

The Status of Maulana Muhammad Ali's English Translation of the Holy Qur'an

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A recent translation of the Holy Qur'an, with text and commentary, has appeared (in 1980) from Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, entitled as "The Message of the Qur'an", which is translated and explained by Mr. Muhammad Asad. The translator is an Austrian Muslim, and is the second European convert to Islam after Mr. Pickthall, who has undertaken the stupendous task of translating the Holy Qur'an into English. Allama Asad lived in Lahore for a number of years and frequently called on the late Maulana Muhammad Ali, who had advised and inspired him to translate the *Sahih al-Bukhari* into English. Mr. Asad did take this work in hand and a few paras were also published, but the work remained incomplete. (My latest information is that it is now complete). However, his translation is definitely a valuable addition to the existing translations of the Holy Book, and we shall discuss it in this brief article.

Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation

Hazrat Maulana Muhammad Ali's English translation of the Holy Qur'an first appeared in the year 1917, and has not

only been the pioneer in the field, but has also served as a beacon of light for all future translators of the Holy Qur'an. About half a dozen translations of the Qur'an into English have since appeared, and they all have followed Maulana Muhammad Ali's work very closely. The unparalleled fame and popularity granted by Allah to this translation has a hidden significance and is part of a divine scheme of things. Maulana Muhammad Ali accomplished this work in fulfilment of a keen desire of the Promised Messiah, who said it was his task and would be done by him or by one who was part of himself. The Maulana was a devoted follower of his Master, and was so close to him as a part belongs to the whole. Secondly, when this translation was completed towards the close of Maulana Nur-ud-Din's life who used to hear its expositional notes every day, it was declared to have been accepted and blessed by Allah as disclosed by a Saint who was recipient of *Ilham*. This translation, therefore, is destined to act as a leading Star for all subsequent translators, and

some of them have really followed it very closely.

Maulana Muhammad Ali's translation has run into many editions, and it was thoroughly revised by him in 1951, the last year of his earthly life. The following other translations have since been published: Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar's translation appeared in 1930, and that of Mr. Marmaduke Pickthall in 1931. Mr. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation appeared in parts in the year 1934. Maulvi Sher Ali's translation appeared in 1955, and Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi's translation and that of Prof. Arberry appeared a few years ago.

Mr. Sarwar and Pickthall's translations

Mr. H. G. Sarwar knew Maulana Muhammad Ali very intimately, as they were fellow-students in the Government College, Lahore for four years. He has paid rich tributes to the Maulana's scholarly work, his tenacious memory, great knowledge of Arabic, and his researches of a high order. According to him Maulana Muhammad Ali had made himself immortal by his English translation of the Holy Qur'an. He writes: "There is no translation or commentary of the Holy Qur'an in the English language to compete with Maulvi Muhammad Ali's masterpiece". Mr. Sarwar's translation and that of Mr. Pickthall were reviewed at length in the famous Christian quarterly, "The Moslem

World" in its issue of July, 1931, and it was concluded that both Mr. Sarwar and Mr. Pickthall had followed Muhammad Ali very closely.

Mr. Pickthall got his work revised and thoroughly scrutinised in Egypt before its publication. About this time a news appeared in the "Egyptian Gazette", as narrated by the "Moslem World", that Mr. Pickthall had joined the Ahmadiyya sect. Mr. Pickthall very emphatically denied it. But even though he disclaimed joining this school of thought, he was so closely identified with Ahmadiyya students that he was looked upon as one of them. And the Reviewer of the "Moslem World" also declared that "a careful comparison of Mr. Pickthall's translation with that of the Ahmadiyya translator, Maulvi Muhammad Ali, shows conclusively that Mr. Pickthall's work is not very much more than a revision of the Ahmadiyya version." Mr. Pickthall held the view that the Qur'an could not be translated; and he had made a special effort to meet the requirements of the English Muslims. He does not mention to have in any way benefited by Maulana Muhammad Ali's work, and declared to have no connections with the Ahmadiyyas, and yet he was found so close to Maulana Muhammad Ali.

"The Moslem World" further states :

“We have made a thorough examination of about forty verses in the second chapter, sixty verses in the third, forty verses in the nineteenth, all of the last fifteen chapters, comparing his rendering with those of Sale, Rodwell, Palmer and Muhammad Ali, as well as with the Arabic. From this careful investigation we have come to the conclusion that Mr. Pickthall’s translation, in all that part of his work which we have examined, resembles very closely the version of Muhammad Ali, the difference between the two versions in many passages being merely verbal”. ... “The dependence of Mr. Pickthall upon the work of Muhammad Ali is also indicated in an occasional footnote, and those who will compare these footnotes with the notes in the 1920 edition of MA, which contains his commentary, will find that throughout chapter 2 almost every footnote is based on the Ahmadiyya commentary”.... “We think it will now be evident to the reader how much Mr. Pickthall is indebted to the version of Maulvi Muhammad Ali, not only for his footnotes, but also for the translation itself”.

It will be interesting to note an instance of verbal difference in the translation of verse 54 of the chapter ‘The family of Imran’. Maulana Muhammad Ali translates it as follows. “When

Allah said : O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence and clear thee of those who disbelieve and make those who follow thee above those who disbelieve to the day of Resurrection”. Mr. Pickthall translates it as under : “(And remember) when Allah said : O Jesus ! Lo ! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me, and am cleansing thee of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow thee above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection”. Instead of the straight translation of *متوفيك* as *causing thee to die*, Mr. Pickthall has used the words *gathering thee* which seems very peculiar, and as stated by the Reviewer, the intention seems to make the rendering vague. Similarly, *والعك الى* is translated by Maulana Muhammad Ali as *exalt thee in My presence*, but Mr. Pickthall renders it as *causing thee to ascend unto Me*, perhaps to accommodate the view generally held by orthodox Muslims about the Ascension of Jesus.

Mr. Muhammad Asad’s translation

Mr. Asad also believes that the Holy Qur’an is untranslatable. This is true to some extent, but not entirely true. The Holy Qur’an is meant for the whole world and our Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) was

raised for the entire mankind, as stated in the Qur'an: "O mankind, surely I am the Messenger of Allah to you all" (7 : 158). His message cannot reach all people unless it is translated in all languages. The Holy Qur'an says : "And this Qur'an has been revealed to me that with it I may warn you and whomsoever it reaches" (6 : 19). It cannot reach everybody unless it is rendered in various languages of the world. Secondly, Mr. Muhammad Asad emphasises the need of living among the Arabs in order to be able to translate the Holy Qur'an correctly and according to the spirit of the language. About the previous translators of the Holy Qur'an, in his Foreword he says : "All of them were — or are — people who acquired their knowledge of Arabic through academic study alone: that is, from books. None of them, however great his scholarship, has ever been familiar with the Arabic language as a person is familiar with his own". — "And because none of the scholars who have previously translated the Qur'an into European languages have ever fulfilled this pre-requisite, their translations have remained but distant, and faulty echoes of its meaning and spirit". And the justification of this new translation is given by him as follows : "The work which I am now placing before the public is based on a lifetime of study and of many years spent in Arabia. It

is an attempt — perhaps the first attempt at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur'anic message into a European language". Mr. Asad also asserts : " that the Qur'an itself has never yet been presented in any European language in a manner which would make it truly comprehensible".

Mr. Muhammad Asad has written a very brief foreword and does not comment on the work of his predecessors. Yet his translation also closely resembles the translation of Maulana Muhammad Ali. The main difference between the Ahmadiyya translation and that of other Muslim scholars is that of the former's belief in the death of Jesus Christ. Whereas Mr. Pickthall and Mr. Yusuf Ali have not clearly mentioned Jesus' death, Allama Asad has very boldly and without any ambiguity translated the Qur'anic text affirming the death of Jesus Christ, and has categorically stated : "Nowhere in the Qur'an is there any warrant for the popular belief that God has taken up Jesus bodily, in his lifetime into heaven". (p. 135) He has translated *انى متولىك* as "I shall cause thee to die" and Maulana Muhammad Ali had rendered it as "I will cause thee to die". which is identical rendering. Similarly, the words *رافعك الى* are translated by Maulana Sahib as "exalt thee

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MAULANA MUHAMMAD ALI's
TRANSLATION (from p. 6)

in My presence", and by Mr. Asad as "shall exalt thee unto Me". And he further adds in the foot-note: "The expression, 'God exalted him unto Himself' in the above verse denotes the elevation of Jesus to the realm of God's special grace — a blessing in which all prophets partake'."

Besides useful explanatory notes given by Mr. Asad on every page of his translation, he has also added four appendices at the end of the book to further elucidate and clarify certain important points about which considerable difference of opinion exists. The following facts are discussed in these appendices: (1) "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'an", (2) "Al-Muqatta'at" (or disjointed letters of Arabic alphabet used at the beginning of certain chapters of the Holy Qur'an), (3) "On the term and concept of Jinn", (4) "The Night Journey" (Isra' and Mi'raj). These appendices are expressive and significant, and we find in them considerable agreement with the views of the late Maulana Muhammad Ali, and we shall discuss these at length on some other occasion.

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