

THE MESSAGE OF THE QUR'ĀN BY
MUHAMMAD ASAD: CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the life and contributions of Muhammad Asad, a prominent 20th-century Muslim thinker, journalist, diplomat, and translator. Born Leopold Weiss in 1900, Asad came from a Jewish background but later embraced Islam after traveling through the Middle East and gaining insight into Arab culture and Islam's spiritual strength. He spent significant time in Arabia, studying Islamic texts and becoming a key figure in Islamic scholarship. Asad's most notable work includes his translation and commentary on the Qur'an, *The Message of the Qur'an*, which reflects his rationalistic approach to Islamic eschatology, creation, and metaphysical subjects. Asad often interpreted Qur'anic miracles and metaphysical concepts through a scientific lens, diverging from traditional exegeses by rejecting supernatural elements and favoring intellectual analysis. His rationalist stance on issues such as the miracles of Jesus, the finality of prophethood, and the creation of man set his work apart from traditional Islamic scholars. Although his translation has been praised for its literary quality and modern insights, his unorthodox interpretations have also garnered criticism, particularly from more conservative circles.

Muhammad Asad's name features prominently on the roll of 20th-century English-language Muslim thinkers. He was a journalist, social traveler, critic, linguist, thinker, reformer, diplomat, political theorist and translator. He was born Leopold Weiss in July 1900 in the city of Lwów (Lemberg), Galicia, now in Poland, and then part of the Austrian Empire.¹ The second of three children, he was the descendant of a long line of rabbis, which was broken only by his father who did not enter the rabbinate but became a barrister. Asad himself received a thorough religious education that would qualify him to keep alive the family's rabbinical tradition. At an early age, he had become proficient in Hebrew and was also familiar with Aramaic. He had studied the Old Testament in the original as well as the text and commentaries of the Talmud: the *Mishna* and *Gemara*. He also had delved in the intricacies of Biblical exegesis: the *Targum*.² His family moved to Vienna, where fourteen-year-old Asad ran away from school and tried unsuccessfully to join the Austrian army to fight in the First World War; no sooner had he been finally officially drafted, than his juvenile expectations of military glory faded with the collapse of the Austrian Empire.³

After the War, he pursued philosophy and the history of art at the University of Vienna, but these studies failed to quench his spiritual thirst and he abandoned them to seek fulfilment elsewhere.⁴ Asad left Vienna in 1920 and travelled in Central Europe, where he did "all manner of short-lived jobs" before arriving in Berlin. Here, he ingeniously secured entry in the world of journalism, when his determination led him to a scoop that revealed the presence in Berlin of Maksim Gorky's wife who was on a secret mission to solicit aid from the West for a Brobdingnagian famine ravaging Soviet Russia. At this stage, Asad, like many of his generation, lived in the depths of agnosticism, having drifted away from his Jewish beliefs despite his rigorous religious studies. He left Europe for the Middle East in 1922, where he came to know and like the Arabs and was struck by how Islam shone on their everyday life with existential meaning, spiritual strength and inner peace. He now became—at the incredibly young age of 22—a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of most prestigious newspapers of Germany and Europe. As a journalist, he travelled extensively, intermingled with the common man, held discussions with the Muslim intelligentsia, and met several

regional heads of state, in “the countries between the Libyan Desert and the snow-covered peaks of the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea”: Palestine, Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.⁵ Asad became a Muslim in 1926 while he was in Berlin.⁶ Asad regarded Islam as a way of life for all times. According to him “Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking; and the result is a structure of absolute balance and solid composure”.⁷

Asad spent almost six years in Arabia, where he was received warmly by the King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd (d. 1373/1953), the founder of modern Saudi Arabia. He spent considerable time in the holy cities of Makkah and Madīnah, where he studied Arabic, the Qur‘ān, the *Ḥadīth* and Islamic history. Those studies led him to “the firm conviction that Islam, as a spiritual and social phenomenon, is still, in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims, by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced” and from that time, his interest was “centred around the problem of its regeneration”. His academic knowledge of classical Arabic—made easier by familiarity with Hebrew and Aramaic, sister Semitic languages—was further enhanced by his wide travels and contacts in Arabia with Bedouins.⁸

To study Muslim communities and cultures further east, such as those of India, Eastern Turkestan, China and Indonesia, Asad departed Arabia for India in 1932. There he met the celebrated poet-philosopher Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1357/1938), the towering Muslim thinker of the modern era and the spiritual progenitor of Pakistan. Iqbāl persuaded Asad to change his plans and stay on in India “to help elucidate the intellectual premises of the future Islamic state which was then hardly more than a dream in Iqbāl’s visionary mind”. Asad soon won Iqbāl’s admiration and wide public acclaim among educated circles with the publication of a perceptive monograph on the challenges facing modern Muslims. But Asad’s freedom was curtailed when the Second World War broke out in 1939. Ironically, though he had refused to accept a passport from Nazi Germany after it had annexed Austria in 1938 and insisted on retaining his Austrian citizenship, the British Rāj imprisoned him on the second day of the War as an “enemy alien” and did not release him till its end in 1945.⁹

He moved to Pakistan after its creation in 1947, and was charged by its Government with setting up a Department of Islamic Reconstruction whose task was to formulate the ideological foundations for the new state. He is credited with drafting the

objective Resolution, which became the preamble to the Constitution of Pakistan. Later he was transferred to the Pakistan Foreign Ministry to head its Middle East Division, where he endeavoured to strengthen Pakistan's ties to other Muslim countries. He capped his diplomatic career by serving as Pakistan's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United Nations. He resigned this position in 1952 to write his autobiography, a work of stunning ingenuity and unrivalled literary effect.¹⁰ He left New York in 1955 and finally settled in Spain. He died on February 23, 1992 and was buried in the Muslim cemetery of Granada.¹¹

Muhammad Asad published the following books:

- Unromantisches Morgenland [The Unromantic East]
- The Road to Mecca
- The Message of The Qur'ān
- Translation and commentary on the Sahīh Bukhārī entitled Sahīh al- Bukhārī: The Early Years of Islam
- This Law of Ours and other Essays
- Islam at the Crossroads
- The Principles of State and Government in Islam
- Edited journal "Islamic Culture" Hyderabad from January 1937 to 1938 after the death of Pickthall.
- Brought out a journal during 1946-47 "Arafāt: A Monthly Critique of Muslim Thought".

Apart from other works, his translation and exegesis of the Qur'ān will be discussed under the following topic.

The Preface:

Most translators of the Holy Qur'ān like to begin by explaining their reasons for doing so. To justify his "translation," Asad argues that "the Qur'ān itself has never yet been presented in any European language in a manner which would make it truly comprehensible".¹² Criticizing Asad on this sentence, Kenneth Cragg remarks that this 'verdict which, if taken too pessimistically, must cast doubt on the present venture also!'¹³ (Asad's own translation). He distinguishes between the two types of scholars of Arabic who have translated the Holy Qur'ān. First, there are those Muslims and non-Muslims "who acquired their knowledge of Arabic through academic study alone. ... none of [whom], however great his scholarship, has ever been familiar with the Arabic language as a person is familiar with his own".¹⁴ According to Asad, such a person's mastery of the grammar and acquaintance with the literature are not sufficient for the translation of the Qur'ān. Second, there is the person (the educated

Arab) who acquires an ability to comprehend the language fully and, consequently, to understand the method of the “*i’jāz*” of the Qur’ān “almost automatically, by a process of mental osmosis, from his early childhood”.¹⁵ This gift, however, does not necessarily come to the modern Arabs of the cities whose “daily speech has become ... largely corrupted and estranged from pristine Arabic.” Asad claims that only the “bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly those of Central and Eastern Arabia” (an area in which he spent ten years) possess the requisite “feel” for the Arabic language. Hanna E. Kassis, a reviewer, questions Asad’s argument. First, one of the basic rules of translation is that the translator should have a native familiarity with the language into which he is translating, it being assumed that he has a command over the language of the original text. Full comprehension of the Arabic text is to be matched by a native and erudite knowledge of the English language, in the case of an Arabic-into-English translation. Second, this reviewer believes that an undue emphasis is being placed on the “purity” of bedouin Arabic. It could be argued that the vocabulary of the Qur’ān is that of the mercantile centres of the Arabian Peninsula (during the age of the Prophet) and not that of “bedouin” society. The argument that the “Arab” in question has uniquely preserved the “feel,” nuances, and subtleties of the Arabic of Quraysh---certainly not a society of bedouin---requires linguistic evidence. Third, the reviewer cannot accept the claim to purity of the Arabic language put forth by the translator. Arabic is a Semitic language, as the translator courageously states in the face of known opposition in some limited though vocal circles. But to argue that it is “the only living language which has remained entirely unchanged” is a contradictory statement and defies evidence to the contrary. To adopt the translator’s argument is to subscribe to an untenable assumption that the meaning of the Holy Book avails itself more readily to an Arab (with the qualifications listed by the author) than to any other.¹⁶

John Haywood congratulated Asad on his eight-pages foreword who considered it ‘a perceptive analysis of the problem of translating the Qur’ān’.¹⁷

Sources of ‘The Message of the Qur’ān’:

Muhammad Asad was such a scholar who could consult the primary sources of hadith, sirah, tafsir, history and fiqh. Among all translators of the Holy Qur’ān into any Western language, he was unequalled in his command over Arabic language. He has himself mentioned the books consulted by him for writing exegetical notes under title “Works of Reference”.¹⁸ Among *hadith* literature, he referred to six authentic hadith collections of Bukhārī, Muslim,

Tirmidhī, Nasa'ī, Abu Da'ūd and Ibn Mājah. He has also consulted ḥadīth collections compiled by other traditionists like al-Muwattā' by Mālik b. Anas, al-Musnad by Ibn Hanbal, Kitāb as-Sunan by Bayhaqī, Dārmī and Dārquṭnī, Mustadrīk by al-Hākīm, and Faḥ al-Bārī by Ibn Hajar al-Asqālānī. He has referred to Arabic commentaries by Zamakhsharī, Baghawī, Baydawī, Rāzī, al-Tabarī, Ibn Taymiyyah and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. He relied on Suyūṭī's al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān for the Qur'ānic sciences. For the biography of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), he has benefited from Wāqidi's Kitāb al-Maghāzī and Ibn Hishām. His historical sources include the books of Ibn Kathīr, Ibn Athīr and Ibn Sa'd. For lexicographical discussion, he has relied on Tāj al-'Arūs by Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, Rāghib's Mufradāt, Firūzābādī's Al-Qāmūs, Jawharī's Tāj al-Lughah and Lisān al-'Arab. He has also consulted Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon. He has alluded to Bidāyat al-Mujtahid, and Muhallā and Mughnī for discussion pertaining to Fiqh.

Literal Meaning of Arabic Words:

Muhammad Asad attempted to understand the actual meaning of Arabic words, various shades of meaning of a word and then to use the suitable equivalent in his translation keeping in view the context. He consulted famous lexicons of Arabic like al-Qāmūs, Mufradāt al-Qur'ān, Lisān al-'Arab and Tāj al-'Arūs. He also depended on Hadīth and exegetical literature for elucidation of various words. He has quoted famous philologists to elucidate certain words like Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, 'Ikrimah, Qatādah and Aḍ-Daḥḥāk. For example, in the verse 2:29, he has explained the word *sama'* in the following way:

The term *sama'* ("heaven" or "sky") is applied to anything that is spread like a canopy above any other thing. Thus, the visible skies which stretch like a vault above the earth and form, as it were, its canopy, are called *sama'*: and this is the primary meaning of this term in the Qur'ān; in a wider sense, it has the connotation of "cosmic system". As regards the "seven heavens", it is to be borne in mind that in Arabic usage - and apparently in other Semitic languages as well - the number "seven" is often synonymous with "several" (see Lisān al-'Arab), just as "seventy" or "seven hundred" often means "many" or "very many" (Tāj al-'Arūs). This, taken together with the accepted linguistic definition that "every *sama'* is a *sama'* with regard to what is below it" (Rāghib), may explain the "seven heavens" as denoting the multiplicity of cosmic systems.¹⁹

He has explained some words with by quotation from hadīth literature. In the verse 5:3, he elucidated *al-nusub* as follows:

The *nusub* (sing. *nasibah*) were the altar-stones set up in pre-Islamic times around the Ka'bah on which the pagan Quraysh used to sacrifice animals to their idols. However, from the story of Zayd ibn 'Amr ibn

Nufayl (Bukhārī) it appears that not only sacrificial animals but also such as were, destined for common consumption were often slaughtered there for the sake of a supposed “blessing” (see Fathāh-Bārī VII, 113). Some philologists consider the form *nusub* a singular, with *ansab* as its plural. In either case the term denotes an association with all manner of practices which could be described as “idolatrous”, and should not be taken merely in its literal sense.²⁰ In the same verse, he referred to Edward William Lane for explanation of *tastaqimū bil-aḥlām* which means “to aim at divining [the future] by means of arrows”. According to him, this is a reference to the divining-arrows without a point and without feathers used by the pre-Islamic Arabs to find out what the future might hold in store for them. (A comprehensive description of this practice may be found in Lane III, 1247.)²¹

In Sūrah al-Ikhlās, he has rendered *aṣ-ṣamad* into “the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All Being”. Justifying his translation he tells his readers that this rendering gives no more than an approximate meaning of the term *aṣ-ṣamad*, which occurs in the Qur’ān only once, and is applied to God alone. It comprises the concepts of Primary Cause and eternal, independent Being, combined with the idea that everything existing or conceivable goes back to Him as its source and is therefore, dependent on Him for its beginning as well as for its continued existence.²²

Asad has quoted Muslim philologist for elucidation of Arabic words. For instance, he explains the term ‘kawthar’ as an intensive form of the noun *kathrah* (*Zamakhsharī*), which, in its turn, denotes “copiousness”, “multitude” or “abundance”; it also occurs as an adjective with the same connotation (*Qāmūs*, *Lisān al-Arab*, etc.). In the above context, which is the sole instance of its use in the Qur’ān, *al-kawthar* obviously relates to the abundant bestowal on the Prophet (peace be upon him) of all that is good in an abstract, spiritual sense, like revelation, knowledge, wisdom, the doing of good works, and dignity in this world and in the hereafter (*Rāzī*); with reference to the believers in general, it evidently signifies the ability to acquire knowledge, to do good works, to be kind towards all living beings, and thus to attain inner peace and dignity.²³

Sometimes, Asad tries to interpret certain words metaphorically. e.g. Consider his explanation of the titles of the Prophet, upon whom be peace and greeting, in the beginning of surah 73 and 74. He writes:

The expression *muḥḥammil* has a meaning similar to that of *muddaththir*, which occurs at the beginning of the next *sūrah*: namely, “one who is covered [with anything]”, “enwrapped” or “enfolded [in anything]”; and, like that other expression, it may be understood in a concrete, literal sense - i.e., “wrapped up in a cloak” or “blanket” - as well as

metaphorically, i.e., “wrapped up in sleep” or even “wrapped up in oneself”. Hence, the commentators differ widely in their interpretations of the above apostrophe, some of them preferring the literal connotation, others the metaphorical; but there is no doubt that irrespective of the linguistic sense in which the address “O thou enwrapped one” is understood, it implies a call to heightened consciousness and deeper spiritual awareness on the part of the Prophet.²⁴

Asad has translated *kalimah* as “promise”²⁵ in verse 4:171 instead of “word” which, according to Hanna E.Kasis, seems to be influenced more by an English idiom than by Arabic lexicography.²⁶

Use of Brackets in Translation:

Asad has used brackets in his translation to differentiate such words which do not have any equivalent in the Arabic text. Some orientalists like George Sale have put these additional words in italics but Asad followed his Muslim predecessors like Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and ‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali. These bracketed words are helpful for full comprehension of the text by such people who lack knowledge of Arabic language. For instance, look at the translation of verses 108:2-3 quoted below:

Hence, pray unto thy Sustainer [alone], and sacrifice [unto Him alone].
Verily, he that hates thee indeed be cut off [from all that is good].²⁷

In these two verses, Asad has used brackets thrice to clarify that bracketed words are not translated of the text but added by him to complete the sentence.

Language of the Translation:

Muhammad Asad produced his translation and exegesis of the Holy Qur'an in very beautiful language. Though English was not his mother tongue but he mastered it to the extent that he surpassed many native English writers. This reminds us of the Polish Joseph Conrad (1857—1924) who is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of English. A.R.Kidwai says:

The Message of the Qur'an by Muhammad Asad represents a notable addition to the body of English translations couched in chaste English.²⁸

According to Kenneth Cragg, the usages such as “nay,” “withal,” “behold” (for “see”), and “thou” and accompanying verbs “dost” etc. give a certain archaic flavour to the English. Very occasionally there is an infelicity....Some readers would wish that Dr. Asad had, at least in places, let himself “go” more fluently in English, since translation has equal obligation to the language of receiving as to the language of origin.²⁹

Bu with all this Asad says:

I make no claim to having reproduced anything of the in describe rhythm and rhetoric of the Qur'ān. No one who has truly experience d its majestic beauty could ever be presumptuous enough to make such a claim or even to embark upon such an attempt.³⁰

Elucidation of Arabic Syntax:

Asad was great scholar of Arabic who spent considerable time in Arabia. In his exegetical notes he has given discussion on Arabic syntax .For example consider verse 2:30.

And Lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: “Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it.

Elucidating *idh* Asad writes:

The interjection “lo” seems to be the only adequate rendering, in this context, of the particle *idh*, which is usually -and without sufficient attention to its varying uses in Arabic construction - translated as “when”. Although the latter rendering is often justified, *idh* is also used to indicate “the sudden, or unexpected, occurrence of a thing” (cf. Lane 1, 39), or a sudden turn in the discourse. The subsequent allegory, relating as it does to the faculty of reason implanted in man, is logically connected with the preceding passages.³¹

In verse 7:54 he has explained, “The conjunctive particle *thumma* which precedes this clause does not always denote order in time (“then” or “thereupon”). In cases where it is used to link parallel statements it has often the function of the simple conjunction *wa* (“and”).³²

The footnote on 4:29 is an excellent example of Asad’s command on Arabic syntax:

If the particle *illā* preceding the above clause is given its usual meaning of “except” or “unless it be”, the phrase ought to be rendered thus: “unless it be [an act of] trade based on mutual agreement”. This formulation, however, has baffled many a commentator: for, if taken literally, it would imply that wrongful profits from trading based on mutual agreement are excepted from the general prohibition, “Devour not one another’s possessions wrongfully”- a supposition impossible to maintain in view of the ethics postulated by the Qur’ān. To obviate this difficulty, most of the commentators express the opinion that the particle *illā* has in this context the meaning of “but”, and that the clause ought to be understood as follows: “but it is lawful for you to profit from one another’s possessions by way of legitimate trade based on mutual agreement”. However, quite apart from the fact that this interpretation is highly laboured and artificial, it does not explain why “legitimate trade” should have been singled out here as a sole means of lawfully deriving economic benefits from one another - for, as Rāzī rightly points out in his commentary on this verse, “it is no less lawful to benefit economically through a gift, a bequest, a legal inheritance,

alms, a dower, or an indemnity for injuries received: for there are, aside from trade, many ways of acquiring possessions [lawfully]”. Why, then, should trade alone have been stressed? - and, moreover, stressed in a context not particularly devoted to matters of trade? A really satisfactory answer to this puzzle can, in my opinion, be obtained only through a linguistic consideration of the particle *illā*. Apart from its usual connotation of “except” or “unless it be”, it has sometimes - as has been pointed out in both *Qāmūs* and *Mughnī* - the meaning of the simple conjunction “and” (*wa*); similarly, if it is preceded by a negative clause, it can be synonymous with “nor” or “and neither” (*wa-lā*): as, for instance, in 27:10-11, “no fear need the message-bearers have in My Presence, and neither (*illā*) need he who...”, etc. Now if we apply this particular use of *illā* to the passage under consideration, we arrive at the reading, “nor [shall you do it] by means of trade based on mutual agreement”, or simply, “not even by way of trade based on mutual agreement” - whereupon the meaning immediately becomes obvious: the believers are prohibited from devouring another person’s possessions wrongfully even if that other person - being the weaker party - agrees to such a deprivation or exploitation under the stress of circumstances. The reading adopted by me logically connects, moreover, with verse 32, which admonishes the believers not to covet one another’s possessions.³³

Originality of the Work

A close examination of different English translations of the Qur’an reveals that many translators have borrowed a lot from their predecessors but the Message of the Qur’an is an original work. Asad’s writing style and vocabulary is unique and the translation of many verses is entirely different from his predecessors. His exegetical notes reveal his independent opinion in many issues. Unlike many translators, he published the Arabic text because without it the translation is likely to jeopardise the purity of the text. He has avoided retaining Arabic words whose equivalents exist in English. He has transliterated the names and Arabic words adopting the best system of transliteration in use. Asad’s originality is evident from the translation of *basmalab*:

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace.³⁴

Interpretation of Disjoined Letters:

Asad has explained *al-muqatta’āt* in appendix ii and also added footnotes in his translation where these disjoined letters occur. According to him, out of twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, exactly one-half—that is, fourteen—occur in this position, either singly or in varying combinations of two, three, four or five letters. There is no evidence of the Prophet’s having ever referred to them in any of his recorded utterances, nor of any of his companions

having ever asked him for an explanation. He does not agree to the suggestion advanced by some Western orientalists that these letters may be no more than the initials of the scribes who wrote down the individual revelations at the Prophet's dictation, or of the companions who recorded them at the time of the final codification of the Qur'ān during the reign of the first three caliphs. Asad concludes that 'We must content ourselves with the finding that a solution of this problem still remains beyond our grasp. This was apparently the view of the four Right-Guided Caliphs, summarized in these words of Abū Bakr: "In every divine writ (kitāb) there is [an element of] mystery—and the mystery of the Qur'ān is [indicated] in the openings of [some of] the surahs."³⁵

The author of "the Message of the Qur'ān" had commented disjointed letters *Ta-Ha* that occur in the beginning of Surah 20 in the following passage:

According to some commentators, the letters t and h (pronounced ta ha) which introduce this surah belong to the group of *al-muqatta'at* -the "single [or "disjointed"] letters"-which are prefixed to a number of the Qur'ānic surah. However, in the opinion of some of the Prophet's Companions (e.g., `Abd Allāh ibn `Abbās) and a number of outstanding personalities of the next generation (like Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, Mujāhid, Qatādah, Al-Hasan al-Baṣrī, `Ikrimah, Aḍ -Daḥḥāk, Al-Kalbī, etc.), ta ha is not just a combination of two single letters but a meaningful expression of its own, signifying "O man" (synonymous with *ya rajul*) in both the Nabataean and Syriac branches of the Arabic language (Tabarī, Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr), as well as in the-purely Arabian-dialect of the Yemenite tribe of `Akk, as is evident from certain fragments of their pre-Islamic poetry (quoted by Tabarī and Zamakhsharī). Tabarī, in particular, gives his unqualified support to the rendering of ta ha as "O man."³⁶

He is different to his predecessor Muslim exegetes that tried to translate these words in some surahs. He rendered Yā-Sīn into "O Thou human being!" Commenting on it he observes:

Whereas some of the classical commentators incline to the view that the letters y-s (pronounced Yā Sīn) with which this surah opens belong to the category of the mysterious letter-symbols (*al-muqatta'at*) introducing a number of Quranic chapters. `Abd Allāh ibn Abbās states that they actually represent two distinct words, namely the exclamatory particle yā ("O") and sin, which in the dialect of the tribe of Tayy is synonymous with *insān* ("human being" or "man"): hence, similar to the two syllables ta ha in surah 20, Yā Sīn denotes "O thou human being!" This interpretation has been accepted by Ikrimah, Aḍ -Daḥḥāk, Al-Hasan al-Baṣrī, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, and other early Qur'ān-commentators (see Tabarī, Baghawī, Zamakhsharī, Baydawī, Ibn Kathīr. etc.). According to Zamakhsharī, it would seem that the syllable sin is an abbreviation of

unaysin, the diminutive form of *insān* used by the *Ṭayy* in exclamations. (It is to be borne in mind that in classical Arabic a diminutive is often expressive of no more than endearment: e.g., *yā bunayyā*, which does not necessarily signify “O my little son” but, rather, “my dear son” irrespective of the son’s age.) On the whole, we may safely assume that the words *Yā Sīn* apostrophize the Prophet Muḥammad, who is explicitly addressed in the sequence, and are meant to stress - as the Quran so often does - the fact of his and all other apostles’ humanness.³⁷

The Quranic Oaths:

In the Qur’ān, two Arabic letters ‘*ta*’ and ‘*waw*’ have been used as *ḥarf qasm*; the former is only used with God but the latter is used to swear things other than God. Abdullah Yusuf Ali³⁸ and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall³⁹ translate both these letters as “By” like many other translators but Asad has rendered *tallabi(ta+Allah)* into “By God”⁴⁰ and ‘*waw*’ is translated as “consider”.⁴¹ According to him the adjectival particle *wa* is used in the sense of a solemn oathlike assertion and it is to give weight to a subsequently stated truth or evidence of truth.⁴² Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates *Lā uqsimu* as “I do call to witness”⁴³ which is translated as “Nay, I call to witness”⁴⁴ by Muhammad Asad. For detail discussion of the topic please consult “Oaths and Adjurations in the Qur’ān” by Yusuf Ali.⁴⁵

Introduction to each Sūrah

Each Surah is preceded by a brief introduction and is copiously annotated. The introductory remarks give the usual explanation for the title of the surah, an indication of its chronological position, and a comment on the religious theme(s) running through it. Asad seems to adhere closely to the Cairo (“Royal,” according to Asad) Edition as far as the names of the surahs are concerned. In some-unfortunately not all-cases he mentions alternative names given to some of the surahs. Missing are references to the following: Surah 25, al-Furqān, is also entitled al-Khalas; Surah 41, Fussilat, is also entitled as- Sajdah; Surah 111, al-Masad, is also entitled Tabbat and al-Lahab; Surah 112, al-Ikhlās, is also known as at-Tawḥīd. In addition, it should be mentioned that Surah 94, ash- Sharh, is also known as al-Inshirah and Surah 96, al-’Alaq, is sometimes called Iqrā’. Similarly, Asad adopts the chronological preferences arrived at in the Cairo Edition although, from time to time, he offers an alternative point of view referring to differences of opinion among authorities but without consistently naming his sources. It should be borne in mind that the difference between the Cairo Edition and others lie mainly in the titles of some of the Surahs and, rarely (Surah 18), in the verse numbering.⁴⁶

He has briefly mentioned the chronological order of many surahs. About Surah Muzzammil, he writes, “This surah is almost certainly the fourth in the order of revelation. Although some of its verses may have come at a slightly later date, the whole of it belongs to the earliest Mecca period.”⁴⁷

In introduction to Surah al-Muddaththir he has mentioned the Prophet’s earliest revelation consisting of the first five verses of *surah* 96 (“The Germ-Cell”) that was followed by a period elapsed during which he received no revelation at all. The length of this break in revelation (*fatrat al-wahy*) cannot be established with certainty; it may have been as little as six months or as much as three years. At the end of this intermission the Prophet had a vision of the Angel Gabriel, “sitting between heaven and earth”. Almost immediately afterwards, the present *surah* was revealed; and from then on, in Muhammad’s own words, “revelation became intense and continuous” (Bukhārī, *Bad’ al-Wahy* and *Kitāb at-Tafsīr*; also Muslim). Although some verses of this *surah* may have been revealed at a slightly later time, there is no doubt that all of it belongs to the earliest part of the Mecca period, that is, to the very beginning of Muhammad’s mission. In this way some of these introductory notes are helpful for knowledge pertaining to *sūrah*.⁴⁸

Asad has mentioned the places of revelation of some surahs. He considers *Sūrah Muḥammad* as the earliest revelations of the Medina period which may have been revealed during the Prophet’s hijrah.⁴⁹

He has also given the reasons of nomenclature of some surahs. About *Sūrah al-An’ām*, he suggests that its title is derived from several references in verses 136ff. to certain pre-Islamic superstitions concerning animals.⁵⁰ About *Surah Muḥammad* he says that the title is based on the mention of the name of the Prophet Muḥammad in verse 2.⁵¹

Discussing the period of revelation of *Surah Kawthar*, he states that Ibn Kathīr considers it most probable that it was revealed at Medina. The reason for this assumption (shared by many other scholars) is to be found in an authentic *hadith* on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik, who narrates - with a good deal of circumstantial detail - how the *surah* was revealed “while the Apostle of God was among us in the mosque” (Muslim, Ibn Hanbal, Abū Da’ūd, Nasā’ī). The “mosque” referred to by Anas can only have been the mosque of Medina: for, on the one hand, Anas - a native of that town - had never met the Prophet before the latter’s exodus to Medina (at which time Anas was barely ten years old); and, on the other hand, there had been no mosque - i.e., a public place of congregational worship -

available to the Muslims at Mecca before their conquest of that city in 8 H.⁵²

He has also discussed the controversy that Sūrah Quraysh and Sūrah al-Fīl are considered as one surah by some of the Companions of the Prophet and several learned men of the next generation.⁵³

In introductory notes to some surahs, he has also told the importance and reward of its recitation. About Sūrat al-Ikhlās he tells his readers, “As reported in a great number of authentic Traditions, the Prophet was wont to describe this *surah* as “equivalent to one-third of the whole Qur’ān” (Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Hanbal, Abū Dā’ūd, Nasā’ī, Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah)⁵⁴ About al-Isrā he says, “According to `A’ishah, the Prophet used to recite this surah every night in his prayer (Tirmidhī, Nasā’ī and Ibn Hanbal)”⁵⁵

Circumstances of Revelation:

Muhammad Asad has described circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) of some sūrahs, extracts and verses. About surah 111, he has recounted the occasion on which it was revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the following way:

As reported by several unimpeachable authorities - Bukhārī and Muslim among them - the Prophet ascended one day the hillock of Aṣ-Safā in Mecca and called together all who could hear him from among his tribe, the Quraysh, When they had assembled, he asked them: “O sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib! O sons of Fihri! If I were to inform you that enemy warriors are about to fall upon you from behind that hill, would you believe me?” They answered: “Yes, we would.” Thereupon he said: “Behold, then, I am here to warn you of the coming of the Last Hour!” At that, Abu Lahab exclaimed: “Was it for this purpose that thou hast summoned us? May thou be doomed?” And shortly afterwards this *surah* was revealed.⁵⁶

Asad has told the *asbāb al-nuzūl* of the Sūrah 111 as, “As reported by several unimpeachable authorities—Bukhārī and Muslim among them—the Prophet ascended one day the hillock of As-Safā in Mecca and called together all who could hear him from among his tribe, the Quraysh. When they assembled, he asked them: “O sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib! O sons of Fihri! If I were to inform you that enemy warriors are about to fall upon you from behind that hill, would you believe me?” They answered: “Yes, we would.” Thereupon he said: “Behold, then, I am here to warn you of the coming of the Last Hour!” At that Abu Lahab exclaimed: “Was it for this purpose that thou hast summoned us? May thou be doomed!” And shortly afterwards this surah was revealed.”⁵⁷ About the verses from 96:9 to the end of surah, he writes that most of the classical commentators see in this passage an allusion to Abu Jahl, the

Prophet's bitterest opponent in Makkah, who persistently tried to prevent Muhammad and his followers from praying before Ka'bah.⁵⁸

Dignity of Almighty God:

Asad was very careful in translating the verses pertaining to Almighty Allah. Two examples quoted below will make it clear.

1. The verse 3:141 has been translated by Muhammad Ali, an Ahmadi translator, as follows:

Do you think that you will enter the garden while Allah has not yet known those who strive hard from among you, and (He has not) known the patient?⁵⁹

But Muhammad Asad translates it in a very careful manner as follows:

Do you think that you could enter paradise unless God takes cognizance of your having striven hard [in His cause], and takes cognizance of your having been patient in adversity?⁶⁰

2. Some translators were mistaken while rendering the word "*makara*" occurring at more than one place in the Qur'an. Abdul Majid Daryabadi has translated verse 3:54 as follows:

And they plotted, and Allah plotted, and Allah is the Best of plotters.⁶¹

Daryabadi's translation is inappropriate but Asad has translated the same verse very carefully as "And the unbelievers schemed [against Jesus]; but God brought their scheming to nought: for God is above all schemers."⁶²

Veneration for the Prophet Muhammad:

Asad is very careful in translating the verses pertaining to the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him). For instance, he translates verse 93:7 as follows;

And found thee lost on thy way, and guided thee?⁶³

The British translators alleged the Prophet to be a sinner on the basis of this verse. The translation of some orientalist is as under:

And did he not find thee wandering in error, and hath he not guided thee into the truth? (George Sale)⁶⁴

And found thee erring and guided thee. (J.M.Rodwell)⁶⁵

And (did He not) find thee erring, and guide thee. (E.H.Palmer)⁶⁶

Like some other modernists, Asad has not written *salat wa salam* with the name of Prophet Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting) and has not added any explanatory note to the divine injunction pertaining to it.⁶⁷ When he translated Al-Jam 'al-*Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imam Bukhārī, he left out "*Sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam*" untranslated that occurs in Arabic text.⁶⁸

Reference to Hadith Literature:

Hadith is the fundamental source of the Qur'ānic exegesis and Muhammad Asad was a scholar of Hadith. He has not only translated *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī in 1938, but also wrote its explanation between 1935 and 1938. He published the first five of forty projected instalments of al-Bukhārī's book.⁶⁹ He consulted hadith literature throughout in his exegetical notes and has mentioned 14 hadith collections in his "Works of Reference".⁷⁰

Asad has referred to hadith literature in his explanatory notes. In a footnote to verse 4:34 he has referred to Bukhārī, Muslim, Tirmidhī, Abū Dā'ūd, Nasā'ī, Ibn Mājah, Bayhaqī, Aḥmad ibn Hanbal, Ibn Hibban and Hākim.⁷¹

Reference to Sirah:

Most of the translations of the Holy Qur'ān are preceded by a short biographical sketch of the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) but Asad has not done so. It was pointed out by Dr Rashid Ahmad in his review as follows: "A sketch of the Prophet's life is necessary at the beginning of the book."⁷² But it was ignored when the complete and exegesis was published. However, Asad has referred to the relevant events of sirah in many explanatory notes and in introduction to some surahs. He has referred to the Prophet's treatment of the deputation from Christian Najran in the year 10 H. They were given free access to the Prophet's mosque, and with his full consent celebrated their religious rites there, although their adoration of Jesus as "the son of God" and of Mary as "the mother of God" was fundamentally at variance with Islamic beliefs.⁷³ Asad has mentioned the battle of Badr while commenting on the verse 3:13. According to him it is generally assumed that this is an allusion to the battle of Badr, in the third week of Ramadan, 2H., in which three hundred and odd poorly-equipped Muslims, led by the Prophet, utterly routed a well-armed Meccan force numbering nearly one thousand men, seven hundred camels and one hundred horses; it was the first open battle between the pagan Quraysh and the young Muslim community of Medina. According to some commentators, however (e.g., *Manar* III, 234), the above Qur'ānic passage has a general import and alludes to an occurrence often witnessed in history - namely, the victory of a numerically weak and ill-equipped group of people, filled with a burning belief in the righteousness of their cause, over a materially and numerically superior enemy lacking a similar conviction. The fact that in this Qur'ān-verse the believers are spoken of as being faced by an enemy "twice their number" (while at the battle of Badr the pagan Quraysh were more than three times the number of the Muslims) lends great

plausibility to this explanation - and particularly so in view of the allusion, in the next verse, to material riches and worldly power.⁷⁴

Commenting on the verse 3:121, Asad has described the battle of Uhud which includes holding of a council, decision to fight in open area, defection of some three hundred men led by ‘Abdullah ibn Ubayy, posting of archers on a hill by the Prophet, death-defying assault upon superior forces by Muslims, advantage over enemy, misunderstanding of the archers who abandoned their position, attack of Makkian cavalry from the rear, rumour of the Prophet’s martyrdom, how the Muslims rallied round him and began the counter-attack and the enemy’s retreat.⁷⁵

Asad has mentioned all events that led to the truce of Hudaibiyyah in the introduction of Surah al-Fath. He has mentioned that the Prophet had a dream in which he saw himself and his followers entering Mecca as pilgrims. He decided to perform, accompanied by his followers, the “lesser pilgrimage” or “pious visit” (umrah) to Mecca. Although for nearly six years there had been a more or less permanent state of war between the Muslim community at Medina. Thus, the Prophet’s party which set out for Mecca consisted of only 1400-1500 men, all of them dressed in the pilgrim’s garb (ihram) and, apart from their sheathed swords, unarmed.

On learning of the Prophet’s approach, the Meccans decided - against all Arabian tradition - to oppose the entry of the pilgrims by force of arms. Then Asad has described how the Prophet and his companions alighted on the plain of al-Hudaibiyyah and Uthman was sent as envoy to negotiate the Makkans. The events following the rumour of Uthman’s murder include “Pledge of the Tree (bayt al-ridwan), negotiation with representative of Makkans and agreement on a truce called Truce of Hudaibiyyah.⁷⁶

Reference to the Earlier Scriptures:

Asad has referred to the Bible in his exegetical notes. He has made allusion to the books of the Old Testament and New Testament. As he was a formerly Jew, he had good knowledge of the Old Testament. His footnote contains many references to Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, I Chronicles, Ezekiel, Revelation of St. John.⁷⁷ His commentary on the verses pertaining to Jesus is equally readable. The Holy Qur’ān has confirmed what was foretold in earlier scriptures in the following verses:

And [this happened, too,] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said: “O children of Israel! Behold, I am an apostle of God unto you, [sent] to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to give [you] the glad tiding of an apostle who shall come after me, whose

name shall be Ahmad.” But when he [whose coming Jesus had foretold] came unto them with all evidence of the truth, they said: This [alleged message of his] is [nothing but] spellbinding eloquence! ⁷⁸ Muhammad Asad has commented on these verses as follows:

This prediction is supported by several references in the Gospel of St. John to the *Parakletos* (usually rendered as “Comforter”) who was to come after Jesus. This designation is almost certainly a corruption of *Periklytos* (“the Much-Praised”), an exact Greek translation of the Aramaic term or name *Mawhamana*. (It is to be borne in mind that Aramaic was the language used in Palestine at the time .of, and for some centuries after, Jesus, and was thus undoubtedly the language in which the original - now lost - texts of the Gospels were composed.) In view of the phonetic closeness of *Periklytos* and *Parakletos* it is easy to understand how the translator - or, more probably, a later scribe - confused these two expressions. It is significant that both the Aramaic *Mawhamana* and the Greek *Periklytos* have the same meaning as the two names of the Last Prophet, *Mubammad* and *Ahmad*, both of which are derived from the verb *hamida* (“he praised”) and the noun *hamd* (“praise”). An even more unequivocal prediction of the advent of the Prophet Muhammad - mentioned by name, in its Arabic form - is said to be forthcoming from the so-called Gospel of St. Barnabas, which, though now regarded as apocryphal, was accepted as authentic and was read in the churches until the year 496 of the Christian era, when it was banned as “heretical” by a decree of Pope Gelasius. However, since the original text of that Gospel is not available (having come down to us only in an Italian translation dating from the late sixteenth century), its authenticity cannot be established with certainty.” ⁷⁹ His Biblical knowledge is manifest from his explanation of “Ashab Al-Ukhduh” in Surah al-Buruj as follows:

In order to explain this parabolic passage, the commentators interpret it - quite unnecessarily - in the past tense, and advance the most contradictory legends meant to “identify” those evildoers in historical terms. The result is a medley of stories ranging from Abraham’s experiences with his idolatrous contemporaries (cf. 21:68-70) to the Biblical legend of Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to burn three pious Israelites in a fiery furnace (The Book of Daniel iii, 19 ff.), or the persecution, in the sixth century, of the Christians of Najran by the King of Yemen, Dhu Nawas (who was of Jewish creed), or the entirely apocryphal story of a Zoroastrian king who burnt to death those of his subjects who refused to accept his dictum that a marriage of brother and sister was “permitted by God”; and so forth. None of these legends needs, of course, to be seriously considered in this context. As a matter of fact, the very anonymity of the evildoers referred to in the above Qur’anic passage shows that we have here a parable and not an allusion to “historical” or even legendary events. The persecutors are people who, having no faith whatsoever, hate to see faith in others (see verse 8 below); the “pit of fire” is a metaphor for the persecution of the latter

by the former: a phenomenon not restricted to any particular time or to a particular people but recurring in many forms and in varying degrees of intensity throughout recorded history.⁸⁰

Reference to Historical Events:

The author of “The Message Of the Qur’ān” has described many historical events in his commentary. Commenting on the verse 2:125 he has told about the Ka`bah Referring to Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-‘11m, Tabarī’s *Tarīkhkh al-Umam*, Ibn Sad, Ibn Hishām, Mas’ūdī’s *Mūraj adh-Dhahab*, Yāqūt’s *Mu’jam al-Buldān*, and other early Muslim historians he has told about Makkah, Ka’bah, the Well of Zamzam, Abraham and his wives Sārah and Hagar.⁸¹ Asad has provided historical background of the Queen of Sheba in exegesis of the verse 34:15. According to him, the kingdom of Sheba (Sabā in Arabic) was situated in south-western Arabia, and at the time of its greatest prosperity (i.e., in the first millennium B.C.) comprised not only the Yemen but also a large part of Hadramawt and the Mahrah country, and probably also much of present-day Abyssinia. In the vicinity of its capital Marib - the Sabaeans had built in the course of centuries an extraordinary system of dams, dykes and sluices, which became famous in history, with astonishing remnants extant to this day. It was to this great dam that the whole country of Sheba owed its outstanding prosperity, which became proverbial throughout Arabia. (According to the geographer Al-Hamdānī, who died in 334 H., the area irrigated by this system of dams stretched eastward to the desert of Sayhad on the confines of the Rub al-Khalī). The flourishing state of the country was reflected in its people’s intense trading activities and their control of the “spice road” which led from Marib northwards to Mecca, Yathrib and Syria, and eastwards to Dufar on the shores of the Arabian Sea, thus connecting with the maritime routes from India and China.⁸²

The footnote in the beginning of Sūrah Ar-Rūm elucidates the defeat and victory of Byzantines as follows:

During the early years of the seventh century the Persians conquered parts of Syria and Anatolia, “the lands close-by”, i.e., near the heartland of the Byzantine empire; in 613 they took Damascus and in 614, Jerusalem; Egypt fell to them in 615–16, and at the same time they laid siege to Constantinople itself. At the time of the revelation of this surah - about the seventh year before the hijrah, corresponding to 615 or 616 of the Christian era - the total destruction of the Byzantine Empire seemed imminent. The few Muslims around the Prophet were despondent on hearing the news of the utter discomfiture of the Byzantines, who were Christians and, as such, believed in the One God. The pagan Quraysh, on the other hand, sympathized with the Persians who, they thought, would vindicate their own opposition to the One-

God idea. When Muhammad enunciated the above Quran-verses predicting a Byzantine victory “within a few years”, this prophecy was received with derision by the Quraysh. Now the term bid (commonly rendered as “a few”) denotes any number between three and ten; and, as it happened, in 622 – i.e., six or seven years after the Quranic prediction - the tide turned in favour of the Byzantines. In that year, Emperor Heraclius succeeded in defeating the Persians at Issus, south of the Taurus Mountains, and subsequently drove them out of Asia Minor. By 624, he carried the war into Persian territory and thus put the enemy on the defensive: and in the beginning of December, 626, the Persian armies were completely routed by the Byzantines.⁸³

His Views about Mysticism:

Asad was such intellectual who was guided by reason. According to Murad Hofmann, he was sceptical of Sufism.⁸⁴ He did not refer to mystic literature produced by Sufis throughout his exegesis. When some part of his translation and commentary was published by Islamic League of Makkah, it was reviewed by Dr. Rashid Ahmad Jullundhari in the Islamic Quarterly London who suggested Asad to consult *Tafsīr Qāshānī* by Sūfī commentator ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī.⁸⁵ But the suggestion was just to derive a rationalistic exegesis of verses pertaining to the miracles of Jesus. Asad’s views about Sufism can be read in the introduction of Surah al-Kahf:

The story of the Men of the Cave - from which the surah takes its title - illustrates (in verses 13-20) the principle of world-abandonment for the sake of faith, and is deepened into an allegory of death, resurrection and spiritual awakening. In the story of Moses and the unnamed sage (verses 60-82) the theme of spiritual awakening undergoes a significant variation: it is shifted to the plane of man’s intellectual life and his search after ultimate truths. Appearance and reality are shown to be intrinsically different -so different that only mystic insight can reveal to us what is apparent and what is real. And, finally, the allegory of Dhu ‘I-Qarnayn, “the Two-Horned One”, tells us that world-renunciation is not, in itself, a necessary complement of one’s faith in God: in other words, that worldly life and power need not conflict with spiritual righteousness so long as we remain conscious of the ephemeral nature of all works of man and of our ultimate responsibility to Him who is above all limitations of time and appearance. And so the surah ends with the words: “Hence, whoever looks forward to meeting his Sustainer let him do righteous deeds, and let him not ascribe unto anyone or anything a share in the worship due to his Sustainer.”⁸⁶

Rationalistic Approach and Denial of Miracles:

According to Asad the metaphysical ideas mentioned in the Qur’ān relate to a realm beyond the reach of human perception or experience which are underlined in the book by means of loan-images derived from our actual –physical or mental-experiences.⁸⁷

Relying on this idea, he interpreted the miracles mentioned in the Qur'ān in a different way. The Qur'ān has mentioned the miracle of Jesus in verse 3:49. Asad has translated the verse as follows:

“And [will make him] an apostle unto the children of Israel” “I have come unto you with a message from your Sustainer. I shall create for you out of clay, as it were, the shape of [your] destiny, and then breathe into it, so that it might become [your] destiny by God’s leave; and I shall heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God’s leave; and I shall let you know what you may eat and what you should store up in your houses. Behold, in all this there is indeed a message for you, if you are [truly] believers.”⁸⁸

In this verse the miracles are interpreted by Asad in a rationalistic way. The first miracle of making a living bird out of clay is taken as destiny of his people. According to him, the noun *ṭayr* is a plural of *ṭā’ir* (“flying creature” or “bird”), or an infinitive noun (“flying”) derived from the verb *ṭara* (“he flew”). In pre-Islamic usage, as well as in the Qur'ān, the words *ṭā’ir* and *ṭayr* often denote “fortune” or “destiny”, whether good or evil. He also opines that it is probable that the “raising of the dead” by Jesus is a metaphorical description of his giving new life to people who were spiritually dead. The “healing of the blind and the leper” has a similar significance: namely, an inner regeneration of people who were spiritually diseased and blind to the truth. Saying of Jesus that he would tell his people what they eat and what they store is interpreted as “what good things you may partake of in the life of this world, and what good deeds you should lay up as a treasure for the life to come”.⁸⁹

The translation and interpretation of the above-mentioned verse by other translators and commentators is different from Asad’s.

And will make him a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah’s leave. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah’s leave. And I announce unto you what ye eat and what ye store up in your houses. In this verily is a sign for you, if ye are to be believers----. Pickthall⁹⁰

“And (appoint him) an apostle to the Children of Israel, (with this message): “I have come to you, with a Sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by Allah’s leave: And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I quicken the dead, by Allah’s leave; and I declare to you what ye eat, and what ye store in your houses. Surely therein is a Sign for you if ye did believe.-----Yusuf Ali⁹¹

I have come to you with a sign from God: I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God’s

permission, it will become a real bird; I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life with God's permission; I will tell you what you may eat and what you may store up in your houses. There truly is a sign from your Lord.----- Abdel Haleem⁹²

Criticizing Asad's translation of verse 3:49, Dr. Rashid Ahmad Jullundhri⁹³ has following reservations on his rendering:

1. It is hard to translate the word *Tā'ir* as used in this verse as 'destiny'. The structure of the sentence does not allow it. The presence of the verbs 'to fashion', 'to breathe', and 'to be' rule out *Majāz*.
2. Jesus was described by his opponents as a sorcerer. One wonders what was justification for this, if his miracles were merely spiritual miracles.
3. Jesus' first listeners were common people and villagers. It would be difficult to claim, therefore, that he employed highly idiomatic language.
4. Even by 1922 a study called 'Miracles and the New Psychology' was able to declare that in the Gospels the particulars of the miracles of healing upon which most reliance can be placed are not themselves incompatible with the view that such healing was accomplished the agency of ascertainable psychological laws.

Being a rationalist, he accepts the theory of human evolution. Commenting on verse 71:17 "And God has caused you to grow out of the earth in[gradual]growth" he states:

It alludes to evolution of the human species, which starting from the most primitive organisms living on earth has gradually ascended to ever higher stages of development until it has reached that complexity of body, mind and soul evident in the human being.⁹⁴

In Surah al-Kahf, according to Asad, the parable of Moses and his quest for knowledge (verses 60-82) has become, in the course of time, the nucleus of innumerable legends with which we are not concerned here. We have, however, a Tradition on the authority of Ubayy ibn Ka'b (recorded in several versions by Bukhārī, Muslim and Tirmidhī), according to which Moses was rebuked by God for having once asserted that he was the wisest of all men, and was subsequently told through revelation that a "servant of God" who lived at the "junction of the two seas" was far superior to him in wisdom.⁹⁵

In Sūrah al-Fīl "the stones of sijjīl" is explained by Asad as follows: the particular chastisement to which the above verse alludes seems to have been a sudden epidemic of extreme virulence: according to Wāqidī and Muḥammad ibn Ishāq - the latter as quoted by Ibn Hishām and Ibn Kathīr - "this was the first time that spotted

fever (hasbah) and smallpox (judarī) appeared in the land of the Arabs”. It is interesting to note that the word hasbah - which, according to some authorities, signifies also typhus - primarily means “pelting [or smiting] with stones” (Qāmūs). - As regards the noun ṭā’ir (of which ṭayr is the plural), we ought to remember that it denotes any “flying creature”, whether bird or insect (Tāj al-’Arūs). Neither the Qur’ān nor any authentic Tradition offers us any evidence as to the nature of the “flying creatures” mentioned in the above verse; and since, on the other hand, all the “descriptions” indulged in by the commentators are purely imaginary, they need not be seriously considered. If the hypothesis of an epidemic is correct, the “flying creatures” - whether birds or insects - may well have been the carriers of the infection. One thing, however, is clear: whatever the nature of the doom that overtook the invading force, it was certainly miraculous in the true sense of this word - namely, in the sudden, totally unexpected rescue which it brought to the distressed people of Mecca.⁹⁶

Asad has referred to even Mu’tazilites in his footnotes, e.g. Qur’ānic Commentary of Abu `Ali al-Jubba’i, the famous Mu’tazili scholar who died in 303 H., which corresponds to 915 or 916 of the Christian era.⁹⁷ This has made his translation and commentary not acceptable for orthodoxy.

His Views on Crucifixion of Christ:

Muhammad Asad’s views regarding the end of worldly life of Jesus are different from viewpoints of orthodoxy. Both the Jews and the Christians believe in crucifixion of Jesus and they possess faith in his death on the cross but Ahmadis believe in his natural death. Muhammad Asad also holds the similar views regarding the death of Jesus. He translates verses 4:156-58 as follows:

And for their refusal to acknowledge the truth, and the awesome calumny which they utter against Mary, and their boast, “Behold, we have slain the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, [who claimed to be] an apostle of God!” However, they did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so; and, verily, those who hold conflicting views thereon are indeed confused, having no [real] knowledge thereof, and following mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they did not slay him: nay, God exalted him unto Himself - and God is indeed almighty, wise.⁹⁸

Commenting on these verses he says that the Qur’ān categorically denies the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. There exist, among Muslims, many fanciful legends telling us that at the last moment God substituted for Jesus a person closely resembling him (according to some accounts, that person was Judas), who was

subsequently crucified in his place. However, none of these legends finds the slightest support in the Qur'an or in authentic Traditions, and the stories produced in this connection by the classical commentators must be summarily rejected. They represent no more than confused attempts at "harmonizing" the Qur'anic statement that Jesus was *not* crucified with the graphic description, in the Gospels, of his crucifixion. The story of the crucifixion as such has been succinctly explained in the Qur'anic phrase *wa-lakin shubbiba lahum*, which I render as "but it only appeared to them as if it had been so" - implying that in the course of time, long after the time of Jesus, a legend had somehow grown up (possibly under the then-powerful influence of Mithraistic beliefs) to the effect that he had died on the cross in order to atone for the "original sin" with which mankind is allegedly burdened; and this legend became so firmly established among the latter-day followers of Jesus that even his enemies, the Jews, began to believe it - albeit in a derogatory sense (for crucifixion was, in those times, a heinous form of death-penalty reserved for the lowest of criminals).⁹⁹

Asad has translated the first portion of verse 3: 55 in the same way as Ahmad is interpret it. His translation runs: "Lo! God said: "O Jesus! "Verily, I shall cause thee to die, and shall exalt thee unto Me."¹⁰⁰

According to Asad the verb *rafa abu* (lit., "he raised him" or "elevated him") has always, whenever the act of *raf'* ("elevating") of a human being is attributed to God, the meaning of "honouring" or "exalting". Nowhere in the Qur'an is there any warrant for the popular belief that God has "taken up" Jesus bodily, in his lifetime, into heaven. The expression "God exalted him unto Himself" in the above verse denotes the elevation of Jesus to the realm of God's special grace - a blessing in which all prophets partake, as is evident from 19: 57, where the verb *rafa nabu* ("We exalted him") is used with regard to the Prophet Idris. (See also Muhammad 'Abduh in *Manar* III, 316 f., and VI, 20f.) The "nay" (*ba*) at the beginning of the sentence is meant to stress the contrast between the belief of the Jews that they had put Jesus to a shameful death on the cross and the fact of God's having "exalted him unto Himself".¹⁰¹

Muhammad Ali, a Lahori Ahmadi, has translated this verse as follows:

When Allah said: O Jesus! I shall cause you to die and exalt you in My presence.¹⁰²

Muhammad Zafrulla Khan has translated the verse as follows:

Allah reassured Jesus: I shall cause thee to die a natural death, and shall exalt thee to Myself.¹⁰³

Many Muslim scholars have translated the above-mentioned text in a different way.

(And remember) when Allah said: O Jesus! I am gathering you and causing you to ascend to Me.”-----Pickthall¹⁰⁴

Behold! God said: “I will take thee and raise thee to Myself...”. A. Yusuf ‘Ali ¹⁰⁵

God said, ‘Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me.’ ----- Abdel Haleem¹⁰⁶

Asad and Orientalists:

It is strange that Asad has avoided mentioning Western scholars who have levelled false charges against the Qur’ānic revelation and its recipient. He had read orientalists but never referred to them. In ‘Works of Reference’ he has only three Western sources. i.e., Authorized King James Version of the Bible, Encyclopaedia of Islam and Edward William Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon. ¹⁰⁷ He has alluded to Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon in his exegetical notes as well. ¹⁰⁸ Hanna E. Kassis criticizes Asad because he ‘overlooks Western scholarship’ notably Theodor Noldeke’s work which does not appear even in the Bibliography.¹⁰⁹ Actually Asad never mentioned Noldeke but he has referred to Suyūṭī’s “Al-Itqān fī Ulūm al-Qur’ān” ¹¹⁰ for deriving his discussion pertaining to chronology of surahs .However, he has analyses the Western approach towards the Qur’ān in his “Foreword” and differentiates between response of a non-Muslim Westerner and a believer in the following words:

Where the believer, reading the Qur’ān in Arabic, sees beauty, the non-Muslim reader often claim to discern “crudeness”; the coherence of the Qur’ānic world-view and its relevance to the human condition escape him altogether and assume the guise of what, in Europe’s and America’s orientalist literature, is frequently described as “incoherent rambling” and passages which, to a Muslim, are expressive of sublime wisdom, often sound “flat” and “uninspiring” to the Western ear.”¹¹¹

The Qur’ānic Philosophy:

Muhammad Asad possessed philosophical and rationalistic thinking .That is why, he has elucidated the philosophy of some Qur’ānic commandments. Commenting on verse 5:4 he writes that the permission to partake of the food of the followers of other revealed religions excludes, of course, the forbidden categories of meat enumerated in verse 3. As a matter of fact, the Law of Moses, too, forbids them explicitly; and there is no statement whatsoever in the Gospels to the effect that these prohibitions were cancelled by Jesus: on the contrary, he is reported to have said, “Think not that I have come to destroy the Law [of Moses]. .. : I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matthew v, 17). Thus, the latitude enjoyed by

post-Pauline followers of Jesus in respect of food does not correspond to what he himself practiced and enjoined.¹¹²

Asad explains the reason why Muslim men are allowed to marry women from among the followers of another revealed religion but Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslims: the reason being that Islam enjoins reverence of all the prophets, while the followers of other religions reject some of them e.g., the Prophet Muhammad or, as is the case with the Jews, both Muhammad and Jesus. Thus, while a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim can be sure that - despite all doctrinal differences - the prophets of her faith will be mentioned with utmost respect in her Muslim environment, a Muslim woman who would marry a non-Muslim would always be exposed to an abuse of him whom she regards as God's Apostle.¹¹³

About permission of polygamy and prohibition of polyandry Asad has given the following justification:

As regards the permission to marry more than one wife (up to the maximum of four), it is so restricted by the condition, "if you have reason to fear that you might not be able to treat them with equal fairness, then [marry only] one", as to make such plural marriages possible only in quite exceptional cases and under exceptional circumstances. Still, one might ask why the same latitude has not been given to women as well; but the answer is simple. Notwithstanding the spiritual factor of *love* which influences the relations between man and woman, the determinant *biological* reason for the sexual urge is, in both sexes, procreation: and whereas a woman can, at one time, conceive a child from one man only and has to carry it for nine months before she can conceive another, a man can beget a child every time he cohabits with a woman. Thus, while nature would have been merely wasteful if it had produced a polygamous instinct in woman, man's polygamous inclination is biologically justified. It is, of course, obvious that the biological factor is only one - and by no means always the most important - of the aspects of marital love: none the less, it is a basic factor and, therefore, decisive in the institution of marriage as such. With the wisdom that always takes human nature fully into account, Islamic Law undertakes no more than the safeguarding of the socio-biological function of marriage (which includes also care of the progeny), allowing a man to have more than one wife and not allowing a woman to have more than one husband at one time; while the spiritual problem of marriage, being imponderable and therefore outside the scope of law, is left to the discretion of the partners.¹¹⁴

In verses 81:8-9 the Holy Qur'ān has referred to the pre-Islamic cruel custom of burying young daughters alive as follows:

And when the girl-child that was buried alive is made to ask for what crime been slain¹¹⁵

Commenting on the verses he has elucidated the motives of this barbaric action and also mentioned the efforts to save innocent girls by some kind-hearted Arabs:

About burying alive of girl-child, he thinks that the barbaric custom of burying female infants alive seems to have been fairly widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia, although perhaps not to the extent as has been commonly assumed. The motives were twofold: the fear that an increase of female offspring would result in economic burdens, as well as fear of the humiliation frequently caused by girls being captured by a hostile tribe and subsequently preferring their captors to their parents and brothers. Before Islam, one of the foremost opponents of this custom was Zayd ibn Amr ibn Nufayl, a cousin of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and spiritually a precursor of Muhammad (cf. Bukhārī, *Fada'il Ashāb an-Nabī* on the authority of 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar); he died shortly before Muhammad's call to prophethood (*Faṭḥ al-Bārī* VII, 112). Another man, Sa'sa'ah ibn Najīyah at-Tamīmī - grandfather of the poet Farazdaq - achieved equal fame as a saviour of infants thus condemned to death; he later embraced Islam. Ibn Khallikān (II, 197) mentions that Sa'sa'ah saved about thirty girls by paying ransom to their parents."¹¹⁶

Finality of Prophethood:

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last apostle of God. The holy Qur'ān has underlined in it in al-Ma'idah 5:3 as follows:

Today have I perfected your religious law for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings, and willed that self-surrender unto Me shall be your religion."¹¹⁷

Commenting on this verse Asad writes:" According to all available Traditions based on the testimony of the Prophet's contemporaries, the above passage - which sets, as it were, a seal on the message of the Qur'ān - was revealed at 'Arafat in the afternoon of Friday, the 9th of Dhu '1-Hijjah, 10 H., eighty-one or eighty-two days before the death of the Prophet. No legal injunction whatsoever was revealed after this verse: and this explains the reference to God's having perfected the Faith and bestowed the full measure of His blessings upon the believers. Man's self-surrender (islam) to God is postulated as the basis, or the basic law, of all true religion (din): This self-surrender expresses: itself not only in belief in Him but also in obedience to His commands: and this is the reason why the announcement of the completion of the Qur'ānic message is placed

within the context of a verse containing the last legal ordinances ever revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.”¹¹⁸

In Surah al-Ahzab33:40, it has been underlined that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is Khatam al-Nabiyyin. According to Asad it means the last of the prophets, just as a seal (Khatam) marks the end of a document; apart from this, the term khatam is a synonymous with khitam, the “end” or “conclusion” of a thing: from which it follows that the message revealed through Muhammad—the Qur'an—must be regarded as the culmination and end of prophetic revelation.¹¹⁹ Muhammad Asad has commented on verse 2:252 that ‘ this appears to be an allusion to Muhammad inasmuch as he was the Last Prophet and the bearer of a universal message applicable to all people and to all times.’¹²⁰ Asad has spent a long time in the Indian subcontinent and was familiar with so-called ‘apostolic prophet ‘of Punjab whose name was Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani .He emphasised the belief in the finality of prophethood and rejected any claim for the office of prophethood after the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace and greeting.

Scientific Translation and Interpretation of Certain Verses:

Muhammad Asad was a rationalist who has translated and interpreted the verses pertaining to cosmology, zoology, botany, physics, astronomy and other sciences in a scientific manner. The Holy Qur'an has mentioned certain facts which have only recently been discovered by scientists .In verse 41:11, the origin of the universe has been underlined as follows:

And He [it is who] applied His design to the skies, which were [yet but] smoke; and He [it is who] said to them and to the earth, Come [into being], both of you, willingly or unwillingly!¹²¹

Asad has interpreted smoke (*dukhan*) as a gas—evidently hydrogen gas, which physicists regard as the primal element from which all material particles of the universe have evolved and still evolve.¹²² About the creation of the universe from homogeneous mass the Holy Qur'an has told in the verse 30 of *Sūrah al-Anbiya'* as:

Are, then, they who are bent on denying the truth not aware that the heavens and the earth were [once] one single entity, which We then parted asunder?¹²³

Asad commented on this verse as follows: “It is, as a rule, futile to make an explanation of the Qur'an dependent on “ scientific findings” which may appear true today, but may equally well be disapproved tomorrow by new findings .Nevertheless ,the above unmistakable reference to the unitary origin of the universe—metonymically modern astrophysicists that this universe has originated as one entity from one single element ,namely ,hydrogen,

which became subsequently consolidated through gravity and then separated into individual nebulae ,galaxies and solar systems, with further individual parts progressively breaking away to form new entities in the shape of stars, planets and the latter's satellites.”¹²⁴

Just to compare the scientific translation of Muhammad Asad, consider the following translation of verse 51:47 by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall:

“We have built the heaven with might, and We it is Who make the vast extent (of it).”¹²⁵

Now read Asad's rendering of the verse:

And it is We who have built the universe with [Our creative] power; and, verily, it is We who are steadily expanding it.¹²⁶

According to Asad the last phrase “*inna la-musi'un*” clearly foreshadows the modern notion of the “expanding universe”---that is, the fact that the cosmos, though finite in extent, is continuously expanding in space.¹²⁷

Here Asad's translation and commentary coincides with modern knowledge of cosmology but the translation by other translators only gives the literal meaning of the verse. About the creation of heavenly bodies it has been underlined in verses 71:15-16:

‘Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in full harmony with one another, and has set up within them the moon as a light [reflected] and set up the sun as a [radiant] lamp?

Asad tells his readers that the sun is described as “a [source of] radiant light” (*diyā'*) and the moon as “light [reflected]” (*nūr*).¹²⁸

In the first revelation the word “*al-'Alaq*” has been translated as blood-clot or congealed blood by most of the translators but Asad has rendered it into English as follows: “Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created – created man out of a germ-cell!”¹²⁹

Asad's comments on these verses are worth-reading: “The past tense in which the verb *kbalaqa* appears in these two verses is meant to indicate that the act of divine creation (*kbalaq*) has been and is being continuously repeated. It is also noteworthy that this very first Qur'ānic revelation alludes to man's embryonic evolution out of a “germ-cell.” - i.e., out of a fertilized female ovum - thus contrasting the primitiveness and simplicity of his biological origins with his intellectual and spiritual potential: a contrast which clearly points to the existence of a conscious design and a purpose underlying the creation of life.”¹³⁰

Holy Qur'ān has enumerated stages of in vivo human development in *Sūrah al-Mu'minūn* 23:12-14. Asad has rendered these verses into English as follows:

Now, indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, and then We cause him to remain as a drop of sperm in [the wombs] firm keeping

,and then We create out of the drop of sperm a germ-cell, and then We create out of the germ-cell an embryonic lump, and then We create within the embryonic lump bones, and then We clothe the bones with flesh - and then We bring [all] this into being as a new creation: hallowed, therefore, is God, the best of artisans.¹³¹

According to Asad the frequent Quranic references to man being “created out of clay or out of dust” or (as in this instance) “out of the essence (*sulalah*) of clay point to the fact that his body is composed of various organic and inorganic substances existing on or in the earth, as well as to the continuous transmutation of those substances, through the intake of earth-grown food, into reproductive cells (Rāzī - thus stressing man’s humble origin, and hence the debt of gratitude which he owes to God for having endowed him with a conscious soul. The past tense in verses 12 - 14 (lit., “We have created”, “We have caused him to remain”, etc.) emphasizes the fact that all this has been ordained by God and has been happening again and again ever since man was brought into being by Him; in the above context, this recurrence is brought out best by the use of the present tense. Asad elucidates ‘*aḥsan al-khāliqīn*’ as the best of creators. Quoting Tabarī he points out that the Arabs apply the designation “creator” to every artisan (*sani*) - a usage also current in European languages with reference to the “creation” of works of art and imagination. Since God is the only Creator in the real, primary sense of this word, the phrase *aḥsan al-khāliqīn* must be understood in this secondary sense of the term *khāliq*.¹³²

God has told about the organs producing male and female germ cells in *Sūrah at-Tāriq*. Consider the translation of verses 86:5-7:

Let man, then, observe out of what he has been created: he has been created out of a seminal fluid issuing from between the loins [of man] and the pelvic arch [of woman].¹³³

The plural noun *tara’ib*, has been rendered by Asad as “pelvic arch”¹³⁴ but other translators told its meaning as ‘ribs’¹³⁵ It has also the meaning of “ribs” or “arch of bones”; according to most of the authorities who have specialized in the etymology of rare Quranic expressions this term relates specifically to *female* anatomy.¹³⁶

About creation of primordial man and his mate, God said in the opening verse of *Sūrah an-Nisā*:

O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women.¹³⁷

Commenting on the verse Asad observes: “Out of the many meanings attributable to the term *nafs* - soul, spirit, mind, animate being, living entity, human being, person, self (in the sense of a personal identity), humankind, life-essence, vital principle, and so

forth - most of the classical commentators choose “human being”, and assume that it refers here to Adam. Muḥammad ‘Abduh, however, rejects this interpretation (*Manār* IV, 323 ff.) and gives, instead, his preference to “humankind” inasmuch as this term stresses the common origin and brotherhood of the human race (which, undoubtedly, is the purport of the above verse), without, at the same time, unwarrantably tying it to the Biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve. My rendering of *nafs*, in this context, as “living entity” follows the same reasoning - As regards the expression *ṣanjaba* (“its mate”), it is to be noted that, with reference to animate beings, the term *ṣanj* (“a pair”, “one of a pair” or “a mate”) applies to the male as well as to the female component of a pair or couple; hence, with reference to human beings, it signifies a woman’s mate (husband) as well as a man’s mate (wife). Abu Muslim - as quoted by Razi - interprets the phrase “He created out of it (*minhā*) its mate” as meaning “He created its mate [i.e., its sexual counterpart] out of its own kind (*min jinsihā*)”, thus supporting the view of Muhammad ‘Abduh referred to above. The literal translation of *minhā* as “out of it” clearly alludes, in conformity with the text, to the biological fact that both sexes have originated from “one living entity.”¹³⁸

In verse 36:80, it has been told: “He who produces for you fire out of the green tree, so that, lo! you kindle [your fires] therewith.”¹³⁹

According to Asad, the ancient Arabian proverb, “In every tree there is a fire” (Zamakhshari): evidently an allusion to the metamorphosis of green - i.e., water-containing - plants into fuel, be it through desiccation or man-made carbonization (charcoal), or by a millennial, subterranean process of decomposition into oil or coal.”¹⁴⁰

God has told about occurrence of pairs in the verse 36:36 as follow:

Limitless in His glory is He who has created opposites in whatever the earth produces, and in men’s own selves, and in that of which [as yet] they have no knowledge.¹⁴¹

According to Asad, it is a reference to the polarity evident in all creation, both animate and inanimate, which expresses itself in the existence of antithetic and yet complementary forces, like the sexuality in human beings, animals and plants, light and darkness, heat and cold, positive and negative magnetism and electricity, the positive and negative charges (protons and electrons) in the structure of the atom, and so forth. (It is to be borne in mind that the noun *ṣanj* denotes both “a pair” and “one of a pair”. The mention of “that of which they have no knowledge” evidently relates to things or

phenomena not yet understood by man but potentially within the range of his comprehension: hence my interpolation, between brackets, of the words” as yet”.¹⁴²

Scholars' Views About “The Message of the Qur’ān”:

Professor Isma’il Ibrahim Nawwab praises Muhammad Asad as follows:

He rose to unparalleled eminence among Western Muslims because none has contributed more than Asad to elucidating Islam as an ideology and conveying its quintessential spirit in contemporary terms to Muslims and non-Muslims alike—not even Pickthall (d. 1355/1936), “an Englishman of the English”, who can easily be credited with the most widely read translation of the Qur’ān undertaken by any English-writing convert, with brilliant writings on Islam and with wide-ranging services to the Muslims, sometimes rendered at great personal sacrifice.¹⁴³

Hanna E. Kassis says about Asad’s translation of the Qur’ān: The ability and erudition of the translator are evident throughout this book, which is addressed by a man of faith to those Muslims and non-Muslims who are incapable of reading the Holy Book in its Arabic original.¹⁴⁴

A.R. Kidwai observes in his article on survey of English translations of the Qur’ān: The Message of the Quran by Muhammad Asad (Gibraltar, 1980) represents a notable addition to the body of English translations couched in chaste English. This work is nonetheless vitiated by deviation from the viewpoint of the Muslim orthodoxy on many counts. Averse to take some Qur’ānic statements literally, Asad denies the occurrence of such events as the throwing of Abraham into the fire, Jesus speaking in the cradle, etc. He also regards Luqmān, Khizr and Dhulqarnain as ‘mythical figures’ and holds unorthodox views on the abrogation of verses. These blemishes apart, this highly readable translation contains useful, though sometimes unreliable background information about the Qur’ānic Sūras and even provides exhaustive notes on various Qur’ānic themes.¹⁴⁵

Gai Eaton who is a leading British thinker, has pointed out some of the limitations of Asad’s rationalistic approach but he has praised “The Message of the Qur’ān” in the following way:

In practical terms this is the most helpful and instructive version of the Qur’ān that we have in English. This remarkable man has done what he set out to do, and it may be doubted whether his achievement will ever be surpassed.¹⁴⁶

Murad Hofmann (b.1931) remarked about The Message of the Qur’ān:

It was the best, next only to Abdullah Yusuf Ali's and Marmaduke Pickthall's translations which are the most remarkable among the contemporary efforts to convey the message of the Qur'ān into English. Asad's...translation...has been further translated en toto into several languages such as Turkish and Swedish. His work is particularly appreciated for lucidity and precision of its commentary, based on his stupendous command of Bedouin Arabic. Readers appreciate perhaps most that Asad treats them as grown-ups. He exposes the root of the translation problem, relates other options (and the reasons given up for choosing them), and then explains reason(s) he preferred in his particular translation.¹⁴⁷

Abdin Chande wrote an article entitled "Symbolism and allegory in the Qur'ān: Muhammad Asad's modernist translation" in which he observed:

Muhammad Asad brings a modernist perspective to his translation of the Qur'ān, which at certain points diverges from traditional Muslim understandings of the text.¹⁴⁸

Khaleel Mohammed writes in his article "Assessing English Translations of the Qur'ān", "It remains one of the best translations available, both in terms of its comprehensible English and generally knowledgeable annotations."¹⁴⁹

Malise Ruthven has paid a glowing tribute to Asad's translation in the following way, "Muhammad Asad...has come as near as anyone to making the divine text intelligible to modern readers of the English language. That is an achievement for which future generations of Muslims and non-Muslims must always be grateful."¹⁵⁰

Dr Rashid Ahmad Jullundhri thinks that "Asad has successfully avoided the serious errors which other translators have made".¹⁵¹

The Asad's translation of the Holy Qur'ān is regarded as 'a labour of love' by J. Wansbrough¹⁵² and 'a valuable contribution' by John Haywood¹⁵³ While according to Neil Robinson, Muhammad Asad is scientific rationalist.¹⁵⁴

Kenneth Cragg states that every fair-minded reader will esteem Dr. Asad's labour of love and learning. In the growing number of English versions of the Muslim Book it will find a sure place and students will be well advised to take the plural opportunity they afford, thus to attain the unattainable.¹⁵⁵

According to Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem "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."¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

Muhammad Asad was an unparalleled scholar of Arabic language in the contemporary Western world. He possessed vast knowledge of *tafsir* and *hadith* literature. Being from the Jewish tradition with religious background he was also acquainted with the knowledge of previous scriptures. "The Message of the Qur'an" is a combination of *tafsir bi'l-rivāyah* or *tafsir bi'l-mathbūr* (interpretation by transmission) and *tafsir bi'l-dīrāyah* or *tafsir bi'l-rā'y* (interpretation by sound opinion). In his exegetical notes, he mostly relied on famous commentators and substantiated his point of view by quoting from them. However, he deviated from exegetical tradition in his footnotes on such verses in which the Prophetic miracles or super natural events have been underlined. He based such discussions on intellect rejecting any possibility of such events which is beyond the realm of cause and effect. Some of his explanatory notes on verses underlining scientific facts are worth reading but when he accepts theories as scientific facts, it becomes difficult for readers to agree with him. He was a modernist but different from modernists of Indian subcontinent who have rejected *hadith* literature altogether in their exegeses. For instance, Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and Ghulām Aḥmad Parvez did not rely on *hadith* for interpretation of the Holy Qur'an. Asad's views on creation of man, miracles, night journey (*isrā'*) of the Prophet (peace be upon him), jinn and allegory in the Qur'an are based on intellect where he put *tafsir* and *hadith* literature aside. His rationalistic approach in such discussions has made his work unacceptable for orthodox scholars.

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