(15)

Here A. Yūsuf Alī translated the word **بَعُوضَةً** as lowest while others translated as Gnad and Mohsin Khan translated it as mosquito.

‘Abdullāh Yūsuf Alī followed a particular pattern in his commentary. In the beginning of a Surah he gives a comprehensive introduction to the following Surah and then translates the text. In the footnotes he gives explanation and also sometimes discussion about a word.

Before the verses of a one continuous subject or story he puts in a brief summary of the event and then goes forward translating it. For example in Surah Ta’Ha (طه) before verse no. 9, he gave summary of verses 9-36 that is the story of the Prophet Mūsa A.H (Moses).(16)

Yūsuf Alī’s translation was for the first time critically examined by Marmaduke Pickthall who published his own work and was still working for his bilingual edition. As regards the English of the translation, Pickthall commented that it was "in better English than any previous English translation by an Indian." On the other hand, he warned that "it could not be mistaken ... for the writing of an Englishman:’ Translation of the Qur’ān, according to Pickthall, "requires a special kind of English." The Qur’ānic rhythm that is so impressive in the Arabic "cannot be transported into any other language." Therefore, according to him, it was a rash undertaking on the part of Yūsuf Alī to impose a new literary form that was not prose, "but broken into lines which look like meter but are neither metrical nor reasoned ... upon a language not his own.(17)

Pickthall also disapproved Yūsuf Alī’s "conveying the meaning of the sacred text in his own words. For example, "Most Gracious, Most Merciful" according to Pickthall, was not an improvement on "the Beneficent, the Merciful." The use of the word "Apostle" to refer to Prophet Mohammed (SAW) throughout, in his opinion was "quite a serious error for a Muslim writer.' Although the Greek word **apostolos** was equivalent to **Rasul** in Arabic, in English this word was used for twelve messengers of Jesus Christ. But he commended his footnotes as "valuable for the faith which they reveal and for the frequent apt comparison with Christianity.(18)

T. B. Irving said: "Yūsuf Alī’s (translation) is more satisfactory as a commentary but his English is over-laden with extra words that neither explain the text nor embellish the meaning. True embellishment is a simple telling word that does not detract, but carries the mind directly to the meaning.(19)

Arafat scrutinized Yūsuf Alī's English translation and discovered some 400 "incorrect equivalents" in it.(20) Abdul Rahim Kidwai reviewed Yūsuf Alī's translation and concluded that it "represents the sense of original" and he commented on Arafat's criticism that "literally not one" out "of four hundred alleged incorrect equivalents" was "worthy of serious consideration.(21)

'Abdullāh 'Abās AI-Nadwī pointed in his review the unique translation of the first verse of Surah Baqarah as "This is the Book: In it is guidance sure without doubt to those who fear God;" i.e., Yūsuf Alī relates the lack of doubt to the existence of guidance in the Qur'ān, while all other known translators and interpreters of the Qur'ān relate the lack of doubt to the Book being from Allah.(22)

In 1981, Amana Corporation, U.S.A, a commercial publisher in cooperation with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), U.S.A, appointed a selection committee comprised of highly reputable Muslim scholars to select the "most recognized and authentic available English translation" of the Qur'ān. The committee decided in favor of the work of Yūsuf Alī.(23) However the notes of the original edition were thoroughly checked, revised, and brought up-to-date. Changes were also made in the text so as to clarify all "doubtful or shady points." For example, the words God and Apostle in the original edition have been substituted by Allah and Rasul, respectively. Moreover, the majority of the Islamic and historical terms, such as Zakat, Tawrat have been retained in Arabic instead of translating them into English.

In short the most widely known and read commentary of A. Yūsuf Alī is a remarkable example of modern language and literary taste while having different point of views. The cause behind its popularity is its language and availability. The status of the Commentator is also an attraction that invites the modern generation while subsidy granted by Saudi government played an important role in promulgation of this commentary.

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