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The Interpretation of the Quranic Text between Prohibition and Permissibility

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Abstract

The study of Arab-Islamic civilization is a vast field that has attracted the attention of both Arab and Western scholars alike. The Holy Qur'an constitutes the foundation of this civilization and one of its essential pillars. Therefore, its revelation in an inimitable Arabic. The translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an can contribute to its interpretation and facilitate the dissemination and understanding of its intended message. Consequently, some scholars have permitted such translation, whereas others have rejected it on the grounds of its prohibition and the perceived impossibility of accurately translating the Qur'anic text.

Keywords: interpretation; Quran; Interpretatin; Quranic Text

Introduction

The translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an constitutes a subject of considerable complexity, given that the Qur'an embodies divine and miraculous discourse characterized by unparalleled eloquence, rhetorical sophistication, and inimitability. These unique features have made the issue of translating its meanings a



matter of ongoing scholarly discussion. Accordingly, the following aspects will be examined:

- The most significant translations of the Holy Qur'an.
- Orientalists and the translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an.
- The views of opponents regarding the permissibility of translating the Qur'an.
- The perspectives of scholars supporting the translation of the Qur'an, including the debate between permissibility and prohibition, along with the evidence advanced by each position.

2. Translations of the Holy Qur'an

According to historians, the earliest translations of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an are attributed to Orientalist scholars and emerged during the early stages of Orientalism, particularly in the aftermath of the First Crusade. During this period, Christian intellectual circles sought to engage with and challenge Islam through scholarly, theological, and intellectual approaches. At the same time, the School of Translators in Toledo was established and developed into an important center for translating major Arabic works into various European languages.

Within this context, Peter the Venerable (*Petrus Venerabilis*) initiated a project to translate the Holy Qur'an into Latin. The task was entrusted to Robert of Ketton (*Robertus Retinensis*), and the translation was completed in 1143 CE. Subsequently, Toledo became one of the earliest centers of Oriental studies in Europe and played a significant role in the transmission of Arabic and Islamic knowledge to the West (Hitti, 1958, p. 63).

A manuscript attributed to Robert is preserved at the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* in Paris. This translation has generally been described as interpretive in character and marked by a degree of bias. In this regard, George Sale, who later translated the meanings of the Qur'an into English, criticized Robert's work, arguing that it could scarcely be considered an accurate translation because it exceeded the acceptable limits of translation and contained numerous deficiencies. In certain instances, it failed to convey the intended meanings adequately, while in others it introduced excessive

interpretive elements, thereby altering or obscuring the meanings expressed in the original text (Sale, 1734, p. 160).

Sale expressed this criticism as follows:

"It should not be referred to as translation; the inexplicable liberties taken within it and the countless errors of both omission and commission result in little resemblance to the original.."

Among the most prominent translations of the Qur'an is that produced by the renowned Orientalist Jacques Berque (1915-1995), who had previously translated the *Mu'allaqat*. Another notable translation was prepared by René Khawam, who first published a translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* before later producing a translation of the meanings of the Qur'an. Berque's translation was published by Sindbad Publishing House in Paris in 1990, whereas Khawam's translation was published by Maisonneuve and Larose in Paris in the same year (Berque, 1990, p. 846).

On the other hand, certain groups hostile or ideologically distant from Islam, such as the Qadianis, became actively involved in translating the Qur'an. Their translations incorporated doctrinal and legislative elements consistent with their beliefs. They also included alterations to the divine text, accompanied by interpretive comments intended to promote their sectarian orientations (Watt, 1970, pp. 109-119).

According to historical accounts, the earliest translation to appear was that initiated by Peter the Venerable. The first French translation dates back to the mid-seventeenth century and was produced by André du Ryer. This version was subsequently translated into English by Alexander Ross in 1649. In the Netherlands, another translation was undertaken by Glazemaker in 1657 (Camara, 1414 AH, pp. 111-112).

As one researcher observes, *"An examination of most French translations of the meanings of the Qur'an reveals that they frequently fail to convey the divine message accurately and clearly to French-speaking readers. The translated content often falls short of achieving the intended objective of rendering the meanings of the Qur'anic text, lacking precision and failing to do justice to the language of revelation."* (Baranji, p. 02).

The Holy Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and is safeguarded from distortion and alteration. Consequently, no translation can fully capture its essence, as it constitutes sacred and divinely revealed discourse. Indeed, Islam is a universal message, and God Almighty commanded His Messenger and Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, to convey this message to all humanity: *"Blessed is He who sent down the Criterion upon His Servant that he may be a warner to all the worlds"* (Al-Furqan: 1).

Divine wisdom ordained that the language of the Holy Qur'an be Arabic, while the languages of other peoples remained numerous and diverse. This linguistic diversity created barriers that often hindered the proper understanding and application of the Islamic message. Consequently, translation emerged as one of the most important means of conveying Islam to people across different regions of the world. It serves as a vital bridge for communication, interaction, and mutual understanding among peoples and cultures.

In recent decades, translation has become an urgent necessity, especially given the political climate and the relentless media campaigns targeting Islam and Muslims (Baranji, p. 03). Such conditions have intensified efforts to distort the image of Islam and its followers, and to manipulate the original meanings of the Qur'an in the translation process.

Hostile Western writings have long sought to challenge Islam and portray it as synonymous with terrorism and brutality. Such representations can be traced back to the earliest translation undertaken by Pierre de Tolède under the commission of Pierre le Vénérable, the abbot of the Abbey of Cluny, during the eleventh century. This trajectory continued with the translation of André du Ryer in the seventeenth century, recognized as the first French translation of the Qur'an. It was subsequently used as the basis for English and Dutch translations. This was followed by Savary's French translation, which gained considerable popularity, and eventually by the translation of André Chouraqui published in 1990 (Baranji, p. 03).

Commenting on Chouraqui's translation, Dr. Hassan Azzouzi stated: *"André Chouraqui, a Jewish translator and former mayor of occupied Jerusalem, also translated the Bible. His Qur'anic translation was met with substantial criticism, even within*

Orientalist circles, which argued that its language bore little resemblance to standard French and instead reflected colloquial usage." (Azzouzi, 1996, p. 39).

Consequently, this translation was criticized for its poor quality and colloquial style. It was considered unsuccessful in achieving its intended objective of producing a faithful translation capable of assisting readers in understanding the meanings of the Holy Qur'an.

The translation of the Holy Qur'an into the Amazigh language has likewise attracted scholarly attention. Researcher Mohammed Laazmat devoted a doctoral dissertation to this subject at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Fez, Morocco, in 2015, entitled:

"The Amazigh Translation of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an by Al-Hussein Jihadi: An Attempt to Critique and Refine the Translation."

This study focused on examining certain shifts and modifications that occurred in the Amazigh translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an produced by Al-Hussein Jihadi Al-Baamiri. The researcher adopted a comparative and contrastive approach, analyzing the Qur'anic text alongside its translation into the Amazigh language (2017, pp. 71-72).

3. Orientalists and the Translation of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an

Orientalism played a significant role in the translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an. Translating the Qur'anic meanings came to be regarded as an intellectual accomplishment that many Orientalists aspired to achieve during their lifetimes. It was considered a measure of their familiarity with the Qur'anic text, their command of the language of the Qur'an, and their linguistic proficiency, which they continually sought to refine (Sezgin, 1983, p. 22).

Despite the ideological agendas and distortions often associated with Orientalist discourse toward Islam and Muslims, some Orientalists undertook the translation of the meanings of the Qur'an with sincere scholarly intentions.

Such sincerity was evident in the translation of E. H. Palmer, also known as Abdullah Palmer, who was distinguished by his profound mastery of both Arabic and English and by his ability to appreciate and convey the effect of Arabic expressions to English readers. In this way, Orientalist scholars devoted considerable effort to translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an.

Several Orientalists attempted to demonstrate their intellectual perspectives regarding the Arabic language and their familiarity with Qur'anic discourse through engagement in Qur'anic translation. Their work was often shaped by particular religious and doctrinal backgrounds. One notable example is Régis Blachère, an Orientalist who produced a translation of the meanings of the Qur'an arranged according to the chronological order of revelation.

This translation was published between 1947 and 1951 in three volumes, the first of which served as an introduction to the Qur'an. Blachère subsequently revised his translation (Al-Aqiqi, p. 309). Orientalists had various motivations for translating the Qur'an, including the desire to understand the meanings contained within it and to compare them with those found in other revealed religions (Chouraqui, 1990, p. 09).

Régis Blachère (1900–1973) is regarded as one of the most prominent French Orientalists of the twentieth century and was among the distinguished members of the Arab Scientific Academy. He studied Arabic in Casablanca, Morocco, and graduated from the Faculty of Arts in Algeria in 1922. Between 1924 and 1935, he served as a professor at the Institute of Higher Moroccan Studies in Morocco. In 1938, he was appointed as a lecturer at Sorbonne University in Paris.

Among his most significant scholarly contributions, in addition to his translation of the Holy Qur'an, are the following:

- *History of Arabic Literature*, translated into Arabic by Dr. Ibrahim Al-Kilani.
- *Rules of Classical Arabic*.
- *Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi*, translated into Arabic by Dr. Ahmed Badawi.
- *Western Dictionary: French/English* (Al-Aqiqi, p. 310).

4. Views of Opponents Regarding the Permissibility of Translating the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an

Scholarly opinions have diverged considerably regarding the permissibility of translating the meanings of the Holy Qur'an. The majority of doctrinal schools did not permit the translation of the Qur'an and maintained a consensus on the impossibility of rendering it with its original meanings and rhetorical dimensions. Consequently, they argued that any translation would be inadequate. Even if produced, it could not be regarded as the Qur'an itself, since such an act would amount to alteration and distortion of the divine word.

Their argument rests primarily on the premise that the distinctive characteristics of Arabic structure and expression cannot be transferred into another language. This position led many scholars to reject literal translation, as it can never approximate or reproduce the linguistic and rhetorical functions of Arabic expressions (Al-Bandaq, 1983, p. 55).

Among the principal reasons advanced are the following:

- The Holy Qur'an constitutes miraculous divine discourse whose nature renders translation impossible.
- Languages differ in their linguistic systems, and certain lexical items fail to convey their precise meanings through literal translation, which may result in distortion and thus conflict with the authenticity of the divine message.
- Translation lacks the profound psychological and emotional impact generated by the Qur'anic text, thereby losing the fluency, eloquence, and aesthetic harmony inherent in Arabic composition (Al-Bandaq, 1983, p. 59).
- In general, translations of the Holy Qur'an produced by certain Jewish and Christian Orientalists were viewed as containing varying degrees of distortion. This, in turn, contributed to misconceptions perceived as attempts to challenge Islam and diminish its significance and role, leading many Muslim scholars to condemn such translations.

Among the scholars who asserted the impossibility of translating the Holy Qur'an was Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276 AH). He presented his position at the beginning of his work *Ta'wil Mushkil al-Qur'an* in a chapter entitled "*On the Arabs and the Distinctive Eloquence, Expression, and Breadth of Figurative Usage Bestowed upon Them by God.*" (Touati, 2015, p. 03).

In this section, he explicitly declared the impossibility of translating the Qur'an into another language, stating: *"No translator is capable of rendering it into any other tongue."* (Al-Dhahabi; Ibn Qutaybah, 1973, p. 296)

Accordingly, most specialists in this field maintain that translation inevitably fails to preserve the original semantic value of Qur'anic expressions, thereby opening the way to distortion and erroneous interpretation.

5. Views of Scholars Supporting the Translation of the Qur'an

A number of scholars have maintained the permissibility of translating the Qur'an. Al-Zarqawi pointed out that there exists a group of scholars who permit what is termed customary translation and presented the arguments upon which they relied. However, as was his usual approach, he did not devote an independent section to this issue.

What may be inferred from his discussion is that they upheld the permissibility of translation for several reasons, among which are the following (Touati, 2015, p. 31):

5.1 Translation as a Means of Fulfilling the Obligation of Conveying the Message

Translation is regarded as a necessary means of fulfilling the religious duty of conveying the message of Islam. According to the legal maxim, *"Whatever is indispensable for the fulfillment of an obligation becomes itself obligatory."* In this context, the obligation refers to communicating the Qur'anic message to non-Arab communities.

5.2 Translation as a Means of Refuting Errors and Misconceptions

Translation serves as an effective instrument for addressing misunderstandings, inaccuracies, and misconceptions related to Islam. This objective may be achieved through translating Qur'anic exegesis and presenting concise explanations of its meanings, thereby facilitating a more accurate understanding of the text.

5.3 The Prophet's Approval

Supporters further argue that the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, implicitly approved the translation of Qur'anic meanings when communicating with

rulers and foreign leaders. The Prophet's letters contained Qur'anic verses whose meanings could only be understood by non-Arab recipients through translation (Touati, 2015, p. 32).

5.4 The Narration Concerning Salman al-Farisi, May Allah Be Pleased with Him

Advocates of customary translation cite textual evidence from the Prophetic tradition supporting the permissibility of translating the Qur'an. It has been reported that al-Shurunbulali, in *Al-Nafhah al-Qudsiyyah*, stated:

"It is narrated that the people of Persia wrote to Salman requesting that he write Surah Al-Fatihah for them in Persian. Accordingly, he wrote for them: 'In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,' and they recited it in prayer until their tongues became accustomed to the Arabic pronunciation. Thereafter, Salman presented what he had written to the Prophet." (Al-Zarqawi, p. 119).

Based on this narration, proponents argue for the permissibility of translating Qur'anic verses.

5.5 Translation as Equivalent to Exegesis in Arabic

Translation is also considered analogous to Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) in Arabic. Despite the linguistic challenges and methodological limitations it may involve, it remains permissible, just as exegesis itself is permissible. Its function is to clarify and explain the meanings of Qur'anic verses in a manner that facilitates comprehension and understanding (Touati, 2015, p. 33).

6. Conclusion:

The Holy Qur'an occupies a central and distinguished position in the lives of Muslims, as it constitutes a comprehensive source of guidance encompassing both worldly and spiritual dimensions. It embodies the principles governing thought, life, and society and serves as the fundamental constitution guiding Muslims in their daily lives. Owing to this profound significance, the issue of Qur'anic translation has generated diverse scholarly perspectives, ranging between acceptance and rejection.

Nevertheless, the more persuasive view holds that translation functions as an essential means of communication among peoples, cultures, and nations. It therefore remains imperative to convey the concepts and values of Islam to all parts of the world without distinction based on ethnicity, race, or doctrinal affiliation.

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