"IF THE BOOK IS READ WITH THE SERIOUSNESS AND ATTENTION IT MERITS, IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO HAVE AS PROFOUND AND FAR-REACHING AN IMPACT ON RELIGION, SOCIETY, GOVERNMENT AND HUMAN RELATIONS AS CHARLES DARWIN'S ORIGIN OF SPECIES EVENTUALLY CAME TO HAVE ON SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL THOUGHT NEARLY A CENTURY AND A HALF EARLIER."

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DRIVING ISLAM HOME TO THE WORLD -- ONE CONCEPT AT A TIME!
How to Read a Translation of the Qur’an

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The first thing you do, when you pick up a translation of the Qur’an to read, is to realize that the Qur’an is Qur’an. It is God’s word. And there is nothing like it in this world. And now you hold a translation of it in your hands.

The second thing is to realize that what you have in your hand is only a translation. It is not the real thing, but only a human approximation to the real thing. And no matter how good it may be, it is still only a translation. It is a feeble and often flawed human attempt to render in human language words and content that are entirely divine, and which, therefore, are beyond all human power to translate, emulate or duplicate.

As a result, the translation you have in your hands is nothing like the original Qur’an in the Arabic language, but only an approximation of the original.

God, in his infinite wisdom, chose Arabic language to reveal the Qur’an in; and he chose Prophet Muhammad (May God bless him!) to reveal the Qur’an to. God also chose the words, the content and the style in which the Qur’an exists today; and he determined and ordained the order in which to arrange the various parts and passages of the Qur’an.

All this was 1400 years ago.

Ever since, the Qur’an has existed - all of these 14 centuries - in the form in which it was originally revealed and in the order in which it was arranged by God Almighty himself. Today, hundreds of millions of people of all colors, races, nationalities, backgrounds and ethnicities, in practically all parts of the world, read the Qur’an every day. They do so at least five times a day in the compulsory prayers or worship called Salaah.

It is nothing short of a miracle. And there is nothing like it in the world.

At the same time, millions upon millions of people around the globe memorize the Qur’an, cover to cover, and can recite it verbatim anytime, anywhere- all 6000-7000 passages of the Qur’an called Aayats.

Once again, this is nothing short of a miracle and there is nothing like it in the world.

As the revelations were brought to him by the angel, the Prophet (May God bless him!), a man unlettered and unschooled in any form or fashion, except through what God himself chose to teach him directly, read out the parts and passages of the Qur’an to others - just as they were given to him from God. These parts of the Qur’an were then memorized by those around him. And everyone recited them at least five times a day, every day, in their obligatory daily prayers.

It is nothing short of a miracle and the world has seen nothing like it.

The Prophet (May God bless him!) called those around him his companions - a most amazing display of human equality at the highest level that the Qur’an came to teach the world. The world, however, caught up in its social differences and status hierarchies and inequalities, refers to them to this day
as his followers.

The companions of the prophet were some of the most wonderful men and women of all ages and backgrounds that the world has ever seen. The Prophet (May God bless him!) taught them the Qur’an; he explained its meaning to them; and he showed them in practice how the Qur’an worked in real life. Then he set about building a new society and a new nation based on the teachings of the Qur’an – a new nation under God whose creed was justice, compassion, equality, peace and truth.

The Qur’an addresses human life at all levels and in all facets and dimensions – individual as well as collective; personal as well as social; political as well as economic and cultural; mundane and physical as well as sublime and spiritual. From marriage and divorce to war and peace, and from trade and commerce to government and public service, the Qur’an does not leave out any area or aspect of human life without providing direct divine light to illumine it, and without having the Prophet illustrate it in practical form in his own life.

The Qur’an teaches people to walk softly on earth and speak sweetly to others. It asks believers to honor their word and fulfill their contracts. It invites everyone not only to fear God but also to love and obey him and to serve his creation.

At the hands of the Prophet (May God bless him!) and his companions, the Qur’an became a living, walking, talking, breathing, vibrant human reality, covering the entire gamut of human life. The result was that the Qur’an changed the world, and it did so in less than 23 years.

The Prophet (May God bless him!) and his companions changed the world from one of ignorance to one of knowledge; from one of injustice and cruelty to one of kindness, compassion, fairness, justice and equality; from one of superstition and blind obedience to authority to one of enlightenment, rationality, critical inquiry and science; from one of slavery and bondage of both mind and body – to one of liberty, dignity and freedom for all; and from one given to idolatry to one devoted to the worship of one true God.

Ever since, much of human history has been pretty much a story of the rest of the world trying to catch up with the teachings and principles of the Qur’an. It is a story of the systematic emulation and absorption, in society after society, in culture after culture, and in age after age, of the wonderful principles and teachings that God revealed in the Qur’an and the Prophet (May God bless him!) then converted, under direct divine guidance and supervision, into personal, social, family, political, government, economic, military, trade, educational, international and other models and methods of everyday life – from the most private and personal levels to the most public and collective levels.

Thus, from beginning to end the Qur’an is a miracle. As is everyone of its individual passages called Aayats – all 6000-7000 of them. An Aayat means a sign that says that a book like the Qur’an could only come from God and no human mind could have invented it. An Aayat means a miracle, in the sense of its being an event whose likelihood is infinitesimal – something whose probability of occurrence is extremely small.

Many of the miracles of the Qur’an we can see with our own eyes. Having seen them, we need to ask where we stand in relation to them. Do we accept them and embrace the Qur’an as the word of God? Or do we – even as God shows us his signs and miracles in the Qur’an – turn our back on them and reject them?

That means, for example, with regard to each one of the claims below we need to ask if it is true or false. If these claims are false then the makers of these claims have a problem. For, obviously they
are promoting falsehood. If, on the other hand, they are true, then those of us who read them have a problem. For, we are left with no alternative but to accept them and accept the Qur’an as the word of God.

Here are some of those simple miracles in the Qur’an – self-evident and compelling:

1. The first message revealed by God in the Qur’an was: Read! – “Iqra’!” This was 1400 years ago, at a time when reading material was scarce; libraries a rarity; printing unknown; and reading mostly the prerogative of the rich and the powerful such as royalty, nobility and clergy. The world since then has been evolving in the direction of this divine commandment of “Iqra’!” – Read! The world now does what the Qur’an commanded it to do 14 centuries ago.
2. The Qur’an refers to itself as “The Book.” A book, in the burning desert of Arabia, 1400 years ago, at the hands of a man who could neither read or write?
3. The word “Qur’an” itself means reading; or to read; or something to read or to be read. Talking about reading at that time, in that place and environment, and naming a book “Reading”? How can a human mind come up with something like that? The Qur’an set the trend that the rest of the world was to adopt in later centuries.
4. The Qur’an says that God taught human beings through “the pen.” There is an entire chapter in the Qur’an called “The Pen.” And not a single mention of the word sword! And this in a world of 7th Century? It does not make sense unless you believe in the divine origin and miraculous nature of the Qur’an.
5. The Qur’an refers to human collectivity with that most amazing of all names, “The People” – not mankind, even though that is what unfortunately you may find in some of the translations, but “The People.” And it does so consistently every time – well over 200 times. The world has finally caught up with the Qur’an on this issue.
6. The Qur’an refers to the sun as the lamp and to the moon as the light – and it does so consistently every time.
7. The Qur’an says God made every living thing out of water.
8. The Qur’an invites human beings to reflect and to reason their way to the discovery of truth and their way to God.

The list goes on. The entire Qur’an, as you read it, is one miracle after another that challenges the reader to stop and to reflect and to decide.

Therefore, what you have in your hands is not an ordinary book. It is God’s abiding miracle that he chose to place in our mortal hands out of love and compassion for us. Yet it is not the actual Qur’an, but only an English rendering of its passages – a mere translation.

It is not possible for human minds to fathom or translate the word of God in any language. A translation, no matter how well done, is only an attempted approximation to the real thing. It is limited by the background, culture, abilities, skills and understanding of not only the individuals doing it but also of the time and culture in which the attempt is undertaken.

A classic example is translating the word An-Naas as “Mankind,” just because that was the prevailing expression at the time of the translation. But the Qur’an itself has nothing to do with that expression: “Mankind.”

Qur’an’s own word An-Naas is gender-inclusive. It applies equally to men as well as to women. The only word that comes close to it in the English language is “people.” The word An-Naas was given to us by God at a time when our own English language did not have anything even closely resembling it. In fact that was a time when what we know as English language today was still in its prenatal stages in the wombs of Latin, French and several other parent languages.
The story of the world, therefore, has been one of trying to catch up with that divine concept and expression – An-Naas. If the Qur’an had given the world nothing but this one word, or if the Qur’an had given the world nothing but the commandment that says “Read!” the world will still be in Qur’an’s debt forever.

The question, therefore, is what do you do when you hold a copy of the Qur’an translation in your hand? I don’t know how many people have ever asked this question of themselves, but it is a question worth asking. The answer is simple: Let us just read it! And let us do so, however, with the greatest humility and respect and with the clearest heart and mind.

And that is quite possibly the single most important thing we will ever do in our life: reading the Qur’an.

If possible, take a shower or a bath. Make sure your body is clean. Make sure your clothes are clean. Wash your hands and mouth and face. And then ask God to protect you from the Devil. And then begin in the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate and full of grace.

And then be aware that you are reading the word of God – even though you may be reading it only in translation form and therefore many levels and several degrees removed from the original Arabic text. Yet, in picking up his book to read, you are more directly and immediately in the presence of God than you have ever been before.

Ask God to guide and help you. Ask him to open your eyes, heart and mind to his light. And then read with great humility and respect. But at the same time, keep your critical and reasoning human faculties about you. At every stage ask yourself if in the light of what you know, whatever you were reading was true; if it made sense; and if it sounded logical and reasonable and practical.

Allow yourself to be intrigued by what you read. When you read something that you do not understand, investigate and research it further. Do not be afraid to reason through and question what you read. But do so respectfully and with a view to find the truth – and not to score points.

God’s word is clear and robust enough to withstand any light you may shine upon it. In fact, the more light you shine upon it, the more that light will reflect back upon your own heart and soul and illumine them – provided you are truthful and honest and you leave your common human arrogance and partisanship behind.

So, as you read the translation of the Qur’an, reason and question and rationally and critically inquire your way through to God’s light and guidance. And be mindful all the time that what you have in your hands is only a translation – and not the real thing.

After that it is you and your God – each alone and face-to-face with the other. No one can get between the two of you. And that is the most wonderful place for anyone to be – alone with God Almighty, the most merciful, the most compassionate and loving, and the most full of grace and bounty.

If you truly want to find him and go to him, and then he, on his part, wants to have you, there is no one and nothing that will stop you from getting to him. If that does not happen, that means you have not received the invitation from him. That means you are not on his priority list; and it is not yet time for you to be accepted by him.

Somehow you have allowed the Devil to cloud your judgment; to pollute your heart and mind; to clog the arteries of your soul; and to arrest your progress toward God. If at this stage panic and fear grip you, it is a most natural thing to happen. And it could be a good thing – provided you make sure your
panic and fear make you run to god and not away from him.

Throw yourself at God’s mercy. Evidently, your only recourse now, as always, is God and his mercy and grace. You must now double and redouble your efforts and your supplications to him to help and guide you and have mercy on you. His mercy, he says in his book, is not far from good people.

At the same time, don’t hesitate to talk things over with those whose knowledge, judgment and integrity you trust. And then watch the torrents of divine mercy pour down on you and around you.

May God’s “As-Salaam” – peace, blessings and all the wonderful things of this world and the next world – and his Rahmah (mercy, love and grace) cover and envelope those who seek, pursue and embrace his guidance!

END

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