Translation Of The Quran

The Quran brings down Islam in its entirety and resonates through time and place. It is defined as “the Arabic Speech of Allah, which He revealed to Muhammad (?) in wording and meaning, and which has been preserved in the mushafs, and has reached us by mutawaatir transmissions, and is a challenge to mankind to produce something similar to it” (Qadhi, 1999, p.25).

The Need For Translations

The Quran being reveled in Arabic posed a difficulty in its understanding for those who weren’t familiar with the Semitic tongue which thus called for its translations to be done in languages the people were familiar with. It is nearly impossible to translate the beauty and perfection of the Arabic language into any other and doing so, although necessary, causes mistakes and deviations from its correctness.

Scholars grant the sciences of translation the precept of fard kifayah (Qadhi, 1999).This resulted in a number of translations being done, which came to be critically acclaimed and some of them even accepted, like the works of Mirza Abul Fadl, Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, ‘Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Richard Bell, Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Taqiuddin al-Hilali, Muhammad Asad, T.B. Irving and many others (Nassimi, 2008).

In this essay, we shall look at the life of one the translators of the Quran, Muhammad Asad, his work, ‘The Message of Quran’, and in light of recent developments how his work, albeit extensive, couldn’t stand the test of time.

About The Translator

Born a Jew in Austria (1900-1992), Leopold Weiss was well versed in the Christian and Jewish scriptures. He became a journalist and travelled to many parts of the Arab world which broadened his views regarding the Jews and the Arabs. This opened up the doors of knowledge of Islam for him causing him to accept it. He went on to publish two other books, ‘Islam at the Crossroads’ and ‘The Road to Makkah’ apart from the Quran’s translation and a translation of a portion of Saheeh Bukhari (Muhammad Asad (1900-1992CE), 2014).

Overview

The translation done by Muhammad Asad is called ‘The Message of the Quran’. It contains parallel columns of the Arabic text and the English translation, reference materials, introduction, short commentaries (footnotes), introductions before each surah and four appendices, ‘Symbolism and allegory in the Quran’, ‘al-Muqatta’at’, ‘the term and concept of Jinn’ and ‘the night journey’(3).

‘The Message of Quran’, published in 1980 in Gibraltor, is widely used in academic circles and is renowned for its liberal approach in interpreting the Quran. Asad refers to the tafsir of Zamakshari and the views of Muhammad Abduh in many places and uses pleasant, easy and

impressive English literature (Asad, 2003; Philips, 1997).

Drawbacks Of Asad's Translation

Yaser Qadhi calls the book "an English translation with a Mu'tazilee perspective" (Qadhi, 1999, p.372). It is not a recommended read for the various misinterpretations present in it with regards to miracles performed by the prophets, matters of aqeedah, fiqh, concept of the jinn and various other matters. Due to these mishaps, his translation was refused by the Saudi government and its publication had been denied by the Muslim World League (Philips, 1997).

In the following portions we will look at some of the mistakes that Muhammad Asad made in his translation of the verses and the footnotes that accompany these verses.

1. Renouncing the truth of certain figures mentioned in the Quran and authentic ahadeeth (Asad, 2003) (Nassimi, 2008) (al-Hilali & Khan, 1983):
    - Footnote 12 of Surah Luqman verse 12- Asad calls Luqman a legendary sage who was in fact a myth.
    - Footnote 73 and 80 of Surah al-Kahf verse 65 and verse 82- Asad calls Al-Khidr an allegorical and legendary figure who also happened to be a mystic.
    - In verse 83 of Surah Kahf, Asad translates "Dhul Qarnayn" as "the two horned one" and in its footnote 81, Asad describes the meaning of the two horns and then goes on to claim that it is an example of Quranic allegory (myth) and has only been mentioned due to his characteristics.
2. Disclaiming the miracles and stories of the prophets (Asad, 2003) (Nassimi, 2008) (al-Hilali & Khan, 1983):
    - Footnote 24 of Surah Maryam verse 30- Asad refers to the miracle of Prophet Isa speaking in the cradle as an allusion to the future and that it was in fact said at a later time i.e. it was an anticipation of what the prophet's life would be like in the future.
    - In verse 55 of Surah Aal Imran, Asad translates "I will take you" to "I shall cause you to die" in the case of Prophet Isa thus asserting the death of the Prophet.
    - Footnote 64 of Surah al-Anbiya verse 69- Asad claims that Prophet Abraham was never thrown in the fire and that the fire alludes to the trials and tribulations that the Prophet would have to face in his life.
3. Matters of Fiqh (Asad, 2003) (Nassimi, 2008) (al-Hilali & Khan, 1983):
    - In verse 30 of Surah an-Noor and its footnote 38 (concerning matters of hijab), Asad refers to khumur as "head coverings" that should cover the women's breasts only whereas khumur stands for "veils"

Conclusion

The requirement and need for the translated works of the Quran is a necessity for the message of Islam to spread as far and wide as imaginable. Although the scholars try their best to stick as close to the truth as possible, the probability of mistakes or deficiencies occurring while translating from one language to another is inevitable. The most common reason for mistakes done by Muslim translators are (Qadhi, 1999):

- Insufficient or incorrect understanding of a word

- Misunderstanding in the intention of the verse
- Ignorance of the grammatical rules in Arabic