

BOOK REVIEW

THE NOBLE QUR'AN

– A New Rendering of its Meaning in English

by Hajj Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley

(1999 Madinah Press, pp. 664. Hardback. ISBN 1-874216-36-3)

At last, here is a translation into English of the Qur'an which is easy to read and which gives easy access to the meanings of the original Arabic without compromising or obscuring them in any way. In short, it is a new rendering of its meaning which is not only trustworthy but also a pleasure to read. This is not to belittle or denigrate the classical works of Mohammed Pickthall or Yusuf Ali, but it is clear to anyone remotely conversant with the English language that these earlier translators' English usage and vocabulary is now outdated and not always intelligible, belonging as it does more to the last century than to the one which lies ahead. Most of those English speaking people who have embraced Islam during the last 25 years, as well as many English speaking Muslims whose mother tongue is not English, will confirm that it is often necessary to 'translate' this outmoded English into a more modern equivalent, perhaps with the help of a Qur'anic Arabic/English dictionary such as Penrice, before the meaning appears to be apparent – and often in this process mistakes and misinterpretations are easily made by those whose grasp of Arabic is limited.

Furthermore, those more recent 'translations' which have in effect been attempts to modernise the Pickthall and Yusuf Ali translations have on the whole lacked penetration and depth, especially when prepared by authors lacking either a complete education or a proper grasp of English or both. There is of course the Arberry translation, but this while remaining technically faithful to the Arabic, and while succeeding in conveying at least something of the poetical splendour of the original Arabic, does not always convey the actual meaning, simply because the author was not a practising Muslim and therefore did not have experiential access to the subject matter itself. Anyone who has read a literal translation of an instruction manual from, for example Japanese into English, made by someone without a working knowledge of the appliance for which the manual has been written, knows how misleading and often nonsensical and amusing such 'translations' can be, even when most of the important words have been translated more or less accurately.

As regards other contemporary translators from Arabic into English, scholars who can translate both accurately and clearly – without being either too profuse and shallow or too dry and academic – are not plentiful. Fortunately Hajj Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley are not only scholars but also they have been practising Muslims and prolific translators for the last 30 years. How different their work is to, for example, De Sale's awful 'translation' which was made principally from a deformed Latin translation of the Arabic for the Pope with the express intention of distorting the Qur'an's meaning so as to ridicule Islam and strengthen what remained of Christendom.

In marked contrast, Hajj Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley have utilised their great expertise in translating from Arabic into English, grounded firmly in their knowledge of the *deen* of Islam and their love for the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and combined with their deep sincerity towards and fear of Allah. In addition, they have also been guided, as they humbly acknowledge in their Preface, by what has been transmitted as regards the meanings of the Qur'an by "the great mufassirun of the past who spent so much time and energy in unearthing, preserving and passing on the meaning of Allah's Book and in protecting it from unacceptable interpretation and deviation." Thus although it may not be immediately apparent to the reader, many of the particular meanings which appear in their translation are not a matter of personal preference or interpretation, but rather are based on what has been directly transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, may the blessings and peace of Allah be on them.

It is clear, from a socio-cultural perspective that what especially hampered the earlier translations was the use of a linguistic mode and tradition which was essentially European Christian,

and which therefore was characterised by a variety of concepts which had been repeatedly projected out onto existence by Christian thinkers in the past, and which had been gradually absorbed into the general schema or view of existence of European Christian society during the course of centuries – and which in fact often had very little in common with the actual message of the Qur'an, which is so immediate and straightforward once the traditional misconceptions have been jettisoned and the mind cleared and the heart opened.

It is this freedom from inappropriate terminology and vocabulary which especially characterises Hajj Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley's translation. Indeed as they point out in their helpful Preface, several key terms which appear again and again throughout the Qur'an have not been translated and remain in the text in a transliterated Arabic phonetic form, because: "English speaking Muslims have assimilated into the language various Arabic words which are either untranslatable or words whose English equivalents have become so imbued with a meaning other than that intended by the original Arabic that to use them would be to mislead rather than give the correct significance." The result is a refreshing mode of expression which rises above traditional misconception on the one hand, and which is untainted by modern doublethink and newspeak on the other. Wherever Arabic terminology is employed in the text, a small Glossary at the end provides concise definitions. It will be interesting to see how long it is before these words begin to appear in English dictionaries.

The two translators also draw attention in their Preface to the fact that their main objective in presenting this new rendering into English was: "to allow the meaning of the original, as far as possible, to come straight through with as little linguistic interface as possible so that the English used does not get in the way of the direct transmission of the meaning." In this they have succeeded admirably and with humility, for as they themselves point out, "we can only admit along with all our predecessors that the result falls far short of being anything like a complete exposition of the meanings of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, we hope that this rendering will give people of this time, and in particular English speaking Muslims, a more direct access to the meaning of the Book of Allah and encourage them to go further and discover from the original Arabic the inexhaustible fund of light and wisdom it contains."

To conclude, this is the translation into English of that Book in which there is no doubt for which many of us have been waiting. It is fresh and refreshing. I cannot speak as highly of it as it deserves. I can only recommend that you read it and treasure it and reflect on it and apply it and use it to gain access to the original Arabic so that you can recite the Qur'an as it was revealed with understanding and not like a parrot. This masterpiece is without doubt the definitive translation into English of the Qur'an for this present age and insh'Allah it will help bring the Qur'an to life for generations of English speaking Muslims to come, thereby emphasising through firsthand direct experience the following words of the final Messenger to whom it was revealed, Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace:

“Allah sent down this Qur'an to command and prevent, and as a *sunna* to be followed and a parable. It contains your history, information about what came before you, news about what will come after you and correct judgement between you. Repetition does not wear it out and its wonders do not end. It is the Truth. It is not a jest. Whoever recites it speaks the truth. Whoever judges by it is just. Whoever argues by it wins. Whoever divides by it is equitable. Whoever acts by it is rewarded. Whoever clings to it is guided to a straight path. Allah will misguide whoever seeks guidance from other than it. Allah will destroy whoever judges by other than it. It is the Wise Remembrance, the Clear Light, the Straight Path, the Firm Rope of Allah and the Useful Healing. It is a protection for the one who clings to it and a rescue for the one who follows it. It is not crooked and so puts things straight. It does not deviate so as to be blamed. Its wonders do not cease. It does not wear out with much repetition.” (At-Tirmidhi).

Ahmad Thomson