

Beginners Guide to the Quran (part 2 of 3)

Description: A three-part lesson for beginners focusing on basic issues they face when approaching the Quran. Part 2: With regards to the translation and explanation of the Quran.

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Objectives

- To understand the difference between the text of the Quran and its translation.
- To be aware of the kinds of translations available in the market.
- To understand the importance of the exegesis of the Quran and its specific methodology.

Arabic Terms

- *Salah* - the Arabic word to denote a direct connection between the believer and Allah. More specifically, in Islam it refers to the formal five daily prayers and is the most important form of worship.
- *Tafseer* - exegesis, particularly such commentary on the Quran.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.

Translations of Quran

A beginner should know a few points about Quran translations.

First, there is a distinction between the Quran and its translation. In Christian view, the Bible is Bible, no matter what language it may be in. But a translation of the Quran is not the word of Allah, for the Quran is the exact Arabic words spoken by God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, through Gabriel. The word of God is only the Arabic Quran as Allah says:

“Indeed, I revealed it as an Arabic Quran.” (Quran 12:2)

A translation is simply an explanation of the meanings of the Quran. The translated text loses the inimitable quality of the original so be aware of the degree to which a translation reflects the original message at every level of meaning, and that it will probably not match it. For this reason, all which is regarded as recitation of the Quran is to be done

in Arabic, such as the recitation of the Quran in *salah*.

Second, there is no perfect translation of the Quran and being human works, each almost always has errors. Some translations are better in their linguistic quality, while others are noted for their exactness in portraying the meaning. Many inaccurate, and sometimes misleading, translations that are generally not accepted as reliable renditions of the Quran by mainstream Muslims are sold in the market.

Third, while a review of all the English translations is out of the scope of this lesson, some translations are recommended over others. The most widely read English translation is by Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, followed by that of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, the first translation by an English Muslim. Yusuf 'Ali's translation is generally acceptable, but his footnote commentary, useful at times, can be odd and unacceptable. Pickthall, on the other hand, has no footnotes or commentary and that makes it difficult for a beginner. The language of both tends to be archaic and difficult to understand for some people. Another widespread translation is done by Dr. Hilali and Muhsin Khan called 'Interpretation of the Meaning of The Noble Quran.' Although it is the most accurate, the many transliterated Arabic terms and endless parentheses makes it hard to follow and confusing for a beginner. A newer version with more flowing text has been published by Saheeh International, and this is probably the best translation yet, as it combines both exactness in translation and readability.

Exegesis (*Tafseer* in Arabic)

Although the meanings of the Quran are easy and clear to understand, one must be careful to make assertions about the religion without relying on an authentic commentary. Not only did Prophet Muhammad bring the Quran, he also explained it to his companions, and these sayings have been collected and preserved till this day. Allah, the Exalted, says:

“And We have sent down to you (O Muhammad) the message that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them.” (Quran 16:44)

In order to understand some of the deeper meanings of the Quran, one should rely upon commentaries which mention these statements of the Prophet as well as his companions, and not upon what they understand from the text, as their understanding of it is limited to their prior knowledge.

A specific methodology exists for exegesis of the Quran in order to extract the proper meaning. The Quranic sciences, as they are called, are an extremely specialized field of Islamic scholarship which requires mastery in multiple disciplines, like exegesis, recitations, script, inimitability, circumstances behind revelation, abrogation, Quranic grammar, unusual terms, jurisprudential rulings, and Arabic language and literature. A person new to the exploration of Quran should approach it with humility.

According to scholars of *tafseer*, the proper method of explaining the verses of Quran are:

- (i) *Tafseer* of the Quran by Quran.
- (ii) *Tafseer* of the Quran by the *Sunnah* of the Prophet.
- (iii) *Tafseer* of the Quran by the statements of the Companions.
- (iv) *Tafseer* of the Quran by Arabic language.
- (v) *Tafseer* of the Quran by scholarly opinion if it does not contradict the above four sources.

A final word of advice to the beginner: keep notes, write down what questions arise during your reading, and finally turn to those who have proper knowledge about the religion and accept their explanation if it is based on evidence.

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