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THE QUR'AN

THE QUR'AN is the supreme authority in Islam. It is the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics, and laws of the Islamic religion. This supreme status stems from the belief that the Qur'an is the word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel, and intended for all times and all places.

The Qur'an was the starting point for all the Islamic sciences, which were developed in order to study its grammar, pronunciation, and style, and it is the basis of Islamic law and theology; indeed, as the celebrated fifteenth-century scholar and author Suyuti said, 'Everything is based on the Qur'an'. The entire religious life of the Muslim world is built around the text of the Qur'an. As a consequence of the Qur'an, the Arabic language moved far beyond the Arabian peninsula, deeply penetrating many other languages within the Muslim lands—Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Indonesian, and others. The first *sura* (or section) of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha*, which is an essential part of the ritual prayers, is learned and read in Arabic by Muslims in all parts of the world, and many other verses and phrases in Arabic are also incorporated into the lives of non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

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The Qur'an



A new translation by

M. A. S. ABDEL HALEEM

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INTRODUCTION

THE QUR'AN is the supreme authority in Islam. It is the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics, and laws of the Islamic religion. It is the book that 'differentiates' between right and wrong, so that nowadays, when the Muslim world is dealing with such universal issues as globalization, the environment, combating terrorism and drugs, issues of medical ethics, and feminism, evidence to support the various arguments is sought in the Qur'an. This supreme status stems from the belief that the Qur'an is the word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad via the archangel Gabriel, and intended for all times and all places.

The Qur'an was the starting point for all the Islamic sciences: Arabic grammar was developed to serve the Qur'an, the study of Arabic phonetics was pursued in order to determine the exact pronunciation of Qur'anic words, the science of Arabic rhetoric was developed in order to describe the features of the inimitable style of the Qur'an, the art of Arabic calligraphy was cultivated through writing down the Qur'an, the Qur'an is the basis of Islamic law and theology; indeed, as the celebrated fifteenth-century scholar and author Suyuti said, 'Everything is based on the Qur'an'. The entire religious life of the Muslim world is built around the text of the Qur'an. As a consequence of the Qur'an, the Arabic language moved far beyond the Arabian peninsula, deeply penetrating many other languages within the Muslim lands—Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Indonesian, and others. The first *sura* (or section) of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha*, which is an essential part of the ritual prayers, is learned and read in Arabic by Muslims in all parts of the world, and many other verses and phrases in Arabic are also incorporated into the lives of non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Muslim children start to learn portions of the Qur'an by heart in their normal schooling: the tradition of learning the entire Qur'an by heart started during the lifetime of the Prophet and continues to the present day. A person attaining this distinction becomes known as a *hafiz*, and this is still a prerequisite for admission to certain religious schools in Muslim countries. Nowadays the Qur'an is recited a number of times daily on the radio and television in the Muslim

world, and some Muslim countries devote a broadcasting channel for long hours daily exclusively to the recitation and study of the Qur'an. Muslims swear on the Qur'an for solemn oaths in the lawcourts and in everyday life.

The Life of Muhammad and the Historical Background

Muhammad was born in Mecca in about the year 570 CE. The religion of most people in Mecca and Arabia at the beginning of Muhammad's lifetime was polytheism. Christianity was found in places, notably in Yemen, and among the Arab tribes in the north under Byzantine rule; Judaism too was practised in Yemen, and in and around Yathrib, later renamed Madina (Medina), but the vast majority of the population of Arabia were polytheists. They believed in a chief god *Allah*, but saw other deities as mediators between them and him: the Qur'an mentions in particular the worship of idols, angels, the sun, and the moon as 'lesser' gods. The Hajj pilgrimage to the Ka'ba in Mecca, built, the Qur'an tells us, by Abraham for the worship of the one God, was practised but that too had become corrupted with polytheism. Mecca was thus an important centre for religion, and for trade, with the caravans that travelled via Mecca between Yemen in the south and Syria in the north providing an important source of income. There was no central government. The harsh desert conditions brought competition for scarce resources, and enforced solidarity within each tribe, but there was frequent fighting between tribes. Injustices were practised against the weaker classes, particularly women, children, slaves, and the poor.

Few hard facts are known about Muhammad's childhood. It is known that his father Abdullah died before he was born and his mother Amina when he was 6 years old; that his grandfather Abdul Muttalib then looked after him until, two years later, he too died. At the age of 8, Muhammad entered the guardianship of his uncle Abu Talib, who took him on a trade journey to the north when he was 12 years old. In his twenties, Muhammad was employed as a trader by a wealthy and well-respected widow fifteen years his senior named Khadija. Impressed by his honesty and good character, she proposed marriage to him. They were married for over twenty-five years until Khadija's death when Muhammad was some 49 years old. Khadija

was a great support to her husband. After his marriage, Muhammad lived in Mecca, where he was a respected businessman and peacemaker.

Muhammad was in the habit of taking regular periods of retreat and reflection in the Cave of Hira outside Mecca. This is where the first revelation of the Qur'an came to him in 610 CE, when he was 40 years old. This initiated his prophethood. The Prophet was instructed to spread the teachings of the revelations he received to his larger family and beyond. However, although a few believed in him, the majority, especially the powerful, resented his calling them to abandon their gods. After all, many polytheist tribes came to Mecca on the pilgrimage, and the leaders feared that the new religion would threaten their own prestige and economic prosperity. They also felt it would disturb the social order, as it was quite outspoken in its preaching of equality between all people and its condemnation of the injustices done to the weaker members of the society.

The hostility of the Meccans soon graduated from gentle ridicule to open conflict and the persecution of Muhammad's followers, many of whom Muhammad sent, from the fifth year of his preaching, to seek refuge with the Christian king of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The remaining Muslims continued to be pressurized by the Meccans, who instituted a total boycott against the Prophet's clan, refusing to allow any social or economic dealings with them. In the middle of this hardship, Muhammad's wife, Khadija, and his uncle, Abu Talib, died, so depriving the Prophet of their great support. This year became known as the Year of Grief. However, events were soon to take a change for the better. The Prophet experienced the event known as the Night Journey and Ascension to Heaven, during which Muhammad was accompanied by Gabriel from the sanctuary of Mecca first to Jerusalem and then to Heaven. Soon afterwards, some people from Yathrib, a town some 400 km north of Mecca, met Muhammad when they came to make the pilgrimage and some of these accepted his faith; the following year more returned from Yathrib, pledged to support him, and invited him and his community to seek sanctuary in Yathrib. The Muslims began to migrate there, soon followed by the Prophet himself, narrowly escaping an attempt to assassinate him. This move to Yathrib, known as the Migration (Hijra), was later adopted as the start of the Muslim

calendar. Upon arrival in Yathrib, Muhammad built the first mosque in Islam, and he spent most of his time there, teaching and remoulding the characters of the new Muslims from unruly tribesmen into a brotherhood of believers. Guided by the Qur'an, he acted as teacher, judge, arbitrator, adviser, consoler, and father-figure to the new community. One of the reasons the people of Yathrib invited the Prophet to migrate there was the hope that he would be a good arbitrator between their warring tribes, as indeed proved to be the case.

Settled in Yathrib, Muhammad made a pact of mutual solidarity between the immigrants (*muhajirun*) and the Muslims of Yathrib, known as the *ansar*—helpers. This alliance, based not on tribal but on religious solidarity, was a departure from previous social norms. Muhammad also made a larger pact between all the tribes of Yathrib, that they would all support one another in defending the city against attack. Each tribe would be equal under this arrangement, including the Jews, and free to practise their own religions.

Islam spread quickly in Yathrib, which became known as Madinat al-Nabi (the City of the Prophet) or simply Medina (city). This was the period in which the revelations began to contain legislation on all aspects of individual and communal life, as for the first time the Muslims had their own state. In the second year at Medina (AH 2) a Qur'anic revelation came allowing the Muslims to defend themselves militarily (22: 38–41) and a number of battles against the Meccan disbelievers and their allies took place near Medina, starting with Badr shortly after this revelation, Uhud the following year, and the Battle of the Trench in AH 5. The Qur'an comments on these events.

In AH 6 the Meccans prevented the Muslims from undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca. Negotiations followed, where the Muslims accepted that they would return to Medina for the time being but come back the following year to finish the pilgrimage. A truce was agreed for ten years. However, in AH 8 a Meccan ally broke the truce. The Muslims advanced to attack Mecca, but its leaders accepted Islam and surrendered without a fight. From this point onwards, delegations started coming from all areas of Arabia to meet the Prophet and make peace with him.

In AH 10 the Prophet made his last pilgrimage to Mecca and gave a farewell speech on the Mount of Mercy, declaring equality and

solidarity between all Muslims. By this time the whole Arabian peninsula had accepted Islam and all the warring tribes were united in one state under one head. Soon after his return to Medina in the year 632 CE (AH 10), the Prophet received the last revelation of the Qur'an and, shortly thereafter, died. His role as leader of the Islamic state was taken over by Abu Bakr (632–4 CE), followed by 'Umar (634–44) and 'Uthman (644–56), who oversaw the phenomenal spread of Islam beyond Arabia. They were followed by 'Ali (656–61). These four leaders are called the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

After 'Ali, the first political dynasty of Islam, the Umayyads (661–750), came into power. There had, however, been some friction within the Muslim community on the question of succession to the Prophet after his death: the Shi'is, or supporters of 'Ali, felt that 'Ali and not Abu Bakr was the appropriate person to take on the mantle of head of the community. They believed that the leadership should then follow the line of descendants of the Prophet, through the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law 'Ali. After 'Ali's death, they adopted his sons Hasan and then Husayn as their leader or imam. After the latter's death in the Battle of Karbala in Iraq (680 CE/AH 61), Husayn took on a special significance for the Shi'i community: he is mourned every year on the Day of 'Ashura. Some Shi'i believe that the Prophet's line ended with the seventh imam Isma'il (d. 762 CE/AH 145); others believe that the line continued as far as a twelfth imam in the ninth century.

The Islamic state stretched by the end of its first century from Spain, across North Africa, to Sind in north-west India. In later centuries it expanded further still to include large parts of East and West Africa, India, Central and South-East Asia, and parts of China and southern Europe. Muslim migrants like the Turks and Tartars also spread into parts of northern Europe, such as Kazan and Poland. After the Second World War there was another major influx of Muslims into all areas of the world, including Europe, America, and Australia, and many people from these continents converted to the new faith. The total population of Muslims is now estimated at more than one billion (of which the great majority are Sunni), about one-fifth of the entire population of the world,¹ and Islam is said to be the fastest-growing religion in the world.

¹ See <http://www.iiie.net/Intl/PopStats.html>.

The Revelation of the Qur'an

Muhammad's own account survives of the extraordinary circumstances of the revelation, of being approached by an angel who commanded him: 'Read in the name of your Lord.'² When he explained that he could not read,³ the angel squeezed him strongly, repeating the request twice, and then recited to him the first two lines of the Qur'an.⁴ For the first experience of revelation Muhammad was alone in the cave, but after that the circumstances in which he received revelations were witnessed by others and recorded. When he experienced the 'state of revelation', those around him were able to observe his visible, audible, and sensory reactions. His face would become flushed and he would fall silent and appear as if his thoughts were far away, his body would become limp as if he were asleep, a humming sound would be heard about him, and sweat would appear on his face, even on winter days. This state would last for a brief period and as it passed the Prophet would immediately recite new verses of the Qur'an. The revelation could descend on him as he was walking, sitting, riding, or giving a sermon, and there were occasions when he waited anxiously for it for over a month in answer to a question he was asked, or in comment on an event: the state was clearly not the Prophet's to command. The Prophet and his followers understood these signs as the experience accompanying the communication of Qur'anic verses by the Angel of Revelation (Gabriel), while the Prophet's adversaries explained them as magic or as a sign of his 'being possessed'.

It is worth noting that the Qur'an has itself recorded all claims and attacks made against it and against the Prophet in his lifetime, but for many of Muhammad's contemporaries the fact that the first word of the Qur'an was an imperative addressed *to* the Prophet ('Read')

² These words appear at the beginning of Sura 96 of the Qur'an.

³ Moreover, until the first revelation came to him in the cave, Muhammad was not known to have composed any poem or given any speech. The Qur'an employs this fact in arguing with the unbelievers: 'If God had so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor would He have made it known to you. I lived a whole lifetime among you before it came to me. How can you not use your reason?' (10: 16). Among other things this is taken by Muslims as proof of the Qur'an's divine source.

⁴ The concepts of 'reading', 'learning/knowing', and 'the pen' occur six times in these two lines. As Muslim writers on education point out (e.g. S. Qutb, *Fi Dhilal al-Qur'an* (Cairo, 1985), vi. 3939), the revelation of the Qur'an began by talking about reading, teaching, knowing, and writing.

linguistically made the authorship of the text outside Muhammad. Indeed, this mode is maintained throughout the Qur'an: it talks to the Prophet or talks about him; never does the Prophet pass comment or speak for himself. The Qur'an describes itself as a scripture that God 'sent down' to the Prophet (the expression 'sent down', in its various forms, is used in the Qur'an well over 200 times) and, in Arabic, this word conveys immediately, and in itself, the concept that the origin of the Qur'an is from above and that Muhammad is merely a recipient. God is the one to speak in the Qur'an: Muhammad is addressed, 'Prophet', 'Messenger', 'Do', 'Do not do', 'They ask you . . .', 'Say' (the word 'say' is used in the Qur'an well over 300 times). Moreover, the Prophet is sometimes even censured in the Qur'an.⁵ His status is unequivocally defined as 'Messenger' (*rasul*).

The first revelation consisted of the two lines which began the Qur'an and the mission of the Prophet, after which he had no further experience of revelation for some while. Then another short piece was revealed, and between then and shortly before the Prophet's death in 632 CE at the age of 63 (lunar years), the whole text of the Qur'an was revealed gradually, piece by piece, in varying lengths, giving new teaching or commenting on events or answering questions, according to circumstances.

The Compilation of the Qur'an

With every new revelation, the Prophet would recite the new addition to the Qur'an to those around him, who would eagerly learn it and in turn recite it to others. Throughout his mission the Prophet repeatedly recited the Qur'an to his followers and was meticulous in ensuring that the Qur'an was recorded,⁶ even in the days of persecution. As each new piece was revealed, Gabriel instructed the Prophet as to where it should go in the final corpus. An inner circle of his followers wrote down verses of the Qur'an as they learned them from

⁵ 9: 43; 80: I-II.

⁶ The word *qur'an* means 'reading/reciting' and came to refer to 'the text which is read/recited'. The Muslim scripture often calls itself *kitab* 'writing', and this came to refer to 'the written book'. Thus the significance of uttering and writing the revealed scripture is emphasized from the very beginning of Islam, and is locked in the very nouns that designate the Qur'an.

the Prophet and there are records of there being a total of twenty-nine scribes for this. By the end of the Prophet's life (632 CE) the entire Qur'an was written down in the form of uncollated pieces. In addition, most followers learned parts of it by heart and many learned all of it from the Prophet over years spent in his company.⁷ They also learned from the Prophet the correct ordering of the Qur'anic material.⁸ They belonged to a cultural background that had a long-standing tradition of memorizing literature, history, and genealogy.

The standard Muslim account is that, during the second year after the Prophet's death (633 CE) and following the Battle of Yamama, in which a number of those who knew the Qur'an by heart died, it was feared that with the gradual passing away of such men there was a danger of some Qur'anic material being lost. Therefore the first caliph and successor to the Prophet, Abu Bakr, ordered that a written copy of the whole body of Qur'anic material as arranged by the Prophet and memorized by the Muslims should be made and safely stored with him.⁹ About twelve years later, with the expansion of the Islamic state, the third caliph, 'Uthman, ordered that a number of copies should be made from this to be distributed to different parts of the Muslim world as the official copy of the Qur'an, which became known as the 'Uthmanic Codex. This codex has been recognized throughout the Muslim world for the last fourteen centuries as the authentic document of the Qur'an as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Structure of the Qur'an: Suras and Ayas

As explained above, Qur'anic revelation came to the Prophet gradually, piece by piece, over a period of twenty-three years. Material was placed in different sections, not in chronological order

⁷ See Subhi al-Salih, *Mabahith fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (Beirut, 1981), 65–7.

⁸ During the last twenty-five years there have been some views contesting this traditional history of the Qur'an and maintaining that it was canonized at a later date. The reader can consult a survey and discussion of these views in Angelika Neuwirth, 'The Qur'an and History: A Disputed Relationship', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, 5/1 (2003), 1–18. Also see H. Motzki, 'The Collection of the Qur'an: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments', *Der Islam* (2001), 2–34.

⁹ The written fragments were another important source for the collation of this 'canonical' document.

of revelation, but according to how they were to be read by the Prophet and believers. The Qur'an is divided into 114 sections of varying lengths, the longest (section 2) being around twenty pages in Arabic, the shortest (sections 108 and 112) being one line in Arabic each. These sections are each known in Arabic as *sura*, and we will use this word to refer to them.

Each *sura* (with the exception of Sura 9) begins with 'In the Name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy', and a *sura* consists of a number of verses each known in Arabic as an *aya*. Again, an *aya* can run into several lines and consist of several sentences, or it can be one single word, but it normally ends in Arabic with a rhyme.

The titles of the *suras* require some explanation. Many *suras* combine several subjects within them, as will be explained below under 'Stylistic Features', and the titles were allocated on the basis of either the main theme within the *sura*, an important event that occurs in the *sura*, or a significant word that appears within it. The introductions to the *suras* in this translation are intended to help the reader in this respect.

Meccan and Medinan Suras

The Qur'anic material revealed to the Prophet in Mecca is distinguished by scholars from the material that came after the Migration (Hijra) to Medina. In the Meccan period, the Qur'an was concerned mainly with the basic beliefs in Islam—the unity of God as evidenced by His 'signs' (*ayat*),¹⁰ the prophethood of Muhammad, and the Resurrection and Final Judgement—and these themes are reiterated again and again for emphasis and to reinforce Qur'anic teachings. These issues were especially pertinent to the Meccans. Most of them believed in more than one god. The Qur'an refers to this as *shirk* (partnership): the sharing of several gods in the creation and government of the universe. The reader will note the frequent use of 'partnership' and 'associate' throughout the Qur'an. The Meccans also initially denied the truth of Muhammad's message, and the Qur'an refers to earlier prophets (many of them also mentioned in the Bible, for instance Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph,

¹⁰ See e.g. 25: 1–33; 27: 59 ff.; 30: 17 ff.; 41: 53.

Moses, and Jesus),¹¹ in order both to reassure the Prophet and his followers that they will be saved, and to warn their opponents that they will be punished. The Qur'an stresses that all these prophets preached the same message and that the Qur'an was sent to confirm the earlier messages. It states that Muslims should believe in all of them without making any distinction between them (2: 285). The Meccans likewise could not conceive of the Resurrection of the Dead. In the Meccan suras the Qur'an gives arguments from embryology and from nature in general (36: 76-83; 56: 47-96; 22: 5-10) to explain how the Resurrection can and will take place; the Qur'an seeks always to convince by reference to history, to what happened to earlier generations, by explanations from nature, and through logic.

In the Medinan suras, by which time the Muslims were no longer the persecuted minority but an established community with the Prophet as its leader, the Qur'an begins to introduce laws to govern the Muslim community with regard to marriage, commerce and finance, international relations, war and peace. Examples of these can be found in Suras 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9. This era also witnessed the emergence of a new group, the *munaḥiqun* or hypocrites, who pretended to profess Islam but were actually working against the Islamic state, and these 'hypocrites' are a frequent theme in the Medinan suras. We also see here discussion of the 'People of the Book' with particular reference to Jewish and Christian communities, both those contemporary with the Prophet and those in the past. It will be seen that the Qur'an tends to speak of groups or classes of people rather than individuals.

Throughout the Meccan and Medinan suras the beliefs and morals of the Qur'an are put forward and emphasized, and these form the bulk of Qur'anic material; the percentage of strictly legal texts in the Qur'an is very small indeed. The Qur'an contains some 6,200 verses and out of these only 100 deal with ritual practices, 70 verses discuss personal laws, 70 verses civil laws, 30 penal laws, and 20 judiciary matters and testimony.¹² Moreover, these tend to deal with general principles such as justice, kindness, and charity, rather than detailed laws: even legal matters are explained in language that appeals to the emotions, conscience, and belief in God. In verses dealing with retaliation (2: 178-9), once the principles are established

¹¹ See e.g. 2: 136; 3: 84-5; 6: 83-90; 42: 13.

¹² A. Khallaf, *A Concise History of Islamic Legislation* [Arabic] (Kuwait, 1968), 28-9.

the text goes on to soften the hearts of both parties: offender and victims. In introducing the obligation of the fast of Ramadan (2: 183–7), the aim throughout is to make the fast seem easy and highly desirable, and it is indeed perceived this way by Muslims. The month of Ramadan is a time of festivity and rejoicing.

Stylistic Features

The Qur'an has its own style. It may be useful to readers to mention some of the important features of this style. The reader should not expect the Qur'an to be arranged chronologically or by subject matter. The Qur'an may present, in the same sura, material about the unity and grace of God, regulations and laws, stories of earlier prophets and nations and the lessons that can be drawn from these, and descriptions of rewards and punishments on the Day of Judgement. This stylistic feature serves to reinforce the message, to persuade and to dissuade. This technique may appear to bring repetition of the same themes or stories in different suras but, as the Qur'an is above all a book of guidance, each sura adds to the fuller picture and to the effectiveness of the guidance. For instance, in the midst of discussion about divorce and settlements, it suspends the introduction of regulations and instructs the believers to keep up prayer and stand in obedience to God (2: 237–8), later to resume discussion of the divorce regulations. While urging people to give in charity, before the day comes when there will be no trade and no help from friends or intercessors, it shifts to the Throne verse (2: 255) to describe the glory of God and refer to the time when no one can intercede for anyone else. Afterwards, having reminded people of God's power, it resumes its injunctions to give in charity. In a religion that seeks to affect people's beliefs and behaviour in all aspects of life it is never sufficient to say something once or twice, and if the material on God, on earlier prophets, or on the Day of Judgement were each dealt with only once, the effect would not be so all-pervasive. This technique compresses many aspects of the Qur'anic message into any one sura, each forming self-contained lessons. This is particularly useful as it is rare for anyone to read the whole Qur'an at once: it is mainly used in short sections during worship and preaching, as well as by individuals or on television and radio in daily readings.

A central feature of Qur'anic style is contrast: between this world

and the next (each occurring exactly 115 times), between believers and disbelievers, between Paradise and Hell. This has been studied in great detail, and scholars have found truly remarkable patterns of contrasts: angels and devils, life and death, secrecy and openness, and so on, occurring exactly the same number of times.¹³ This sense of balance in the text is continued in passages where the Prophet is instructed to say, 'Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so' (18: 29) and 'There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error' (2: 256) (one of the names the Qur'an gives for itself is *al-Furqan*—the book that distinguishes [right from wrong] (25: 1)).

One stylistic feature that makes the Qur'an particularly effective is that God speaks directly to people (e.g. 56: 57–73) and to the Prophet, often using 'We', the first person plural of majesty, to represent Himself. It involves the readers/listeners by questioning, directing, and urging them, alternating this with information (e.g. 56: 47–74). The Qur'an is also full of dialogue between God and His prophets (e.g. Abraham in 2: 260; Noah in 11: 45–8), between prophets and their audiences (e.g. Salih and the Thamud people in 11: 61–5), and between different individuals (e.g. Solomon and the hoopoe, Solomon and his chieftains, and the Queen of Sheba talking to her advisers, all in 27: 19–44).

One of the obvious stylistic features of the Qur'an is the use of grammatical shifts from one personal pronoun to another (e.g. third to second to first person speaker; from singular to plural of majesty), and in the tenses of verbs. This is an accepted rhetorical practice in Arabic, similar to features used in some European literature. It is called in Arabic *iltifat* (i.e. 'turning' from one thing to another). One example (4: 114) is changing from talking about God, in the third person, to God Himself speaking in the first person plural of majesty: 'There is no good in most of their secret talk, only in commanding charity, or good, or reconciliation between people. To anyone who does these things, seeking to please God, We shall give a rich reward.' Instead of saying 'He will give him . . .', God speaks in the plural of majesty to give His personal guarantee of reward.¹⁴

¹³ A. Nawfal, *al-I'jaz al-'Adadi lil-Qur'an il-Karim* (Cairo, 1976).

¹⁴ M. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 187–208.

The Qur'an always offers justification for its message, supporting it with logical argument, for example in explaining the unity of God (e.g. 21: 21-2; 23: 91; 36: 78-83). The Qur'an supports its statements with reference to the past (the history of earlier nations and prophets), to the present (to nature as a manifestation of God's wisdom, power, and care), and to the future (life in the Hereafter and Judgement), in addition of course to reminding people constantly of God and His attributes.

Another feature of the Qur'an is that it does not name individuals, with a few rare exceptions such as prophets and angels, but consistently uses techniques of generalization. One method of achieving this is the use of general words like 'those who' or 'whoever', giving the message universal application. Thus, in permitting Muslims to defend themselves, it gives permission generally to 'those who have been driven unjustly from their homes . . .' (22: 40 ff.). This will apply at any time or place. When it urges the Prophet to deliver the message, even when dealing with his own personal situation and feelings, instead of saying 'You should deliver the message and fear none but God', it speaks of 'those who deliver God's messages and fear only Him and no other: God's reckoning is enough' (33: 39). Reformers, preachers, and anyone standing for the truth can apply this readily to themselves, because such statements are put in a proverbial style. Verses of the Qur'an are therefore readily quoted and inscribed on plaques which can be hung on the walls of offices, houses, courtrooms, and so on as an inspiration or a reminder.

Issues of Interpretation

Over the years, a large body of commentaries on the Qur'an has accumulated, and differences in interpretation can be observed both between the various traditions within Islam (such as Sunni, Shi'i, or Sufi),¹⁵ and between different periods in history. It is not the intention here to go into detail (see the Bibliography to this volume for useful works for further reading), but some illustrative examples may give the reader some understanding of the complexity and sophistication of views that arise from reading the Qur'an.

¹⁵ For a definition of these terms see I. R. Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992).

An important feature of the Qur'anic style is that it alludes to events without giving their historical background. Those who heard the Qur'an at the time of its revelation were fully aware of the circumstances. Later generations of Muslims had to rely on the body of literature explaining the circumstances of the revelations (*asbab al-nuzul*),¹⁶ and on explanations and commentaries based on the written and oral records of statements by eyewitnesses. These oral testimonies were collected and later written down.

Interpretation is further complicated by the highly concise style of the Qur'an. A verse may contain several sentences in short, proverbial style, with pronominal references relating them to a wider context. Moreover, proverbial statements can be lifted from the text and used on their own, isolated from their context and unguided by other references in the Qur'an that might provide further explanation. Both non-Muslims eager to criticize Islam and some Islamic extremists have historically used this technique to justify their views.

Some examples will illustrate this feature, for instance the verse 'Slay them wherever you find them' (2: 191),¹⁷ thus translated by Dawood and taken out of context, has been interpreted to mean that Muslims may kill non-Muslims wherever they find them. In fact the only situations where the Qur'an allows Muslims to fight are in self-defence and to defend the oppressed who call for help (4: 75), but even in the latter case this is restricted to those with whom the Muslims do not have treaty obligations (8: 72). The pronoun 'them' here refers to the words 'those who attack you' at the beginning of the previous verse. Thus the Prophet and his followers are here being allowed to fight the Meccans who attack them. The Qur'an makes many general statements but it is abundantly clear from the grammar and the context of this statement that this is not one of them.

'Wherever you find them' or 'come up against them' is similarly misunderstood. As exegetes and commentators explain, the Muslims

¹⁶ The *asbab al-nuzul* are found in Qur'an commentaries. They identify the circumstances of the revelations and refer to names and details of what actually happened.

¹⁷ N. J. Dawood's translation, *The Koran*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1990). This has been used as the title of an article, '“Slay them wherever you find them”': Humanitarian Law in Islam', by James J. Busuttill of Linacre College, Oxford, in *Revue de droit pénal militaire et de droit de la guerre* (1991), 113-40.

were anxious that if their enemies attacked them in Mecca, which was and is a sanctuary (in which no Muslim is allowed to fight, or kill even an animal or plant), and they retaliated and killed, they would be breaking the law. The Qur'an simply reassured the Muslims that they could defend themselves when attacked, even if they killed their attackers, whether within the sanctuary or outside it. However, the six verses that concern war (2: 190–5) contain many restrictions and are couched in restraining language that appeals strongly to the Muslims' conscience. In six verses we find four prohibitions; seven restrictions (one 'until', four 'if', two 'who fight you'); as well as such cautions as 'in God's cause', 'be mindful of God', 'God does not love those who overstep the limits', 'He is with those who are mindful of Him', loves 'those who do good', and 'God is most forgiving and merciful'. The prevalent message of the Qur'an is one of peace and tolerance¹⁸ but it allows self-defence.

Equally misinterpreted and taken out of context is what has become labelled as 'the sword verse' (9: 5) although the word 'sword' does not appear in the Qur'an: 'When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you find the polytheists, kill them, seize them, besiege them, ambush them'. The hostility and 'bitter enmity' of the polytheists and their *fitna* (persecution: 2: 193; 8: 39) of the Muslims during the time of the Prophet became so great that the disbelievers were determined to convert the Muslims back to paganism or finish them off: 'They will not stop fighting you [believers] until they make you revoke your faith, if they can' (2: 217). It was these hardened polytheists in Arabia, who would accept nothing other than the expulsion of the Muslims or their reversion to paganism, and who repeatedly broke their treaties, that the Muslims were ordered to treat in the same way—either to expel them or to accept nothing from them except Islam. But, even then, the Prophet and the Muslims were not simply to pounce on such enemies, reciprocating by breaking the treaty themselves: an ultimatum was issued, giving the enemy notice that, after the four sacred months mentioned in 9: 5 above, the Muslims would wage war on them.

Yet the main clause of the sentence—'kill the polytheists'—is singled out by some non-Muslims as representing the Islamic attitude to war; even some Muslims take this view and allege that

¹⁸ See Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*.

this verse abrogated many other verses, including 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2: 256) and even, according to one solitary extremist, 'God is forgiving and merciful'. This far-fetched interpretation isolates and decontextualizes a small part of a sentence and of a passage, 9: 1-15, which gives many reasons for the order to fight such polytheists: they continually broke their agreements and aided others against the Muslims, they started hostilities against the Muslims, barred others from becoming Muslims, expelled them from the Holy Mosque and even from their own homes. At least eight times the passage mentions the misdeeds of these people against the Muslims. Moreover, consistent with restrictions on war elsewhere in the Qur'an, the immediate context of this 'sword verse' exempts such polytheists as do not break their agreements and who keep the peace with the Muslims (9: 7); it orders that those enemies seeking safe conduct should be protected and delivered to the place of safety they seek (9: 6). The whole of this context to verse 5, with all its restrictions, is ignored by those who simply isolate one part of a sentence to build on it their theory of war and violence in Islam.

One further cause for misinterpretation is the lack of awareness of the different meanings of a given term in different contexts (see below, 'This Translation: Identifying Aspects of Meaning'). Thus, for example, in Dawood's translation: 'He that chooses a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him and in the world to come, he will be one of the lost' (3: 85),¹⁹ it has to be borne in mind that the word *islam* in the Arabic of the Qur'an means complete devotion/submission to God, unmixed with worship of any other. All earlier prophets are thus described by the Qur'an as *muslim*. Those who read this word *islam* in the sense of the religion of the Prophet Muhammad will set up a barrier, illegitimately based on this verse, between Islam and other monotheistic religions. The Qur'an clearly defines its relationship with earlier scriptures by saying: 'He has sent the Scripture down to you [Prophet] with the Truth, confirming what went before: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel earlier as a guide for people' (3: 3-4). Indeed it urges the Christians and the Jews to practise their religion (5: 68, 45, 47). They are given the honorific title of 'People of the Book', and the Qur'an appeals to

¹⁹ *The Koran*, translated by N. J. Dawood, Penguin Classics.

what is common between them: 'Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords"' (3: 64).

The Qur'an forbids arguing with the People of the Book except in the best way and urges the Muslims to say: 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God are one [and the same]' (29: 46). God addresses Muslims, Jews, and Christians with the following: 'We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about' (5: 48). The Qur'an allows Muslims to eat the food of the People of the Book and marry their women (5: 5). These are explicit statements which Muslims involved in interfaith dialogue rely upon.

Misinterpretation is also observed with regard to the status of women. For example, 2: 228 'husbands have a degree [of right] over them [their wives]' has been variously interpreted by Muslims and non-Muslims to relegate women in general to a lower status, when in fact this cannot be based on this verse. The reference here is not to 'women' and 'men' but to 'wives' and 'husbands'. The context is in questions of divorce, between wives and husbands. Partly based on a misinterpretation of this verse, for example, most traditional scholars came to the view that Muslim women could not be judges, whereas Abu Hanifa (d. AH 150/767 CE), the founder of one of the four main schools of Islamic law, and modern jurists in many Muslim countries (although not all) do also allow women to be judges.

A further example of discrimination against women due to disregard of context is found in the way some scholars interpreted 2: 282. In urging the recording of a debt in writing, the Qur'an says: 'Call in two men as witnesses. If two men are not there, then call one man and two women out of those you approve as witnesses, so that if one of the two women should forget the other can remind her.'²⁰ The majority view was to generalize this to all testimony and all

²⁰ Many translate *tadilla* as 'err', not realizing that one of the many meanings (*wujuh*) of the verb is 'forget'.

other situations. The fact is that the verse should be seen in its context, where the Qur'an is insisting on the protection of people's property. In the preceding pages, it urges wealthy people to give in charity, but it then turns in the above verse to ensure that their money is not taken fraudulently or through neglect. After urging the wealthy to give free loans (as opposed to charging interest) for the sake of God, it urges in the strongest manner the recording of any loan agreement. In the longest verse in the Qur'an (twelve lines in Arabic) it gives instructions on how to secure the agreement in writing and by testimony to avoid conflict or loss of the lender's money. It calls on people to do this in a cultural environment where women generally were less involved in money matters and calculations than men, and less literate. Modern interpreters take the view that the cultural context is different now and that a woman can be as well educated as a man, or even better. Therefore they confine this verse to its cultural context and allow a woman now to give witness alone, just as she is allowed to be a judge on her own.

It is in the nature of central religious scriptures to be open to endless interpretation and enlisted to justify all shades of opinion, and these are just a few examples of misinterpretation, which can become further complicated with mistranslation. The Qur'an itself predicts in 3: 7 that some people will deliberately interpret certain verses in a skewed way; the Arabic of the Qur'an is very concise and attracted a sophisticated body of exegesis and commentary, including interpretations by those wishing to derive authoritative foundations for their sometimes extremist ideologies. It is the job of the translator to bring his or her reader as close as is possible to the meaning of the original Arabic, utilizing the tools of solid linguistic analysis and looking at it in the context of its own stylistic features, but in a language that is comprehensible to the non-specialist majority. The Qur'an was after all first addressed to the Arabs in their own language, 'to make things clear' (see for example 12: 2; 43: 3).

A Short History of English Translations

The history of translation of the Qur'an is a long and interesting one. The title itself has often been rendered in English as 'Koran', but this older Anglicized form is gradually being replaced by 'Qur'an', which reflects the correct Arabic transliteration and pronunciation

of the word. The first translation into English was done in 1649 by Alexander Ross, a grammar school teacher in Southampton. However, Ross unfortunately did not know Arabic and made his translation from one in French by André du Ryer. The translation is at times widely different from the original. Ross's title is indicative of his attitude. He describes it as *The Alcoran of Mahomet translated . . . and newly Englished, for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities*. A century later, in 1734, George Sale's Protestant translation was the next version of the Qur'an to be presented in English, and his italicized commentaries, embedded in the text, helped to make the Qur'an more understandable to an English-speaking audience. For centuries this was one of the most successful translations, in both the UK and the USA, and it continued to be printed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It is still available for consultation in many academic libraries.

In 1861 the Revd J. M. Rodwell undertook a translation of the Qur'an. His perspective on the Qur'an was a strongly biblical one.²¹ One oddity is his disregard for the traditional Muslim arrangement of the suras, rearranging them into what he thought to be the chronological order; moreover some of his footnotes include material that is incorrect and offensive to Muslims. Nonetheless he had a linguistic talent that enabled him to come up with innovative solutions to previously intractable problems. It is easy to perceive the influence of Rodwell's work on many subsequent translators. Rodwell also instigated the practice of partial numbering of Qur'anic verses, providing some help to those wishing to cite passages from his translation.

The next translator of the Qur'an into English, E. H. Palmer (1840–82), is claimed to be the first who had direct and long-lasting contact with Arabs and sought, in style, to retain some of the 'rude, fierce eloquence' of the Qur'an but without becoming 'too rude or familiar'. His translation appeared in 1880. He was the first to reflect, in his footnotes, some real respect for the text and the Prophet of Islam. The first British Muslim to translate the Qur'an, however, was the novelist and vicar's son Muhammad Marmaduke

²¹ In his notes he is over-eager to claim biblical sources for Qur'anic material, and quick to claim that there are contradictions between verses where none exists.

Pickthall. He undertook a new translation (published in 1930) after observing that some of the earlier translations included 'commentation offensive to Muslims and employed a style of language which Muslims at once recognise as unworthy'. Although his language may now seem almost artificially archaic, his translation keeps close to the original Arabic, and is still very popular among Arabs and Muslims. The next significant translation was written by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, an Indian Muslim, and appeared in 1934. This text, entitled *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, has appeared in numerous editions, normally including the Arabic text parallel with the translation, along with 6,310 explanatory notes, 300 pieces of running commentary in blank verse, fourteen appendices and indices. It is an extremely useful work, especially his notes and indices, for those who want a fuller and more guided understanding of the background and text of the Qur'an. His language contains poetic features and archaic words that make the style outdated.

Arthur J. Arberry's translation, *The Koran Interpreted*, appeared in 1955 and is undoubtedly one of the most respected translations of the Qur'an in English. Arberry shows great respect towards the language of the Qur'an, particularly its musical effects. His careful observation of Arabic sentence structure and phraseology makes his translation very close to the Arabic original in grammatical terms. To those unfamiliar with the text itself, this feature, along with the lack of any notes or comments, can make the text seem difficult to understand and confusingly unidiomatic. However, it remains a popular version of the text, particularly in academic circles.

In the following year (1956), N. J. Dawood produced his translation for Penguin Books. His stated aim was above all to make the language modern and readable, and he certainly succeeds in this, when one compares it with the translations available at the time. However, from the beginning his translation was seen to take too many liberties with the text of the Qur'an and to contain many inaccuracies, as was immediately pointed out by reviewers; moreover, many Muslims were deeply offended by the way he translated key terms and by some of the notes to the translation.

In 1980 an English translation by Muhammad Asad was published. He was an Austrian (Leopold Weiss) who converted to Islam. He called it *The Message of the Qur'an, Translated and Explained*. It contains a parallel Arabic text, 5,371 very useful notes, and four

appendices. Asad is one of the most original translators, who did the background research for himself in the original lengthy Arabic exegeses. His language and choice of words too are original, but he inserts many bracketed explanatory words which, though useful, make his sentences cumbersome. Also his 'rationalistic' approach leads him to translations that some Muslim theologians disagree with: for example, his translation of 50: 17 as 'the two demands of his nature . . .' rather than 'recording [angels]', or *hamim* in 56: 93 as 'burning despair' rather than 'scalding water'.

There is not enough space here for an exhaustive survey of all English translations; we have mentioned only some important or popular ones from the past and present.

This Translation

General Style

This translation is intended to go further than previous works in accuracy, clarity, flow, and currency of language. It is written in a modern, easy style, avoiding where possible the use of cryptic language or archaisms 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*. The message of the Qur'an was, after all, directly addressed to all people without distinction as to class, gender, or age: it does not rely on archaisms or pompous language for effect. Although the language of the present translation is simple and straightforward, it is hoped that it does not descend to an inappropriate level.

Special attention has been paid to certain criteria which, if ignored, could have led to confusion, misrepresentation of the Arabic meaning, or a translation comprehensible only to an academic or enthusiast. The present translator fully recognizes how very difficult the task is of translating the Qur'an, and the following remarks are not meant to belittle the efforts or qualities of previous translators, all of whom have made a useful contribution, but merely to illustrate how the methodology utilized in this present translation can lead to enhanced accuracy and clarity of meaning.

Intertextuality

It has frequently been remarked that different parts of the Qur'an explain each other, and utilization of the relationship between the parts of the Qur'an was considered by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE) to be the most correct method. He explained: 'What is stated in a general way in one place is explained in detail in another; what is stated briefly in one place is explained at length in another.' The reader will find in the footnotes to the translation examples of how useful this technique is in explaining the meaning of ambiguous passages of the Qur'an.

Context

Context is crucial in interpreting the meaning of any discourse, Qur'anic or otherwise. For instance, when the Prophet was fleeing from Mecca for his life, he hid with Abu Bakr in a cave on the route to Medina. His Meccan enemies were pursuing him, but they passed by the mouth of the cave and lost the trail, enabling the Prophet eventually to reach Medina unharmed. In this translation the Qur'anic passage that describes the Prophet's experience as he waited tensely in the cave is rendered: 'God sent His calm down to him, aided him with forces invisible to you, *and brought down the disbelievers' plan*. God's plan is higher' (9: 40), but Dawood pursues the warlike metaphor implied in 'forces invisible to you' (understood by the commentators to include a spider that distracted the pursuers from looking into the cave by weaving a cobweb across the entrance to it) to render the passage as: 'God caused His tranquillity to descend upon him and sent to his aid invisible warriors so that *he routed the unbelievers* and exalted the Word of God.' He takes the subject of routed/brought down to be Muhammad rather than the contextually evident God, and consequently produces an incorrect translation of the Arabic text which does not match the context of the passage, in which the Prophet was utterly helpless, taking refuge in the cave.

Identifying Aspects of Meaning

Key terms are frequently used in the Qur'an with different meanings for different contexts, a feature known in Arabic as *wujuh al-Qur'an*. These were recognized from the early days of Qur'anic exegesis and

have been highlighted in many publications.²² As will be shown later, ignoring this feature and forcing upon a word one single meaning for the sake of consistency results in denial of the context and misrepresentation of the material. There are numerous concepts of the Qur'an which illustrate this feature, including *amr*, *jihad*, *awliya*, and *taqwa*. Thus *amr* is commonly translated as 'command' when in many situations it has other meanings, including 'matter' and 'affair'; *jihad* is commonly translated as 'fighting', although in certain situations it is more appropriate to render it as 'struggle'; *awliya* is commonly translated as 'friends' when it in fact generally means 'allies' or 'supporters'; and *taqwa* is commonly translated as 'fear of God', but the true meaning is closer to the concept of 'being mindful of God'. It is important for the translator to recognize when it is appropriate to be consistent in the translation of a repeated term, and when to reflect the context. This also applies to such fundamental terms as *islam*, *muslimun*, *kafirun*, *fasiqun*, *dhalimun*, and *din*. Arabic classical dictionaries include varieties of meanings for these terms.

Arabic Structure and Idiom

Throughout this translation, care has been taken to avoid unnecessarily close adherence to the original Arabic structures and idioms, which almost always sound unnatural in English. Literal translations of Arabic idioms often result in meaningless English. Moreover, the Arabic language at the time of the Qur'an was very concise. Parts of the sentence could be omitted because they were well understood from the context, and elision is a marked feature in the Qur'an: sometimes whole clauses are elided. This type of elision is particularly noticeable in conditional sentences, in oaths, and in contrasts (e.g. 11: 17; 50: 1; 13: 31; and 38: 9). In some cases it is possible to use dots to indicate that something is missing. In others it is better to supply the omitted clause.

Another example where adhering to Arabic can be misleading is in the description of Paradise, regularly described in the Qur'an as

²² For classical studies see Bibliography: Ibn Sulayman; al-Mubarrad; and Ibn al-Jawzi. A useful modern study that recognizes this feature is Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran: A Study in Semantics* (Tokyo: Keio University, 1959).

having streams. A literal translation of the Arabic phrase *tajri min tahtiha al-anhar* is thought by some to be 'under which rivers flow'. This may, however, suggest to the English reader that the rivers flow underground, which is not what is meant in Arabic; rather the image is of a shady garden watered by many streams. The present translation gives 'graced with flowing streams'. 'Graced' was intended to convey the generosity in God's gift to the people of Paradise implicit in the Qur'anic text; the adjective 'flowing' is taken from the Arabic verb *tajri* used in connection with these 'rivers'; while 'streams' was chosen above the more general 'rivers' as the impression is one of many small rivulets coursing throughout the garden, keeping it watered, beautiful, and fresh. In classical Arabic, the term *nahr* applies to any body of running water, from the smallest of streams to the widest of rivers. In modern Arabic the term has become restricted to rivers and this may in some cases have led to a misunderstanding of the term.

Also problematic can be a particular kind of rhetorical question, frequent in the Qur'an, which expresses disapproval through its grammatical structure rather than by any lexical addition. It was decided for this translation to use 'How' to convey this sense of disapproval. For instance, in describing the actions of the disbelievers in 16: 72 the present translation gives 'How can they believe in falsehood and deny God's blessings?'; in the question posed by the disbelievers in 17: 94, 'How could God have sent a human being as a messenger?' The literal translations 'Do they believe in falsehood?' or 'Has God sent a human being?' would not convey the disapproval inherent in the Arabic original.

In other instances a literal translation of the Arabic would produce a text incomprehensible to most readers. Thus for example 20: 113, which describes the contents of the Qur'an, translated literally as 'We have turned about in it something of threats', is here rendered as 'We have . . . given all kinds of warnings in it.' Or 74: 45 'we plunged *along with the plungers*' has been adapted in this translation to 'we indulged with others [in mocking the believers]'.

Pronouns

Identifying the proper reference of pronouns is problematic in the Qur'an since these sometimes shift in the same verse with the risk of

ambiguity and distortion of meaning if these shifts are not correctly identified. There are numerous examples in the Qur'an where there is a change of addressee from Prophet to believers and others and vice versa. Like many other languages, Arabic distinguishes between 'you' singular and 'you' plural; in modern English 'you' is used for singular and plural without distinction. Yet in the Arabic of the Qur'an, in almost all cases where 'you' is used in the singular it is the Prophet who is being addressed. In this translation, therefore, 'Prophet' is added to the English text where it is clear that it is he who is being addressed, to make the passages as clear in English as they are in Arabic. This is particularly important in passages where, within the same verse, there is a shift between plural and singular address. For example in 10: 61 the Arabic reads 'In whatever matter you (singular, therefore addressing the Prophet) may be engaged and whatever part of the Qur'an you (singular, therefore addressing the Prophet) are reciting, whatever work you (plural, therefore addressing the whole community) are doing, We witness you (plural) when you (plural) are engaged in it.'

Classical Usage

It is important to identify the meaning of Arabic words as used at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an rather than the one(s) they have acquired in modern Arabic. The present translation has placed great emphasis on information gleaned from classical Arabic dictionaries, including the *Lisan al-'Arab* by Ibn Mandhur, *al-Qamus al-Muhit* by al-Fayruzabadi, and *al-Mu'jam al-Wasit* by the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo. It is interesting to give an example of how the semantic spread of a certain key term has changed: *walad* in classical (Qur'anic) Arabic means the non-gender-specific 'child' or 'children', while in modern Arabic it can only mean 'boy' or 'son'. The claim of the pagan Arabs that God has *walad* is repeated several times in the Qur'an. As the Meccans believed that the angels were the daughters, not the sons, of God, it is immediately evident that the modern meaning of *walad* is too restrictive to express accurately the intended meaning of the classical Arabic original in this context. Although later, in Medina, references were made to the Christian belief that Jesus was the son of God, to use 'son' when talking about the beliefs of Meccan Arabs is incorrect and misleading.

Paragraphing and Punctuation

The Arabic convention throughout the ages has been to put each sura in one continuous paragraph, however many pages this may entail. This is clearly not normal usage in English. It can furthermore make the volume seem overwhelming to someone not familiar with its contents. In order to clarify the meaning and structure of thoughts and to meet the expectation of modern readers, the present translation divides the material into paragraphs. We have also marked the beginning of each verse with its number in superscript small type so as to aid those who wish to consult specific passages (while not, we hope, interrupting the flow or distracting the reader). This combination is new in presenting the Qur'an and should add to the clarity and help quick reference to every verse in the Qur'an. Among the current translations there are two conventions, either to break each sura into individual verses given on separate lines, or to use free-flowing paragraphs but to give the verse numbers only at intervals of five or ten verses. Neither of these systems is satisfactory: the first makes the translations look, in places, more like a list than a text and interrupts the flow and indeed the understanding of the text as a whole, while the second system leaves the reader unable to ascertain where the intervening verses begin and end, something which is extremely important for the referencing and cross-referencing which contributes so much to understanding the meaning of the text.

Nor does the Arabic Qur'an use a system of punctuation in the same way as modern English. The Qur'an has its own system of marking pauses, indeed a whole branch of study is devoted to it,²³ but the now conventional system of commas, full stops, colons and semicolons, question marks, dashes, quotation marks, etc. is not used in the Qur'an. These have been carefully and consciously introduced into this translation. The quotation marks are important because the Qur'an very frequently presents dialogue and direct speech, sometimes not introduced or even attributed, yet it is imperative to identify in the translation where one speaker ends and another begins. Dashes have frequently been used because there is a feature of Qur'anic language, long recognized by Arab scholars, where for

²³ *'Ilm al-waqf wa 'l-ibtida'.*

instance the Qur'an will report the views of disbelievers and interrupt their statement with comments such as 'so they claim'. Also, sometimes it will break the expounding of a general argument with a more detailed episode, before going back to the general argument. Such material is placed between dashes in this translation in order to make the sentence structure and the flow of ideas clearer. Colons are used especially near the end of verses, where a short statement concludes and comments on the sentence.

Sometimes it has been necessary to break what might appear to be a single sentence into smaller units, in order to avoid creating sentences that were several lines long, and in order to solve problems of shifting pronouns in Arabic: an important stylistic feature of the Qur'an called *iltifat* (grammatical shifts for rhetorical purposes) mentioned earlier. Thus, in one verse, there can be shifts in pronouns from first to second to third person or changes in tense from present to future. This clearly does not correspond to the norms of English sentence structure. One solution was to break up even short verses which have been traditionally kept together to the detriment of clarity. Sometimes it happened that a new paragraph was even started mid-verse in an attempt to solve stylistic difficulties.

Footnotes and Explanatory Introductions

In order not to overburden or overzealously guide the reader with extensive commentaries, only short introductions to the suras have been supplied. These are designed to help the reader by identifying where the title comes from, and giving some information on the background and the general structure of the sura. The footnotes are meant to be minimal, and to explain allusions, references, and cultural background only when it was felt these were absolutely necessary to clarify meaning and context. Sometimes the footnotes explain reasons for departing from accepted translations, give alternatives, or make cross-references. The footnotes also give explanations (where they are considered to be helpful or of interest) of ambiguous passages which are made clear in the Arabic commentaries on the Qur'an, classical and modern. Particular use was made of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's twelfth-century *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Abu Hayyan's early fourteenth-century *al-Bahr al-Muhit* (Beirut, 1993), and Baydawi's late fourteenth-century *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'wil*.

Razi must be singled out as the most useful tool in understanding the Qur'an. He is an all-round linguist *par excellence*, noting and discussing linguistic questions missed by perhaps all the others, and opening up areas for discussion where others do not. He is always aware of the context and the position of the verse in the whole structure of the sura. His mind is mathematical, analytical, as he spells out the linguistic function of each verse or statement. He cites as many references and opinions as possible and normally evaluates them, using other verses of the Qur'an and references to Arabic poetry as well as other commentaries. All these qualities mark his thought patterns as the most 'modern' of all the commentators, his linguistic analysis illuminated by philosophy, logic, and reason.

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M. A. S. Abdel Haleem

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE QUR'AN

- c.570 Birth of Muhammad (his father died before his birth)
- 576 Death of Muhammad's mother when he is 6
- 578 Death of Muhammad's grandfather
- 595 Muhammad's marriage to Khadija
- c.610 First revelation of Qur'an
- 615 First migration of Muslims to Abyssinia seeking refuge from persecution in Mecca
- 615 'Umar ibn al-Khattab converts to Islam after reading a written Qur'anic passage his believing sister was trying to hide from him
- 619 Death of Khadija and Abu Talib (the Prophet's uncle and support)
- 620 Muhammad's 'Night Journey to Jerusalem and Ascension to Heaven'
- 622 Migration to Medina (Hijra) and starting date of Muslim calendar
- 624 Battle of Badr: the Muslims defeat the much larger Meccan army
- 625 Battle of Uhud: Meccan army defeat Muslims
- 627 Battle of the Trench—Meccans fail to take Medina and retreat
- 628 Treaty of Hudaibiyya: truce with the Meccan alliance, allowing peaceful preaching of Islam and so many converts
- 630 Truce broken by a tribe allied to Mecca; Mecca's surrender to the Muslims and acceptance of Islam
- 630 Battle of Hunayn
- 631 Expedition to Tabuk
- 631 The Year of Embassies—Islam accepted by all the Arabian tribes. Muhammad concludes treaties of peace with the Christian chief of al-Aqaba and the Jewish tribes in the oases of Maqna, Adhruh, and Jarba to the south
- 632 Muhammad's farewell pilgrimage to Mecca
8 June Death of Muhammad in Medina
- 633 Qur'an collected into one volume by Abu Bakr
- 645 'Uthman commissions copies of the Qur'an to be made and circulated
- 1153 First Latin translation of the Qur'an
- 1543 First printed edition (Basle) with a preface by Martin Luther
- 1649 Alexander Ross makes first translation of the Qur'an into English (from French)

- 1734 George Sale's translation of the Qur'an
- 1861 J. M. Rodwell's translation of the Qur'an
- 1880 E. H. Palmer's translation of the Qur'an
- 1930 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's translation of the Qur'an
- 1934 Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an
- 1955 Arthur J. Arberry's translation of the Qur'an
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- 1980 Muhammad Asad's translation of the Qur'an

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