

Arberry's English Translation of the Qur'ân: An Assessment

Prof. Abdur Raheem Kidwai*

Since its publication in 1955, the renowned British Orientalist, Arthur J. Arberry's translation of the Qur'ân, *The Koran Interpreted* has enjoyed immense popularity. It has been reprinted around 40 times. Its handy World Classics edition brought out by the Oxford University Press is available in almost every Western library and bookstore. The wide acclaim this translation won may be attributed, in a large measure, to Arberry's impeccable credentials as a scholar of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Arberry (1905-1969), had served as Head, Department of Classics, Cairo University, Egypt and later as Professor of Arabic and Persian at the Universities of London and Cambridge. During his stay in Egypt, he gained thorough familiarity with Muslim culture, including literature. Illustrative of it are his excellent translations of dozens of Arabic, Persian and Urdu literary masterpieces¹. However, what makes him stand out above other Orientalists, both his predecessors and contemporaries, is his treatment of Islam. Remarkably, his works are free, to a great extent, from the errors of perspective common among other Orientalists. For example, in a sharp contrast to other Orientalist English translators of the Qur'ân, ranging from Alexander Ross (1649) to Richard Bell (1937), in the Preface to his translation, he, at least, faithfully records the Muslim belief about the divine origin of the Qur'ân². Moreover, unlike others, he does not harp on the so-called sources of the Qur'ân or it being the product of the Prophet's mind. On the contrary, he is seen severely criticizing his predecessors, namely, Ross, Sale, Rodwell and Bell for the lack of scholarly impartiality in their approach to the Qur'ân. He illustrates, in particular, how Bell, as a representative of Higher Criticism, threw himself "with brisk enthusiasm into the task of demolishing the Koran"³. Far from others who perceive little merit in the form or contents

* Department. of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

of the Qur'ân, he pays a glowing homage to "the rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and sublimity of the Koran"⁴.

Yet these valuable elements should not blind one to some serious incongruities in his work which appear all the more odd in view of his enviable command over Arabic. There are instances of omission and mistranslation, to which we would revert later in this piece. First, let us begin with some inexplicable and intriguing aspects of his work.

His thirty-one pages long Preface does not say a word about the contents or message of the Qur'ân. Although he produced this work specifically for the Western, non-Muslim readers, it never occurs to him to introduce the Qur'ân to them. Being new to the Qur'ân his target readership needed all the more some guidance on the subject matter, themes and impact of the Qur'ân. This gap appears more marked because his work does not have even a single explanatory note. It consists only of the translation of the text and a short index, bereft of any background material on the Qur'ânic personalities, allusions, and, historical events. Without any commentary or authorial notes, a translation alone cannot and does not advance the understanding of the Qur'ân, especially of those studying it for the first time.

Equally hard to justify is his use of archaic, outdated expressions of the King James Bible in a work published in 1955. His readers must have found these mostly incomprehensible. The preponderance of such obsolete words comes out sharply in the following instances:

Thee only we serve; to *Thee* alone we pray for succour.
 Guide us in the straight path,
 The path of those whom *Thou hast* blessed,
 Not of those against whom *Thou art* wrathful,
 Nor of those who are astray⁵.

Here is another passage littered with unintelligible words:

My Lord, *hadst Thou* willed
Thou wouldst have destroyed them before, and me.
Wilt Thou destroy us for what the foolish ones
 Of us have done? It is only *Thy* trial whereby
Thou leadest astray whom *Thou wilt*, and *guidest*

Whom *Thou wilt. Thou art* our Protector⁶.

Nowhere in his work has Arberry mentioned the Arabic Surah titles; these appear only in their English version. At places, he employs highly unusual ones:

Surah 30 al-Rum as the Greeks

Surah 07 al-A'raf as The Battlements

Surah 35 Fatir as The Angels

Surah 25 al-Furqan as Salvation

Surah 56 al-Waqi'ah as The Terror

Both the Surahs 23 and 40, al-Muminun and al-Mumin respectively are assigned the same title "The Believers".

As already mentioned, Arberry's work is without any explanatory notes. As a result, one gets no idea about his mindset regarding things Qur'anic. Only the Index to his work provides some clues about his approach which is, in several instances, flawed. The Qur'an relates at length Prophet Abraham's quest for truth, stating how he discarded one after another such objects of nature as the sun, the moon and stars as unworthy of the Lordship. In the index, however, this episode is branded as 'Abraham's conversion'⁷. This description does not do justice to the import of the Qur'an. According to the Qur'an, after man's creation, Allah directed the Angels to prostrate before him. Arberry refers to it under the misleading heading, "Adam worshipped by the angels"⁸. Qur'anic scholars have tried, down the ages, to identify the historicity of Dhu al-Qarnayn. There is divergence of opinion among them about his true identity, as they cite different personalities in this context, ranging from 1) Alexander the Great to 2) a pre-historic king contemporary with Prophet Abraham bearing the identical name of Alexander, 3) the great king of Persia (Cyrus) and 4) a pre-historic Himyarite king from Yemen, however, Arberry arbitrarily equates Dhu al-qarnayn with Alexander the Great⁹. It is recorded in *Surah al-Ahqaf* that Allah made some jinn listen to the Qur'an. Arberry, however, places this incident under the Index heading "Jinn listen to Muhammad"¹⁰. This readily brings to mind the Orientalist stance about the Prophet's authorship of the Qur'an.

Another glaring incongruity in Arberry's work is his inappropriate use of the peculiarly Christian theological terminology. In his Preface he

cites the Qur'anic passage on the birth of Prophet Jesus (pbuh) while calling it as the "passage on the Nativity of Our Lord"¹¹. In a similar vein is his claim about the distinguishing feature of his translation:

If, set out like this, the Koranic treatment of this most sacred theme seems to recall, however distantly and however faintly, some medieval Christian carol, the resemblance is surely not fortuitous; but I make bold to claim that the point escapes notice in any other kind of translation¹².

As already stated, this work is not free from instances of omission and mistranslation either. Following are the examples in which Arberry, for reasons best known to him, fails to render certain Qur'anic words in his translation, as a result of which it appears faulty.

1. *Āl-i- 'Imran* 3:43: The Qur'anic phrase "ma'al-rak'iyin" is left out: "Mary, be obedient to thy Lord, prostrating and bowing before Him". (Arberry's incorrect version¹³)

"Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrating and bowing with those who bow". (correct)

2. *Al-Dhariyat* 51:4: The Qur'anic expression "amra" is left untranslated.

"By the swift scatterers and the burden bearers and the smooth runners and the partioners". (incorrect¹⁴)

"By the swift scatterers and the burden bearers and the smooth runners and the partioners by command". (correct)

3. *Al-Mumtahanah* 60:12: The Qur'anic expression "fabayaiyuhunna" is left out.

O Prophet, when believing women came to thee, swearing fealty to thee upon the terms that they will not associate with God anything, and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children, nor bring a calumny, they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey thee in ought honourable, ask God's forgiveness for them. God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. (incorrect¹⁵)

O Prophet, when believing women come to you, swearing fealty to you upon the terms that they will not associate with God anything, and will not steal, neither commit adultery, nor slay their children, nor bring a calumny, they forge between their hands and their feet, nor disobey you in ought honourable then accept their allegiance, ask God's forgiveness for them. God is All-Forgiving, All-Compassionate. (correct)

Instances of mistranslation too, are not uncommon in Arberry's work. Illustrative of it are the following:

➤ *Al-Tauba* 9:64 "The hypocrites are afraid, lest a Sura should be sent down against them, *telling thee* what is in their hearts" (incorrect¹⁶)

"The hypocrites are afraid, lest a Sura should be sent down about them, showing them what is in their hearts" (correct)

➤ *Al-Anfal* 8:59 "And thou are not to suppose that they who disbelieve me have outstripped Me; they cannot frustrate My will". (incorrect¹⁷)

"And let those who disbelieve suppose that they can outstrip. They cannot frustrate (Allah's purpose)". (correct)

➤ *Al-Furqan* 25:62: "And it is He who made the night and day a succession for whom *He desires* to remember or *He desires* to be thankful". (incorrect¹⁸)

"And it is He Who made the night and day a succession for him who desires to remember or desires to be thankful". (correct)

➤ *Al-Sajadah*, 32:23: "Indeed We gave Moses the Book, so be not in doubt *concerning the encounter with him.*" (incorrect¹⁹)

"Indeed We gave Moses the Book, so be not in doubt of his receiving it". (correct)

➤ *Al-Tauba*, 9:70: "Has there not come to you the tidings of those who were before *you?*" (incorrect²⁰)

"Has there not come to you the tidings of those who were before them?" (correct).

➤ *Al-i-Imran*, 3:115: "And whatever good *you do*, *you* shall not be denied the just reward of it". (incorrect²¹)

"And whatever good they do, they shall not be denied the just reward of it". (correct)

➤ *Al-Shuraa*, 26:108: “So *serve* you God, and obey you me” (incorrect²²)
 “So fear God, and obey me”. (correct)

➤ *Al-Waqiah*, 56:11, “Those are they brought nigh *the Throne*”.
 (incorrect²³)

“Those are they brought nigh”. (correct)

➤ *Al-Waqiah*, 56:88, “Then if he be of those brought nigh *the Throne*”.
 (incorrect²⁴)

“Those are they brought nigh”. (correct)

➤ *Al-Nisa* 4:157: “And for their saying, “We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God” — yet they did not slay him, nor crucified *him*, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning *him* are surely in doubt regarding *him*; they have no knowledge of *him*, except the following of sunrise”.
 (incorrect²⁵)

And for their saying, “We slew the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God” — yet they did not slay him, nor crucified him, but it appears so unto them. Those who are at variance concerning it are surely in doubt regarding it; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise.

➤ *Yunus* 10:88: “Moses said: our Lord, Thou hast given to Pharaoh and his council adornment and possessions in this present life. Our lord, *let them go astray from Thy way*”. (incorrect²⁶)

“Moses said: our Lord, You have given to Pharaoh and his council adornment and possessions in this present life. Our lord, let them go astray from Thy way”. (correct)

➤ *Hud* 11:30: “O My people, who would help me against God, if I drive *you* away? Will you not remember?” (incorrect²⁷)

“O my people, who would help me against God, if I drive them away? Will you not take heed?”

➤ *Hud* 11:46: “Said He, “Noah! He is not of thy family; *it is a deed not righteous*. Do not ask Me that thereof thou hast no knowledge”.
 (incorrect²⁸)

Hud 11:46: “Said He, “Noah! He is not of our family; for his conduct is unrighteous. So ask not of Me that of which you have no knowledge”.
 (correct)

As is evident from the above examples, Arberry's mistranslation often twists the intended meaning of some Qur'anic verses. In view of his envisable mastery over Arabic language, these mistakes appear not only unpardonable but also inexplicable.

Another irksome feature of Arberry's work is his too literal translation of certain Qur'anic expressions. Granted the English equivalents employed by him may be etymologically or literally sound; nonetheless, they leave an odd impression on the mind of an average reader who may not necessarily appreciate the etymological background of the English equivalents chosen by Arberry. As is evident from the following examples of this type, Arberry's translation in these instances, far from advancing one's understanding of the Qur'an, makes the import of the Qur'an somewhat incomprehensible and bewilders the reader:

SNo	Surah & No.	Verse No.	Qur'anic Expression	Arberry's Choice	Better Choice
1	Al-Hijr 15	53	alim	Cunning	Wise
2	Al-Dhariyat 51	28	alim	Cunning	Wise
3	Al-Anbiya 21	72	nafile	In superfluity	Grandson or additional gift
4	Fatir 42	34	shakur	All-thankful	All-Appreciative
5	Al-Shura 42	23	shakur	All-thankful	All-Appreciative
6	Al-Taghabun 64	17	shakur	All-thankful	All-Appreciative
7	Al-Baqarah 2	158	shakir	All-thankful	All-Responsive
8	Al-Araf 7	157	al-nabi al-ummi	Prophet of the common folk	the unlettered Prophet

9	Al-Araf 7	158	al-nabi al-ummi	Prophet of the common folk	the unlettered Prophet
---	-----------	-----	-----------------	----------------------------	------------------------

To sum up, Arberry's translation, rich in stylistic qualities and sympathetic in its stance on Islam, is superior to other translations of the Qur'ân rendered by Orientalists. Nonetheless, in view of the above criticism it should be used cautiously.

Notes and References

¹ Of Arberry's spate of translations the following deserve mention in particular: Arabic: *Attar's Tadhkirat al-Auliya*; *Al-Niffari's Mawaqif and Mukhatabat*; *Ibn al-Farid's Mystical Poems: The Seven Odes*; *Al-Sarraj's Kitab al-Luma*; *Al-Mutanabbi's Poems*. Persian: Translations of the poems of Rumi, Hafiz and Umar Khayyam. Urdu: Poetical works of Iqbal.

² A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1980. 2 Volumes. 1, 25. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³ *Ibid.*, 2, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 364.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 364.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 365.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 365.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1, 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 237.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 273.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 214.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 204.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 215.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 88.

²² *Ibid.*, 2, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2, 254.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 257.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 123.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 235.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 242.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 244.

Select Bibliography

For further discussion and reviews on Arberry's translation of the Qur'ân see the following:

M. Mohar Ali, *The Qur'ân and the Orientalists*, Ipswich, UK, 2004, pp. 344-351.

A. L. Tibawi, review on *The Koran Interpreted*, Islamic Quarterly (January 1957), p. 8.

A. Guillaume, Review on *The Koran Interpreted*, Muslim World 47:3 (July 1957), pp. 248-249.

M. Ruthven, review on *The Koran Interpreted*, Middle East Journal (June 1984), p. 19.