

Beginner's guide to the Qur'aan (part 2 of 3)

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

Translations of the Qur'aan

A beginner should know a few points about Qur'aan translations.

First, there is a distinction between the Qur'aan and its translation. In Christian view, the Bible is Bible, no matter what language it may be in. But a translation of the Qur'aan is not the word of Allaah, for the Qur'aan is the exact Arabic words spoken by God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel. The word of God is only the Arabic Qur'aan as Allaah says:

["Indeed, I revealed it as an Arabic Qur'aan."]¹

A translation is simply an explanation of the meanings of the Qur'aan. The translated text loses the inimitable quality of the original so be aware of the degree to which a translation reflects the original message at every level of meaning, and that it will probably not match it. For this reason, all which is regarded as recitation of the Qur'aan is to be done in Arabic, such as the recitation of the Qur'aan in Salaah.

Second, there is no perfect translation of the Qur'aan and being human works, each almost always has errors. Some translations are better in their linguistic quality, while others are noted for their exactness in portraying the meaning. Many inaccurate, and sometimes misleading, translations that are generally not accepted as reliable renditions of the Qur'aan by mainstream Muslims are sold in the market.

Third, while a review of all the English translations is out of the scope of this lesson, some translations are recommended over others. The most widely read English translation is by Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, followed by that of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, the first translation by an English Muslim. Yusuf 'Ali's footnote commentary can be odd and on the whole unacceptable. Pickthall, on the other hand, has no footnotes or commentary and that makes it difficult for a beginner. The language of both tends to be archaic and difficult to understand for some people. Another widespread translation is done by Dr. Hilali and Muhsin Khan called 'Interpretation of the Meaning of The Noble Qur'aan.' Although it is the most accurate, the many transliterated Arabic terms and endless parentheses makes it hard

¹ Qur'aan [12:2]

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to follow and confusing for a beginner. A newer version with more flowing text has been published by Saheeh International, and this is probably the best translation yet, as it combines both exactness in translation and readability.

Exegesis (Tafseer in Arabic)

Although the meanings of the Qur'aan are easy and clear to understand, one must be careful to make assertions about the religion without relying on an authentic commentary. Not only did Prophet Muhammad bring the Qur'aan, he also explained it to his companions, and these sayings have been collected and preserved till this day. Allaah, the Exalted, says:

[“And We have sent down to you (O Muhammad) the message that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them.”]²

In order to understand some of the deeper meanings of the Qur'aan, one should rely upon commentaries which mention these statements of the Prophet as well as his companions, and not upon what they understand from the text, as their understanding of it is limited to their prior knowledge.

A specific methodology exists for exegesis of the Qur'aan in order to extract the proper meaning. The Qur'aanic sciences, as they are called, are an extremely specialized field of Islaamic scholarship which requires mastery in multiple disciplines, like exegesis, recitations, script, inimitability, circumstances behind revelation, abrogation, Qur'aanic grammar, unusual terms, jurisprudential rulings, and Arabic language and literature. A person new to the exploration of Qur'aan should approach it with humility.

According to scholars of tafseer, the proper method of explaining the verses of Qur'aan are:

- (1) Tafseer of the Qur'aan by Qur'aan.
- (2) Tafseer of the Qur'aan by the Sunnah of the Prophet.
- (3) Tafseer of the Qur'aan by the statements of the Companions.
- (4) Tafseer of the Qur'aan by Arabic language.
- (5) Tafseer of the Qur'aan by scholarly opinion if it does not contradict the above four sources.

A final word of advice to the beginner: keep notes, write down what questions arise during your reading, and finally turn to those who have proper knowledge about the religion and accept their explanation if it is based on evidence.

² Qur'aan [16:44]