

A Critical Study of Abdel Haleem's New Translation of the Holy Qur'an

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Abstract

The Holy Qur'an is a divine book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It has been translated into various languages by both Muslims and non-Muslims. George Sale was the first to translate it into English directly from Arabic. After him E.H. Palmer, J. M. Rodwell, Richard Bell and Arthur J. Arberry gained familiarity among orientalist for their renditions of the Qur'an. Two Western converts to Islam namely Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and Muhammad Asad published their translations. Some Arab scholars including an Iraqi Jew N. J. Dawood also translated the Holy Qur'an. Abdel Haleem, an Arab-British Muslim, has brought out his rendering of the Holy Qur'an in the first decade of twenty-first century. The article is a comparative study of the latter's translation.

M.A.S.Abdel Haleem was born in Egypt, and learned the Qur'an by heart during his childhood. He was educated at al-Azhar University, Cairo (Egypt). Later, he studied in the United Kingdom and obtained his Ph.D. from the Cambridge University. He has been teaching Arabic at Cambridge and London Universities since 1966. He is currently a Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and the editor of the Journal of Qur'anic Studies.(1) He was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the 2008 Birthday Honours.(2) Professor Abdel Haleem was recognized for his services to Arabic culture and literature, and to inter-faith understanding.

He has published several works in the field of Arabic and Islamic Studies. He has published 7 books in these areas and edited two books. He has contributed chapters in 16 books and encyclopedias.

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His research papers appeared in the Journal of Qur'anic Studies, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Islamic Quarterly and Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations.(3) He has special interest in Arabic-English lexicography and Quranic studies. He co-authored *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage* and *English-Arabic Business Dictionary*. Besides other books, he has authored his famous work entitled “*Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*”. In 2004, Oxford University Press published his translation of the Qur'an into English including it in ‘Oxford World Classics’ series.

The English translation of the Holy Qur'an by Professor Abdel Haleem is a unique work because its author is an Arabic-speaking Muslim who has been living in England since 1966. No other translator of the Holy Qur'an has such mastery of both languages. Furthermore, he is a lexicographer fully equipped with the knowledge of both classical and modern Arabic. He does not lag behind in having full command over English. Most of his predecessors rendered the Holy Qur'an into English using the King James idiom that had been considered as the standard idiom from translating any religious scripture. That is why, his rendering manifests originality which is lacking in many other translations. The old usage and archaic words are very difficult to understand by modern reader. Abdel Haleem's translation is in modern and plain English. He always opts for contemporary usage and sentence structure and avoids confusing phrases.

Andrew Rippon has praised the title: “*The Qur'an: A new translation.*”(4) Abdel Haleem directly calls it translation avoiding the words used by his predecessors in their titles. Pickthall and Asad, great Muslim translators from the West, avoided calling their versions ‘translations’ and titled their works: “The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an” and “The Message of the Qur'an” respectively. Some translators have called their versions ‘interpretations’ and still others have used “Translation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an”. Among Muslim translators, Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar titled his rendering as “Translation of the Holy Qur'an”. It is a fact that all translators were actually attempting to render the Qur'an into English, whatever the title of their work. So Abdel Haleem aptly calls it a translation but the word “new” will lose its meaning with the passage of time as the language is likely to change with time. However, it is strange that in the same year when Abdel Haleem published his translation, another translator Dr. Thomas Cleary used a similar title “The Qur'an: A New Translation” for his rendering of the Holy Qur'an. (5)

He has written a useful introduction which contains the life of Muhammad (PBUH) and the historical background, the compilation of the Qur'an, the structure of the Qur'an: Suras and Ayas, Meccan and Medinan Suras, stylistic features, issues of interpretation, a short history of English translations. The translator has also enumerated characteristics of his translation under various sub-headings. He has given a chronology of the Qur'an and select bibliography. In the end he has prepared an eighteen-page index that is helpful for researchers.

Abdel Haleem worked on his translation for nearly seven years which appeared for the first time in 2004 and reissued in 2005 and 2008. It is hitherto being published without Arabic text but an edition under the title "The Qur'an: English translation with parallel English text" will appear this year as well. The list of contents contains the titles of chapters in Arabic and English. The chapters and verses in the text are properly numbered making it easy to consult for research purposes. To differentiate the verse numbering from those of footnotes, the latter are marked by English alphabets.

One of the main characteristics of this translation is the brevity exercised by the learned translator that is not possible without mastery of both the languages. Professor Abdel Haleem has used minimum words in his translation and exegetical notes. He has added footnotes where there is extreme need of clarification or further explanation. In footnotes he refers to Arabic grammar and lexicography. He often alludes to *al-Mu'jam al-Wasit*(6) and occasionally to Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* (7) for elucidation of Arabic words. Time and again, he refers to the famous Muslim commentator Fakhr al-Din Razi's(8) famous exegesis to justify his interpretation. Imam Raghīb Isfahani's *Mufradat*(9) and Zamakhshari's *Kashshaf* (10) are also referred to in his footnotes at the few places. He neither refutes nor alludes to any orientalist's translation work. Two translations by Muslims—Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Asad—are mentioned in his *Select Bibliography* but in footnotes he has once referred to the latter.(11)

The translator has explained the purpose of this translation:

"This translation is intended to go further than previous works in accuracy, clarity, flow, and currency of language. It is written in modern, easy style, avoiding where possible the use of cryptic language or archaism that tend to obscure meaning. The intention is to make the Qur'an accessible to everyone who speaks English, Muslims or otherwise, including the millions of people all over the world for whom the English language has become a lingua franca."(12)

Abdel Haleem has added an introduction in the beginning of each *surah* that gives a contextual sense to the reader before the study of that *surah*. He has summarized every *surah* without missing any important theme of it. His introduction opens with the information whether a *surah* is Makkan or Madinan. He has also told the period during which it was revealed. He has discussed the nomenclature of each *surah* pointing out the verse from which it derives its name. For instance, he has said about *Surah al-Hujrat*: “This Medinan sura takes its title from the reference to the Prophet’s private rooms in verse 4.”(13) He has discussed historical background of some *surahs*. Referring to the history, he has told in the introduction to *Surat al-Fil* that it is a reference to the events that happened in 570 C.E., the year of the Prophet’s birth, when the army of Abraha(a Christian ruler of Yemen), which included war elephants, marched to attack Makkah, destroy the Ka’ba, and divert pilgrims to the new the cathedral in San’a.(14) He has referred to the verses containing important events or commandments. For example, he tells in introduction to *Surah al-Kahf* that *Dhu’l-Qarnayn* is mentioned in verses 83-99 of this *surah*.(15)

Abdel Haleem’s translation demands a comprehensive study a critical evaluation may reveal its merits and few lacunae. He has translated *basmalah* as “In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy!”(16)

He has used ‘mercy’ in translating both divine epithets because *rahman* and *rahim* derive from the same root, translating them into two words with different roots, like ‘Compassionate and Merciful’ loses the connection.(17) Before him, Muhammad Asad has also rendered both these divine attributes with the same word. His translation of *basmalah* reads: “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace.”(18) According to Andrew Rippon the translation of *basmalah* has the merit of using “mercy” in both instances but does seem rather a mouthful.(19)

Abdel Haleem has translated verse 1:1 as follows:

“Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds.”(20)

The Arabic word *al-hamd* is translated as “Praise” ignoring definite article *al-* prefixed to it. Talking on ‘*Fatiha: The Opening of the Qur’an*’ in his book “*Understanding the Qur’an*”, he himself noted that the generic *al-* in Arabic make the word *hamd* encompass all praise(21) but in translation he could not convey it. “Lord” cannot convey the literal meaning of Arabic “*Rabb*” but in English it cannot be translated by any other single word. *Al-‘alamin* is accurately

rendered as “the worlds,” elucidating it in footnote as “all the worlds, of mankind, angels, animals, plants, this world, the next, and so forth.”(22) If *al-‘alamin* is translated as worlds in one verse, it should be rendered as such everywhere in the Qur’an. The translator has not done so in verse 21:107 which has been translated as: “It was only as a mercy that we sent you [Prophet] to all people.”(23) Here *al-‘alamin* is translated as “all people”. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is a mercy not only for people of this planet but all the worlds. According to a *hadith* transmitted by Imam Ahmad, the Apostle of Allah (PBUH) said, “Verily Allah has raised me as ‘a mercy for all the worlds’ and ‘guidance for all the world’.”(24) So his mercy should not be restricted to human beings or this world only. Besides humans, he was a mercy for angels, jinn, birds, and even animals. His mercy also encompasses the next world. So, the verse should be translated as follows: “And We have not sent you but a mercy for all the worlds.”(25)

Abdel Haleem is very careful in translating the verses pertaining to Almighty Allah. He never used words like ‘plot’ or ‘contrive’ for any divine activity. In the following examples his translation is compared to Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi’s (1892-1977) translation to see his care in this regard.

Verse3:54

Daryabadi: And they plotted, and Allah plotted, and Allah is the Best of plotters. (26)

Abdel Haleem: The [disbelievers] schemed but God also schemed; God is the Best of Schemers. (27)

Verse8:30

Daryabadi: They were plotting and Allah was plotting, and Allah is the Best of plotters.(28)

Abdel Haleem: They schemed and so did God: He is the best of schemers.”(29)

Verse12:76

Daryabadi: In this way we contrived for Yusuf. (30)

Abdel Haleem: In this way We devised a plan for Joseph. (31)

Verse3:142

Daryabadi: Or, deem ye that ye shall enter the Garden while yet Allah hath not known those of you who have striven hard nor yet known the steadfast! (32)

Abdel Haleem: Did you think you would enter the Garden without God first proving which of you would struggle for the cause and remain steadfast. (33)

He has shown veneration for the Prophets in his translation. He has translated such verses with utmost care in which these chosen people of God are underlined. For instance, he has translated verse 12:24 very carefully which tells about the Prophet Yusuf:

“She made for him, and he would have succumbed to her if he had not seen evidence of his Lord---We did this in order to keep evil and indecency away from him, for he was truly one of Our chosen servants.”(34)

Some orientalist were careless in translating the verses pertaining to Mary (Maryam), the mother of Christ (‘Isa).Look at the E.W. Lane’s renderings of two verses:

“She said, How shall I have a son, when a man hath not touched me, and I am not a harlot?”(35) (12:20)

“O sister of Aaron, thy father was not a man of wickedness, nor was thy mother a harlot.”(36) (12:28)

Abdel Haleem has not used words like ‘harlot’ for the mother and grandmother of a prophet. His translation is as follows:

“She said, “How can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste.” (37)

“Sister of Aaron! Your father was not an evil man; your mother was not unchaste!” (38)

In verse 66:12, he deviated from literal meaning to show veneration for the mother of Christ: “And Mary, daughter of ‘Imran, she guarded her chastity.” (39)

Abdel Haleem is extremely careful in case of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).In verse 93:7,he avoids to use words like ‘astray’ or ‘wandering’ and translates it as: “Did He not find you lost and guide you?”(40)

Some scholars like Muhammad Asad do not accept the night journey and the ascension as a physical experience and consider it only a spiritual experience (41) but Muhammad Abdel Haleem has views similar to the majority of Muslims. According to him, towards the end of the Meccan period God caused Muhammad, in the space of a single night, to journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and from there to heavens and back again. (42)

Abdel Haleem has translated the verses relating to Christ very carefully, not deviating from the belief that he was raised up by God. Consider the following examples:

God said, “Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me.(43) (Al ‘Imran3:55)

God raised him up to Himself. God is Almighty and wise. (44)
(al-Nisa' 4:158)

Abdel Haleem has translated the Qur'an on the basis of his own understanding and has not relied on any previous translations. His rendering is entirely different from other translations at many places. For instance, he translates verse 16:67 as follows:

“From the fruits of date palms and grapes you take sweet juice and wholesome provisions. There truly is a sign in this for people who use their reason.”(45)

The translator has translated the word “sakar” as “sweet juice”, elaborating in footnote that it means ‘wine’, ‘juice’, or ‘vinegar’.(46) Pickthall (47) translated it as “strong drink” ;Abdullah Yusuf Ali (48) as “wholesome drink” and Asad (49) as “intoxicants”.

The translator is living in twentieth century Europe and is well aware of the scientific advancement in various fields. He has translated some verses pertaining to physical or biological worlds in a scientific way. Some examples are quoted below:

He translated verse 21:33:“It is He who has created night and day, the sun and the moon, each floating in its orbit.” (50)

His translation of verse 96:2 is worth-reading: “He has created man from clinging form.”(51) According to Zaid Elmarsafy, Abdel Haleem uses the more accurate ‘the clinging form ’for *alaaq*.(52) The other translators have rendered it as ‘clot’,(53) ‘blood clot’ (54) or ‘congealed blood’(55) which is incorrect if modern embryological knowledge is kept in mind .There is no such stage as blood clot in the whole development of human embryo.

He has translated verses 23:12-14 as follows:

“We created man from an essence of clay, then We placed him as a drop of fluid in a safe place, then We made that drop into a clinging form, and We made that form into a lump of flesh, and We made that lump into bones, and We clothed those bones with flesh, and later We made him into other forms-----glory be to God, the best of creators!” (56)

In translation of verses 84:18-20, he has not alluded to moon conquest. His rendering runs: “By the full moon, you will progress from stage to stage. So why do they not believe.”(57) Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri translates these verses as follows: “And the moon when it appears full, you will assuredly ride along stage by stage. So, what is the matter with them that (even after witnessing the Truth of the forecast of the Qur'an), they do not believe.” (58)

Abdel Haleem is very careful in translating word “*ohilla*” in verses 2:173 and 5:3. His translation of both these verses is as under:

“He has only forbidden you carrion, blood, pig’s meat, and animals over which any name other than God has been invoked.”(59)

“You are forbidden to eat carrion; blood; pig’s meat; any animal over which any name other than God has been invoked.”(60)

Pickthall has translated the first part of verse 2:173 as follows:

“He has forbidden you only carrion, and blood, and swine flesh, and that which has been sanctified to (the name of) any other than Allah.”(61)

Abdul Majid Daryabadi translated it as follows: “He hath only forbidden unto you the carcass and blood and the flesh of swine, and that over which is invoked the name of other than Allah.”(62)

Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdudi’s translation runs as: “Allah has only forbidden you to eat what dies of itself, and blood and swine flesh and what has been consecrated to any other name than Allah.”(63)

‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali (64) and Muhammad Asad (65) also failed to translate it accurately. Among the English translators, Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan has translated correctly this verse as follows: “He has forbidden you only the *Maytatah* (dead animals), and blood, and the flesh of swine, and that which is slaughtered as a sacrifice for others than Allah (or has been slaughtered for idols, etc., on which Allah's name has not been mentioned while slaughtering).(66)

The famous verse of Surah ar-Rahman which is recited repeatedly is not correctly translated by famous translators. Some examples are quoted here:

“Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?”---
Abdullah Yusuf Ali (67)

“Which of it, of the favours of your Lord that you deny?”---
Muhammad M.Pickthall (68)

“Which, then, of your Sustainer’s powers can you disavow?”--
-Muhammad Asad (69)

None of these translators could convey the *tathniyyah* (dual number) occurring in the last word in the text of this verse. Professor Abdel Haleem succeeded in conveying it in his translation: “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?”(70) Many years before him Stanley Lane-Poole rendered it into English in somewhat similar manner: “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?”(71)

The atmosphere influences any person and there is a change in the thinking of an individual if he shifts from one land to another. Abdel Haleem has been living in the Great Britain, a pluralistic society, for nearly half a century. This experience has also modified some of his ideas. For example, his views about veil are different from the orthodox scholars living in Islamic countries. He has translated verse33:59 as follows:

“Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang over them so as to recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful.”(72) In footnote he says that the Arabic idiom *adna al-jilbab* means ‘make it hang low’, not ‘wrap around’. (73)

He has translated divine commandment “*wa lataqulu thalathah*” in verse4:171 as “and do not speak of ‘Trinity’” (74) instead of “and say not ‘Three’ ” (75) Perhaps he softens the strict refutations of Christian belief unknowingly.

Andrew Rippon says,” I am impressed with Abdel Haleem's work and I will undoubtedly continue to work through it (with Arberry always close at hand). In part, simply because it is a pleasing book to work with physically, having been nicely designed and printed.”(76)

Professor David F. Ford calls it Professor Haleem’s major scholarly achievement. (77)

Khaleel Mohammad describes this translation as falling short in some respects but also praises it due to its language, saying , “The preciseness of English is certainly commendable, but there are problems that show that Abdel-Haleem has incorporated his doctrinal bias into his translation.... Abdel-Haleem has done a good job.”(78)

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