

The Letter and the Review which the *Telegraph on Sunday* would not print

On Sunday 19th February 2006 the *Sunday Telegraph* published an article by Alasdair Palmer which quoted inflammatory remarks by Dr Sookhdeo which were highly critical of a translation of the Qur'an which he said was called *The Noble Koran: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* and which seriously misrepresented and distorted what the Qur'an actually says about Jews, Christians and warfare.

Other than the elementary mis-spelling of *Qur'an* – it begins with a Q, not a K – which is the standard spelling used by both the BBC and the Telegraph, presumably in reliance on those orientalist who do not yet have a sound grasp of Arabic – even though the inaccuracy has been pointed out to them, there is only one English translation of the Qur'an entitled *The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* and this is the translation by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, published by Bookwork, Norwich.

Hajj Abdalhaqq Bewley contacted the *Sunday Telegraph* to protest about the article and in the exchange of emails with the Editor's personal assistant which followed, it was pointed out, *inter alia*, that:

“Since its first publication, our translation has been the subject of a good few reviews, mostly by eminent academics at various British and American universities. These have been largely favourable, although there have been a couple of distinctly less favourable ones. However, even the most critical of our reviewers has been in no doubt that, whatever its perceived deficiencies, our translation represented a faithful rendering in English of the original Arabic text of the Qur'an.

This being the case, Dr Sookhdeo's remarks about it, recorded by Alasdair Palmer in his article, can only be construed as a direct attack on the Qur'anic text itself. His first claim that the Qur'an calls for the killing of Jews and Christians is simply not true. There is one ayat (or verse) out of the nearly 7,000 which make up the Qur'an which, subject to very specific circumstances, mentions 'fighting the People of the Book'. To suggest, as Dr Sookhdeo does, that there is a general instruction in the Qur'an to kill Jews and Christians is a false allegation. His further description of the text as “setting out a strategy for killing infidels and for warfare against them”, is another gross distortion of the Qur'anic text. He himself talks earlier in the article about the vital importance of contextual knowledge when reading the Qur'an and says: “The meaning of any part of it depends on a knowledge of its context – a context that is not in the Qur'an itself.”

The truth is that, although the Qur'an does discuss warfare in various places, the amount of space devoted to it is a tiny proportion of the whole and is entirely dependent on knowing the circumstances and the legal limits involved. To suggest, as Dr. Sookhdeo does, that it is somehow a main purpose of the Qur'an is blatantly misleading and certainly constitutes an example of the “serious misrepresentation” I referred to in my first e-mail to you.

It is also the case that during the seven years since the translation was first published, we have had masses of feedback from readers of all persuasions, Muslims and non-muslims pointing out typos and small errors of various sorts as well as making all kinds of useful comments. Never, however, has anyone come up with anything at all which in any way supports Dr Sookhdeo's analysis.

As I said, I originally assumed that Alasdair Palmer did not realise exactly what was implied by Dr. Sookhdeo's remarks, but his e-mail to me makes it clear that he knew very well what was involved, to the point of actually endorsing Sookhdeo's opinions about the Qur'an, thereby implicating the *Sunday Telegraph* in a direct attack on the text of the Qur'an itself. I do find that extremely shocking.

I have been reflecting on Alasdair Palmer's comment about our translation regarding 'modern weaponry' and I cannot understand what he is referring to at all. As for what he says about hadith, I have absolutely no idea what he is talking about there either. Our only criterion from first to last was to be as true as possible to the Arabic text of the Qur'an. If anything, our translation has been criticised for not containing enough interpretative material. Perhaps he could list the passages he is referring to and explain what he means.

I also think that it is extremely disingenuous of him to say what he does about Dr. Sookhdeo's remarks. "I find it hard to see how Mr (sic) Sookhdeo's comments in this context could produce any disagreeable results anyway." Dr. Sookhdeo says, quite explicitly, that he thinks that a crime has been committed. Therefore he is calling me and my wife, as the ones responsible for the book he finds so offensive, criminals and as a consequence people who, in his eyes, should be arrested and prosecuted for the crime he claims to have been committed. I would certainly consider that a most disagreeable result!"

In response, it was then asserted by the *Sunday Telegraph* that Dr. Sookhdeo and Alasdair Palmer had in fact been attacking an entirely different translation of the Qur'an altogether – in whose title the words *A New Rendering into* do not feature at all and in whose title a good many other words which were not mentioned in Alasdair Palmer's original article are integral – namely the Saudi-sponsored *Interpretation of the Meanings of The Noble Qur'an in the English language, a summarised version of At-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir with comments from Sahih Al-Bukhari, summarized in one volume*, by Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali & Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan of the Islamic University, Medina, published by Darussalam, Riyadh, 1996.

Although one cannot help wondering why the actual title of the translation under attack had not been made clear in the original article, Alasdair Palmer did apologise to Mr Bewley for such a "very basic misunderstanding", the *Sunday Telegraph* did print a letter in reply from Mr Bewley together with an apology from the paper in the 5th March 2006 edition (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/2006/03/05/dt0501.xml#head8>) – and after his repeated insistence, the original offending article was removed from the *Telegraph* internet archive.

But of course by then the damage had been done. Other newspapers around the world and a wide assortment of anti-Islam internet blogs ensured that the offending article (but usually not the letter in reply or the apology) was reproduced and repeated far and wide. Hajj Abdalhaqq Bewley had referred to the likelihood of this knock-on effect when in the earlier exchange of emails with the Editor's personal assistant, he wrote:

“I accept Alasdair Palmer's apology and realise that a genuine misattribution has taken place. At the same time I am dismayed both at his own lack of careful research and also at the fact that you do not have more checks and balances in place to prevent a thing like this occurring, especially when such defamatory remarks concerning a particular publication are involved. You must realise that a paper like the *Sunday Telegraph* wields a lot of influence and could have had an extremely damaging effect on the reputation of our translation. Hopefully lessons have been learned which will prevent the same thing happening to anyone else. I am also disappointed that the *Sunday Telegraph* has allowed itself to be used to promote Dr Sookhdeo's agenda of hostility towards Islam which is well known throughout the British Muslim community.”

Since a letter in reply neither has the same weight nor commands the same attention as an original inflammatory article, on the 9th March 2006 I wrote a short letter via email to the Editor, whom I believed to be Sarah Sands, pointing out that mud sticks and politely requesting that my letter and my original review of the Bewley translation be printed in the next edition of the *Sunday Telegraph* in order to redress the imbalance. It was not. On checking that I had directed my email to the right person, I discovered that Sarah Sands had ceased, whether as a result of divine retribution or for some other reason I know not, to be the Editor prior to Sunday the 12th March 2006. I accordingly forwarded my original email to the new Editor, Patience Wheatcroft, and politely renewed my request. It was not granted – neither my letter nor my review appeared in the 19th March 2006 edition of the *Sunday Telegraph*.

Accordingly – as an antidote to the poison which has spread far and wide via the internet as a result of the original ineptly researched article by Alasdair Palmer which could not even spell the phonetic transliteration of the Arabic word *Qur'an* correctly and which did not even reproduce accurately the title of the translation under attack – the letter and the review which the *Sunday Telegraph* would not publish appear below, followed by some of the assessments made by academics far more qualified than I to evaluate the invaluable Bewley translation – but firstly, by way of gentle advice, I would like to draw the attention of Mr Palmer, Dr Sookhdeo and the editors of the *Sunday Telegraph* to the following passages from the Qur'an which might have escaped their undivided attention, quoting, as I usually do, from the translation of the Qur'an which I have certainly found to be the most accurate and the most reliable, namely *The Noble Qur'an: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* translated by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley and published by Bookwork, Norwich. Allah says in the Qur'an:

It is We Who have sent down the Reminder
and We Who will preserve it. (Qur'an: 15.9)

and:

Tell My slaves that I am the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Merciful,
but also that My punishment is the Painful Punishment.
(*Qur'an*: 15.49-50)

and:

Those who are misguided from the Way of Allah
will receive a harsh punishment
because they forgot the Day of Reckoning. (*Qur'an*: 38.25)

and:

This truly is a Reminder,
so whoever wills
should take the Way towards his Lord.
But you will not will unless Allah wills.
Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.
He admits whoever He wills into His mercy.
But He has prepared a painful punishment
for the wrongdoers. (*Qur'an*: 76.29-31)

In other words, it gives me great pleasure to invite Mr Palmer, Dr Sookhdeo and the editors of the *Telegraph on Sunday* (past, present and future) to embrace Islam – and if they accept this invitation, I am certain they will never regret it, simply because the following words of Allah are true:

Who could do greater wrong than someone
who invents a lie against Allah
when he has been called to Islam?
Allah does not guide wrongdoing people.
They desire to extinguish Allah's Light
with their mouths
but Allah will perfect His Light
though the kafirun hate it.
It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance
and the Deen of Truth
to exalt it over every other deen,
though the mushrikun hate it.
You who have iman! shall I direct you to a transaction
which will save you from a painful punishment?
It is to have iman in Allah and His Messenger
and do jihad in the Way of Allah
with your wealth and your selves.
That is better for you if you only knew.
He will forgive you your wrong actions
and admit you into Gardens
with rivers flowing under them,
and fine dwellings in the Gardens of Eden.
That is the Great Victory. (*Qur'an*: 61.7-13)

The Letter

Dear Editor,

Like many Muslim readers of the *Telegraph*, I was astonished to read the recent article by Alasdair Palmer quoting Patrick Sookhdeo's attack on *The Noble Qur'an, A Rendering of its meaning into English*. I was equally relieved to learn, when you published Mr Bewley's letter in response together with your clarification, that it was not in fact the Bewley translation which was under attack.

Nevertheless, mud sticks - and accordingly I hope that you will accept that in the circumstances it would be courteous of the *Telegraph* to publish my review of the Bewley translation which was written shortly after the translation was first published. A copy is attached herewith in pdf format.

On the whole I have always believed that the *Telegraph* has been able and willing to publish the pros as well as the cons as regards any issue in order to assist its readers in arriving at a balanced and well-informed view. I hope you will prove my belief to be well-founded this time, by granting my request.

I would also like to take this opportunity to point out that the Qur'an is spelt Qur'an - not Koran. The confusion between q and k often occurs in the transliteration from Arabic to English, when using phonetic spelling. In the Arabic the letter *kaf* corresponds to the English *k* and the letter *qaf* corresponds to the letter *q*. In Arabic, Qur'an is spelt with a *qaf*, not a *kaf* - and therefore the correct phonetic equivalent is Qur'an.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Ahmad Thomson.

London, 9th March 2006

The Review

THE NOBLE QUR'AN – A New Rendering of its Meaning in English

by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley

(1999 Bookwork, 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 mufasssiruun 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

Glossary of Terms

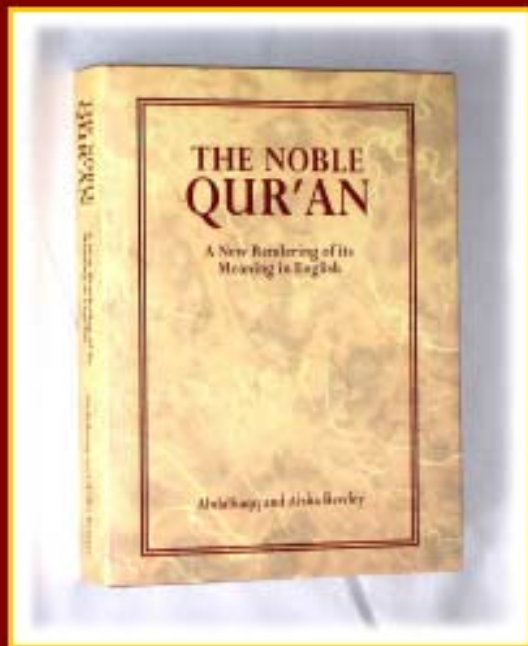
- deen* : life-transaction, religion in the broadest sense. The *deen* of Allah and the Muslim community is Islam but every society and cultural grouping have a *deen* which they follow.
- iman* : belief, faith, acceptance in the heart of Allah and His Messenger. Iman consists of believing in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, the Garden and the Fire, and that everything, both good and bad, is by the decree of Allah.
- jihad* : struggle, particularly fighting in the way of Allah to establish Islam.
- jinn* : inhabitants of the heavens and the earth made of smokeless fire who are usually invisible.
- kafirun* : plural of *kafir*, someone who rejects Allah and His Messenger and the *deen* of Islam.
- mufasssirun* : plural of *mufasssir*, someone who makes *tafsir*.
- muminun* : plural of *mumin*, a believer, someone who possesses *iman*, who trusts in Allah.
- mushrikun* : plural of *mushrik*, someone who commits the unforgiveable wrong action of worshipping something or someone other than Allah or of ascribing to something or someone attributes which in fact belong to Allah alone.
- Qur'an* : the 'Recitation', the last Revelation from *Allah* to mankind and the *jinn* before the end of the world, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, may *Allah* bless him and grant him peace, through the angel Jibril, over a period of twenty-three years (beginning in 610 and ending in 632), the first thirteen of which were spent in *Makka* and the last ten of which were spent in *Madina*. The *Qur'an* amends, encompasses, expands, surpasses and abrogates all the earlier revelations revealed to the earlier Messengers, peace be on all of them. The *Qur'an* is by far the greatest of all the miracles given to the Prophet Muhammad by *Allah*, for he was illiterate and could neither read nor write. The *Qur'an* is the uncreated word of *Allah*. The *Qur'an* still exists today exactly as it was originally revealed, without any alteration or change or addition or deletion. Whoever recites the *Qur'an* with courtesy and sincerity receives knowledge and wisdom, for it is the well of wisdom in this age.
- tafsir* : commentary of explanation of the meanings of the Qur'an.
- taqwa* : awe or fear of Allah, which inspires a person to be on guard against wrong action and eager for actions which please Him.

[See next page for excerpts from other reviews]

THE NOBLE QUR'AN

A New Rendering of its Meaning in English

Translated by **Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley**



It is very clear that Islam has become an immensely important subject of study in the contemporary world and it is, therefore, vital to have reliable and straightforward access in English to the Qur'an, the core text of Islam and the source of all Islamic teaching. This recent translation – now in its second edition – provides just that. It is becoming more and more the translation of choice among writers and broadcasters and has been used in several recent television programmes by both the BBC and commercial networks. Channel 4 describes it as "the standard English translation of the Qur'an".

ISBN 0-9538639-3-X pp. 651

"Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley's (translation) has, perhaps, the potential of setting new standards in this discipline. ...For those who want to familiarise themselves with the content of the Qur'an this is the ideal translation to start with."

Dr A. Christmann, University of Manchester.
Journal of Semitic Studies, 2002, pp 372-375

"The translation made by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley has much in its favour. The English is fluent and the manner in which the verses are laid out makes for easy reading."

D. Johnson-Davies, Books Supplement,
Al-Ahram Weekly, Feb. 2002

"This new translation of the Qur'an immediately outdates all the others in the English-speaking world. The result of over twenty-five years of detailed study of the Qur'anic text, the Bewley translation has the advantage of high quality, naturally fluent English, along with the benefit of access to the traditional understanding of the text."

Dr Y. Dutton, Head of Dept. of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Edinburgh University.
Journal of Qur'anic Studies, vol. ii,
No. 2, 2000, pp. 82-88

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