

A Case for keeping Arabic text with the translation of Holy Quran

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People hold varying opinions on whether each translation of the holy Quran should be accompanied by the Arabic text or not. However if you search for, "The Quran in English only", you can find a number of English only translations of the holy Quran. This prompted me to bring to light some of my own experiences that may indicate to some the importance of keeping the Arabic text with the translation of the holy Quran.

Somewhere towards the end of 1984 someone suggested that I memorize Surah Yusuf (Chapter 12 of the holy Quran). It took me a few days to memorize it. I had a copy of the holy Quran with Sir Zafrullah Khan's (RA) translation and would usually look up the translation. It was quarter of a century ago, I had good memory. So I could compare translations of similar phrases and of course I had some knowledge of Arabic having lived and worked in Libya for a while.

I got stuck at the translations of two verses: [12:32] and [12:51]. The reasons for my confusion were the words: **قطعن ايديهن** which mean in ordinary translation: They (those females) cut their hands. But Sir Zafrullah (RA) had used two different meanings in the above mentioned verses and those were not close to the ordinary meanings. Let me copy the verses and translations below. Since the translations are grouped I have included [12:32] and [12:52] as well; yet I have enclosed within quotes the translations in question.

[12:31]:

وَقَالَ نِسْوَةٌ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ
تُرَادُ فَتَاهَا عَنِ نَفْسِهِ ۗ قَدْ شَغَفَهَا
حُبًّا ۗ إِنَّا نَنْزِيلُهَا فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣١﴾

فَلَمَّا سَمِعَتْ بِمَكْرِهِنَّ أَرْسَلَتْ
إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَعْتَدَتْ لَهُنَّ مُتَّكَأً وَآتَتْ كُلَّ
وَاحِدَةٍ مِّنْهُنَّ سِكِّينًا وَقَالَتِ اخْرُجْ
عَلَيْهِنَّ ۚ فَلَمَّا رَأَيْنَهُ أَكْبَرْنَهُ وَقَطَّعْنَ
أَيْدِيَهُنَّ وَقُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا هَذَا بَشَرًا
إِن هَذَا إِلَّا مَلَكٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٣٢﴾

[12:32]

[12:31-32] Some of the women in the town began to gossip: The wife of the Aziz seeks to seduce her slave boy. She must be infatuated with him. We consider this great folly on her part. When the gossip reached her ears she invited them to a banquet prepared seats for them and provided each of them with a knife and then asked Joseph to appear before them. When they beheld him they esteemed him highly and in wonderment 'pressed their fingers between their teeth' and exclaimed: He has resisted evil for fear of Allah: He is super-human; he must be a noble angel.

[12:51]

وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ ائْتُونِي بِهِ ۚ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ
الرَّسُولُ قَالَ ارْجِعْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَسْأَلْهُ مَا
بِالْنِسْوَةِ الَّتِي قَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ ۗ إِنَّ
رَبِّي بِكَيْدِهِنَّ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

[12:52]

قَالَ مَا خَطْبُكُمْ إِذْ رَأَوُكُمْ يُوسُفَ
عَنْ نَفْسِهِ ط قُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا عَلِمْنَا
عَلَيْهِ مِنْ سُوءٍ ط قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ
الْأُنْ حَصْحَصَ الْحَقُّ أَنَا رَأَوُكُمُ عَنْ
نَفْسِهِ وَإِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ٥٢

[12:51-52]When the King heard all this he said: Bring him to me. When the King’s messenger came to Joseph, he said: Go back to thy lord and ask him how fare the women who had ‘gnawed at their fingers’? My Lord knows well their design. The King enquired of the women: What was the truth of the affair in which you sought to seduce Joseph against his will? They said: He eschewed vice for fear of Allah; we have not known any evil against him. Whereupon the wife of the Aziz exclaimed: The truth has now come to light. It was I who sought to seduce him against his will; he is surely one of the righteous.

I was in London those days and trying my level best to do the research that I had planned during my stay in Libya and publish it. So could not ask around. Luckily, in 1985 I was able to go to the London Mosque more frequently and had the chance to attend the Question-Answer sessions graced by Hadhrat Khalifa-tul-Masih IV. In one of those sessions I decided to seek Hadhrat Sahib’s guidance.

I recited [12:32] and [12:51] and asked as to why Sir Zafrullah (RA) would have used “pressed their fingers between their teeth’ in [12:32] and “gnawed at their fingers” in [12:51] and should the act of gnawing at one’s fingers become news?

I think the above question and the ensuing discussion were recorded and the session was aired a couple of times by the MTA, though I have not had the chance to see that particular question and answer session. In short Hadhrat Khalifa-tul-Masih IV told me to think about it.

In 1987 I came to the US I got busy and almost forgot all about it’ though I would often wonder. Then in 1994 when I was too sick to teach because of my kidney problems, I decided to give some time to this problem and wrote a longish letter to Hadhrat Sahib. The main point was my conclusion that since in [12:32] God Almighty sets the scenario that the women were seated comfortably and given knives in their hands, it would be wrong to translate: قطعن ايديهن , into anything other than “they cut their hands”,

as cutting the hands was more newsworthy than gnawing at fingers. Somewhere in 1995 when I was on dialysis, I received word that Hadhrat Khalifa-tul-Masih IV also translated قَطَعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ as “they cut their hands”.

The point of all this is I was able to catch this discrepancy because there was Arabic script along with the superb and almost classical English rendering by Sir Zafrullah (RA). If I were given only the English rendering as “the Quran” I would, perhaps, not be able to see the problem.

I must say here that the holy Quran is the word of God Almighty and He only knows the exact meanings of what He said in it. We can only guess at what the words really mean. As our knowledge base extends we understand the holy Quran better. For example in the old days people thought the following verse referred to the state of fright humans will have on the Day of Judgment:

وَإِذَا الْعِشَارُ عُطِّلَتْ ۝

[81:5] And when the she-camels, tenmonth pregnant, are abandoned.

In the old days a ten-month pregnant she-camel meant two camels and no one could think of abandoning her. Camels were precious those days being a means of transport. Now we know that camel is only a hunk of meat, for those who like to eat camel-meat. In fact the whole of Chapter 81 seems to talk about the current times. So the more we know the better we learn from the Quran.

But there is always a danger with more knowledge; you want to show it off. That is there is always an urge in us the humans to try to make what we produce more interesting than others, so that our work is read more than others’ or our followers consider us more knowledgeable. Sometimes such efforts culminate in some correct but somewhat strange translations. For example, Sir Zafrullah translates

حَاشَ لِلَّهِ as “He has resisted evil for fear of Allah” in the first instance and “He eschewed vice for fear of Allah” in the second, and it is well known that it is an exclamatory figure of speech equivalent to saying “glory be”. (When “glory be...” is said “glory be to the Lord” is understood.) The trouble here is that in both cases the women are surprised and when people are surprised they usually invoke God. But I would not quarrel much with this translation because the meanings seem to fit and only God Almighty knows what is really meant here*(5); though if Sir Zafrullah made a mistake in the first two instances he could be considered culpable in the other two as well. That is if the translations in question do not match other scholars’.

The point is we should always approach the task of translating the Quran humbly and fearing God and openly admitting that we are just trying so that those who do not know Arabic can have some idea.

We the Muslims are lucky, praised be the Lord, that God Almighty has given the following assurance in the holy Quran to us via the holy Prophet (SAW):

[15:10] إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ ۝

[15:10]: Verily, We Ourselves have sent down this Exhortation, and most surely We will be its Guardian.

So whenever someone gets out of line with the translation or produces a new idea which could create misconceptions about the content of the message He arranges to remove the misunderstanding.

Notes and Bibliography

1. The copy of the Quran, with Sir Zafrullah's translation, that I read from was published in Great Britain by Curzon Press. The first edition was published in 1970, though I certainly had a later edition. I have now a paperback version of the same book published by the Olive Branch Press of New York. The deal that Hadhrat Maulana Bashir Ahmad Rafique cut with the Curzon Press leaves Jama'at Ahmadiyya with no distribution rights.
2. I copy pasted the Arabic text from alislam.org or typed without the vowels.
3. About my exchange with Hadhrat Khalifa-tul-Masih about the verses in question, if no evidence is "found" to corroborate my "allegations" then I offer this with: لعنة الله على الكذابين
4. The reasons included appear to be sound enough. So the article does its job even if it were written without the story. But of course there is a purpose behind the story.
5. Let us not forget that all those dialogues took place in a language far from the all polished idiomatic Arabic in which the Quran was revealed. So God Almighty is giving us, in Arabic, exactly what they meant. If they meant "glory be ..." then حاش الله is the exact translation. This leads to the question: What religion did the Egyptians have? From Surah Yusuf (Ch. 12) it appears that the Egyptians did have a justice system based on some religion ([12:77]). The use of حاش الله shows that they did believe in a Supreme Deity, but from Joseph's preaching to his fellow inmates [12:38-41] it appears they also showed allegiance to some other gods.