

# BOOK REVIEW

by

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*THE MESSAGE OF THE QURAN* by Muhammad Asad

(Dar al-Andulus, Gibraltar, 1980), Pp. 1000, £22.50

This voluminous work is an English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran (with original Arabic text) by a Muslim of Austrian origin who embraced Islam over fifty years ago. A part of the work had been published in 1964 by the Muslim World League based at Makkah.

A study of the commentary reveals that Mr Asad holds enlightened views, boldly challenges any commonly-accepted Muslim notion he finds opposed to the Holy Quran, and interprets the Holy Book in the light of modern knowledge and in a manner showing its relevance to today's problems. Despite this, however, Mr Asad is unjustified in his claims as to the uniqueness of his translation.

## *NON-ARABS AND KNOWLEDGE OF ARABIC*

Mr Asad believes that for a real understanding of the Holy Quran "knowledge of Arabic through academic study alone" (p iii) is not enough. Only by living amongst the Bedouin of Saudi Arabia, as he himself did, can a non-Arab acquire a "feel" for the Quranic Arabic. That is why, in his opinion, *all* previous translations "have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit", since the translators, Muslim or non-Muslim, were all non-Arabs who had learnt their Arabic only "from books".

Having said this at length in his *Foreword*, when he comes to interpreting those verses where the "orthodox" Muslims (among whom are included the Arabs) generally hold views diametrically opposed to the Lahore-Ahmadiyya beliefs expressed by Maulana Muhammad Ali, *Mr Asad sides with the Maulana who never learnt his Arabic from Arabs!* And actually the difference in interpretation in most of these cases arises from the meaning one may give to certain *Arabic* words and expressions. So Mr Asad must agree that the late Maulana Muhammad Ali, whose English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran first appeared in 1917, had a more accurate grasp of the Arabic

language than do the Arabs, even the Bedouins. To take one example, Mr Asad follows the late Maulana in taking the word *raf'* in 4:158 to mean *exaltation* or *being honoured* and rejects *physical elevation* which is the meaning given to it by the Arabs. Two other important examples are the word *āyat* in 2:106 and *zinā* in 24:2. Now how does Mr Asad justify describing (by implication) the Maulana's translation as one of those which are "but distant, and faulty, echoes of its (the Holy Quran's) meaning and spirit" ?

#### TECHNICAL VS. BROAD SIGNIFICANCE OF QURANIC TERMS

Another criticism Mr Asad levels against *all* previous translators relates to the rendering of certain Arabic words which have assumed a technical significance in Islamic theology. For instance *muslim*, *islām* and *kufr* are translated by "the non-Arab of our day, believer and non-believer alike" in their technical, not broad or linguistic, sense, alleges Mr Asad (p.vi).

As for *muslim*, Mr Asad's criticism does not apply to the Maulana who usually does translate this term as *submitting ones (to God)*, not as *Muslim*. In fact, in 27:42 his translation of this word as *submitters to Solomon* is more general than Mr Asad's recurrent *surrenderers unto God*. The word *islām*, however, in verses such as 5:3 cannot bear Mr Asad's broad rendering of *self-surrender unto God*, but actually means "the religion of Islam", as one may see from the context.

Mr Asad suggests that the word *kitāb*, when used in the Holy Quran for the Quran itself, should be translated as "Divine writ", rather than "book", because "those who listened to its recitation did not conceive of it as a 'book'". This is simply not correct. Incidents such as that of Hadrat Umar's conversion clearly show that the Holy Quran was physically a "book" from the earliest days; and even if it was not then, it became so very soon afterwards, and hence its description as *kitāb* may have been prophetic.

#### TRANSLATION

As regards the translation as a whole, its language tends to be laborious and long-winded, for not only are single Arabic terms rendered by longer English expressions, but there are frequent parenthetical insertions. Rather than clarifying verses, these insertions introduce Mr Asad's subjective impressions into the translation itself. Below we give his translation of 3:101 on the left, with Maulana Muhammad Ali's for comparison on the right:

"O you who have attained to faith!  
Be conscious of God with all the  
consciousness that is due to Him,  
and do not allow death to overtake  
you ere you have surrendered  
yourself unto Him" (p. 82).

"O you who believe, keep your duty  
to Allah, as it ought to be kept,  
and die not unless you are Muslims"

There is nothing in Mr Asad's translation to suggest, as he has claimed that he has acquired a special feel and knowledge of Arabic by having lived amongst the Bedouins.

#### COMMENTARY

This is the redeeming feature of the work. Some of the interpretations are quite new and very appealing. Mr Asad makes use of classical dictionaries and commentaries, as well as modern knowledge, in interpreting the Holy Book.

Generally, Mr Asad's commentary is well worth reading and in many places very refreshing. It shows that fair-minded non-Ahmadi Muslim scholars are not only adopting the general principles of Quranic interpretation expounded in our age by Hadrat Mirza and followed by Maulana Muhammad Ali, but are even beginning to accept specific Ahmadiyya interpretations of particular Quranic verses.

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## PROPHECY FULFILLED

Recent events prove the truth of a twin prophecy made by our Founder in his book *Izālah Auhām* published in 1891:

*"I have been asked whether it is appropriate for the propagation of Islam in the West to send English-knowing Muslim missionaries there for preaching. I would not normally agree with this proposal. . . . In my view, sending such representatives would do more harm than good. . . ."*

*"My proposal is that, instead of missionaries, choice literature should be sent there. . . . I wish to prepare, have translated into English, and send there a commentary of the Quran, but I cannot help stating that this is my work and no other can do it as can I or a 'branch' of mine who is included in me".*

\*The Prophecy relating to a unique English commentary has been amply fulfilled by the now historic work of the late Maulana Muhammad Ali who departed from us 29 years ago this October.

\*The first part of the prophecy, which apprehends the harm done to the cause of Islam in the West by half-baked "missionaries" of meagre knowledge, is sadly but inevitably being fulfilled before our very eyes in this country as well as other Western lands such as the West Indies.