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The Qur'an
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A new translation by
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A Short History of English Translations

The history of translation of the Qur'an is a long and interesting one. The title itself has often been rendered in English as 'Koran', but this older Anglicized form is gradually being replaced by 'Qur'an', which reflects the correct Arabic transliteration and pronunciation

of the word. The first translation into English was done in 1649 by Alexander Ross, a grammar school teacher in Southampton. However, Ross unfortunately did not know Arabic and made his translation from one in French by André du Ryer. The translation is at times widely different from the original. Ross's title is indicative of his attitude. He describes it as *The Alcoran of Mahomet translated . . . and newly Englished, for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities*. A century later, in 1734, George Sale's Protestant translation was the next version of the Qur'an to be presented in English, and his italicized commentaries, embedded in the text, helped to make the Qur'an more understandable to an English-speaking audience. For centuries this was one of the most successful translations, in both the UK and the USA, and it continued to be printed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. It is still available for consultation in many academic libraries.

In 1861 the Revd J. M. Rodwell undertook a translation of the Qur'an. His perspective on the Qur'an was a strongly biblical one.²¹ One oddity is his disregard for the traditional Muslim arrangement of the suras, rearranging them into what he thought to be the chronological order; moreover some of his footnotes include material that is incorrect and offensive to Muslims. Nonetheless he had a linguistic talent that enabled him to come up with innovative solutions to previously intractable problems. It is easy to perceive the influence of Rodwell's work on many subsequent translators. Rodwell also instigated the practice of partial numbering of Qur'anic verses, providing some help to those wishing to cite passages from his translation.

The next translator of the Qur'an into English, E. H. Palmer (1840–82), is claimed to be the first who had direct and long-lasting contact with Arabs and sought, in style, to retain some of the 'rude, fierce eloquence' of the Qur'an but without becoming 'too rude or familiar'. His translation appeared in 1880. He was the first to reflect, in his footnotes, some real respect for the text and the Prophet of Islam. The first British Muslim to translate the Qur'an, however, was the novelist and vicar's son Muhammad Marmaduke

²¹ In his notes he is over-eager to claim biblical sources for Qur'anic material, and quick to claim that there are contradictions between verses where none exists.

Pickthall. He undertook a new translation (published in 1930) after observing that some of the earlier translations included 'commentation offensive to Muslims and employed a style of language which Muslims at once recognise as unworthy'. Although his language may now seem almost artificially archaic, his translation keeps close to the original Arabic, and is still very popular among Arabs and Muslims. The next significant translation was written by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, an Indian Muslim, and appeared in 1934. This text, entitled *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*, has appeared in numerous editions, normally including the Arabic text parallel with the translation, along with 6,310 explanatory notes, 300 pieces of running commentary in blank verse, fourteen appendices and indices. It is an extremely useful work, especially his notes and indices, for those who want a fuller and more guided understanding of the background and text of the Qur'an. His language contains poetic features and archaic words that make the style outdated.

Arthur J. Arberry's translation, *The Koran Interpreted*, appeared in 1955 and is undoubtedly one of the most respected translations of the Qur'an in English. Arberry shows great respect towards the language of the Qur'an, particularly its musical effects. His careful observation of Arabic sentence structure and phraseology makes his translation very close to the Arabic original in grammatical terms. To those unfamiliar with the text itself, this feature, along with the lack of any notes or comments, can make the text seem difficult to understand and confusingly unidiomatic. However, it remains a popular version of the text, particularly in academic circles.

In the following year (1956), N. J. Dawood produced his translation for Penguin Books. His stated aim was above all to make the language modern and readable, and he certainly succeeds in this, when one compares it with the translations available at the time. However, from the beginning his translation was seen to take too many liberties with the text of the Qur'an and to contain many inaccuracies, as was immediately pointed out by reviewers; moreover, many Muslims were deeply offended by the way he translated key terms and by some of the notes to the translation.

In 1980 an English translation by Muhammad Asad was published. He was an Austrian (Leopold Weiss) who converted to Islam. He called it *The Message of the Qur'an, Translated and Explained*. It contains a parallel Arabic text, 5,371 very useful notes, and four

appendices. Asad is one of the most original translators, who did the background research for himself in the original lengthy Arabic exegeses. His language and choice of words too are original, but he inserts many bracketed explanatory words which, though useful, make his sentences cumbersome. Also his 'rationalistic' approach leads him to translations that some Muslim theologians disagree with: for example, his translation of 50: 17 as 'the two demands of his nature . . .' rather than 'recording [angels]', or *hamim* in 56: 93 as 'burning despair' rather than 'scalding water'.

There is not enough space here for an exhaustive survey of all English translations; we have mentioned only some important or popular ones from the past and present.