

# The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Editor-in-Chief**

**General Editors: Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard**

**Assistant Editor: Mohammed Rustom**

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The burgeoning field of Quranic studies has at last found the criterion by which to gauge all future endeavors at translating and commenting on the lodestone of Muslim belief and devotion, the Quran. Rather than a single scholarly translator, *The Study Quran* is a collaborative effort involving five scholars and requiring their coordinated labor for nearly a decade. In its Chief Editor's words, it is a collective endeavor "to produce the best translation possible" (p. xliii) of the Quran into English, along with extensive commentary, annotation, maps, and supplementary essays. (The essays, fifteen in all numbering over 250 pages, warrant a further review but they will be excluded from what follows in order to stress major features of the translation with commentary, the core element of *The Study Quran*.)

There have been several efforts in the past to collaborate on Quran translations into English. Some have come from two individuals working in tandem. Major ones include: Muhammad Baqir Behbudi with Colin Turner, *The Quran: A New Interpretation* (1997), Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of Its Meaning in English* (1999), and especially, Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi ud-din al-Hilali, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Quran* (1977/1999). This last item, sponsored by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has been the most widely distributed English translation for more than two decades, eclipsing not only other translations from elsewhere but also another Saudi-based endeavor: William Davut Peachy and Manneh al-Johani, *The Quran: The Final Book of God—A Clear English Translation of the Glorious Quran* (2012).

There have also been larger collectives – of three or more scholarly translators – attempting to render the Quran into English. Some have come from abroad, such as Ali Ozek, Ali, N. Uzunoglu, R. Topuzoglu, and M. Maksutoglu, *The Holy Quran with English translation* (1992), Saheeh International, *The Quran: English Meanings and Notes*

(1997), a translation by three American women converts with links to Saudi Arabia: Amatullah J. Bantley, Umm Muhammad Aminah Assami, and Mary J. Kennedy; *The Majestic Quran* (2000), translated by a committee that included Cambridge professor Timothy Winter, the American Muslim writer Uthman Hutchinson, and Mostafa al-Badawi; and most recently, Edip Yuksel, with Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafeh, *The Quran: A Monotheist Translation* (2012).

What distinguishes *The Study Quran* is not merely its collective authorship but the scope and scale of its ambition. The Editor-in-Chief, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, has relied on three general editors, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, and Joseph Lumbard, along with an assistant editor, Mohammed Rustom, to fashion a massive work of many parts. Its translation is dwarfed by the commentary that explains minor as well as major elements in the Qur'anic text from a nuanced, trans-sectarian perspective. Nowhere else in the vast inventory of works interpreting the Quran for English readers can one find a series of reflections that provide reference to Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi and philosophical commentaries, each valorized and often combined in a single entry. For instance, the word *imam* is crucial to Shi'i Muslims since they accord absolute authority to the biological descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Even while recognizing that perspective, the commentary on *imam* (Q 17:71 passim) also acknowledges *imams* at large in a variety of functions. The commentary on this term alone is nearly a page (715-716), but that is miniscule next to commentary on "the story of the cranes". Related to the Satanic verses controversy, the debate about *gharaniq* (cranes) derives from, and relates to, traditional commentaries on two Qur'anic passages: Q 22:52, & Q 53:19-23. *The Study Quran* explores at length both the tenacity and dubious nature of prior commentaries on Q 22:58, as also the revelation of Q53:19-20, which seems to suggest that three goddesses – Al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and Manat – are to be considered as divine signs. This commentary alone extends over three pages (842-844), providing a fuller temporal and theological analysis that one can find elsewhere. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (1980/2003), for instance, only mentions that the three goddesses were worshipped as Allah's daughters by pagan Arabs; he never touches on "the story of the cranes" or the Satanic verses controversy (926:n.13 &14)).

There are some surprising gaps, more omission of detail than factual error or disguised bias. Consider the initial discussion of *al-Fatihah* (the Opening). It sets the tone for the rest of the commentary on this pivotal *surah*. There is a fulsome Preface that gives the several alternate names of the Opening (including *al-Sab' al-mathbani*, the seven oft-repeated, 15:87) as also its significant use in Muslim ritual, both Shi'i and Sunni, as well as on other occasions. Included are hadiths, reports relating the words or deeds of the Prophet. One cited to underscore the centrality of the *Fatihah* comes when Muhammad is asked which *surah* is the most important. He replies: "It is *Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds, the seven oft-repeated, and the Mighty Quran* [15:87] that I was given."<sup>(4)</sup> If one then looks at the subsequent commentary on Q 15:87, one finds the assertion: "Some say that *the seven oft-repeated*, refers to the first seven *surahs* of the Quran, but many others believe it refers to the first *surah* of the Quran, the *Fatihah*, which consists

of seven verses **if one counts as a verse the opening formula** *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful* (see 1:1c).”(652:n.87; my emphasis added).

Yet the commentary on 1:1c (5) refers neither to *the seven oft-repeated* nor to the debate about whether or not the *basmalah* (that is, *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*) counts as **the first verse in the *Fatibah***. Instead, we are plunged into a related but different debate: “as to whether the *basmalah* is a verse of each *surah* or an indication of the beginning of a new *surah*” (1:1c). The more pointed question is: who counts the *basmalah* as a verse solely in the *Fatibah* and why? Far from being a minor issue, this one is major for those concerned with parsing the lyrical weight of the *Fatibah* in Arabic. Phonological harmony requires that the *basmalah* be counted as a verse here (otherwise, the rhyme scheme of *-him, -min, -him, -din, -in, -qim*, and *-lin* is broken). Considerations of rhythmic sound and lyrical recitation inform the Hanafi *madhhab*, one of the four major Sunni schools of law: it requires that the *basmalah* be counted only in the *Fatibah*, and not in subsequent chapters where it appears at the head of all (except *Surat al-Tawbah*, where its absence is deftly explained in the Preface (503-4)).

Especially strange is the further failure to mark *sab' al-mathbani*, or better, *sab'un min al-mathbani*, as an item to be discussed first in Arabic, then in English. One of the features of *The Study Quran* is a recurrent reference to original Arabic words that cannot easily be rendered as single word or even multiple word equivalents in English. In *Surat al-Tawbah* alone, there are three words that are left in the original Arabic, then explained in the commentary: *hajj* (v.3), *jizyah* (v. 29), and *nasi'* (v. 37), in addition to *surah* (vv. 64, 86, 124, 127), which here as in every other instance is left untranslated. No one could or would dispute the importance of each of these terms, but the practice of leaving them untranslated underscores the extent to which this is not a text that affords pleasure for its reading in English as it has during past centuries, and still does today, for those who read, and recite, it in Arabic. In M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Quran* (2004), for instance, none of these terms except *surah* is left untranslated: *hajj* is rendered as Great Pilgrimage, *jizyah* as tax, *nasi'* as postponing.

The comparison with Abdel Haleem is germane at another level. His translation too has been produced for a mass-market, and it is likely that many who have read Abdel Haleem, both in the 2004 version and the later 2010 version that comes with a parallel Arabic text, will now turn to *The Study Quran* for further insight into the majesty and mystery of Islam's scriptural bedrock.

The question about the Arabicized English comes as just one of several points of comparison/contrast between Abdel Haleem and S.H. Nasr. The latter is wedded to a traditional approach, and that shapes not just the choice of commentaries (where no modernist is used or even cited) but also the choice of language. *The Study Quran* is unabashed in its appeal to archaic English usage. Especially when referring to the Prophet, thees and thous, thys and thines abound. Consider Q 33:50a, detailing relations between the Prophet and his wives. In *The Study Quran*, it is rendered: “O Prophet! We have made lawful for thee thy wives to whom thou has given their bridewealth, as well

as those whom thy right hand possesses of those whom God has granted thee as spoils of war, etc.” In Abdel Haleem the same verse reads: “Prophet, We have made lawful for you the wives whose dowry you have paid, and any slaves God has assigned to you through war, etc.”

In fairness, one should note that rendering all pronouns referring to the Prophet in archaic usage sometimes helps clarify the distinction between Muhammad and others when *both* are being addressed in the same verse. Abdel Haleem, for example, has to provide parenthetical signals to indicate who is the audience of the divine directive in Q 10:61a: “In whatever matter you [Muhammad] may be engaged and whatever part of the Quran you are reciting, whatever work you [the people] are doing, We witness you when you are engaged in it. . . .” *The Study Quran* can, and does, avoid parentheses in rendering the same passage: “Thou are not upon any task, nor does thou recite any part of the Quran, nor do you perform any deed, save that We are a Witness over you when you engage therein. . . .”

Whichever of the two renditions a discerning reader may prefer, it is important to note that each has precedents within previous translations of the Quran into English. The move to distinguish Muhammad from a general audience for this verse, and numerous others, goes back at least to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (1937), still the most popular, the most oft printed and the best selling translation of the Quran. Here is Yusuf Ali’s rendition of Q 10:61a: “In whatever business thou mayest be, and whatever portion thou mayest be reciting from the Quran, - and whatever deed ye (mankind) may be doing, - We are witnesses thereof when ye are deeply engrossed therein.” Though *The Study Quran* prefers ‘you’ to ‘ye’ and omits the parenthetical (mankind), its translation follows the trajectory of Yusuf Ali. [S.H.Nasr does acknowledge having consulted six well-known translations, of which Yusuf Ali is the first, yet he also asserts that “our rendition is based on the Arabic text itself and not on any previous translation”(p. xliii). Ironically, Yusuf Ali himself was dependent on an earlier translator, one not usually cited since he was Ahmadi in his filiation. Maulana Muhammad Ali (1917) translates the same passage as: “And thou are not (engaged) in any affair and thou recitest not concerning it any portion of the Quran, and you do no work, but We are Witness of you when you are engaged therein.” For this and more than 40 other translations of the Quran into English, see <http://www.islamawakened.com/>).

Similarly, the alternative practice of retaining the pronoun you and using parentheses for *both* addressees has a genealogy, though much shorter. It is offered in Saheeh International (1997) in this form: “And, [O Muhammad], you are not [engaged] in any matter or recite any of the Quran and you [people] do not do any deed except that We are witness over you when you are involved in it. . . .” (also found on <http://www.islamawakened.com/>).

What needs to be stressed again and again is the significant ways in which every translation is also ipso facto a commentary, even when no commentary per se is provided. One of the several benefits of the extensive commentary after nearly every verse in *The Study Quran* is to make explicit the choice of translation, and so for Q 10:61a, we

are told why one of the major traditional commentators, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, deemed the recitation of the Quran to be one of the many tasks of the Prophet Muhammad (558 bottom left). This close reading helps us understand why many reviewers have been unhappy with poetic renditions of the Quran that omit any commentary, yet often make choices that reflect the absence of attention to the weight and authority of traditional commentaries. Two examples on the verse just cited underscore this point. They come from Thomas Cleary, *The Quran – A New Translation* (2004) and Tarif Khalidi, *The Quran – A New Translation* (2008):

And whatever business you take part in,  
and whatever you read from the Quran,  
and whatever deed you do,  
We are witnessing you  
As you are immersed therein. (Cleary)

Whatsoever you are engaged in,  
Whatever portion of the Quran you recite,  
Whatever work you do,  
Yet still We are witnesses over you the instant you embark  
upon it. (Khalidi)

Neither Cleary nor Khalidi makes any distinction between the addressees of this verse, and so they stand in opposition to both Abdel Haleem and S.H.Nasr as well as to many other translators Muslim and non-Muslim. (Again, for comparison, consult <http://www.islamawakened.com/>).

Vast are the choices facing translators, commentators, critics and believers when they face a text as compelling and elusive as the Quran. A.J. Arberry, whose rendition is cited as one of the six consulted by S.H.Nasr and his team, observed that no rendering prior to his own (1955) had made “a serious attempt to imitate, however imperfectly, those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and the sublimity of the Koran” (25). While one will not find a sequel or rival to Arberry in *The Study Quran* translation, every reader will be illumined in her or his quest to plummet its layers of meanings through the capacious commentary: its careful attention to intertextual references is matched only by its consistent affirmation of a universal message of Mercy from its source and its messenger. Both are without precedent and also likely without successor, at least in the foreseeable future. No one will be able to offer a basic course on Islam, or to propose an in depth study of the Quran, without reference to this monumental achievement by a team of devoted scholars.

**Bruce B. Lawrence**  
*Duke University*