RATIONALIST HERMENEUTICS:

A STUDY OF MUḤAMMAD ASAD'S TRANSLATION

AND COMMENTARY OF THE QURʾĀN

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by

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Abstract

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The Message of the Qurʾān (*TMOQ*) by Muḥammad Asad (formerly

Leopold Weiss, d. 1992) ranks among one of the major influential works of

translations and exegetical literature in the contemporary period. It employs a

hermeneutical method which critically positions reason or independent thinking

(*ijtihād*) as the interpretive key in unlocking Qurʾān's intended "message."

As such, its rationalist orientation stands not only as a worthy

hermeneutical method which generates a clearer understanding of the Islamic

worldview. It also serves as a critique to Islamic traditionalism (*taqlīd*) which

privileges the deductions and conclusions of the past as the arbiter of the affairs

of the present. Expectedly, *TMOQ* also draws criticism as applying excessive

Western-like rationalism, the likes of which, they say, has evoked the excesses of some intellectually intemperate Muʿtazilis of the Classical Islamic period.

This dissertation is an in-depth study of Asad's *magnum opus, The Message of the Qurʾān*. It mines the latter for any clue or marker which explains its rationalist orientation. It closely analyzes select verses from *TMOQ* which convey or illustrate the author's basic dynamic of translation and interpretation.

In particular, it identifies some sources of interpretation and hermeneutical methods. It also contextualizes its praxis of translation within the discourse of current theories translations. Moreover, this dissertation also argues that an attempt at a comprehensive understanding of *TMOQ* is, at best, haphazard and incomplete if it ignores a subjectivist and contextualist investigation of the life's journey of its author -- especially his conversion from Judaism to Islam. Thus, Chapter One portrays "The Making of a Translator."

To my parents, Crispin and Gabriela

and my sisters Linda, Fely, Ma. Ana and Elvie and their families,

and brothers Junior and Carlos and their families,

for their undying love and care.

To the Passionist Community, my spiritual family,

for their unconditional support.

To Jews, Christians and Muslims

that together we might continue to build peaceful communities.

CONTENTS

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باسم الأب والابن والروح القدس، الإله الواحد. آمين

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INTRODUCTION

One cannot seriously study qurʾānic translations and exegesis in English in the twenty-first century without taking full cognizance of Muḥammad Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1980). Asad, who was born as Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) in the Ukraine, has contributed an extraordinary work of translation and commentary of the Qurʾān to the world. In this work, Asad claims that none of its preceding extant translations have matched in bringing the Arabic Qurʾān "closer to the hearts or minds of people raised in a different religious and psychological climate."[1] Many critics rank *TMOQ* among one of the major works of translation and exegetical literature to date.

Asad's whole life was a preparation for this project which he only achieved in his old age. On a personal level, his preparation involved being born and raised in a rabbinical family which was thrust into a Central European society ravaged by World War I. He had early success in journalism and explored the Middle East as a special correspondent for a major Berlin newspaper.

Asad also brought exceptional experience and background to the translation project that occupied him for seventeen years. He had studied the

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[1] Muḥammad Asad, "Foreword," in *The Message of the Qurʾān* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), ii (i-viii). Here onward Asad's work of Translation of the Qurʾān may also be referred to as *TMOQ*.

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Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well as their sources of interpretation. He had language proficiency in Hebrew, Aramaic and later in Arabic. All of these made him confident and apparently gave him an advantage over his counterparts in the comparative study of religious and theological literary sources. On a social and cultural level, he lived in Austria at the beginning of the twentieth-century during an era deeply affected by dramatic and revolutionary intellectual and social movements. A brief experience at the University of Vienna allowed him to immerse himself in these movements while he pursued courses in the history of art, philosophy, physics and chemistry. He also participated in Vienna's discussion circles which explored psychoanalysis, logical positivism, and linguistic analysis and semantics.[2] All of these sharpened his understanding of emerging modern and contemporary Western thought.[3]

On the one hand, religious institutions seemed unable to address the moral and social questions of European society in that era. This failure left Asad dissatisfied or disillusioned with institutionalized religion, including his own faith of Judaism. But the intellectual thinkers and trends of the time stimulated him. They acted like "potent wine" -- especially discussions about Freud's psychoanalysis. These intellectual revolutions also drew criticism from Asad because of their

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[2] Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muḥammad Asad and Islām," in *Islamic Research Institute* 39.2 (Summer 2000): 156 (155-231)

[3] A Viennese filmmaker, Georg Misch, made a 92-minute documentary in English in 2008 entitled, *A Road to Mecca - The Journey of Muḥammad Asad*. It traces the path of a Muslim Scholar and political theorist which eventually led him to conversion to Islām. Alissa Simon of *Variety* reviewed the film saying, "Informative... a well-judged combo of travelogue and biopic... a fine piece of anthropology, worthy of the dedication it copies from Asad's translation of the Qurʾān: 'For people who think,'" *Icarus Films* (Brooklyn, NY), access Oct 2015, www.icarusfilms.com/new2009/mecc.html.

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"intellectual arrogance... which tried to reduce all mysteries of man's Self to a series of neurogenetic reactions... and the philosophical conclusions... were too cocksure and over-simplified to come anywhere within the neighborhood of ultimate truths."[4]

Nonetheless, these modern ideas clearly helped to shape the mind of Muḥammad Asad as can be seen in the rationalist approach of interpretation that he later brought to his work with the Qurʾān. For instance, from among many Muslim scholars who represented a range of approaches to the interpretation of the Qurʾān, Asad favored the reformist and modernist Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) as a sort of mentor or guide. Much of the philosophical "modernism" he had encountered in the study of Logical Positivism, Freudian Psychology and linguistic analysis had left its mark on him. In fact, these early influences may be viewed as key influences in his later predilection to demythologize supernatural or miraculous statements of the Qurʾān.

Asad himself was a unique phenomenon. He lived for substantial periods of time in both the East and the West. This provided him with the unique opportunity to get an accurate "feel" of these two very different worlds.[5] His first book, *The Unromantic Orient* (1924)[6] especially attests to "the beginning of discovering a new East merging with his old West." It reveals how he struggled to

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[4] Muḥammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 64.

[5] Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muḥammad Asad and Islām," 155.

[6] Muḥammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), *The Unromantic Orient*, trans. E. R. Harder (Sherwood Park, AB, Canada: Al-Qalam Publishing, 2004). First written in German as *Unromantiches Morgenland, aus dem Tagebuck einer Reise* ("Unromantic Orient, from a Diary of a Journey"), this work is a travelogue containing Asad's narration of what he observed and what he experienced in the Near East from March 14 till October 10, 1923. It was written (originally in 159 pages and 59 black and white photographs) under contract with *Frankfurter Zeitung*. It appeared in installments in German newspapers, and was subsequently published by Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei in 1924 ("Translators Introduction," xii).

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forsake old ideas, including "his biases and predilections about European attitudes, Jewish zeal and alienation, colonization, Arab demeanor, political ideology, and harsh daily realities." Meanwhile, he learned to accept unforeseen challenges and appreciate new things.[7]

But, it was his six-year sojourn in the Arabian Peninsula that initiated him into new fields of learning. He devoted himself to the study of the Arabic language, the History of Islām, the science of the Qurʾān's exegesis, and the prophetic Traditions. Furthermore, being in the *Ḥijāz* also gave the solicitous Asad opportunities to interact with both local and pilgrim scholars from around the globe. All of these experiences, including his conversion to Islām, are recalled in his *New York Times* best-selling autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* (1954).

This book treats readers to "enthralling pages" about a European's discovery of Islām. This travelogue, according to Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb, revealed for many "the gems of literary talent in the secret casket of Asad's genius."[8] Shortly after his in-depth and extensive exposure to the Muslim intellectual world and his journey through the *Ḥijāz*, this Jewish convert became the emerging and persuasive expositor of the Islamic religion. In 1934, he

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[7] E. R. Harder, trans. "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient* by Asad, xii (ix-xvi).

[8] Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muḥammad Asad and Islām," 168. Maryam Jameelah (born Margaret Marcus in 1934), a known ideologue of Islamic fundamentalism, wrote in her *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth in America* ([Lahore, 1989], 109) that she was particularly inspired reading Asad's travelogue in a New York library and, as a matter of fact, influenced her decision to embrace Islām saying, "what he (Asad) could do, I thought I could also do"

produced his inaugural monograph as a Muslim writer and titled it, *Islām at the Crossroads* (*Al-Islām ʿAlā Mufṭariq al-Ṭuruq*).[9]

Such an eloquent work from a convert heralded a bold and fearless critique of the social and political state of Islām. It also confronts the intellectual onslaught of the Western *weltanschauung.* Asad's work also advances a dynamic vision which summons Muslims back to its spiritual and temporal greatness. In particular, it calls for a textualist-traditionist reorientation which takes the Qurʾān and the Sunnah as the only binding explanation and standard for the Muslim way of life. Muḥammad Iqbal (d. 1938) himself called *Al-Islām ʿAlā Mufṭariq al-Ṭuruq* an "eye-opener." Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936), who was an early twentieth-century English translator of the Qurʾān – and himself a convert to Islām -- commented that Asad's work

> "is a notable contribution to... the literature of Muslim regeneration... it is the most thoughtful and thought-stimulating work on the means of Islamic revival that has appeared since Saʿīd Ḥalīm Pāshā's (d. 1921) famous *İslâmlaşmak* ("To Islamize").[10]

This book catapulted Asad to great fame and properly launched his career.

In 1938, Asad released his *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, The Early Years of Islām.* It was a partially completed work of translation and commentary of the most

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[9] Muḥammad Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads* (New Delhi, India: Kitāb Bhavan, 2014 [1st, 1934]).

[10] Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall, "Review of *Islām at the Crossroads* by M. Asad," in *Islamic Culture, The Hyderabad Quarterly Review* (Hyderabad Deccan, October 1934), 665-668.

important canonical collection of *ḥadith*.[11] But this book became an early and enduring expression of Asad's textualist-traditionist reforms. Giving "an excellent"[12] modern voice to the authentic prophetic Tradition, especially in the field of qurʾānic exegesis, Asad hoped to produce a relevant understanding and a direct appreciation of the true teachings of Islām for modern Muslims.

But, Asad's potent ideas were first elaborated in the areas of Islamic jurisprudence and political theory through the monthly journal *Arafat.* His work appeared in the issues of the magazine published between September of 1946 and February of 1947. They were grounded in the principle that the spiritual and temporal success of the Muslim community depended upon a correct understanding and application of Islamic law and sound political systems. The essays were well received and offered both a critical and prescriptive assessment of the state of Muslim institutions of that time. The articles later appeared in 1948 in the publication, *Islamic Constitution-Making*[13] and again in 1987, gathered into a single volume, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*.[14]

Asad's writings turned out to be quite influential to the intellectual and ideological framework adapted by the new Islamic state of Pakistan. Asad's contribution was duly acknowledged with his appointment as the foreign

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[11] Muḥammad Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, The Early Years of Islam, Translated and Explained* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2013 [1st 1938]).

[12] Francesco Gabrieli, "Review of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, The Early Years of Islām*, transl. and expl. By Muḥammad Asad," in *Rivista degli studi orientali* 18.2 (Aug 1939): 295-296.

[13] First in English and Urdu but later reprinted as *The Principles of State and Government in Islām* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961).

[14] Muḥammad Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2001 [1st 1987]).

representative of Pakistan. His first outreach was to Middle Eastern countries. Later, he served as Pakistan's plenipotentiary diplomat at the United Nations. It was, therefore, this latter part of his sojourn in the Indian Subcontinent that Asad carved out for himself a niche among scholars and dignitaries. Thus, he became known as an important figure in Islam.

A divorce from his Saʿūdi wife of twenty-two years and a second marriage soon after to an American convert to Islām seemed to be a chronological watershed in Asad life's journey. Martin Kramer says that these deeply personal events provided a turning point. Metaphorically, they could be summarized with the title of Kramer's article on Asad, "The Road from Mecca." Asad was, from then on, turning back to the West, from whence he had come.[15] Whether Kramer's analysis of Asad's shifting intellectual or ideological journey is valid or not, one thing could not be ignored. Asad's acerbic criticism of the Western encroachment into the Muslim psyche was significantly reduced while he and his new wife traveled through Europe and Africa following his assignment at the United Nations.

Abul Aʿlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) noticed Asad's transformation. In his letter to Maryam Jameelah, he described how Asad may have compromised his erstwhile respectable devotion to true Islām by drifting closer to "the ways of the so-called 'progressive' Muslims like the 'reform' Jews."[16] Questions about Asad's fidelity to

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[15] Martin Kramer, "The Road from Mecca: Muḥammad Asad," *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis, ed. M. Kramer* (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1999), 237, (225-247).

[16] "I have great respect for [Asad's] exposition of Islamic ideas and especially his criticism of Western culture and its materialistic philosophies. I am sorry to say, however, that although in the early days of his conversion, he was a staunch, practicing Muslim, gradually he drifted close

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Islām, however, may have been one reason why Asad decided to write the second part of *The Road to Mecca*. Co-written with his wife Pola Ḥāmida (d. 2006), the memoir was published in 2006 and deliberately titled *Home-coming of the Heart (1932-1992)*. In the memoir, Ḥāmida herself related that this book expressed her husband's true love for the immense, austere deserts of Arabia, and also for its people, especially the Bedouins and the people of his beloved Najd.[17]

Asad's most defining and significant intellectual accomplishment, however, is in his works of translation and exegesis of the Qurʾān. Arguably, everything in Asad's personal and professional life which preceded this project was nothing more than a long preparation for the completion of this *magnum opus*.

His linguistic immersion and a successful acquisition of the idiomatic sense of the Bedouins' language of the Arabian Peninsula became his best credentials as a translator. This facility made him uniquely equipped to undertake the task of translation and interpretation. No less significant was his access to the major works in the Arabic language of renown Classical and modern commentators and philologists. Among these authorities were al-Ṭabarī, al-

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to the ways of the so-called "progressive" Muslim just like the "reformed" Jews. Recently his divorce from his Arab wife and marriage to a modern American girl hastened this process of deviation more definitely….Once a man begins to live the life of a true Muslim, all his capabilities lose their "market value." It is the same sad story with Muhammad Asad, who had always been accustomed to a high and modern standard of living and after embracing Islam, had to face the severest financial difficulties. As a result, he was forced to make one compromise after another (Maryam Jameelah, *Correspondence between Maulana Maudoodi and the Marcuses* [Delhi: Crescent Publishing, 1969], 33-5).

[17] Muhammad Asad and Pola Hamida Asad, "Preface," in *Home-coming of the Heart (1932-1992)*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore, Pakistan: The Truth Society, 2012), 18 (17-24).

Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, Ibn Kathīr, ʿAbduh and Riḍā, etc. Asad became familiar with their hermeneutical methods, and he reproduced their views in his exegetical exposition to assume confirmatory, corroborating or contrasting functions. According to one critic who carefully analyzed Asad's work, "he mostly relied on famous commentators and substantiated his points of view by quoting from them."[18]

Kenneth Cragg notes certain occasional archaic verbiage in Asad's translations and wished that he had written more fluently in English -- "since translation has equal obligation to the language of receiving as to the language of origin."[19] A. R. Kidwai, for his part, remarks that *TMOQ* signals, as it is "couched in chaste English"[20] and embraces both classical and modern thought patterns, a significant scholarly contribution to the body of qurʾānic translation and commentary in the twentieth century.[21]

In his article "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān: Muḥammad Asad's Modernist Translation," Abdin Chande qualifies that while Asad brings a modernist perspective to his translation of the Qurʾān, at certain points, he

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[18] Muḥammad Sultan Shāh, "*The Message of the Qurʾān*: by Muḥammad Asad: A Critical Study," in *Muḥammad Asad, An Austrian Jewish Convert to Islām*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore: Pakistan Writer's Cooperative Society, 2015), 264 (217-264).

[19] Kenneth Cragg, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān* by Muḥammad Asad," in *The Middle East Journal* 35.1 (1981: Winter): 89.

[20] Abdur Rahman Kidwai, "A Survey of English Translations of the Qurʾān," in *The Muslim Word Book Review* 7.4 (Summer, 1987).

[21] Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable, A Critical Guide to 60 English Translations of the Qurʾān* [New Delhi: Sarup Book Pub. Pvt. Ltd, 2011], 69).

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diverges from a traditional Muslim understanding of the text.[22] Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb himself also testified that through *TMOQ,* Asad "rose to the unparalleled eminence among Western Muslims because none has contributed more than Asad to elucidating Islām as an ideology and conveying its quintessential spirit in contemporary terms to Muslim and Non-Muslims alike."[23]

Hanna Kassis, too, noticed and credited "the ability and erudition of the translator... throughout this book, which is addressed by a man of faith to those Muslims and non-Muslims who are incapable of reading the Holy Book in its Arabic original."[24] The British Ṣūfī scholar, Ḥasan Gai Eaton found that Asad's translation

> "in practical terms, is the most helpful and instructive version of the Qurʾān that we have in English. This remarkable man has done what he set out to do, and it may be doubted whether his achievement will ever be surpassed."[25]

M.A.S Abdel Haleem, had similar words of praise to share. He calls Asad "one of the most original translators who did the background research for himself in the original lengthy Arabic exegesis. His language and choice of words too are original." But, he also criticized Asad's for his insertion of "many bracketed explanatory words which, though useful, make his sentences cumbersome. Also,

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[22] Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān: Muḥammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islām and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:1 (2004): 79-89.

[23] Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muḥammad Asad and Islām," 162.

[24] Hanna E. Kassis, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān* by Muḥammad Asad," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 17.4 (November, 1985): 570.

[25] Ḥasan Gai Eaton, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān* by Muḥammad Asad," in *Spectator*, 7 June 1980, 18.

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his 'rationalistic' approach leads him to translations that some Muslim theologians disagree with."[26]

A special feature in Asad's modernist approach to the interpretation of the Quran is his cognizance of the issues that challenge both the contemporary Muslim and his or her society. Bearing these issues in mind, he employs rationalist hermeneutics in his exegesis as is evident in his metaphorical (*majāzī*) reading of supernatural elements found in the Qurʾān. This includes passages about the "burning bush" in Q 28:30 (cf. Q 20:10, Q 27:7), or the "crossing of the Red Sea" in Q 20:27 (cf. Q 26:63 etc.), or the "brimstone" which fell on Lot's people in Q 11:77-83 (cf. Q 15:62-77), or the three miracles performed by Jesus, son of Mary, mentioned in Q 3:49 (cf. Q 5:110).

This demythological treatment clearly betrays a modernistic preference of rationality over irrational presuppositions. Asad proposes to read them as statements of moral or spiritual truths. He sees them as teachings which appropriately resonate with his intended Anglophone readers. Reviewing Asad's methodology, John Wansbrough confirms that "the rationalist theology of the translator informs his work throughout but cannot really be said to impair its quality."[27] Structurally, Asad's demythological interpretation is not confined to his notes but is occasionally carried into the main body of translation. This is dramatically clear, for example, in his exegetical rendition of Jesus' miracle in the "creation of a bird" in Q 3:49 (or in Q 5:110). In his translation, Asad boldly defies

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[26] Shāh, "*The Message of the Qurʾān*: by Muḥammad Asad: A Critical Study," 264.

[27] John Wansbrough, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān* by Muḥammad Asad," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43.3 (1980), 594.

the standard translation of the Arabic word *ṭayr*, namely, "birds." He draws his rendition from an alternate meaning derived from the Arabic root, a meaning which Asad holds was current in pre-Islamic Arabia, namely, "destiny" or "fortune." Thus, he translates it into "destiny," asserting that, instead of "birds," Jesus must have preached about himself fashioning for Israel "the vision of a soaring destiny," a faith-filled destiny "by God's leave."

Asad also remained cognizant of the manner in which Orientalists treated issues related to the origins of Islām and the Qurʾān. This may explain why he, according to Wansbrough, eschewed "all explicit reference to Orientalist scholars." On the other hand, "the influence of *al-Manār* school is pervasive, nowhere more evident than in the four appendices (pp. 989-998)."[28] However, Kassis finds it unfortunate that Asad "overlooks Western scholarship," that is, without naming anywhere notable works, including that of Theodor Nöldeke, which would have presented a modern application of qurʾānic chronological organization in the middle of the nineteenth century.[29] Moreover, says another critic, Asad was a modernist but different from modernists from the Indian subcontinents who rejected *ḥadīth* as an interpretive matrix for qurʾānic exegesis.[30]

Asad's rationalist method was also criticized as excessive for its alleged outright rejection of the miracles of the Qurʾān. According to Muḥammad Sultan

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[28] Wansbrough, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān*.

[29] Kassis, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān*," 570-572.

[30] Shāh, "*The Message of the Qurʾān*: by Muḥammad Asad: A Critical Study," 264.

Shāh, "he based such discussions on intellect, rejecting any possibility of such events as are beyond the realm of cause and effect." His rationalistic approach in some discussions, according to Shāh, has made his work unacceptable to orthodox scholars.[31] Moreover, Asad's interpretation is also labeled by some critics as antithetical to the esoteric or mystical dimension of the Qurʾān, and inordinately favorable to the *ẓahirist* reading which examines the apparent meaning of the text.

To a certain extent, according to critics, with this rationalist method, Asad succumbed to the materialistic inclination which characterizes the modernist impulse. He was more orientated to the horizontal than to the vertical valuation of the Qurʾān. As such, his approach is said to be dominated by an exegetical agendum which confines itself to contemporary demands of guidance in the contingent, ephemeral, and mundane issues of the present.

Such a criticism, however, is not entirely consistent with Asad's predilection to demythologize certain qurʾānic elements, as it will be elucidated later. He sees this translational approach as a beneficial and appropriate strategy in deducing the Qurʾān's spiritual and ethical message. In fact, it is nowhere stated in the *TMOQ* that Asad categorically rejects the merits of these supernatural narratives. Rather, for him, it seemed wiser for the sake of his reading audience to allegorize these miraculous stories so that they could generate moral and spiritual guidance.

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[31] Shāh, "*The Message of the Qurʾān*: by Muḥammad Asad: A Critical Study," 264.

It is worth noting that Asad also espouses the common interpretation of Q 3:7 as a key to the understanding the Qurʾān. It generally delineates the qurʾānic assertions as either *muḥkamāt* or *mutashābihāt.* The former are statements which are self-evident in their literal sense. The latter "are expressed in a figurative manner, with a meaning that is metaphorically implied but not directly, in so many words, stated."[32]

This delineation, he argues, cannot be dogmatically understood since there are qurʾānic statements which may be legitimately translated in very different ways. Yet, as Asad explains, "there are many expressions and passages which, despite their allegorical formulation, reveal to the searching intellect only one possible meaning."[33] Nonetheless, his appraisal of the Qurʾān is grounded on two basic complementary principles. The first is the conviction that this holy writ carries a rational message *li-qawmin yatafakkarūna* or "for people who think."[34]

Another feature of Asad's modernist orientation is the application of the new philosophy of linguistics. He is praised for employing modern linguistic insights to help understand qurʾānic assertions and thus provide a better rendering in idiomatic English. As a corollary, he appears to dislike the meanings of qurʾānic words and phrases offered by the mainstream tradition. As far as he is concerned, they are not in conformity with his modernistic and rationalistic

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[32] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66, n. 5 on Q 3:7.

[33] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66, n. 5 on Q 3:7.

[34] Derived from the same qurʾānic expression which occur in seven locations: Q 10:24; 13:3; 16:11, 69; 30:21; 39:42; 45:13.

mindset. Bringing modern Western psychology to bear on his exegetical efforts is also characteristic of his modernist orientation. This approach can be identified in his interpretation of the *Isrā'* (The Night Journey") of the Prophet in Q 17:1. While strongly favoring the spiritual over the corporeal interpretation, Asad, nonetheless, attempts to balance the two extremes of the debate by appealing to the findings of modern psychological studies about the "temporary independence of a man's spirit from his living body."

The status of existing translations of the Qurʾān into English is now under extensive scrutiny. Besides the critical role of the translator's sincerity and capability, the unfolding of the post 9/11 social and political climate has profoundly impacted views about Muslims. New conversations have emerged about the Muslims' place in the western world. It has also become apparent that new translating efforts will require the exhaustive employment of the linguistic and literary resources of the English language to satisfy new scholarly and emotional demands involved in the translating task.

Many Muslim critics of the Qurʾān's translation have maintained a stringent standard of dignity and fidelity vis-à-vis the source text. These methodological demands will play out, one way or another, in the study of Asad's translation and commentary of the Qurʾān which shall now commence.

The following five chapters are an attempt to understand the genesis, the dynamics, and the contribution of Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* to the body of Qurʾān translation and exegesis in the contemporary period.

Chapter One surveys the historical underpinnings which undergird or substantiate both a subjectivist and a contextualist study of Asad's psychological and intellectual development leading up his emergence as a translator. This chapter, therefore, argues that acquiring a clearer grasp of the genesis and the dynamics operative in *TMOQ* without serious consideration of Asad's unfolding subjectivity, may not be genuinely rewarding. Thus, it is deemed worthwhile to study the interior dynamics with which he negotiated through the contours of his life's journey, while paying attention to the attendant external stimuli imposed by Asad's shifting context.

It is suggested, therefore, that readers of this dissertation exercise patience in going through sections which trace the unexpected shifts in Asad's religious affiliation, his cultural and linguistic immersion, and his travels and discoveries in the Arabian Peninsula. This also includes his engagements with co-religionist scholars who played a significant role in the shaping of his intellectual and ideological identity.

A related argument is pursued in Chapter Two. It studies the sources that Asad references in his exegesis. Of interest is the way these sources not only helped in the shaping of Asad's mind, but also how they ultimately helped to substantiate his exegetical deliberations. More importantly, by featuring six reputable Islamic scholars from both the Classical and modern periods, this chapter aims to present their particular qurʾānic hermeneutics and how each contributed to Asad's own exegetical work. Moreover, some similarities and dissimilarities will be outlined between the Classical or modern applications of

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these methods and in Asad's *TMOQ.* Thus, samples of comparative exegesis on particular verses of interest will be seen at the latter part of this chapter.

Chapter Three attempts to contextualize Asad's *TMOQ* within the body of modern translation theories, and against the backdrop of existing works of English translation of the Qurʾān. In so doing, some theoretical underpinnings or principles employed in Asad's praxis of translation are laid bare and studied. One of the important considerations, for example, is the need to discern which translational orientation governs *TMOQ.* Does it lean towards one singular orientation or is it a composite of "source-centered," "target-centered," and "translator-centered" orientations. A comparative analysis of six works of English translations will help to address this question through a closer, synoptic reading and exegesis of fourteen particular qurʾānic verses. This chapter, therefore, argues that a methical espousal of any of these aforementioned orientations (or a combination of them) reveals the translator's working ideology which governs or influences the outcome of the target text.

Chapter Four plunges deeper into Asad's rationalist hermeneutic of Qurʾān exegesis. It closely examines his demythologization of the miracles in the Qurʾān. This method basically illustrates his reading of the supernatural elements in the Qurʾān as mythical linguistic tools or literary metaphors. Through these, he gives preference to the intended spiritual or ethical message over its literal meaning. Eight sample qurʾānic miracles which allude to narratives in the Bible are selected to demonstrate this praxis. This chapter argues that Asad's

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demythological exegesis is consistent with his rationalist appraisal of the Qurʾān as a rational or reasonable guidance "for people who think."

Chapter Five is comprised of two rationalistic expositions of two highly valued qurʾānic themes identified by Asad. One concerns the question of the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," and the other is an articulation of a qurʾānic Christology. Each of these expositions methodically surveys relevant qurʾānic verses and their corresponding commentaries. This study gives witness to Asad's consistent rationalist argument and polemics against the respective assertions of the Jews and Christians. These thematic expositions further aim to demonstrate Asad's consistent privileging of the faculty of reason as a heuristic criterion. Reason, as far as he is concerned, helps unlock and generate the message of the Qurʾān.

CHAPTER 1:

THE MAKING OF A TRANSLATOR

1.1   Religious Conversion in Context

Any attempt at a comprehensive understanding of *The Message of the Qurʾān* without taking into serious consideration some relevant turning points in the personal life of its author, Muḥammad Asad (1900-1992) is bound to fail. Or at best, this analysis would be haphazard and incomplete. Asad's conversion story, if studied by modern scholars in the field of conversion studies would undoubtedly generate useful information in understanding the psychological and spiritual foundations of his aforementioned *magnum opus*. Hence, there is a compelling imperative for understanding his entry into Islām.

The dynamics of religious conversion have baffled social scientists for centuries. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* tells us, "everyone has an opinion about how and why people change within or to other religions or reject religion altogether."[1] As a corollary, other academic disciplines have proposed theories and methods to describe, understand, and interpret the nature of conversion processes.

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[1] Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E Farhadian, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1 (1-17).

Two of the most influential early scholars on religious conversion in the early twentieth century were William James (d. 1910) and Arthur D. Nock (d. 1963). These two have been repeatedly cited by later scholars for their critical scholarship on the nature of this religious experience. In his chapter on "Conversion" in the "*Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), for example, James says of the process of conversion,

> "to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities."[2]

In contrast, Nock's book *Conversion* (1933), considered to be the second most influential book on the subject, describes this experience as a deliberate and definitive break with past religious beliefs and practices. He asserts that

> "by conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religions."[3]

The orientation of these two scholars, James and Nock, has been called subjectivist as they reflect a deep influence of Protestant pietism. A Protestant

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[2] William James, "Lecture IX: Conversion," *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. M. Bradley (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150, (150-170).

[3] Arthur Darby Nock, "The Idea of Conversion," in *Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander*

the Great to Augustine of Hippo (MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 7 (1-16).

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pietistic understanding of religious conversion puts an emphasis on the interior state of individuals. Thus, for William James, conversion experience meant a dramatic sense of continuity, while for Nock, it is a total discontinuity.[4]

This subjectivist orientation of the study of James and Nock later inspired other psychological researchers to study the inner experience of converts in order to comprehend the process of conversion. These more modern studies of conversion, however, have been eclipsed by contemporary conversion studies. These studies now contend that the majority of conversions are taking place gradually over a period of time and are less dramatic and radical than it was assumed.[5] As a matter of fact, "the emphasis today is on the process of constructing new identities within a context which, in some cases, starts, stops, experiences diversions and even reversals."[6]

Moreover, some anthropologists have also now engaged in these studies of conversion, thus broadening the scholarship in this field. Robin Horton, for example, has an "intellectualist" theory about the African experience. His thinking has stimulated wider discussions that have shifted the direction of

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[4] A contrast to this distinction is a popular debate within Islām as to whether to categorize someone who adopts or embraces Islām as "a convert" or "a revert." Those who favor the latter base their argument on the belief that every human being is born with a natural faith, an innate sense of submission (*Islām*) called the *fitrah* (Q 30:30); or as the Prophet reportedly said, on the authority of Abū Hurayrah, "There is no child who is not born in a state of *Fitrah*, then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian" (Abul Hussain Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* [*English*], trans., Nasiruddin al-Khattab [Riyadh, KSA: Kalamullah, 2007], 7:2658). In this sense, one is "returning" back to the original Islām. "To convert," is preferred by some as better describing the active choice one has made to adopt a different religious path; one does not feel he or she has anything to "go back" to, perhaps because he or she had not strong sense of faith as a child, or perhaps because he or she was raised without religious beliefs at all.

[5] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862–875.

[6] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook,* 6.

conversion study. He proposed that conversion to a world religion involved an expansion of worldviews and religious rituals.

As he saw it, people transitioned from the indigenous religions that focused on their local, relatively limited microcosms to the broader world in which they encountered expanding relationships with different groups and circumstances.[7] There is, therefore, a pressing need for the study of conversion that widens the discourse and considers many factors. These factors include the influence of socio-cultural forces, cognitive scientific factors, psychological influences, identity formation, immigration and intercultural contact in religious conversion.

Nonetheless, the *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* encapsulates prominent and enduring themes that have preoccupied contemporary scholarship in this field of study.[8]

First, the Handbook puts an emphasis on the continuities and discontinuities between a person's or a group's religious past and their new religion. Second, there is a focus on the ways in which converts are actively engaged in a complex assessment and negotiation with a new religious option. Third, attention is also paid to the complexity and diversity of motivations within converts. Fourth, the Oxford Handbook gives weight and importance to the

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[7] Robin Horton's three essays on conversion have stimulated extensive debate and discussion. See "African Conversion," *Africa* 41, no. 2 (1971): 85–108; "On the Rationality of Conversion, Part 1," *Africa* 45, no. 3 (1975): 219–235; and "On the Rationality of Conversion, Part 2," *Africa* 45, no. 4 (1975): 373–399.

[8] Rambo and Farhadian, *The Oxford Handbook,* 7-9.

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convert's own conversion story. It acknowledges that some scholars see these stories as vital to the constitutive process of how converts are 'made.'

Fifth, the *Handbook* reminds us that studies have also been done on the physical place and space in which conversion transpires and is sustained. This touches on rituals and other 'material' dimensions of conversion. Sixth, some scholars are linking theoretical analyses on religious conversion with the impact of historical material. Seeing religious conversion in the light of historical events -- or conversely – studying history's effect on conversion has embellished and expanded various conversion theories. These theoretical analyses of religious conversion offer us a context for examining the religious experience of our person of interest.

The following biographical and topical presentation of Muhammad Asad's life will be grounded in a subjectivist and contextualist perspective. As we shall see, his conversion story is complex, and therefore warrants more than a subjectivist frame of analysis. Our study of Asad cannot be limited to his interior dynamics and his response to outside stimuli.[9] In fact, we cannot speak of a subjective kind of conversion story as though his conversion amounted to an independent singular act, an act that altered his religious loyalties or sympathies. We must pay attention to external influences, or what scientists call, "predisposing conditions."

In other words, it is vital to understand not only the interior process of his conversion, but also the historical exigencies that shaped his decision to adopt a

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[9] Lofland and Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver...", 862-75.

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new religion. Moreover, within the spectrum of these interior and exterior experiences, it is also incumbent upon this study of Asad to pay attention to the continuities and discontinuities in his beliefs and attitudes, the internal and external pressures he was under, and the sustaining elements of his conversion process. All of these angles will be elucidated in the hope of presenting and in-depth portrait of Muhammad Asad.

1.2   The Road to Mecca, the Formative Years

1.2.1   Jewish Family Legacy

In August 1954, a remarkable book came out in America which immediately won critical acclaim, most notably from prestigious newspapers and magazines in New York, the city where it was published by Simon and Schuster. Martin Kramer describes it as "a combination of memoir and travelogue, as it tells the story of a convert to Islām who had crossed the spiritual deserts of Europe and the sand deserts of Arabia on a trek that brought him ultimately to the oasis of Islamic belief,"[10]

The book was written by Muḥammad Asad and bore the title *The Road to Mecca.* In his review of this work, S.C. Chew of the *New York Herald Tribune* called it an "Intensely interesting and moving book."[11] Robert Payne of *The New York Times* praised it as though it occupied the most prominent place in the

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[10] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 225.

[11] S.C. Chew, "Review of *The Road to Mecca* by Muḥammad Asad," in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review,* 15 August 1954.

pantheon of Arabian travelogues. "Not since Freya Stark has anyone written so happily about Arabia as the Galician now known as Muḥammad Asad."[12]

Leopold Weiss became Muhammad Asad when he converted from Judaism to Islām in September of 1926. He was born on July 12, 1900 and was raised in the town of Lvov (Lemberg, which today is Lviv, Ukraine[13]) in Eastern Galicia, then part of the Habsburg Empire.[14] Leopold was the second of the three children[15] of Karl "Akiva" Weiss (b. 1872) and Amalia "Malka" Feigenbaum (b. 1875), a daughter of a wealthy local banker, Menahem Mendel and Luiza Feigenbaum.[16] His family then moved to the city of Vienna in the years leading up to the Great War of 1914, or World War I.

In Vienna, the Weiss family enjoyed this metropolitan capital at its peak, for good or ill. From the middle of the nineteenth century until after the world war,

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[12] Robert Payne, "Review of *The Road to Mecca* by Muḥammad Asad," in *The New York Times,* 15 August 1954. Freya Stark (d. 1993), a British-Italian explorer and travel writer who was one of the first non-Arabs to travel through the southern Arabian Desert. She wrote several books about her travels in the Middle East and Central Asia.

[13] On May 28, 2015, the Lviv Islamic Cultural Center was opened and named after Muḥammad Asad. The ninth of its kind in Ukraine, this is the first time that a center named after a prominent Muslim figure of global impact who was born and raised in that city. It is dedicated "to become not only the heart of spiritual life for the Muslims of Lviv region ... but become a platform for a fruitful intercultural and interfaith dialogue in the region known for its respectful attitude towards different religions." ALRAID, All-Ukranian Association of Social Organizations, "Lviv Muḥammad Asad Islamic Cultural Centre," Accessed August 2015, http://www.arraid.org/en/lviv-icc.

[14] By the turn of the century, Jews formed a quarter to a third of the population of Lvov, a town inhabited by Poles and Ukranians (Anna Reid, *Border Land: A Journey through the History of Ukraine* [UK: Westview Press, 1997]. 1-22).

[15] Heinrich Weiss (b. 1897) and Rachel Weiss (b. 1906)

[16] Who along with many in the growing Jewish community in eastern Galicia prospered in commerce, specifically into industry and banking (Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 226).

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Vienna was one of the most significant centers of European cultural and was a hub for intellectual revolutions.[17]

The historian George E. Berkley writes that among many of Vienna's noteworthy historical events was the growth of the Jewish community despite intermittent threats of political persecution.[18] Two Jewish religious forms of Judaism became prominent at this time -- Reform and Orthodox. The former camp was mostly composed of liberal locals and immigrants who advocated and sought for "integration" into the greater community. The second group was mostly conservative Viennese and immigrants who sought to maintain a separate identity and were strongly identified with the "nationalist" movement that soon bred, *inter alia,* the Zionist ideology.[19]

The Viennese Jewish community of this era could, therefore, be characterized not only by different creedal and ideological stripes but also by the rushing influx of multinational and multicultural newcomer-immigrants -- especially the *Ostjuden* from the eastern imperial borders.[20] The latter were Jews

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[17] To mention a few examples of Austria's cultural, social and intellectual reach: in the field of Music for which Vienna became the music capital of the world in the works of Beethoven (d. 1827), Schubert (d. 1828) and Strauss (d. 1949) to cite a few; in its grandeur and pioneering architecture designs and in its legendary literatures; the breakthroughs of Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), Bertrand Husserl (d. 1938) , Martin Buber (d. 1965), Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951); of scientists such as Siegfried Marcus' (d. 1898) internal combustion engine, Gregor Mendel's (d. 1884) genetic discovery in nearby Austrian city; and presiding over this remarkable outburst in science, scholarship, and the arts was the Empire's august sovereign, Franz Joseph I (d. 1916). On the darker side, however, were bloody erratic irruption of political and religious wars and revolts against the Empire, the cholera epidemic, spates of anti-Semitism, etc. (George E. Berkley, "Via Gloriosa," *Vienna and Its Jews, the Tragedy of Success: 1880s-1980s* [Cambridge, MA: Abt Books, 1988], 3-24).

[18] Berkley, "Division, Dissension, and Doubts," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 46 (45-58).

[19] Berkley, "Division, Dissension, and Doubts," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 46 (45-58).

[20] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 35 (29-44).

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from the former Galician territory and from Moravia. They fled from local religious and racial persecutions, and from economic stress. To a certain degree, they were granted political and social recognition in Vienna and given an outlet for self-expression under the auspices of the imperial-sanctioned *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* or Jewish Community Council.[21] Under the regulatory jurisdiction of the *Gemeinde*, Jewish immigrants were expected to make religious and cultural adjustments to adapt and comply with the new lifestyle of Viennese living.

For example, there was a shortage of synagogues in Vienna, a city which had the largest Jewish population in Western Europe at the turn of the century. The shortage, largely due to the government's building restrictions, resulted in difficulties in providing for the religious education and formation of Jewish children. It just could not be provided at these few houses of worship. [22]

As a result, this responsibility for the religious education of children was delegated to individual families. This was particularly challenging and problematic for many immigrants who were poised to spend more time working in the hope of alleviating their poverty. As these economic and professional pursuits increasingly became an important priority for many Jewish families, their commitment to their children's religious education suffered. As a result, after-

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[21] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 42.

[22] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 35.

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school Hebrew education for Jewish boys sharply decreased towards the end of the nineteenth century. Synagogue attendance also declined significantly.[23]

This religious concern was further felt even in the rabbinical seminary which had once attracted its best students from the eastern areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After a time, however, it had almost no students.

This may help to explain why as late as 1900, Vienna rarely produced a single rabbi who had been born in the city.[24] As a corollary, it was also reported that the Jews of Vienna were less and less concerned with Jewish studies, or college education.[25] Moreover, many Viennese Jews also increasingly lost interest in religious affairs in general and in Judaism in particular. This negative sentiment especially became more prevalent among the young Orthodox *Ostjuden* -- with which the family of Leopold Weiss was identified. This family too embraced the "integrationist" agenda and pursued more progressive ideals even to the point of disdaining and seeking to distance themselves from their religious origins. Berkley concluded that it should not come as a surprise to find that large numbers of Viennese Jews were becoming less and less interested in being Jews.[26]

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[23] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 52.

[24] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 52.

[25] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 52.

[26] Berkley, "The Emergence of Jewish Vienna," *Vienna and Its Jews,* 52.

1.2.2 Drifting from Judaism

From Asad's own account in *The Road to Mecca,* his roots in Judaism were deeper on his father's side, especially before they immigrated to Vienna. His paternal grandfather, Benjamin Weiss, had been one among a succession of Orthodox rabbis in Czernowitz, the capital of what was then the Austro-Hungarian province of Bukovina, now in western Ukraine.[27]

Asad remembers his grandfather as "a graceful old man with very delicate hands and a sensitive face framed in a long, white beard" who loved chess, mathematics and astronomy.[28] The grandfather always held rabbinic learning in the highest regard, and so wished his son, Akiva – Leopold's father – to enter the rabbinate. And so, Akiva was exposed early to the study of the Talmud.

Instead, Asad's father Akiva secretly devoted himself to the curriculum of the humanistic *gymnasium* which led him eventually to announce his open break from the rabbinate.[29] It was a rebellion that would forebode his son's very different break from Judaism. Akiva wanted to pursue further studies in physics but the family's financial constraints prevented it. He was, thus, compelled to the more practical yet "lucrative profession of Law," and in time became a barrister.

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[27] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 57 f.

[28] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 57.

[29] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 59.

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He practiced law first in Lviv, and later in Vienna where the Weisses settled before the First World War.[30]

Leopold Weiss testifies that his parents had little religious faith. For them, Judaism had become, in his words, "the wooden ritual of those who clung by habit - and only by habit - to their religious heritage."[31] He later came to suspect that his father had grown distant or, worse, skeptical about any form of religion, calling it "outmoded superstition," and "intellectually indefensible."[32] Be that as it may be, in deference to family tradition[33] and to his grandfather's wishes, young Leopold – or "Poldi" as his family called him – spent long hours being homeschooled by a tutor. He studied the Hebrew Bible, reading the *Targum,* Talmud, *Mishna*, and *Gemarra*, to the extent that he could "discuss with a good deal of self-assurance the differences between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds."[34] Moreover, he was also asked to learn Hebrew and Aramaic which he

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[30] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 59.

[31] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 60.

[32] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 60.

[33] An inherited legacy largely based on the rabbinical lineage that ran through the family; it was first breached by Weiss' great-great paternal Uncle who ran away and rebelled, "who turned away from the religion of his forefathers" (Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 58). Like many men in the family, that uncle's name, an ordained rabbi, was never spoken aloud or heard again in their family circles. One day, without any advance warning, he shaved off his beard, left his wife -- whom he did not love -- and went off to London, where he converted to Christianity and, according to the family legend, became an important astronomer and a member of the nobility (*Ibid.*). Leopold Weiss' parents talked about the mysterious uncle with awe and pent-up anger reserved for a black sheep of the family. The same legacy was then breached by Leopold's father, Akiva, who veered into science instead of the rabbinate (*Ibid.*, 64-65).

[34] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 55. Also, in an interview by Malise Ruthven, Asad related his studies of the Old Testament in the original as well as the text and commentaries of the Talmud: the *Mishna* and *Gemara*; and delved into the intricacies of Biblical exegesis: the *Targum*. "Muḥammad Asad: Ambassador of Islām," *Arabia: The Islamic World Review,* (September 1981), 59.

claimed to have achieved "with great fluency" by the age of thirteen.[35] Asad even thought of this early education in Judaism at that time as a sign that he had been "destined for a rabbinical career."[36]

Nonetheless, Asad in his memoir could only recall the apparent diminishing sense of his family's religiosity, a reality which he would later partly blame for his personal spiritual or religious woes. He would think of his early upbringing in Judaism as amounting to "nothing but a series of restrictive regulations." It was an upbringing that later failed to prevent him from drifting away into a "matter-of-fact rejection of all institutional religion."[37]

His family's empty faith, however, was not an isolated phenomenon, according to Asad. Looking back, it seemed to be a microcosm of a larger reality. The level of spirituality and religiosity in Central Europe was declining at the turn of the twentieth century and even continued thereafter. He described this phenomenon, thus,

> "a generation, which while paying lip service to one or another of the religious faith that had shaped the lives of its ancestors, never made the slightest endeavor to conform its practical life or even its ethical thought to those teachings."[38]

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[35] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 66. Moreover, this home-schooling would have been a significant ancillary formation to, or vice-versa, the "two hours of state-paid Jewish religious instruction a week" that Jewish children of Vienna received at that time (Berkley, *Vienna and its Jews*, 43).

[36] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 55

[37] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[38] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 60 f.

Throughout his religious upbringing, Weiss also developed what he called "supercilious feeling" toward the premises of Judaism.[39] While he did not disagree with its moral precepts, it seemed to him that the God of the Hebrew Bible and Talmud "was unduly concerned with the ritual by means of which His worshippers were supposed to worship Him."[40] Moreover, this God seemed "strangely preoccupied with the destinies of one particular nation, the Hebrews."[41] Far from being the creator and sustainer of humanity, the God of the Hebrews appeared to be a tribal deity, "adjusting all creation to the requirements of a 'chosen people'."[42] In short, Weiss' religious education led him away from Judaism, although he later credited it with helping him to "understand the fundamental purpose of religion as such, whatever its form."[43]

Nonetheless, this early disillusionment with Judaism did not lead him at that time to the pursuit of alternative spiritual or religious paths. Instead, under the influence of what he called "an agnostic environment," he drifted, like teenagers of his age chasing after "action, adventure, excitement."[44] For example, towards the end of 1914, at the age of fourteen, when the Great War was already raging, he saw the chance at fulfilling his boyish dream of enlisting in the Austrian Army under a false name. He thought that his rather tall height

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[39] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 60.

[40] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 60 f.

[41] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[42] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[43] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[44] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

would help him to pass the minimum age requirement.[45] This deception failed when his father discovered where he was and came to bring him back to Vienna. It was only four years later that he was legitimately drafted. By then, his "dream of military glory" had already expired, and he was pursuing new avenues to self-fulfillment.[46]

In 1918, Weiss entered the University of Vienna and studied "in a somewhat desultory fashion" the history of art and philosophy.[47] However, academic life did not seem to satisfy his restless desire for adventure, despite the fact that his evenings were spent listening to academic debates in the cafés of Vienna. His nights were given to "passions," an outlet which he said was glorified by "so many others of my generation, in what was considered a rebellion against the hollow conventions."[48]

This lifestyle eventually made Weiss realize that the prospect of a life in academics would not be profitable for him.[49] Moreover, his restless wandering into those places of "excitement" further betrayed an underlying search for

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[45] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[46] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

[47] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 62.

[48] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 65; cf. Harder, trans. "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xiv. Nonetheless, on April 10, 2008, the City of Vienna, Austria dedicated and named an open area in front of Gate 1 of the Vienna International Center (VIC) after Muḥammad Asad. On this occasion, a Press Release from the United Nation (UN) identifies Asad as one "who campaigned for a better understanding between the Muslim world and the West." The ceremony was attended by Austrian Government officials, diplomats, members of civil society, NGOs and UN officials (Press Releases, "Area in Front of Vienna International Centre to be Named 'Muhammad Asad Square'," *Unis Vienna United Nations Information Service,* Accessed June 2015, http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2008/unisvic161.html).

[49] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 62.

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religious and spiritual meaning which he knew must exist but could not yet find.[50]

This interior longing could only be perceived as a preview of his later restless

pursuit for religious, spiritual, intellectual clarity as well as for moral certitude.[51]

In 1920, Weiss defied his father's wishes and left Vienna for Berlin to seek

a career in journalism. There he joined the *littérateurs* at the Café des Westen,

worked briefly for the expressionist film director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and

sold a few film scripts. He also worked as a telephone operator for an American

news agency in Berlin before he landed a job with a news agency.[52]

1.2.3 "Agnostic Environment"

Besides his family upbringing, which informs us about Muḥammad Asad's

spiritual and intellectual dissatisfaction, his rebellion and subsequent drift from

Judaism, this section discusses the impact of the world outside, and the socio-

cultural backdrop in which he grew up in. Looking more deeply into these two

factors sheds further light as to how they shaped the consciousness of Leopold

Weiss. Both of these factors can be considered as "predisposing contingencies"

which are critical to understanding of the intellectual and religious roots of

Leopold Weiss. This is a man whom the world would come to know as

Muḥammad Asad, a Muslim convert, a rationalist philosopher, a politician, a

statesman and a translator and interpreter of the Arabic Qurʾān.

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[50] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 68 f.

[51] Asad, *The Road to Mecca* 61.

[52] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 62 f.

Asad describes the immediate socio-cultural world of his pre-conversion years as "an agnostic environment."[53] While this perception is implicitly alluded to in his first monograph, *The Unromantic Orient*,[54] it is discussed in a more prominent way in *The Road to Mecca*. In an entry dated June 14, 1923 in the *Unromantic Orient,* Weiss reflects on the culture and the religion of the Palestinian people. The reflections date from his first tour of the Middle East and reflect on why the East matters so much to the spiritual experience of Europe during his time. He writes,

> "this place and this place alone, which can clearly reveal to us, via its primitive and uncomplicated structure, our own present existence and the connections between suffering and the root of suffering. Here there is still harmony; there, in Europe, one yearns for release from the rotting divisiveness, yearns for a unity of nature deeper than the political mottos of the last decade could hope to rewrite.... And if Europe is suffering today ... it is just because it has fled the immediacy of the present and cannot draw on its own resource in the ignorance of its condition. Consequently, the search for models in politics, sociology, art, and thus the bitter struggle between principles.[55]

There is no doubt that such an early critical analysis of the European socio-cultural condition became seminal to his deeper understanding of the subject in *The Road to Mecca.* In the latter work, Asad characterizes "the agnostic environment" of the Europe of his younger years as one of "spiritual vacuum." According to him, there was an alarming devaluation and erosion of ethical values at this time.[56] He says that the moral deterioration was not that

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[53] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61, 328

[54] Harder, trans. "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xiv.

[55] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 59.

[56] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 61.

manifest in the opening decades of the twentieth century. It only became a full-blown phenomenon as a result of the Great War which devastated Europe from 1914 to 1918.[57] Besides the devastating impact of the war, Asad also placed blame for the spiritual and moral erosion on the intellectual revolution that was sweeping Europe; this, especially, affected and influenced the young people. Thus, a culture of agnosticism emerged.

The theoretical provenance of this agnostic ideology from the first quarter of the twentieth century may be linked to the influential and controversial work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* published in 1921 by the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951).[58] This work introduced a revolutionary, if not a contentious, understanding of philosophy by underscoring the limits of science and the human language especially where they touched on religious, ethical, aesthetical or mystical propositions.

For critics at that time, this concept was tantamount to restricting philosophical inquiry to what is "thinkable" and "sayable." Beyond that, intellect and language could no longer serve philosophy meaningfully.[59] This philosophical theory could not have been announced and promoted more loudly than it was by the skeptical philosopher, Bertrand Russell (d. 1970). Russell was Wittgenstein's teacher at Cambridge.

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[57] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 62.

[58] Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape, 1990), 212, 214–216, 220–221(192-233).

[59] A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16 ff. (16-72).

Russell described himself as an "agnostic" when "speaking to a purely philosophical audience," but as an "atheist" when "speaking popularly," since he could not disprove the Christian God – just as he could not disprove the existence of the Olympic gods.[60] In turn, Russell's philosophical rationalism was most likely rooted in the earlier philosophical theory of the Oxfordian Thomas Henry Huxley (d.1895). It was Huxley who coined the word "agnosticism." He said that it was "not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle," that is to follow "reason as far as it will take you,"[61] without regard to any other consideration. Reason, he insisted, must be the sole criterion of truth. He advised that when it comes to "matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable."[62]

Earlier, we have seen Leopold Weiss as a young University student in Vienna consciously frequented the intellectual circles or cafés where the impact of *Tractatus* by Wittgenstein was undoubtedly stimulating controversy and discussion. Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb corroborates this Viennese phenomenon saying that right about the time when the young Weiss was wandering around

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[60] Bertrand Russell, "Am I An Atheist or an Agnostic?" in *Scepsis with Doubt comes Freedom,* Accessed October 2015, http://scepsis.net/eng/articles/id_6.php. "I never know whether I should say "Agnostic" or whether I should say "Atheist"... As a philosopher, if I were speaking to a purely philosophic audience I should say that I ought to describe myself as an Agnostic, because I do not think that there is a conclusive argument by which one prove (sic) that there is not a God. On the other hand, if I am to convey the right impression to the ordinary man in the street I think I ought to say that I am an Atheist..." (*Ibid.*).

[61] Antony Garrard Newton Flew, "Agnosticism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* Accessed October 2015, https://www.britannica.com/topic/agnosticism.

[62] Karen Armstrong, "Christians: Brave New World (1492-1870)," in *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 96 (61-97).

the cafés of Vienna, the city was reverberating with lively intellectual debates on

"new, glittering perspectives on the human person."[63] Indeed, Vienna in the

decade after the First World War, according to Malise Ruthven, was a city

engaged in an almost desperate search for identity. The war and the collapse of

the six-hundred-year-old Habsburg monarchy had undermined values and

conventions which were already coming under attack from the artistic and

intellectual avant-garde of the time.[64]

Besides logical positivism, the captivating topics of interest at this time

included psychoanalysis, linguistic analysis and semantics.[65] Elma Ruth Harder,

translator of *Unromantiches Morgenland*, agrees with Asad's depiction of Vienna

as the intellectual and cultural center of Europe where the views of Sigmund

Freud, Alfred Adler and Ludwig Wittgenstein filled the air.[66]

In retrospect, Muḥammad Asad felt that many intellectual persuasions

such as those already mentioned had deeply infiltrated the fabric of society. He

comments that

"a feeling of brittleness and insecurity... a presentiment of social and
intellectual upheavals that made one doubt whether there could be any
permanency in man's thoughts and endeavors. Everything seemed to be

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[63] Ismāʿīl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb, "A Matter of Love: Muḥammad Asad and Islām," *Muḥammad Asad (Leopold Weiss) Europe's Gift to Islām,* ed. M. I. Chaghatai (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2014), I:131 (129-219).

[64] Malise Ruthven. "Muḥammad Asad, Ambassador of Islām," in *Arabia: The Islamic world review* (1981), 59 (59-62).

[65] Ruthven. "Muḥammad Asad," 59. Cf. Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 63-64.

[66] Harder, trans. "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xiv. He must have also known, Harder adds, of scholars such as Karl Kraus whose public lectures in Vienna attracted hundreds of enthusiasts and who attacked everything and everyone. As a University student in Vienna it was also highly probable that the cynical, sarcastic polemics of Anton Kuh contributed to his disquietude (*Ibid.*)

flowing in a formless flood, and the spiritual restlessness of youth could nowhere find a foothold."[67]

This absence of any reliable standards, Asad observes, was illustrated in the way that science had inculcated the sense that "cognition is everything." However, the concomitant ethical goal that science had always appeared to have no longer seemed important.[68] Even social reformers, revolutionaries, and the communists, who undoubtedly wanted to alleviate the ills of society, had now come to think in terms of outward, social and economic circumstances. To heal that defect, they had begun to rely upon the "materialistic conception of history." It was being elevated to a kind of new, anti-metaphysical metaphysics.[69]

The writer Stefan Zweig described Central Europe at that time in his *World of Yesterday* as "wild, anarchic and unreal."[70] It was an epoch of high spiritual ecstasy and crude fraud. Every extravagant movement that eluded the critique of common sense enjoyed a golden age then. Among these new movements and interests were theosophy, spiritualism, anthroposophy, palm reading, graphology, and mystic doctrines from the Far East. Anything that promised external release, including drugs was in great demand. Incest and patricide were the preferred themes in the theater. Art turned to Dadaism and Communism, and Fascism had a heyday. Correctness and moderation were cast aside. Millions of confused

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[67] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 62.

[68] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 62.

[69] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 62 f.

[70] Stefan Zweig, "Homecoming to Austria," in *The World of Yesterday* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 301-2 (281-303).

young people wandered in a daze through European capitals searching for a new road that would release them from their spiritual plight.[71]

Consequently, Asad considers the emergent intellectual or ideological persuasions of his younger years as partly to blame for rendering "all the ethical valuations to which Europe had been accustomed for so many centuries ... amorphous." All of this significantly contributed to the emergence of a widespread "agnostic environment."[72] Even more important than the decline in morality, he deduces, was the connection between an agnostic philosophy and the decline in people's respect for traditional religious and spiritual doctrines. It was these teachings which he believes were the ultimate provenance of all ethical or moral presuppositions. There was also a growing popular proclivity towards a materialistic view of human existence. In his opinion, that would lead to a way of life that could bring Vienna and the entire European society into spiritual bankruptcy.[73] The same materialism, Asad says, could derail the moral foundation and fabric of a society. He feels that was happening to European and Western societies where culture and conduct were being stripped of their reliable standards of morality. These societies were treading down detrimental paths.[74]

Asad believes that even if his generation was still bound by the remnants of conventional morality, it still would have been difficult to avoid being drawn into

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[71] Zweig, "Homecoming to Austria," 301 f.

[72] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 62

[73] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xiv.

[74] Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 62.

that intellectual trend that had become so widespread. This situation, he

extrapolates, could lead either to complete moral chaos and cynicism, or to a

creative, personal search for the good life. E. R. Harder surmises that "perhaps, it

was not merely accidental that Asad's (Weiss') intellectual journey began at this

time and that he found the Europe of his youth so appalling; a whole generation

of Europeans was then looking eastward for spiritual, intellectual, and emotional

nourishment."[75]

1.2.4 An Unexpected Detour

Leopold Weiss' journey of religious conversion to Islām formally began

when he decided to visit the Middle East for the first time in the Spring of 1922.[76]

The trip was arranged after he received an unexpected invitation from his

maternal uncle, Dorian (Isidor) Feigenbaum, who lived in Jerusalem. The uncle

was a psychoanalyst and a student of Freud and was then running the only

psychiatric hospital in Jerusalem.[77] Asad recalls that his uncle was

unsympathetic to the Zionist movement and was not attracted to the Arab culture.

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[75] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xiv.

[76] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 80.

[77] In January 1921, Dorian Feigenbaum was appointed head of this psychiatric hospital in Palestine, located in Jerusalem, Ezrat Nashim, which served a heterogeneous population of Jews, Muslims, and Christians (Susannah Heschel, "Construction of Jewish Identity through Reflections on Islām," *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religion, and the Challenge of Objectivity*, eds. A. Sterk & N. Caputo [New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014], 179. Weiss also had another maternal uncle, Leopold "Aryeh" Feigenbaum (d. 1981), who was an ophthalmologist and was also living in Palestine through whom he would be introduced to the Zionist leadership of the time -- Chaim Weizmann (d. 1952) and Arthur Ruppin (d. 1943) among them -- and, as a matter of fact, he would have a chance to interview them soon thereafter (Shalom Goldman, "Leopold Weiss, The Jew who helped Invent the Modern Islamic State," *Tablet Magazine* [July 1, 2016], online version, accessed September 2016, www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/206221/jew-helped-invent-Islamic-state).

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As a bachelor, Dorian "felt lonely and isolated in a world which had nothing to offer him but work and income."[78] In a letter to his nephew, he recalled his good times in Vienna when he had guided Leopold through the labyrinthine world of psychoanalysis, and concluded with a generous offer:

> "Why don't you come here and stay some months with me? I will pay for your return ticket; you will be free to go back to Berlin whenever you like. And while you are here, you will be living in a delightful old Arab stone house which is cool in summer (and damned cold in winter). We shall spend our time well together. I have plenty of books here, and when you get tired of observing the quaint scenery around you, you can read as much as you want."[79]

This unanticipated invitation presented a fork-in-the-road situation for the young Weiss. While the thought of travelling to the Orient was exciting, he was initially torn with indecision about the prospect. Only three months earlier, he had been hired as a journalist at one of the most prestigious news outlets in Germany, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.[80] Landing a job at this news outlet was genuinely a hard-earned achievement for Weiss. He was, after all, a university drop-out, and had not written an article in his life.[81]

When he arrived in Berlin, Asad had endured some hard times. He was subjected to "an endless number of humiliating interviews," and even became "acquainted with hunger."[82] For a while, he was living like a gypsy and worked as

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[78] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 80.

[79] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 80-81. Cf. Amir Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia," *Haaretz* (Nov 15, 2001). Accessed June 2015, www.haaretz.com/leopold-of-arabia-1.74797.

[80] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 104 ff.

[81] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 66.

[82] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 66.

a low-paid telephone operator.[83] In fact, his father wrote him an angry letter

saying, "I can already see you ending one day as a tramp in a roadside ditch."

But, the young Weiss replied, "No roadside ditch for me -- I will come out on top."

[84] Indeed, his predicament took a dramatic turn in the right direction thanks to a

lucky news scoop he received and utilized. His life changed "over-night."

A hushed rumor was in the air about an undisclosed visit of the "wife" of a

Russian Bolshevik dignitary, Maxim Gorky.[85] Weiss found out that Madame

Gorky had come to Berlin to promote humanitarian awareness about the dire

economic situation of the people of Russia.[86] Through an insider's help at the

hotel where she stayed, the young Weiss got her to agree to an exclusive

interview. The publication of this interview, according to Asad, caused a stir

among news agencies of Germany who were now seeking the author of the

article.[87]

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[83] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 72 ff.

[84] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 66.

[85] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 69 ff.

[86] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 68-69. This Madame Gorky, whose real name is not identified by Asad, is likely the Maria Fedorovna Andreeva (d. 1953). The *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* names her as a "Russian actress, theatrical manager, and one of the founders of the Bolshoi Drama Theater in St. Petersburg." Andreeva left her first husband, a railroad Engineer, for the playwright Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) in 1903, and they lived together. In 1904, she settled down and worked for the Marxist Bolshevik Party as an editor of the party paper *Novaia zhin'.* She and Gorky left Russia in an effort to raise funds for the underground troops, but their unmarried state turned off some of the donors. Now, working with the Petrograd section of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts), Andreeva travelled to Berlin in 1922 on cultural missions which included selling Russian arts and artifacts. (Anne Commire et al. eds. *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* [Waterford, CT: Yorkin Publications, 2002]. This visit most likely could have presented to Leopold Weiss an opportunity to reach out to her for an interview.

[87] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 72.

The renowned *Frankfurter Zeitung* invited him to come for a job interview and was quite surprised to find that a very young man was responsible for this professionally written article and its evidence of "mature journalism." [88] At twenty-two, Weiss was hired as a special correspondent for *Frankfurter Zeitung.* And when the newspaper learned of his desire to go to the Orient after only three months on the job, editors officially commissioned him to be their Middle Eastern stringer or correspondent and gave him a contract to write a book upon his return.[89]

The Arab stone house in Jerusalem that Dorian described in his letter was as promised. It was located on the edge of the Old City near the Jaffa Gate.[90] Its spacious, high-ceilinged rooms seemed to Leopold to be suffused with the memories of the lives of an aristocracy from bygone eras. The sounds of the vibrant life of the market penetrated even the thick walls of the house and fired the imagination of the young European newly arrived from frozen Berlin.

1.2.4.1 ʿ*Ayin l'Tzion* ("an Eye towards Zion")

While this was his first trip to the Orient, Leopold Weiss, at twenty-two years of age, was not entirely unfamiliar with the Middle East, with Arabs and Islām, and with the political relationship between Muslims and Jews in the region.

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[88] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 148 f.

[89] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 148 f. This book is *The Unromantic Orient*; first published in 1924 by Frankfurter Societats-Druckerei, Germany as *Unromantisches Morgenland, aus dem Tagebuch einer Reise* by Leopold Weiss.

[90] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 96.

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His first book, *The Unromantic Orient* is a proof of his considerable pre-conversion awareness and knowledge about the peoples and the cultures of the Near East. With little doubt, his educational upbringing in Europe, a system of instruction suffused with knowledge and information about the diminishing but still influential legacy of European colonization in the Orient at the time, must have contributed to his awareness about the region.[91] Besides, his religious background and education in Lviv and in Vienna also undoubtedly contributed to his knowledge about Jerusalem.

Because of their rabbinic heritage, the Weisses must have been familiar with the biblical importance of Jerusalem or *Eretz Israel* as a fundamental orientation of the Jewish life.[92] For this reason, Semitic languages, like Hebrew

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[91] Bringing in a perspective on how this colonial legacy had potential influential role in shaping the European or Western minds, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques Eurocentric universalism for its setting up a binary opposition of the superiority of western cultures and the inferiority of colonized, non-Western cultures. Said identified this perspective as a central aspect of Orientalism. This view sees the Middle East -- and by extension, Africa and South, Southeast, and East Asia -- as the "Orient," and "other" inferior to Western culture. Said pointed out that Orientalism discourse has the pernicious effect of treating the colonized as if they were all the same. Thus, "Orientals" are perceived not as freely choosing autonomous individuals, but rather as homogenous faceless people who are known by their commonality of values, emotions, and personality traits. They are, in effect, essentialized to a few stereotypical, often negative characteristics and rendered as lacking individual personalities. A strong racist tendency is also operating in such views. Said provided numerous accounts of colonial administrators and travelers who described and represented Arabs in dehumanizing ways. After citing one such example, he remarked: "In such statements as these, we note immediately that 'the Arab' or 'Arabs' have an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories" (Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books [25th anniversary] Editions, 2003), 229).

[92] At the turn of the twentieth century, the idea of the city of Jerusalem (or *Eretz Israel* by extension) was associated with two dominant school of thoughts: one, religious nature, the other, political or nationalistic. It is known that the Jewish people, especially those in diaspora, consider Jerusalem as the ultimate axis point of their worship. Jewish tradition over the centuries developed the concept of 'aliyāh (עֲלִיָּה, lit. "ascent" or "going up") which somehow shaped for them a metaphysical and geographical orientation as far as Israel is concerned. This means that, on a metaphysical level, through his or her observances, every Jew in Diaspora orientates or acculturates oneself, in a disposition of "ascent" to the Semitic culture and language, as the Bible prescribes. On the geographical level, while many religious Jews espouse 'aliyāh as a return to the "Promised Land" and as the fulfillment of God's Biblical promise to the Patriarchs, the same

and Aramaic and other cultural elements of the region were taught and used in worship and study in the synagogues. All of this was part of the knowledge and background that Leopold Weiss took with him to the Middle East.

Moreover, his early exposure to this information also explains the relative ease with which he negotiated his way with the Arab people and their culture when he arrived. He interacted with them confidently on the streets or in the train, in spite of knowing little Arabic at that time.[93] The twenty-two-year-old hustled his way to meet and engage in some substantial ideological conversations with Israelis and Palestinians about the fate of the "colonized" region. This gives us an early indication of how captivated he was by the political shift in this region at the turn of the twentieth century. It was an interest which will be discussed further below.

1.2.4.2   "Fascinated by All Things Arab"[94]

Weiss' apparent ease in his interaction with the people and culture of this Middle-Eastern region later evolved into "fascination for all things Arab."[95] By this, Weiss initially meant his interest in "the Arabs" as an ethnic group and culture,

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concept has also come to be tightly associated with the rise of the Zionist political ideology; as a matter of fact, it serves as its fundamental component of its national aspiration. Further discussion and reflection on the subject, see Philologos, "Move On Up (Toward Your Destination)," *The Forward Association, Inc.* (2018), accessed October 2015, forward.com/culture/132111/move-on-up-toward-your-destination. Cf. Rafael Rosenzweig, *The Economic Consequences of Zionism* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 1 ff.

[93] Asad, *Road to Mecca,* 90.

[94] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xv.

[95] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xv.

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and not necessarily as a religious community. He found that the Arab identity

was "a way of being that permeates all levels of existence, and is existence

itself."[96] His later references to the concept of Arab identity, however, did become

narrowly and almost exclusively applied to a particular group. For example, in his

entry of March 14, 1923, Weiss focuses on the people of Jerusalem at the end of

spring season, describing them as:

> "the same Arabs who are now shivering and huddling in their long robes
> surrounded by colorful sacks and bags as they wait for the train will then
> become cheerful again and more through the streets at an unbelievable
> pace, and life will again flow wide and free."[97]

On the other hand, when referring to Arab people in the religious or

political context, he narrowly uses the term "Arabs," to refer to Muslims of the

land. For example, he writes about the simultaneous religious festivities in

Jerusalem saying,

> "Jerusalem lies at the intersection of a three-fold festival: you sense, in all
> the streets, the Christian Easter and Jewish Passover, and even they are
> outdone by the color of the Arab festival of the Prophet Musa...."

The political significance of this Arab festival, Weiss adds, had been forgotten,

but the power of its religious symbolism remained intact. Even today, as we

consider the current political conflicts in the region, Arab religious enthusiasm

continues to throb with national fervor.[98] In an April 8, 1923 entry in his

travelogue, again in reference to the people of the city of Jerusalem, he writes,

> "they rub shoulders, where they jostle one another, Arab and Jew, all
> possible varieties of both; locally born Jews with tarboush and wide,

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[96] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xv.

[97] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 5

[98] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 22.

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colored coats, in their facial type strongly resembling the Arabs.... Then the Arabs: city-dwellers, fellahin, Bedouin. With them the graduated differences of race are clear enough. Only the Bedouin can be spoken of as pure children of the Arabs, the pure Semitic type, with sharp, clear-cut and almost without exception, lean faces, wearing their cloaks in a strangely self-confident manner, frequently with hands on hips and elbows wide apart, as if they took it for granted that everyone would make way for them."[99]

Such was his ambivalent reference to the concept of "the Arabs" in his early writing! Over time, however, his views would clearly evolve as he began to narrow the term to specifically describe the followers of Islām.

Weiss' fascination for "all things Arab" had grown like a thirst for deeper knowledge. It had given him a tenacious determination to learn more about the Arab reality. Asad refers to this sensation in his first book as a Muslim, in *Islām at the Crossroads.* In this book, he comments on his early contact with them saying,

"I saw before me a social order and an outlook on life fundamentally different from the European; and from the very first there grew in me a sympathy for the more tranquil ... more human ... conception of life, as compared with the hasty, mechanized mode of living in Europe."[100]

It was a sympathy that gradually led him to an investigation of the reasons for such a difference. E. R. Harder characterizes the evolution of the young Weiss' quest as "a restless, yearning spirit on a journey to unknown places with an incredibly keen observation and an openness to unfamiliar vistas."[101] This journey not only infused Weiss with an exceptional receptivity for everything

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[99] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 24.

[100] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 3.

[101] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xi.

Arab, but also opened a vast window of opportunities for acquiring knowledge about Islām.

The same experience is poignantly referenced later in *The Road to Mecca.* It occurred sometime after his conversion, when he was in the Arabian Peninsula. A Bedouin friend and guide, who knew about his journey of conversion, testifies on his behalf, saying that "first he (Asad) fell in love with the Arabs, and then with their faith."[102] Confirming his friend's testimony, Asad shares a story about how his encounter with the Arabs unfolded and eventually led him to embrace Islām. He said,

> "In the Arabs I began to find something I had always unwittingly been looking for: an emotional lightness of approach to all questions of life -- a supreme common sense of feeling, if one might call it so. In time it became most important to me to grasp the spirit of these Muslim people: not because their religion attracted me... but because I recognized in them that organic coherence of the mind and the senses which we European had lost.... And what at first had been hardly more than a sympathy for the political aims of the Arabs, the outward appearance of Arabian life and the emotional security I perceived in its people, imperceptibly changed into something resembling a personal quest. I became increasingly aware of an absorbing desire to know what it was that lay at the root of this emotional security and made Arab life so different from the European... I began to look for openings that would give me a better insight into the character of the Arabs, into the ideas that had shaped them and made them spiritual so different from the Europeans."[103]

Asad's retrospection reveals the origins of his fascination and his "restless" search for knowledge about the Arabs. It was his discontentment about a previous life shaped and formed by a society in which belief and morality had disintegrated. The Arab way of life presented to him at that time was a glaring but

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[102] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 198.

[103] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 107 f.

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encouraging contrast. It presented an "organic coherence of the mind and the senses." As such, it offered him a hopeful promise of redemption from a disappointing past. Confident that he was at the right place, a place where he could reclaim what he had lost, he writes on May 6, 1923,

> "Here I am at the center of the world because in Arab life I hear the hum of the present as nowhere else. It is true that things acquire their worth mostly through the meaning they hold for a particular reason. In the present fullness of this Arab people, and also in myself who perceives it, in this, now and for this one moment, lies the center of the world."[104]

For Weiss, the daily hustle and bustle of the Arab community in this region -- the *souks*, the crowded markets and bazaars, and the flood of worshipping Jewish, Christian and Muslim pilgrims -- presented a stark contrast to the vanishing soul of Western society. Such quotidian occurrences reflected a genuine, convivial unity of diversity. There was an exchange and a celebration of life and faith in the present which, according to Weiss, Europe had lost.[105] Weiss was also impressed at the Arabs' concept of time which, according to him, "doesn't distinguish between yesterday and tomorrow, between the deed and the thought, between objective reality and personal perception."[106]

This sense of coherence was also evident in their music and lyrics which, according to him, were neither happy nor melancholy. Music was performed extemporaneously in "throaty and nasal intonations which flowed into each other with scarcely a consonant, more splendid yet than every speech." Weiss heard

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[104] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 42.

[105] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 59.

[106] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 62.

some of this music from Arab passengers on a bus while he was going to Jericho on June 17, 1923.[107] On another occasion in the same year, he also witnessed a similar sense of coherence on a train ride from Alexandria, Egypt to Jerusalem. It was an experience of Bedouin hospitality. Weiss recalls that one of the passengers sitting opposite him suddenly "brought a piece of cake, turned around and was about to sit down, when his eye fell on me; and without a word, he broke his cake in two and offered me half."[108] In retrospect, Asad reflects,

> "When I now think of this little occurrence, it seems to me that all my later love for the Arab character must have been influenced by it. For in the gesture of this Bedouin, who, over all barriers of strangeness, sensed a friend in an accidental traveling companion and broke bread with him, I must already have felt the breath and the step of humanity free of burden."[109]

Such an eye-opening attitude of inclusion and hospitality which knew no "barriers" was for Weiss a perfect example of the principle of "unity." In his early days in the Middle East, he believed this orientation to unity was intrinsic to the Arab worldview.[110] But, Europe, according to Weiss, did not understand this Arab principle of "coherence." As a matter of fact, such an organic philosophy betrayed

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[107] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 62.

[108] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 90.

[109] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 90.

[110] In an address he delivered at a Conference of the Islamic Council in London in April 1980, Asad qualified his understanding of who the Bedouins are, that is, as distinguished from the "Arabs." He said "when I speak of the 'Bedouin,' I comprise with this term all the Arabian societies -- both the nomadic and the settled ones -- of pre-Islamic and early Islamic times: for, whether nomad or settled, no person in that early period could rightly claim to be an "Arab" unless he belonged to a tribal, Bedouin groupment and could trace his physical descent from a tribal ancestor. In that sense, the urban societies of Mecca, Ṭaif or Medina were no less representative of Bedouin culture that any of the countless nomad or semi-nomad tribes inhabiting the rest of the Arabian Peninsula" (Asad, *This Law of Ours,* 188 f.).

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an intellectual crudeness and, Europeans therefore considered their Arab counterparts as inferior by Western standards.[111]

In the European mindset, Arabs had a backward way of thinking. It defied or was diametrically opposed to the Western appraisal of life which put an emphasis on "the material and the essential."[112] Such a derogatory evaluation of the Arab *weltanschauung*, according to Asad, revealed that the West had a very narrow and limited knowledge of Arab civilization of that time.

Nonetheless, according to E. R. Harder, not even Weiss himself was completely immune from condescending attitudes. He admits that he recognized "his struggles with his European biases and his predilections."[113] In *The Road to Mecca,* Asad asks "what did the 'average European' know of the Arabs in those days?" Then, he answers,

> "practically nothing. When he came to the Near East, he brought with him some romantic and erroneous notions, and if he was well-intentioned and intellectually honest, he had to admit that he had no idea at all about the Arabs. I, too, before I came to Palestine, had never thought of it as Arab land. I had, of course, vaguely known that some Arabs lived there, but I imagine them to be nomads in desert tents and idyllic oasis-dwellers.[114]

There is no doubt that Weiss was dissatisfied with the European dualistic or schismatic perception of reality. It was the reason that he "ran away" to the Orient. There, Weiss found refuge and meaning in the Arabs' "more universalistic

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[111] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 62.

[112] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 62.

[113] Harder, "Translator's Introduction," *The Unromantic Orient*, xii

[114] Asad*, The Road to Mecca,* 99.

instinct, inordinately resigned to the present in a relationship that is superior with nature, and not against it, and does not know this schism."[115]

Be that as it may be, Weiss also acknowledges that this coherent and unitarian Arab philosophy of reality was not always reflected in the life of the Arab people. In his June 1923 entry, he cites the ongoing conflicts among the Arab tribes of Transjordania which he had witnessed as a journalist. Weiss had a rare personal interview with the presumptive leader and the supposed "unifier" of these warring groups, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Hussein (d. 1951). The interview took place in the sparsely populated little town of Amman.[116] Despite their political differences, these Arab factions, according to ibn Hussein, were unified in their unyielding determination to pursue genuine freedom from foreign interferences or dominations.[117]

Weiss' "fascination with all things Arab" represented a personal deep dissatisfaction that longed for restitution. What the Europe of his past had lost and failed to provide was now a promise of redemption glittering on the horizon of Middle-Eastern society. This fascination and attraction appeared to be very compelling and disarming for Weiss. It was only a matter of time for him before he embraced the Arab ethos. Moreover, at this time, the distinction between the concept of "Arab" and the religion of Islām became thinner in his mind. In other

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[115] Asad, *Unromantic Orient,* 63.

[116] Asad, *Unromantic Orient,* 73 ff.

[117] Asad, *Unromantic Orient,* 70. Perhaps in reference to the British attempt to intervene in the tribal wars which was perceived suspiciously as one of the colonizer's ploys to strengthened local loyalties in their campaigns against the presumed threats of the Turks.

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words, the delineation between his attraction to the Islamic system of belief and morality and his fascination of all things Arab became increasingly more blurred. Islām, he realized, was not really something extraneous to the quotidian life of the Arabs. It was, indeed, a reality that profoundly "permeates all levels of existence, and is existence itself." His discovery of "an organic coherence of the mind and the senses" which, he says, "we Europeans had lost" led the future Muhammad Asad to infer that,

> "nothing in the whole world -- neither the most perfect automobile nor the proudest bridge nor the most thoughtful book -- can replace this grace which has been lost in the West and is already threatened in the East -- this grace which is nothing but an expression of the magic consonance between a human being's Self and the world that surrounds him...."[118]

Among the Arabs, Weiss discovered an "inner security" and "freedom from self-mistrust," virtues which, according to him, were unknown to Europeans.

Interestingly, however, when he was interviewed by Malise Ruthven at his house in Tangier, Morocco in 1980, Asad was asked if he would have repeated his journey into Islām in modern times, given the conditions of that era.[119] Asad's response came in two parts. The first focused on his conversion to Islām, and the second dealt with the Arabs. The first part of the question, he said, was "impossible for me to answer" because "I know so much about Islām now. Certainly, if faced with them again I would repeat the same choices."[120] But, the second part of his answer seemed to undermine whatever caused him to be

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[118] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 220.

[119] Ruthven, "Muḥammad Asad: Ambassador of Islām," 60.

[120] Ruthven, "Muḥammad Asad: Ambassador of Islām," 60.

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"fascinated by all things Arab." He told Ruthven that "if I would come into contact with Arabs today for the first time, I would no longer be attracted by them...."[121] Asad was frank about his feelings when he told Ruthven that the Arab-Muslim world of 1980 had lost much of that "organic coherence of the mind and the senses" that attracted him when he first visited the Middle East in his early 1920s.

In part, Asad blames the persistent, corrosive effects of Westernization and the abandonment of nomadic ways. These developments, he says, led to some of the disappearance of those values which once fascinated him.[122] In an interview with the Israeli *Haaretz* newspaper in November of 2001, Talal Asad, Asad's only child, then a professor of anthropology at the City University of New York (CUNY), recalled that his father often spoke of how the Muslim culture, and especially Bedouin culture, had been a healthier culture than the one in which he had been raised in Europe. Talal said,

> "I think there are significant differences between his views and the views that prevail nowadays in New Age circles. To begin with, he was drawn to an existing, established community, and to a religion, as he construed it, which was not 'fabricated' or 'invented,' like most of the New Age viewpoints. But, I can see the connection, at least where the attachment to a nature is concerned. From what I remember both from the period of the war and the time afterward, he was drawn to honesty, simplicity, naturalness. Those are the things he talked a great deal. Those were the things he valued highly -- and we have to remember that we are talking about a time when oil did not yet exert a powerful influence on the region."[123]

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[121] Ruthven, "Muḥammad Asad: Ambassador of Islām," 60.

[122] Ruthven, "Muḥammad Asad," 60.

[123] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia." Talal Asad was born in Medina (April 1932). One commentator said that Asad may have named his son after the name of the Jordanian Emir ʿAbd Allāh's son "Talal" whom he met nine years earlier. Talal spent the days of his childhood and youth in Lahore, Srinagar and Delhi. After completing his education from London he joined the

But, as far as Malise Ruthven was concerned, if Asad's faith in the Muslims suffered, his belief in Islām had in no way diminished.[124]

1.2.4.3 Zionism, "A Wound in the Body of the Near East"

Alongside of his love and fascination for the Arabs and his initial discovery of the realities of Islām in the Middle East, Leopold Weiss' religious exploration would also be characterized by his discovery of the "immoralities" of Zionism. *The Unromantic Orient* obviously reveals an author who already possessed a clear and solid conviction about this ideology early in his twenties. As a matter of fact, in his March 14, 1923 entry, written shortly after arriving in Jerusalem, Weiss does not hesitate to share a very strong opinion about the political state of the region as he viewed it then. He states,

> "Jerusalem (and Palestine) is the land of uneasy conflicts, which work their way into the lungs like a fine dust, stifling all breath; Zionism has bound itself irrevocably to outside Western powers; and, as such, is a wound in the body of the Near East."[125]

City University of New York from where he was retired as Professor of Social Anthropology. He lives in New York (Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," in *Home-coming,* 29 n. 9 (25-42).

[124] Ruthven, "Muḥammad Asad," 60.

[125] Asad, *Unromantic Orient*, 7. Historically, the emergence of the concept of Zionism has always been associated with Theodor Herzl (d. 1904), a Budapest-born attorney-turned-playwright and a journalist whose *Ostjuden* family moved to Vienna after his sister's death in 1887. It became a full-blown ideology thanks to the publication of his *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) in 1896 (Berkley, *Vienna and Its Jews,* 113) which became an inspiration to the creation of the World Zionist Organization in which Herzl was elected president until his death in 1904. The seed of Zionism, however, may have been sown by a book published in 1882 entitled *Self-Emancipation.* It was written by Leon Pinsker (d. 1891), a Russian-Jewish physician as a reaction to the breaking out of pogroms in Russia a decade or two earlier. This book basically called for the colonization of Palestine (*Ibid.,* 113). The latter was an embryonic notion that began to attract sympathizers, but surprisingly not from Vienna initially, where the largest and growing concentration of Jews in the diaspora was located all throughout Europe at that time. It, rather, drew support from eastern European Jews and a few from Germany and England. Eventually, this cause would draw a bulk of Viennese Jews so that it is in this Austrian capital city where the

None of Weiss' or Asad's writings explicitly mention the source of his knowledge and understanding of the Zionist ideology. But, the historian, Martin Kramer researched aspects of the Weiss family background which may have been influential in shaping Leopold Weiss. Kramer says that Weiss' position in the debate was not necessarily a family inheritance. Although the uncle who invited him to Jerusalem was not himself a Zionist sympathizer, another uncle in Jerusalem was.[126] For some reasons, Weiss never mentions him in any of his works.

Aryeh Feigenbaum (d. 1981) was an ophthalmologist who had immigrated to Palestine in 1913. This eye doctor became a leading authority on trachoma, a bacterial infection of the eye "whose Jerusalem clinics were frequented by

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Zionist headquarters was to be located. For this reason, the consensus opinion seems to point to Vienna as the would-be proper birthplace of this ideology. It is noteworthy that it took a while for the Jews of Vienna to appreciate and be convinced of the "genuine" vision of the movement (*Ibid.,* 114). The reason for this reluctance is, perhaps, that the Zionist idea of "emancipation" was thought initially to advocate for a Jewish nationalism, which was understood at that time by the Jewish masses -- that is, those outside the 'think-tank' circle -- as gearing towards the formation of a "Jewish State" within Europe (*Ibid.*, 115 ff.). This nationalistic idea would then stir deep anxiety and serious disapproval from many European Jewish communities, especially in the metropolitan city of Vienna. This angst was on top of the fact that many of them, mostly immigrants, were still reeling from their escape from the recent pogroms in their countries of origin, and thus were expectedly worried about any potential negative ramifications in the relatively anti-Semitic Vienna society, which they call as their new adoptive home. But, Herzl's unyielding determination, with the help of a hardcore circle of university students, continued to promote the global vision, which was to establish a Jewish State outside of Europe, through conferences and publications. For this purpose, they strived to spur in the European Jews a desire to immigrate to the Holy Land where such a "State" was possibly envisaged. This call of emancipation galvanized a group of students from the Viennese University who organized themselves into a nationalist movement called the *Kadimah* (lit. from Hebrew word meaning *forward* and/or *eastward*). One of its student leaders, Nathan Birnbaum, began to establish a journal in 1885 called *Selbst-Emancipazion* in which he introduced for the first time the word "Zionism" (*Ibid.,* 113 f.)

[126] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 228.

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thousands of Arabs and Jews."[127] Kramer cites a passage from *The Road to Mecca* which strongly suggests that the young Weiss must have known about the medical challenges that his uncle and other eye specialists were dealing with. Asad writes that the eyes of Jerusalem's Arabs,

> "seemed to remain clear and untouched by age -- unless they happened to be affected by trachoma, that evil "Egyptian" eye disease which is the curse of all countries east of the Mediterranean."[128]

According to Ben-David of *Haaretz*, when Leopold Weiss arrived in Jerusalem, the "Jews were poised at the gateway to a new era that was filled with danger and promise."[129] Only five years earlier, the Zionist movement was accorded an international recognition by the Balfour Declaration (November 2, 1917). As a result of that declaration, a wave of immigration (the Third ʾAliyah) brought about 35,000 ardent Zionists from Europe to Palestine. Ben-David describes these new arrivals as a "tough breed, whose ideal was articulated by their hero, Josef Trumpeldor (d. 1920), who had been killed two years before in a battle with Arabs at Tel Hai in Galilee."[130] It was the same Trumpeldor who campaigned and called for more people who were ready to defend and build the land of Israel at any cost. Trumpeldor was later quoted, talking about his vision for Israel.

> "a generation that will have no private interests or habits, but be like a simple iron bar, which can be shaped to anything that is needed for the

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[127] In 1920, Aryeh Feigenbaum founded the first Hebrew medical journal; from 1922, he headed the ophthalmological department at Hadassah Hospital. Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 228.

[128] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 244, n. 8, citing Asad's *The Road to Mecca*, 99.

[129] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[130] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

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national machine. Is a wheel missing? I am that wheel. Do we lack a nail, a screw, a flywheel? Take me. Must we dig? I am the spade. We need a soldier? I am a soldier. Policeman, doctor, lawyer, fireman? Take me. I will do everything. I have no faith, no philosophy, no feelings; I do not even have a name. I am the pure ideal of service, prepared for anything. I am bound by no limits. I know only one command: to build."[131]

As much as he was searching for something big to attach himself too, Weiss could not identify with Trumpeldor's mindset, according to Ben-David. He was too independent, too much of an intellectual, and too interested in adventures. But, he was also too sensible to be swept up by such revolutionary sentiment. "He had not come to Palestine 'to build and be built,' but to think and write."[132]

In fact, while in Jerusalem as a journalist, Weiss managed to arrange a meeting with Zionist leaders in which he interviewed and confronted them about the Arab question at every turn. He raised it both with Menachem Ussishkin (d. 1941) and Chaim Weizmann (d. 1952).[133] Both were zealous Zionists who brooked no compromises, but Ussishkin was especially committed.

As a result, Weiss gained a reputation as a sympathizer of the Arab cause, and thus became more and more alienated from his own people. He was viewed by Zionists with suspicion and outrage. Fortunately for him, not all the Jews in Palestine were Zionists. He befriended and benefitted from the assistance of the Dutch poet, lawyer and journalist Jacob Israel de Haan (d.

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[131] Steven Pressfield, "En Brera: Ad Halom," in *The Lion's Gate: On the Front Lines of the Six Day War* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2014), 51 f. (37-100).

[132] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[133] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 46.

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1924). The latter was a correspondent of the British paper, *The Daily Express*. In fact, de Haan objected to Zionism for reasons similar to those enunciated by Weiss, though de Haan was also strongly influenced by his ultra-Orthodox beliefs. Among these beliefs was the view that the Return to Zion must wait for the advent of the messiah. "We Jews," de Haan said to Weiss,

> "were driven away from the Holy Land and scattered all over the world because we had fallen short of the task God conferred upon us. We had been chosen by Him to preach his word, but in our stubborn pride, we began to believe that He had made us a chosen nation for our own sake and thus we betrayed Him."[134]

Kramer describes de Haan's career as already having taken many turns. He had gone from a life of a socialist agitator to a religious mystic, from an ardent Zionist to a fervent anti-Zionist.[135] De Haan further fueled Weiss' rejection of Zionism and helped him to find work as a journalist. And, it was through De Haan that Weiss met the Emir ibn Hussein in the summer of 1923 in Transjordan.[136] This was the first of his many meetings with Arab heads of state. Because of his political leanings, the *Haganah*, a Jewish paramilitary organization, would assassinate de Haan in 1924.[137]

Weiss' shared his unfavorable opinions about Zionism in an article, which, of course, was highly displeasing to Zionist readers of the 1920s, and sent it to European newspapers. The Jews Weiss saw in Jerusalem made a very poor

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[134] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[135] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 229

[136] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 118.

[137] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 229.

impression on him and he thought that the ideas of the Zionist movement were immoral and dangerous. He consistently presented his anti-Zionism as a simple moral imperative. "I conceived from the outset a strong objection to Zionism," Weiss would later affirm in *The Road to Mecca*.[138] He said that apart from his personal sympathy for the Arabs,

> "I considered it immoral that immigrants, assisted by a foreign Great power, should come from abroad with the avowed intention of attaining to majority in the country and thus to dispossess the people whose country it had been since time immemorial."[139]

His moral position was buttressed by a flash of insight which he received near the Jaffa Gate while observing a Bedouin Arab, "silhouetted against the silver-grey sky like a figure from an old legend."[140] He imagined the man as "one of that handful of warriors who had accompanied young David on his flight from the dark jealousy of Saul, his King."[141] Then, suddenly he saw the real-life Bedouin begin to move. He started walking down the ramp, and his "dream-fantasy" disappeared. This imaginative flight of fancy lead Weiss to realize that this man was an Arab, while those biblical figures with David -- were Hebrews! And, he observed,

> "but my astonishment was only of a moment's duration; for all at once I knew, with that clarity which sometimes bursts within us like lightning and lights up the world for the length of a heartbeat, that David and David's time, like Abraham and Abraham's time, were closer to their Arabian roots

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[138] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 101.

[139] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 101.

[140] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 98.

[141] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 101. Cf. Book of Samuel chapters 21, 22, 23.

-- and so to the Bedouin of today -- than to the Jew of today, who claims to be their descendant."[142]

On the ground, however, Weiss bemoaned the immoral neglect and dispossession of the 650,000 Arabs who became, according to him, the unfortunate victims of the creation of the Jewish State.[143] This, according to him, was the cause for the ensuing sporadic hostilities between Jews and Arabs in the main streets of Jerusalem. And unfortunately, those hostilities have lingered and grown more virulent up to the present day. Weiss describes these occurrences as though they were a quotidian phenomenon in the region saying,

> "always there is some invisible scale in the air, weighing the governing voice of the street. Everything that happens, every concern affecting more than ten people, has to sort itself out within this divisive hatred, which grows remorselessly by the day."[144]

Because of these conflicts, Weiss extrapolates the view that Zionism would not be successful owing to its ineffectual "political and economic tactics."[145] But, for even deeper reasons than that, he saw the fate of this movement as doomed to fail. Weiss identifies a "sickness that lies in the very foundations of Zionist thought."[146] According to him, the pretext of Zionism was not really about acquiring a physical Jewish homeland, it was rather a more profound sense of "homelessness."[147]

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[142] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 98.

[143] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 23 ff.

[144] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 23.

[145] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 28.

[146] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 28.

[147] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient,* 28.

He characterizes this sense of homelessness as "the deep misfortune and longing of the Jewish people" that could not simply be remedied by establishing a geographical State that the Jewish people could uniquely call their own.[148] This very "homelessness," according to Weiss, was "the tragedy of a loss of ethical moorings."[149] As though echoing de Haan's sentiments, he says, these moorings as they are memorialized in the Hebrew Bible were

> "of the most exalted kind; the strength had attained form. It was forbidden them, a thousand times over, to worship idols, to pray to the works of their own hands, to pray to themselves: their advance was to remain pure and vigorous, not to be diverted. The nation was quite unique in this respect. Yet, in Biblical times it was precisely this intolerance towards 'those of other faiths' that drove civilization on, for the precondition was the firm resolution of a nation to advance along the path recognized as the true one and to build up values from within their own selves. But their great faith in themselves entailed the peril of a boundless curse, in the event of turning away 'God,' that is, loosening the ethical moorings, despairing of their own strength and going along with their own destruction. For the strength they possessed had pledged itself, in 'God,' to great if as yet unrecognized goals, and how, as the curse struck home, it became, inevitably, purposeless and self-destructive."[150]

This deep sense of guilt, according to Weiss and the sense of having willfully betrayed "God" remained with the Jews. Even when they scattered to the four corners of the world, he says that

> "they automatically clutched at the concept of 'God,' clinging on to it as to a form, which became too demanding once the content had been lost. All the longing of the Jewish people gathered around the old symbol, as they thirsted for the new mooring they never found."[151]

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[148] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 28.

[149] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 28.

[150] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 29.

[151] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 29.

For Weiss, therefore, the "Jewish Question"[152] was deeper than the racial, political, or economic concerns. It was, rather, fundamentally rooted in their declining appreciation or betrayal of God's covenant. And so, the Jewish community lost its sense of "ethical moorings." As a corollary, he accuses the proponents of the Zionist movement of ignoring this theological, existential "tragedy" in their deliberation or consideration.

Instead, Weiss says that they favored the "realization of the here and now" over and above the fallout of the divine-human relationship. But did the voice of the twenty-two-year-old Weiss resonate with the Jews of Palestine? Ben-David says, "No." He observes: "No one in the Jewish community in Palestine took Weiss' views seriously, not during his stay in Jerusalem in the 1920s and not years later, either."[153] The fact that he was a "convert" or an "apostate" was sufficient to ensure that he would be ignored, Ben-David adds.

In the summer of 2015, I visited a tourist information bureau near Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem and asked the Jewish attendants if they had ever heard of "Leopold Weiss" or "Muḥammad Asad." Not surprisingly, none of the personnel

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[152] As far as Theodor Herzl is concerned the "Jewish Question," which was at the heart of the Zionist cause, was significantly informed by the writing of the German anti-Marxist socialist, Eugene Dühring's (d. 1921) *Die Judenfrage als Racen - Sitten- und Culturfrage* (1881) or *The Jewish Question as a Question of Race, Morality, and Culture*. The latter introduced the "Jewish Question" in a systematic and in novel nature, namely, that it was fundamentally a racial question in contrast to the religionism which was heretofore thought to be the only perspective (Alex Bein, *The Jewish Question: Biography of a World Problem* [Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990], 608f.). Herzl, therefore, saw the efforts at assimilating the Jews to the society at large as pointless and could further endanger the future of the Jewish identity. He believed that one of the objectives of anti-Semitism was to promote the ideology that the Jews would always be outsiders; and the only way out was the creation of a Jewish State through diplomatic means, which was a matter of interest to both Jews and non-Jews, and would put an end to the Jewish problem (Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 5, 49).

[153] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

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had heard of him. Ben-David, himself, had not found any trace of him in the Zionist Archives in Jerusalem: "none of his writings, including *The Road to Mecca*, have been translated into Hebrew. A publisher who would take the initiative would contribute greatly to the Israeli Library."[154]

If Talal Asad were to have the final word on his father's sentiments about the Jewish "Question," he would say that his father was extremely critical of Israel; but, he never hated the Jewish religion or the Jewish people. Talal Asad wrote,

> "One of the things I am proud of in connection with my father is his awareness of an immense need to reach understanding between the three great monotheistic religions. I always knew he had been a Jew in his past, I never heard him speak disparagingly about Judaism. Never. He thought Islām was a more open religion, but from many points of view, he considered Islām a religion that was very close to Judaism."[155]

1.2.5 Converting to Islām

From the Orient, Weiss returned to Frankfurt to write the book which was part of his agreement with the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, which sent him to the Middle East as a regional correspondent. In Frankfurt in 1924, he married Elsa Schiemann (d. 1928). Schiemann was a widow and fifteen years his senior. She was a painter by trade and Weiss had met her in 1924 during one of his trips to Berlin. He remembers her as "probably the finest representative of the pure 'Nordic' type I have encountered."[156]

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[154] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[155] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[156] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 152.

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Weiss initially struggled to make some progress on his book. He was preoccupied and distracted, unable to put pen to paper to create the contracted summary of his travels. A disagreement with the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* over his writer's block ended in his resignation. He left with Elsa and moved to Berlin where he completed a series of lectures at the Geopolitical Academy about the East. At twenty-six, he was the institution's youngest lecturer. He also took up some Islamic studies while writing as a stringer for less well-known European newspapers.[157]

It was there in Berlin, on a fateful night in September of 1926 that Weiss experienced what Kramer calls as his second epiphany.[158] Earlier, we noted that that he had a flash of insight near the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem: the Arabs or the Bedouins – and not the "Jews of today" -- were the rightful descendants and heirs to the biblical Hebrews. Now, on the Berlin subway with his wife, he had another flash of cultural insight. Watching the passengers on this train, in their finery and displaying prosperity, he noticed that none smiled. For Weiss, this sight seemed to suggest unhappiness, perhaps "hidden suffering, so hidden that the owner of the face seemed to be quite unaware of it."[159]

Such was their appearance and apparent disposition in spite of the fact that these people were at the pinnacle of Western material achievement. This insight continued to bother him until he and his wife returned to their flat. As

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[157] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 327 f. Asad identifies three papers: the *Zeitung* of Zurich, the *Telegraph* of Amsterdam, and the *Zeitung* of Cologne.

[158] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 230.

[159] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 329.

though it was a *eureka* moment of inspiration, he glanced at a copy of the Qurʾān

he had been reading. His eye settled upon the verse which he believed was the

explanation for what they had seen in the subway,

> "You are obsessed by greed for more and more
> Until you go down to your graves.
> Nay, but you will come to know!
> Nay, but you will come to know!
> Nay, if you but knew it with the knowledge of certainty,
> You would indeed see the hell you are in.
> In time, indeed, you shall see it with the eye of certainty:
> And on that Day, you will be asked what you have done
> with the boon of life."[160]

Fifty-five years later, in his introduction to sūrat al-Takāthur (Q 102) in *The*

Message of the Qurʾān, Asad would refer to that passage as an early Meccan

sūrah. It is, he said, "one of the most powerful, prophetic passages of the Qurʾān,

illuminating man's unbounded greed in general, and, more particularly, the

tendencies which have come to dominate all human societies in our

technological age."[161]

As far as his own era was concerned, he affirms that the prophetic purport

of this statement was an appropriate critique and challenge to the human

tendency to strive "for more and more comforts, more material goods, greater

power over his fellowmen or over nature, and unceasing technological

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[160] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 330. Q Takāthur 102:1-8, The translation is Asad's when he wrote *The Road to Mecca* (1954). However, in the 1980 *The Message of the Qurʾān* it is rendered thus, "You are obsessed by greed for more and more, until you go down to your graves, Nay, in time you will come to understand! And once again: Nay, in time you will come to understand! Nay, if you could but understand [it] with an understanding [born] of certainty, you would indeed, most surely, behold the blazing fire [of hell]! In the end you will indeed, most surely, behold it with the eye of certainty: and on that Day you will most surely be called to account for [what you did with] the boon of life!"

[161] Asad, *TMOQ,* "Introduction to *sūrat* al-Takāthur," 973.

progress."[162] Such a "passionate pursuit" to the exclusion of everything else, Asad explains, will likely lead to one's alienation from "all spiritual insight" which comes from purely moral values. He believes that this alienation was threatening both individual and social "inner stability."[163] Many decades later, Asad would have the same view about that *sūrah* that he had read in 1926. As a corollary, he came to a conclusion that the Qurʾān was nothing less than a God-inspired book. Any remaining doubts were "suddenly at an end."[164]

Such a flash of insight led him to believe that this book was not merely the wisdom of a man from distant Arabia; "such a man could not by himself have foreseen the torment so peculiar to this twentieth century. Out of the Qurʾān spoke a voice greater than the voice of Muḥammad...."[165] After some deep and intense personal reflection and conversations with Elsa, he decided to go to a "Muslim friend," an Indian who happened to be the leader of the small Muslim community in Berlin.[166] In front of him, Leopold professed his adherence to Islām,

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[162] Asad, *TMOQ,* 973, n. 1 on Q 102:1

[163] Asad, *TMOQ,* 973, n. 1 on Q 102:1

[164] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 330.

[165] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 331.

[166] Later, Asad identified this "Indian Imām" as Abdul Jabbār al-Khairi (d. 1958). The latter arrived in Berlin in 1918, and in May 1922 founded *Jamiʿat al-Islāmiyyah Berlin* (*Islāmische Gemende zu Berlin*). He was the first elected "Imām" of this Society and devoted his life for the propagation of Islām in this part of Germany (Chaghatai, "Introduction," *Europe's Gift to Islām,* I:vi ff. (i-xvi). In one interview, Asad explains: "Do you know that Lemberg (his place of birth in Galicia) comes from 'Löwe' (lion) and when I converted to Islām in Berlin in 1926, the Indian Imām said to me 'you are called Leopold, and leo means lion -- therefore we take the Arabic name for lion, Asad." When Asad arrived in Lahore and visited the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* seminary at Sheranwala Gate, he was struck by the fact that the locality was named after "lions" that decorated the Gate under which the seminary was located (Khaled Ahmed, "Muḥammad Asad: the Road Beyond Mecca," in *Europe's Gift to Islam,* I:288 (287-291).

and took the name "Muḥammad Asad" -- Asad being the Arabic translation of his

first name Leo (Lion). His wife did the same a few weeks later.

In January 1927, the couple left for Mecca, accompanied by Heinrich,

Elsa's son from a previous marriage. On arrival, Asad made his first pilgrimage.

A moving passage at the end of *The Road to Mecca* describes his

circumambulation of *Kaʿbah*:

> "and there I stood before the temple of Abraham and gazed at the marvel without thinking ... and out of some hidden, smiling kernel within me there slowly grew an elation like a song ... and over the *smooth marble slabs* walked many people, men and women, round and round the black-draped House of God. Among them were some who wept, some who loudly called to God in prayer, and many who had no words and no tears but could only walk with lowered heads ... I walked on and on, the minutes passed, all that had been small and bitter in my heart began to leave my heart, I became part of a circular stream -- oh, was this the meaning of what we were doing: to become aware that one is a part of a movement in an orbit? Was this, perhaps, all confusion's end? And the minutes dissolved, and time itself stood still, and this was the center of the universe ...."[167]

Tragically, Elsa died nine days later of a tropical disease and was buried "in the

sandy graveyard of Mecca." A year later, her parents reclaimed her son – their

grandson – who had taken the name "Aḥmad."[168]

Years later, in 1934, Asad was asked the same questions many times.

"Why did you embrace Islām? What was it that attracted you, particularly?" Asad

would write that he had no satisfactory answer. He could not say that there was

any particular teaching that attracted him. Instead, he maintains his earlier, pre-

conversion view that in Islām he had discovered an,

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[167] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 394 f.

[168] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 395.

"inexplicably coherent structure of moral teaching and practical life program ... all parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure."[169]

Asad also admits that he struggled to analyze and articulate his motives.

"After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things; of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings, of our strength and our weakness."[170]

But, Talal Asad also later recalled the simple, basic response that his father typically offered to that question while they were at the detention camp in British India during the Second World War. (Austrian nationals – such as Asad – were often suspected of being in cahoots with the Nazis). A Jewish shop owner was greatly amazed when he learned that Asad was a Jew who had converted to Islām. Talal said,

"Naturally, they couldn't understand that and they asked him why he did it. Father reflected for a bit and replied, 'Don't you think that it's preferable. After all, before, I did not believe in anything. Now, I at least believe in God.' Of course, they could not accept that."[171]

In the Feigenbaum families, however, the conversion of Leopold Weiss was more commonly thought of as stemming from a hatred for his father. That hatred, some maintained, also included a contempt for the faith and people of his birth.[172] Asad's own father saw his son as a person who had deserted and

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[169] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 5-6.

[170] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 6.

[171] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[172] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia" citing Habib Kena'an's (a Haaretz correspondent) interview with Weiss' ophthalmologist uncle, Prof. Aryeh Feigenbaum when *The Road to Mecca* was published in New York in the mid-1950s.

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betrayed his family, community, and culture. Asad writes of this painful situation, remembering that,

> "some months later my sister wrote, telling me that he considered me dead ... Thereupon I sent him another letter, assuring him that my acceptance of Islām did not change anything in my attitude towards him or my love for him; that, on the contrary, Islām enjoined upon me to love and honor my parents above all other people ... But this letter also remained unanswered." [173]

Talal, however, later seemed to refute his father's thesis in an interview saying that he did not know his grandfather, other than from stories,

> "but I do know that he loved my father very much. Always. He was his beloved son. I remembered that my father always carried a small photograph of his father wherever he went, and he always spoke of him and about his sister with the greatest fondness."[174]

In 1935, Asad writes that his relationship with his father warmed up and resumed after his father learned the reasons for his conversion to Islām. Although Asad would never meet his family again, their correspondence continued until 1942 when his father and sister were deported from Vienna by the Nazis and subsequently died in a concentration camp.[175]

Some Jewish critics and writers, however, viewed Asad's conversion quite differently. Judd Teller (d. 1972),[176] for one, wrote a scathing review of *The Road*

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[173] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 332.

[174] Ben-David, "Leopold of Arabia."

[175] Asad*, The Road to Mecca,* 332, note.

[176] Judd Teller was a native Austrian himself who was brought to the United States as a boy and had been active in the Zionist cause (*New York Times,* May 5, 1972). Teller informs the book's readers that the author himself "was born in Galicia, where the Jews were caught up as scapegoats in the power struggles of the anti-Semitic Ukrainians and Poles and the dubiously tolerant Austrian government. He was brought up in Vienna, when it was the capital of European anti-Semitism... Did all of this leave him untouched?" Teller then argues what then underpinned the author's "restiveness" or what did he mean when he wrote, "Now I see how simple and straight, in spite of all its length, my road has been -- my road from a world which I did not

to Mecca. He accused Asad of apathy towards European anti-Semitism, "as though this had no effect at all on him." But, he also attacked him for dissimulating his true motives for conversion. Whether this was a willful act of duplicity or the result of self-deception Teller did not know. He even seemed to suggest that both explanations were possible.

If Asad's true reason for embracing Islām was that it did not separate the flesh and the spirit, as he claimed in his autobiography, could he not "have spared himself his spiritual turmoil" by simply remaining a Jew? Teller wondered about that. "For is not the affirmation of life a basic element of the Judaism he forsook -- and, indeed, a key to Jewish survival?" the reviewer asked polemically. This reasoning led Teller to conclude that Asad's conversion was driven by "more personal forces," forces that the author himself might not have been fully aware of.

In his article, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām as a Case Study in Jewish Self-Orientation,"[177] Abraham Rubin also argues that Asad's conversion was "a resolution to the dilemmas of emancipation and assimilation faced by Central European Jews of his generation."[178] Rubin says that Asad's acerbic critique of Zionism and his renunciation of European Jewry was complex. Weiss'

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possess to a world truly my own?" (Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 54) or "Oddly enough, the urge to wander that has made me so restless for the greater part of my life ... stems from a longing to find my own restful place in the world..." (*Ibid.* 27) (In "A Jew in Islām," Review of *The Road to Mecca* [Jan 1, 1954], *Proquest*, 280).

[177] Abraham Rubin, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām as a Case Study in Jewish Self-Orientation," in *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 22.1 (Fall 2016): 1-28

[178] Rubin, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām," 1.

position, he feels, was a personal, rebellious pursuit of a Jewish Orientalist self-affirmation. As such, it appropriately characterizes his generation's search for new modes of Jewish self-definition.

In other words, Rubin argues that Asad's embrace of Islām was a kind of self-reinvention in the Oriental context. As such, Rubin concludes that Asad's journey and rhetoric is indistinguishable from a Zionist Jew's pursuit for self-affirmation. He explains that

> "Asad's biography was written under the influence of the post-assimilatory spirit that spread throughout Central Europe during the author's youth. The yearning for wholeness and communal integrity, the disenchantment with modernity, and the exotization and romanticization of the Orient as a nostalgia site of pure origins -- all of the motifs underlying Asad's conversion narrative -- are mirrored and anticipated in a Zionist discourse that stretches back to the *fin de siècle*. His self-invention as a Muslim is firmly anchored in the imagery and rhetoric of Jewish and European orientalism, a reflection of his generation's search for new modes of Jewish self-definition."[179]

Rubin characterizes Asad's embrace of Islām as a Zionist hope for the redemption of a "European Jew's identitarian ambiguity."[180] His "home-coming" sentiment basically reflected that of "Zionism's idealization of the new Jew who had returned to his Oriental essence and purged himself of the cultural confusion that allegedly plagued European Jewish existence."[181]

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[179] Rubin, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām," 4 f.

[180] Rubin, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām," 20.

[181] Rubin, "Muḥammad Asad's Conversion to Islām," 20.

1.2.5.1   "A Home-Coming"

Asad describes his conversion to Islām as "not even the story of deliberate search for faith -- for that faith came upon me, over the years, without any endeavor on my part to find it." Instead, he says, it was "simply that of a European's discovery of Islām and of his integration within the Muslim community."[182]

On the other hand, he also compares this journey to a "home-coming."[183] On a night journey in the Arabian desert on his way to Mecca, Asad and his guide, Zayd, stopped at a well at an oasis to rest and feed their dromedaries. Women from the village were there fetching water in their earthenware pitchers at the same well. Asad was suddenly reminded of how another woman (Rebecca) reacted to the servant of Abraham some four thousand years earlier after he had come from Canaan to find a wife from their kinfolk for his master's son, Isaac.[184]

This biblical story prompted Asad to consider his journey of conversion to Islām, and the way he had come to wander in the Arabian desert. At the age of thirty-two, Asad's six years in Arabia seemed like "a home-coming" experience for him, both spiritually and geographically.[185]

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[182] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 3-8.

[183] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 54,

[184] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 46, referencing the Book of Genesis 24:11 ff.

[185] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 54.

What this meant was that drifting away from his native religion did not necessarily signify an abnegation of his Jewish heritage. This explains how he was able to identify himself with Abraham as an ancestor. Abraham's tribe, he believes, came from a small, socially and economically weak Arabian tribe of Hebrews in the central Peninsula.

This tribe, Asad recalls from the scriptures, had made its way from the arid deserts to stay for a while in the northern city of Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham was born.[186] Of Arabian descent, Abraham must have watched the stars of the Arabian sky as Weiss himself had.[187] Abraham also must have heard that divine call of promise to go to "the northern dreamlands that were said to be flowing with milk and honey -- the settled lands of the Fertile Crescent, Syria and Mesopotamia."[188]

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[186] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 54. Cf. the Book of Genesis 11:31. Although its existence, prior to the development of scientific archaeology, was considered a legend, Ur was believed to have been actually excavated by the British archaeologist J.E. Taylor in 1854 near the Persian Gulf between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (E. Sollberger, "Mr. Taylor in Chaldaea," *Anatolian Studies* 22 [1972]: 129-139). Since it was found in this region, some Muslims reportedly came to claim that Abraham was therefore an ʿArab and a Muslim, but they gave no explanation of how that is possible, since there were no Arabs in existence in Abraham's day and Islām was not founded by the Prophet Muḥammad until the 7th century. Some scholars, rather, believe that it is more accurate to speak of Abraham as a Hebrew. The word is derived from the Hebrew word *aphar*, which means to cross over or to ford. Since Abraham and family forded the Euphrates river to get to the land God would show him, he was called *ivri* in Hebrew. Hebrew is the English corruption of *Ivri.* Chaldea was located in present day Southern Iraq. The Chaldeans succeeded in defeating the power of the Assyrians who had ruled Mesopotamia for some time. In fact, the Chaldeans ruled ancient Babylon. The language spoken in Chaldea was related to Hebrew, called Aramaic. (Gerhard Falk, "Chaldea in Jewish History," *Jewish Buffalo on the Web,* accessed January 2016. http://jbuff.com/c041603.htm)

[187] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 53; cf. the Book of Genesis 15:5

[188] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 54*.*

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Asad understands that his sojourn in the Arabian desert and his two tours throughout the larger Middle East region retraced the roots of his Hebrew ancestry. He says that it was a

> "home-coming of the heart that has espied its old home backward over a curve of thousands of years and now recognizes this sky, my sky, with painful rejoicing. For this Arabian sky -- so much darker, higher, more festive with its stars than any other sky -- vaulted over the long trek of my ancestors, those wandering herdsmen-warriors ... toward the fertile country of Chaldea and an unknown future...."[189]

On that night in the oasis, he was reminded that he was not a total stranger to the dark, star-studded Arabian sky, its topography and its culture. These were the same lands trodden by his biblical ancestors of old.

Second, the journey of his conversion to Islām was also a profound spiritual "home-coming." It evoked the biblical story of Abraham's response to the divine call. Though Abraham's destination was specifically determined -- a land "of plenty, of milk and honey,"[190] – his own journey was,

> "driven towards unknown spaces and so to a discovery of his own self ... he (also) had to wander through many lands before he could build his life into something that you might grasp with your hands and had to be guest at many strange hearths before he was allowed to strike root .... He would have known -- as I know it now -- that the meaning of all my wanderings lay in a hidden desire to meet myself by meeting a world whose approach to the innermost question of life, to reality itself, was different from all I had been accustomed to in my childhood and youth."[191]

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[189] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 54.

[190] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 54.

[191] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 55.

Asad thinks of his own journey as a repetition of the journey made by his forefather in faith. Abraham had left behind the idolatry of his clan,[192] his dissatisfaction over his being childless[193] and the life of a nomad. Abraham had no land that he could call his own. But, he had come to know the almighty God, the only one who could fulfill his true desires.

Asad refuses to reduce his own journey to the simple pursuits of an adventurer with a passion for exciting discoveries. As a matter of fact, he sees his family's migration from Eastern Europe to Vienna, his own wandering in Central European cities, and finally his Middle Eastern trip as parts of an inward journey. During that journey, he had to grapple with life's existential questions. Finding answers, he believes, came through his encounter with and reflection upon the worldview of the Arabs. It was a belief system with which he could perfectly resonate. Hence, his conversion to Islām was a "home-coming of the heart."

That "home-coming" metaphor fits with his growing understanding of the twists and turns that his life's journey had taken. The biblical figure of Abraham helped him to unlock the purpose and meaning of his rather mysterious, yet serendipitous odyssey. In the life of Abraham, Asad saw paths that his life's journey had also taken. Abraham followed a persistent but mysterious call which eventually brought him into a relationship with God that would ultimately be identified with a "Promise." Weiss knew that an obscure and mysterious

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[192] Book of Joshua 24:2, or the Book of Genesis 12:1; cf. Q 6:74-82, or Q 21:51-70, or Q 37:83-100.

[193] The Book of Genesis 15:2.

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sensation had driven him from his rather "aimless" life in Europe to falling in love with the Arab life, and then with Islām. There, his heart found a "home."

Readers of his autobiography, *The Road to Mecca*, would likely describe the author as a headstrong and determined adventurer. But, Asad admits that he was powerless to resist the strong gravitational force of Islām. It seemed to dominate him interiorly and revealed a submissive Asad. He seemed to be passively steering towards a "reality...which was different from all I had been accustomed to in my childhood and youth."[194]

1.2.5.2　　"Lifting of a Curtain"

Besides the "home-coming" metaphor, Asad also describes his conversion to Islām as the "lifting of a curtain." This figure of speech describes his intellectual awakening which led him to a gradual appreciation of the Islamic belief system. We may recall that the young Weiss was driven by his insatiable quest across Arab cultural and social landscapes "for a world of ideas" of which he claimed to have been hitherto "entirely ignorant."[195]

Through formal and informal academic inquiries, through "studies and talks," while visiting libraries or meeting reputable Muslim scholars, he was keenly observant. In all these ways, he immersed himself in his surroundings, and all of this contributed to Asad's intellectual initiation into Islām.

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[194] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 55.

[195] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 137.

One of the most compelling subjects that stimulated the mind of the young Weiss after his first arrival in the Middle East was the Arab existential anthropology. In this culture, there was a spirit of coherence or unity which permeated Arab life. Such a cultural and social philosophy became for Weiss an interpretive key through which he attempted to understand the underlying principle which governed the behavior and attitudes of every Arab that he met in the region.

This philosophy, for example, helped him to understand the ritualistic daily actions of an older man and his companions that were performed not far from his uncle's stone house in Jerusalem. At different times, he saw them sharing meals or simply resting or chatting on the ground. Anyone unfamiliar with these sorts of rituals "could not help but admire the nobility and ease of their bearing and their inner quiet: you could see that they had respect for themselves and the everyday things of their lives."[196]

The unity of their movements during ritual prayers also fascinated Weiss. Like soldiers acting with precision, they bowed down together in the same direction, rose again, and then knelt down and touched the ground with their foreheads. They appeared to be following inaudible instructions from their leader. In between prostrations, he stood barefoot on his prayer carpet with eyes closed, arms folded over his chest, soundlessly moving his lips and obviously lost

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[196] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 94.

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in deep absorption. That leader, Asad remembers, was "praying with his whole soul."[197]

This vision of "real prayer combined with almost mechanical body movements" made the young Weiss curious.[198] He approached the Arab leader who, in turn, explained to him that Muslim prayer as a genuine worshipping of God, uses both the body and soul. Such unity, the leader said, is, moreover, felt on a grand scale when Muslims all around the world pray as one body in the same direction facing the Kaʿbah in Mecca where God is at the center. This principle of unity is evoked in the recitation of the Qurʾān, the source of divine moral prescription for Muslims, and in the occasional ejaculation of the mantra Allāhu akbar. The same principle of unity is conveyed even at the conclusion of the ritual prayer where participants greet the person to their left and to their right as-salāmu ʿalaykum.[199]

From the leader, Weiss also learned that this same ritual was performed by the Prophet Muḥammad fourteen centuries earlier and then taught to his followers. These rituals expressed a willingness to surrender to God. This moment of learning was one of his first, formal intellectual encounters with the religion of Muslim Arabs. Weiss credited it as his "first door to Islām."[200]

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[197] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 94.

[198] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 95.

[199] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 95.

[200] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 94.

That entry point apparently stimulated his curiosity as it led him to find other doors of learning. It became such an irresistible quest that he made an arduous and dangerous trek by foot across some unfamiliar landscapes of the highly-patrolled Palestine-Syrian borders. He was a guest at different Arab homes along the way although he had no immigration papers in hand. But Weiss could not resist any opportunity that could further unlock that treasure-chest of knowledge he was seeking.[201]

This drive brought him to Damascus in the summer of 1923. One Friday, Asad experienced, for the first time, what he describes as a "Muslim Sabbath." He recalled that in Damascus, there was a "little whirlwind of happy excitement and, at the same time, solemnity." It was almost the exact opposite of what he remembered of Sundays in Europe. There, the silent city streets and closed shops signified "empty days and the oppression which that emptiness brought forth."[202] Europeans, he believed, were overburdened in their everyday lives. They looked forward to Sunday not so much as a day of rest, but as a day of release from stress. As such, he recalls, it was "an escape into the unreal, a deceptive forgetfulness behind which, doubly heavy and threatening, the 'weekday' lurks."[203]

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[201] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 121 ff.

[202] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 136.

[203] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 136.

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For Muslim Arabs, Fridays, on the other hand, offered Weiss a remarkable contrast. This day of religious observance did not simply provide an opportunity for people to forget their workdays. Arabs, as Weiss saw them, simply consider

"their labors, even the heaviest, did not seem to conflict with their personal desires. Routine, for the sake of routine, was absent; instead, there was an inner contact between a working-man and his work: and so, respite became necessary only if one got tired. Such a consonance between man and his work must have been envisaged by Islām as the natural state of affairs and, therefore, no obligatory rest had been prescribed for Friday."[204]

He saw this way of life demonstrated in what some artisans and shopkeepers of Damascus did on their holy days. They worked for a few hours, then left their shops for a few hours and then went away to the mosque for noon prayers. After that, they met with some friends in a café. They would finally come back to their shops to work again for a few hours in glad relaxation. "Everyone just as he or she pleased,"[205] Asad recalled. And, when people assembled in the mosques, all streets were as full of hustle and bustle as they were on other days.

When Weiss observed Muslims praying on a Friday at the Umayyad Mosque, he was able to piece together fragments of information he had received from the prayer leader in Jerusalem. He said that

"it was at that moment that I became aware how near their God and their faith were to these people. Their prayer did not seem to be divorced from their working day; it was part of it -- not meant to help them forget life, but to remember it better by remembering God. 'I wish I could feel so myself'[206]

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[204] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 136.

[205] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 136.

[206] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 137.

Weiss was able to deduce once again that consistent Arab philosophy of unity and coherence was not only a hallmark of their cultural worldview. It was also profoundly imbedded in their religiosity and spirituality.

In *The Road to Mecca,* Asad launches a polemical critique against what he perceived as an erroneous, "dualistic" Christian anthropology. This was a discussion that would recur several times in his later scholarly works. He understands this doctrine as the basic soul of the European or Western anthropological worldview. That worldview included a "tendency to dichotomize matter and spirit."[207]

Here, it is important to outline how Asad arrived at this conclusion and where it came from because this "doctrine" of Christian dualism became seminal to his later thinking. For example, we see it in his interpretation and translation of the Arabic Qurʾān into English. We read about it in *The Unromantic Orient* where Weiss poignantly criticizes the cultural and social disintegration of Europe or the West though he did not mention this Christian doctrine as the root cause.[208]

But, this subject could not be more explicitly discussed than it is in his book, *Islām at the Crossroads.* There, he draws a stark contrast between what he calls Islām's more unified and positive anthropology and Christianity's more pessimistic anthropology. He extols the Islamic view because it makes it

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[207] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 137.

[208] Asad, *The Unromantic Orient*, 62.

"possible for man to enjoy the full range of his earthly life without for a moment losing its spiritual orientation."[209] He criticizes the Christian anthropology, saying,

> "mankind stumbles under a hereditary sin committed by Adam (Peace be upon him) and Eve, and consequently the whole life is looked upon -- in dogmatic theory at least -- as a gloomy dale of sorrows. It is the battlefield of two opposing forces: the evil, represented by *shaytan*, and the good, represented by Jesus Christ."[210]

A corollary to this theological principle, Asad infers, is the Christian dualistic understanding of the human being. The body -- which is material and worldly -- is seen as evil. Hence, there is an imperative to discipline its passions. At the same time, the soul -- which is spirit -- is divine and good. The only way to obtain salvation for a Christian, as Asad understands it, was that "man must turn his heart away from this world of flesh towards the future, the spiritual world, where the 'sin of mankind' is redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross."[211]

Another reference to this dualism is made in *This Law of Ours and Other Essays* where he, again contrasts Islām with Christianity, and describes Christianity as predominantly preoccupied with spiritual principles. Therefore, it was hopelessly inadequate in addressing practical concerns, such as solving social ills.[212]

In *The Road to Mecca*, Asad relates an encounter with a Jesuit priest named "Father Felix." The priest was on the same ship which took Weiss to his

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[209] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 26.

[210] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 26-27.

[211] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 27.

[212] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*, 16, 30-31.

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first visit to the Middle East in the summer of 1922.[213] The subject of Christian anthropology came up in their discussion. It was broached by the twenty-two-year-old Weiss through a metaphorical reflection on the constantly changing colors of his surroundings while at sea. For him, that characterized the "eternally changing rhythm" which beset human existence, and he hoped that,

> it might be possible to catch all this within an integrated image; but deliberate concentration, the habit of connecting one isolated concept with another, led to nothing but a series of broken-up, separate pictures. But out of this difficulty, this strangely irritating confusion, an idea came to me with great clarity -- or so it seemed to me at the time – and I said, almost involuntarily: "Whoever could grasp all this with his senses would be able to master destiny."

Upon hearing this riddle, the *padre,* according to Asad, responded by explaining what Christian teaching had to say about human destiny. "The people of paradise had no destiny; they acquired it only after they succumbed to the temptation of the flesh and thus fell into what we call Original Sin."[214] This doctrine, the priest continued, was illustrated by the stumbling of the spirit over the hindering urges of the body. By this, he meant the animal remnants within human nature. According to Asad, he then distinguished what is essential: the "human-divine part of man...which is his soul," from the non-essential: which is "non-divine composition of the body and its urges," which every Christian is taught to deny. Each man and woman must free himself or herself from the

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[213] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 82.

[214] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 84.

attendant ephemeral and carnal aspects of life to return to his or her spiritual heritage.[215]

Asad recalls that he admitted to having lost his faith and was later inclined to rationalism.[216] So, the priest's characterization of a human being as suspended between the "essential" and the "non-essential" was difficult to swallow.[217] It was hard for him to agree with the denial of "all righteousness to physical urges, to the flesh, to earthbound destiny."[218] Asad then objected to the priest's view by saying,

> "my desire goes elsewhere: I dream of a form of life -- though I must confess I do not see it clearly as yet -- in which the entire man, spirit and flesh -- would strive after a deeper and deeper fulfillment of his Self -- in which the spirit and the senses would not be enemies to one another, and in which man could achieve unity within himself and with the meaning of his destiny, so that on the summit of his days he could say, 'I am my destiny.'"[219]

Asad's recollection of this conversation, which had taken place many decades earlier, does not sound exhaustive. But, his impression of the priest's reflection on the Christian theology in question remained with him for a long time, if not, until his death. As a matter of fact, from this first discussion of the subject, Asad later concludes that Christian theology is fundamentally dualistic in its

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[215] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 84.

[216] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 85.

[217] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 84.

[218] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 84 f.

[219] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 84.

perception of reality.[220] And by extension, so too was the worldview underlying

modern Western anthropological thought.

Later on, in his introduction and throughout *The Message of the Qurʾān,*

this assertion became more defined and more polemical. He argues that this is

one of the doctrines that fundamentally differentiates the Qurʾān from all other

scriptures. It also explains why non-Muslims and most Westerners lack an

appreciation of the Qurʾān. He is specifically referring to the Qurʾān's

> "Insistence on the inseparability of the spiritual and physical (and,
> therefore, also social) spheres of human existence: the inseparability of
> man's daily actions and behavior, however 'mundane,' from his spiritual
> life and destiny. This absence of any division of reality into 'physical' and
> 'spiritual' compartments makes it difficult for people brought up in the orbit
> of other religions, with their accent on the 'supernatural' element allegedly
> inherent in every true religious experience, to appreciate the
> predominantly rational approach of the Qurʾān to all religious questions...
> In short, the Westerner cannot readily accept the qurʾānic thesis that all
> life, being God-given, is unity, and that problems of the flesh and of the
> mind, of sex and economics, of individual righteousness and social equity
> are intimately connected with the hopes which man may legitimately
> entertain with regard to his life after death."[221]

In August of 1923, another door of learning was opened for Weiss when

he visited the library of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. "I spent much of my

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[220] Orthodox Christian teaching rejects all forms of a dual origin of the world which erected matter, or evil, or any other principle into a second eternal being coexistent with God, and it taught the monistic origin of the universe from one, infinite, self-existing spiritual Being who freely created all things. From the 13th century, through the influence of Albertus Magnus and still more of St. Thomas Aquinas, the philosophy of Aristotle, though subjected to some important modifications, became the accredited philosophy of the Church. The dualistic hypothesis of an eternal world existing side by side with God was of course rejected. But the conception of spiritual beings as opposed to matter received fuller definition and development. The distinction between the human soul and the body which it animates was made clearer and their separability emphasized; but the ultra-dualism of Plato was avoided by insisting on the intimate union of soul and body to constitute one substantial being under the conception of form and matter (R. M. McInerny, "Dualism," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [Detroit, MI: Gale, 2013], 4:914-916).

[221] Asad, *TMOQ*, ii f.

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time reading all manner of books on Islām which I could lay my hands on."[222] On

this same occasion, he claimed to have read the Qurʾān in its totality although he

relied significantly on French and German translations and other secondary

sources by European writers because his proficiency in the Arabic language was

insufficient at that time.[223] When asked by a Bedouin what his initial educational

foray into Islām was like, Weiss said it was like the "lifting of the curtain," and

then he explains,

> "It was in such bits and pieces, Manṣūr, that Islām revealed itself to me: a
> glimpse here and a glimpse there, through a conversation, a book, or an
> observation - slowly, almost without being aware of it .... Every day new
> impressions broke over me; every day new questions arose from within
> and new answers came from without .... they awakened an echo of
> something that had been hidden somewhere in the background of my
> mind; and as I progressed in my knowledge of Islām I felt, time and time
> again, that a truth I had always known, without being aware of it, was
> gradually being uncovered and, as it were, confirmed."[224]

At this early stage, therefore, the "curtain" had indeed been gradually lifted

before his eyes as he learned and realized many new things about Islām. One of

his conclusions was that Islām seemed to be a way of life rather than a religion in

the popular sense of the word. It was not so much a system of theology as a

program of personal and social behavior based on the consciousness of God.[225]

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[222] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 137.

[223] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 137.

[224] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 212 f.

[225] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 137.

1.2.6 The Arabian Sojourn

Asad's six-year sojourn in the Arabian Peninsula was critically formative to his life as a Muslim. Everything about it is recounted in detail in his novel-like travelogue, *The Road to Mecca.* The book highlights several significant experiences such as journeying across the Arabian desert by camel,[226] performing five pilgrimages (*ḥajj*),[227] and writing essays and articles for European newspapers. After the sudden death of Elsa, Asad spent most of his time in Mecca.

There, in the Grand Mosque's library, he met Prince Fayṣal ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl Saʿūd (d. 1975), the third son of King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥman Āl Saʿūd (r. 1932-1953).[228] It was through Fayṣal's invitation that Asad later met the king. That meeting led to one of the significant highlights of his time in Arabia. Asad portrays himself not only as a member of the inner circle of King ibn Saʿūd, but also as a "friend" of the latter.[229] He then divided his time between religious study in Medina and palace politics in Riyadh.

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[226] Paul Lunde, "The Lure of Mecca," in *Aramco World, Arab and Islamic Cultures and Connections* 25.6 (Nov/Dec 1974), accessed June 2015, archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/197406/the.lure.of.mecca.htm

[227] NiʿMah Ismaʿil Nawwab, "The Journey of a Lifetime," in *Aramco World, Arab and Islamic Cultures and Connections* 43.4 (July/August 1992), accessed June 2015, archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/199204/the.journey.of.a.lifetime.htm

[228] The founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At that time King Ibn Saʿūd (1875-1953) held primary regional positions as King or Sultan of Najd and the Ḥijāz before being crowned as King of all the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

[229] Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 4, 18, 51,

The authenticity of this relationship is attested to by an independent source. In his research, Martin Kramer found that in late 1928, an Iraqi named ʿAbd Allāh Damlūjī who served as an adviser to King Ibn Saʿūd, submitted a report to the British on "Bolshevik and Soviet penetration" of the Ḥijāz. In this report, he identifies,

> "a person known as Asadullah von Weiss, formerly an Austrian Jew, now a Muslim, who resides presently near ... Mecca ... travelled to Medina ... then he was able to travel -- I have no idea how -- to Riyadh with King Ibn Saʿūd ... His apparent purpose is to obtain news from the King."[230]

And, then, Damlūjī alleged that "this Austrian Jew Leopold von Weiss" had connections with Bolsheviks:

> "What is the real mission which makes him endure the greatest discomforts and the worst conditions of life? On what basis rests the close intimacy between him and the Shaykh Yūsuf Yāsīn (secretary to the King and editor of the official newspaper *Umm al-Qurā*)? Is there some connection between von Weiss and the Bolshevik consulate in Jiddah?"[231]

Kramer deduces from this report that Asad was a privileged observer, rather than an adviser to the king. But, he did have an exceptional access to the court of Ibn Saʿūd most likely "as part of the earliest Saudi efforts at public relations."[232]

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[230] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 231-2, from an undated Arabic report (with translation) included in dispatch from Political Secretary of High Commissioner for Iraq (Baghdad) to Consul (Jiddah), 18 Dec 1928, Public Records Office (London), FO967/22. Damlūjī, he said, had left Ibn Saʿūd's service in September 1928 and returned to Iraq.

[231] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 231 f.

[232] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 232. "Ibn Saʿūd," Kramer adds, "may have kept Asad close to him because this useful convert wrote flattering article about him for various newspapers in continental Europe." An anecdote reported by Daniel van der Meulen (d. 1989), then Dutch Consul in Jiddah, who was one of Asad's few European contacts, notes that "Philby" (Harry St. John Bridger Philby [d. 1960]), who was a British Arabist and whose conversion to Islām in Arabia is attributed to Asad's high reputation with the King, "is concerned about Leopold Weiss.... It is said, that he [Weiss} has influence on the King, and that this finds expression in some decisions, made in recent times; i.e. in an invitation of Swiss specialists for organizing post

On one occasion, King Ibn Saʿūd made Weiss a secret agent of some kind. The king sent him to Kuwait in 1929 to trace the sources of financial and military assistance being provided to Fayṣal al-Dawīsh -- an *Ikhwān* leader-turned-rebel against Ibn Saʿūd's rule. Travelling night and day through the desert, Asad reached Kuwait to collect first-hand evidence. He concluded that Britain was behind the rebellion to weaken Ibn Saʿūd. Britain wanted to secure a "land route to India" -- a railroad from Haifa to Baṣra that would ultimately connect the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Subcontinent.[233]

Asad also began to settle down. He married twice in Saudi Arabia, first in 1928 to a woman from the Muṭayr tribe. Then, in April of 1930, following a divorce, he married Munīra bint Ḥusayn who came from a branch of the Shammar.[234] It was Munīra bint Husain who gave birth to Talal.

After months of being in proximity with the king's court and observing his political affairs, Asad became critical of the king who appeared to prioritize the consolidation of his power. He was just like his Eastern counterparts and was not very concerned about reviving Islamic ideals in his realm.[235] Asad made this

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and telegraphy; beside that, Ibn Saʿūd's position in the Iraq conflict has changed" (Günther Windhager, "Muḥammad Asad's Travels and Writings in King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Saʿūd's Arabia," in *Muḥammad Asad, An Austrian Jewish Convert to Islām*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai [Lahore, Pakistan Writer's Cooperative Society, 2015], 52 (50-54).

[233] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 245.

[234] Munīra (d. 1978 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). When Asad married her (April 1930 in Ha'il), she was only 15 years of age. In New York, when Asad firmly decided to marry for the fourth time, Munīra strongly opposed and ultimately Asad divorced her (Muhammad Asad and Pola Ḥāmida Asad. "The Dust of India [1932-33]," *Home-coming*, 29, n. 8.

[235] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 190

criticism public much later in *The Road to Mecca,* saying that the king had

established order, but that he did so

> "by harsh laws and punitive measures and not by inculcating in his people a sense of civic responsibility ... he has done nothing to build up an equitable, progressive society ... he indulges and allows those around him to indulge in the most extravagant and senseless luxuries ... he has neglected the education of even his own sons and thus left them poorly equipped for the tasks that lie before them."

Asad's final verdict of Ibn Saʿūd's life and reign was scathing and called it

a "tragic waste."[236] Asad's disappointment with Ibn Saʿūd somehow turned his

attention and sympathy to the Sanūsī movement in Cyrenaica. He was hoping

that the Sanūsī would bring about a society that would embody his ideal of Islām.

He met the Grand Sanūsī, Sayyid Aḥmad (d. 1932) who was then exiled in Saudi

Arabia. Aḥmad sent Asad on a secret mission to Cyrenaica on his behalf. Asad

was to transmit plans to a remnant of the Sanūsī forces who were continuing to

struggle against Italian forces. However, this mission failed as the Italian forces

crushed the last of the Sanūsī resistance later that year.[237]

By this time, Asad had fallen from favor. *The Road to Mecca* provides no

explicit reason for his break with King Ibn Saʿūd other than his personal

disappointment with the monarch. However, there were also rumors circulating

that his marriage to Munīra created tensions between his wife's Shammar clan

and the Āl Saʿūd. It was also thought that his Jewish origins, coupled with the

violent explosion of Arab-Jewish tensions in 1929 in Palestine may have made

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[236] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 190 ff.

[237] Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 333 ff.

him unwelcome. "What is certain," Kramer wrote, "is that he left Saudi Arabia in 1932, with the declared aim of travelling through India, Turkestan, China, and Indonesia."[238]

1.3. The Road to India

1.3.1 Passage to the Subcontinent

In the summer of 1932, Asad headed to India on a "lecture tour" thanks to his connection with an Amritsar activist, Ismāʿīl Ghaznavī (d. 1960). Asad had met this man at a royal function in Saudi Arabia.[239] Asad arrived in Karachi by ship with Munīra and Talal that same year and left promptly for Amritsar.[240] There and in the neighboring Lahore, he involved himself with the local community of Kashmirī Muslims. It was an experience that he was "eagerly anticipating" as he left the Arabian Peninsula. He was excited to become acquainted with a larger Muslim community in the Subcontinent. He had heard that this community was "a very important segment of the Muslim *ummah,*" and was larger than any group he had seen before.[241]

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[238] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 234.

[239] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 234; Ghaznavī was also known to be a staunch follower or admirer of the King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Saʿūd who deputed him to look after the Indian *ḥajjis* (Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India [1932-33]," *Home-coming,* 40, n. 7).

[240] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 245, n. 24, citing "history sheet of Herr Leopold Weiss Alias Mohammad Asad Ullah Vyce. An Austrian Convert to Mohammadanism," prepared by the Intelligence Bureau of the Government of India. In *The Road to Mecca,* Asad dates his last Arabian journey to the late Summer of 1932, which would place his final arrival in India at a date later than June.

[241] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," *Home-coming,* 29.

On the other hand, he was also anxious about his reception from the British rulers of India. They had no reason to offer him a friendly welcome. After all, he was a "European convert to Islām." He had been highly critical of the British role and presence in Arabia in the articles he submitted to the European newspapers with which he was affiliated.[242]

As a matter of fact, it is not unlikely that his critical position vis-à-vis this political situation explained his "real attraction of Kashmir." In that era, Kashmir was a contested ground, where an unpopular local *maharaja* was backed by the British authorities despite lack of support from Kashmir's discontented Muslim population.[243] "Just what Asad did in Kashmir is uncertain," Kramer noted.[244] But, when the Kashmiri authorities learned of his arrival, the government wanted him "externed." Government officials could not pursue it legally owing to the absence of substantial evidence and the legal obstacles in prosecuting a European national.[245]

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[242] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," *Home-coming,* 29.

[243] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 234, explains that in the beginning of 1931 the Kashmiri Muslims of Punjab organized an extensive "agitation" in favor of the Muslims in Kashmir. It was reported that hundreds of bands of Muslim volunteers crossed illegally from Punjab into Kashmir, and thousands were arrested. But, by early 1932, the disturbances had subsided, but the Kashmir government remained ever-wary (David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islām: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 96-99).

[244] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 234.

[245] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 234, citing Lieut-Col. L.E. Lang, Resident in Kashmir (Sialkot) to B.J. Glancy, Political Secretary, Government of India, Foreign and Political Department (New Delhi), 31 January 1934, India Office Records, R/1/4670

1.3.2 Asad and the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* Movement

Another factor that drew Asad to India was his growing friendship with some Indian intellectuals who had ideologies with which he resonated. First, he met ʿAbd al-Ghani (d. 1943) at one of the royal audiences in 1927 in Mecca. ʿAbd al-Ghani was being honored by King ibn Saʿūd with membership in his Educational Council.[246]

Asad had heard of this man's reputation as "the Teacher of Afghanistān" and was immediately drawn to the spirit and passion of this teacher-physician. Though he was Afghanistān's Director of Public Instruction, Dr. Ghani advocated for the liberation of India from British domination. It was through this friendship that Asad came to know other reputable Muslim Indians who had come to Mecca on pilgrimage. Of special mention were the Qaṣūrī brothers from the Punjab town of Qaṣūr: ʿAbd al-Qādir Qaṣūrī (d. 1942) and ʿAbd Allah Qaṣūrī[247] (d. 1949). The older brother, ʿAbd al-Qādir, especially had a deep impact on Asad. He was not only a prominent member of the Khilafāt Indian independence movement,[248] but also was an outstanding member of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* movement in the Subcontinent. The latter movement greatly appealed to Asad especially through what he called its "direct, independent approach to the Two Sources of Islām --

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[246] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," *Home-coming,* 26.

[247] ʿAbd Allah Qāsūrī hosted Asad and his family upon their arrival in Lahore, that is, by letting them use their house indefinitely until they were settled into a home of their own.

[248] It was a pan-Islamic movement, a political protest campaign launched by Muslims of India to influence the British government not to abolish the Ottoman Caliphate. The movement, however, collapsed by late 1922 when Turkey gained a more favorable diplomatic position and moved toward secularism. By 1924, Turkey simply abolished the roles of Sultan and Caliph (Gail Minault, *The Khilafāt Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], 1-212).

the Qurʾān and the teachings of the Prophet, forthcoming from the authentic Traditions (aḥādīth) transmitted to posterity by his Companions."[249]

Asad's regard and understanding of these "Two Sources" will be treated at some length. But for now, it is important to underscore that this line of thought strongly resonated with a personal conviction which he claimed to possess "ever since I had embraced Islām."[250] His conviction rested on the principle that a correct comprehension of the message of the Prophet Muhammad does not merely depend on the teachings of the early exponents of Islamic thought, "the so-called imams."[251] It is, rather, a return to the aforementioned "Two Sources." He argues that it was in those sources that one could properly understand the authentic fundamentals of Islām.

In particular, Asad was attracted to the ideological persuasion of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement, which he refers to as "almost identical with -- the thinking of the so-called 'Wahhabis.'"[252] The Wahhabis school of thought, he recalls, was the prevalent ideology of most of the population of Central and Eastern Arabia. These regions were places that he had visited, and they were so close to his heart and his home for six years. His attraction to the religious thinking of the adherents of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth was almost instantaneous when he initially met their representatives, but especially after he came to know of its larger following

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[249] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," Home-coming, 29.

[250] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," Home-coming, 28.

[251] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," Home-coming, 29.

[252] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India (1932-33)," Home-coming, 29. Followers of the 18th century Najdī scholar and religious leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792).

in India. The *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, as he recalls, was "...to become, and remain, my spiritual home, as well as with my new Indian friends."[253]

1.3.3 Asad and Iqbal

Asad soon retreated from Kashmir to Lahore where he met Muḥammad Iqbal who was of Kashmiri descent. Asad had wanted to meet this Indian philosopher and a poet of great renown ever since his arrival in the Subcontinent. A western educated scholar who had studied philosophy in Germany and Law in London, Iqbal was "a seer who had grasped the innermost reality of Muslim life, of its virtues and its faults, of its errors and its great potentialities."[254] Asad even learned after Iqbal's death that he was the first one who formulated, "in clear-cut political terms,"[255] the idea of an Islamic State in the northern region of India. Iqbal's thinking gave the Islamic State concept its "body and life."[256] Thus, it came as no surprise for Asad that throughout the Muslim world, Iqbal would be known as "the Father of Pakistan."

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[253] Asad and Asad, "The Dust of India," *Home-coming,* 29.

[254] Asad and Asad*,* "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 68 (65-76).

[255] Asad and Asad, "The Bleak Years (1938-1945)," *Home-coming,* 98 (97-114).

[256] Although it was Iqbal's disciple, Raḥmāt ʿAlī (d. 1951), who would put down his teacher's idea in printed leaflet of four pages and would coin the name 'Pakistan' for the country-to-be; he displayed it in bold lettering and signed by his name. Asad, too, perceived such a caption as a bold call for the separation of the Muslim-majority provinces of North-Western India from the rest of the country and the establishment of a sovereign Muslim state. The word PAKISTAN was "a name formed by the first letters of Punjab, Afghan Province (known as the North-West Frontier Province at the time of the British *raj*), Kashmir and Sind, as well as the last syllable of Balochistan" (Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 73).

Asad met Iqbal for the first time at an evening gathering in Lahore hosted by Ilahi Bakhsh (d. 1960),[257] only a few days after the 1934 publication of his first book, *Islām at the Crossroads.* This book was the synthesis of the two lectures Asad gave in January and February of 1933 in the Subcontinent on the theme "Islām and Western Civilization."[258]

The thirty-four-year-old Asad recalls that at this evening event, the fifty-seven-year-old Iqbal greeted him with these words, "I have read your *Islām at the Crossroads*,"[259] and then added, "this work is extremely interesting. I have no doubt that coming as it does from a highly cultured European convert to Islām it will prove an eye-opener to our younger generation."[260] For some scholars, however, Asad's work is basically a diatribe against the materialism of the West.[261] It may have seemed to echo the description that the author himself gave his book – a case of "Islām *versus* Western civilization."[262]

In this work, Asad develops themes which would later become widespread in Islamic fundamentalist thought. He draws a straight line from the Crusades to modern imperialism. He holds that Western Orientalists were to blame for widely spread distortions of Islām. This text went through repeated printings and

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[257] Educated in England, Bakhsh was a medical doctor of high reputation in works of charity in the region, and the personal doctor of Muhammad Iqbal and Muḥammad ʿAlī Jinnah, who was credited as the founder and first governor-general (1947-48) of Pakistan.

[258] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 67, n. 1.

[259] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 69.

[260] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 74, n. 2.

[261] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 234.

[262] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 8.

editions in Lahore and Delhi. More significantly, however, it was translated into Arabic by the Lebanese historian and poet ʿUmar Farrukh (d. 1987), with its literal title "*Al-Islām ʿAlā Mufṭariq al-Ṭuruq*," and it appeared in Beirut in 1946. It was believed to have had a crucial influence upon the early writings of the Islāmist theoretician Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966). He drew extensively from the work of Asad in developing the idea of "Crusaderism."[263]

On the same evening that Asad and Iqbal met, Iqbal did express his disagreement with Asad's call for a new *ijtihād* (independent reasoning).[264] His disagreement had something to do with the mounting political and social crisis in the Subcontinent at that time. Calling for a new *ijtihād*, Iqbal said,

> "is certainly salutary and necessary, but it is dangerous at a time of decadence -- a time like ours -- because it could lead to a chaotic divergence of views about Islām, and so to a still greater disruption of our social fabric...."[265]

Iqbal's consternation about the subject was attested to by a contemporary disciple. He said that his teacher was worried about the reaction of the conservative *'ulama'* and the general public.[266] In one of his lectures, Iqbal describes *ijtihād* as "the principle of movement" in the structure of Islām. He

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[263] Kramer, "Road from Mecca," 235. Asad treats this subject in a chapter entitled, "the Shadow of the Crusades," in Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 63-83. In his *Khasa'is al-Tasawwur al-Islāmī wa Muqawamatuhu* ("The Characteristics and Values of Islamic Conduct") 1960, Sayyid Quṭb refers to Asad's translated *Islām at the Crossroads*, 109-112.

[264] Scholars who have studied the works of Iqbal would, however, caution taking the latter's statement as indicating he was against the process of *ijtihād.* Iqbal himself would immediately qualify his comments to Asad by adding that he considered *ijtihād* as "certainly salutary and necessary" (Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 69).

[265] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 69.

[266] Muhammad Khalid Masud, "Iqbal's Lecture on ijtihād," in *Iqbal Review* 19.3 (Oct 1978): accessed January 2016, www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/oct78/1.htm.

rejects a static view of the term and cites its role in the formulation of Islamic law during the first four centuries of Islām.[267] Asad responded to Iqbal's concern "with some vehemence" by saying,

> "Dr. Iqbal, don't you agree that without a new living *ijtihād* on the part of those Muslims who are able to think for themselves Muslim society is bound to fall deeper and deeper into cultural sterility, without any hope of ever emerging from it?... I am convinced that it is precisely at a time of decadence like ours that we must find the courage to look at our ideology with new eyes, untrammelled by what the earlier generations of Muslims thought about the problems of Islām! No, if we want to survive -- survive as a community and overcome our cultural decadence -- we must, whether our *mullahs* like it or not, try to exert our *ijtihād* even at the risk of committing errors! We must not be afraid of errors: we must be afraid of stagnation..."[268]

Iqbal smiled and asked Asad to return the next day. Their friendship lasted until the death of this Indian philosopher and poet in 1938.[269]

1.4   Asad and *Ijtihād*, Methodology for Islamic Revival

1.4.1   Historical Development and Resurgence of *Ijtihād*

Asad's advocacy for *ijtihād* could be considered as a continuing development and as a historical resurgence of the debate about it in modern

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[267] In a separate article Iqbal would illustrate what the practice or the essence of *ijtihād* entails thus, "if we contemplate on the present situation we will come to the conclusion that as, in order to support the fundamentals of re-ligion, we need a new theology, similarly we need great jurists for the reinterpretation of Islamic law. The jurist must be able not only to codify Islamic law on a modern pattern but he should also be capable of extending these principles, by his power of imagination, to cover all the possible situations of the present-day social needs. As far as I know there is no one such single jurist born yet in the Islamic world. Considering the significance and volume of the work it appears that this requires definitely more than one mind" (Masud, "Iqbal's Lecture on ijtihad," citing Iqbal, "Qaumī Zindagī" *Makhzan*, October 1934, vide 'Abd al-Valid Mu'īnī, Maqālāt-i Iqbāl [Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963], 55).

[268] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 69.

[269] Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," *Home-coming,* 70.

times. In the Classical Period, jurists understood *ijtihād* as the "exertion of mental energy in the search for a legal opinion... the maximum effort expended... to master and apply the principles and rules of *uṣūl al-fiqh* for the purpose of discovering God's law."[270] According to Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), the same concept evolved from its erstwhile state of being the *ijtihād al-ra'y* (subjective or individual opinion or judgment). It was exercised by the earliest specialists in religious law as part of their search for legal rulings based on the rudimentary guidance available in the Qurʾān. It was also found in the practice of the local community of Muslims.[271] It was further applied in cases where the "Two Sources" did not provide clear direction for certain decisions. "Determining what the law is was not a matter of speculation," Wael Hallaq writes.[272] Rulings of individual cases had to be arrived at through a highly complex methodology known as *ijtihād.*

Later, however, questions were raised as to who a qualified mujtahid was (practitioner of *ijtihād*) and who had the right to independently exercise a personal opinion. This led to a period during which no one was deemed to have the necessary qualifications for independent reasoning in law. So, "all future activity would have to be confined to the explanation, application, and, at the

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[270] Wael B. Hallaq, "Was the Gate of *Ijtihād* Closed?" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16.1 (1984), 3 (3-41).

[271] Joseph Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 69 (69-75).

[272] Wael B. Hallaq, "On the Origin of the Controversy about the Existence of Mujtahids and the Gate of Ijtihad," *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986): 132 (129-141).

most, interpretation of the doctrine as it had been laid down once and for all."[273]

Schacht describes this phenomenon as the "closing of the door of *ijtihād*"[274]

(ʿ*insidād bāb al-ijtihād*). It was an "officially sanctioned" denial of any further

independent reasoning after the time when "all essential questions had been

thoroughly discussed and finally settled" by the beginning of the tenth century.[275]

Moreover, this also could have been precipitated when the principle of the

infallibility of the consensus of scholars evolved and progressively narrowed and

hardened the doctrine.[276] The inevitable corollary of that narrowing, Schacht

concludes, was the demand for *taqlīd.* In the ancient schools of law, *taqlīd* was a

term that customarily referred to the Companions of the Prophet. It later meant

the unquestioning acceptance by a *muqallid* (practitioner of *taqlīd*) of the

doctrines of established schools and authorities.[277]

Contrary to the notion of ʿ*insidād bāb al-ijtihād*, Hallaq argues that such a

phenomenon never occurred "in theory nor in practice," and that *mujtahidūn*

existed at nearly all times to promote positive law after the formation of the

schools. Any notion of closure, he adds, was never mentioned in Islamic sources

until the end of the eleventh century.[278]

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[273] Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 71.

[274] Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 71.

[275] Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 71.

[276] Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 69. Cf. Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islām* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 77-80 (68-84).

[277] Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 71.

[278] Hallaq, "Was the Gate of *Ijtihād* Closed?" 4.

In fact, Hallaq asserts that *ijtihād* was indispensable in legal theory for it constituted the only means by which jurists were able to reach the rulings decreed by God, which he equated with the ʿ*ilm* (knowledge). In other words, its continued functioning depended upon the survival of ʿ*ilm,* and, in turn, on the *sharīʿah*.[279] For modern scholars like Schacht to suggest the notion of closure, Hallaq argues, could only presuppose that Muslims of this period viewed law as "quantitatively limited." The *sharīʿah* was not really providing sufficient means for solving legal problems arising from new situations.[280]

In modern times, the practice of *ijtihād* has become increasingly encouraged by modernist intellectuals especially concerning the rethinking of dogmatic certainties.[281] Some scholars point to the Indian reformist and modernist, Shāh Walī Allāh Dehlawī (d. 1762) who gave impetus to this development as he expressly rejected *taqlīd* or the "blind imitation" of early scholars. Instead, he advocated for *ijtihād,* and for the application of fresh ideas in interpreting the Qurʾān.[282]

Other thinkers also supported moving away from the blind adherence to tradition. Walī Allāh rejected some accepted views related to the principle of exegesis (*uṣūl tafsīr*). While his reformist ideas may not be radical from a twenty-

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[279] Hallaq, "On the Origin of the Controversy," 132.

[280] Hallaq, "On the Origin of the Controversy," 132.

[281] Muḥammad Qāsim Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 75 (75-107).

[282] J.M.S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Wali Allāh* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 165.

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first century perspective, they were, nonetheless, influential in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In fact, thanks to Walī Allāh's pioneering modernist and reformist trend, more and more "Muslims have come to explicitly reject the authority of the medieval schools of law in favor of unmediated recourse to the Islamic foundational texts. These texts, of course, were the Qurʾān and the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad as well as the practice of the earliest generations of Muslim forbears (the *salaf*)" in the late nineteenth-century phenomenon.[283]

Sayyid Aḥmad Khan (d. 1898) published a six-volume work on the Qurʾān in 1879. In his work, he attempted to reinterpret the Qurʾān in the modern period.[284] He believed that Muslims needed to reassess their tradition, heritage and ways of thought. There were newly emerging and dynamic sources of knowledge, values and institutions. Similarly, Muḥammad ʿAbduh challenged the nineteenth-century Islamic orthodoxy in his emphasis on the need for an independent reading of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān itself should be consulted anew each time. No Muslim, he said, should ever rely solely on the interpretations of theologians and jurists from preceding generations for ideas about their true beliefs.[285]

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[283] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 75.

[284] Christian Troll, *Sayyid Aḥmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 144-170. Aḥmad Khan's approach to qurʾānic hermeneutics, however, is characterized as more radical as he argued that *tafsīr* should rely on the principles of reason and "nature," free even from *Sunnah* (Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 44).

[285] Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* trans., I. Musa and K. Cragg (New York: Books for Libraries, 1980), 129.

ʿAbduh, therefore, took the position against the established practice of *taqlīd* and the corresponding prohibition of *ijtihād* for the religious scholars of Islām.[286] Ardent advocates of *ijtihād* – like ʿAbduh's pupil Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā – also challenged would-be practitioners to articulate new legal norms on "matters not settled by definitively known indicants in the [foundational] texts."[287] New practitioners should possess an understanding of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah as well as knowledge of the purpose of the law. This new approach should be cognizant of people's customs and circumstances because the rulings of the sacred law, especially those that concern human interactions, turn on the common good, namely, attention should be paid to the principles of avoiding harm and seeking what is beneficial.[288]

For Riḍā, *taqlīd* was diametrically opposed to *ijtihād.* The former deadened people's mental faculties and set up barriers between people and what God had intended to be their unmediated access to the Qurʾān.[289] Riḍā accused many in the ʿulamāʾ of having committed themselves to *taqlīd.* He said that they had contributed to the political and social stagnation.

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[286] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity*, 125.

[287] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age,* 77.

[288] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 77.

[289] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age, 77.* Cf. Perhaps, Sayyid Quṭb's *Fī Zilāl al-Qurʾān* is a good example of a modern work which is somewhat divorced from standard exegetical tradition in more free-flowing ideas around the text; it draws in the modern world and its challenges, and refuses to follow any early approach to *tafsīr.* It is, as the title suggests, "in the shade' of the Qurʾān, and attempts to find relevance and meaning at a personal and collective level for Muslim youth.

On the other hand, most Deobandi ʿulamāʾ were firm adherents of *taqlīd.* This revivalist movement in India, inspired by the scholarship of Walī Allāh, argued that while they were not a "modernist institution," they were devoted to reintroducing the foundational texts of Islām to the Muslims of India. It was necessary because the "markers of Islām" had become blurry due to India's distance from the cradles of Islām.[290]

On the question of *Ijtihād*, however, Deobandi nonetheless believed it should be exercised when a ruling was not forthcoming from the Qurʾān or from the Sunnah. If there existed a definitive text, then no *ijtihad* is needed.[291]

1.4.2 *Ijtihād,* a Modern Islamic Imperative

Asad strongly argues that only through a renewed practice of *ijtihād* in the contemporary period could Islām be restored to its former state of glory. We recall that it was his attraction to the philosophical *weltanschauung* of the Arab people that facilitated his entry into Islām. This was deepened through his experience of a relatively "ideal" or "conserved" form of the religion in the Ḥijāz. For these reasons he recounts his first impression of Islām as

> "a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other; nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure."[292]

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[290] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 78.

[291] Zamān, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 79.

[292] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 6.

Unlike other religions, he saw Islām as endowed from the beginning with all the essential attributes of a civilization. It had a sharply outlined community, a characteristic worldview, a comprehensive system of law, and a definite pattern of social relations. He even concluded that Islām was, by far, the "greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced."[293] As a polity, he found in it the most complete form of theocracy history has ever known."[294]

The Qurʾān speaks about Islām, acknowledging its superlative nature when it says, "You are the best community that has been sent forth unto mankind: You enjoin the Right and forbid the Wrong: and you have faith in God" (Q 3:110).[295] Asad interprets this qurʾānic declaration as basically sanctioning the mission of the Muslim community to construct "a worldly frame for the best possible spiritual development of man. For, according to the teachings of Islām, moral knowledge automatically forces moral responsibility upon man."[296] Above all, Islām's greatness, according to Asad, was grounded in its unassailable fundamentals provided by the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Together, both of these became "a band of steel around that grand social structure."[297] They furnished not only coherent teachings but also a path of life that is concrete and practical.

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[293] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 7.

[294] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 33.

[295] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 32. Likely his own translation as this predates his *The Message of the Qurʾān* of 1980. It is rendered slightly different in his latter translation thus, "You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and you believe in God."

[296] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 32.

[297] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 41.

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They are inherently adjustable to different historical and cultural settings and thus serve as an aid to societies and individuals of different times and cultures, he adds.[298]

However, Asad saw a different Islamic reality on the ground. It had gone astray from the ideology provided by the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. It was now fraught with what he called, "the intellectual lethargy of dumb adherence to formulas."[299] It was also burdened with the meanest internecine wrangling, with laziness, superstition and social corruption. All of these faults were "dimming almost beyond recognition the glorious promise" held out in the beginning.[300]

Asad saw that the Islamic thrust and potentials were eroded and turned upside-down. Drawing a metaphor from the New Testament, Asad compares this decline to the predicament of the younger son of the rich man in the story of the "prodigal son."[301] The son squanders his splendid patrimony and later wallows in the gutter.[302] Nonetheless, Asad believes that "Islām was still there" but that it was "a body without a soul."[303] In a sense, Islām's original strength, its touted religious foundations also became the seeds of its weaknesses. Asad believes

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[298] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 11.

[299] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 67.

[300] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 13.

[301] See the Gospel of Luke 15:11-32.

[302] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 13.

[303] Asad, "*This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 13; *Ibid, Islām at the Crossroads*, 4. This observation echoes the sentiment of Muḥammad ʿAbduh about his appraisal of the global state of Islām upon his return to Egypt from Europe. He said, "I went to the West and saw Islām, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islām." Ahmed Ahsan, "Democracy, Religion and Moral Values: A Road Map toward Political Transformation in Egypt," Foreign Policy Journal. Web. Accessed January 2016.

that the weakening of Islām's cultural structure "might cause its ultimate disappearance."[304]

This decline later became manifest in the political realm, particularly in its increasing orientation towards Western civilization.[305] Asad recalls an experience in the Muslim polities of Northern India where he was working with the interim government to envision a future Islamic Pakistan. After arriving in India in 1933, he had spent most of his time writing in Lahore, the capital city of the Province of Punjab. That region was to become the largest federal territory in the soon-to-be partitioned state of Pakistan.[306]

Asad always worked on his own. Though he held several leaders of the modern Islamic reform movements in high esteem, he was also an independent thinker. He did not hesitate to question their intellectual and political currency and he did not grind any ideological or political axes for anyone. He never belonged to any organized movement, nor did he wish to form a socio-political organization to promote his reformist ideas. Part of this aversion was because he had little sympathy for the intolerance that often accompanied group partisanship.

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[304] Asad., *Islām at the Crossroads,* 4.

[305] Asad*., This Law of Ours and Other Essays*, 13. According to Ḥalīm Pāshā, whose work *İslâmlaşmak* ("To Islāmize," 1918) Asad referenced in his first monograph, the reason why the Muslim "intelligentsia" rallied to the idea of "westernization" is because "that class had, in large numbers, gone to Western centers for their education, or to schools which foreign powers, in rivalry with one another, were eager to create Muslim lands, being anxious to establish by propaganda their ethical and social domination of the Muslim world in order to consolidate their economic and political dominion (Reprinted as "The Reform of Muslim Society," in *Islamic Studies* 47.3 (Autumn 2008): 389 (379-404).

[306] Pakistan was partitioned from the Indian subcontinent on August 15, 1947 as an independent "dominion" according to the two-nation theory of the "Indian Independence Act of 1947." The states of "Pakistan" at this time still included the East Pakistan, the modern-day Bangladesh (which eventually seceded in 1971).

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Probably, he also felt that the consuming demands of organizational involvement had detrimental effects on creative writing.

By the time of the partition in 1947, the name of "Muḥammad Asad" and his works were relatively well known to the intelligentsia and political figures in this Punjabi region. As a matter of fact, in October of 1947, roughly two months after Independence, he was summoned by the first Chief Minister of Punjab -- who had apparently followed his literary works. This minister wished to commission Asad to create a special department in the new government to "work out the ideological premises on which Pakistan should rest..."[307]

Asad named this office the "Department of Islamic Reconstruction," and he was appointed as its first Director. The term "reconstruction," he says, put an emphasis on "exactly what we are aiming at: a reconstruction of our social life, and thinking along genuinely Islamic lines."[308] By, "thinking along genuinely Islamic lines," Asad was likely echoing the voice of Ḥalīm Pāshā who in his *İslâmlaşmak*[309] advocated for the full but carefully interpreted application of Islām in the areas of belief, morality, living and politics.[310] As such, this reconstruction

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[307] The first Chief MInister was Iftikhar Husayn Mamdot (d. 1969) who reigned from August 15, 1947 to January 25, 1949. While he envisioned this department for the whole new "nation," Asad suggested it to be established first in his province before endorsing it to the Central Government in Karachi. Asad and Asad, "Islamic Reconstruction," *Home-coming,* 133 (133-146).

[308] Asad and Asad, "Islamic Reconstruction," *Home-coming,* 134. Asad dubbed this new government agency as "the first and only" in the entire Muslim world.

[309] While the preceding quotation is not attributed to Ḥalīm Pāshā in the current work, Asad made mention of the Turkish Prince in his 1934 *Islām at the Crossroads* (p. 105) where he echoed the latter's view on the authenticity of living as a Muslim in an authentic Islamic society.

[310] Syed Tanvir Wasti, "Saʿīd Ḥalīm Pāshā," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44,1 (Jan 2008): 95 (85-104).

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entailed, first and foremost, a debunking of what Asad considers to be an erroneous idea that

> "there could be only one form of state deserving the adjective 'Islamic,' namely the form manifested under the 'Four Rightly-Guided Caliphs,' -- and that, therefore, any deviation from that model would detract from the Islamic character of the state."[311]

As far as Asad was concerned, this notion was embraced by some of the influential members of the conservative scholars or ʿulamāʾ. This group, he says, was comprised of advocates of the "petrified *fiqh*."[312] Most likely, this was the same intellectual atmosphere that the late Iqbal had contended with. Because of this group, Iqbal had been reluctant to push for *ijtihād* because he feared that it could cause further social instability.

In a sense, Asad realized as well that he was facing a mentality and viewpoints that ran counter to ideals envisaged for the new would-be state of Pakistan. In his earlier writing, he refers to the position of this "so-called ʿulamāʾ class" as narrow-minded and ignorant of the true teachings of Islām. These people adhered uncritically to the subjective deductions arrived by the great *fuqahā'* (sing. *faqīh*) of the past."[313]

Asad criticizes them for adopting old conclusions and solutions as though they would be applicable and relevant for all times. Instead, they should have gone back to the main sources, the Qurʾān and the Sunnah, and exercised their

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[311] Muḥammad Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making (1948)," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1004 (1001-1047).

[312] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 104.

[313] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 103.

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own creative reasoning. Such a misguided method, Asad infers, was tantamount to a dereliction of divine duty. It had misled many Muslims into thinking that the Islamic system was not compatible with progress. Instead, they assumed that Islām should be modified along Western lines.

In this sense, according to Asad, these scholars made themselves accomplices to rendering the Law of Islām obscure. Worse still, they had made it inaccessible or "impracticable" by burdening it with the juristic speculations and diversifications of many centuries.[314] Instead of being a source of guidance and well-being, the Law had become an obstruction or hindrance to modern progress.

By extension, Asad believes that these "petrified" views of the past had indoctrinated the modern sources of Islām, at least in the Subcontinent. This had developed because of the faulty interpretive methodology of the *'ulama'* class. He also observes that these outdated ideas were not totally unknown nor ignored by modern Muslims. He could see that this modern influence of "petrified" views may have been the "main reason why so many modern Muslims were reluctant to apply the principles of Islām to the problems of practical economics and politics."[315] These Muslims realized that these outdated ideas were counter-cultural. They held Muslim societies back and were unable to keep pace with the rest of the world. And sadly, they made the Muslim world stagnant.

As a consequence, Asad deduces, modern Muslims were led to think that Western principles or ideologies were far superior and more relevant to their

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[314] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 161.

[315] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 161.

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society than were traditional Islamic teachings. He summarizes the confusion of

these modern Muslims in these words:

> "Instead of turning their attention to the original sources of Islām, they silently identified the shari'ah with the petrified *fiqh* of the present days, and found the latter wanting in many respects; subsequently, they lost all practical interest in the *sharīʿah* and relegated it to the realm of history and book of knowledge. And, so an imitation of Western civilization appeared to them as the only outlet from the mire of the Muslim degeneration."[316]

Acknowledging that outdated Muslim thinking was not a new issue for the

Islamic world, Asad agrees with Ḥalīm Pāshā's *İslâmlaşmak.* In recent times,

Ḥalīm Pāshā was one of those writers who conclusively proved that the Islamic

sharīʿah was not a hindrance to modern progress.[317] Unfortunately, he laments,

that the healing benefit of those works was

> "neutralized by a flood of second-rate apologetic literature. The writers of those books and articles tried to show that the *sharīʿah* could well be subordinated to the social and economic conceptions of the Western world."[318]

The implied corollary was that the imitation of Western Civilization by

Muslims was justified. The way was paved for the gradual renunciation of the

most elementary social principles of Islām -- "always under the guise of Islamic

'progress'."[319]

Asad was not antagonistic to the idea of studying Western sciences or

learning about and acquiring the best practices or the technological

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[316] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 104

[317] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 105.

[318] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 105.

[319] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 105.

advancements of the West. These are all beneficial for Muslims. It was, rather, the "imitation of the Western mode of life by Muslims" which concerns him as the "greatest danger" to the existence and revival of the Islamic civilization.[320]

Imitation of Western ideas and ideals would, he believes, inevitably lead Islām to disconnect from its origins. Thus, it would lose its cultural and spiritual foundation. [321] Asad's rejection of *taqlīd* was not only a turning away from that "Western spirit." It also disavowed the conclusions reached by the early *fuqahā'* because they do not only alienate modern Muslims from the exercise of creative reasoning, they also purport automatic applicability and relevance for all times and contexts.[322]

Asad did not doubt the conscientiousness of these "foremost exponents of *fiqh*"[323] from the past in their study of the Two Sources. He only wanted to assert categorically that the views of these medieval scholars were "subjective" for two reasons. First, it was undeniable that these deductions were determined by the *faqīh's* individual choice of intellectual method or legal approach to Islamic sources.[324]

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[320] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 85-102.

[321] Asad*, Islām at the Crossroads*, 111.

[322] He reiterated consistent sentiments of utmost caution concerning "imitation" of Western ideas and ideals that it is "a deadly enemy of all creativeness, and that by imitating, the aims or even the outward forms and aspects of another civilization the Muslims were, by implication, denying to Islām the role of a culture-producing power and, thus, the very right of existence. Asad and Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads," 67.

[323] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1010.

[324] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1010.

This diversity of methods and applications would only result, according to Asad, in "a very complicated picture of Islamic Law." In fact, it was almost inaccessible to an ordinary but intelligent Muslim who was not an expert in *fiqh*. Second, these "*ijtihādi* deductions" of the past were undeniably conditioned or influenced by the "intellectual and social environment of their age."[325] Those environments were different from the contemporary Islamic period. The views and opinions of "one thousand years ago," he infers, would naturally clash with many modern sociological experiences. [326]

Unless the complication brought about by the ʿulamāʾ was resolved and Islamic Law and teaching restored with clarity and simplicity,[327] Asad warns that "the Muslims were condemned endlessly to blunder along through a maze of conflicting concepts as to what that Law really is and what it demands of its followers."[328]

Therefore, for Asad, the singular reason for the cultural and social deterioration of Muslim society was the fact that Muslims had gradually ceased to follow the teachings of Islām in spirit.[329] Islām had become, as mentioned, "a body without a soul." Asad likens the overall problem of Islām in modern times to a traveler who has come to a crossroads where there were three roads to choose from (thus, *Islām at the Crossroads*). One path or choice was "to stand there and

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[325] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1010.

[326] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1010.

[327] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 2.

[328] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 2.

[329] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 4.

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die of starvation," while another was to choose the road bearing the sign "towards Western Civilization." Or, the traveler could choose the third road which advertised that it led "towards the reality of Islām."[330]

1.4.3 Asad's Rational Dynamic of *Ijtihād*

For Asad, the rightful praxis and position of *ijtihād* in Muslim societies could and should be realized in two ways. First, it has to be utilized by open-minded jurists and intellectuals in their study of the Two Sources of Islām. Secondly, grassroots Muslims are to be strongly encouraged to exercise their independent and rational reception to the latter's *ijtihādī* conclusions. In other words, Asad's call for the reestablishment of *ijtihād* is primarily focused on the reawakening of reason in both scholars and ordinary Muslims.

He describes this program in one of his 1948 essays as "a new way of thinking."[331] It is an intellectual ethos that urges an awakening of reason for critical inquiry into all levels of Islamic teaching. This new norm of thinking, on the one hand, argues for an end to the unquestioning acceptance of any inherited decision or conclusion from the past. On the other hand, it endorses the idea that all teachings should be open to rational scrutiny.[332]

Asad's insistence on a return to independent thinking was inspired by luminaries of the classical, medieval and modern periods. Among these were

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[330] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 112.

[331] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*, 11-14.

[332] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 134.

'Umar Ibn al-Khattāb (d. 644), ʿAlī Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī (d.1210), Taqi al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905).

Asad, however, makes it clear that he is not advocating an unrestricted practice of reason. Rather, it is a type of reasoning with boundaries that would not claim infinite comprehension of the "idea of totality."[333] In the practice of *ijtihād*, reason assumes the function of a "controlling character" to make sure that "nothing is imposed on the human mind which it cannot bear easily."[334] Asad believes that the exercise of this intellectual dynamic is imperative for all Muslims. Only by honestly engaging in such a new way of thinking could they avoid falling prey to a simplistic acceptance of what previous generations taught them.[335]

This intellectual process is applicable even with regards to the Sunnah of the Prophet which is indispensable in the life of every Muslim. Thus, it is perceived as an imposition. Every Muslim, Asad insists, must recognize the "right not only to know that the observance of the Sunnah has been imposed upon us but also to understand the inherent reason of its imposition."[336]

In support of his position, Asad frequently cites the prophetic tradition that, if a person exercised his judgment and was right, God would reward him doubly.

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[333] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 137.

[334] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 135.

[335] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays*, 12.

[336] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 133-134.

But, if the person's judgment turned out to be wrong, God would still give him a reward.[337]

Asad distinguishes the latter type of "reason" used in *ijtihād* from the popularly misconceived notion of "rationalism." In contrast to the "controlling" or discerning character of the former, "rationalism" tends to speculate and thus, could become detached from "pure reason."[338] Its deductions, he says, could therefore be characterized as subjective, temperamental and preposterous in their unlimited epistemological claims. The popularity of this unimaginative "rationalism," Asad warns, had unfortunately confused many modern Muslims. As a result, many of them were led astray from the guidance of the Sunnah.

Asad's understanding of the dynamic between the teachings of Islām and the believer's rational assent to it is illustrated in *The Message of the Qurʾān.* Even in the book's subtitle, *li-qawmin yatafakkarūna,* "for people who think," Asad is announcing an intellectual campaign to show readers that the Islamic holy writ is a rational message intended for a rational humanity.[339] He discerns this rationality, for example, in his reading of Q 12:108, which goes,

> "This is my way: Resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason (ʿalā baṣīratin), I am calling [you all] unto God - and they who follow me." And

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[337] Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī (Arabic-English)*, trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khan (Riyadh, KSA: Darussalam Pub & Dist., 1997), 9:7352; Muslim, 4:1716.

[338] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads*, 136.

[339] Asad's advancement of the use of reason in approaching the Qurʾān finds echoes in the modernist Muslim thinker, Ghulam Aḥmad Parvez (d. 1985 CE), who said that the Qurʾān contained all the necessary principles for practicing the Islamic conception of right belief and action. The task of explaining those principles was to be assigned to both reason and divinely sanctioned political authorities (Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,1996], 48.

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[say:] "Limitless is God in His glory; and I am not one of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him!"[340]

Asad translates *alā baṣīratin* as "conscious insight accessible to reason."[341] He explains that the word "insight," which in this *surah* alludes to the prophet Joseph, represents the core message of the Qurʾān. That message was revealed to Muḥammad and is, by nature, "accessible to reason."[342] That rational ability necessary for those for whom the message of the Qurʾān is intended is assured by the Qurʾān, Asad believes. He refers to verse Q 16:4,

> "He creates man out of a [mere] drop of sperm: and lo! this same being shows himself endowed with the power to think and to argue (*khasīmun mubīnun*)!"

By interpreting the expression *khasīmun mubīnun* to mean "endowed with the power to think and to argue,"[343] Asad is characterizing one of the most important human functions bestowed and created by God – the ability to reason.[344] He asserts that its primary purpose is to discern the will of God. Asad

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[340] Unless otherwise indicated, all qurʾānic quotations in this whole document, either in the main text or in the notes, are from *The Message of the Qurʾān*.

[341] Other translations: Abdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī: "...on evidence clear as the seeing with one's eyes..." Which he explains as referencing to the "way" of God accessible to human experience (*The Holy Qurʾān, Text, Translation and Commentary* [Cambridge, MA: The Murray Printing Co., 1946; 1st 1934]); Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall, "...with sure knowledge..." (*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* [Hyderabad: Hyderabad Government Press, 1930]); A. J. Droge: "... on (the basis of) evidence ..." (*The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation* [Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013]).

[342] This exegesis will be treated more extensively in Chapter Two, 2.4.2.1.5 "Echoing Exegetical Principles."

[343] Yusuf ʿAlī: "...an open disputer"; Pickthall: "... and open opponent"; Sayyid ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī: "... an open contender" (*The Qurʾān, With a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation* [Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qurʾān, Inc., 2006]); and Arthur Arberry: "...an open adversary" (*The Koran Interpreted* [New York, NY: A Touchstone Book, 1996]); Droge: "... a clear adversary."

[344] Asad consistently renders or interprets the eighteen occurrences of this triliteral root *khā-ṣād-mīm* in a manner that demonstrates the rational and argumentative faculty with which every person is endowed and uses it for good or for ill. This exegesis will be treated more extensively in Chapter Two, 2.4.1.1.4, "Al-Zamakhsharī in *TMOQ*."

goes on to reinforce the importance of using one's own faculty to reason to understand the many facets of the qurʾānic message. This, then, is the process of *ijtihād*. Asad writes that this teaching is emphasized in the Qurʾān itself. It is a theme he returns to again and again.

1.4.4 *Ijtihād and* the Roots of Islamic Teaching

For Asad, Islamic reforms – in fact every reform – should be generated from an assiduous practice of *ijtihād*. This practice, he argues, is an indispensable praxis for every Islamic society and for every Muslim. But, *ijtihād* should not be just the application of independent thinking or thinking that is divorced from the fundamental teachings of Islām. Rather, it should seek to deduce rulings and conclusions needed in order to develop a modern *fiqh* through a careful study and deliberation of the "Two Sources" of Islamic teachings, Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Backed by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), ʿAlī Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE), and Taqi al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE), Asad takes the uncompromising stand that nothing merely based on *ijmāʿ* ("consensus") or *qiyās* ("analogy") could be seen as a divine norm. Thus, a return to the "Two Sources" of Islām is necessary.

The goal of *ijtihād* here is not the discovery of defects in these sources. That was what he often heard from other critics of Islām. Nor is it intended to generate new principles from the sources. [345] Its application, rather, is meant to

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[345] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 157.

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review the value of the so-called "old-and-forsaken-ones" kind of propositions[346] in the light of a new reading and understanding of the original sources.

By so doing, these propositions would be separated from a thick layer of conventional interpretations which were accumulated over the centuries and were found wanting in modern times.[347] The praxis of *Ijtihād* is the only approach that could free these teachings from the limitations imposed by centuries of time-bound *fiqh*, Asad said. The outcome of such an endeavor, he believes, would be,

> "the emergence of a new *fiqh*, exactly conforming to the Two Sources... and at the same time answering to the exigencies of the present life: just as the older forms of *fiqh* answered to the exigencies of a period... and to the conditions of life prevailing in those earlier ages."[348]

In a sense, Asad's mission to rekindle the relevance of Islām in society and in the lives of modern Muslims could only be realized by the proper practice of *ijtihād.* The ultimate objective is to re-establish the nexus between Islamic propositions or teachings and the "Two Sources." He compared the reactivation of *ijtihād* to a "fresh wind" that would blow Islām back to these "Two-Sources," from where the life of the *ummah* or the community originates.[349]

This modern dynamic of *ijtihad*, Asad asserts, should proceed by returning to the *naṣṣ* (pl. *nuṣūṣ*) of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Literally, *naṣṣ* meant "to raise" or "to elevate a thing so that it is visible to all." But, as a technical term used in *uṣūl al-fiqh,* he defines *naṣṣ* as

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[346] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 157.

[347] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 162.

[348] Asad, *Islām at the Crossroads,* 162.

[349] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* 13.

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"statements, injunctions and statutes which are self-evident (ẓāhir) in their wording, having 'particular meaning, not admitting any other than it'; in short, where no differences of interpretation can possibly arise."[350]

He asserts that the naṣṣ is "the only admissible criterion of what the Law of Islām expects us to do and to leave undone."[351] It is utilized through the help of a small elected representative panel of ʿulamāʾ -- people who are "fully conversant with the Arabic language, the methodology and history of the Qurʾān, and the science of ḥadīth." It is through this naṣṣ that the sharīʿah begins and ends with the enunciation of the nuṣūṣ-laws in the "Two Sources" of Islām. Since the selection of naṣṣ ordinances from the Qurʾān is more easily done than it was from the Sunnah, Asad enjoins the entrusted panel to apply this principle to aḥādīth through careful study of the various riwāyāt ("reports" or "sayings" of the Prophet) against their historical background.[352] In this respect, only Traditions that rise to the highest standards laid down by the great Sunnī muḥaddithūn (reporters) need to be considered. While Traditions with questionable authenticity are to be excluded, this does not mean that Traditions that are *probably* authentic should not be occasionally used for purposes of ijtihād.[353]

Asad's point here is that seriously questionable or weak Traditions are inadmissible as material for the sharʿī code. In addition, Asad urges that special attention be paid to discriminate between ordinances designed by the Prophet to

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[350] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849.

[351] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making (1948)," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1013.

[352] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849.

[353] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849.

have universal validity from ordinances meant to meet the needs of a particular occasion or time.[354]

If, however, there are no detailed *sharʿī* rulings available in cases where the interest of the community does call for detailed rulings, Asad recommends the traditional approach. In this way, scholars can look into the context of the Sunnah for a "general principle" of law. If such a general principle is forthcoming from the *nuṣūṣ* of the Qurʾān and the Sunna, then "it falls within the scope of Muslim Law to evolve the relevant details of legislation in consonance with the established *sharʿī* principle."[355]

There are also some issues which are not fully treated by the *sharīʿah.* In such situations where neither detailed rulings nor general principles had been formulated in the *nuṣūṣ,* Asad encourages the application of the Mālikī method of jurisprudence, the *istislāh.* Through *istislāh,* Muslim scholars exercise their freedom "to formulate their own temporal laws. They took only the spirit of Islām and the community's welfare into consideration."[356] This provision for creative formulation, Asad explains, is rightfully underpinned by the spirit of the qurʾānic locution, *li-kullin jaʿalnā min-kum shirʿatan wa-minhājan* (Q 5:48), which he

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[354] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849.

[355] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849.

[356] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849. Mālikī school's sources for *sharīʿah* are hierarchically prioritized as follows: Qurʾān and then trustworthy Hadiths (sayings, customs and actions of Muhammad); if these sources were ambiguous on an issue, then `Amal (customs and practices of the people of Medina), followed by consensus of the Ṣahaba (the companions of Muhammad), then individual's opinion from the Ṣahaba, Qiyas (analogy), *Istislah* (interest and welfare of Islām and Muslims), and finally *Urf* (custom of people throughout the Muslim world if it did not contradict the hierarchically higher sources of sharīʿah). Irshad Abdal-Haqq, *Understanding Islamic Law: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Hisham M. Ramaḍan (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006), 26–27 (1-42).

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translated in his 1948 article, "Islamic Constitution-Making," as "[f]or every one of you We have made a Divine Law and an open road."[357] He considers the *sharīʿah* as undeniably broad in its scope in that it already outlined the necessary areas where a Muslim life may develop. But, the "Law-Giver," according to Asad, "conceded to us, within this area, an 'open road (*minhāj*).'"[358]

In this light, he interprets the term *minhāj* as that gift of latitude that gave Muslims the right to create laws for those contingencies "purposely left out" from the overall structure of the *sharīʿah*. While he acknowledges this sanctioned liberty to supplement the unchangeable Divine Law, he also cautions scholars about using the same liberty to "omit any of the existing *sharʿī* rulings from the context of whatever temporal law we may have at any time, or to frame legislation that would run counter to the letter or the spirit of the *sharīʿah*."[359]

In the mind of Asad, this process of *ijtihād* would ultimately "restore the concept of the *sharīʿah* to that clearness and conciseness, to that purity and obviousness it possessed at the time of its enunciation by the Prophet."[360]

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[357] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849. As Asad did not indicate his source of translation for this locution, we can presume this was his own rendition. In *TMOQ* this is rendered into, "Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life." While he renders *minhājan* differently later as "a way of life," he nonetheless maintains its meaning as those sets of laws, in contrast to the unchanging truths of the *sharīʿah*, that communities promulgate "in accordance with the exigencies of the time and of each community's cultural development." (Asad, *TMOQ,* 178, n. 66 on Q 5:48). While Yūsuf ʿAlī's *The Holy Qurʾān, Text, Translation and Commentary* renders it into "an open way," he provides an almost completely inverse meaning to Asad's: "Law; *shirʿa* = rules of practical conduct. Open Way: *Minhaj*= the finer things which are above the law, but which are yet available to everyone, like a sort of open highway."

[358] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849

[359] Asad, "This Law of Ours," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:849

[360] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making (1948)," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1010.

Moreover, this process helps to draw a clear distinction between the eternal values of the *sharīʿah* – since it was a Divine Law -- and the results of human *ijtihād*. Lumping them together was one of the greatest blunders of Islamic scholars from the third century onwards. As a result,

> "the *ijtihād* of the early Imams has quite unwarrantably received the imprint, as it were, of Divine Ordinance. An unavoidable consequence of this attitude was the fixation of all *ijtihād* to the thought-process of one particular period - or, more exactly, the removal of all real *ijtihād* from the community's life. This suppression of creative thought was one of the foremost reasons of the tragic decay of Muslim culture."[361]

In this section, I described Asad's vision of restoring the integrity of Islām's fundamental teachings. These, he said, can only be fulfilled with the restoration of *ijtihād* to its rightful position. In the process, these teachings are made to assume their role in providing a solution to the sociological and political problems plaguing Muslim societies. Additionally, they are to adapt to specific historical and cultural exigencies. This intellectual process has to involve the use of reason or creative thought.

Asad was convinced that it is only through the exercise of "reason" in the practice of *ijtihād* that one could awaken and re-activate the "intellectual inertia" that had long kept Muslim communities from addressing the challenges and vicissitudes of human existence. As a result, as far as Muḥammad Asad was concerned, *ijtihād*, is an indispensable engine in the upgrading of Islamic teachings so that Muslims could move along through the constantly changing environment. Be that as it may be, Asad seems to belittle the importance of the

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[361] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making (1948)," *Europe's Gift to Islam,* II:1013.

tradition which had been essential to the conserving and development of Islamic culture and civilization.

In this section, there was discussion of Asad's strong view on the doctrine of *ijtihād* as an engine of Islamic revival. His views were not only occasioned by his encounter with Muḥammad Iqbal. They also emerged from his view that there should be preferential option for the use of human reason which, in itself, is the lifeblood of *ijtihād.*

As we shall see later, such a preference is conspicuously addressed in *The Message of the Qurʾān.* In that book, from cover to cover, Asad applies reason to unlock the "message" of the Qurʾān for his English-speaking readers. But, first, let us trace how the conception and the eventual realization of this *magnum opus* came about.

1.5   Conceiving *The Message of the Qurʾān*

1.5.1 The Translation Enterprise

The idea of translating the Arabic Qurʾān into English did not occur to Asad right away. This does not mean, however, that the Qurʾān was not essential to the early transformation of his life and worldview. It is true, we may recall, that his first attraction to Islām came through observing the life of the Arabs, specifically the Muslims of the Middle East, and not through exposure to some Islamic teachings or propositions. But, driven by his maturing journalistic skills and instincts, he probably looked at the world of Islām at that time with increasing personal and professional keenness and curiosity. The concept must

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have attracted him like a tantalizing urge to undertake a journey that would help him discover the anthropological and philosophical underpinnings of a fascinating people as seen through their worldview and lives.

We have learned earlier that it was in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus in August of 1923 that Asad described seeing the Qurʾān for the first time. Somehow, such an experience enkindled in him a deep longing to journey into the heart of this Islamic holy book. This book, he could see, underpinned the Arab worldview. It was, however, three years after that Damascus experience that Asad had another encounter with the Qurʾān.

In September of 1926, the Qurʾān played a crucial role in a poignant life-defining moment for Asad. It would seal his open-ended adventure and propel him towards conversion to Islām. It was in his first book about Islām in 1934, *Islām at the Crossroads*, that Asad infused, for the first time, some qurʾānic verses rendered in English and accompanied by explanatory notes. That, as far as I know, may be referenced as his initial foray into translation. Thereafter, Qurʾān citations with English translation became more visible in his journal publications and in a series of essays published in the late 1940s, as well as in the 1954 travelogue, *The Road to Mecca.*

Towards the end of 1959, Asad decided to attempt a Qurʾān translation. The decision came shortly after he and his American wife of eight years, Pola Ḥāmida Kazimirzka (d. 2006), decided to relocate in Geneva, Switzerland.[362]

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[362] In the intervening period, however, that is, before they settled in Switzerland, a known German publisher, S. Fischer (Verlag), invited Asad to translate *The Road to Mecca* in German language for German readership in Europe. So, the couple travelled to Europe for this purpose since Asad himself felt the need to "once again, speak German, think in German and,

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Ambitious in scope and significance, such a large-scale project required support from patrons who would help him to see his plan realized.

On their way to Switzerland, the couple made some stopovers in Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sharjah and Qatar where they visited some influential friends. Many of those they visited became great supporters and contributed to the success of his translation project. Having a circle of friends who came from the upper echelon, or from the Islamic royalty or intelligentsia was undoubtedly important for the success of Asad's *magnum opus.*[363] Ḥāmida, his wife, mentioned a supplemental pension that Asad received from Saudi Arabia which allowed her husband "to concentrate on his work in Switzerland without pressing financial problems."[364] The Saudi pension, as the Asads would come to know, initially came from the purse of their friend Muḥammad Sarūr Al-Sabban (d. 1971). At the time, this man was the Saudi Finance Minister, and the founder

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consequently write in German" (Asad and Asad, "The Road to Mecca [1952-1954[," *Home-coming,* 193 ff.). Once in Germany, Asad gave a series of lectures on German radios as well as took some spare time to visit some influential friends around Germany, Belgium, Italy and, from there, moved to Lebanon and Syria where they lived for three years alternatingly. Towards the end of their stay in the "fertile crescent," an invitation came for Asad from the University of Lahore in Pakistan to spearhead a committee that would organize an International Islamic Colloquium. This assembly occurred from December 29, 1957 to January 8, 1958 and was held at the Punjab University in Lahore. This was modelled after a similar conference held in Princeton University in 1953. The then Pakistani Ambassador to the USA turned Minister of Finance decided to hold the conference in Pakistan with Muḥammad Asad as highly recommended to be the Director of the event (Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude [1958-1959]," *Home-coming,* 229). This, then, brought him and his wife (for the first time) back to the new nation of Pakistan in March of 1957, a nation of which foundation Asad was deeply involved, before and after the partition in 1947. However, some disagreements over the preparation process of the Colloquium would prompt Asad and his wife to finally decide to abdicate the task of organizing and leave Pakistan for good, now to "a distant, and still unknown to us, Switzerland," says his wife in a later memoir segment "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 225.

[363] For example, the influential Al-Shaya family of Kuwait, an old merchant clan from pre-petrol days, offered significant financial assistance in largely anonymous ways (Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude [1958-1959]," *Home-coming,* 226).

[364] Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 226.

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and first secretary-general of the *Rābiṭat al-ʿĀlam al-Islāmī* ("Muslim World League").[365] The same funding would be officially regularized later under the administration of King Fayṣal ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Saʿūd (r. 1964-1975),[366] and was increased at the instance of King Fahd ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAziz al-Saʿūd (r. 1982-2005).

The principal patron whom Asad hoped to get on board for the translation project was King Fayṣal. In 1927, Prince Fayṣal had been very instrumental in introducing Asad to the kingdom's royal court. Asad re-established a link with Fayṣal in 1951 when he visited Saudi Arabia for the first time in eighteen years while serving in the Pakistani foreign ministry service as the head of their Middle East Division. For years, Asad nurtured the tie as Fayṣal began his ascent towards the throne. He became one of Fayṣal's most fervent enthusiasts as he saw vast improvements made in the country compared with those made by Faysal's father, Ibn Saʿūd.

In a postscript to his fourth revised edition of *The Road to Mecca*, Asad wrote, "Whenever I reflect on the manner in which King Fayṣal rules over his

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[365] Muḥammad Sarūr al-Sabban was a Meccan merchant and was also the former Director of Pilgrimage before becoming the Saudi Minister of Finance and National economy. Asad remembers him as an old friend in his Arabian days. The last time they met was when he visited Saudi Arabia as a Pakistani diplomat in 1951 and where the Minister of Finance himself picked him up at the airport and catered all his needs (Asad and Asad, "In Search of Unity [1951]," *Home-coming,* 171).

[366] Fayṣal was the third son of King ʿAbd al-ʿAziz and the Foreign Minister in 1930 and the Viceroy of the Ḥijāz, enthroned as King himself in 1964; Asad recounts his friendship with him during his Arabian days, and later Pola Ḥāmida would remember him as "the man about whom my husband had spoken so often and with so much love" (Asad and Asad, "In Search for Unity [1951]," *Home-coming,* 59; Asad and Asad*, "*Switzerland [1959-1964]," *Home-coming,* 237). In March 25, 1975, King Fayṣal was assassinated by a nephew whose brother he reportedly accused the King of killing for leading protests against the former's program of modernization (David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* [London: I.B. Tauris, 2006], 110).

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realm, it appears to me as the fulfillment of every promise which the life of his father had held out and left open."[367] Kramer observed that such words of praise may have done very little to cancel out his "stinging indictment" of Ibn Saʿūd in *The Road to Mecca* as "Fayṣal was a dutiful son."[368] Nonetheless, it turned out that it was not an insurmountable obstacle as Asad, in the fourth edition of his autobiography, according to Kramer, "completely excised his enumeration of Ibn Saʿūd's failing, replacing them with a few pages of banal ruminations on the desert."[369]

In short, Fayṣal renewed Asad's Saudi patronage and financial support through the *Muslim World League* in Mecca. The league subscribed in advance to Asad's planned translation which he began to compile in Switzerland. Besides the financial contributions, the Asads also received words of encouragement and moral support for the project from friends like ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ʿAzzam Pāshā (d. 1976),[370] the founder of the Arab League. As soon as he heard that he was embarking on the venture of Qurʾān translation and commentary, this Arab leader told Asad, "with this work...you are a hundred years before the times."[371]

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[367] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 247, n. 49, citing 1973 postscript to the 4th rev. Ed. of *The Road to Mecca* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus), 378.

[368] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 241.

[369] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 241, including 247, n. 49, referring to pages 177-181 of the 4th rev. Ed. of 1980.

[370] ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Azzam Pāshā was a pro-Ottoman Egyptian nationalist and an Ottoman officer in Cyrenaica. He was also the uncle of Asad's friend, Dr. ʿAbd al-Wahhab ʿAzzam, the Egyptian Ambassador to Pakistan whom he called "a scholar of considerable attainments (he had been a professor of the Persian language and literature at the University of Cairo (Asad and Asad, "Foreign Service: Middle East Division [1949-1951]," *Home-coming,* 153, 155).

[371] Asad and Asad, "In Search of Unity (1951)," *Home-coming,* 162, note.

1.5.2 The Compelling Imperative

According to Ḥāmida, one of the most compelling reasons that Asad considered undertaking the translation project was the "innumerable inquiries to recommend an English-language translation of the Holy Book."[372] These requests may have come because of Asad's growing reputation as a writer while he was in India. Besides, many people may have heard of Asad's background – that he had traveled in the Arabian Peninsula where he deeply immersed himself into the language and culture of both Bedouin and urban communities. That background, according to Ḥāmida, made him "uniquely equipped to undertake this difficult task."[373] So, people highly regarded his capability to be able to produce a competent and authoritative English translation of the Arabic Qurʾān. Though there were already many English translations of the Qurʾān in the world at that time, there was dissatisfaction with their quality.

For example, Ḥāmida heard that Muhammad ʿAlī's *The Holy Qurʾān* (1917), an English translation with the Arabic texts and brief commentary was "very respectable and probably the best" available, other readers, however, insisted that it was "not quite adequate."[374] She also heard some people saying that while the language of Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* (1955) was

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[372] Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 224.

[373] Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 224.

[374] Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 224. Muḥammad ʿAlī (1874-1951), an Indian writer and scholar, and a leading figure of the Aḥmadiyyah Movement. Published in England, his translation at that time was considered to be the first English translation by a Muslim to be generally available and to be made accessible to the West.

considered excellent, others had noticed some few lapses perhaps because this version of the Qurʾān was not produced by a Muslim.[375]

Some people also took issue with Yūsuf ʿAlī's (d. 1953) English language in his *The Holy Qurʾān: Text, Translation and Commentary* (1934). They said it was "too flowery and his footnotes not always to the point." Furthermore, it was reported that Asad had not been satisfied with Marmaduke Pickthall's widely-used translation, since Pickthall's credential as a translator from Arabic to English had been "limited." Later, in his introduction to *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Asad says that "familiarity with the Bedouin speech of Central and Eastern Arabia -- in addition, of course, to academic knowledge of the classical Arabic" seemed to be the only way for non-Arabic natives to achieve an intimate understanding of the diction of the Qurʾān. And, he added,

> "because none of the scholars who have previously translated the Qurʾān into European languages has ever fulfilled this prerequisite, their translations have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit."[376]

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[375] Asad and Asad, "Pakistan Interlude (1958-1959)," *Home-coming,* 224. Arthur John Arberry (1905-1969) a respected British orientalist and a prolific scholar of Arabic, Persian and Islamic studies. His *The Koran Interpreted*, published in 1955, is one of the most prominent written by a non-Muslim scholar, and widely respected among academics, and according to *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, it is "rendered into accessible English verse, this verse continues to be praised for its language, literary quality, and its even-handed approach, making it valuable not only for those new to the Qurʾān, but also for bilingual Muslims, non-Arabic-speaking students of the Qurʾān, and a wide range of other readers" (Accessed March 2016, www.oxfordIslamicstudies.com/Public/book_tki.html.) While Abdel Haleem mostly or somehow agrees with this depiction he at the same time criticizes it as lacking of any notes or comments thereby making the text seems difficult to understand and confusingly unidiomatic. M.A.S Abdel Haleem, "Introduction," in *The Qurʾān, a new translation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), xxviii.

[376] Asad, *TMOQ*, v.

The Asads found Switzerland to be an ideal place to begin the project. They settled and lived there from 1959 to1964. Away from the distractions of the world, Asad devoted "his entire energies to the translation of the Qurʾān." He got to work and adopted "a definite rhythm -- long hours of work at the translation," according to Ḥāmida.[377] During these six years, he completed the first third of his Qurʾān translation. That amounted to the first nine chapters or sūrahs, from al-Fātiḥah to al-Ṭawbah, along with copious commentaries.[378]

This first installment was published in Mecca by the *Muslim World League* in 1964. That had been arranged under the auspices of Fayṣal who was by then the king. At about this time, the Asads moved to Tangier, Morocco, settling in a comfortable villa surrounded by cypress trees and bougainvillea where he planned to complete the translation and commentary on the Qurʾān. They lived there for the next nineteen years.

1.5.3 The League Controversy

This partial publication, however, was met with some concerns raised by some membership of the *Rābiṭah* ("League"), especially some clerics. The clerics were variously concerned about "this or that of his (Asad) interpretations,"[379] which resulted in a ban on either the whole or fragments and parts of the

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[377] Asad and Asad, "Switzerland (1959-1964)," *Home-coming,* 234.

[378] Asad and Asad, "Switzerland (1959-1964)," *Home-coming,* 233.

[379] Asad and Asad, "Tangier (1964-1983)," *Home-coming,* 249.

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translation.[380] Some say that the "real reason must have been that parts of the translation were too liberal for the standards of most Saudi scholars."[381] The dispute could also have been over Asad's "modernist and allegorical interpretation of some verses."[382]

Specifically, some of his critics "accused him of denying the existence of angels, the permissibility of concubinage, and the bodily ascent of Jesus to Heaven."[383] In a 1981 article in the magazine *Arabia* entitled "Clarification,"[384] Asad tries to address these controversies. He regretted that members of the *Rābiṭah* had misinterpreted or misunderstood his interpretation of some Qurʾān verses, and "condemned the whole work out of hand."[385]

Asad attributed this misunderstanding largely to members or critics who had insufficient command of the English language. Their criticisms, he felt, were "obviously based on second-hand information." The alleged denial of the existence of angels, he said, was "totally false and absolute nonsense." "On almost every page of my translation and commentary there is a mention of angels, and no Muslim in his right mind can or will deny that the Qurʾān is full of references to angels and angelic forces."[386] Asad, however, writes that human

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[380] Stefan Wild, "Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qurʾān into English," *Journal of Qurʾānic Studies* 17.3 (2015): 166.

[381] Wild, "Muslim Translators and Translations," 166.

[382] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

[383] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

[384] Muḥammad Asad, "Clarification," *Arabia, The Islamic World Review* (Oct 1981), 4.

[385] Asad, "Clarification," 4.

[386] Asad, "Clarification," 4.

beings don't possess nor can they acquire categorical knowledge about angels, such as, how "how they manifest themselves." Rather, they belong to the realm of *al-ghayb*, says Asad – "that which is beyond the reach of human perception" -- of which God alone has full knowledge.[387]

Asad presumed that his critics were referring to his note concerning Q Āl ʿImrān 3:124-125 where he referred to the thousands of angels who aid believers. He said that the assistance of angels could be seen "metaphorically [as] a strengthening of the believers' hearts through spiritual forces coming from God."[388] Then, he added that "this by the way, was exactly the view of the greatest scholar of recent Muslim history, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, as quoted by me in the above-mentioned note, citing *Tafsīr al-Manār*." As to the permissibility of concubinage, Asad directed his critics to his note on Q Nisāʾ 4:3 and to related notes. He cited important modern and classical scholars who supported his view that the reference to "all married women," coming after the enumeration of prohibited degrees of relationship, is "meant to stress the prohibition of sexual relations with *any* woman other than one's lawful wife."[389]

He also addressed the complaint that he did not believe that Jesus ascended bodily into heaven. He argues that "nowhere in the Qurʾān is to be found a statement" to the effect that Jesus was raised bodily to heaven by

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[387] Asad, "Clarification," 4.

[388] An extensive analysis of Asad's exegesis on this theme is found in Chapter Two, 2.4.2.1.5, "Echoing Exegetical Principles."

[389] Asad, "Clarification," 4. See Asad, *TMOQ,* 101 f., n. 3, 4 on Q 4:3.

God.[390] Again, supported by the views of ʿAbduh, Asad inferred that his personal comment should not diminish the integrity of the Prophet Jesus as all apostles before Prophet Muḥammad passed away (Q 3:144), "in other words, as having died physically, as is obvious from the context."[391]

Privately, according to Kramer, there were also those who insinuated that the translation reintroduced *isrāʾīliyyāt,* "Jewish distortions" akin to those allegedly introduced by the first Jewish converts to Islām.[392] Later on, one scathing review on the final and complete 1980 publication of *The Message of the Qurʾān* enumerated the reviewer's concerns by stating,

> "This work (*sic*) is nonetheless vitiated by deviation from the viewpoint of the Muslim orthodoxy on many counts. Averse to take some qurʾānic statements literally, Asad denies the occurrence of such events as the throwing of Abraham into the fire,[393] Jesus speaking in the cradle,[394] etc. He also regards Luqmān, Khaḍir[395] and Dhu'l-Qarnayn[396] as 'mythical figures' and holds unorthodox views on the abrogation of verses.[397] These blemishes apart, this highly readable translation contains useful, though

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[390] Asad, "Clarification," 4. An extensive analysis of Asad's exegesis on this theme is found in Chapter Five, 5.2.6, "His Persecution and Death."

[391] Asad, "Clarification," 4.

[392] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

[393] An extensive analysis of Asad's exegesis on this theme is found in Chapter Four, 4.2.5, "Casting Abraham into the Fire."

[394] An extensive analysis of Asad's exegesis on this theme is found in Chapter Five, 5.2.2, "An Apostle with a Message"

[395] This theme is referenced in an extensive treatment Chapter Four, 4.2.2, "Moses and His Staff."

[396] An extensive analysis of Asad's exegesis on this theme is found in Chapter Four, 4.2.8, "Gog and Magog and Dhu'l-Qarnayn."

[397] This theme is referenced in an extensive treatment in Chapter Two, 2.4.1.2.4, "Citing Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī."

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sometimes unreliable background information about the qurʾānic sūrahs and even provides exhaustive notes on various qurʾānic themes."[398]

In her memoir segment entitled "Tangier (1964-1983)," Ḥāmida Asad put a different perspective on this controversy. She mentioned that the *Rābiṭah*, was the organization which originally sponsored the publication, but "not the work" itself. It was Asad himself, of course, she added, who did and completed the work independently.[399] Differences broke out among the scholars of this organization, she said, over the quality of Asad's translation and his interpretation of the Qurʾān.

Central to this probing scrutiny were Pakistani members of the League who were the followers of Mawdūdī. These were people whom Asad knew and had worked with during his Pakistan years.[400] Objections were raised to Asad's work of translation among the Arab members of the League. Ḥāmida thought these criticisms were one-sided and incorrect. They wanted to impose editorial conditions should it proceed to publication.

Those "imposed" changes were an ordeal which Ḥāmida likened to "a kind of inquisition in Mecca." They were not amenable to Asad. But the *Rābiṭah*, which was founded by his personal friend, Muḥammad Sarūr Al-Sabban, decided to renege on the original contract, and it banned the book from circulation. It was

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[398] Kidwai, "A Survey of English Translations of the Qurʾān."

[399] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 249.

[400] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 249.

reported that Mawdūdī himself was one of the signatories who disapproved of Asad's translation and strongly recommended that it be banned.[401]

Ḥāmida Asad recalled that her husband's decision about the book's translation was no small matter. Had he acquiesced to their objections and followed the "imposed" changes, it would have cleared the way for the first installment of the work. It would also have provided substantial financial support for the ongoing project. On the other hand, submission to these demands from Asad would have been "fatal to his integrity." Ḥāmida thought, that Asad would not have been able to live with himself if he had compromised his conscience.[402]

The *Rābiṭah*'s secretary-general, Muḥammad Sarūr Al-Sabban, who was not a scholar himself, decided to recuse himself from the process. Therefore, he could not intercede on Asad's behalf. [403] Neither did King Fayṣal intervene

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[401] M. Ikram Chaghatai, Ed. and Anno., "Muḥammad Asad's Indian Years," *Europe's Gift to Islām*, I:335. Asad knew Mawdūdī, founder of *Jamāʿat Islāmī*, way back in the pre-partitioned Subcontinent years. Their relationship, which stemmed from their mutual acquaintance with Iqbal, evolved from that of friendly collaboration to being two impersonal rivals representing two differing ideological perspectives. They both worked for *Dar al-Islām* institute, a foundation inspired by Iqbal for the propagation of *daʿwah*; Asad served as consultant, while Mawdūdī as the Director (Asad and Asad, "Partition," *Home-coming,* 131). Mawdūdī was described as "a close and sincere friend of Asad who acknowledged his excellent cooperation and help in order to facilitate his life and scholarly pursuits" (Asad and Asad, "The Golden Years," *Home-coming,* 95, n. 21). Later, however, this 'friendship' broke down for unspecified reason, and somehow made them into two rivals. It was suggested that this may have been set off during or immediately after Asad's departure from his brief term as a Pakistan's minister plenipotentiary to the United Nations in New York. This exit reportedly became controversial as Asad decided to divorce his third wife, Munīra, and marry the American Pola Ḥāmida Kazimirska, 26, herself a convert to Islām, on November 1, 1953. Ḥāmida suspected the latter may have been the case since on her first meeting with Mawdūdī at Lahore airport she felt ignored, her greetings unreciprocated (*Ibid.*, "Pakistan Interlude," *Home-coming,* 222). Another theory may be extrapolated from Mawdūdī's correspondence with Maryam Jameela (formerly Margaret Marcus, [d. 2012]), herself a Jewish convert to Islām, dated February 25, 1961, already cited in the "Introduction." For Mawdūdī's political and social ideology, see Roy Jackson, *Mawlana Mawdudī and Political Islām, Authority and the Islamic State* ([London: Routledge, 2011], 84-94).

[402] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 250.

[403] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 249.

despite Asad's plea to help "untie his knotted relations with the *Rābiṭah* in Mecca."

Such a refusal to act, though disappointing, was understandable to the Asads. But they could not understand why Sarūr and Fayṣal recused themselves from the controversy. [404]

1.5.4 The Final Phase

Nonetheless, Asad continued to finish the work on his own and was supported financially by friends. Especially supportive was Aḥmad Zakī al-Yamanī (b. 1930), the Saudi minister of oil and natural resources. Asad referred to him as "my brother-in-spirit" on the dedication page of a collection of his essays a few years later.[405] The translation project remained an absolute priority for him. He did not even consider an attractive invitation from the new Pakistani President Ayub Khan to come back to Pakistan to help form a team of seven scholars and advisors on social and political matters.[406] Asad could not put aside his work on the Qurʾān.

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[404] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 257.

[405] Asad, *This Law of Ours and Other Essays,* dedication page.

[406] One of the pretexts of this invitation could have been that President Khan had read Asad's *The Principle of State and Government in Islām* (Asad and Asad, "Switzerland [1959-1964]," *Home-coming,* 239). As the new President was in the process of implementing article 199 of the new Pakistani Constitution, viz. which envisaged a creation for an Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology -- he was in search of seven non-conservative and non-traditionalist members, almost anti-ʿulamāʾ establishment. He thus, thought of inviting Muḥammad Asad sometime in 1962, to which the latter declined. Fazlur Raḥmān, a scholar educated in Pakistan and at Cambridge University was one of the well-known scholars who became a member of this Advisory Council (John L. Esposito, *Islām and Politics* [New York: Syracuse University Press, 1984], 120 ff.).

Completing this project, Ḥāmida said, meant a daily routine of work. Sometimes, Asad labored hard for four to five hours at a stretch. She herself helped by typing Asad's hand-written work, re-reading the work, and discussing and polishing its language until they were both satisfied.[407] She recalled that "there were days when Asad worked for hours on end without finding the right word or phrase in English. He wanted to bring out the full meaning of this or that passage of the Qurʾān."[408]

On occasions like these, she would usually counsel him to "leave it until tomorrow and sleep on it; it will come by morning." As a matter of fact, she recalled, it always did.[409] Ḥāmida herself admitted that she was simply a "witness" to Asad's accomplishment. She saw his complete surrender, his honesty and integrity during the long years when he devoted himself to "this greatest work."[410]

Asad completed his project of translation and commentary over the next eleven years and titled it *The Message of the Qurʾān.*[411] Before he completed the translation and before it was published, rumors of Asad's project circulated. In the mid-1970s, the Muslim communities of London and some in South Africa, for example, invited him to give a series of lectures about the Qurʾān.[412] This

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[407] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 247.

[408] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 247.

[409] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 247.

[410] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 247 f.

[411] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 241, n. 4.

[412] Asad and Asad*,* "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 258.

advanced publicity could be partly credited to Muḥammad Salahuddin (d. 2011), an Egyptian-born Saudi writer and publisher of the Middle-Eastern English-language magazine, *Arabia.* This publication dedicated many pages to the works of Muḥammad Asad and championed his translation of the Qurʾān.[413] Asad himself was present later, at the launching of this magazine in London where he led a conference at a separate event. It was at this juncture that he also saw his friend and benefactor, Aḥmad Zakī al-Yamanī.[414]

Asad also credited another benefactor for significantly supporting the final publication of his completed work. This benefactor was Muḥammad Abu Bakr Bakhashab Pāshā.[415] This man was a rich businessman from Jiddah who became a close neighbor and friend of the Asads in Tangier. According to

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[413] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 266.

[414] Ḥāmida wrote that the first time they met, Aḥmad Zakī al-Yamanī approached Asad while taking a lunch-break from the Islamic conference in Saudi Arabia and sat with him at the table and introduced himself to Asad (Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 246). Such an acquaintance turned-great friendship would occupy a very special place in the memoirs of Pola Ḥāmida Asad. In the early 1980s, Zakī al-Yamanī invited the Asads to Saudi Arabia to celebrate Ramaḍan with the family. It is likely that their exposure to the Yamanī's extended family as well as the comfort provided by their generous and opulent friend could have significantly deepened this relationship (*Ibid.,* 272 f.). Later, Zakī al-Yamanī continued supporting Asad morally and financially even at his treatment of his cancer of the bladder, and would even facilitate an immediate transfer to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston for further treatments. Although he was not at Asad's funeral, for an undisclosed "serious" reason, Ḥāmida would feel "his presence at the side of the grave - because Zakī had been the best friend -- much, much more than a friend -- that either Asad and I had ever had" (Asad and Asad, "The End of the Road (1987-1992)," *Home-coming,* 288.

[415] Muḥammad Abu Bakr Bakhashab Pāshā was the son of Bakhasab Pāshā who was a shipping magnate. Abu Bakr is credited by the website of King ʿAbd al-ʿAziz University in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia as one of its founders when it was yet a private institution. *King Abdulaziz University*. Accessed April 2016, http://waqf.kau.edu.sa/content.aspx?Site_ID=808&lng=EN&cid=3310&URL=www.kau.edu.sa.

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Ḥāmida, Muḥammad Abu Bakr "saw to it that Asad's unmatchable Qurʾān translation finally saw the light and helped us to publish it."[416]

It is likely that Muḥammad Abu Bakr's substantial financial assistance was also instrumental in helping Asad to establish his own publishing house in 1978. It was called the *Dar al-Andalus* and located in Gibraltar. It was this publishing house that published his *magnum opus*, *The Message of the Qurʾān*, in 1980.[417] This translation opened with this dedication: "For people who think." Kramer described the spirit of the translation as "resolutely modernist."[418] Another convert spoke of this new translation's "intellectual engagement with the text, its intimate, subtle and profound understanding of the pure classical Arabic of the Qurʾān ... *as* power and intelligence without rival in English."[419]

About four years after the completion of the Qurʾān, the Asads decided to leave Tangier and moved to Portugal where they lived for about four years.[420] As the dust settled under their feet, Ḥāmida tried to persuade her husband to write a second volume, a sequel to *The Road to Mecca.* This book would describe his departure from Arabia and his journey to India in the summer of 1932. But Asad, she said, was still absorbed in his meditations about the Qurʾān and even

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[416] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 248 f.

[417] Asad and Asad, "Tangier 1964-1983," *Home-coming,* 266, n. 5.

[418] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

[419] Mushtak Parker, "Death of a Muslim Mentor," in *The Middle East* no. 211 (May 1992): 28 f.

[420] Asad and Asad, "Portugal (1983-1986)," *Home-coming,* 269-277.

indicated that he would write another book which he intended to name "Meditations on the Qurʾān."[421]

This proposed sequel to his master work was meant to bring out new aspects of the Qurʾān and to further deepen his commentary. Although he had ample notes about this prospective project, Ḥāmida wrote that Asad "never really got down to writing it and, indeed, it would probably have become an endless task, just as his translation of the Qurʾān had almost been."[422]

Asad had expected that the translation of the Qurʾān could be finished in two to three years. In all, it took him about seventeen years.[423] The "Meditations" project was never realized or published. But, Ḥāmida's plea for a sequel to *The Road to Mecca* was to be rewarded. Her husband was later persuaded to write a second part, a sequel to *The Road to Mecca* during the mid–1980s. This book was titled *Home-coming of the Heart,* a title he himself chose. Soon, however, as his age and health declined, he could only cover the period from his arrival in India in 1932 until 1952, the year he resigned from the Pakistani Foreign Service.[424]

After four years in Portugal, the Asads went back to Spain in December of 1987. They lived in the Mijas area of Malaga. Although he was already eighty-six, Asad continued to entertain interviewers from the media who wanted to pick

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[421] Asad and Asad, "Portugal (1983-1986)," *Home-coming,* 271.

[422] Asad and Asad, "Portugal (1983-1986)," *Home-coming,* 271.

[423] Asad and Asad, "Portugal (1983-1986)," *Home-coming,* 272.

[424] On March 23, 2013, Pakistan Post issued a stamp with denomination Rs. 15 under the "Men of Letters" series in honor of Allamah Muḥammad Asad, "Pakistan Post Stamps-2013," *Pakistan Post,* accessed 2015, www.pakpost.gov.pk/2013.php.

his thoughts about his personal achievements and the state of Islām in the world. Shortly after moving to Spain, he received a formal invitation from President Zia al-Haqq of Pakistan who invited them to consider relocating to Pakistan for good.[425] But by the time the Asads accepted the offer, Zia al-Haqq had been killed in an airplane accident over Pakistan. The fate of the Asads had taken another sudden turn.[426]

A few months later, Asad had symptoms of cancer of the bladder.[427] He was treated in Spain, but eventually, through the assistance of his friend Shaykh Zakī Al-Yamanī, he was airlifted to Boston, MA. There, in the United States, he received additional treatment and care. Tests confirmed that the cancer was spreading and that another operation was needed immediately. The operation took place and was followed by many months of chemotherapy alternating with radiation treatments. Physio-theraphy was also needed before the Asads could return to Spain. In the following year, Ḥāmida said that Asad became more and more withdrawn from life. He spent most of his day resting in bed and lost interest in current events, books, and in everything else.

Asad's health declined rapidly after the new year, 1992 began and he died on the 20th of February. Asad had told his wife that he wished to be buried in a Muslim graveyard and in the Muslim way. But, to another friend, he had said that

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[425] Asad and Asad, "The end of the road," *Home-coming,* 281.

[426] Asad and Asad, "The end of the road," *Home-coming,* 281.

[427] Asad and Asad, "The end of the road," *Home-coming,* 282.

he hoped to be able to die and be buried in his beloved Arabia where the "homecoming of the heart" took place.

The Friday after his death, Asad's body was taken to a mosque in Marbella, Costa del Sol for funeral prayers. He was buried the following Sunday morning in a tiny Muslim graveyard opposite the Alhambra hill in Granada.[428]

1.6   Conclusion

Tracing the life of Leopold Weiss, who became Muḥammad Asad, has given us a much clearer portrait of this man who was ultimately a translator and interpreter of the Qurʾān. Our examination has looked at his life from anthropological, sociological, political and religious points of view.

Through a combined subjectivist and contextualist approach, this chapter paid serious attention to Weiss'/Asad's unfolding subjectivity as he moved through crucial stages in his life. But, it has also examined the constantly shifting social, historical and religious contexts in which he lived. As a result, both of these considerations have generated useful information about the influences and factors that helped shape the intellectual development of Muḥammad Asad.

But, in a particular way, this chapter has also introduced Asad's profound advocacy for the exercise of the faculty of human reason both in the spheres of Islamic beliefs and social engagement in Muslim societies and beyond. This was at the core of his critique on the state of Islām in the contemporary period when he called for an awakening of that rational spirit or independent thinking (*ijtihād*).

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[428] Asad and Asad, "The end of the road," *Home-coming,* 287 ff.

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Such a spirit, according to him, is the only hope of redemption for Islām in the modern times. This advocacy, however, could not be more palpably manifested in his unwavering aspiration to produce a qurʾānic translation and commentary which demonstrates the rationality of and accessibility of the Qurʾān. Chapter Two will introduce Asad's sources of interpretation and hermeneutical methods in his translation and commentary of the Qurʾān.

CHAPTER 2:

SOURCES AND HERMENEUTICS

2.1   Introduction

In the commentary of *The Message of the Qurʾān* (*TMOQ*), Muḥammad

Asad cites a number of authors and their respective works.[1] These works are

generally classified as follows: sixteen works of prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), eight

Arabic lexicons (dictionary/thesaurus/grammar and biographical sources), nine

classical commentaries (*tafsīr*), three biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad

(*sīra*), three works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and one encyclopedia.

All of these are utilized by Asad to explain, expound, define, give nuance

to or broaden the meaning of certain terms or concepts. They also provide

context to specific segments of thoughts enunciated by a verse or a group of

verses in the Qurʾān. As such, this chapter distinguishes two types of sources or

references relative to the functions they serve in the *TMOQ*, namely, *active* and

passive sources.

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[1] The first edition of *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1980) apportions preliminary pages ix-x
to acknowledge forty-two works of references.

A few of these sources are called *active* because Asad explicitly referred to them as having direct influence on his translation process. They were integral in providing him with English wording that is equivalent to the original meaning of the passages. As Asad, himself, explicitly acknowledges in the following examples:

> In his rendition of *amatun mu'minatun* in Q 2:221, Asad credits a classical commentator, "Thus, Zamakhsharī explains the words *amah mu'minah* (lit., "a believing bondwoman") as denoting 'any believing woman, whether she be free or slave; and this applies to [the expression] 'believing bondman as well: for all human beings are God's bondmen and bondwoman.' My rendering of the above passage is based on this eminently plausible interpretation."[2] Or,

> In his rendition of *wa-utū bihi mutashābihan* into "for they shall be given something that will recall that [past]" in Q 2:25, Asad notes, "[f]or the manner in which I have translated it, I am indebted to Muḥammad ʿAbduh.[3]

Most of the sources in this work, however, are labeled *passive* as Asad refers to them because they have explanatory, confirmatory, or corroborating functions. Some even provide contrasting opinions to his point of view. Consequently, none of these sources are referred to as having that direct

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[2] Asad, *TMOQ,* 48, n. 208 on Q 2:221. Or, in his rendition of *makarū makrahum* into "they devise that false imagery of theirs" in Q 14:46, Asad also credits a classical commentator thus, "lit., 'they devised their devising,' i.e., their blasphemous belief in the existence of other 'divine powers' side by side with God: this is the interpretation given by Tabari towards the end of his long commentary on this verse" (*Ibid.,* 380, n. 61 on Q 14:46).

[3] Asad, *TMOQ*, 7, n. 17 on Q 2:25. Or, in his reading of *yulqūna aqlāmahum* in Q 3:44, Asad owes the context to a dictionary, thus, "[t]he phrase rendered above as 'they drew lots' reads literally, 'they cast their reeds' - obviously a reference to an ancient Semitic custom, perhaps similar to the divination by means of blunt arrows practiced by the pre-Islamic Arabs and comprehensively described in Lane III, 1247. The pronoun 'they' relates to the priests, of whom Zachariah was one" (*Ibid.,* 73, n. 31 on Q 3:44). *Tafsīr al-Manār* interprets *wa-utū bihi mutashābihan* as referring to the sustenance granted in the days of yore, something that is promised to earthly life as a requital for faith and righteous deeds (Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* I: 171 f., on Q 2:25).

influence on Asad's process of producing appropriate and equivalent English translations. The following examples illustrate this classification:

> In his commentary on Q 3:20, Asad mentions al-Rāzī in order to provide further explanation on the term *ummiyyīn* in these words, "according to Rāzī, this refers to people who have no revealed scripture of their own."[4]

> In order to nuance his rendition of *baʿdi mawtikum* into "after you had been dead" in Q 2:56, Asad appeals to some Arab philologists, such as Abū'l-Qāsim Ḥusayn al-Raghib al-Isfahānī (d. 502 AH/1108 CE), who in his *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾān* explains the verb *māta* (lit. he died), as having, in certain contexts, the meaning of "he became deprived of sensation, dead as to the senses"; and occasionally as "deprived of the intellectual faculty, intellectually dead."[5]

Notwithstanding these binary characterizations of sources in *TMOQ*, all sources have arguably, in one way or another, shaped Asad's intellectual ability and facilitated his translation enterprise. As he did not receive formal education from any Islamic institution of higher learning, Asad independently pursued a study of the hermeneutics of the Qurʾān. This study gave him access to the wealth of both classical and modern literature which specialized in qurʾānic interpretation.

A self-taught scholar in his own right, his linguistic abilities were further honed to prepare him for the later task of translating the Arabic Qurʾān for what many critics call, his *magnum opus, The Message of the Qurʾān*. Through his copious commentaries, Asad has allowed us to extrapolate who and which works have contributed and made significant impact on his intellectual development.

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[4] Asad, *TMOQ,* 69, n. 14 on Q 3:20.

[5] Asad, *TMOQ,* 12, n. 41 on Q 2:56.

Thus, this chapter focuses on six individual classical and modern Islamic figures who played very influential roles in Asad's venture. As such, they occupy a prominent place in *TMOQ.* They are selected to represent different fields relevant to qurʾānic studies and interpretations. They come from the prophetic tradition -- the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* of al-Bukhārī and Muslim; from the theological and rationalist tradition -- al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī, and finally, from the modern period, the Egyptian reformist and rationalist, Muḥammad ʿAbduh and his Lebanese disciple, Rashīd Riḍā. This study includes a brief history of the lives and works of these Islamic figures along with a study of how Asad interacted with them intellectually in his commentary.

2.2   Overview of the Sources

Asad based his translation and interpretation of the Qurʾān on the recension of Ḥafṣ ibn Sulaymān al-Asadī (d. 796 CE).[6] The latter was an Iraqī promoter of a *qirāʾa* or a reading of the Qurʾān by ʿĀṣim al-Asadī (d. 745 CE),[7] Ḥafṣ's father-in-law who belonged to the Kūfan school of Qurʾān readers. The Ḥafṣ version has been judged by many to be reliable, and became the system

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[6] His fame rests on the knowledge he had acquired of the "reading" of the master of Kūfa, ʿĀṣim al-Asadī, whose son-in-law he was. After the death of the latter and the foundation of Baghdād, he settled in the capital, where he had numerous pupils, then went to spread the "reading" of his father-in-law in Mecca (ED, "Ḥafṣ b. Sulaymān," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, Eds. B. Lewis, et al. [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986], 3:63).

[7] Or Abū Bakr ʿĀṣim b. Bahdala Abīʾl-Najjūd al-Asadī (A. Jeffery, "ʿĀṣim," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:706 f.) It is said that Abū Bakr ʿĀṣim succeeded ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī as head of the Kūfan school of Qurʾān readers, where the former's preeminence in qūrʾānic studies secured him a place as one of the Seven Readers whose systems are commonly recognized by Muslim academics. Through his son-in-law and pupil, Ḥafṣ, his system of pointing and vowelling the qurʾānic text has become the *textus receptus* in Islām (*Ibid.*)

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passed down and adopted for the establishment of the text of the Qurʾān published in Cairo in 1924. It became known as the "Royal Egyptian" edition under the auspices of King Fuʾād.[8] This edition has been recognized as a sort of modern Vulgate of the Qurʾān. Its popularity is so widespread that the Islamic community may well recognize in the future only the "reading" of ʿĀṣim handed down by Ḥafṣ.[9] Asad himself agreed that the Ḥafṣ version was regarded by Arab scholars as "the most exact of all existing editions."[10] Others also noted that the adoption of this version responded to the need for a universal and uniform reading of the Qurʾān. Thus, it was hoped that the Ḥafṣ version could curtail widespread publications with variations in text and *qirāʾāt* or readings.[11]

Contemporary qurʾānic scholars agree that this version was not intended to be a text-critical edition in a historical sense. Nonetheless, its existence somehow stirred some controversy since, while "this edition maintains its value -- it is typeset in a pleasant font, for example -- but its verse numbering scheme, being at variance with any accepted Muslim tradition, has created an unfortunate complexity in scholarly referencing."[12] Be that as it may be, Asad's *opus* adhered

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[8] For the history of the development of this Cairene edition, see Reynolds, *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, 2 ff.

[9] Régis Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve, 1947), 134-135;

[10] Asad, *TMOQ,* ix. But, from the view of pre-modern Islamic scholarship this is, nonetheless, considered as one among several equally valid versions (Sinai, *The Qurʾān*, 32).

[11] Andrew Rippin, *Qurʾān: Oxford Bibliographies Online Research Guide* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10-11. This codification is considered as the latest shift from the highly divisive *scriptio defectiva* (unvowelled and unmarked consonants) to the *scriptio plena* (full script) (Gabriel Reynolds, *The Emergence of Islam, Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012], 102).

[12] Rippin, *Qurʾān,* 11. Reynolds describes the initiatives that led to this Cairo edition as follows: it was "meant to establish a uniform text for religious education in Egypt"; it was "never intended to be text-critical... (it) did not seek to reconstruct the ancient form of the Qurʾān, but

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to this edition concerning the division of verses and names of the *sūrahs*. It also

adhered to this version's chronology although he occasionally offered an

alternative point of view to their chronology. Asad would refer to differences of

opinion among authorities.[13]

Before going any further, I offer a brief summary that details the scholars

and works that were considered by Asad for specific interpretive purposes. As

indicated earlier, Asad was a scholar who could consult the primary sources of

ḥadīth, sīra, tafsīr, fiqh and history. Among the *ḥadīth* works, he refers to the six

authentic collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE), Abū Da'ūd (d. 889 CE), Muslim

(d. 875 CE), al-Tirmidhī (d. 892 CE), Ibn Māja (d. 887 CE), and al-Nasāʾī (d. 915

CE). In addition, he also consults the *ḥadīth* collections by other traditionists,

such as that of Mālik b. Anas (d. 795 CE), Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), al-Dārimī (d.

869 CE), al-Dārquṭnī (d. 995 CE), al-Ḥākim (d. 1012 CE), al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066

CE), and Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449 CE). Asad also makes reference to the

classical commentaries by Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), al-Baghawī (d. 1122 CE), al-

Zamakhsharī (d. 1143 CE), al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE), al-Bayḍawī (d. 1286 CE), Ibn

Taymiyya (d. 1328), and to the modern commentary by Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d.

1905 CE) and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935 CE). He also relies on al-

Suyūṭī's (d. 1505 CE) *al-Itqān fī ʿulum al-Qurʾān* for the qurʾānic sciences. For

the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, Asad draws from *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* by

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rather to preserve one of the canonical *qirāʾāt* 'readings'"; it was "not about recovering a text as
much as choosing a text.... (its) validity is based not on antiquity, but rather on canonicity"
(Reynolds, *The Qurʾān in its Historical Context*, 2 f.).

[13] Cf. Kassis, "Review of *The Message of the Qurʾān*," 570-572.

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al-Wāqidī (d. 823 CE) and *Sīra al-Nabawiyyah* by Ibn Hishām (d. 833 CE). His historical references include the books of Ibn Saʿd (d. 845 CE) and Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373 CE).

For lexicographical discussion, Asad refers to *Tāj al-Lugha* by al-Jawharī (d. 1002 CE), *al-Mufradāt* by Raghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1108 CE), *Lisān al-Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311 CE), *al-Qāmūs* by al-Firūzābādī (d. 1414 CE), and *Tāj al-ʿArūs* by Murtadā al-Zabīdī (d. 1790 CE). He also consults the *Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward W. Lane (d. 1876 CE). For discussion pertaining to *fiqh*, Asad refers to the work of *al-Muḥallā* by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064 CE), *Bidāyāt al-Mujtahid* by Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE) and *Mughnī* by ibn Hisham al-Anṣārī (d. 1360 CE). Asad also considers the *Authorized King James Version* (*KJV*, first published in 1611) as an important interpretive source. He drew on this biblical translation in arguments against some biblical doctrines, or to give to context to biblical allusions in the Qurʾān.

2.3   The Prophetic Tradition

2.3.1 Asad and *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī

Asad encountered the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī for the first time when he visited the library of the "Prophet's Mosque" in Medina during his six-year sojourn in the Arabian Peninsula.[14] As it was the same place where Muslims believe the Prophet Muḥammad was buried, studying the science of *ḥadīth* in this library was a momentous experience for Asad. It gave him that "overwhelming force" which

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[14] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v; *Ibid., The Road to Mecca*, 304.

seemed to transport him back to a "direct contact with the original spirit of Islām."[15] His encounter with the text made him realize that,

> "it is not enough... to know what this or that great man of the past thought about matters Islamic; it is not enough to live in the shadow of thoughts that have been thoughts at a period so remote from us that they can hardly have any immediate bearing on the exigencies of our present-day life."[16]

Asad somehow felt at that time that the message of the text he was reading was far removed from his present context. It was trapped or relegated to the past, and thus rendered irrelevant for the present. The only solution to this irrelevance, according to him, was to "once again make real the voice of the Prophet of Islām -- real as if he were speaking directly to us and for us: and it is in the *ḥadīth* that his voice can be most clearly heard."[17]

Such a realization actually planted a seed inside Asad to pursue a larger project and to bring this vision into fruition later. It was the well-known and greatly admired Muslim philosopher of the Indian Subcontinent, Muḥammad Iqbal who would awaken that desire and become very instrumental in inspiring Asad to translate the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī into English.[18] This project would then give birth to

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[15] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v. At this time, Asad has obviously already been exposed to some reformist and modernist Islamic literatures which he criticized as obscuring the authentic Traditions of Islām and, in the process, rendering them inapplicable to the present context (Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v).

[16] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v.

[17] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v.

[18] Muhammad Asad and Pola Ḥāmida Asad, "Islām at the Crossroads (1933-1934)," in *Home-coming of the Heart (1932-1992)*, ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore, Pakistan: The Truth Society, 2012), 70 f., (65-76). In this memoire, Asad recalls one of the first private conversations he had with Iqbal at the latter's home. The topic was about Islamic reforms and the relevance of the Prophet Muḥammad in the contemporary period. As Asad was expressing to him some of his frustrations about how the Traditions of the Prophet have been drowned by modern Islamic scholarships, Iqbal, in turn, urged him "to do something about it... you could translate some of the *aḥādīth* from the Arabic into English. Take for instance, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī: it has never yet

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the publication of the first five installments of Asad's translation and commentary of the *Kitāb al-Jamiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Bukhārī in May of 1938. It bears the title, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, The Early Years.*[19]

Of the many known collections of the Prophet's sayings or Traditions, Asad particularly looks to al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a paragon of authenticity in this genre. Compiled by a ninth-century author who lived almost 200 years after the *Hijrah*, this work was described by Asad as one that subscribed to the "high sense of intellectual and moral responsibility and extreme severity with which...it approached the problem of *ḥadīth.*"[20]

Asad alludes to the problem of unsystematic and uncritical collections which purported to enshrine the Prophet's teachings. They seemed to compile and mix unreliable materials along with genuine ones.[21] For this reason, there ensued a critical investigation of Traditions which eventually led to a science of

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been translated into English; why don't you do it." Consider how many millions of Muslims in this country know English, although they are ignorant of Arabic -- think of the many to whom you could make the Prophet's voice audible, if you but tried! Try it!" (*Ibid.,* 70-71).

[19] These installments comprise the historical chapters which include "the beginning of the Prophet's revelation and the early years of Islām up to and including that decisive turning-point of Islamic history, the Battle of Badr" (Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* v). These five parts, however, were published together in one volume (Dar al-Gibraltar, 1981). The totality of the project would have been thirty-five instalments in the envisioned eight-volume publication; however, with the outbreak of WWII, and Asad's detention in the internment camp as an Austrian citizen in late autumn of 1939 until 1945, this project ceased abruptly. In his memoir, he recalls "and so it (incarceration) went on, day after day, week after week, month after month. I had no books with me with which to work on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī;* and in any case, work was unthinkable in a barrack filled with seventy men" (Asad and Asad, "The Bleak Years 1938-1945," in *Home-coming of the Heart [1932-1992],* 102 [97-114]). Asad's translation project would, however, have a "bitter postscript" when nearly two-thirds of his manuscripts were looted in autumn of 1947, and he would soon watch some of these pages floating in River Ravi (Asad and Asad, "Partition [1946-1947]," *Home-coming of the Heart* 127 [115-132]).

[20] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* vi.

[21] Cf. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1968), 82, 126, 131, 127.

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the *hadith*. The *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī, according to Asad, is distinguished by its standard of investigation and scrutiny. It is far more rigorous and it has withstood the most exacting demand of historical criticism.[22] Such a reputation could have only been achieved through its basic compliance with fundamental principles of verification before composition. This verification, Asad asserts, could have meant "a corroboration of the evidence adduced to in the document as concerned by other, independent sources." It could also mean, "a thorough investigation of the reliability of the authorities -- or the chain of authorities or *isnād* -- responsible for the transmission of the historical facts underlying the document in question."[23]

There is no doubt that because of his high regard and reverence for the standard and methodology of this compilation that Asad turned to the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī as one of his most important sources for interpreting and translating the Qurʾān.

2.3.1.2   The *Ṣāḥib al-Ṣaḥīḥ*

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Mughīra b. Bardizbeh al-Juʿfī al-Bukhārī was born in an ancient city in Uzbekistan, called Bukhārā.[24] He started studying *ḥadīths* at a young age, precociously learning verses by heart. He had a remarkable memory, according to Bukhārān experts.

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[22] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* vi.

[23] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.

[24] J. Robson, "al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:1296 f.)*.* This city was also known as prominent stop along the Silk Road trade route between the East and the West, and a major medieval center for Islamic theology and culture.

Then, early in his teens, he began writing books on the sayings of the

Companions and the Successors of the Prophet. As a well-travelled man, he met

the most vaunted *ḥadīth* scholars of his day. Thus, he "claimed to have heard

traditions from over 1000 shaykhs."[25]

When he moved to Naysābūr around 864 CE, his academic reputation not

only gained accolades; it also earned the jealous enmity of the Naysābūrī senior

muḥaddith, Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī (d. 873 CE). Accused of saying that

"the physical recitation (*lafẓ*) of the Qurʾān was created,"[26] al-Bukhārī was

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[25] In Khurāsān, for example, al-Bukhārī studied with the *muḥaddith* and *faqīh*, Isḥāq ibn Rāhawayh (d. 853 CE), who supported him especially in his compilation of the *Ṣaḥīḥ.* In western Iran, al-Bukhārī was staying in Rayy while making frequent trips to Baghdad, where he studied with Rāhawayh's fellow student, the traditionist *muḥaddith, faqīh* and theologian Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855 CE), and another traditionist, Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn (d. 847 CE). In Baṣra he heard from ʿAlī b. al-Madīnī (d. 849), who would become one of his main teachers, and the Meccan born traditionist *muḥaddith* Abū ʿAṣim Daḥḥāk al-Nabīl (d. 827 CE) who was also known for his authentic *hadiths*. Al-Bukhārī also studied in the Iraqi cities of Wāsiṭ, and Kufa, as well as in Medina. In Mecca he heard from the Shāfiʿī *faqīh* and *muḥaddith* ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr al-Ḥumaydī (d. 834 CE). From there he also visited Egypt and cities like ʿAsqalān and Ḥimṣ in greater Syria (Robson "al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:1296 f.).

[26] Otherwise known as the "*lafẓ* scandal," the accusation against al-Bukhārī falls within this debate, namely, whether the Qurʾān is created or not created. It was a divisive theological issue which arose during the early ʿAbbāsid period (r. 750-1258 CE) that drew a stark line between the rationalist position -- represented by members of the Jahmiyyah, the Muʿtazilah and the Ḥanafiyyah groups -- which argued that the Qurʾān was created, and the traditionalist position -- represented by members of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* or *Ahl al-Sunnah* camp -- which believed that the Qurʾān is one of God's uncreated attributes (*qadīm*) (C. Melchert, "The Adversaries of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal." *Arabica* 44.2 [1997]: 252 [234-253]). According to George Makdisi, some members of the traditionalist camp, those whom he characterizes as "the ultra conservatives," instigated a purge (*mihna*) (George Makdisi, "Ashʿarī and the Ashʿarites in Islamic Religion History," *Studia Islamica* 17 [Jan 1962]: 39 [37-80]) within their ranks in order to sift the genuine ones from what Melchert describes as those who were "self-proclaimed traditionalists" but in reality were "semi-rationalists" (Melchert, "The Adversaries of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal," 252). This purge may be construed as a countervailing reaction to the partisan intervention of the reigning Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813-833 CE) who sided with the rationalists and sanctioned an official *miḥnah* to purge the Caliphate from opposing opinions (Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 78). Melchert believes that al-Bukhārī was a "semi-rationalist" as he upheld the stance that the *lafẓ* of the Qurʾān is created (*Ibid.*, 252). Jonathan Brown, however, attempting to clarify the latter's position in this debate, says that to describe al-Bukhārī, "who was a diehard traditionalist," as a "semi-rationalist" is not accurate; rather, he should be viewed as a "representative of Ibn Ḥanbal's original traditionalist school who fell victim to its most radical wing" (Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 80). Brown proposes that al-Bukhārī's position should, instead, be labelled as "conservative traditionalist" as he tried to navigate the contradictions inherent in the blunt *Ahl al-Sunnah* creed touched by the "ultra conservatives" like al-Dhuhlī of

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reportedly expelled from the city.[27] Nonetheless, he remained and retired in

Naysābūr where he stayed for another five years.[28]

2.3.1.3 Major Works

Before the *Ṣaḥīḥ,* al-Bukhārī was first preoccupied with musings on the

sayings of the Companions and the Successors. These intellectual reflections

later matured into a much more ambitious project, the so-called, *al-Tarīkh al-*

Kabīr which he began writing while still a young man in Medina.[29] Besides the

latter, al-Bukhārī also produced a smaller dictionary of *ḥadīth* transmitters. It was

one large book of weak transmitters as well as a smaller book on weak

narrators.[30]

Naysābūr (*Ibid.,* 80). For al-Bukhārī, according to Brown, the Qurʾān was God's uncreated speech, but as its spatial and concrete manifestation into a recitation (*lafẓ*), or its writing, is a human act, then, in this sense, the Qurʾān also has a created nature (*Ibid.,* 80). However, as delicate as this issue was, al-Bukhārī himself reportedly was very reluctant to discuss this issue, like his predecessors (Muhammad ibn Ismāʿīl Bukhārī, *Khalq afʿal al-'ibad* [Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2003], 62).

[27] It was further related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 938 CE) -- whose work, *al-Jarḥ wa al-taʿdīl* is considered to be the earliest source on al-Bukhārī -- that al-Dhuhlī publicly condemned al-Bukhārī for his beliefs about the *lafẓ* of the Qurʾān (Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 66).

[28] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 66. This report is from Ibn ʿAdī al-Jurjānī (d. 975-6 CE), whose work is considered as the earliest significant source on al-Bukhārī (*Ibid.*). Another report says that al-Bukhārī returned to his native Bukhārā where he would spend the last years of his life. There too, he would also be reportedly driven away on account of his disobedience to the Ṭāhirid *amīr,* Khālid b. Aḥmad (whose surname is also al-Dhūlī), by refusing to give the *amir's* children a private reading of his *Ṣaḥīḥ,* his past *lafẓ* scandal in Naysābūr seemed to have caught up with him (*Ibid.*, 67-68). Tired and intimidated, al-Bukhārī passed through the city of Nasaf before dying in the village of Khartank a few miles from Samarqand.

[29] C. Melchert, "Bukhārī and Early Ḥadīth Criticism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society,* 121.1 (2001): 8 (7-19).

[30] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 68.

But, it is the *Ṣaḥīḥ* which represents the primary expression of al-Bukhārī's personal method of *ḥadīth* criticism and legal vision which took him sixteen years to compile.[31] It covers the full range of legal and ritual topics. Yet, it also includes treatments of many other issues such as the implication of technical terms in *ḥadīth* transmission and the authority of *āḥād hadiths* (those reports that were transmitted from the Prophet by a less impressive number of *isnāds*) in law. It also contains other materials which deal with Creation, paradise and hell, descriptions of different prophets including a very detailed one of Muḥammad, and a Qurʾān commentary. It consists of ninety-seven chapters (*kutub*), each divided into subchapters (*abwāb*).

There is no agreement as to the exact number of *hadiths* in the *Ṣaḥīḥ.* Opinions have varied because definitions of the *ḥadīth* itself have varied. Is it understood as a "tradition" or as a saying attributed to the Prophet? Or, is it a "narration," meaning is it one version of that saying narrated by a specific *isnād*?

Touted to contain only traditions of the highest authority, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* is characteristically of the *muṣannaf* type. That is, these traditions are essentially transcripts of the legal discourses that developed during the first two centuries of Islām which are organized thematically according to subject-matter.[32] As such, this work cannot be identified or associated with any of the nascent schools of law. Nor was al-Bukhārī dependent or constrained by any particular school.[33]

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[31] Robson "al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:1296 f.

[32] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 50-51.

[33] Robson, "al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:1296 f.)

Nonetheless, all four *madhāhib* are said to have laid claim on the *Ṣaḥīḥ* and on al-Bukhārī.[34]

Methodologically speaking, in the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Bukhārī "followed his teacher ʿAlī b. al-Madīnī in requiring proof that "at each link in the *isnād*, the two transmitters had to have narrated hadiths to one another in person at least once." But, al-Bukhārī actually did not provide a methodological introduction to this work.[35] With this absence of information, scholars of the next generations who studied the *Ṣaḥīḥ* and *al-Tarīkh al-kabīr* have had to reconstruct his criteria of authenticity.[36]

Thus, it is argued, that the current understanding of al-Bukhārī's methods depends either on these later analyses, or on statements attributed to al-Bukhārī in later sources.[37] Finally, as an example of Islamic literature, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* is not a unique genre in al-Bukhārī's time. It attracted a number of commentators who wrote about this work. These eventually contributed to raising its reputation as an outstanding collection of Sunnī tradition.

2.3.1.4 An Interpretive Context

In spite of the fact that Asad's plan to do a complete English translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* volumes did not materialize, all of his preliminary research and

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[34] Robson, "al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:1296 f.).

[35] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 70.

[36] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 70.

[37] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 70.

the intellectual exercise it involved must have provided considerable knowledge about the Islamic tradition even though it came only through the singular lens of a *muḥaddith.* As he prepared to translate the Qurʾān into English, Asad must have seen the *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a rich resource for his new venture. As it will be shown, Asad utilized this document essentially as a hermeneutical context in which qurʾānic thoughts and concepts were broadened, nuanced or given proper context.

A good example here is how Asad attempts to read, interpret and render the qurʾānic term *al-ḥawāriyyun* (sing. *ḥawāri*).[38] In its four occurrences in the Qurʾān (in three *surahs*), the term *al-ḥawāriyyun* is commonly understood and translated into "apostles" or "disciples,"[39] Asad breaks rank with this translation and consistently renders the term as "white-garbed ones" as in the following:

> Q Āl ʿImrān 3:52, "... Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The white-garbed ones (*al-ḥawāriyyun*) replied: "We shall be [thy] helpers [in the cause] of God! We believe in God: and bear thou witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto Him!

> Q Maʾidah 5:111, "And [remember the time] when I inspired the white-garbed ones (*al-ḥawāriyyun*) ... "

> Q Ṣaff 61:14, "O you who have attained to faith! Be helpers [in the cause of God] - even as Jesus, the son of Mary, said unto the white-garbed ones (*al-ḥawāriyyun*), "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" - whereupon the white-garbed [disciples] (*al-ḥawāriyyun*) replied, "We shall be [thy] helpers [in the cause] of God!... "

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[38] The same term is discussed in Chapter 5, 5.2.4, "His Helpers," but it is within the context of Asad's Christology of the Qurʾān.

[39] In his article, Prof. Reynolds draws a list of some twenty renditions of the term by "critical scholars" and translators, if I may add, who "are generally content to translate this term (*al-ḥawāriyyūn*) as 'apostles' or 'disciples' without any further comment" (Gabriel Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76.2 [May 2013]: 213, n. 22 [209-227[).

While Asad acknowledges that in the Qurʾān the term *al-ḥawāriyyun* is "the designation applied to the disciples of Jesus,"[40] he believes that there is more to the concept than the way it was commonly rendered by scholars and translators. Asad feels that his readers deserve a more informative rendition and exegesis. For this reason, he considers three semantic sources as interpretive contexts that would help shape his rendition.

First, he looks into the multifarious interpretations of the *mufassirūn* and chooses the meaning that seems to be most appropriate for this textual context.[41] Among those interpretations, Asad was particularly drawn to the two levels of the meaning of "whiteness" that the commentators gave to the term *al-ḥawāriyyun*. On the literal level, it refers to "one who whitens clothes by washing them." According to the commentators, this was allegedly the occupation of some of Jesus' disciples. The other interpretation of the term is "one who wears white

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[40] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52. Some commentators interpret *al-ḥawāriyyūna* as "intimate companions (*khāṣṣa*) of Jesus (Ṭabarī 3:336's3:52); or "those who assist His (Jesus) religion: they were Jesus' intimates and the first to believe in him" (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:54, on Q 3:52); or, according to ʿAbduh, it means "the supporters of Jesus" (Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ḥakīm, al-shahīr bi-Tafsīr al-Manār* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 2007), III:218, on Q 3:52). The others basically understand the term to be a proper Arabic term from the root *ḥ-w-r*, with the meaning "to be white." It can also be a cognate to Geʿez word *ḥawāryā*, which literally means "walker" (Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," 2-3). One of Ṭabarī's explanations why the companions of Jesus are called *al-ḥawāriyyūn* is that they worked as bleachers later on, however, they were called as such because of the "whiteness of their clothing (Ṭabarī, 3:336, on Q 3:52).

[41] Many of the commentators commonly contextualize this verse in relation to Jesus, and so interpret *al-ḥawāriyyun* as the disciples of Jesus. It is thought by some to indicate purity (Rāzī, 8:56, on Q 3:52), or could also mean "pure companion" (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:54, on Q 3:52). While some call them as "special (*khaṣṣah*) companions of Jesus" (Ṭabarī 3:336, on Q 3:52). In the Arabic word *ḥawāri* meaning "support" (Ibn Kathīr, 2:166 f., on Q 3:52) or they are the ones who supported Jesus in propagating the message of his religion (Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār,* 3:218, on Q 3:52). While some maintain that *ḥawāriyyun* is from the Ethiopic *ḥawārya* meaning "apostle," others see it as deriving from the word *ḥawwara,* meaning "to transform" or "to whiten" (Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāz al-Qurʾān* [Bayrūt: Dār al-Qalam, 2011], 262 f.) The title could thus refer to those who transform and purify the souls of people by guiding them in religion and knowledge (*al-Mufradāt*, 262 f.).

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garments." On the metaphorical level, that understanding could mean "one whose heart is white," that is, "pure."[42]

A second source of interpretation for Asad originated in Palestine at the time of Jesus. According to Asad, the "evidence provided by the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls" strongly points to the existence of a Jewish religious group called the Essene Brotherhood.[43] He asserts that the term *ḥawārī* was popularly used to denote a member of this group which Jesus himself may have belonged to.[44]

While Asad does not specify or provide citations to support his assertion that the same term or its cognate was used by this community, he nonetheless sees a useful correspondence in the two levels of meaning of the white garments the men wore. The first meaning addresses the outward sign of the community's convictions. The second, more specifically, was the symbol of their "strong insistence on moral purity and unselfish conduct." [45]

The high moral standard which characterizes the Palestinian concept of *ḥawārī* made Asad turn to this usage in translating, giving it a third context of interpretation. In his second installment of the 1938 translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Asad takes notice of the term *ḥawārī* in a role which Ibn ʿAbbās identifies and introduces al-Zubayr bin al-ʿAwwām (d. 692 CE) as "a helper of the

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[42] Ṭabarī, 3:336, on Q 3:52; Rāzī, VIII:56, on Q 3:52; Ibn Kathīr, 2:166 f., on Q 3:52

[43] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

[44] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

[45] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

Prophet."[46] In addition to this introductory line, Ibn ʿAbbās, obviously alludes

exegetically to the cognate of the term in the Qurʾān. He says, "and the

ḥawāriyyūn were thus called on account of the whiteness of their garments."[47]

This exegetical linkage becomes for Asad an initial foray into his interpretation of

the qurʾānic concept of *al-ḥawāriyyūn.* It makes sense for him, then, to

incorporate this notion into his commentary on the concept in his *TMOQ.*

In the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and in a couple of other *ḥadīth* collections, the

term *ḥawārī* [48] was used three times. Besides Ibn ʿAbbās' introductory line, it was

always used in reference to al-Zubayr, the Companion whom the Prophet called

as his *ḥawārī*.[49] While the sense of "whiteness" did not appear in the *ḥadīth* vis-à-

vis the *al-ḥawāriyyun* concept (i.e. besides ibn ʿAbbās' note), Asad, nonetheless,

found some affirmation for its use in the words of the Prophet -- "every prophet

has his *ḥawārī*." There is a strong indication that the Prophet was familiar with the

qurʾānic terminology. In this setting, he was intending to use "this term

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[46] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 71 (17-136), n. 2 on Section 9. Cf. Bukhārī, 5:3717.

[47] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 71.

[48] According to Edward Lane, *ḥawārī* generally denotes "one who advises, or counsels, or acts, sincerely, honestly, or faithfully; ... a friend, or true, or sincere, friend ... or a strenuous assistant, ... or an assistant of prophets" (*Arab-English Lexicon,* [Beirut, Lebanon: Librairie du Liban, 1997]*,* II, 666).

[49] The ḥadīth narrated by Jābir goes, "The Prophet said, "Every prophet used to have a *ḥawārī* (i.e. disciple), and my *ḥawārī* is al-Zubayr bin al-ʿAwwam" (Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī [Arabic-English]* [Riyadh-Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Pub. & Distr., 1997], 5: 3719); also 5:4113; 9:7261. Cf. al-Tirmidhī (Muḥammad ibn ʿĪsá Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī: wa-huwa al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ* [Bayrūt : Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2011]), 851, nos. 3752, 3753.

figuratively, recalling thereby Jesus' "helpers in God's cause."[50] Thus, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* assumes here an important interpretive role for Asad.

With his knowledge of the New Testament, Asad could have easily adopted the commonly used terms, "disciples" or "apostles" for the word *al-ḥawāriyyun* in his rendition instead of "white-garbed ones."[51] But, these supposed interpretations, as mentioned earlier, did not satisfy his larger understanding of the word.

The sense of "whiteness," however, provided Asad with a functional interpretation that better illustrated the term's moral sense – namely, purity.[52] And, by employing the sense of "whiteness" associated with the Essene Brotherhood, Asad further strengthens his interpretation of *al-ḥawāriyyun* as "white-garbed ones." But, it was the Prophet's authoritative usage of the term *ḥawārī* in the *ḥadīth* that gives Asad the confidence to persist with his translation of *al-ḥawāriyyun* as "white-garbed ones." Asad explains that the Prophet once

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[50] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

[51] In his article, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," Prof. Reynolds appears to suggest that most scholars and commentators most putatively based their interpretation on *al-ḥawāriyyūn* concept directly on the biblical relationship between Jesus and his disciples, hence they are "generally content to translate this term as "apostles" or "disciples" without any further comment" (Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," 2, 5 f.).

[52] Prof. Reynolds challenges the position of many scholars (and translators), like Asad, who largely agree that the Qurʾān presents the *ḥawāriyyūn* as faithful "apostles" or "disciples" of Jesus. After analysing relevant verses, especially Q 3:52, Q 5:111-112 and Q 61:14, Reynolds concludes that the Qurʾān's portrayal of the *ḥawāriyyūn* is rather ambiguous, "On the one hand, the Qurʾān reports how the apostles proclaimed their belief in Jesus, how God revealed messages to them (on at least two occasions), and how God supported them, against the Jews for the sake of their belief in Jesus. On the other hand, they forgot the words of Jesus and split into different sects." Rather than "faithful" followers, Reynolds describes them as "imperfect believers whom the Qurʾān seeks to reprimand" (Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," 18).

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said "Every prophet has his *ḥawārī*". [53] It, therefore, appears to Asad that the

Prophet's authoritative statement concerning this term not only provides

unquestionable confirmation for the term's meaning, but also attests to the moral

interpretation it seemed to have among the Essene Brotherhood. In this sense, it

is the *ḥadīth* reported particularly in the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that becomes the

interpretive arbiter for the most appropriate sense of the qurʾānic term *al-*

ḥawāriyyun.

In the same way, al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* helps provide Asad with a semantic

interpretation of the triliteral root *ḥ-n-f*. In all of its twelve occurrences[54] in the

Qurʾān, it is consistently interpreted by Asad as a "turning away from falsehood."

Eight of these citations explicitly characterize the faith of Abraham who refuses to

follow his clan's idolatrous worship. And so, the Qurʾān endorses Abraham's

refusal as the ideal praxis of monotheistic faith. The following examples illustrate

Asad's rendition of the triliteral root under consideration,

> Q Baqarah 2:135, "Nay, but [ours is] the creed of Abraham, who turned
> away from all that is false (*ḥanīfan*) and was not of those who ascribe
> divinity to aught beside God."

> Q Bayyinah 98:5, "And withal, they were not enjoined aught but that they
> should worship God, sincere in their faith in Him alone, turning away from
> all that is false (*ḥunafāʾ*); and that they should be constant in prayer; and
> that they should spend in charity: for this is a moral law endowed with
> ever-true soundness and clarity.

Asad traces the original context in which the word *ḥanīf* was used, along

with its various cognates or grammatical permutations in the Qurʾān, in pre-

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[53] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

[54] Verses directly related to Ibrāhīm: Q 2:135; Q 3:67, 95; Q 4:125; Q 6:79, 161; Q
16:120, 123; to Muḥammad or Muslims: Q 22:31; Q 30:30; Q 98:5; Q 10:105.

Islamic times.[55] Even at that time, he said, it already "had a definitely monotheistic connotation and was used to describe a man who turned away from sin and worldliness and from all dubious beliefs, especially idol-worship."[56] But, in his third installment of his 1938 translation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Asad states that the pre-Islamic context he was talking about was not necessarily the one identified by some Arab philologists and some Orientalists.[57] Many of these scholars insisted that the word *ḥanīf* was not of Arabic origin. They reported that it came from the Aramaic *hanpa* or *hanfa*, which literally means "one who turns away."[58] The latter signification usually linked the term to a theological usage of the Syrian-Christian Church which defined it as "a renegade from Christianity."[59]

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[55] Asad, *TMOQ,* 28, n. 110 on Q 2:135.

[56] Asad, *TMOQ,* 28, n. 110 on Q 2:135. In *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, commentators give five interpretations of the word, all of them manifestly extrapolated from the contexts in which the word occurs in the Qurʾān: (1) it means "*ḥajj*," "pilgrim," or more precisely, a person who performs the *ḥajj* at Mecca; (2) it means "obedient" (cf. Q 16:123); (3) it means Abraham's religion, *al-ḥanīfiyyah,* because he was the first *imām* to prescribe circumcision for worshippers*,* which implies that these authorities thought that *ḥanīf* means "circumcised"; (4) it refers to a person who devotes one's religion to God alone (cf. Q 98:5); (5) *al-ḥanīfiyyah* means *al-Islām* (cf. Q 3:67) (Ṭabarī, 1:654 f., on Q 2:135). For his part, Ṭabarī describes *ḥanīf* as *mustaqīm* or "straight" (cf. Q 6:161), however, when these two words are juxtaposed closely, then the connotation becomes bizarre as *ḥanīf* is linked to *aḥnaf,* "having a crooked foot, lame" (Ṭabarī, 1:653, on Q 2:135)

[57] See Asad, "The Beginnings of Islam," *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143 f. (138-251), n. 3 on Section 1:2.

[58] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143, n. 3.

[59] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143. In Semitic languages the root *ḥ-n-p* is used in very different, intrinsically negative meanings that seem quite irreconcilable with the qurʾānic usage. An example is from R. Payne Smith's *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxonii: E Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1879-1901): *ḥanpā'* which means "to paganize; to turn aside to idolatry"; *atḥanap,* "to be profane, irreligious"; *aḥnāp,* "to apostatize; to pervert to paganism," (149); or from *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrick Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2012): *ḥānēf* means "be polluted, profane," or "inclining away from right, irreligion, profaness" (337). Sidney Griffith (*Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* [Vermont, USA: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1992]) also relates that the most frequent designation for the Muslims in the Syriac literatures in the early ʿAbbāsid period is the term *ḥanpâ*, a word, in general, means "pagan" or "heathen," perhaps reflective of how the Greek fathers called "hellene" a follower of the old 'pagan' religion who had not become Christian with

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Asad retorts that "it would be erroneous to assume that this word (ḥanīf) came to the Arabs by way of Christian theology."[60] While he does not completely dismiss the possibility that it could be an Aramaic word, he argues that its incorporation into the Arabic language must have taken place much earlier. His reasoning was that "the Arabs always used it in its original sense of 'turning away,' namely, from sin and worldliness and never that of heresy."[61]

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the empire (118). But, it could also mean, Griffith adds, that the Syriac apologists "employed the term ḥanpâ to designate the Muslims, first of all because of the simple fact that the term means 'non-Christians.' It does not mean, of itself, 'polytheists,' or 'idolators,' as these writers well understood, although the term may also be applied to these non-Christians. Secondly, ... (they) wanted to call Muslims by one of their own names for themselves" (*Ibid,* 120, 121). Asad himself cites a couple of sample Christian usages of this supposed Aramaic concept which he draws from Tor Andrae's 1936 English translation of *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith* (London, 1936, 150 f. [or Dover Pub., 2000 ed., 108 f.]): "so the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate is called, in Syriac writings, *Yulyana hanpa;* the same term seems to have been applied there to the Manichaeans and Sabaeans as well, presumably owing to the fact that their religions contained Christian elements without fully subscribing to the doctrines of the Christian Church (Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143, n. 3).

[60] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143, n. 3. In his philological and etymological discussion of the qurʾānic term ḥanīf, François de Blois ("Naṣrānī [Ναζωραῖος] and ḥanīf [ἐθνικός]: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islām," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65:1 [2002]: [1-30]) arrives at a hypothesis that the "designation of the Abraham as a ḥanīf was inherited from Christian parlance and that the original meaning of the term was no longer understood at the time when the Qurʾān was composed. But it is not necessary to assume this. Ḥanīf can, in all of its qurʾānic contexts, plausibly be translated as 'gentile,' or perhaps more specifically as 'a person in the state of religious innocence, not bound by Jewish law'." In his analysis, de Blois points to the Pauline reference of Abraham in the third and fourth chapters of the letter to the Galatians as that 'person in the state of religious innocence, not bound by Jewish law,' that is to say, that God declared Abraham righteous not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision, meaning outside or before the "Law" (*Ibid.,* 22). De Blois deduced from Paul that it is precisely to such an Abraham, "the gentile" that God promised salvation 430 years before the Law of Moses. In a sense, the latter would be an attractive exegesis to the qurʾānic locution, "Abraham was neither a "Jew" nor a "Christian", but was one who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him" (Q 3:67, Asad, *TMOQ) (Ibid.,* 24).

[61] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 143, n. 3. He rejects as groundless Hubert Grimme's (*Mohammed* [Munster: Aschendorff, 1892-1895]) assumption that ḥanīf meant, even in the qurʾānic usage, "a heathen" (I:12 ff.). Such a presumption, according to Asad, is contradicted by the evidence not only of the Qurʾān itself but also by available pre-Islamic poetry of the Arabs as mentioned in *Lisan al-ʿArab* (Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr [Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1993]) where the word ḥanīf could denote "an upright man," "one who turns away from idol worship," "a worshipper of One God (*Ibid.,* III: 362 f.). Moreover, Asad adds that the latter meaning may explain the Prophet's observance of taḥannuth as its later offshoot in which, according to the ḥadīth on the authority of ʿĀʾishah, "he used to go in seclusion in the cave of Ḥirāʾ where he used to worship (Allah Alone) continuously for many nights before returning to

For this reason, he asserts that in this pre-Islamic setting in which the usages of *ḥanīf* in the Qurʾān and Traditions should be understood, the term meant, "turning away from all that is false."

As far as Asad is concerned, knowing whether this word was of Aramaic or Arabic origins was not of primary importance to him or his translation efforts. More important was understanding its oldest known Arabic usage and whether it carried the same connotation in the Qurʾān and the Traditions. Sometimes *ḥanīf*, according to Asad, was applied in the Tradition not to the worshipper but to the kind of worship and to a religious orientation. When used as a noun, it denoted a "unitarian religion."[62]

The use of *ḥanīf* as an adjective in conjunction with a mode of worship was very commonly seen. It frequently occurred in the Qurʾān and in Traditions.[63] It was the *ḥadīth* reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* that illustrates what a *ḥanīf* might have been about in pre-Islamic times which informs Asad's own translation of the twelve occurrences of the term.[64]

(or his desire to see) his family" (Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 5 f., n. 12, citing and commenting on Bukhārī, 1:3). According to Asad, the word *taḥannuth,* which is one of the two available readings in this particular *ḥadīth* (the other is *taḥannuf*) is derived from *ḥanth* means "avoidance of sin." But, since the textual context indicates "worship," he is favorable with the alternative, *taḥannuf,* which better describes the observance of the Prophet in this report. In this case, he acknowledges, the latter word is not of Arabic origin, but probably derived from the Canaanite-Aramaic *hanpa* which literally means "one who turns away," as indicated earlier.

[62] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 144, n. 3.

[63] Asad, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī,* 144, n. 3.

[64] On the authority of Ibn ʿUmar, al-Bukhārī relates about Zayd ibn ʿAmr bin Nufail's (d. 605 CE) -- Ibn Hishām (d. 833 CE) identifies Zayd ibn ʿAmr bin Nufail as a cousin of ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the third Caliph of Islam, and the father of the well-known Companion, Saʿīd Ibn Zayd. Zayd was known to be one of those God-seekers from among the Quraysh who, shortly before the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad, grew disgusted with the idolatry prevalent among their people and then turned to the worship of the One God (Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad,* 98 ff.). On his way to Syria in search of the true religion, he meets and inquires from a learned Jew

2.3.2 Asad and Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim

Along with al-Bukhārī, Asad also placed Muslim in the semantic

foreground of his qurʾānic interpretation. The latter's Ṣaḥīḥ also became a

reference in which qurʾānic locutions could find their backstory. As a matter of

fact, in Asad's commentary on *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Muslim was almost

always put in tandem or in a hyphenated relationship with al-Bukhārī. On the one

hand, this reveals Asad's high regard for both of their works as authoritative

interpretive sources for the Qurʾān. It was a regard that many Sunnī Muslims

share. On the other hand, a hyphenated relationship indicated a much deeper

historical and methodological relationship.[65]

2.3.2.1   Life and Works

Abū al-Husayn Muslim b. al-Hajjāj al-Qushayrī was born in Naysābūr. Like

al-Bukhārī he was also a traveler at a young age in search of *ḥadīth*, on so-called

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and a Christian whose presentations about their respective religions prove unsatisfactory to him.
They each then intimate to the unyielding Zayd that perhaps he is seeking for a *ḥanīf* kind of
religion that is said to be of Abrahamic origin. So he went away and went back to the Kaʿbah
declaring to his people that he has embraced the religion of Abraham (Bukhārī, 5:3827).

[65] According to Juynboll, Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* forms together with *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as the
most reliable collection of Prophetic traditions of all times (G.H.A Juynboll, "Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj," in
EI New Ed., 7: 691 f.). This resulted for these two books, to which in the course of time four more
were added making up *al-kutub al-sitta* (the Six Books), in a prestige commensurate with
canonization (*Ibid.*). There has been some controversy on whether Muslim's work should be
given preference even to that of al-Bukhārī. In Morocco, for example, Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* seems to be
preferred over al-Bukhārī's. The alleged reason for this may have been the censure from the
influential Ibn Ḥazm on Bukhārī's additional *taʿlīqāt* (i.e. substantiating traditions with interrupted
(*munqaṭiʿ*) *isnād* strands) to his traditions, a practice Muslim very rarely resorted to (*Ibid.*).
Juynboll says that "in the long run it was al-Bukhārī's work which took pride of place and became
Islām's holiest book of religious learning after the Qurʾān, albeit immediately followed by Muslim's
collection" (*Ibid.*).

fī ṭalab al-ʿilm journeys.[66] He was educated in *hadith* under Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh at home and under masters of *ḥadīth* who studied under Mālik bin Anas[67] in the Ḥijāz when Muslim went there for the *ḥajj* in 835 CE. In Baghdad, he also studied under Ibn Ḥanbal, and in Rayy where he met the two famous scholars Abū Zurʿa al-Rāzī (d. 878 CE) and his relative Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 890 CE).[68]

Muslim's most famous work is possibly the second most prestigious traditional collection of *ḥadīth* in Islam. It was his *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*.[69] It was a work of his later years and followed many other works which apparently served as preparation for his *Ṣaḥīḥ*.[70] His methodology was characterized by laxity insofar as ascertaining whether a link in an *isnād* marked "from/on the authority of (ʿan)" actually represented personal contact.[71]

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[66] Literally, "for the purpose of seeking knowledge," *fī ṭalab al-ʿilm* characterized those journeys of transmitters (*ḥamala*) in search for a *ḥadīth* or *sunnah* of the Prophet in the beginning of the development of the science of *ḥadīth* collection. These journeys were usually undertaken, especially, when "theologians of a particular province wished to fill the gaps in the tradition of their home, they had no recourse but travel ... even if the journey should lead as far as China" (Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 164 f.).

[67] Among whom are the most influential: Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā al-Tamīmī or al-Naysābūrī (d. 839 CE), ʿAbd Allāh b. Maslama al-Qaʿnabī (d. 835), the famous transmitter of Mālik legal collection, *Muwaṭṭa'* (the earliest written collection of *ḥadīth*), and Qutaybah b. Saʿīd (d. 849) (G.H.A. Juynboll, "Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj," in *EI New Ed.*, 7: 691 f.).

[68] In addition, it is reported that Muslim also heard from nearly 220 teachers in Mecca, Madina, Iraq and Egypt (Abul Hussain Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* [*English-Arabic*], trans., Nasiruddin al-Khattab [Riyadh, KSA: Darussalam Pub & Dist., 2007], 1:28.

[69] This was originally titled *al-Musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ* (Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 81). Besides, he was also known to have collected *muṣannaf* and a *musnad* from which he selected his *Ṣaḥīḥ*; he also produced biographical dictionaries and other smaller works (*Ibid.* 82).

[70] Muslim, 1:30.

[71] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 82.

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For him, when "ʿan" was used, it did not require affirmative proof that the two transmitters actually met. Rather, the most important criterion was that they were contemporaries, and that there was no evidence (dalāla bayyina) that they did not meet.[72] Affirming one meeting between two transmitters, Muslim asserts, did not assure or guarantee direct transmission of hadith. He divided hadiths and their concomitant transmitters into three groups.

The first group consisted of the well-established hadiths whose transmitters did not fall into the confusion into which many narrators stumbled. Second, there were those who were not masterful as transmitters like the first group. Instead, they were nonetheless characterized by pious behavior, honesty and the pursuit of knowledge. The third group consisted of the forgers of hadiths whose materials differed so significantly from that of superior scholars that the two versions could never be reconciled.[73]

Muslim's Ṣaḥīḥ contained fifty-four chapters and had many narrations. It numbered about 12,000, with 4,000 repetitions. It is simply a ḥadīth book, unlike al-Bukhārī's legally focused work. Besides providing support for both sides of a particular issue, it also condemned both the answering of questions for which one had no textual recourse as well as narrations from untrustworthy people.

Unlike al-Bukhārī, Muslim excluded hadiths and narrations from Companions without full isnāds as commentary.[74] Nonetheless, Muslim and al-

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[72] Muslim, 1:79 ff.

[73] Muslim, 1:40 ff.

[74] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 83.

Bukhārī drew on essentially the same pool of transmitters, sharing approximately 2,400 narrators.[75] Although later sources reported that Muslim explicitly shared al-Bukhārī's position on the created recitation (*lafẓ*) of the Qurʾān, there is scanty evidence for this. The suggestion for this emerged from a saying from the father of al-Ḥassān b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī (d. 955 CE). He said he preferred to imitate Muslim's book over that of al-Bukhārī because he was not tainted by the *lafẓ* issue.[76]

Like al-Bukhārī, Muslim similarly fell out with Naysābūrī's senior ḥadīth scholar, Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī. Reportedly, the disagreement emerged over the former's conflict with the latter's son, Haykān (d. 881 CE). As a result, the elder al-Dhuhlī revoked his authorization for Muslim to use his hadiths and Muslim reciprocated by saying "I will never narrate from you."[77] This quarrel intensified when Muslim's teacher, al-Bukhārī, was prosecuted by al-Dhuhlī over the *lafẓ* scandal some twenty years later. This prompted Muslim to leave al-Dhuhlī's circle permanently. He, nonetheless, stayed and settled in Naysābūr and was a prominent *ḥadīth* scholar in the city until his death.[78]

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[75] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 83.

[76] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 84.

[77] Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim,* 84.

[78] G.H.A Juynboll, "Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj," in *EI New Ed.*, 7: 691 f.

2.3.2.2   An Interpretive Context

It is interesting to see how Asad refers to Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* to broaden his understanding of the concept of *nāfaqa* ("hypocrisy") or *munāfiq* ("hypocrite").[79] For Asad, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* provides the seminal meaning of the concept which he applies in writing *The Message of the Qurʾān*. This concept appears thirty-seven times in the Qurʾān but is used as different parts of speech. Nonetheless, in all these citations in the Qurʾān, they carry similar meanings.

For example, in Q 3:167, Asad renders the verbal form *nāfaqū* as "those who are tainted with hypocrisy";[80] and in Q 9:97, he translates the verb noun *nifāqan* simply as "hypocrisy";[81] and again in Q Fatḥ 48:6, the active participle *al-munāfiqīna* or *al-munāfiqāt* becomes "hypocrites, both men and women."[82] Asad seems to indicate that his exegesis of *munāfiqīna* in Q ʿAnkabūt 29:11-- perhaps the first occurrence of the concept in the chronology of qurʾānic revelation – appropriately captures his conceptualization of the subject. This verse says,

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[79] The triliteral root *n-f-q* occurs 111 times in the Qurʾān, 37 of which are commonly understood with the concept of "hypocrisy," while the rest carry the sense of "spending" or "expenditures."

[80] Some commentators interpret this verse as referring to the withdrawal of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy (d. 631) with approximately three hundred others before the battle began. When called upon to stay and fight with the Prophet, he said, "we do not believe there will be fighting. If we knew that there would be fighting, we would be with you" (Qurṭubī, 4:258 f., on Q 3:167). This can mean either that they did not believe there would be fighting, only a kind of a tense standoff, or that if fighting ensued, it would not be a battle, but an all-out massacre (Rāzī, 9:68 f., on Q 3:167), in either case, their attitude would have been hypocritical, not sincere.

[81] In al-Rāzī, this is in reference to the *Bedouin*, which translates *aʿrāb*, who were nomadic Arabs as opposed to sedentary residents of the towns, and here in this verse it refers specifically to the hypocrites among the former (Rāzī, 16:131 f., on Q 9:97)

[82] Commentators identify these people as those who thought that God would not help the Prophet and his followers (Ṭabarī, 26:86, on Q 48:6; Zamakhsharī, 4:325 f., on Q 48:6), or those who thought that the Prophet and those who left with him on pilgrimage would not return to Madina (Qurṭubī, 16:226, on Q 48:6)

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"[Yea -] and most certainly will God mark out those who have [truly] attained to faith, and most certainly will He mark out the hypocrites (*al-munāfiqīna*)."[83]

According to Asad, it is useful to be cognizant of the etymology of the noun *nafaq* which denotes an "underground passage,[84] that has an outlet different from the entry. The word specifically signifies the complicated burrow of a field-mouse, a lizard, etc., from which the animal can easily escape or outwit a pursuer."[85] As such, it makes sense to imagine a *munāfiqun* as someone who was "two-faced," inasmuch as he or she always tries to find an easy way out of any real commitment, be it spiritual or social. One did this by adapting one's course of action "to what promises to be of practical advantage to him in the situation in which he happens to find himself."[86] In its Western sense, "hypocrisy"

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[83] Many commentators contextualize the qurʾānic concept *munāfiqun* to an incident concerning ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy. He was known to be the leader of the hypocrites in Madinah, who never forgave the Prophet for having overshadowed him who previously had been unquestioningly recognized by the people of Madinah as their most outstanding leader. Since the Prophet's political strength depended mainly on the Meccan Muslims who followed him in his *Hijrah* to Madinah, Ibn Ubayy, while on expedition with the Prophet, tried to persuade his compatriots -- many of whom were supporting the newcomers with all the means at their disposal -- by saying, "Do not spend anything on those who are with God's Apostle, so that they [may be forced to] leave" (Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 63:7) for most of whom were very poor to leave Madinah. "[And] they say, 'Indeed, when we return to the City [we,] the ones most worthy of honour will surely drive out therefrom those most contemptible ones!'" (*Ibid.,* Q 63:8). It was, therefore, a stratagem which, if, successful would have greatly weakened the Prophet's position. The *anṣār,* of course, rejected this suggestion (Asad, *TMOQ,* 867, n. 9 on Q 63:7; Qurṭubī, 18:109 f., on Q 63:1; Ṭabarī, 28:120, on Q 63:1; Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl,* trans., M. Guezzou [Louisville, Ky: Fons Vitae, 2008]), III:231, on Q 63:1).

[84] JM Cowan, ed., *Arabic-English Dictionary, The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic,* (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, c1994), 1158; also "tunnel," "subway shaft."

[85] Asad, *TMOQ,* 607, n. 7 on Q 29:11.

[86] Asad, *TMOQ,* 607, n. 7 on Q 29:11. Some commentators describe a *munāfiqun* as "like shapes without spirits, or bodies without minds" or like wood that has been eaten from the inside, so that the exterior seems strong but the interior is hollow (Qurṭubī, 18:112, on Q 63:4). They are afraid every time they hear a battle *cry,* because they fear that their true nature, and in some cases their alliances with enemies, may have been discovered (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, I:549, on Q 63:4).

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describes someone who pretends to be morally better through a conscious effort to deceive others. In Arabic, Asad explains, the word *munāfiq* "could also be applied -- and occasionally is applied in the Qurʾān – to a person who, is weak or uncertain in his beliefs or moral convictions who thereby deceives himself."

Hence, Asad advises that in his renditions of the thirty-seven occurrences of the triliteral root *n-f-q*, he intended to enunciate both of these meanings in a narrower way, that is to connect it with "hypocrisy."[87]

But, the decisive factor for Asad's rendition and exegesis of the divergent forms or occurrences of the qurʾānic word *munāfiq* is the *hadith*'s understanding of the concept. Especially important is the one reported by the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim. That interpretation proved to be useful for Asad as it provided the "characteristics of the hypocrite." It also provided an authoritative foundation for different expressions of the same concept. He refers to the narration in the *Ṣaḥīḥ,* on the authority of ʿAbdullāh bin ʿAmr, which relates what the Prophet said thus,

> "There are four characteristics, whoever has them all is a pure hypocrite, and whoever has one of its characteristics, he has one of the characteristics of hypocrisy, until he gives it up: When he speaks he lies, when he makes a covenant he betrays it, when he makes a promise he breaks it, and when he disputes he resorts to obscene speech." [88]

This prophetic instruction and its duplications provided Asad with the seminal meaning for the qurʾānic expressions *nāfaqa* ("hypocrisy") or *munāfiq* ("hypocrite"), and their related cognates. It was this *ḥadīth* that helped Asad to articulate his understanding of "hypocrisy" as "a two-face" person who breaks

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[87] Asad, *TMOQ,* 607, n. 7 on Q 29:11.

[88] Muslim, 1:106; cf. I:107 and 108, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, both relate "three signs of the hypocrite..."

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and runs away from commitments and escapes when an opportunity presents itself.

Moreover, the same kind of people, he says, were likely to "offend against their own reason and conscience."[89] These were the kind of people who, "being shaky in their beliefs and uncertain in their moral convictions, are inclined to deceive themselves."[90] With very high regard, Asad looks to the authority of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a transmitter of this particular prophetic Tradition. He takes the concept even though it took him time to adapt it and give it a Western equivalence – namely, "hypocrite," or "hypocrisy." For this reason, Asad frequently appended a commentary to remind his readers that there was more than one meaning for this term translated into English.

2.4   The Qurʾān Commentators

Although Asad highly regarded the work of the commentators of the Qurʾān (*mufassirūn*) in the Classical period, he questioned the importance of their contribution to later translations and interpretations of the Arabic Qurʾān into non-Arabic languages. He disagreed with the notion that their interpretations should be received with "finality."[91] He made these comments conscious of the fact that Muslim scholars or ʿ*ulamāʾ* would likely disagree. They espoused the opinions of one *mufassir* or commentator over another with uncritical reception

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[89] Asad, *TMOQ,* 653, n. 89 on Q 33:73.

[90] Asad, *TMOQ,* 838, n. 13 on Q 57:13.

[91] Asad, *TMOQ,* viii.

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(*taqlīd*). It was as though such and such *mufassir* had the final and authoritative claim of the meaning of any particular qurʾānic verse at issue.

In fact, there were as many commentators as there were opinions for those seeking enlightenment about the Qurʾān. All of this cast serious doubts on the perceived finality and reliability of the opinions from the *mufassirūn*.[92] This is not to say that Asad discouraged consultation with the Islamic intellectual heritage. In fact, he highly regarded the earnest efforts of these commentators, saying that "without their work no modern translation of the Qurʾān could ever be undertaken with any hope of success."[93]

His primary concern, rather, was that those who utilized them should be conscious of two important considerations. First, it should be remembered that these commentators were constrained by their choice of methodologies used in certain intellectual enterprise. There were several methods and approaches at their disposal during the era in which they lived and worked. Consequently, there were as many possible results as there were commentators. And there was a propensity towards inventiveness which sometimes led to distortions and total incomprehensibility.[94]

Secondly, these commentators were people of their own time who were subject to the social and political expediencies of their day. Their opinions and

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[92] Asad, *TMOQ,* viii.

[93] Asad, *TMOQ,* viii.

[94] Asad*,* "Islamic Constitution-Making," 1010.

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reflections, therefore, could not be thought of as immune to the influence of their respective environments.[95]

It was imperative, Asad asserts, to be cautious in considering their relevance and applicability to later ages or other environments. Their views could clash with the prevailing currents of later social and intellectual systems. Asad admits that he often drew from these great classical and modern commentators.[96] One could only assume that in *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Asad was guided by his own prescriptions about the best way to read and apply the work of these Muslim commentators.

It is for this reason that I deem it important to identify some of these Classical and modern authors along with their works. Especially important are those who contributed significantly in the shaping of Asad's mind as a translator and interpreter. In the process, we can come to understand Asad's interpretive intent in referencing them. We also can see what considerations he had in mind as he chose the scholars and views he wished to include.

As alluded to earlier, Asad utilizes these sources in a consultative fashion. He wanted these sources to confirm or endorse certain opinions that he himself advanced. Occasionally, these citations provided contrasts or alternative interpretations for his own reading and renditions. Citations were also deemed useful in other places where Asad wanted to augment his own explanation with some glosses or nuances.

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[95] Asad, "Islamic Constitution-Making," 1010.

[96] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

2.4.1 The Classical Sources

2.4.1.1 Asad and Al-Zamakhsharī

2.4.1.1.1 Formative Years

One of the outstanding and popular Ḥanafī Muʿtazilite scholars from the late Medieval Islamic era was Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (1075-1144 CE). He was born in the Khurāsān city of Zamakhshār, hence his *nisba* was al-Zamakhsharī. It is very likely that his studies in the city of Jurjāniyya in Khurāsān introduced him to Muʿtazilism which was popular in the region from the second half of the eighth up until the fourteenth century. During the same era, this school of thought declined significantly in the other parts of the Muslim world.[97]

While he was a native of Greater Persia, al-Zamakhsharī's command of Arabic was considered excellent and unparalleled. His scholarship significantly contributed to Arabic linguistics, theology, philosophy and qurʾānic exegesis. But, it was his work in the qurʾānic exegesis in Arabic, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq al-tanzīl wa ʿuyūn al-ghawāmiḍ fī wujūh al-taʾwīl*, for which he is considered one of the leading intellectuals in qurʾānic commentary. It was this work that made him famous as an Islamic scholar.[98]

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[97] Wilfred Madelung, "The Theology of al-Zamakhsharī," *Actas del XII Congreso de la U.E.A.I.* (Malaga, 1984) (Madrid: Union Europeenne d'Arabisants et d'Islamisants, 1986), 485.

[98] W. Madelung, "al-Zamakhsharī," in *EI New Ed.*, 12:840 f.

Besides giving explanations for the Qurʾān's grammatical, lexicographical and rhetorical features as well as variant readings, *al-Kashshāf* was also known for its quintessential Muʿtazilite doctrine. In the words of Andrew Rippin,

> "the distinctiveness of al-Zamakhsharī's Qurʾān commentary lies in his Muʿtazilī theological leanings ... The Muʿtazilī doctrines of the unity and justice of God and the consequent ideas of the human free will and the need to de-anthropomorphize the Qurʾān become the prime themes of the distinctive passages of interpretation."[99]

Moreover, al-Zamakhsharī frequently infused his personal views into his commentaries. That sometimes provoked criticism from the traditionalist Sunnīs. Nonetheless, even while he was criticized, *al-Kashshāf* continued to be "cited, adopted, and commented upon by the orthodox community and there was an almost endless number of glosses, superglosses, and supercommentaries on it."[100] He also mentioned the views from members of the two Muʿtazilite schools of Baṣra and Baghdad,[101] but somehow avoided associating himself with either

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[99] Andrew Rippin, "al-Zamakhsharī," *Encyclopedia of Religion,* ed. M. Eliade (New York and London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), XVI:554.

[100] Kifayat Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf, Al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite Exegesis of the Qurʾān* (Germany: De Gruyter, 2017), 2. According to Madelung, the work of al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-taʾwīl* is the most famous attempt to distill the essence of al-Zamakhsharī's work while attempting to omit those views considered reprehensible to Sunnī Orthodoxy. Ibn al-Munayyir's work, *Kitāb al-Intiṣāf min al-Kashshāf* also refuted al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite interpretations. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Ibn Khaldūn, in his *Muqaddima,* and al-Suyūṭī, all criticized al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite views (Madelung, The Theology of al-Zamakhsharī, 485). Modern scholarships such that of Lupti Ibrāhīm's *The Theological Question at Issue between az-Zamakhsharī and al-Baydawī with special reference to al-Kashshāf and Anwār al-tanzīl* [Ph. D. Thesis] are divided on the extent to which his *tafsīr* expressed Muʿtazilite doctrine and approach. Ibrāhīm's comparative analysis between the works of al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī concludes that the former, as a Muʿtazilite, gives priority to reason over revelation, whereas, al-Bayḍāwī, as an Ashʿarite, maintains that revelation has priority over reason (cited in Ullah's *Al-Kashshāf,* 2-3.)

[101] Other than the geographical, chronological or political considerations, scholars have not made a clear distinction between these two schools doctrinally or ideologically. Rather, it is only often recorded that the Muʿtazilah originated in Baṣra, and in the following century it became, for a period of thirty years, the official doctrine of the caliphate in Baghdad during the reign of the rationalist al-Maʾmūn. This patronage Muʿtazilism, however, was revoked or reversed in 848 CE when al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) came to power who favored the traditionalist view that the "uncreatedness" of the Qurʾān was one of God's attributes (Mālik Muḥammad Tariq, "The

school. Evident in his Muʿtazilite creed, *al-Minhāj fī uṣūl al-dīn*, is his familiarity with the Muʿtazilite theology of ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) and the doctrine of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 1085).[102] The Baṣran Muʿtazilah was founded by Wāṣil b. ʿAtāʾ (d. 748 CE), a disciple of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728 CE), while the latter was established later by Bishr b. al-Muʿtamar (d. 825 CE).

Muʿtazilism is believed to be a development of the debate on human free-will at the time of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣriʾ. It essentially rejected the doctrine of predestination and affirmed an individual's absolute responsibility for transgressions. This doctrine of "absolute responsibility" was underpinned by the belief that a person possesses intelligence which enables him or her to acquire and access needed knowledge even in the absence of any revelation. It is, therefore, legitimate to consider Muʿtazilis as "rationalists" by virtue of their belief that God can be known through reasoning.[103]

Ideological Background of Rationality in Islām," in *Al-Hikmat* 28 [2008]: 35 [31-56]; C.E. Bosworth et al, eds. *The History of al-Ṭabarī* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991], XXXIII:xvi).

[102] W. Madelung, "al-Zamakhsharī," in *EI New Ed.*, 12:840 f.)*.*

[103] D. Gimaret, "Muʿtazila," in *EI New Ed.*, 7:783 ff. Muʿtazilism espouses the idea that "reasoning to know God" is the first of the obligations laid upon humans. It is only in this fashion that here below humans can know God, and know God's existence, that is, in the capacity of a creator. Through this creation, God is known by reason as powerful, wise, living, endowed with hearing and sight, unembodied, self-sufficient, just and cannot do or will anything other than what is good. It is by this principle of reason that Prophet Muhammad can be an authentic Messenger of God and the qurʾānic revelation can be taken into account. This revelation can, in fact, only confirm that which reason has established; there can be no contradictions between one and the other. If contradictions ever exist, they are resolved by an appropriate interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the revealed text. An element of rationalism which is thought to be exclusive to Muʿtazilah is in the sphere of ethics. Endowed with the faculty of reason, humans are also capable of knowing, in a spontaneous manner and, albeit in insufficient way, what is morally good or evil. In this context also, the revelation can only confirm that which our reason tells us (*Ibid.*).

2.4.1.1.2   His Works

Al-Zamakhsharī also believed that Arabic is the language that has been selected by God for revelation. Thus, qurʾānic grammar is the source for all the sciences. Issues related to the sciences ultimately depend on the comprehension of the Arabic language and its grammar.[104]

From this conviction, he produced an important grammatical work, *Kitāb al-Mufaṣṣal fī'l-naḥw* which is a compendium on Arabic grammar. *Al-Mufaṣṣal* demonstrated what an excellent linguist al-Zamakhsharī was. The latter examined the qurʾānic text in the light of context and evaluated various possible readings, or attempted a diachronic explanation.[105] "He is an innovative and critical analyst of textual material and does not hesitate to break with the accepted grammatical wisdom of his time."[106]

Al-Zamakhsharī also provided many extra-linguistic bits of information which are potentially illuminating. In lexicography, al-Zamakhsharī wrote a thesaurus of the Arabic language, *Asās al-Balāgha*. It is known for its methodical arrangement. It also gives special consideration to the metaphorical meanings of the words.[107] And, in the field of *ḥadīth,* he also composed a large, alphabetically-

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[104] C.H.M. Versteegh, "al-Zamakhsharī," in *EI New Ed.*, 11:432 ff.

[105] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 3.

[106] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 3

[107] Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī writes that, "al-Zamakhsharī's book *Asās al-balāgha* is one of the finest books (*aḥāsini'l-kutub*) in which he expressed and distinguished between the real and metaphorical meanings of the words used singularly or compositely in an unprecedented manner" (Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Lisān al-Mizān,* [Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī: Muʾassasat al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabī, 2010], VI:653).

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arranged dictionary of unusual words entitled *al-Fāʾiq fī Gharīb al-ḥadīth* in which *ḥadīths* are fully quoted and explained.

2.4.1.1.3　　Methods and Principles of Exegesis

There has been a remarkable continuity of form and method in the production of *tafsīr* works since the beginnings of the exegetical enterprise. Such continuity, however, has not meant uniformity of opinions. Rather, varied hermeneutical approaches and interpretations have always been acceptable where there was a shared reverence for the divine text.[108]

Al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* exegesis followed the text of the Qurʾān from the beginning to the end – as in most cases in the *tafsīr* genre. It followed exegetical techniques that differed from the standard format of traditional exegesis.[109] Besides employing the traditional techniques in Qurʾān commentary -- which included *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān* ("interpretation of the Qurʾān by means of the Qurʾān"), use of *ḥādīths*, and the variant readings of the Qurʾān (*qirāʾāt*)[110] -- there were also other discernible characteristics of al-Zamakhsharī's *tafsīr*.[111]

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[108] Feras Hamza, et al, eds. *An Anthology of Qurʾānic Commentaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 1:1.

[109] Andrew Rippin, "Tafsīr," in *EI New Ed.*, 10:83 ff.

[110] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 125 ff.

[111] In his *Al-Kashshāf, Al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite Exegesis of the Qurʾān*, Kifayat Ullah enumerates and discusses seven techniques and principles of *tafsīr* which he ascribes to al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf*: 1) *Muḥkamāt wa mutashābihāt*, 2) *ʿIlm al-maʿānī and ʿilm al-bayān*, 3) Questions and Answers (*asʾila wa-ajwiba)*, 4) Grammar, 5) *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-al-Qurʾān,* 6) *Ḥadīth*, 7) Variant Readings of the Qurʾān (*qirāʾāt*). For my purposes, I will only discuss and develop four of them briefly below: *Muḥkamāt wa mutashābihāt, ʿIlm al-maʿānī and ʿilm al-bayān,*

First, there was his emphasis on the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses.

Thus, the point of departure for his exegesis is the principle based on verse Q

3:7, which says,

> "He it is who has bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, containing messages that are clear in and by themselves (*āyātun muḥkamātun*) -- and these are the essence of the divine writ (*umm al-kitāb*) -- as well as others that are allegorical (*mutashābihātun*). Now those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth (*fī qulūbihim zayghun*) go after that part of the divine writ which has been expressed in allegory, seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion, and seeking [to arrive at] its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner]; but none save God knows its final meaning. Hence, those who are deeply rooted in knowledge say: "We believe in it; the whole [of the divine writ] is from our Sustainer (*āmannā bihi kullun min ʿindi rabbinā*) - albeit none takes this to heart save those who are endowed with insight."

Al-Zamakhsharī approached the word *muḥkamāt* in a lexical way and

interpreted it in verses that are *ḥufiẓat min al-iḥtimāl wa-al-ishtibāh* or verses

which are "preserved from speculation and doubt."[112] For him, the issue of

muḥkamāt and *mutashābihāt* was not only important but represented the very

foundational key to qurʾānic interpretation.[113] As a matter of fact, without a proper

comprehension of the *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* verses, no exegesis is

possible.[114]

Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-al-Qurʾān, Ḥadīth. These, I discern, are the ones which are specifically relevant to Asad's hermeneutics of the Qurʾān.

[112] Maḥmūd bin ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl* (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2009), 1:332, on Q 3:7; Ibn Manẓūr explains the word *aḥkama shayʾan* (a verbal form of *muḥkam*) as *amnaʿahu min al-fasād* (to protect it from imperfection) (*Lisān al-ʿArab*, III:272). Ṭabarī identifies the *āyāt muḥkamāt* with what the philologists and jurists describe as *naṣṣ,* namely, ordinances or statements which are self-evident by virtue of their wording (Ṭabarī, 3:200, on Q 3:7).

[113] Zamakhsharī, 1:332, on Q 3:7.

[114] Zamakhsharī, 1:333, on Q 3:7.

Al-Zamakhsharī explained that *muḥkamāt* verses are *uḥkimat ʿibārat* or expressions that are clear because they have been preserved (*ḥufiẓat*) and are free from speculation (*iḥtimāl*) and doubt (*ishtibāh*).[115] In other words, these expressions have a particular meaning. This view contends that no differences of interpretation can legitimately arise. This interpretation is further clarified by his intensified reading of a similar locution found in Q 11:1,

> "Alif. Lam. Ra. A Divine Writ [is this], with messages that have been made clear in and by themselves (*uḥkimat āyātuhu*), and have been distinctly spelled out as well -- [bestowed upon you] out of the grace of One who is wise, all-aware."

He read *uḥkimat āyātuhu* in this context as *nuẓimat naẓman raṣīnan muḥkaman lā yaqaʿu fīhi naqḍ wa-lā khalal* or verses that were "firmly arranged" or whose meaning were "clearly established." It is neither "refutable" nor "defective."[116] In other words, "the clarity of *muḥkam* verses can be found in their own wordings.... They do not require any explanation from extraneous sources, such as other verses of the Qurʾān or from prophetic traditions or linguistic investigation in order to understand them."[117] Moreover, al-Zamakhsharī interpreted *umm al-kitāb* or the "essence of the divine writ" in Q 3:7 as a reference or basis for interpreting *mutashābih* verses (*tuḥmal al-mutashābihāt ʿalayhā wa-turadda ilayhā*).[118]

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[115] Zamakhsharī, 1:332, on Q 3:7.

[116] Zamakhsharī, 2:363, on Q 11:1.

[117] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 65.

[118] Zamakhsharī, 1:332, on Q 3:7.

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But, the Qurʾān, according to him, is not all *muhkam.* There are also the *mutashābihat* verses. Contrasting his more comprehensive definition of the *muḥkamāt* verses, al-Zamakhsharī understood that the *mutashābihat* verses were basically combinations of *mutashābihat* and *muḥtamilāt.* He felt that they should have a sort of semantic fluidity.[119] One of the reasons for the existence of *mutashābihat*, according to al-Zamakhsharī, was the belief that it should not be too easy or convenient for people to investigate the Qurʾān. If it was too accessible, people would be reluctant to explore it and use reason to understand it. For this reason, scholars needed to investigate and consider the meaning of texts, using their reasoning and great talent. Thus, they could derive the explanation of a *mutashābih* verse by referring it to a *muḥkam* verse.[120]

The second characteristic of al-Zamakhsharī's qurʾānic exegesis is his emphasis on the knowledge of *ʿilm al-maʿānī* and *ʿilm al-bayān*. He said that it is essential for understanding the finer meanings of the Qurʾān.[121] In his own words he said that,

> "no one can understand the real meanings except a person who is proficient in two sciences related to the Qurʾān, and they are the science of expression and the science of semantics and syntax" (*lā yaghūṣu ʿalā shayʾ min tilka al-ḥaqāʾiq illā rajulun qad barʿa fī ʿilmayn mukhtaṣṣayn bi-al-Qurʾān wa-humā ʿilm al-maʿānī wa-ʿilm al-bayān*).[122]

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[119] Zamakhsharī, 1:332, on Q 3:7. Some commentators define *mutashābih* as "unknown" or "undetermined" in the sense that one cannot tell whether a thing is there or not; that is to say, a thing's being can "resemble" that thing's not being so (Rāzī, 7:151 ff., on Q 3:7). According to Ibn Manzūr *mutashābihāt* is synonymous with *mushkilāt*, that is, difficult or obscure words (Lisān al-ʿArab, VII:23).

[120] Zamakhsharī, 1:333, on Q 3:7

[121] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 68.

[122] Zamakhsharī, 1:96. Translation by Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 69.

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So, for Zamakhsharī, "*ʿilm al-bayān* (science of semantics) and *ʿilm al-maʿānī* (science of expression) represented two sciences though he failed to draw a clear dividing line between them.[123] He identified the former with the study of *naẓm* or the styles of phrasing. He identified the latter with the study of *maʿānī* which explores the meanings of discourse and ideas in the abstract.

This has resulted in certain overlapping areas between the two sciences. Sometimes what is said to be a *maʿānī* issue might equally be considered as *bayān* issue.[124] Nonetheless, these sciences are indispensable in comprehending the finer points and deeper meanings of the Qurʾān.

The third exegetical technique and principle that al-Zamakhsharī applied in his work of exegesis is *tafsīr al-Qurʾān biʾl-Qurʾān,* meaning "to interpret the Qurʾān by means of the Qurʾān." He believed that in the Qurʾān, some verses could interpret or explain other verses and vice-versa (*al-qurʾān tufassiru baʿḍahu baʿḍan*).[125] With this principle, he saw the contents or the verses of the Qurʾān as potentially complementary in their meanings or interpretations. In the *Kashshāf,* al-Zamakhsharī abided by this principle and followed this exegetical method when he intended to clarify and elucidate one verse of the Qurʾān by quoting one or several others from the Qurʾān. The main objective of *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-al-Qurʾān* is to explain, illustrate and reinforce his viewpoint as found in other verses.

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[123] Badri Najib Zubir, *Balāgha as an Instrument of Qurʾān Interpretation: A Study of al-Kashshāf* (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2008), 24.

[124] Zubir, *Balāgha as an Instrument of Qurʾān Interpretation*, 24.

[125] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 82.

Finally, citing *ḥadīth* in his Qurʾān commentary was another exegetical technique that al-Zamakhsharī used. He applied these traditions in his reasoning as long as they were agreeable with his point of view. Moreover, these traditions were also admitted into his discussion if they supported his arguments and were consistent with the principles of Muʿtazilism."[126] Despite the fact that he was well-versed with *ḥadīth* literature, in most cases these traditions were cited with little regard to either their *isnāds* (chain of authorities) or fidelity to the actual transmitted text (*matn*).[127]

2.4.1.1.4 Al-Zamakhsharī in *The Message of the Qurʾān*

In *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Asad refers to the three works of al-Zamakhsharī, namely, his Qurʾān commentary, the *al-Kashshāf,* his *ḥadīth* dictionary *al-Fāʾiq*, and his thesaurus of the Arabic language, *Asās al-Balāgha*. While he was unquestionably impressed by this scholar's contribution and stature in Islām's Classical period, he does not necessarily agree with al-Zamakhsharī's perspectives on every subject. What is evident, rather, is that Asad does not refer to any of Zamakhsharī's works as though they were the original sources of his knowledge on a certain subject.

Reading his copious, almost verse-by-verse commentary would give readers an impression that Asad was a learned man in his own right, and that his intellectual deliberations prove that he was a man with basic knowledge about a

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[126] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 83.

[127] Ullah, *Al-Kashshāf,* 83.

topic even before citing these works in his footnotes. Nonetheless, Asad uses these scholarly works, including al-Zamakhsharī's, only to confirm or corroborate. Asad does not consider the works of al-Zamakhsharī as a hermeneutical lens through which a term or verse is interpreted. Instead, he assigns them ancillary roles and they buttressed his arguments or helped him to decide on the best equivalence or translation of a given qurʾānic term or thought.

We can see Asad's treatment or application of al-Zamakhsharī's *tafsīr* in his rendition of Q 1:7, which said,

> "the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings (*ṣirāṭaʾl-ladhīna anʿamta ʿalayhim*), not of those who have been condemned [by Thee] (*ghayriʾl-maghḍūbi ʿalayhim*), nor of those who go astray (*wa-lā al-ḍāllīna*)."

Asad brings up al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation specifically to show contrast. Al-Zamakhsharī, Asad notes, drew the same meaning from the verse, "the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings" – but understands the next clause "*ghayriʾl-maghḍūbi ʿalayhim wa-lā aḍ-ḍāllīna* (not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray) as a modifier (*ṣifa*) which described the blessed ones (*al-munʿam ʿalayhim*).[128] So, if we may reconstruct the syntax according to al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation of the verse, it can be expressed this way,

> "the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings, those who have not been condemned [by Thee], and do not go astray."[129]

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[128] Asad, *TMOQ,* 2, n. 4 on Q 1:7; Zamakhsharī, 1:25 f., on Q 1:7.

[129] Zamakhsharī, 1:25 f., on Q 1:7.

The difference, therefore, was that in his rendition, Asad appears to identify three categories of people: those who are blessed (*alladhīna anʿamta*), those who are condemned (*al-maghḍūb*) and those who go astray (*al-ḍāllīn*).[130] Al-Zamakhsharī, for his part, read the whole verse as referring to just one category of people, namely, "those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings." The rest of the verse simply qualifies what kind of "blessed ones" they were – that is, those who were not condemned and had not gone astray.[131] This case illustrates how Asad appropriates al-Zamakhsharī's grammatical or linguistic approach in his commentary. He cites the latter's interpretation not as a source of new knowledge nor to argue against it. It is simply used to provide a contrast or foil to his own interpretation.

In another example, Asad seems to disapprove of al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation of the expression *mā bayna aydīhim wa mā khalfahum* ("all that lies open before men and all that is hidden from them") in Q 2:255.[132] From Asad's perspective, al-Zamakhsharī simply adapted conflicting or simplistic views of his

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[130] Asad, *TMOQ,* 2, n. 4 on Q 1:7. Asad's reading and interpretation of this verse is echoed by other commentators, such as Baghawī (1:15, on Q 1:7) and Ibn Kathīr (1:89 ff., on Q 1:7). As to the latter two categories: *al-maghḍūb* and *al-ḍāllīn*, Muḥammad ʿAbduh interprets the former as referring to those who have become fully cognizant of God's message and, having understood it, have rejected it; while the second category as referring to whom the truth has either not reached at all, or to whom it has come in so garbled and corrupted a form as to make it difficult for them to recognize it as the truth (Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 1:54, on Q 1:7).

[131] Zamakhsharī, 1:25 f., on Q 1:7. According to some accounts, this verse is in fact two verses, the first of which ends with *anʿamta* or "has blessed" (Ṭabarī, 1:90, on Q 1:7). The first part offers clarification regarding those who will be guided upon "the straight path." Those who are blessed by God are also said to be those whom God has purified, so that they are able to attain unto Him (Abū l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if Al-ishārāt (Subtle Allusions)*, Great Commentaries of the Holy Qurʾān (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2017), VI:19 f., on Q 1:7).

[132] Asad, *TMOQ,* 57, n. 247 on Q 2:255. A related treatment of its cognate expression *li-mā bayna yadayhi* is discussed in Chapter Five, 5.2.3 "Confirmer of the Truth," in the context of qurʾānic Christology.

predecessors. Asad notes that even commentators who preceded al-Zamakhsharī were divided about how to interpret this expression.[133] Al-Zamakhsharī understood the phrase to mean *mā kāna qabluhum wa-mā yakūn baʿaduhum* or "that which took place before them and that which will take place after them."[134]

Asad believed that al-Zamakhshari's reading of this expression, eliminated or ignored "the obvious meaning of the idiomatic expression *mā bayna yadayhi* ("that which lies open between one's hands")," namely, "that which is evident, known, or perceivable."[135] Similarly, *mā khalfahu*, according to him, refers to that which is beyond one's range of perception.[136]

Hence, Asad believes that he rendered the whole expression appropriately with: "all that lies open before men and all that is hidden from them." He believes that the whole tenor of the verse, in which this expression is found, relates to God's omnipotence and omniscience. This example, therefore, illustrates how Asad sometimes disagrees with the linguistic analysis of al-Zamakhsharī.

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[133] Asad, *TMOQ,* 57, n. 247 on Q 2:255. Citing al-Rāzī (7:6, on Q 2:255), Asad relates the interpretation of Mujāhid Ibn Jabr (d. 722 CE) and ʿAṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 732 CE) who assumed that *mā bayna aydīhim* means "that which has happened to them in this world," while "that which is behind them" is an allusion to "that which will happen to them in the next world"; there is also al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāḥim (d. 723 CE) and Muḥammad al-Kalbī (d. 763 CE) who assumed the exact opposite and said that "which is between their hands" refers to the next world, "because they are going towards it," while "that which is behind them" means this world, "because they are leaving it behind" (*Ibid.,* I:10, on Q 2:255).

[134] Zamakhsharī, 1:296, on Q 2:255.

[135] Asad, *TMOQ,* 57, n. 247 on Q 2:255.

[136] Asad, *TMOQ,* 57, n. 247 on Q 2:255.

On another occasion, Asad integrates al-Zamakhsharī's point of view in a more appreciative manner. This concerns the reading of a qurʾānic term *al-jamal* in verse Q 7:40, which says,

> "Verily, unto those who give the lie to Our messages and scorn them in their pride, the gates of heaven shall not be opened; and they shall not enter paradise any more than a twisted rope can pass through a needle's eye: for thus do We requite such as are lost in sin."

In this verse, the phrase "twisted rope" is Asad's English rendition of the qurʾānic term *jamāl*. The standard reading of the term is "camel."[137] In fact, most of the English translators of the Qurʾān render it that way.[138] Asad, however, argues that "there is hardly any doubt that its translation, in this context, as 'camel' is erroneous." That translation, he says, is inconsistent with how many of the Companions and successors of the Prophet read it.[139] Such a rendition, Asad maintains, could only be the result of an uncritical association between this qurʾānic diction and that of the Greek version in the Synoptic Gospels.[140] He argues that the correct reading was *jummal* meaning "twisted rope."[141]

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[137] The second part of Q 7:40 resonates that of the Synoptic Gospels' sayings of Jesus, "Yes, I tell you again, it is easier for a camel (κάμηλον) to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 19:24; cf. Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25). A similar saying is used in the Babylonian Talmud to refer to unthinkable thoughts. To explain that dreams reveal the thoughts of man's heart, the product of reason rather than the absence of it, some rabbis say, "they do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through the eye of a needle" (Maurice Simon, trans., "Berakoth," in *The Babylonian Talmud [Hebrew-English],* eds. I. Epstein [London: The Socino Press, 1990], 55b).

[138] Pickthall: "... until the camel goeth through the needle's eye...."; Yūsuf ʿAlī: "... until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle...."; Qulī Qarāʾī: "... until the camel passes through the needle's eye...." ; Droge: "... until the camel passes through the eye of the needle...."

[139] Asad, *TMOQ,* 208, n. 32 on Q 7:40.

[140] Asad, *TMOQ,* 208, n. 32 on Q 7:40.

[141] Asad, *TMOQ,* 208, n. 32 on Q 7:40. Abdel Haleem's rendition likewise reads it as "rope." Cyril of Alexandria claimed that "camel" is a Greek misspelling; that *kamêlos* (camel) was written in place of *kamilos,* meaning "rope" or "cable" (Manilo Simonetti, *Ancient Christian*

Thanks to al-Zamakhsharī who quoted Ibn ʿAbbās in *al-Kashshāf* who read the word as *jummal* signifying "a thick rope" (*ḥabl*) or "a twisted cable."[142] Ibn ʿAbbās, according to al-Zamakhsharī, could not believe that God created an inappropriate metaphor about "a camel passing through a needle's eye" because there is no relationship between a camel and a needle's eye. On the other hand, there is a definite relationship between a camel and a rope, which after all, is an extremely thick thread.[143]

Moreover, Asad notes that there are also several other dialectical spellings of this word, namely, *jumal, juml, jumul* and, finally, *jamal* (which is found in the generally-accepted version of the Qurʾān). All of them signify "a thick, twisted rope."[144] Asad does not disclose where he learned that "rope" could be an alternative translation for *jamāl.* But, he certainly benefited significantly from the *tafsīr* of al-Zamakhsharī who cited previous commentators of the Qurʾān.

Commentary on Scripture: New Testament [Matthew 14-28] [Downers Groove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002], 102). Cyril said that by "camel," Jesus means not the living thing, the beast of burden, but the thick rope to which sailors tie their anchors (*Ibid.*). He shows this comparison to be not entirely pointless (as a camel would be), but he makes it an exceedingly difficult matter; in fact, next to impossible (*Ibid.*). Also, in his *Syriac-Aramaic Peshitta English* translation, George M. Lamsa has the word "rope" for *gamlā* in Matt 19:24, so that, "Again I say to you, It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (*Holy Bible From the Ancient Eastern Text* [New York: A.J. Holman Company, 1968], 974). But, he adds a footnote saying that the Aramaic word *gamlā* means rope and camel, possibly because the ropes were made from camel hair (*Ibid.*; cf. Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25).

[142] Zamakhsharī, 2:99, on Q 7:40. Cf. Rāzī, 14:64, on Q 7:40; the same reading is attributed to ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib in *Tāj al-ʿArūs* (Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Murtaḍá al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs min jawāhir al-Qāmūs* [Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Fikr, 1994], XIV:118 ff.

[143] Zamakhsharī, 2:99, on Q 7:40.

[144] Asad, *TMOQ,* 208, n. 32 on Q 7:40. Cf. Ismāʿīl ibn Hammād al-Jawharī, *Tāj al-Lugha wa-Ṣiḥaḥ al-ʿArabiyyah* (1865). Digital version, accessed Feb 2018, II: 167-168.

Furthermore, al-Zamakhsharī supports Asad's rendition of the term

khaṣīm in verse Q 16:4. This verse says, "He creates man out of a [mere] drop of

sperm: and lo! this same being shows himself endowed with the power to think

and to argue! (*khaṣīmun mubīnun*)."[145] Al-Zamakhsharī's interpretation of this

verse obviously broadens Asad's own understanding of the verse, especially its

observation about the nature of reason and its ethical implication.[146]

Al-Zamakhsharī explains that there were two ways in which these verses

could be interpreted. One interpretation is that, after having been a (mere) drop

of sperm which is a particle of matter without consciousness (*ḥass*) or motion

(*ḥarakah*), a human being becomes highly articulate (*minṭīq* or *manṭīq*), able to

argue (*mujādil*) on his own, courageously faces disputes (*mukāfiḥ*), and clearly

formulates his argument (*ḥujjah*). All of this is an indication of God's creative

power.[147]

The other interpretation suggests that a human being is prone to become

a contender or opponent engaged in argument (*khaṣīmun*) against God and

refuses (*munkir*) to acknowledge his Creator.[148] Indeed, these two explanations

substantiate Asad's free rendering of this profoundly elliptical verse. He believes

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[145] This expression was treated earlier in Chapter 1, 1.4.3, "Asad's Rational Dynamic of *Ijtihād*" in relation to Asad's appraisal of the rationality of the Qurʾān.

[146] Asad, *TMOQ,* 394, n. 5 on Q 16:4.

[147] Zamakhsharī, 2:570, on Q 16:4.

[148] Zamakhsharī, 2:570, on Q 16:4. Cf. Mawdūdī, IV:313, n. 7 on Q 16:4. Rāzī, on his part, gives his unqualified affirmation to al-Zamakhsharī's first view because this verse is about conveying the evidence of the existence of a wise Creator (*alā wujudi al-ṣāniʿiʾl-ḥakīmi*), and it is not about human's insolence, proneness to blasphemy and ingratitude (Rāzī, 19:180, on Q 16:4). Other commentators also read this verse as evoking human's essential weakness and helplessness, and at that a manifest adversary (Ibn Kathīr, 5:432, on Q 16:4).

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that al-Zamakhsharī's viewpoints are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are "complementary. He feels that this passage is meant to bring out the person's unique quality as a rational being – a quality that may lead him to great heights of achievement, but may also lead him utterly astray."[149]

2.4.1.2   Asad and Al-Rāzī

Muḥammad Asad mentions the name of al-Rāzī more than any other personality he cites in his commentaries in *The Message of the Qurʾān.* This predilection and affinity for one of the greatest Muslim theologians and exegetes of the Medieval period is understandable. Al-Rāzī had a reputation for being an exegete who tried to reconcile religion and rational philosophy.[150] He was one of the leading representatives of Sunnī orthodoxy of his time and was imbued with the heritage of Greek philosophy. In this way, al-Rāzī had a pivotal role in the Islamic tradition. He was, according to Tariq Jaffer, "the first intellectual to exploit the rich heritage of ancient and Islamic philosophy to interpret the Qurʾān."[151]

As such, this man carved a distinguished place for himself, a place which is unique in the intellectual history of Islam's twelfth century. He became its "renewer of religion (*mujaddid al-dīn*)."[152]

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[149] Asad, *TMOQ,* 394, n. 5 on Q 16:4.

[150] M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Germany: Allgauer Heimatverlag GmbH., 1963), 644 (642-656).

[151] Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī, Master of qurʾānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

[152] For further consideration of this notion of periodic religious renewal see Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "*Tajdīd al-Dīn:* A Reconsideration of Its Meaning, Roots and Influences in Islam," *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions,* ed. by W. M. Binner and S. D. Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 99-108. Fathalla Kholeif (*A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and His Controversies in*

2.4.1.2.1   Formative Years

Abū 'l-Faḍl Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar, known as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who was also nicknamed as *Imām al-Mushakkikīn* (the Imām of the Doubters)[153] was born in Rayy in northern Persia. In his early years, his father[154] educated him in the Ashʿarī school of theology,[155] in the Shāfiʿī school of law and in qurʾānic

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Tansoxiana [Beyrouth: Dar El-Machreq Editeurs, 1966], 9-13) has discussed the authenticity of the Prophetic tradition from which this epithet was drawn and has also recorded some of the uncomplimentary statements about al-Rāzī that the biographers preserve. A saying attributed to the Prophet that every hundred years a renovator of the faith would arise in the community (Abū Dāʾūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* [Beirutt: Dār al-Kotob al-ʿIlmīyah, 2008], 5:4291); thus, it was said that the first was ʿUmar Ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 720 CE), the second Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (820 CE), the third Aḥmad Ibn Surayj (d. 918 CE), the fourth Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), the fifth Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1013 CE), the sixth Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE) (Kholeif, *A Study on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī,* 9).

[153] Rāzī was given this title because he was one of those who used "doubt" as a way of attaining truth (Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 19). Other scholars recognized his methodical doubt as forging a new path in Islamic theology and philosophy by opposing the practice of *taqlīd* (*Ibid.*). For some, however, this title is considered pejorative especially by Shiʿīte theologians among the Muʿtazila; for them, al-Rāzī was a feisty opponent who tried to undermine their doctrines through the use of methodical doubt (*Ibid.).*

[154] Al-Rāzī's father was a preacher from whom he inherited his passion to preach (Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 63; G. C. Anawati, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *EI New Ed.*, 2:751 ff.). By his preaching, Rāzī was also known to have brought many Karrāmīs to Sunnism. The latter sect which flourished in the central and eastern parts of the Middle East from 9th to 13th CE centuries embraced the doctrine which consisted of literalism and anthropomorphism (C. E. Bosworth, "Karrāmiyya," in *EI New Ed.*, 4:667 ff.). Its founder, Ibn Karrām, believed God to be a substance and that he had a body (*jism*) finite in certain directions when he come into contact with the Throne. The Karrāmīs also held the view that the world was eternal and that God's power was limited (*Ibid.*).

[155] An early key theological school in Islām which arose mainly as a response to the Muʿtazilah school of thought and some of their beliefs. For example, the Muʿtazilah believed the Qurʾān to be created, whereas Ashʿarites believed that it is uncreated. The same school brought a shift to Islām in the sense that it was promoting an understanding of Islām as it depended on a rationalistic approach to the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth (W. Montgomery, "Ashʿariyyah," in *EI New Ed.*, 1:696). The Ashʿarites, therefore, believed that the "Two Sources" should keep developing with the aid of older interpretations. Moreover, the Ashʿarites also believed that the unique nature and attributes of God cannot be understood fully by human reasoning and the senses. Although humans possess free will or, more accurately, freedom of intention, they have no power to create anything in the material world as only God can (*Ibid.*). Knowledge of moral truths must be taught by means of revelation and is not known *a priori* or by deduction from *a priori* propositions or by sheer observation of the world. The school therefore holds that human reason, in and by itself, is

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exegesis.[156] Even at a young age, his intelligence and methodical thinking suggested he would have a future as a celebrated Islamic teacher throughout Central Asia. Al-Rāzī's education in Ashʿarī theology[157] was believed to be particularly influenced by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) and al-Juwaynī.

As a matter of fact, al-Rāzī's contribution was seen "in many ways [as] a repetition of that of al-Ghazālī." Al-Rāzī was, therefore, "the reviver of Islām in the 12th century" as al-Ghazālī "was in the 11th century."[158] Al-Rāzī was well-versed in Shāfiʿī jurisprudence and all the sciences and philosophies. Yet, he too was opposed to many aspects of the Greek philosophical heritage. He was also conversant with scientific *kalām*, a legacy he inherited which dated from the time of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 936 CE).[159]

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not capable of establishing with absolute certainty any truth with respect to morality, the physical world or metaphysics (*Ibid.*)

[156] Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 651. Al-Rāzī cites his father's intellectual genealogy in his *Taḥṣīl al-ḥaqq* in both ʿilm al-uṣūl (foundational theology) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) tracing the former back to the famed theologian Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and the latter to the Imām al-Shāfiʿī himself (McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians,* 63).

[157] In Ashʿarī theology, he was under the tutelage of the jurist and exegete with a Ṣūfī orientation from Nīshāpūr, Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1070 CE). In philosophy, he followed Majd al-Dīn al-Jīlī (d. 1126 CE) -- the teacher of the mystic Suhrawardī (d. 1191), founder of the Iranian school of illuminationism -- to Marāgha (Azerbaijan) and there received his instruction. In the area of *fiqh,* Rāzī also studied the works of the traditionist, Ḥanafi jurist, and Ashʿarī theologian, al-Sumnānī (d. 1052 CE), who was a pupil of al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013 CE) who was a Mālikī (Frank Griffel, "On Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Life and the Patronage He Received," in *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18 [2007]: 318 f. [313-344]).

[158] Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 643.

[159] While a devoted follower of al-Ashʿarī, he nonetheless opposed the philosophical concept of atomism which was promoted by the latter himself. Islamic "atomism" teaches that God created every moment in time and every particle of matter. The *mutakallimūn* held the view that the human being's true nature, or the self, is a body that is perceived by the senses because it is an arrangement of atoms which only becomes a corporeality or alive through the accident of life that inheres the body. God can remove the accident of composition when God wishes; when God does so, the body or the corporeality ceases to exist and only the atoms remain (Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 180). This doctrine which, according to Rāzī, is inconsistent to the qurʾānic understanding which dictates that because the spirit comes into being *ex nihilo*, its nature must differ from perceptible bodies and their accidents (Rāzī, 21:31 f., on Q 16:40). This concept was an

Due to his ardent defense of Sunnism, al-Rāzī made himself some bitter enemies. When he went to Khurāsān, the primary homestead of the Muʿtazilīs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,[160] he became involved in relentless debates with the Muʿtazilīs. They eventually forced him to leave the country.[161] Al-Rāzī spent the rest of his life as a teacher and preacher in comfort and honor in Afghanistan where he was regarded as *Shaykh al-Islam*.[162] On his deathbed, he professed the Sunnī faith with beautiful resignation to the will of God. He died on Sunday, 21 Muḥarram or on the 26th of July, 1209. His tomb is still venerated at Herāt.

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important component of the effort by early Muslim theologians to develop an alternative worldview, one that they could feel comfortable with as believing and practicing Muslims. How this concept got into Islām is a subject of debate. One theory is that some *mutakallimūn* may have seen in the Galenic tradition which contained substantive discussion of "atomism." Galen (210 CE) and his school were the authoritative voice of those who deny creation and who viewed the natural world as a self-contained system functioning under its own laws. So, Galen, rather than Aristotle, may have been viewed as posing the greatest threat to Islamic belief. For this reason the *mutakallimūn* may have seen in "atomism" which Galen was so careful to reject, a promising physical theory which could be utilized to serve their own purposes, in particular the elaboration of a worldview in which there is a Creator God (See Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Islamic Atomism and the Galenic Tradition," in *History of Science* 47 [2009], 277-295).

[160] McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians*, 65.

[161] According to Goldziher, while al-Rāzī was an opponent of Muʿtazilīs, he was nevertheless influenced by them in certain respects, for example concerning the problem of the ʿisma of the Prophet, and the validity of *āḥād* traditions (aḥadīth transmitted by fewer reporters of which authenticity are thus questioned) in theological argument (G. C. Anawati, "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *EI New Ed.*, 2:751 ff).

[162] McAuliffe also relates a story from Ibn Khallikān's *Wafayāt* associated with al-Rāzī when he was giving a lecture one cold and snowy day that evokes the likes of Francis Assisi. A pigeon, chased by a predator, fell at his feet lay there incapacitated by fright and cold. To the surprise of his audience, Fakhr al-Dīn interrupted his lecture and stooped to take care of the stricken bird. *Qurʾānic Christians,* 65.

2.4.1.2.2 His Works

The works of Imām al-Rāzī are characterized by the integration of theological themes with other sciences. This can be seen in his *Asrār al-Tanzīl* where he combines theology with ethics, or in his *Lawāmiʿ al-Bayyināt* where he combines theology and Sufism. But, it was al-Rāzī's *magnum opus*, which would be of greatest interest and use to Asad. This was al-Rāzī's commentary on the Qurʾān, namely, the *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* or "The Keys to the Unknown," (a phrase found in sūrat al-Anʿām [Q6]:59). It was also known as *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* or "the Great Commentary."

This work is a massive work of thirty-two volumes.[163] He labored to write it from about 1198 CE until his death in 1210 CE. It represented "the crowning glory of his vast oeuvre."[164] As mentioned earlier, al-Rāzī's devotion to the study of the Qurʾān began during his childhood under his father's guidance. But this devotion never diminished despite this scholar's exposure to many other sciences. In fact, towards the end of his life, Rāzī confessed that

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[163] Muḥammad b. ʿUmar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr,* 32 vols. (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿilmīya, 1990); cf. 32 vols. (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al Bahiyyah al-Misriyyah, 1938). According to McAuliffe not everybody is agreed of its content: one said that it contains "everything but *tafsīr*," another said that it contained "everything else in addition to *tafsīr."* She infers that it is certainly far different from much traditional *al-tafsīr bi'l-maʾthūr*, for al-Rāzī has packed it with philosophical and theological erudition (*Qurʾānic Christians,* 68).

[164] Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 5. In front of the questions regarding the authorship of this work, recent scholarship has shown that this entire work was authored by Rāzī himself. Jaffer mentions a few of those who question Rāzī' complete authorship: In his foundational work on qurʾānic exegesis, Goldziher claimed that the commentary was completed by Rāzī's student al-Khuwayyī (d. 1239 CE); Brockelmann also takes the view that Rāzī did not complete his commentary, but was completed by a certain al-Qamūlī (d. 1327 CE) (*Ibid.*, 5, n. 15).

"I have had experience of all the methods of *kalām* and of all the paths of philosophy, but I have not found in them either satisfaction or comfort to equal that which I have found in reading the Qurʾān."[165]

Al-Rāzī's method and arrangement in *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* may be compared to the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas.[166] It is analogous to the latter's format of question and answer presentation. Al-Rāzī's organizational principle for analyzing particular verses is to create a series of "questions" or "issues" (*masāʾil*, which he defined as "a place to raise a subject for investigation"). These questions or issues are generated for each verse under discussion.[167]

From this exhaustive list of derivative questions, he classifies knowledge from the ʿaqlī (rational) and *naqlī* (scriptural) sciences. Along with *masāʾil*, al-Rāzī also applies the key textual device called *wajh* or "argument," "aspect," or "viewpoint." He also multiplies this textual device as the *mas'alah* so that he could record, analyze, corroborate, and critique the knowledge from the ʿaqlī and *naqlī* sciences that he integrated into his work.[168] Furthermore, in the same work al-Rāzī intermingles history, geography, and other branches of knowledge with the commentary of the qurʾānic text.

Because of its intellectual interpretation and the combining of ʿaql (reason) and *naql* (authority), and because of its demonstrated understanding of the

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[165] Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, 651-652. Jane McAuliffe's translation based on al-Dāwūdī's *Ṭabaqāt,* "I have diligently explored the paths of *kalām* and the ways of philosophy but have not found what quenches thirst or heals the sick; but now I see that the soundest way is the way of (the) Qurʾān read deanthropomorphically (*fī al-tanzīh*) (*qurʾānic Christians,* 67).

[166] McAuliffe, *Qurʾānic Christians,* 69.

[167] Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 36 f..

[168] Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 38.

sacred Scriptures, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* remains one of the major commentaries on the Qurʾān. In this work, al-Rāzī often mentions and praises the Muslim sages who combined intellectual principles with the principles of Islamic revelation. This same work of commentary is also noted for its anti-Muʿtazilī stance and its strong defense of Ashʿarī Sunnism.[169]

2.4.1.2.3   "The Transmitter"

One of the most prominent functions that Asad assigns to al-Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* in *The Message of the Qurʾān* is the role of "a transmitter" of earlier interpretations of the Qurʾān.[170] But, al-Rāzī was not a typical transmitter as far as his *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* is concerned. He was not one to simply repeat the work of his predecessors. For example, he was one of the firebrands opposing the practice of *taqlīd* at his time. Consequently, al-Rāzī "forged a new methodological course by discarding the approaches of exegesis that were developed by the established authorities who preceded him."[171]

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[169] Some scholars, however, like Ignaz Goldziher questioned the extent to which al-Rāzī was influenced by Muʿtazilī thought ("Aus der Theologie des Fachr al-dīn al-Rāzī," in *Der Islām* 3 [1912]: 233 f.) In a short note entitled "A Sublime Subtlety?" Michael Schub makes the surprising statement that "Rāzī himself is in large measure dependent on Zamakhsharī" (*ZAL* 6 (1981): 72). Schub's short note, however, indicates that this dependence seems to be in terms of grammatical issues as that is what his note discusses (*ibid.*). Paul Kraus ("The 'Controversies' of Fakhr al-Din Rāzī," in *Islamic Culture* 12 [1938]), for his part, stresses the extremely wide range of *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* that it "is not merely, as it is frequently supposed, an Ashʿarite answer to Muʿtazilite theological commentaries such as the *Kashshāf* of Zamakhsharī" (133). In it al-Rāzī discusses the most difficult problems of his philosophy (*Ibid.*).

[170] Jacques Jomier ("Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī et les commentaires du Coran les plus anciens," *MIDEO* 15 [1982]; 145-72) has collected and grouped those sources to which al-Rāzī refers in his commentary on sūrah Āl ʿImrān.

[171] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 29.

Rāzī's strong opposition to *taqlīd* appeared, for example, in his interpretation of Q Shuʿarāʾ 26:74. This verse presents the response of Abraham's clan after he condemns them for their idol-worship. The verse states, "They exclaimed: 'But we found our fore-fathers doing the same!'" Al-Rāzī considers this verse as one of the strongest indications of the immorality (*fasad*) inherent in the principle of *taqlīd*.[172] In other words, he reads this verse as evoking an argument against belief based on conformity, and in favor, instead, of belief based on sound reasoning and proof. A way out of *taqlīd*, therefore, according to Rāzī is the use of human reason to bring out the meaning or sense of religious beliefs in inherited texts or of traditions.

It is this methodology that drew Asad to al-Rāzī's legacy as a "reconciler" of religion and rational philosophy. Asad himself began a project of translation and interpretation that uses rational tools and principles to explain the verses of the Qurʾān. Moreover, Asad's attraction to al-Rāzī's *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* is also likely due to the fact that the latter had incorporated early *mufassirūn* into his *tafsīr.* The reputation of these interpreters of the Qurʾān was known to be rationally or linguistically oriented.

The following section identifies two figures in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr* who were contributors of *wujuh* or "arguments" to his deliberation.

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[172] Rāzī, 24:123, on Q 26:74.

2.4.1.2.4   Citing Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī

In his commentary, Asad cites al-Rāzī seven times for quoting the works of Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 933 CE). In fact, the latter only appears in *The Message of the Qurʾān*, because he was "quoted by al-Rāzī."[173] Not much is known about al-Iṣfahānī's life besides being a Muʿtazilī based in Baghdad who was also a master linguist, fluent in Arabic and Persian. This man's "extreme intelligence" was also praised by many theologians like ʿAbd al-Jabbār. A few scattered historical reports indicate that he was probably born in Iṣfahān, Persia where he began his studies. It is also known that he travelled to Baghdad where he not only pursued his education but also became a prominent scholar in the ʿAbbāsid administration.[174]

Through al-Rāzī, therefore, Asad was introduced to al-Iṣfahānī's rationalist interpretation of God's injunction upon Zechariah in Q 3:41 (cf. Q 19:10). This verse reads: "thy sign shall be that for three days thou wilt not speak unto men other than gestures." This locution tells about the *āyah* or "sign" given by the angel interlocutor in response to Zechariah's earlier supplication for a *dhurriyya ṭayyiba* or "a goodly offspring" in Q 3:38. Bible readers will easily detect in this verse an echo of the Gospel of Luke 1:20 which describes the angel promising Zechariah that a son, John the Baptist, will be born to him and his wife.

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[173] Asad, *TMOQ*, n. 25 on Q 13:11; n. 35 on Q 18:27; n. 81 on Q 20:96; n. 1 on Q 37:1; n. 35 on 41:42; n. 6 on 44:7; n. 1 on 79:1.

[174] Masʿud Habibi Mazaheri, et al., "Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (or Iṣbahānī)," *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, eds. W. Madelung and F. Daftary (London: Brill, in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008), 6:224 f.

In the Gospel of Luke, it says, "you will be silenced and have no power of speech until this has happened."[175] While the biblical version evokes a miraculous intervention in Zechariah's being struck dumb, the qurʾānic version – according to Asad's reading of Q 3:41 – does not include such a miraculous feature. For this reason, in his rendition of this qurʾānic locution, one may not be able to extrapolate any supernatural implication other than a straightforward injunction, "thou wilt not speak unto men other than gestures."

To buttress or reinforce this translation, Asad needed an authoritative perspective for corroboration. So, he integrated al-Iṣfahānī through al-Rāzī. Al-Iṣfahānī interpreted this statement of the angel rationally rather than literally. For him, the angel's statement – "you will not be able to speak to anyone" – would ordinarily imply a temporary incapacity to speak. But this scholar maintained that Zechariah was simply enjoined not to speak to anyone for three days.[176]

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[175] *idou esē siōpōn kai mē dynamenos lalēsai*. The reflexive Greek verb σιωπάω (*siópaó*, lit. to be silent; from *siópé*, silence) essentially means involuntary stillness or inability to speak, to be dumb, but also not deaf; figuratively, to be calm. Thus, the silencing of Zechariah by Gabriel is not a punishment for an objection of disbelief, but is the Lucan counterpart of the silencing of Daniel by Gabriel in Dan 10:15 (Robert J. Karris, OFM, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* eds. R. Brown et al. [New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 680 (675-721). The Gospel of Luke 1:57-80 (the birth of J. Baptist and Benedictus) is not really the confirmatory sign indicated in the Gospel of Luke 1:20, but is an instance of what might be called Lucan redundancy: what is important should be repeated (*Ibid.*). By depicting Zechariah as dumb, the Gospel of Luke in effect says that he is unable to complete the liturgy he began, for he cannot bless the people (*Ibid.*).

[176] Rāzī, 8:36, on Q 3:41. Other commentators interpret the "sign" for Zechariah to mean that he was rendered temporarily incapable of speaking, though his faculties were still sound, in a sense resonating the New Testament version (Ṭabarī, 16:62, on Q 19:10; Ṭabarsī, 6:322, on Q 19:10; Zamakhsharī, 3:7, on Q 19:10). Some report that he continued to be capable of uttering prayers and praises to God, but was unable to speak to people (Ṭabarsī, 6:322, on Q 19:10; Quṭb, II:80 f., on Q 3:41). Quṭb, for his part, appears to echo al-Iṣfahānī as he interprets the "sign" for Zechariah in Q 19:10 as "he was to isolate himself from all worldly concerns for three days and live in direct contact with God (II:80 f., on Q 3:41).

Moreover, al-Iṣfahānī added that the *āyah* or "sign" of not speaking to anyone represents a "purely spiritual" injunction in this verse. It "was to consist in Zechariah's utter self-abandonment to prayer and contemplation."[177] In a sense, al-Iṣfahānī, with the endorsement of al-Rāzī, offers a rational contrast to the New Testament's version which implies a miracle.

Here, we have an example of Asad making use of a rationalist interpretation to corroborate his reading and rendition of the Arabic Qurʾān into English.

In another example in which al-Rāzī served as a "transmitter," al-Iṣfahānī's interpretation is incorporated into Asad's commentary and thus corroborates the latter's rejection of the doctrine of *naskh* or "abrogation." According to Asad, the *naskh* doctrine must have sprung from an erroneously restrictive reading of the term *āyah* which occurs in verses like Q 2:106 which reads,[178]

> "Any message (*āyah*) which We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or a similar one. Dost thou not know that God has the power to will anything?"

In the Arabic lexicon, the term *āyah* could denote "message," "verse," "sign," or "miracle" etc.[179] Asad argues that a restricted reading of this qurʾānic term, that is, one that adheres to a preferred singular signification, could definitely limit its application. The *naskh* doctrine, according to Asad, comes from

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[177] Rāzī, 8::36 on Q 3:41

[178] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22, n. 87 on Q 2:106.

[179] In his *āyah* entry, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary* provides as its synonyms in English: "token," "mark," "miracle," "wonder," "marvel," "prodigy," "model," "exemplar," "paragon," "masterpiece," also "Qurʾān verse," "passage" (in a book), "utterance," "saying," "word" (46).

the misreading of the term *āyah* in Q 2:106 into "verse."[180] With this restrictive reading, "some scholars conclude... that certain verses of the Qurʾān have been 'abrogated' by God's command before the revelation of the Qurʾān was completed."[181]

In Asad's mind, such a "fanciful" assertion evokes "the image of a human author correcting, on second thought, the proofs of his manuscript, deleting one passage and replacing it with another."[182] But, at the root of the "doctrine of abrogation" may be the inability of some of the early commentators to reconcile one qurʾānic passage with another. That was a difficulty which was overcome by declaring that one of the verses in question had been "abrogated."[183] Rather, if the term *āyah* is read in this verse as "message"[184] then, according to Asad, the difficulty in interpreting this term or passage "disappears immediately."[185] Its meaning would then be consistent with the meaning and intent of the preceding verse which states that "the Jews and the Christians refuse to accept any

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[180] On Q 2:106: A.J. Arberry, "And for whatever verse We abrogate or cast into oblivion..."; Qulī Qarāʾī, "For any verse We abrogate from memories..."; Mawdūdī, "For whatever verse We might abrogate or consign to oblivion...."

[181] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22, n. 87 on Q 2:106. Droge, asserts that this passage, along with a few others "provides the basis" for the later, and much more elaborate theory of "abrogation," according to which certain commands in the Qurʾān had been canceled and replaced by others (Droge, 12, n. 130 on Q 2;106). The words "we annul or consign to oblivion" imply that some verses have not been retained in the present Quran"

[182] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22, n. 87 on Q 2:106.

[183] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22, n. 87 on Q 2:106.

[184] On Q 2:106: Yūsuf ʿAlī, "None of our revelations do we abrogate or cause to be forgotten..."; Pickthall, "Nothing of our revelation (even a single verse) do we abrogate..." Abdel Haleem, "Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten..."

[185] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22 f., n. 87 on Q 2:106.

revelation which might supersede that of the Bible; for, if read in this way, the

abrogation relates to the earlier divine messages and not to any part of the

Qurʾān itself."[186]

It is for this reason that Asad absolutely rejects the doctrine of *naskh* or

"abrogation." Moreover, he also argues "that there does not exist a single reliable

Tradition to the effect that the prophet ever declared a verse of the Qurʾān to

have been 'abrogated.'"[187] To reinforce and corroborate his position, Asad

employs the views of al-Iṣfahānī through al-Rāzī in his commentary of two

particular verses: Q 18:27 and Q 41:42. According to the first:

> "And convey [to the world] whatever has been revealed to thee of thy
> Sustainer's writ. There is nothing that could alter (*lā mubaddila*) His words;
> and thou canst find no refuge other than with Him."

According to al-Rāzī it is on the phrase *lā mubaddila li-kalimātihi,* that al-

Iṣfahānī bases his rejection of the so-called "doctrine of abrogation."[188] The other

corroborating verse is Q 41:42, especially its first clause which says, "no

falsehood (*bāṭilu*) can ever attain to it openly, and neither in a stealthy

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[186] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22 f., n. 87 on Q 2:106.

[187] Asad, *TMOQ,* 22 f., n. 87 on Q 2:106. This arbitrary procedure explains also why there is no unanimity whatsoever among the upholders of the "doctrine of abrogation" as to which, and how many, Qur'an verses have been affected by it: al-Zuhri (d.742 CE) held that 42 *āyahs* had been abrogated, then the number steadily increased in the 11th century CE, with Ibn Salāma (d. 1021 CE) claiming that there were 238 abrogated *āyahs*, al-Fārīsī claiming that there were 248, in subsequent generation, a reaction set in: the Egyptian polymath Suyūṭī claimed that there only 20, and Shāh Walīullāh Dehlawī whittled the number down to 5 (See David S. Powers, "The Exegetical Genre *nāsikh al-Qurʾān wa-mansūkhuhu',*" in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾān,* ed. A. Rippin [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 122 f. [117-138]). Furthermore, there is also no consensus as to whether this alleged abrogation implies a total elimination of the verse in question from the context of the Qur'an, or only a cancellation of the specific ordinance or statement contained in it. In short, the "doctrine of abrogation" has no basis whatever in historical fact, and must be rejected (Asad, *TMOQ,* 22, n. 87 on Q 2:106).

[188] Rāzī, 21:98, on Q 18:27.

manner."[189] This verse also becomes a basis for al-Iṣfahānī's absolute rejection

of the theory of "abrogation."[190] The "abrogation" of any Qurʾān verse would

have amounted to its *ibṭāl* – a declaration that it was to be regarded as null and

void. The verse in question would have to be considered "false" (*bāṭilu*) in the

context of the Qurʾān.[191]

This inference was unacceptable for al-Iṣfahānī because it would clearly

contradict the message of this verse that "no falsehood (*bāṭilu*) can ever attain it."

2.4.1.2.5   Citing Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Jubbāʾī

Another early commentator, narrated by al-Rāzī, who also became useful

for Asad's exegesis, was Abū ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Jubbāʾī (d. 915 CE). He was a

celebrated Muʿtazilī who became the teacher of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, the

founder of al-Ashʿarī School of theology, along with his son, ʿAbd al-Salām Abū

al-Hāshim al-Jubbāʾī (d. 933 CE). These two were known for their direct influence

on Sunnī thought.[192]

Asad finds al-Rāzī's narration of al-Jubbāʾī's rationalist interpretation of

the verb *yughwiyakum* in Q 11:34 to be a helpful segue into his discussion on

whether God causes anyone to go astray and fall into sin. For Asad, such a

suggestion presents a fundamental challenge to Islamic orthodoxy which held

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[189] Rāzī, 27:114, on Q 41:42. Some commentators read this clause as evoking the notion that the Qurʾān cannot be openly changed by means of additions or omissions (Rāzī, 27:114, on Q 41:42).

[190] Rāzī, 27:114, on Q 41:42.

[191] Rāzī, 27:114, on Q 41:42.

[192] L. Gardet, "al-Jubbāʾī," in *EI New Ed.*, 2:569 f.

that God could only be conceived as *rabbu al-ʿālamīna, al-raḥmāni al-raḥīm* or "the sustainer of all the worlds, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace" (Q 1:2-3). In Islamic orthodoxy, a creator "deity" who causes evil for any creature or caused anyone to fall into sin is inconceivable.

In an attempt to address this ancient theodicean question, Asad advances his own interpretation of the "question." It is based on the occurrences of the term *ighwā* (a verbal noun of the fourth form of the root *gh-w-y*[193]). He looks at the occurrences where the syntax appears to impute agency to God as the one who leads people astray. For example, twice in the Qurʾān, *Iblīs* or "Satan" blames God for *aghwaytanī* (Q 7:16[194] and 15:39[195]). Instead of rendering its literal meaning,[196] Asad translates these two occurrences identically with "thou hast thwarted me." Asad justifies his rendition on two levels. First, he believes that the equivalent word "thwarted" (connotes a displacement towards the opposing or counter-position)[197] was the most appropriate equivalent in this context since it

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[193] Cf. Lane VI, 234 f.: The term *'aghwahu* denotes both "he caused [or "allowed"] him to err" or "he caused him to be disappointed" or "to fail in attaining his desire." cf. Lit. "he could misguide or lead you astray," in *The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 806.

[194] "[Whereupon Iblis] said: "Now that Thou hast thwarted me, (*aghwaytanī*) I shall most certainly lie in ambush for them all along Thy straight way."

[195] "[Whereupon Iblis] said: "O my Sustainer! Since Thou hast thwarted me (*aghwaytanī*), I shall indeed make [all that is evil] on earth seem goodly to them, and shall most certainly beguile them - into grievous error."

[196] Lit. "You have misled me" (my interpretation), essentially used by some English translators: Pickthall: "...Thou hast sent me astray..."; Arberry: "...for thy perverting me..."; Cf. Yūsuf ʿAlī : "...thou hast thrown me out of the way..."

[197] Merriam-Webster, "thwart," accessed June 2016, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thwart.

captures the reaction of *Iblīs* to the "loss of his erstwhile position among the angels."[198]

Thus, according to the syntax of those two verses, this deprivation subsequently led *Iblīs* to say that he would "certainly lie in ambush for them (those granted a respite) all along Thy straight way (Q 7:16)," or that he would "make [all that is evil] on earth seem goodly to them, and shall most certainly beguile them - into grievous error (Q 15:39)." Second, with this rendition, Asad intentionally immunizes God from blame for leading or causing anyone to go astray. At face value, however, one could not help but sense ambiguity in Asad's line of reasoning in this rendition. Although his argument posits a viable but limited theodicy, his syntactical reading of the verse nonetheless evokes an unmistakable indirect divine causation.

This is where, I believe, Asad's insertion of al-Rāzī's quotation of al-Jubbā'ī in his commentary of Q 11:34 is important because it broadens his discussion of the subject. The verse relates to Noah's hypothetical statement against his unbelieving people, thus,

> "for, my advice will not benefit you much as I desire to give you good advice - if it be God's will that you shall remain lost in grievous error (*yughwiyakum*). He is your Sustainer, and unto Him you must return."

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[198] Asad, *TMOQ,* 204, n. 11 on 7:16. Other commentators held that God caused *Iblīs* to err only insofar as His command to *Iblīs* to prostrate before Adam uncovered *Iblīs* hidden pride and stubbornness (Rāzī, 14:31 ff., on Q 7:16). The Baghdadī mystic al-Hallāj (d. 922 CE) famously imagined *Iblīs* as a sincere lover of God who could not bring himself to bow to anyone other than God, even on pain of his own ultimate destruction and eternal banishment from his Beloved (Louis Massignon, *The Passion of Al-Hallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islām,* trans. H. Mason [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982], 1:30).

Al-Jubbāʾī interpreted the term *yughwiyakum* in Q 11:34 as "He shall deprive you of all good."[199] Having been warned by Noah of an impending suffering or punishment in Q 11:26, his unbelieving people ultimately challenge him to *fa'tinā* or "bring upon us" that which he threatened would befall them in Q 11:32. Noah directs them to God who decrees the punishment and its timing and adds that "if it be God's will," He could even *yughwiyakum*, that is, He could "deprive you of all good." Al-Jubbāʾī's interpretation of *yughwiyakum* requires some contextual explanation.

Further inquiry revealed that al-Jubbāʾī's take on *yughwiyakum* could be understood within the larger discussion of the concept of *iktiṣāb* (lit. "acquisition"). That term refers to the debate on freedom and predestination in which he was deeply involved during his time.[200] This early theological concept was based on the qurʾānic locution, *tuwaffā kullu nafsin mā kasabat* or "every human being shall be repaid in full for what he has earned" (Q 2:281). It was considered to be one of the most contentious subjects among the Muʿtazilah and Ashʿariyyah theological schools.[201]

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[199] Rāzī, 17:226 f., on Q 11:34. According to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, as quoted by al-Rāzī, *yughwiyakum* is to be understood as that He shall punish you for your sins (*Ibid.*). Others read it as "that He shall destroy you (*yahluku*)" (Ṭabarī, 12:40, on Q 11:34). Al-Zamakhsharī comments that when God, knowing the persistence in sinning on the part of one who denies the truth (*al-kafir*), leaves him in this condition and does not compel him to repent, this act of God is described in the Qurʾān as "causing to err" (*ighwa*) and "causing one to go astray" (*iḍlāl*); similarly, when He, knowing that a person will repent, protects him and is kind to him, this act of God is described as "showing the right direction" (*irshād*) or offering guidance (*hidāyah*) (Zamakhsharī, 2:376, on Q 11:34).

[200] L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *EI New Ed.*, 4: 692 ff.

[201] L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *EI New Ed.*, 4: 692 ff.

The rationalist Muʿtazilites brazenly contended that God's creatures had absolute free will even if this limits God's power to will and act as He wishes.[202] The Ashʿarites, the orthodox theologians, reacted to these Muʿtazilite excesses and professed belief in God's absolute freedom at the expense of human liberty. They argued that humanity is predestined to abide by whatever God decrees. This was the view of orthodox Islām in subsequent ages.[203]

While al-Jubbāʾī did not agree with the extreme position of his Muʿtazilah school, he also did not accept its application by the Ashʿarīs.[204] Some Muʿtazilīs applied it only to involuntary human actions since God, in their view, could not limit or stop free human actions. The Ashʿarīs, however, adhered to the notion that every free human action is created by God, but it is also linked to human responsibility.

In a rather equivocal position, al-Jubbāʾī maintains that the validity of human ʿaql or reason is a criterion for human responsibility. At the same time, he also affirms that a mysterious divine Will impacts the actions which a person performs freely.[205] In other words, unlike the Ashʿarī solution, al-Jubbāʾī calls man the *khāliq*, or creator of his actions. In this sense, one's actions proceed from himself or herself with a determination (*qadar*) that comes from God.[206]

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[202] Shabbir Akthar, *The Qurʾān and the Secular Mind, A Philosophy of Islām* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 303-304.

[203] Akthar, *The Qurʾān and the Secular Mind*, 303-304.

[204] L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *EI New Ed.*, 4: 692 ff.

[205] L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *EI New Ed.*, 4: 692 ff.

[206] L. Gardet, "Kasb," in *EI New Ed.*, 4: 692 ff.

There was, therefore, a strong likelihood that al-Jubbā'ī must have been cognizant of this theological debate on *iktiṣāb* when he superimposed his own interpretation on the term *yughwiyakum* in Q 11:34. He suggested that it should read, "He shall deprive you of all good" rather than a literal translation, "God could lead you astray" (my translation). He is treading carefully, not wanting to ascribe divine agency to the disobedience of Noah's people. Thus, he was subscribing to the position of some Muʿtazilīs who believed that God cannot be the cause of every free human action.

At the same time, al-Jubbā'ī did not totally excuse God from responsibility for contributing to their state of hard-heartedness. They are, after all, deprived "of all good" which only God could do. Thus, he was adhering to the belief of some Ashʿarīs that God and human beings share the responsibility of the action.

Al-Jubbā'ī's solution to the theodicean question may seem equivocal, particularly in his interpretation of *yughwiyakum* in Q 11:34. Nonetheless, it provides Asad with an interpretive context, and his interpretation of *aghwaytanī* in Q 7:16 and 15:39 was similar in many ways. Be that as it may, such support from al-Jubbā'ī does not give Asad definitive clarity on the question as much as it helps him to continue searching for it. In his attempt to advance another line of theodicean reasoning, Asad renders Noah's words *in kāna Allāhu yurīdu an yughwiyakum* in Q 11:34 with "if it be God's will that you shall remain lost in grievous error." This phraseology may indicate a divine ability either "to will to cause" or "to will to let them be" – in response to the refusal of Noah's people to believe in his warning. Asad, nonetheless, insists that his rendition appropriately

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demonstrates "God's way." He says that when one persistently refuses to acknowledge the truth, God "leaves him (takhliyah) in this condition and does not compel him to repent."[207]

2.4.1.2.6   The *Taʾwīl* Legacy

Another function that al-Rāzī assumes in Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* may be understood in the light of al-Rāzī's use of the method of *taʾwīl* or interpreting qurʾānic phrases figuratively. There is strong evidence in Asad's work of translation and commentary of the Qurʾān that he applies a similar method of interpretation. Whether this similarity comes from the influence or inspiration of al-Rāzī is not clear. But, it is undeniable that both agree to bring out the figurative and metaphorical meaning of certain verses of the Qurʾān. To illustrate this similarity, some examples from Asad's interpretation of qurʾānic verses are cited below. Not only do they remind us of al-Rāzī's *taʾwīl,* they also seem to endorse al-Rāzī's interpretation.

In his study of al-Rāzī's qurʾānic exegesis, Jaffer observes that *taʾwīl* is one of the interpretive methods which al-Rāzī uses to deal with anthropomorphic verses in the Qurʾān.[208] In a broader sense, al-Rāzī believed that it is only

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[207] Asad, *TMOQ*, 318, n. 56 on Q 11:34; 4, n.7 on Q 2:7.

[208] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 57. For Muslim theologians in the middle ages reading or interpreting such anthropomorphic verses presented a challenge to the immutable doctrine of God's otherness. Falling into *tashbīh*, or "likening God to His contingent creation" which is a potential outcome from reading such anthropomorphism was considered a theological error (*Ibid.* 58-59). Two major proposals were advanced to counter this threat: one is from the traditionalists -- represented by Ḥanbalīs and some Ashʿarīs -- who adhered to the canonical authority of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah as the actual and direct "speech" of God and are therefore to be accepted "as they really are" (*Ibid.*). The classical Ashʿarītes, for one, attempted to resolve the problem of *tashbīh* "by positing that God has a singular nature..." that is "...God's essence differs from that of sensory beings. Thus while it is true to say that God does have a body...His body is

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through the proper application of *taʾwīl,* that is, "by diverting the Qurʾān's apparent sense to a figurative, allegorical, or symbolic sense,"[209] that the secrets (*asrār)* of various branches of knowledge (metaphysics, cosmology, natural science, anthropology, and psychology) embedded in the Qurʾān could be discovered.

Al-Rāzī's method of *taʾwīl* is grounded in two sources of knowledge: the ʿaql, or the basic exercise of human reason which generates rational proof (*dalīl ʿaqlī*), and *naql,* or "transmitted knowledge," namely, the Qurʾān and prophetic traditions which provide scriptural proof (*dalīl naqlī*). The canons are "transmitted knowledge" as far as al-Rāzī is concerned. He believes that "the content of revelation is true only if it can be traced to the credible source of the Prophet and not because it has been handed down from a divine authority and supernatural origin."[210]

As far as Asad is concerned, some qurʾānic verses allude to "a realm which is beyond the reach of human perception"[211] He calls that realm *al-ghayb*

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unlike bodies that can be perceived by the five senses" (*Ibid.*, "Muʿtazilite Aspects of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Thought," *Arabica* 59 [2012], 518 (510-535). The other is from the rationalists -- represented by the Muʿtazilah -- who argued that these anthropomorphic elements "do not befit God" and should be interpreted figuratively, hence the method of *taʾwīl* (*Ibid., Rāzī,* 58-59)*.* While himself deeply educated and entrenched into the Ashʿarī school of theology from his childhood, al-Rāzī, according to Jaffer, favored the Muʿtazilī tendency and therefore rejected the absolutistic literalism of the traditionalists and of "classical Ashʿarīsm" which attributed to the two canonical scriptures unquestioned authority as the only source of religious knowledge and disallowed the use of human reasoning when it came to interpreting the anthropomorphic attributes. While adapting the Muʿtazilī position, al-Rāzī elevated the tension to qurʾānic exegesis; he rearranged the authority of these sources "by assigning more weight to human reasoning and by positioning human reasoning as the arbiter of the *taʾwīl*-issue" (*Ibid.*, "Muʿtazilite Aspects," 516).

[209] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 85.

[210] Jaffer, *Rāzī,* 86.

[211] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

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(pl. *ghuyūb*). In writing about this "realm," Asad suggests that "only a small segment of reality is open to man's perception and imagination, and that by far the larger part of it escapes his comprehension altogether."[212]

How could this realm be comprehended by human perception? Asad believes that it could be, and that the Qurʾān employs "loan-images" derived from human experience – both physical or mental experiences.[213] What Asad is saying is that many qurʾānic passages and expressions must be understood in an "allegorical sense." The messages that these passages carry cannot be conveyed to the reader in any other way. Only through such a literary vehicle is the meaning accessible "to people who think" (*li-qawmin yatafakkarūn*).[214]

For Asad, therefore, taking every qurʾānic passage, statement or expression only in its apparent or literal sense (*ayāt muḥkamāt*) and disregarding its value as an allegory, metaphor or parable (*ayāt mutashābihāt*), would be an offense "against the very spirit of the divine writ."[215] As a matter of fact, Asad finds these "loan-images" and "metaphors" fundamental to the concept of *al-mutashābihāt* as referred to in Q 3:7.

In principle, therefore, it is clear that al-Rāzī and Asad share a common view on the existence of anthropomorphic and metaphysical elements in the

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[212] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

[213] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990. In his commentary of Q 13:35, Zamakhsharī says that the message can be conveyed *tamthīlan li-mā ghāba ʿannā bi-mā nushāhid* or "through a parabolic illustration, by means of something which we know from our experience, of something that is beyond the reach of our perception" (2:512, on Q 13:35).

[214] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

[215] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990.

Qurʾān and how they are to be read and interpreted. Both agree that the essential meaning of these elements is veiled by the literal meaning of the text. The deeper meanings can only be understood through the use of human reason. Finally, both agree that, with regards to the foregoing qurʾānic elements, the scriptural canon does not carry the ultimate authority. Nor does it constitute the "ultimate arbiter of theological questions."[216] Rather, both scholars have the tendency (although it is much more pronounced in al-Rāzī) to assign an authoritative role to human reasoning as an independent source of religious knowledge.

Asad's treatment of the term *shayṭān* (pl. *shayāṭīn*) is a good example of his application of the method of *taʾwīl*. The term *shayṭān* is derived from the verb *shaṭana* and means being or becoming remote from all that is good and true.[217] From its first appearance in Q 2:14, this term is rendered by Asad as "evil impulses," a tendency which issues from human beings rather than from supernatural provenance. [218]

He qualifies this translation as more faithful to the ancient Arabic usage which describes the proclivity of people, through insolent persistence in evildoing,

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[216] Jaffer, "Muʿtazilite Aspects," 511.

[217] *Lisan al-ʿArab,* VII:120 f.; *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, 18:321 f. The adjective term "satanic" in the Qurʾān could mean exceedingly evil propensities in one's own soul, and especially all impulses which run counter to truth and morality (*Mufradāt,* 454).

[218] "And when they meet those who have attained to faith, they assert, "We believe [as you believe]"; but when they find themselves alone with their evil impulses (*shayāṭīnihim*), they say, "Verily, we are with you; we were only mocking!"

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to become like satans.[219] Consistent demythological reading of the term is also recalled in Q 3:155. Asad considers this verse as "an illustration of a significant qurʾānic doctrine." It says,

"behold, as for those of you who turned away [from their duty] on the day when the two hosts met in battle[220] - Satan (*shayṭān*) caused them to stumble only by means of something that they [themselves] had done. But now God has effaced this sin of theirs: verily, God is much-forgiving, forbearing."

In this verse, Asad interprets the role of Satan's influence on human beings not as the primary cause of sin, but as its first consequence. Sin, he adds, is

"a consequence of a person's own attitude of mind which in moments of moral crisis induces him to choose the easier, and seemingly more pleasant, of the alternative open to him, and thus to become guilty of a sin, whether by commission or omission."[221]

A similar interpretation is also brought to bear in Q 4:76.[222] Likely referencing the hypocrite defectors of the same battle, this verse, according to Asad, illustrates the concept of "Satan." It is generally understood as a negative

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[219] Asad, *TMOQ,* 5, n. 10 on Q 2:14. Zamakhsharī, 1:73, on Q 2:14. Other commentators read *shayāṭīn* as referring to the hypocrites (Ibn Kathīr, 1:135, on Q 2:14).

[220] Read in the context of the Battle of Uḥud (624 CE) (Ṭabarī, 4:182 f., on Q 3:155) in which a third of the Muslims, led by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy, *tawallū min* or defected from the ranks and therefore significantly reduced the number of Muslim fighters (Asad, *TMOQ,* 85, n. 90 on Q 3:121).

[221] Asad, *TMOQ,* 91, n. 117 on Q 3:155. Some commentators interpret *bi-baʿdi mā kasabū* or "only by means of something that they [themselves] had done as meaning Satan caused them to slip only in certain matters, not more generally, but it could also mean that they were made to slip precisely because they turned away, since one error or sin can lead to another (Rāzī, 9:42 f., on Q 3:155).

[222] "Those who have attained to faith fight in the cause of God, whereas those who are bent on denying the truth fight in the cause of the powers of evil. Fight, then, against those friends of Satan: verily, Satan's guile is weak indeed!"

symbol which has no independent "intrinsic reality."[223] It can only become a reality, he adds, through a person's willful choice of a wrong course of action. That is, the person succumbs to temptations arising through his or her own moral weakness, and then commits the sin of "denying the truth." [224]

Asad's spiritual and psychological interpretation of the concept of "Satan" is affirmed by al-Rāzī's remarks on Q 14:22[225] about the Day of Resurrection. In al-Rāzī's view, the "real Satan" or *al-shayṭān al-aṣlī* preys on the person's "already-existing (evil) disposition." Satan identifies the complex of desires (*al-nafs*) or the "sinner's soul" and knows how to stir the person by insinuation or *waswasah*.[226]

Asad agrees with al-Rāzī's spiritual and psychological interpretation of the following qurʾānic locution, thus, "We have let loose all [manner of] satanic forces upon those who deny the truth" in Q 19:83. For al-Rāzī, such primordial spiritual

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[223] Asad, *TMOQ,* 118, n. 90 on Q 4:76.

[224] Asad, *TMOQ,* 118, n. 90 on Q 4:76. Some commentators interpret this verse as a kind of inward, spiritual battle against the base passions of the soul, true believers stand with God against the lower elements of their own souls, whereas disbelievers are allies of their own lower souls against God (Sahl ibn 'Abd Allāh Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* [Louisville, KY : Fons Vitae; Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011], IV:55, on Q 4:76).

[225] "And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'Behold, God promised you something that was bound to come true! I, too, held out [all manner of] promises to you - but I deceived you. Yet I had no power at all over you: I but called you - and you responded unto me. Hence, blame not me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine: for, behold, I have [always] refused to admit that there was any truth in your erstwhile belief that I had a share in God's divinity.' Verily, for all evildoers there is grievous suffering in store."

[226] Rāzī, 19:113-114 on Q 14:22. In his own words, al-Ṭabarsī takes Satan's words thus, "I had no power to force or compel you to disbelieve and disobey (*wa mā kāna lī ʿalaykum sulṭanun bi'l-ikrāhi wa'l-ajbār ʿalā'l-kafri wa'l-maʿāṣī*) -- I only had the means of whispering and calling" (Ṭabarsī, 6:56, on Q 14:22).

forces are allowed to be active (*khallaynā*) in every person. It is ultimately left to "man's free will to accept or to reject those evil influences or impulses."[227]

Not every one of the eighty-eight citations of the root *sh-ṭ-n* in the Qurʾān is translated or rendered by Asad into "evil ones" or "evil impulses." But, he asks his readers to broaden their understanding of this root according to the foregoing interpretive principle. The above commentary on the qurʾānic usage of the root *sh-ṭ-n* shows us Asad's rather modern application of the method of *taʾwīl*. He hesitates to assign certain supernatural realities intrinsic to the term. Thus, he defies the theological convention which tends to assign a transcendental role to Satan as antithetical to the one, good God. That could only imply that both of these scholars obviously subscribe uncompromisingly to the absolute concept of *tawhīd*. Instead, Asad and al-Rāzī locate the value and meaning of *shaytan* within the sphere of moral decision-making of every intellectually endowed human being.

Asad also applies the same method of *taʾwīl* in his interpretation of the anthropomorphic phrase "established on the throne" or *istawā ʿalā al-ʿarshi* in Q 7:54. This verse is a reference to a material location or seat of God's power. The verse reads,

> "Verily, your Sustainer is God, who has created the heavens and the earth in six aeons, and is established on the throne of His almightiness (*istawā ʿalā al-ʿarshi*). He covers the day with the night in swift pursuit, with the sun and the moon and the stars subservient to His command: oh, verily, His is all creation and all command. Hallowed is God, the Sustainer of all the worlds!"

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[227] Rāzī, 21:251 f., on Q 19:83. Zamakhsharī, 3:40, on Q 19:83.

Asad does not read this phrase in its literal sense. That would imply that God is limited in space. Obviously, such a limitation would contradict the concept of a God who is an infinite Being. Consequently, Asad strongly cautions his readers that such an anthropomorphism should be seen as nothing more than a "linguistic vehicle meant to convey an idea which is outside all human experience, namely, the idea of God's almightiness and absolute sway over all that exists."[228] Asad prescribes the same interpretive principle when his readers encounter the other six qurʾānic citations in which God is spoken of as "established on the throne of His almightiness."[229] Moreover, similar interpretive principles should be employed, according to Asad, to other anthropomorphic elements like the directional location "in the heavens," or other attributes like "all-seeing," "all-hearing," or "all-aware." These descriptions, he says, "have nothing to do with the phenomenon of physical seeing or hearing but simply circumscribe, in terms understandable to humans, the fact of God's eternal Presence in all that is or happens."[230]

Was Asad dependent on the works and influence of al-Rāzī? At this point of our study, it is inconclusive. Nonetheless, it is fair to assume that there are kindred interpretive principles operating in the works of both of these scholars.

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[228] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990. Since mounting the Throne suggests the physical movement and location of a body, while God has no body according to Islamic thought, many commentators argue that this phrase is a symbol for God's demonstration of His sovereignty over his Creation (Ṭabarsī, 4:208 on Q 7:54).

[229] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990. Q 10:3; Q 13:2;Q 20:5; Q 25:59; Q 32:4.

[230] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990.

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Both assume that there can be no conflict between what human reasoning

imparts about God – about *al-ghayb* – and what the Qurʾān imparts about God.

2.4.2 The Modern Sources

2.4.2.1 Asad and Muḥammad ʿAbduh

The modernist and rationalist orientation of Muḥammad Asad's translation

and commentary on the Qurʾān may not be accurately understood outside of the

late modern reformist trend. That trend was pioneered by Jamāl al-Dīn al-

Afghānī,[231] advanced by Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and propagated by ʿAbduh's

disciple, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. While it cannot be denied that it was al-

Afghānī, a strong exponent of pan-Islamism, who initiated the modernist impulse

in the late modern period, it was at the time of ʿAbduh, especially during the last

quarter of the nineteenth century, that modernism in Egypt developed as a

definitive movement.

For this reason, we should see the development of Asad's mind linked

more closely to the flourishing of ʿAbduh's influence in this Islamic period. And,

that influence came particularly through ʿAbduh's commentary on the Qurʾān --

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[231] Al-Afghānī was known for his untiring pursuit of the unification of all Muslim peoples under one Islamic government, over which the one Supreme Caliph should bear undisputed rule, as in the glorious days of Islām before its power had been dissipated in endless dissensions and divisions, and the Muslim lands had lapsed into ignorance and helplessness, to become the prey of Western aggressions (Charles Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt* [London: Routledge, 2000], 4 ff.). For al-Afghānī, therefore, only when these countries were freed from the incubus of foreign domination or interference, and Islām itself reformed and adapted to the demands of present-day conditions, that Muslim peoples would be able to work out for themselves a new and glorious order of affairs, without dependence on, or imitation of, European nations. One of his ablest Egyptian students and the one closest to him and most sympathetic towards his views was Muhammad ʿAbduh of whom he said in his farewell speech at Suez in 1879, "I leave you Shaikh Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and he is sufficient for Egypt as a scholar" (Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983], 131–2).

which was recorded by his pupil, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. Riḍā's worked was based from the lectures of his teacher at al-Azhar. These commentaries, or the *Tafsīr al-Manār,* were subsequently published in the third volume of *Majalah al-Manār* in 1900 CE.[232] All of this significantly influenced Asad's vision of a modernist and rationalist rendition of the Qurʾān. Therefore, this section studies and traces ʿAbduh's intellectual influence on Asad's work to give us a broader understanding of the interpretive dynamics of Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān.*

As related in Chapter One, Asad heard of Muḥammad ʿAbduh for the first time through his meeting with one of the latter's disciples, Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī (d. 1945)[233] during his first visit to the Middle East in late Spring of 1923. By that time, ʿAbduh's reformist teachings had already spread like wildfire. They had captivated many students and admirers from the Mediterranean basin to the Far East. Many believed that his reformist principles shook the religious, social and

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[232] Charles Adams, *Orientalism: Early Sources, Islām and Modernism in Egypt* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 181; the *Tafsīr al-Manār* reflects the views of both Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā, though it was largely written by Riḍā (*Ibid.,* 198). The commentary on al-ʿAṣr (Q 103) was first printed followed by the final section of the Qurʾān surahs 78-114 and the al-Fātiḥa (*Ibid.,* 199). The name *al-Manār* is also to be distinguished from the circle of *al-Manār* which was coined by Ignaz Goldziher in his *Schools of Koranic Commentators* (ed. & trans. W. Behn [Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006], 211), to refer to those who fell under the influence of the teachings of Muḥammad ʿAbduh.

[233] Al-Marāghī was also closely associated with the inspiring firebrand Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī. He became the rector of al-Azhar University twice (1928-1929 and 1935-1945) and Asad describes him as "one of the most prominent Islamic scholars of the time and certainly the most brilliant among the ʿulamāʾ of al-Azhar" (Asad, *The Road to Mecca,* 202). Under his leadership at al-Azhar an extensive reorganization was undertaken with a view to its greater adaptation to modern conditions in Egypt (Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 209). He was also credited as one of the most important early proponents of allowing translations of the Qurʾān, and also promoted teaching English and other European Languages at al-Azhar (Stefan Wild, "Muslim Translators and Translations of the Qurʾān into English," *Journal of qurʾānic Studies* 17.3 [2015[: 165 [158-182]).

political status quo of many Muslim societies around the world – even before his

death in 1905.

2.4.2.1.1   The Emerging Reformer

The genesis of Muḥammad ʿAbduh's reformist impulse may be traced

back to his early criticism of the *ṭarīqah al-taʿlīm* or method of instruction he

experienced while learning the Qurʾān and Arabic grammar at a local Aḥmadī

Mosque in Ṭanṭā, Egypt. He complained that students did not understand,

> "a single thing, because of the harmful character (*radāʾah*) of the method
> of instruction; for the teachers were accustomed to use technical terms of
> grammar or jurisprudence which we did not understand, nor did they take
> any pains to explain their meaning to those who did not know it."[234]

He subsequently realized that his experience was a microcosm of the

state of instruction in the whole of Egypt. He says that it is

> "the very same method which is in use in the Azhar; and this is in effect
> experienced by ninety-five out of a hundred of those whom fate does not
> permit to attend upon someone who does not follow this manner of
> instruction, namely, wherein the teacher throws out what he knows, and
> what he does not know, without paying regard to the pupil and his capacity
> for understanding."[235]

ʿAbduh himself experienced a similar ordeal when he attended al-Azhar,

saying that it "inflicted injury (*ḍurr*) to his intellect and his reason." Thus, after al-

Azhar, he tried to sweep his mind clean of such methods but never entirely

succeeded.[236] Reforming the Egyptian and Islamic educational system became

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[234] Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār* viii (Misr: Maṭbaʿah al-Manār, July 19, 1905): viii: 381 (digital version).

[235] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 381-382.

[236] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 399.

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Muḥammad ʿAbduh's initial hallmark of a campaign to change this institution. It was an effort that later inspired and gave birth to one of the most influential movements in modern Islamic times.[237] In particular, he sought "to bring into being a new generation among the people of Egypt which will revive the Arabic language[238] and the Islamic sciences, and will correct the deviations of the Egyptian Government."[239]

However, ʿAbduh's reformist efforts would be disrupted with the outbreak of the "ʿUrābī Rebellion."[240] In this rebellion, he was implicated as a conspirator and was eventually exiled to Lebanon. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī reached out to

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[237] While teaching at al-Azhar, ʿAbduh used his lectures to demonstrate the same methods of reasoning and logical proof which al-Afghānī had taught him to use (Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 404). As his teaching reputation spread, he was concurrently appointed to teach history in the school called *Dār al-ʿUlūm*, as well as Arabic Language and Literature in the Khedive School of Languages (*Ibid.*). ʿAbduh envisaged *Dār al-ʿUlūm* to be the school for the future ʿulamāʾ in an attempt to reform the educational dynamics at al-Azhar by teaching them more practical and modern ways alongside modern sciences (Yvonne Haddad, "Muḥammad ʿAbduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform," *Pioneers of Islamic Revival,* ed. ʿAlī Rahnema (New York: Zed Books 2005), 32; Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 45).

[238] This advocacy further led to the foundation of The Society for the Revival of the Arabic Sciences, of which Muḥammad ʿAbduh was the president (Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 491). During his leadership ʿAbduh revived the works of the great Imāms and scholars of the past, edited rhetorical and philological manuscripts, including the *Muwaṭṭā* of Imām Mālik (*Ibid.*).

[239] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 404. Due to an unfavorable political climate, ʿAbduh's teaching was interrupted; but the government offered him soon after that to become the new editor of the *Journal Officiel* of the Egyptian Government, *Al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣriyyah* ("Egyptian proceedings") (Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām Shaykh Muḥammad ʿAbduh* [Cairo: Maṭbaʿah al-Manār, 1931], III:82 [digital version]; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 29-30). This position somehow provided ʿAbduh another opportunity to advance his cause, namely, to promote literacy in Arabic language in Egypt. At that, he was also able to secure a wider hearing for his views and a wider field for his reforming activities, even offering criticism of the Government's conduct of its schools. He believed that Arabic language is the basis of the Islamic religion (Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* III:259), in fact, reforming the Arabic language was, for ʿAbduh, the only means to the reform of religion and its beliefs, the single means by which Muslims are able to access the books of the religion and the sayings of the earlier generation (Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 84-5).

[240] This uprising was inspired and spearheaded by its namesake, Colonel Aḥmad ʿUrābī Pasha (d. 1911). Investigated and arraigned as a conspirator, ʿAbduh would be sentenced to exile to Beirut in September of 1882 and would not be permitted re-entry to Egypt for three-and-a-half years.

him in Beirut and he agreed to collaborate with his organization *al-ʿUrwah al-Wuthqah* ("the Indissoluble bond") which was based in Paris.[241] But, since the organization's mission statement sounded radical and aggressive, local leaders soon suppressed their journal. ʿAbduh's partnership with Jamāl al-Dīn eventually dissolved. ʿAbduh was not an advocate of agitation and revolution as he viewed its political end as hopeless. Rather, he espoused a slower method of reform through education.[242]

Returning to Beirut, ʿAbduh landed a teaching position at the Sulṭaniyya School where he had another opportunity to pursue his vision of reform.[243] However, three and a half years later, the Egyptian government allowed him to go home.[244] Those years from his return up until his death were remembered as his most productive as far as his important contributions to Egypt and to Islām are concerned.[245] He remained unrelenting in his activism to renew the

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[241] Literally, *The Indissoluble Bond*; may be distinguished from its publication or journal and namesake. Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 455; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh,* 4 f. This group's objective was to arouse public opinion, mainly through their short-lived newspaper of the same name, and to forge unity among Muslim nations around the world against Western aggression and exploitation (Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 9; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 43 ff.).

[242] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 60; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh,* 57 ff.

[243] Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* trans., I, Musa and K. Cragg (New York: Books for Libraries, 1980), 1; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh,* 59 ff.

[244] *Ibid.,* 71. While this return was a relief for Muḥammad ʿAbduh, he also came home with some sense of Western nostalgia, although much less of a romantic sentiment than intellectual. Charles Adams describes ʿAbduh's disposition while visiting some European nations as one of "an eager and interested observer of that Western Civilization" (Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 66). As a matter of fact, ʿAbduh himself would later reminisce of his Western sojourn as one of "mercy and blessing, a contribution to the completeness of his learning and his education, and a means to the dissemination of his learning in many lands" (Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 465).

[245] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 68. ʿAbduh was appointed as Qāḍī or Judge, despite his wish to return to teaching at *Dār al-ʿUlūm*, and later promoted to be a member of the national Court of Appeal (Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* III:68; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh,*

"backward state" of his *alma mater*, al-Azhar, especially its administration and its pedagogy.

ʿAbduh believed that if al-Azhar were reformed, Islām would be reformed.[246] Another source states that he wished "Azhar would become a 'lighthouse' and a means of guidance to all the Muslim World."[247] However, after a close encounter with the West, ʿAbduh's plans to reform al-Azhar were said to be more appropriate for a European university than for a true Islamic institution.[248] Another political crisis would soon disrupt his reformist projects again and would send him into retirement in March of 1905.

Be that as it may be, Muḥammad ʿAbduh's reforming impulse and spirit outlived him. He would be remembered for his dreams and vision for reform. From Syria and Morocco to the Subcontinent of India, and from the Far East to South and North America, his name became an inspiration. It sparked a challenge to the perceived decadent status of the fundamentals of Islām.

2.4.2.1.2   Back to the "True Islām"

Muḥammad ʿAbduh was fully aware that he was pursuing the reformist path when the Muslim world of his time was in a state of decline and dismal

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72 f.). In June of 1899 he was appointed Muftī of Egypt, the supreme official interpreter of the canon law of Islām (the *Sharīʿah*) for the whole country; and his *fatwās*, or legal opinions, touching any matters that were referred to him, were considered authoritative and final (Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 80; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 77 f.).

[246] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 470.

[247] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 471.

[248] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 895; Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 101-2.

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stagnation.[249] He had his own views about why this society was in such a state

of decline in spite of the fact that prophets had come to perfect the social order

and to offer a path to well-being for everyone. He says that,

> "after the time of the prophets and the passing of their regime, religion fell
> into the hands of those who quite failed to understand it, or lapsed into
> extremism, or else they did not sincerely love it at all."[250]

ʿAbduh laid the responsibility for the backward state of Muslims on their

rulers and religious leaders. The rulers, he said, have been ignorant of Islām and

its law. They permitted freedom which caused the proliferation of evil-doing and

unbelief, while they limited freedom in the exercise of learning and thought.

Furthermore, they substituted laws of human origin for the Divine Law.[251] The

ʿ*ulamāʾ*, on the other hand, neglected the Qurʾān and the Sunnah and the moral

teachings of their religion. Instead, he maintained, they have magnified

differences of sects, and made much of works of law and theology while

neglecting the training of the people.[252] Thus, many Muslims were misguided and

misled, causing a distortion of the real picture of Islām in the contemporary

times.[253]

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[249] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 550; ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 138.

[250] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 104.

[251] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* i:606

[252] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 107.

[253] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 34-35. According to Hourani, this fear of history as a force of corruption leading to decline has been inherent in the teachings of Islām from its earliest time onwards, "With the full articulation of the message of Muḥammad..., what was significant in history came to an end. History could have no more lessons to teach, if there was change it could only be for the worse..." (Hourani, *Arabic Thought,* 8).

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So, ʿAbduh believed that Islām is not really Islām, but simply a nominal Islām. Consequently, this Islām could not be held responsible for the contemporary decline of Muslims and there was no need to renounce it. Be that as it may be, the messengers of God are only guides to salvation. Those who have accepted their guidance have come to happiness. Those who have not, have come to a bitter end.[254] In his own words, he says,

> "religion is a guide, but human weakness impedes those who are called to take its guidance to themselves. Yet that weakness does not disqualify the perfection of religion, nor yet man's urgent need for it. 'God leads some astray and other He enlightens: but only the evil doers does He mislead'."[255]

ʿAbduh argues that Muslims in modern times are in great need of remedy. Islām needs reform and restoration to its true and sound nature.[256] He was determined to find the cure even if it caused him to lie awake at night pondering the problem.[257] Returning to "the true Islam" entails the recovery of the essentials of that religion. That means a minimum of beliefs without which Islām would not be Islam.[258] What is needed is the true Islām which all could recognize as such, and around which all could unite.[259] ʿAbduh equates "true Islām" with original

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[254] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 106.

[255] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 106, citing Q 2:26.

[256] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 96-97.

[257] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 550;

[258] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 107. According to Hourani, as a reformer, ʿAbduh might have regarded himself a member of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jamāʿah*, a self-appointed, self-recognized, unorganized body of "concerned" Muslims, believing in the revelation of Muḥammad, wishing to preserve it unaltered amidst the changes of time, seeking in it guidance in the new problems cast up by those changes, defending it (*Arabic Thought,* 8).

[259] Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* II: 477.

(*aṣlī*) Islām. By that, he meant Islām as it was revealed and practiced by Muḥammad and the earliest Muslims.

This overview puts strong emphasis on the two canons of Islām as ʿAbduh saw them. The first canon is the original Qurʾān that is impermeable to later accretions.[260] The second is the genuine Sunnah as it was ascertained by strong and unbroken *isnād.*[261] In a way, this view of the two Islamic canons would mean revision of the system of law which is one of the essential parts of Islam. It implies that the law needs to be adaptable as an instrument of government when modern conditions seemed to require it.[262]

ʿAbduh's vision of reform was two-pronged. First, it proposed reforming the religion and restoring it to the simplicity and effectiveness of its early days. Second, it anticipated and promoted the return of people to a sincere and enthusiastic acceptance and practice of this 'pure' religion. This path to the recovery of essentials is distinguished from al-Afghānī's political revolution and from that of those who advocated Western learning and customs. Adopting Western ways, they believed, was the only hope.

However, for ʿAbduh, the best hope for success was a general awakening in every Muslim country.[263] This awakening would consist in the correction of the articles of belief and freeing it from harmful innovations. Hence, Islām could be

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[260] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 32.

[261] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 64.

[262] Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* II: 477.

[263] Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* II: 477.

freed from disorder and confusion. It could then bring understanding and

enlightenment through the help of true sciences, both religious and secular.[264]

2.4.2.1.3   Religion and Reason

Muḥammad ʿAbduh believed that the faculty of human reason and religion

-- in this case Islām and its articles of faith -- should have a dialectical

relationship.[265] He says that religion, with its inaccessible sphere of

transcendence, "checks upon human reason...to hold men back from excesses

and lessen their errors."[266] Human reason, on the other hand, is a God-given

faculty which sits in judgment upon religion.[267]

For human happiness to exist, ʿAbduh believes that there should be a

healthy convergence or confluence between religion and human reason. Religion

provides that sphere in which the ultimate cause and source of guidance is to be

discerned and discovered. But, it is reason which examines the proofs of these

beliefs and rules of conduct. Reason must arrive at a knowledge of these beliefs

and rules to be assured that they emanate from God.[268]

This exalted regard for reason in Islām is demonstrated in the Qurʾān's

insistence in raising reason to a place of the first importance. Reason must

make the final decision regarding the matter of happiness, and in the distinction

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[264] Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām,* II: 477.

[265] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 107-108.

[266] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 892.

[267] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 103, 115, 117.

[268] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 107-108, 126-127.

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between truth and falsehood, and between what is harmful and what is beneficial.[269]

Hence, according to ʿAbduh, the priority of reason in Islām is apparent in the revealed text. He insists that when there is a conflict between reason and what has been given by tradition (*naql*), reason should be given preference. Similarly, it is the duty of reason -- once it determines that a prophet is accepted as a true prophet – to believe all that he came to reveal even though the true meaning of it cannot be understood.[270]

Since his student days, ʿAbduh had rejected the doctrine of *taqlīd*, the uncritical acceptance of belief on the authority of others.[271] Instead, he consistently advocated for the practice of *ijtihād* in order to free the mind from the chains of authority.[272] He alludes to this in his *Theology of Unity* when he says,

> "Islām will have no truck with traditionalism, against which it campaigns relentlessly, to break its power over men's minds and eradicate its deep-seated influence. The underlying bases of *taqlīd* in the beliefs of the nations have been shattered by Islām."[273]

For him, the practice of *taqlīd* is, in itself, antithetical to the spirit of the Qurʾān which propounds laws or guidance in a way that prepare its readers to use reason and gain insights. If *taqlīd*, ʿAbduh argues, is tolerated – as it was by many of the ʿulamāʾ of his time -- religion would be vitiated. But, if the exercise of

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[269] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 107-108.

[270] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 31-32, 39, 66, 71, 107-108.

[271] Sedgwick, *Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 118-120.

[272] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii: 892

[273] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 126.

reason is embraced, there is hope for the revival of religion. He cites Q 2:171 as

clearly challenging the notion of *taqlīd.* It reads,

> "and so, the parable of those who are bent on denying the truth is that of
> the beast which hears the shepherd's cry, and hears in it nothing but the
> sound of a voice and a call. Deaf are they, and dumb, and blind: for they
> do not use their reason."[274]

This verse, according to ʿAbduh,

> clearly announces that belief on authority, without reason and guidance, is
> a characteristic of the godless. For one becomes a believer only when he
> grasps his religion with reason, and comprehends it with his soul, so that
> he becomes fully convinced of it. But he who is trained to simply admit,
> without the use of reason, and to practice without thinking -- even though it
> be something good -- he is not to be called a believer. For the design of
> faith is not this, that man should be drilled for the good, as though he were
> trained for it like an animal; rather, that the reason and soul of the man
> should be elevated by knowledge and comprehension... and that should
> practice the good, not only for the reason that he is thoughtlessly imitating
> his fathers and ancestors. For this reason, the Qurʾān here calls the
> unbelievers 'Deaf are they, and dumb, and blind: for they do not use their
> reason.'[275]

2.4.2.1.4   Qurʾānic Exegesis

One of the ways by which Muḥammad ʿAbduh tried to conceptualize and

articulate his reformist vision was through his commentary of the Qurʾān. In order

to have a deeper grasp on his interpretative orientation of the Qurʾān, it is

imperative to acknowledge ʿAbduh's general understanding of the Qurʾān itself.

As mentioned, when speaking of the Qurʾān, he means the text itself

which he contends is unchanged. In his work, *The Theology of Unity,* ʿAbduh

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[274] Asad, *TMOQ,*

[275] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* vii:442. Quoted by Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,*
131-132,

says, "only the Qurʾān remained unimpaired in its continuity."[276] He questions the value of these "accretions" added to the Qurʾān throughout the history of Islām. He asks, "what are these accretions to their religion, when all the time Muslims have the very Book of God as a balance in which to weigh and discriminate all their conjectures and yet its injunctions they abandon and forsake."[277] Moreover, throughout his commentary, ʿAbduh insists on the divine character of the book, asserting that it is infallibly inspired in every particular.[278]

As an inspired book, however, he refuses to make it identical with God's attribute of speech. Thus, it cannot be labeled as eternal or uncreated. Accused of being ambiguous in his treatment of orthodox belief, ʿAbduh was later prompted to clarify his position in *The Theology of Unity.* In this book, he says that the Qurʾān is an expression or idea of the speech of God and is, therefore, eternal. But, the manifestation of it, including its words which are pronounced and read, are created. Nonetheless, he argues that it is an inspired book which entails that "every order and arrangement of the words and the connection of thought are held to be inspired."[279]

Rashīd Riḍā observes that ʿAbduh provided an interpretation with "a spiritual sense suitable to civilization, by which it will be proven that the wise Qurʾān is for every age the source of religious and social well-being."[280] Indeed,

[276] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 32.

[277] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 151.

[278] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 201.

[279] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 201.

[280] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* vi:198.

such a notion of the relevance and currency of the Qurʾān prompted ʿAbduh to part ways with the nineteenth-century Islamic orthodoxy because of his emphasis on independent and current reading of the Qurʾān. Rather than rely on older interpretations, he deemed it imperative that the Qurʾān should be consulted and read anew each time.[281] In a sense, ʿAbduh was taking a categorical position against the established practice of *taqlīd* and the adherence to interpretations from the established theological and legal schools.[282] In comparing ʿAbduh's commentary to that of his predecessors, Riḍā says that earlier interpretations of the Qurʾān obscured its real character as a revelation of light and guidance and a means for the purification of people's souls.[283] Such is the reformist orientation in ʿAbduh's commentary, according to Riḍā.

2.4.2.1.5   Echoing Exegetical Principles

There are, at least, three fundamental principles that connect Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Muḥammad Asad regarding qurʾānic exegesis. First, both are similar in their appraisal of the Qurʾān as a book of divine revelation. Like ʿAbduh, Asad distinguishes between the Qurʾān compiled some decades after the Prophet's death and the "message" which was revealed, recited and listened to for twenty-three years. He calls that revealed "message" a "divine writ," or "divine revelation," and says it is of "divinely-inspired origin."

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[281] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 129.

[282] ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity,* 125.

[283] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt*, 111, citing Riḍā's introduction to the revised 1927 edition of *Majalah al-Manār.*

Asad acknowledges that there was a sequential process in the development of the Qurʾān. Its origins could be traced from the moment of "revelation" to Muḥammad to the compilation of the *muṣḥaf,* or the collection of written sheets with the message of revelation. Both ʿAbduh and Asad share the view that the former represents the eternal and God's uncreated speech. The latter is the manifestation of the created components of the Qurʾān. Second, ʿAbduh emphasized that the human faculty of reason – the *ʿaql* – has "full authority" in the interpretation of the Qurʾān. This is one of the most elaborated features in Asad's qurʾānic translation.

Asad himself introduces *The Message of the Qurʾān* with the proviso that, unlike other sacred scriptures, the Qurʾān stresses "reason" as a valid way to faith since it is inherently a rational piece of literature.[284] This dialectical relationship between the faculty of human reason and the rationality of the Qurʾān was discussed in Chapter One. Asad uses the qurʾānic expression *khasīmun mubīnun* ("endowed with the power to think and to argue") in Q 16:4 to remind human beings of their God-given capacity to reason. The expression *ʿalā baṣīratin* ("resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason") in Q 12:108 characterizes the rational disposition of the Qurʾān.

Echoing ʿAbduh's fundamental principle, Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* similarly embraces the dialectical engagement between "reason" and "the divine textual message." The former accesses and examines the latter for

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[284] Asad, *TMOQ*, ii.

knowledge useful for belief and rules of conduct. The divine message, on the other hand, tempers human reason from potential excesses and errors.

Third, Asad also embraces ʿAbduh's suggestion that the Qurʾān is a literary work which possesses an internal "order and arrangement" (*nazm*)[285] and should be viewed as conveying a unity of meaning. For this reason, Asad cautions readers not to view the Qurʾān as a mere compilation of individual injunctions and exhortations, but as "one integral whole,"[286] that is,

> "as an exposition of an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, all of them clarifying and amplifying one another. Consequently, its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of its statements with what has been stated elsewhere in its pages, and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross-references, always subordinating the particular to the general and incidental to the intrinsic. Whenever this rule is faithfully followed, we realize that the Qurʾān is - in the words of Muḥammad ʿAbduh – 'its own best commentary.'"[287]

Because they share an exegetical method in interpreting the Qurʾān with the Qurʾān (*tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān*), Abduh and Asad, therefore, disapprove a method of reading the Qurʾān from a strictly historical point of view. The latter approach insists that the Qurʾān may only be read meaningfully when its implied circumstances and events are somehow historically verifiable. Instead, Asad prescribes that any "historical" references should be regarded as an "illustration of the human condition and not as ends in themselves."[288]

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[285] The concept of *nazm* will be discussed in the next chapter.

[286] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

[287] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

[288] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

While not dismissing the conscientious and legitimate pursuits of those who advocate for the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions or circumstances of revelation) principle during the Middle Ages, Asad, like ʿAbduh, warns that such an effort should never be allowed to obscure the underlying purpose of a verse and its ethical importance in the Qurʾān. That is more important, according to these two scholars, than learning about the historical occasions on which a particular verse was revealed. [289]

This "organic" approach to understanding the Qurʾān may be illustrated in the way Q 3:125 is interpreted by both *The Message of the Qurʾān* and *Tafsīr al-Manār.* The verse says,

> "Nay, but if you are patient in adversity (*taṣbirū*) and conscious (*wa-tattaqū*) of Him, and the enemy should fall upon you of a sudden, your Sustainer will aid you with five thousand angels (*bi-khamsati ālāfin mina'l-malā'ikati*) swooping down!"

According to a standard interpretation, this verse refers to God's promise to send 5000 angels to support the Muslims in the Battle of Uḥud (625 CE). Asad agrees with the rationalist reading by *Tafsīr al-Manār* that this pre-battle announcement by God through Muḥammad signifies a metaphorical "strengthening of the believers' hearts through spiritual forces coming from God" (*bi'l-ilhamāti al-ṣāliḥah allatī tuthabbitaha wa-taqwā ʿazīmataha*).[290] By employing

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[289] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

[290] Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār,* 4:81 ff., on Q 3:125; Asad, *TMOQ,* 86, n. 93 on Q 3:125. Asad contextualizes this need for inspirational exhortation by the Prophet in the fact that, first, the number of Muslims going to battle is less than a thousand Muslims against the Meccan army comprising ten thousand men; second, on the way to Mount Uḥud, the Muslim force is further reduced by the defection of three-hundred men led by ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ubayy, and shortly before the battle two other groups clans (Banū Salamah and Banū Ḥārithah) among the Prophet's forces almost lost heart and where about to join the defectors (Q 3:122), but at the last moment decided to follow the Prophet; hence, the inspirational exhortation (*Ibid.,* 85-86, n. 90 on Q 3:121).

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a metaphorical reading, both *The Message of the Qurʾān* and *al-Manār* agree

that the term "angels" in this verse or context should not be read or

conceptualized as reified entity. Instead, the Prophet's allusion to thousands of

angels should be understood allegorically as a message given to strengthen the

morale and drooping spirit of believers.[291] Asad and *al-Manār* are motivated to

demythologize the word "angel" because they took note of the restrictive

adverbial particle *illa* followed by the object *bushrā* in the following verse (Q

3:126) thus,[292]

> "And God ordained this [to be said by His Apostle] only (*illa*) as a glad
> tiding (*bushrā*)[293] for you, and that your hearts should thereby be set at
> rest - since no succour can come from any save God, the Almighty, the
> Truly Wise."

In this textual context, therefore, both *The Message of the Qurʾān* and *al-*

Manār suggest that the words of the Prophet were but a "promise to his

followers." That is, the *Qurʾān* does not explicitly enunciate that a host of angels

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[291] Asad's interpretation finds echoes in some classical commentators who see the help of the angels as being spiritual, strengthening the believer's hearts, heightening their senses, increasing their power, and giving them courage by their presence (Rāzī, 8:187 f., on Q 3:125). However, many commentators also hold that the angels fought only at Badr (Ibn Kathīr, 2:258 ff., on Q 3:125; Rāzī, 8:188, on Q 3:125) and that the ones at Uḥud were sent as a kind of moral support (Ibn Kathīr, 2:260 f. on Q 3:125; Qurṭubī, 4:189 f., on Q 3:125; Rāzī, 8:188, on Q 3:125), although some have pointed out that God does not need angels to support the believers (Ṭabarī, 4:98 ff., on Q 3:125). They are thought to have participated in the battle in various ways. Some say the angels assumed visible or invisible form and actually killed disbelievers, and accounts exist in the *Ḥadīth and sīra* that describe certain mysterious deaths (e.g. heads flying off enemies' bodies as if severed) witnessed during the battle of Badr (Ibn Kathīr, 2:258 ff., on Q 3:125; Qurṭubī, 4:189 f., on Q 3:125).

[292] Asad, *TMOQ,* 87, n. 94 on Q 3:126; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 4:81 ff., on Q 3:126. Some commentators interpret *illa bushrā* to be a reference to the support mentioned in Q 3:125 (Rāzī, 8:188 f., on Q 3:126), where believers would find happiness in the fact that the angels would come (Ibn Kathīr, 2:261, on Q 3:126) or at least in the promise that they would come (Qurṭubī, 4:194, on Q 3:126).

[293] Other renditions: Yūsuf ʿAlī, "but a message of hope"; Pickthall, "only as a message of good cheer"; Qarāʾī, "but as a goodness"; Abdel Haleem, "except as [a sign of] good tidings"; Droge, "only intended that as good news."

will come literally to their succour.[294] Moreover, by asserting this interpretation, Asad appears to also question the "historical" veracity or accuracy of what transpired in the previous battle when he adds, "see Q 8:9, where a similar promise is voiced on the occasion of the battle of Badr." [295]

In a relatively similar situation in which there were too few soldiers going into battle, the Prophet prays for help and God replies. By implication, God says that there will be success in the future, promising "I shall, verily, aid you with a thousand angels following one upon another!" This divine promise is similarly characterized in the next verse (Q 8:10) with, "and God ordained this only as a glad tiding (*illa bushrā*), and that your hearts should thereby be set at rest." Here, the Qurʾān reports that God made the same promise at the battle of Badr, which is the promise referenced by the Prophet in Q 3:124 in Uḥud.

However, nowhere in this context does the Qurʾān declare that both promises took place in a literal way. Each of these promises is simply alluded to as *illa bushrā* or "only a glad tiding."[296] Whether there were real angels who participated in both battles or not, Asad and *al-Manār* infer that the meaning of both promises suggests only spiritual aid. That is, the reference to angels was

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[294] There is also a disagreement among commentators over whether the promise of Q 3:125 to *aid* them *with five thousand angels* was fulfilled or whether the believers failed to be patient and reverent so that the five thousand angels were never sent (Qurṭubī, 4:194, on Q 3:126; Ṭabarī, 4:108 f., on Q 3:126).

[295] Asad, *TMOQ,* 87, n. 94 on Q 3:126.

[296] In his interpretation of Q 8:12 about whether the angels physically participated at Badr, Mawdūdī says "in view of the general principle propounded in the Qurʾān we presume that the angels did not take part in the actual fighting. What we may suggest is that the angels helped the Muslims and as a result their blows became more accurate and effective (III:142, n. 10 on Q 8:12).

only meant to inspire and "give firmness unto those who have attained to faith" (Q 8:12).[297]

Therefore, by exercising the interpretative strategy of *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān,* both Asad and *Tafsīr al-Manār* subscribe to the "organic" character of the Qurʾān where it serves as "its own best commentary."[298]

2.4.2.2   Asad and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā

Muḥammad Asad likewise makes specific mention of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā's contribution to his qurʾānic exegesis in *TMOQ*. In fact, there are at least fifteen citations in which Riḍā's modernist and rationalist perspective in *Tafsīr al-Manār* are referred to as Asad discusses particular verses. But first, it is worthwhile to trace Riḍā's origin and upbringing which shaped his reformist orientation vis-à-vis the state of Islām in the Muslim world.

While Riḍā's reformist views became much more public when he became associated with Muḥammad ʿAbduh later in his career, his ideological formation apparently began during his early years. He grew up in a family known for its

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[297] Asad, *TMOQ,* 239, n. 10 on Q 8:10; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 4:81 ff., on Q 3:125-126, IX:612 ff. on Q 8:12. Asad claimed in his *Arabia* article entitled "Clarification" that his rational and spiritual comment about the "angels" in this particular textual context was misunderstood as "denying the existence of angels" by the *Rabitah's* Council who initially pledged to sponsor the publication of his qurʾānic translation project, but later revoked it. Asad blamed their insufficient command of English (especially Pakistani Council members) and he retorted that "this allegation is, of course, totally false and absolute nonsense. On almost every page of my translation and commentary there is mention of angels, and no Muslim in his right mind can or will deny that the Qurʾān is full of references to angels and angelic forces. Of course, we do not know or pretend to know what the angels really are and how they manifest themselves: they belong to the realm of *al-ghayb* - 'that is beyond the reach of human perception' - of which God alone has full knowledge" (*Ibid.,* 4).

[298] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii.

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scholarship and piety in the village of al-Qalamun near Tripoli, Syria (later Lebanon). Riḍā, like Asad, had an early start with education in the qurʾānic school.[299]

Like ʿAbduh, that early education was also instrumental in shaping a reformist orientation. Riḍā's early education began in an "ancient way," but, coming a generation later than his master, he also benefitted from a new type of education. This newer educational system was based on the Western model and spread by European missionaries, by the Ottoman government, and by ethnic communities.[300] He studied under the educational model instituted by the Syrian scholar Husayn al-Jisr (d. 1909) who opened an Islamic national school in Tripoli. It was a school system meant to prove that Muslims could progress by synthesizing traditional Islamic religious education and Europe's modern national sciences.[301] Albert Hourani describes the influences that shaped the intellectual and ideological disposition of the young Riḍā thus,

> "The great intellectual influence stand out clearly. In Ḥusayn al-Jisr's school and through the writings of the Lebanese journalists of Cairo he caught his first glimpse of modern science and the new world of Europe and America. Among the Islamic classics he fell under the spell of Ghazālī's *Iḥya' ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of Religious Sciences*), and in a sense this was to remain the deepest influence of his life."[302]

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[299] Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 224 f. (222-244).

[300] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 224.

[301] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 222.

[302] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 224.

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The *Iḥya'* persuaded Riḍā that reforming Islām to halt its decline and support Muslims around the world was a moral imperative.[303] He was also drawn to the ideologies of people behind the journal *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā*, namely, al-Afghānī and ʿAbduh. Reading this journal for the first time he said,

> "All I wanted to do before I had read *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā* was to teach the tenets of Islām and the transitory nature of life on earth. Now I saw a new light: to work for the unification of the Muslims of the World. My duty I now knew lay in guiding the faithful to the ways of progress and modern civilization."[304]

Riḍā himself pursued instruction from both of these reformers. But mostly, he received it from his association with ʿAbduh. In fact, Riḍā was later identified as a disciple and intellectual heir of ʿAbduh in Cairo even after the latter's death in 1905 CE.[305] ʿAbduh loved and trusted his pupil, and Riḍā regarded his master with unbounded admiration, celebrating him as the greatest teacher of Islām in modern times.[306] Riḍā would later receive the title as "the mouthpiece of his ideas, the guardian of his good name, and his biographer."[307]

The scholarly work of Riḍā in the Muslim sciences was highly respected and praised. On the other hand, he did not attempt independent work in either theology or philosophy. He limited himself to editing his master's works and comments though he certainly showed a proficient grasp of the subjects

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[303] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 225.

[304] As quoted in Jamāl Aḥmad, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960). 1-29.

[305] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 179.

[306] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* viii:456; also Ibid., *Tarīkh al-Ustadh al-Imām*, 84, 85.

[307] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 226.

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involved.[308] He was particularly adept in the field of traditions. The ʿAbduh movement emphasized the "genuine Sunnah only" as one of the essential sources of revised Islām.[309]

2.4.2.2.1   *Al-Manār*, Reconstructing the Muslim World

With his early training in journalism, Rashīd Riḍā always desired to start his own journal to perpetuate the reformist tradition begun by *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqā*.[310] So, Riḍā moved to Cairo and became acquainted with Muḥammad ʿAbduh. This friendship could not have presented him with a greater opportunity.

The *al-Manār* first appeared in March 17, 1898 as a weekly, and was then published as a monthly journal after a year. Some of its articles were reformist and intended to promote social, religious and economic reforms. This journal aimed to prove the suitability of Islām as a religious system and the practicability of the Divine Law as an instrument of government. It aimed to remove superstitions and beliefs that did not belong to Islām, and to counteract false teachings and interpretations of Muslim beliefs. These false teachings were prevalent and included ideas of predestination, bigotry within the different

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[308] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 180; cf. Ana Belen Soage, "Rashīd Riḍā's Legacy," in *The Muslim World*, 98 (January 2008): 2 (1-22).

[309] Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 180. Citing Goldziher's opinion on Riḍā's ability to test the genuineness of the various traditions, the former says that he has developed "a great mastership that reminds one at times of the ancient classics of Ḥadīth criticism" (*Koranauslegung*, 335).

[310] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* ii:340.

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schools, rites, and in canon law. There were also other abuses connected with the cult of saints and the practices of the Ṣūfī orders.

The *al-Manār* encouraged tolerance and unity among the different sects. It promoted general education, urged the reform of textbooks and methods of education, and encouraged progress in the sciences and arts. And this journal aroused the Muslim nations to compete with other nations in all matters which were essential for national progress.[311]

Beginning with the third year of its publication, a new section was added. It was a commentary on the Qurʾān by Muḥammad ʿAbduh. Riḍā himself was the most prolific contributor to the column.[312] He wrote trenchant criticisms of the existing order of things in Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world while zealously advocating the principles of ʿAbduh.

Al-*Manār* was read by many people in Egypt's highest social classes. But, it also developed a wide circulation in many other Muslim countries, including India, Indonesia, and several countries in northern and southern Africa [313] Its influence also extended into many Egyptian political, educational, and religious societies.[314]

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[311] Summarized in Adams, *Islām and Modernism in Egypt,* 181 from Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* i:11, 12.

[312] Shahin, *Riḍā,* 9, although Riḍā wrote most of the articles, some well-known figures have also contributed like ʿAbd Raḥmān al-Rāfʿī, Muṣṭafā al-Manfalūtī, etc.

[313] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār,* xii:14.

[314] Shahin, *Riḍā,* 13. The most significant of these societies were Jamʿīyat al-Shubbān al-Muslimūn (Muslim Youth Association) and al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn (The Muslim Brothers) both of which played an important political role in the 1930s. See also Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 231-2 (231-244).

It was the decadence of the Muslim world and the Western threat that motivated Riḍā to publish *al-Manār.* With the influx of modern education and institutions into Muslim countries like India and throughout the Ottoman Empire, Riḍā identified two worrisome trends.[315]

The first advocated the preservation of old customs and traditions and relied on the compliance of the masses – all in the name of religion. The second trend focused on a privileged minority. Those who made up this group had a modern education and the ability to think freely. This small but influential group wanted a complete break with tradition.

Between these two trends, Riḍā claimed, there was a third trend. This route sought to purify and revive commendable traditions and reconcile them with the modern world.[316] Through his writings in *al-Manār,* Riḍā attempted to convince adherents of the first two views that Islām did not contradict modern science, reason, or civilization.[317] While Riḍā may have had negative views about European things and ideas,[318] he also recognized their impact. Thus, he wanted Islām to accept the new civilization only insofar as it was essential for its recovery and survival.

He justified this policy of accommodation by appealing to the principle of *jihād. Jihād*, he explains, is a duty which cannot be performed unless Muslims

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[315] Shahin, *Riḍā,* 9 ff.

[316] Shahin, *Riḍā,* 10.

[317] Riḍā, *Majalah al-Manār* vii: 51-52.

[318] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 236

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are strong.[319] In the modern world, they cannot be strong unless they acquire the sciences and techniques of the West. Consequently, he sees it as a duty for Muslims to study the sciences and ways of the modern world.[320]

Riḍā was an active participant in the political arena in the Ottoman Empire and in his homeland in greater Syria. In 1926, Riḍā welcomed the Wahhābī conquest of Mecca and espoused the Saudi cause. Riḍā died in 1935 on his way back from Suez where he had gone to see the king, Ibn Saʿūd.

2.4.2.2.2   Corroborating Qurʾānic Exegesis

Asad appeals to the thinking of Rashīd Riḍā in *The Message of the Qurʾān* in order to advance his teaching about the simplicity and directness of the sources of Islamic Law. Asad first explored this topic in his 1948 work, *The State and Government in Islam*. There, Asad asserts that not all conventional Muslim laws are derived from clear-cut directives and prohibitions articulated in the Qurʾān and Sunnah.

For this reason, some scholars used to apply various deductive methods of reasoning to generate answers that supported *fiqhī* rulings of their time. These "amplifications" were, however, often highly subjective. They were determined by each scholar's personal interpretation of Islam's legal sources as well as by the social and intellectual environment of the era. While these amplifications generated by deductive reasoning may have been necessary, Asad says that

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[319] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 236.

[320] Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 236.

neither the Qurʾān nor the Sunnah offers any support for such an arbitrary enlargement of the *sharīʿah*.[321] He wrote about this issue, explaining that the limited scope of explicit ordinances contained in the Qurʾān and Sunnah

> "was not due to an oversight on the part of the Law-Giver but, on the contrary, was meant to provide a most essential, deliberate safeguard against legal and social rigidity: in short, it is reasonable to assume that the Law-Giver never intended the *sharīʿah* to cover in detail all conceivable exigencies of life. He intended no more and no less than to stake out, as it were, the legal boundaries within which the community ought to develop, leaving the enormous multitude of "possible" legal situations to be decided from case to case in accordance with the requirements of the time and of changing social conditions."[322]

Asad believes that the same principle can be extrapolated from the *pericope* of the sacrifice of the "Cow of *Banū Isrāʾīl*" in Q 2:67-74. In his reading and exegesis of the text, Asad deems it useful to include the influential voice of Rashīd Riḍā. In *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Asad reads this *pericope* in a manner that is topically unrelated to both the preceding topic, the story of the Sabbath-breakers turned into "despicable apes" (Q 2:63-66), and the subsequent exhortations. Yet, Asad strongly believes that the importance of this "sacrifice of the cow" explains why the sūrah is entitled "The Cow."[323]

Because of the elliptical character of the story, some information about the narrative is omitted, making it challenging to understand. Yet, Asad provides an inter-textual glossing or guide in his commentary. He uses Deuteronomy 21:1-9

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[321] Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, 11-12.

[322] Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, 11.

[323] Asad, *TMOQ*, 15, n. 55 on Q 2:71.

as the referential context or backstory for this qurʾānic narrative.[324] He believes that the qurʾānic dialogue between Moses and his people refers to a Deuteronomic injunction. This mandate states that when there is an unresolved murder, a cow should be slaughtered by the river. Afterwards, the elders of the town or village nearest to the murder site should wash their hands in the stream, declaring, "our hands have not shed this blood and our eyes have seen nothing."[325] As a result of these rituals, the community would be absolved of collective responsibility.

But, Asad's point of focus here is not the "cow" to be sacrificed. It is, rather, the Qurʾān's unique amplification of this story which has a biblical counterpart.[326] Asad advances the lesson in this metaphor to address the tendentious nature of Islamic religious jurisprudence. The Qurʾān portrays Moses' interlocutors as obstinate. According to Asad, they want "to obtain closer and closer definition" of what sounds like a "simple commandment revealed to them through Moses." Because something simple has been artificially made complex, it is almost impossible for them to fulfill it.[327]

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[324] However, the qurʾānic story does not refer to any single biblical text, but it rather alludes to two different texts: Asad chose Deuteronomy 21:1-9 where a cow is killed in order to deal with bloodguilt in the case of an unsolved murder over Numbers 19:1-19 (chosen by Yūsuf ʿAlī, 35, n. 80 on Q 2:67) where a red cow is burnt and its ashes are used to purify the pollution arising from contact with corpses. Although, it has been suggested that the qurʾānic story is an amalgamation of both biblical texts (See Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islām,* trans. F.M. Young [New York, Ktav Pub. House, 1970], 136; Patricia Crone, "Jāhilī and Jewish Law: the *Qasāma,*" in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islām* 4 [1984]:177 [153–201]).

[325] *NJB*, Deut. 21:7.

[326] In fact, the developing early discussions in the Qurʾān appear to get progressively further from the biblical texts.

[327] Asad, *TMOQ*, 15, n. 55 on Q 2:71. An apparent reference to the one-line biblical injunction, thus, "a heifer that has not yet been put to work or used as a draught animal under the yoke" (Deut. 21:3). Quoting Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Ṭabarī says that if in the first instance they had

Asad argues that the more numerous and multiform such details become, the more complicated and rigid the law. Here, he infuses the perspective of Riḍā, who, he says, "acutely grasped" the issue. From the *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Riḍā says that the lesson of the qurʾānic *pericope* on the sacrifice of the cow is that,

> "one should not pursue one's [legal] inquiries in such a way as to make laws more complicated ... This was how the early generations [of Muslims] visualized the problem. They did not make things complicated for themselves -- and so, for them, the religious law (*dīn*) was natural (*fiṭriyyan*), simple (*sādhajan*) and liberal (*khafīfiyyan*) in its straightforwardness. But those who came later added to it [certain other] injunctions which they had deduced by means of their own reasoning (*ijtihād*); and they multiplied those [additional] injunctions to such an extent that the religious law became a heavy burden (*ḥamlan thaqīlan*) on the community."[328]

Asad concurs with Riḍā's view that this story points to an important problem in all religious jurisprudence. That problem is "the inadvisability of trying to elicit additional details in respect of any religious law that had originally been given in general terms."[329]

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sacrificed any cow chosen by themselves, they would have fulfilled their duty; but they made it complicated for themselves, and so God made it complicated for them (Ṭabarī, 1:406, on Q 2:71). A similar view is expressed, in the same context, by Zamakhsharī (1:151 ff., on Q 2:71).

[328] Asad, *TMOQ*, 15, n. 55 on Q 2:71 citing Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 1:251, on Q 2:67-74.

[329] Asad, *TMOQ*, 15, n. 55 on Q 2:71. He cites an example of this problem from the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, on the authority of Abū Hurayra where the Prophet reportedly said, "O People, *Ḥajj* has been enjoined upon you, so perform *Ḥajj*," but a man asked about the frequency of this *Ḥajj*, "is it every year, O Messenger of Allāh?", to which the Prophet remained silent; and the man asked this question again for the third time. Then the Prophet said "If I said yes, it would become obligatory, and you would not be able to do it... leave me as I have left you: for those who came before you were doomed because of their questions and differences with their prophets. If I command you to do something, then do as much of it as you can, and if I forbid you to do something, then refrain form it" (Muslim, 3:1337).

Muḥammad Asad also draws a similar moral lesson from the story of the cow's sacrifice in his translation and interpretation of Q 5:101-102. He adds corroborating comments from Rashīd Riḍā to his own. The verses reads,

> "O you who have attained to faith! Do not ask about matters which, if they were to be made manifest to you [in terms of law], might cause you hardship; for, if you should ask about them while the Qur'an is being revealed, they might [indeed] be made manifest to you [as laws]. God has absolved [you from any obligation] in this respect: for God is much-forgiving, forbearing. People before your time have indeed asked such questions - and in result thereof have come to deny the truth."

For Asad, the intended meaning here, as in Q 2:67-74, is that "believers should not try to deduce additional laws from the injunctions clearly laid down as such by the Qurʾān or by the Prophet, since this 'might cause hardship.'"[330] This assumption, according to him, is clearly alluded to by Q 5:3 which says, "today have I perfected (*akmaltu*) your religious law (*dīn*) for you," and in Q 5:99, "No more is the Apostle bound to do than deliver the message."

Be that as it may be, Asad says that over the centuries, the exact opposite has taken place. It is a view shared by Rashīd Riḍā who commented on this verse saying,

> "Many of our jurists (*fuqaha'*) have, by their subjective deductions, unduly widened the range of man's religious obligations (*takālīf*), thus giving rise to the very difficulties and complications which the clear wording (of the Qur'an] had put an end to; and this has led to the abandonment, by many individual Muslims as well as by their governments, of Islamic Law in its entirety."[331]

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[330] Asad, *TMOQ*, 165, n. 120 on Q 5:101

[331] Asad, *TMOQ*, 165, n. 123 on Q 5:102 citing Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār,* 7:101 on Q 5:102. This subject is also discussed in the introduction to Ibn Ḥazm's *Muhalla* where great Muslim scholars have concluded that Islamic Law, in its entirety, consists of not more than the clear-cut injunctions forthcoming from the self-evident wording of the Qurʾān and the Prophet's commandments, and that, consequently, it is not permissible to extend the scope of such self-

Asad admits that these injunctions do not intend to prevent the Muslim community from evolving. Rather, whenever necessary, additional, temporal legislation is tolerated as long as it is in accordance with the spirit of the Qurʾān and the teachings of the Prophet. This should not be regarded as forming part of the Islamic law as such.[332]

Rashīd Riḍā's direct influence on Asad's thoughts on this subject cannot be explicitly established. But, the mere fact that Riḍā's thoughts on the integrity of the Islamic Law is being utilized by Asad to reinforce his argument clearly suggests the affinity of their respective reformist methodologies in their attempt at reforming the fundamentals of Islam. This reform specifically entails a return to the *naṣṣ* of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth as the ultimate sources of *sharīʿah*. This textualist-traditionist orientation, so clearly found in the works of Asad, is not backward-looking. Rather, it simply endorses a renewed Islamic orientation that rests on its true foundation.

2.5   Conclusion

This Chapter has featured six illustrious Islamic figures and their works. It has traced significant, formative moments in each of their scholarly journeys. This effort was deemed important as it generated useful information about who and what shaped their minds and scholarship. By so doing, we can see how

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evident ordinances by means of subjective methods of deduction (Ibn Ḥazm, ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad, *al-Muḥallā bi-al-āthār* [Bayrūt, Lubnān : Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah, 2010], 1:56 ff.).

[332] Asad, *TMOQ*, 165, n. 120 on Q 5:101.

these six figures have deepened and broadened the thinking and knowledge of Muḥammad Asad.

But, beyond this data, this chapter has attempted to present some identifiable hermeneutical tools or lenses in qurʾānic exegesis drawn from the work of these featured scholars of Islām. The same exegetical hermeneutics are discernible and applied in *The Message of the Qurʾān.* The Ṣaḥīḥayn of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, for one, provided Asad with useful interpretive prophetic traditions when some exegetical cases called for relevant "historical" circumstance or context.

Likewise, the classical *mufassirūn* loaned Asad significant interpretative hermeneutical approaches which he used to unravel the different layers of meanings of certain qurʾānic terms, phrases or verses in the field of speculative theology, philosophy and linguistics. As a matter of fact, I argue that Asad's rationalist orientation in *The Message of the Qurʾān* generally betrays the exegetical methods once espoused by al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī.

Finally, there is no doubt that Asad is also indebted to the reformist and rationalist ideologies of the featured modern Islamic scholars. In particular, their widespread textualist-traditionist advocacy for Islamic reforms sparked a connection with Asad in his early years of conversion. Lastly, while this chapter has introduced only some representatives from Asad's roster of references, it, did answer questions about how Asad's work could be filled so impressively with broad knowledge and understanding. He was able to masterfully draw from these Islamic scholars, and we see the results in his reading, interpretation and

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ultimately in his rendition of certain qurʾānic terms, phrases or verses of interest translated into the English text.

CHAPTER 3:

THEORIES AND METHODS OF QURʾĀNIC TRANSLATION

3.1   Theory of Translation

Studies on the practice of inter-linguistic translation basically generate

ambivalent conclusions. On the one hand, translation is considered as a natural

and necessary human endeavor. On the other hand, it is also considered

unnatural and destructive. Albrecht Neubert and Gregory Shreve, for example,

write that on the socio-cultural level,

> "translation has always been a unique source of knowledge and wisdom
> for mankind. Translation arises from a deep-seated need to understand
> and come to terms with otherness. We want to know what other people
> know and feel what other people feel."[1]

In other words, as a "unique source," the process of translation functions as the

mediator of information which would not be, otherwise, meaningful to the

recipient "other." From this socio-cultural perspective, therefore, the translation

enterprise cannot simply be construed as a spontaneous or voluntary initiative. It

is a moral imperative which addresses the need for the enhancement of

interpersonal relationships.

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[1] Albrecht Neubert and Gregory M. Shreve. *Translation as Text* (Kent, OH: Kent State
UP, 1992), 3 (1-35).

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As Neubert and Shreve infer, if there is no translation, "then one of the most significant resources we have for conquering the isolation imposed by linguistic and cultural difference is squandered."[2]

The same view on the process of translation is espoused by the contemporary French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005). He understood the act of translation in an ontological sense, that is, he viewed it as an art of negotiating and mediating between "Self" and "Other."[3] In a specific sense, he says, a work of translation is a communication of meaning from one particular language to another. This communication entails the ontological act of speaking in a way that is not only a translating of oneself to oneself (inner to outer, private to public, unconscious to conscious) but also and more explicitly, a way of translating oneself to others.

For this reason, Ricoeur's ontological model of translation demonstrates how and why translation matters. The work of a translator, in Ricoeur's mind, is that of "middleman" between "two masters." The translator stands between an author and a reader, a self and another.[4] Ricoeur's philosophical view on the praxis of translation explores the question of what really transpires on the individual level during the experience that Neubert and Shreve refer to as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

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[2] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text,* 3.

[3] Richard Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation," *Research in Phenomenology* 37 (2007), 147 ff. (147-159).

[4] Kearney, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation," 147 ff.

On the linguistic level, for good or for ill, "translation has also enriched languages. The lexical, syntactic, and stylistic inventories of languages have been much enhanced by translation as they have been sullied by it."[5] The implication is that no modern language would be what it is today if not for translation.

Be that as it may be, some scholars also consider the process of translation as a problem on many different levels. Their concerns begin with the whole premise of translation -- that is, the conveying of a message from its original linguistic expression into a different foreign language. The whole translation enterprise is indicted for its immense potential to distort and lose the meaning of the original text. Scholars espousing this skeptical view have identified some factors that make the praxis of translation an extremely daunting task, if not an impossible one.

These factors are subsumed or embedded in the basic thrust or goal of the translation process. That goal is "to pull a text from its natural surroundings and recreate it in an alien linguistic and cultural setting."[6] First, there is what Neubert and Shreve call the "dynamic cultural and linguistic ecology"[7] in which the source text is rooted. The uprooting process, therefore, ought to take into serious consideration the hermeneutics involved in the praxis of translation.

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[5] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text,* 3.

[6] Neubert and Shreve. *Translation as Text*, 1.

[7] Neubert and Shreve. *Translation as Text*, 1.

Second, there are those who are convinced that there are few human universals to be found in different cultures. Therefore, they suggest that translation is impossible. Lawrence Venuti, who represents an extremist view on this side of the argument, believes that translation can "never communicate" the original meaning of the source text because

> "the linguistic and cultural differences that make up a source text are inevitably diminished and altered, even when the translator maintains a fairly strict semantic correspondence, because that text is much more than any such correspondence: its distinctive features are the support of meanings, values, and functions specific to its originary culture, and these features do not survive intact, without variation, the move to a different language and culture."[8]

Therefore, "in the absence of cross-cultural communication," Venuti argues, translation as an uprooting process simply *foreignizes* and *domesticates* the source text. Its meaning is mediated by "intelligibilities and interests of the translating language and culture."[9] The whole process of translation, continues Venuti, is a recontextualization of the original text in the translating language and culture by applying a set of formal and thematic interpretants.

This assertion affirms his earlier statement which insisted that "translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text that will be intelligible to the target language reader."[10] Critics like Venuti

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[8] Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything, Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

[9] Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything,* 71.

[10] Venuti, *"*Translation as a Social Practice: or, The Violence of Translation" *Translation Perspectives* 9 (1996): 195. (195-213)

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compare translators to kidnappers or human traffickers. Translators do violence to texts when they rip them from their natural settings.[11]

The loss and gain dynamics intrinsic to translation have made some scholars dispute that complete equivalence can ever be achieved in the translation process.[12] The traditional definition of equivalence in the context of translation is the replacement of textual material in one language (source language) by equivalent textual material in another language (target language).[13] But, this definition is challenged as too general and abstract and as "a circular definition which leads nowhere."[14] Moreover, the dynamics of equivalence also cannot be "validated for languages like Arabic and European languages which are both linguistically and culturally incongruous."[15]

These exceptions, according to critics, invalidate this definition of equivalence since it presupposes that all languages are symmetrical.[16] Even discussion of formal, dynamic or functional equivalence is seen as too difficult to imagine, let alone achieve. According to Hatim and Mason, there is no such thing

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[11] *Ibid.*, *Translation Changes Everything,* 71

[12] B. Hatim and I. Mason, *Discourse and the Translator* (London: Longman, 1990), 8.

[13] J.C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 20.

[14] M. Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies: an Integrated Approach* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1995), 19. Also echoed by Peter Newmark (*Approaches to Translation* [Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982]) who posits that the concept of translation equivalence is a "dead-duck" - either too theoretical or too arbitrary (x).

[15] Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (Cornwall, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), 5.

[16] Snell-Hornby, *Translation Studies*, 22.

as a formally and dynamically equivalent target language translation of a source language text.[17]

A pure form of inter-lingual translation is impossible, agrees Karl Simms. Just as there is no such thing as pure synonymy within a language, there is no such thing as pure lexical equivalence between languages.[18] This difficulty is more accurately seen as an impossibility. It is due to the differences in the socio-cultural norms and cultural presuppositions in the two languages. These factors constitute obstacles to the translating endeavor.[19]

So, instead of aiming at the goal of "equivalence" in the process of translation, some scholars, such as Eugene Nida, opt for "approximation."[20] That means that the goal is transmitting and communicating the relative sense of the term. This translational dynamic is preferred since it implies a more honest appraisal of the translation result. It admits that "skewing can never be absolutely eliminated" in the practice of translation.[21] While other scholars admit that equivalence may be partially achieved, it is, nonetheless, influenced by linguistic and cultural factors. Therefore, its success is always relative.[22]

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[17] J. Hatim and I. Mason, *Discourse and the Translator*, 8

[18] Karl Simms, *Translating Sensitive Texts: Linguistic Aspects* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 6.

[19] Juliane House, *A Model for Translation Quality Assessment* (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1981), 204-5.

[20] Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating: With Special Reference to Principles and Procedures Involved in Bible Translating* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964), 157.

[21] William A. Smalley, *Translation as Mission: Bible Translation in the Modern Missionary Movement* (Georgia: Mercer University Press,1991), 3.

[22] M. Baker, *In Other Words* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6.

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Abdul-Raof concludes that while the notion of "equivalence" dominates translation theory, an "absolute symmetrical equivalence" can never be achieved if the multiple layers of meaning and different cultures connected with the languages are taken seriously.[23] What is achievable, he agrees, is only a relative equivalence, or, in other words, approximation.

3.2   Translational Orientations

Works of translation are putatively classified into three basic orientations. These are source-centered, target-centered, and translator-centered. Each of these orientations basically attempts to characterize how each model of translation treats a source text. They each begin by examining the native linguistic ecology and analyzing how it methodically extracts, transports, and appropriates its meaning into a new linguistic environment – the intended target text. Each of these orientations incorporates a unique ideological preference or priority in the translation process. Is it faithfulness to the source text with its inalienable form and structure? Or, is it the comprehension of the target audience? Or, is it the translating agent's sense of subjective fulfillment through the process?

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[23] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation*, 7.

3.2.1 Source-Centered

Social exigencies may initially demand translators to do their work. Or, a translator may take the initiative to undertake a project. Either way, the translation process obviously must begin with the extant source text.

Scholars are agreed that every source text can be reckoned as a historical artifact. It is, after all, an object manufactured by human beings and is an item of cultural interest. It is, therefore, safe to infer that it belongs to an actual linguistic ecology.[24] Structurally, a source text possesses uniqueness as illustrated in the "invariant" features contained in its lexicon and syntax, style and genre, theme and discourse.[25]

Linguistically, a source-text is a "semantic unit" constituted by "an ongoing semantic relation."[26] Translators who choose the source-text approach understand that "the concept of cohesion is a semantic one." It is "expressed partly through the grammar and partly through the vocabulary."[27]

It is for this reason that translation scholars who are ideologically identified as source-centered consider translation as a transgression against the integrity of any source text. They see the translation process as rendering harm and

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[24] Neubert and Shreve. *Translation as Text*, 1.

[25] Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything*, 3.

[26] M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1985), 291.

[27] M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976), 4f.

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violence to the texts because translators "rip them from their natural settings."[28] Moreover, for them, the act of uprooting entails a "reconstitution" and, to some extent, a "cheapening" of the source text. It means a trivialization of it and a separation from the culture where it was rooted. In some ways, according to Venuti, the practice of translation can share some of the characteristics of "racial discrimination."[29]

Furthermore, the same source-centered scholars tend to emphasize what is "lost" in the process of translation. There is, they say, no absolute synonymy between any two lexical terms.[30] It is a universal fact or truth. Languages, according to them, differ considerably from one another syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. Even if one attempts to arrive at a functional or pragmatic equivalence, through what scholars call "domestication and naturalization" of the source text, a translator can still expect the "loss of semantic content" from the source text.[31]

No matter how faithful a certain translation may be, "absolute equivalence" eludes a translator. One could only settle for an approximation of meaning from the source text. For source-centered scholars, therefore, translation always destroys the original linguistic form of the source text when it is absorbed into the target community.

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[28] Venuti, *Translation as a Social Practice*, 205, 211.

[29] Venuti, *Translation as a Social Practice*, 196.

[30] M. L. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 57.

[31] Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, 42.

Be that as it may be, source-centered scholars are conscious of the social necessity and need for translation. They deign to label works of translation not as "equivalent," but as an "approximation." Venuti, for one, compromises by proposing a developmental theory and practice of translation which he calls "resistive translation."

Primarily intended to clarify the difference between source and target, this theory fundamentally upholds the inviolable uniqueness and foreignness of the source text. He contends that this source text resists domination by the cultural values of the target-language when it is "naturalized" or "domesticated" by translators.[32] Overall, source-centered scholars assume that the target language is incapable of an expression that would transfer and preserve the cultural values and unique ideas of the source text.

3.2.2 Target-Centered

While source-centered translations are oriented to the preservation of the integrity of the source text, target-centered translations prioritize the effective transmission of the source text's message to the target readers. In other words, thoughtful and articulate translators consider different ways to cross the linguistic boundaries or bridge the gulf between source and target. They then reflect and choose a translation process that produces the most accessible and comprehensible result for their target readers.

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[32] Venuti, *Translation as a Social Practice*, 205.

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According to Eugene Nida, this approach complements the view that the act of translation is first and foremost a communicative act.[33] The source text or language has a message to deliver. It needs the translator's or interpreter's help in transmitting that message to a target audience. Nida describes the technical process of a translator who *decodes* the message and *transcodes* it into the recipient's language. Thus, he designates the translator as the sender of this *recoded* message.[34]

Neubert and Shreve consider the role of translators as analogous to "a special class of speakers."[35] Their competence is measured by how effectively they share the message of the source text in the target language. As mediators, translators have two initial tasks. The first task is "to clarify what the message consists of, and who the recipients are and how they should be approached."[36] The translator's communicative function takes into consideration the interest of the recipient or reader. In other words, the goal of a target-centered translator is to mediate the message and find out who the target readers are. The unique goal of this translator is to focus on the recipients or readers.

In many ways, the process of translation is essentially a process of decision-making. It consists of a set of procedures and strategies for making judgments while selecting the optimal choice. This is so because, according to

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[33] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* 43.

[34] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 146.

[35] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text,* 9

[36] Tytti Suojanen, et al., *User-Centered Translation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 40.

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Neubert and Shreve, translation fundamentally involves the *retextualization*[37] of the source text, or a *recasting*[38] of the original message in a new linguistic form. Clearly, this process also raises the question of deviation from the original. And it is closely related to a longstanding dispute in translation practice and theory. The dispute centers on the question: Should translation be fluent, natural-sounding and easily understandable? Or, should it bend and stretch the resources of the target language and introduce readers to foreign elements?

This long-standing, binary discussion over translation is widely known as the debate over *domesticating* and *foreignizing* translation strategies. *Domestication* immediately appears very target-centered. It is based on adapting cultural context or cultural-specific terms or using familiar structures. But, it avoids foreign elements and avoids the pitfalls of culture bumps.

Foreignization, however, seems to be diametrically opposed to target-orientation. It intends to preserve the original cultural context, settings, names, etc. It essentially maintains that the translated text or message is foreign or imported.[39] In his discussion of these opposing approaches to the process of translation, Venuti discusses the dominant Anglo-American translation practice

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[37] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text,* 7

[38] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text*, 9-10.

[39] Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandal of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998). The idea of *domesticating/foreignizing* translation was based on an analysis of Friedrich Schleiermacher's 1813 famous essay, "Über die Verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens," where he says, "[E]ither the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him, or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (Lawrence Venuti, "Genealogies of Translation Theory: Schleiermacher," *TTR* 4.2 [1991]: 130 (125-150), citing Andre Lefevere translation of Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," *Translating Literature: the German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977]).

which favors fluent and transparent strategies in the translation enterprise. This approach, he says, has resulted in a process called acculturation "in which a cultural other is domesticated, made intelligible."[40] Such a translation strategy, Venuti adds, results in "arrogant and ethnocentric violence." Thus, he urges translators to oppose this trend by "choosing more challenging texts to be translated and by translating these in ways that force the readers to confront their 'foreignness.'"[41]

While *foreignizing* and *domesticating* translation strategies are commonly seen as two mutually exclusive categories, Outi Paloposki, says that the work of translators rarely fall squarely into one category or the other.[42] Rather, they are located somewhere along the continuum that stretches between the two strategies. An individual work of translation may reflect both *domesticated* or *foreignized* strategies. They may exhibit *foreignizing* tendencies in one aspect but *domesticating* aspirations in another.[43]

Nonetheless, in his emphasis on translation as communication, Nida cautions translators not to isolate a translated work from its cultural and social context. Context, he says, includes many things. It could include the participants' relation to the *code* or the language of the message. The translator must also take into account the implication of language changes and the effect of that

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[40] Venuti, "Genealogies of Translation Theory..." *TTR,* 127.

[41] Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything,* 25, 35, 13-16.

[42] Outi Paloposki, "Domestication and Foreignization," in *Handbook of Translation Studies,* ed. Y. Gambier and L. van Doorslaer (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2011) 2:40-42.

[43] Paloposki, "Domestication and Foreignization," 2:40-41.

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change on the community where the communication is taking place.[44] These considerations are very important for translators, Nida opines, since the production of equivalent messages is not merely a process of matching the parts of utterances but also of reproducing the total dynamic character of communication.[45] This is why the formal equivalence strategy that focuses only on preserving the form and content of the source message is rarely a sufficient translation strategy. Instead of formal correspondences between the source and the target text, Nida argues for "equivalent effect." The aim of translation here is to reproduce a dynamic relationship between the target readers and target text that is similar to the one between the source readers and source text.[46]

For Nida, dynamic equivalence is "closest, natural and equivalent to the source-language message."[47] Dynamic equivalence is also the approach of the translator in producing a text that will reflect the aims and purposes of the source text.[48] Nida evaluated and judged a translation as competent only when the intent of the source text could be interpreted and understood in the target context.[49] A competent translation could also be seen as a *natural* translation because its goal is to openly shift the focus away from the source to the target language, culture and readers. This approach attempts to accommodate the

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[44] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 51, 147

[45] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 120,

[46] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 159.

[47] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 166

[48] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 166

[49] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 182

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communication needs of the target language and target culture so that the translated message is perceived as natural by the target audience.[50]

As it covers linguistic structures and vocabulary as well as genre features and cultural conventions, it appears that "naturalization" is a central component of Nida's definition and vision of dynamic equivalence. However, naturalness and fluency, Nida adds, are delimited by the third keyword, *closest*. Certainly, there are expectations that translations should have cultural fidelity to the traditions of the culture from which they emerge. So, it is incumbent upon translators to keep as close to the linguistic expression and semantic content of the source text as possible. Hopefully, in the process, a quality of naturalness in the translation can also be retained.[51]

In summary, the dynamic nature of target-centered translation as communication entails crossing over linguistic and cultural boundaries. It presupposes adjustments or alterations in order for the message to pass beyond those boundaries and reach receivers in a way that is easy for them to understand.[52]

3.2.3 Translator-Centered

A later addition to the preceding two theories of translational orientation is called the "translator-centered" approach. Scholars who study the process of

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[50] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* 167

[51] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* 176

[52] Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating,* 131

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translation as "adaptation and selection" basically argue that the translator's subjectivity, creativity, and authority in the translation process play a significant role in the outcome of the process.[53] Thus, they insist that the translator-centered approach is indispensable and certainly worthy of inclusion in the area of translation analysis.[54] It is further asserted that a translator's position should be seen as significant in the translation process because "the translator himself is the focal element in translating … his role is central to the basic principles and procedures of translating."[55] Others argue that the translator stands at the center of this dynamic process of communication. He or she is a mediator between the producer of a source text and its receivers.[56] In some ways, the translator is both the "receiver" and "producer" of communication.[57]

Still others speak of the translator as "the expert communicator, who is at the crucial center of a long chain of communication from original initiator to ultimate receiver of a message: a human link across a cultural frontier."[58]

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[53] Hu Gengshen, "Translator-Centeredness," *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 12.2 (2004): 106 (106-117).

[54] Increased attention given to the role and function of a translator could have also resulted from an increased interest in the "subjective involvement" by modern theories. Basically, these theories pay less attention to the source text as an "objective text" and stress the translators' understanding and interpretation of it. Scholars speak of translator's "visibility" (L. Venuti, *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* [London: Routledge, 1992] and "liberation" (S. Bassnet, "The Visible Translator," *In Other Words* 4 [1994]: 11-15).

[55] Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating*, 145.

[56] Hatim and Mason, *Discourse and the Translator*, 223.

[57] B. Hatim and I. Mason, *The Translator as Communicator* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 2.

[58] C. Schäffner & H. Kelly-Holmes, *Cultural Functions of Translation* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1995), 6.

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Be that as it may be, in actual practice, it has long been recognized that it is a fallacy to believe that the translator's intention is always clear. It has also been argued that once the translation of a text is done, in the eyes of deconstructionist theorists, the translator is "dead."[59] Faced with a book to be translated, a translator will eventually be both a reader and a writer. He or she must be a reader to comprehend the source text, and then a writer in composing the target text. This dual role is expressed somewhat prescriptively by Mildred Larson in terms that are often echoed by practicing translators:

> "The translator should read the source text several times asking himself, 'What was the intent of the author as he wrote this particular text? What information does he want to communicate, what mood, and what response did he expect from the reader?' The goal of the translator is to communicate to the receptor audience the same information and the same mood as was conveyed by the original document to the original audience."[60]

When a translator is commissioned with a translation, he or she will first read the book with the task of translation in mind. That means that "translators are the keenest of readers. They discover all of the author's tricks and notice when he cheats. They are also aware of his absurdities."[61]

The theory of translator-centeredness is that it is really more concerned with the choices and decisions of the translator, and less with the mechanisms of either the source language text or the target text.[62] In this approach, translation is

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[59] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author (1973)," in *Image, Magic, Text*: *Essays,* trans., Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1988), (142-148)

[60] Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation,*142.

[61] Schäffner and Kelly-Holmes, *Cultural Functions*, 7; quoting Günter Grass, "A Tribunal of Translators," *Translation* 2.19 (1984): 19.

[62] Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982), 19.

seen as a process, a form of human behavior.[63] From the perspective of behavior, it is easily seen that adaptation and selection are translation phenomena. In a fundamental way, translators adapt and select in the translation process.

This description, according to Gengshen, sees this translation process as a "cyclic alteration of the translator's selective adaptation and adaptive selection."[64] When we look carefully at this third orientation, it is clear that the translator is accorded a central role in the translating process.[65]

The importance of the translator is best illustrated when the work of different translators who have translated from the same original source is carefully examined. There will be significant differences in the translated versions. Differences are more likely due to differences in the work and personality of the translators than to the influence of publishers, readers, and financial considerations, etc. It is 'different' translators who produce 'different' translated texts.

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[63] Andrew Chesterman, "From 'Is' to 'Ought': Laws, Norms and Strategies in Translation Studies," *Target* 5 (1993): 2.

[64] Gengshen, "Translator-Centeredness," 114.

[65] Looking beyond the singular ability of a translator to perform, Gengshen says that advocates who promote the status of the translator as central in the chain of translational communication enterprise also pay attention to the "extra-translational" factors contributing to the success of the translation process. While it is true that translators are "readers, mediators, decision makers, adapters, and senders," there also exists a host of other associative functions to the work of the translator (Gengshen, "Translator-Centeredness," 114 f.). He adds that those functions that do not directly participate in the process of translating but which are frequently involved in the production of translation, thus may influence the final product as well in terms of "liberties allowed or constraints imposed" (*Ibid.,* 111). Other significant "extra-translational" factors also include the favorable working conditions, work ethics demanding that participants should not seek profit and fame, that translation work was carefully assigned and closely coordinated, and that all translational products were checked, revised, polished, and proofread (*Ibid.,* 111).

An illustration of the impact of translator-centered approaches can certainly be seen in the translation of the Arabic Qurʾān into English. In the examples that follow, six works of translations of the Arabic Qurʾān into English by six different translators from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds will be studied and analyzed. As is true of any other translator, we will see how these qurʾānic translators "leave their imprint in the linguistic layer and in individual interpretations"[66] within their work. These imprints are not only presented in their respective interpretative orientation – whether literal or exegetical – but also with their respective styles and flavors of textual expressions.

In the translator-centered approach, the translator's creativity and authority in the translation process is clearly recognized and legitimized. More importantly, coming to a fuller understanding of this orientation of translation will also provide an analytical category useful for the classification of translations of the Arabic Qurʾān.

To conclude and review, a work of translation is source-centered when a translator, at the outset, emphasizes that the form, texture, and structure of the original text are a semantic unity. While source-centered translation aims to preserve the integrity of the source text, it does not deny that transmission of the message into another linguistic environment inevitably entails loss and potential distortion.

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[66] C. Dollerup, *Tales and Translation: From Pan-Germanic narratives to shared international fairytales* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999), 236.

Works that are classified as target-centered do not consciously intend to diminish or tamper with the integrity of the source text. Instead, they are focused on achieving maximum readability, acceptability and communication of the original message for their target readers. Scholars of translation studies have become aware that a source text will consist of divergent linguistic elements. Some of these elements will yield to the complex demands of translation, while others will seem to resist. They make that transition into another language in a clumsy or artificial way. This reality thus rules out the monopoly of a universal translational strategy in any particular work of translation.[67]

Translator-centered works of translation focus not on the integrity of the source text, nor on the readability of the target text, but on the behavior of translators in the long and complicated chain of translational communication. This third classification, thus, acknowledges the translator's subjectivity, creativity and authority in the translation process.

3.3   Translating the Qurʾān

3.3.1 The History of Qurʾānic Translation

For Muslims, translation of the Qurʾān has always been problematic since it connotes the interpretation of the scripture of Islām into languages other than

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[67] Neubert and Shreve, *Translation as Text,* 6.

Arabic. This enterprise has always led to difficult issues in the areas of linguistics and in Islamic theology.[68]

For one, the Qurʾān specifically describes itself in several passages as *qurʾānan arabiyyan* or "a Qurʾān in Arabic."[69] Thus, modern Islamic theology maintains that the Qurʾān is a revelation in Arabic. Its recitation, whether of the mandated verses in ritual prayer or of other sections, is generally done in Arabic.[70] As a corollary, according to Travis Zadeh,

> "many early Muslim religious authorities advanced a doctrinal argument that the miracle of the Qurʾān was located in its *sui generis* linguistic form, which represented the immutable word of God, and thus could not be replicated through translation."[71]

This qurʾānic distinction is thus, reinforced by a doctrine which developed in the Classical period, namely, the doctrine of the *ʿijāz al-Qurʾān* or "inimitability of the Qurʾān." It posits that part of the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān is its Arabic linguistic form. Therefore, some Muslims believe that translation of the Qurʾān, as a human interpretative work, diminishes the sacred character of the Arabic original.[72] Translation, this argument contends, necessarily entails human

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[68] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation*, 19. Cf. Jane McAuliffe, ed., "Introduction," in *The Qurʾān: A Revised Translation, Origins, Interpretations and Analysis, Sounds, Sights, and Remedies, The Qurʾān in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), xxx (i-xxxvi).

[69] Q Yūsuf 12:2, Q Ṭa Hā 20:113, Q Zumar 39:28, Q Fuṣṣilat 41:3, Q Shūrā 42:7, Q Zukhruf 43:3; cf. Q Raʿd 13:37, *ḥukman ʿarabiyyan*; Q Naḥl 16:103, Q Shuʿarā' 26:195, Q Aḥqāf 46:12, *lisānun ʿarabiyyun mubīnun*.

[70] Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾān, Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53.

[71] Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾān,* 3.

[72] Malise Ruthven, "The Qurʾānic Worldview," in *Islām in the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 90 (80-121). Zadeh relates about the position of Aḥmad Ibn Fāris (d. 1004) whose works on lexicography exalts the sublime position of the Arabic language in the context of Islamic history of salvation (*The Vernacular Qurʾān*, 193 ff.). Arguing that any translation of the Arabic Qurʾān could never be as miraculously inimitable (*ʿijāz*) as the original

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judgment. Those who oppose the Qurʾān's translation also argue that the Arabic words in qurʾānic passages can convey multiple possible meanings. A single act of translation necessarily settles on a single meaning. For example, Asad titled his translation *The Message of the Qurʾān,* while Pickthall called his *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān*. These titles acknowledge that a certain translation is but one possible interpretation and it cannot claim to be the full equivalent of the original.

Nonetheless, full or partial translations of the Qurʾān have been produced from the earliest periods of Islamic history. It is argued that the first such effort may have taken place at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad when he sent a delegation of his followers to Abyssinia. This journey was known as the first *Hijrah*.[73]

According to the *Sīra*, when the Abyssinian Negus or King, Ashama ibn Abjar (r. 614-631 CE), asked the Muslims, "do you have something with you from what he brought from Allāh?" Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib (c. d. 629 CE) reportedly read written material from an excerpt of *sūrat* Maryam which indicated that they may have carried with them written extracts from the Qurʾān.[74]

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itself, Ibn Faris, therefore, contends that reading a Persian substitute of the Qurʾān for ritual prayer -- which is a translation (*tarjuma*) and not a miracle (*muʿjiza*) -- is impermissible (197).

[73] Aḥmad Von Denffer, ʿ*Ulūm al-Qurʾān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qurʾān,* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1994 [1st 1983]), 141-2. In contrast, Afnan Fatani ("Translation and the Qurʾān," in *The Qurʾān: an Encyclopaedia*, ed. O. Leaman [Great Britain: Routledge, 2006]) argues that during the lifetime of the Prophet, no passage from the Qurʾān was translated into these languages nor in any other (31).

[74] Guillaume, *The Life of Muḥammad,* 152.

Another recorded occasion reports that Heraclius (r. 610-641 CE), the Byzantine emperor, reportedly received a message from Muḥammad through his messenger, Abū Sufyān. It was a qurʾānic message, namely, Q Āl ʿImrān 3:64[75] for which the emperor reportedly *daʿā tarjumānahu* or "called his translator."[76]

It was also reported that some Iranians were converted to Islām and asked for permission to temporarily say their prayers in their mother tongue. The Persian Salmān al-Farisī reportedly translated the *sūrah* al-Fātiḥa and sent it to one of them.[77] Salmān's translation, though a paraphrase, is believed to have paved the way for a Turkish translation not long after that.[78] During the expansion of Islām, numerous translations were done in Spain and India which were seen as the western and eastern borders of Islām in the pre-modern period. In the nineteenth century, the number of translations across the Muslim world greatly increased because of the expansion of new printing technologies.

Translation activities in the non-Muslim world, however, were not necessarily motivated to propagate the Qurʾān, but to challenge its "miraculous" status.[79] Some early translations of the Qurʾān into other languages, such as

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[75] "Say: 'O followers of earlier revelation! Come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lords beside God.' And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that it is we who have surrendered ourselves unto Him.'"

[76] Aḥmad Von Denffer, *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān,* 141-142, citing Bukhārī, 8:6260.

[77] Abdul Latif Tibawi, "Is the Qurʾān Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion," in *Arabic and Islamic Themes: Historical, Educational and Literary Studies* (London: Luzac & Co., 1974), 73 (72-85).

[78] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxi. She adds that the Sāmānid ruler Abū Ṣāliḥ Manṣūr ibn Nūḥ (r. 961-74) commissioned a Persian translation of the multi-volume *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* to help non-Arabic speakers understand or to have more knowledge about the Qurʾān.

[79] Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾān,* 4.

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Greek and Syriac, are "known only from citations in polemical tracts."[80] A full-fledged translation of the Qurʾān into Latin appeared in the twelfth century at the instigation of Peter the Venerable (c. 1092-1156 CE), the French abbot of Cluny. In 1142, the abbot commissioned an English Arabist, Robert of Ketton (fl. 1141-1157 CE) to undertake the translation of the Qurʾān, along with other Islamic texts.

With a Muslim collaborator in Spain, Robert completed the centerpiece of the abbot's collection, the Latin Qurʾān which was titled *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* (*The Religion of Muḥammad the Pseudo-prophet*).[81] This translation enjoyed immediate success and wide circulation.[82] It was even more popular when it was published in its entirety in 1543 in Basel, Switzerland by the Swiss reformer, Hebraist, and the Arabist, Theodore Bibliander (d. 1564 CE).[83]

In the early thirteenth century in Spain, Mark Toledo, (fl. 1193-1216 CE), translated the Qurʾān into Latin. He was an Iberian native who probably learned Arabic growing up in that Arab region. His work was titled *Liber Alchorani* and is said to be more literal and less wordy. Thus, it "could easily be read side by side with the Arabic Qurʾān."[84]

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[80] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxi.

[81] Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 15 f.

[82] Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*, 15.

[83] Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*, 110 f. Some copies of which bore an "In Alcoranum Praefatio" by Martin Luther himself, who was instrumental in obtaining a license for the printing of Bibliander's edition; this preface also "ferociously attacked Islām" (*ibid.*)

[84] Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*, 121 ff.

There were few other Latin translations of the Qurʾān that appeared in subsequent centuries.[85] But none compared with the superior scholarship of the seventeenth-century Italian, Fr. Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700) of Padua.[86] Marracci's work is known as *Alcorani Textus Universus Arabice et Latine* (The Entire Text of the Alcoran in Arabic and Latin). This translation used as its textual base the Arabic Qurʾān manuscripts in the Vatican Library.[87] Marracci did not only draw on major classical commentaries of the Qurʾān to refine his renderings of particular words and phrases, he also incorporated extensive notes which proved his intimate knowledge of traditional qurʾānic exegesis.[88] This translation immediately became popular for its scholarly value. It also became the significant source for translations of the Qurʾān into other European languages.

The history of translations of the Qurʾān into the English-speaking world began in 1649. Scottish writer Alexander Ross (c. 1590-1654) published an English version of the 1647 French translation by André du Ryer. Known by the title, *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, Ross' translation is the only English translation to date that is not a direct translation from an Arabic source. He did not know

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[85] Burman mentions a "shadowy figure" translator of the complete Latin Qurʾān of 1518 named Iohannes Gabriel Terrolensis, and his similarly "somewhat shadowy" contemporary Flavius Mithridates (fl. 1475-1785), a Sicilian-Jewish convert to Christianity, whose translation of two sūrahs (Q 21 and Q 22) of the Qurʾān was completed in 1480 or 1481 (*Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*, 14 ff.). Also, the Spanish theologian, Juan de Segovia (d. c. 1458) both commissioned and helped produced a new Latin translation of the Qurʾān in the mid-fifteenth century. It was inserted into a manuscript containing both Arabic original and a literal Castilian version from which his Latin version was derived. Unfortunately, this trilingual edition has been reportedly lost (*Ibid*, 43-44).

[86] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxi.

[87] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxi.

[88] Burman, *Reading the Qurʾān in Latin Christendom*, 47

Arabic. For this reason, he relied completely on du Ryer's French Qurʾān.[89] In a preface to his translation, Ross gave voice to concerns about the Qurʾān which Christian readers might have shared. He titled his preface:

> "The Translator to the Christian Reader and A Needful Caveat or Admonition for them who desire to know what use may be made of, or if there be danger in reading the *Alcoran.*"[90]

In 1806, Ross' translation became the first Qurʾān to be published in America in Springfield, Massachusetts.[91] By that time, the Ross translation had already been superseded in England by the 1737 work of George Sale (d. 1736), the British Orientalist scholar and ʿArabist. Sale drew directly from the Arabic text, frequently consulted both Classical works of qurʾānic exegesis and Ludovico Marracci's Latin translation. Moreover, early in the book, Sale provides a lengthy introduction to the history, doctrines and practices of Islām for generations of English speakers.

The phenomenon of new scholars studying Semitic philology and biblical studies in the nineteenth century was probably extremely beneficial to English translators who followed later.[92] Intensified by European trade and colonization and by the surging post-Enlightenment critiques of religion, the cultural climate was changing. There was decreasing interest in apologetic attacks and more

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[89] Nabil Matar, "Alexander Ross and the First English Translation of the Qurʾān," in *Muslim World* 88.1 (1998): 81-92.

[90] Alexander Ross, trans., *The Alcoran of Mahomet* by Sier André Du Ryer (London, 1649), A2. *British Library,* Accessed Feb 2018, eebo.chadwyck.com.

[91] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxi.

[92] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxii

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interest in cross-cultural scriptural comparison.[93] Nineteenth and twentieth-century English translations of the Qurʾān by non-Muslims were done in that new spirit by John Medows Rodwell (d.1900), Edward Henry Palmer (d.1882), Richard Bell (d. 1952), and Arthur John Arberry (d. 1969). Their works of translation ushered in a new enthusiasm and helped to promote even more English translations from several generations of English-speaking Muslim scholars in South Asia, in the Middle East, in Britain, and in the United States.[94]

Some converts to Islām also joined the ranks of English translators of the Qurʾān. This included Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān* (1930) which preceded Muḥammad Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1980) by two generations. In 1985, Thomas Ballantyne Irving (d. 2002), who converted in his forties, also published his book, *The Qurʾān: The First American Version*. Converted to Islām in 1968, Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley also published their translation entitled, *The Noble Qurʾān* (1998).

In his recent bibliographical reviews of these English translations, Abdur Raheem Kidwai provides a mixed review. He offers affirmation as well as trenchant criticism. He commends this growing community of English translators

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[93] McAuliffe, *The Qurʾān*, xxxii.

[94] A recent inventory puts the number of English translations of the Qurʾān at about seventy (70) including those translated not directly from Arabic but from Urdu (examples are Mawdūdī's *Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*, trans. & ed., Ẓafar Ishaq Ansari [Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1988] and Shāfi's *Maʿariful-Qurʾān,* trans., M.H. Askari and M. Shamim [Karachi, Pakistan: Maktaba-e-Darul-Uloom Karachi, 1996]), Persian, and Turkish. But, overall, there are reportedly, at least, one hundred and ten (110) translations in English versions, complete or partial, that have emerged since the first rigorous translation of the Qurʾān into English by Ross in 1649 (Abdunasir Sideeg, "Translating 'Invisible Meanings': A Critique across Seventy Versions of the Qurʾān in English," in *Arab World Journal* Special Issue on Translation 5 [May, 2016], [77-99]).

for providing Anglophone readers with options in the selection of suitable translation for their study of the Qurʾān. For many in the English-speaking world, these translations are "their only access to the meaning and message of the Word of God."[95] But, what concerns Kidwai in his examination of these translations of the Qurʾān is that they mirror, "the misconceptions and perceptions about the Qurʾān and Islām in the West."[96] These misconceptions were commonly found in the works of the Orientalists who dominated the scene from 1649 until the 1920s.

He praises the work of Muslim translators, finding in them a "gradual, steady Muslim intellectual response" which may offset the "prejudicial" perspectives of the Orientalists.[97] Be that as it may be, Kidwai also finds fault in

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[95] Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable, A Critical Guide to 60 English Translations of the Qurʾān* (New Delhi: Sarup Book Pub. Pvt. Ltd, 2011], xvii (1-322).

[96] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* xviii. He is basically referring to most of the Orientalists versions of the Qurʾān, namely of those by Ross, Sale, Rodwell, Palmer, Bell and Alan Jones (2007).

[97] The earliest Muslim translations by Mirza Abū al-Fadl (1911) and Hairat Dihlavi (1916) illustrate this point, although later translations have characteristically distanced themselves from this defensive move and flourished into "a positive, rewarding enterprise." (Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* xviii). Moreover, apart from the Orientalists, he also critique as "regrettable" those English translations which he observes as obviously influenced by the western intellectual trend and have espoused what he calls as "pseudo rationalism and apologia" in interpreting the Qurʾān; as such, they have a tendency that often leads "to obfuscating the message of the Qurʾān." Of special mention are the works of Abdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī (1934), Muḥammad Asad (1980) and Ahmed ʿAlī (1984) (*Ibid.,* xix). Along with the latter, he also criticizes as playing "havoc with the meaning and message of the Qurʾān" the English translations of Qādyānī translators, those inspired by their founder Mirza Ghulam Aḥmad. Their works are vitiated with "biased sectarian color," especially on the major articles of Islamic faith as the finality of Prophet Muḥammad as the Last Prophet and crucifixion of Jesus. He adds that for years these Qādyānī translations were the only available English translations by non-Orientalist. In less scathing comment, Kidwai also refers to the sectarian bias of Shīʿite and Barīlvī works of translations (*Ibid.,* xix-xx). He also considers those works of translations which -- "swayed by the astounding advances in science and technology" -- are zealously advancing the Qurʾān as a harbinger of scientific and technological development as being "utterly misplaced," since, he said, these theories are yet to be scientifically established (*Ibid.,* xxi).

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the work of some Muslim translators. He says they are guilty of the unscrupulous promotion of ideological or pseudo-rationalistic presuppositions, sectarian notions and personal whims" in their qurʾānic texts. This kind of mistake, he says, "is bound to mislead naïve readers."[98]

That none of the existing English translations of the Qurʾān has attained universal acceptance as a final and authoritative version may give credence to Kidwai's concerns. Nonetheless, as more and more Muslims and non-Muslim scholars are educated in modern and scientific methods of translation and interpretation, many critics of Qurʾān translation believe that the future looks promising. These works must, however, according to them, comply with the higher standards of fidelity to the source text, maintain faithfulness to the message, and offer relevance to the historical context of the intended readers.

3.3.2 The "Untranslatability" of the Qurʾān

To better understand the discourse on untranslatability of the Qurʾān, it is imperative to be briefly acquainted with the larger discourse on the notion of untranslatability. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the latter is, in fact, one of the most interesting and debatable issues among scholars of linguistics and translation theory. It has proved to be a vital concern in the realm of translation studies as it generates a considerable body of literature.

The debate on the subject basically demonstrates a traditional divide between scholars who side either with the possibility or the impossibility of

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[98] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* xvii.

transmitting a given text from one language to another. Two positions on this discourse may be articulated. There are those who espouse a "universalist" approach, and those who embrace the "monadist" approach.[99]

The first group of scholars believes that translation is not only possible, but ensured because of the existence of linguistic universals.[100] The other group of scholars claims the opposite. Translatability, for the latter group, is impossible. Reality, they argue, can be interpreted in many different or particular ways by different linguistic communities.[101]

More recently, a third approach has been added to the traditional ones and is called the "deconstructionist" approach. Proponents of this approach challenge the notion of translation as a transfer of meaning.[102] They argue that since the translation process involves a "re-writing" of the original text, then the target or the outcome texts "cease to be considered as subsidiaries of the original, which, in turn, becomes dependent on translation."[103]

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[99] Raquel De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts: A Historical Overview," *Meta* 44.4 (1999), 546 (546-559)

[100] This group may include linguistics and translation theory scholars like Eugene Nida, Roman Jakobson, Karl-Richard Bausch, Daryl Hauge, Vladimir Ivir.

[101] De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts," 546-559. This hypothesis is later known as Sapir-Whorf (after Edward Safir and Benjamin Lee Whorf) whose anthropological studies theorize that the "real world" is unconsciously established upon language habits of a cohering group, "the worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (*Ibid.,* 547, citing Steiner, 1992).

[102] Those who fall under this category may include Andrew Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida.

[103] Raquel De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts, 554. De Pedro further explains what deconstructionist approach entails: first, the translation process becomes "a validation of the text that is being translated"; second, originality "ceases to be a chronological concept (i.e. it is not about which text was produced first) and becomes a qualitative matter (i.e. it refers to the nature of the text which was conceived first)"; third, the issue of authorship "is challenged and translation is seen as a process in which language is constantly modifying the source text" (*Ibid.,* 554).

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From the field of linguistics, John Catford proposes that untranslatability is a translating failure. It occurs, according to him, when the relevant features of a source text are formal, and there is no possible correspondence of source features to features of the target language.[104] Moreover, from a wider perspective, Catford identifies another kind of untranslatability, as well. This untranslatability occurs when essential features of a source text are distinctively cultural ones. In these texts, there can be no cultural correspondence between the source language and the target language. Catford then infers that cultural untranslatability is considered as "less 'absolute' than linguistic untranslatability."[105]

While Catford's conception of linguistic untranslatability is straightforward and easy to comprehend, his take on cultural untranslatability is difficult to unravel. His distinctions between the two do not go far enough in considering the dynamic nature of language and culture.[106] In fact, these two perspectives need not be exclusive "in so far as language is the primary modeling system within a culture, cultural untranslatability must be *de facto* implied in any process of translation."[107]

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[104] John Cunnison Catford, "The Limits of Translatability," in *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 94 (93-103). As an example, he says linguistic untranslatability may occur typically in cases where an *ambiguity* (e.g. "puns") peculiar to the given text is one of the functionally relevant features.

[105] Catford, "The Limits of Translatability," 99. Catford gives the Finnish vocabulary *sauna*, as an example, which cannot be adequately translated into English (to some extent can be inappropriate) as "bath" or "bathhouse" or "bathroom."

[106] Susan Bassnet, "Untranslatability," *Translation Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 42-43 (40-46).

[107] Bassnet, "Untranslatability," 43.

Thus far, we have learned that scholars from the fields of linguistics and translation theory have two different, if not opposing, positions regarding translatability. One group of scholars, including the universalists, confidently argues that everything is translatable, directly or indirectly, into a target language.[108] Many of them presuppose that most texts are translatable and that "absolute untranslatability, whether linguistic or cultural, does not exist."[109] In fact, many of these scholars contend that there are relatively few works that could be called "untranslatables." The vast majority of texts are "translatables and relative translatables."[110]

However interesting it may have been for scholars to discuss the subject of untranslatability, for a variety of reasons, the debate over translatability and untranslatability has become unpopular and less respected in the field.[111] Studies on the concept of translation have grown and expanded, and new strategies have been learned which translators can employ. Being confronted with linguistic and/or cultural lacuna between the source and the target languages is no longer the barrier it once was.

It is not that scholars arguing for translatability now say that perfect translation is attainable. Instead, they contend that "a practical approach to translation must accept that, since not everything that appears in the source text

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[108] Ke Ping, "Translatability vs. Untranslatability: A Sociosemiotic Perspective," in *Babel* 45.4 (1999): (289-300)

[109] De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts...", 556-557.

[110] Ke Ping, "Translatability vs. Untranslatability..." 297.

[111] De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts..."

can be reproduced in the target text, an evaluation of potential losses has to be carried out."[112] Some scholars who subscribe to this pragmatic view have come to a realistic, yet optimistic, conclusion. Translatability may signify "the capacity for some kind of meaning to be transferred from one language to another without undergoing radical change."[113] Acknowledging that translation will not be perfectly achievable, they have come to understand translatability as "a relative notion that has to do with the extent to which, despite obvious differences in linguistic structure (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), meaning can still be adequately expressed across languages."[114]

The debate on the translatability and untranslatability of the Qurʾān has always drawn a lot of attention from scholars in Islamic studies, theology, and linguistics. In fact, a great deal of literature with a variety of perspectives, has been dedicated to this question. As was indicated earlier, this debate is not new to the field of qurʾānic studies. It began in the middle of the eighth century when Muslim theologians started to debate about the legitimacy of translating the Arabic Qurʾān into other languages.[115]

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[112] De Pedro, "The Translatability of Texts...," 556-557.

[113] Anthony Pym & Horst Turk, "Translatability," *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, ed. M. Baker (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 273 (273-276).

[114] Pym & Turk, "Translatability," 15.

[115] In his historical study on the subject, Travis Zadeh infers that debate on the translation of the Qurʾān centered almost entirely on whether or not it was permissible for Muslims to use translations for recitation during the performance of ritual prayer (Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾān,* 53). Nonetheless, it was difficult to find a jurist at that time, says Zadeh, who was really against the idea to translate the Qurʾān for the purposes of comprehension or for the propagation of Islām. It may have been true that "the majority of Muslim juridical authorities prohibited the use of translations in the context of liturgical performance," this was, however, not the same case for early Ḥanafīs. The latter jurists, says Zadeh, "affirmed that those who had not fully mastered the original Arabic of the Qurʾān could use translations in a range of ritual contexts" (*Ibid.*). Even

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Bringing into this discussion some Muslim intellectuals who have contributed to this debate broadens our understanding of this important topic. We will initially look at some perspectives from translators of the Qurʾān into English.

Referring to his study of two English translations of the Qurʾān -- namely, *The Koran Interpreted* by Arberry and *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān* by Pickthall, the renowned Pakistani scholar Fazlur Raḥmān (d. 1988), looks first at the titles of these two translations. The wording of these titles, he says, indicates that they are "intended to convey to the reader the idea that an adequate translation of the Qurʾān is impossible."[116] Thus, Raḥmān asserts that the language of the Qurʾān "can never be completely or satisfactorily translated into another language."[117]

There are two reasons that it is impossible to produce an adequate rendering of the Arabic Qurʾān into another language, he says. The first is the "the style and expression of the Qurʾān." The second, however, is the very nature of the Qurʾān itself which "is not a single 'book' because nobody 'wrote' it: it is an assembly of all the passages revealed or communicated to Muḥammad by the agency of the Revelation, which ... emanates from the 'Preserved Tablet'."[118]

In his *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, Aḥmad von Denffer is generally supportive of Raḥmān's position. He echoes the Islamic dictum of untranslatability of the

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some authorities outside of the Ḥanafī group also considered permissible to recite the Qurʾān using a translation "for those without a command of Arabic" (*Ibid.*)

[116] Fazlur Raḥmān, "Translating the Qurʾān," in *Religion & Literature* 20.1 (April. 1988), 26 (23-30).

[117] Raḥmān, "Translating the Qurʾān," 24.

[118] Raḥmān, "Translating the Qurʾān," 24.

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Qurʾān, stating, "there is agreement among Muslim intellectuals that it is impossible to transfer the original Qurʾān word for word in an identical fashion into another language."[119] This impossibility, according to him, stems from the inability of words from other languages to capture "all the shades of meanings" of the Qurʾān's vocabulary. A word-for-word translation could inevitably lead to "the narrowing down of the meaning of the Qurʾān." This could cause "confusion and misguidance."[120] The limitation of the Qurʾān translation, according to von Denffer, is further indicated by the loss of "the concept of the uniqueness and inimitability of the Qurʾān (ʿijāz al-Qurʾān)"[121] which is linked by many scholars to the fact that the Qurʾān is written in the Arabic language.

The theological implication of translation is radical, he adds, since the translated version of the Qurʾān has departed from the language of the revelation, namely, Arabic. In a new language, he says, it ceases to be "the word of Allāh."[122] Abdullah Saeed's *The Qurʾān, An Introduction* echoes this same assertion of Muslim intellectuals about the untranslatability of the Qurʾān for theological and linguistic reasons. Theologically speaking, he says,

> "the Qurʾān is the Word of God and, hence, has a unique style that cannot be matched, even in Arabic. They argue that if a piece of writing like the Qurʾān cannot be imitated in Arabic, it follows that it can never be replicated in an entirely different language."[123]

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[119] Von Denffer, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 141.

[120] Von Denffer, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 141

[121] Von Denffer, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 143.

[122] Von Denffer, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 143.

[123] Abdullah Saeed, *The Qurʾān, An introduction* (London, Routledge, 2008), 126.

This linguistic argument, Saeed continues, includes a number of reasons. The reasons range from "the richness of the Arabic language" to "the existence of certain untranslatable terms" to "the fact that a translation can never be completely exact or neutral."[124]

Be that as it may be, von Denffer also asserts that translating the Qurʾān into another language means communicating the message of the Qurʾān. It should not mean being driven to provide a "word-by-word" equivalence. Translation should be done for the sake of those who are not familiar with the Arabic language so that they can know about the Qurʾān and "understand Allāh's guidance and will."[125]

Von Denffer's position is obviously prompted by his missionary advocacy. He is attentive to the fact that the majority of Muslims are non-native speakers of Arabic. Translating the Qurʾān into their mother tongue would help them to become familiar with its meaning.

Other views about the translation of the Qurʾān stress different themes. According to Kidwai, if the primary motive of translating the Qurʾān is conveying or expressing its meaning (i.e. distinguished from other suspicious emotional and ideological motives), translation can be viewed as a logical expression of qurʾānic exegesis – like the efforts made by the *mufassirūn*.[126] In comparing the

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[124] Saeed, *The Qurʾān, An introduction*, 139.

[125] Von Denffer, *ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān,* 141-142.

[126] Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translation of the Qurʾān*. Accessed Feb 2018, https://archive.org/details/ASurveyOfEnglishTranslationsOfTheQuran-Dr.abdurRahimKidwai.

works of Yūsuf ʿAlī and Muḥammad Asad, Muzaffar Iqbal explains that works of translations echo the translator's understanding of the Quran and suggest their intellectual and spiritual make-up as well as their linguistic and ideological limitations. To a great extent, translations will also give us a picture of the social, economic and political background of the translators.[127]

Abdul-Raof, for his part, agrees that the Qurʾān is translatable. But, he strongly cautions that such a work of translation cannot and should not be considered as a replacement for the original Arabic version of the Qurʾān. "We cannot produce a Latin Qurʾān no matter how accurate or professional the translator attempts [are]."[128]

On the other end of the translatability argument, Abdul-Raof, in his *Qurʾān Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* explores the reasons why he believes that the Qurʾān is an untranslatable text.[129] He provides a comprehensive analysis of the limits of qurʾānic translatability by explaining the linguistic and rhetorical limitations that shackle the Qurʾān translator.[130] He

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[127] Muzaffar Iqbal, "Two Approaches to the English Translation of the Noble Qurʾān," in *Muḥammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), Europe's Gift to Islām,* ed. & ann. M.I Chaghatai (Lahore, Pakistan: Sang-e-Meel Pub., 2014), I:369 (369-402).

[128] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 1.

[129] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 1.

[130] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 1. His discussion, in particular, delves into the "style, stylistic mechanism of stress, word order, cultural voids, problems of literal translation, syntactic and semantic ambiguity problems, emotive Qur'anic expressions, disagreement among Qurʾān translators, different exegetical analyses, morphological patterns, semantico-syntactic interrelation, semantic functions of conjunctives, semantico-stylistic effects, prosodic and acoustic features, and most importantly the shackles imposed by the thorny problem of linguistic and rhetorical Qur'an-specific texture."

identifies two distinct reasons, echoing the concerns raised by Raḥmān and von Denffer earlier.

The first difficulty, he says, is the Qurʾān-bound expressions and structures, which "cannot be reproduced in an equivalent manner to the original terms of structure, mystical effect on the reader, and intentionality of source text."[131] Moreover, in a book chapter written in 2005, Abdul-Raof reminds readers that the Qurʾān was revealed in an Arabian milieu that was completely distinct from other cultures outside the Arabian Peninsula. It is, therefore, impossible to domesticate the "Qurʾān-specific cultural expressions as well as Qurʾān-specific linguistic patterns" by the linguistic norms of target language.[132]

Abdul-Raof bases his theories on six textual and structural considerations. First, he asserts that the Qurʾān possesses morphological *forms* that are semantically, syntactically and stylistically motivated. Translators who attempted to find equivalence for qurʾānic texts have had to dilute and betray the Qurʾān's meaning and form to do it. They have therefore ignored or are unaware of those morphological issues.[133]

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[131] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 1.

[132] Hussein Abdul-Raof, "Cultural Aspects in Qurʾān Translation," in *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable*, ed. L. Long (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2005), 162 (162-172).

[133] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 41 f. He cites, as an example, the way translators read the epithets *al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* (Q 1:1). Some English translators simply render them as "most gracious, most merciful," that is, both have equally taken the superlative particle (most). However, in the source text, Abdul-Raof, drawing from al-Zamakhsharī, argues that only the first epithet signifies *hyperbole* but not the second, "it is for this particular reason that it occurs first" (*Ibid.* 41). Another example is how the rhetorically hyperbolic word *khawwānan* in the verse *inna'l-lāha lā yuḥibbu man kāna khawwānan athīma* in Q 4:107 is read by translators as *khāʾinan* (traitor), a word which "does not have emotive signification nor does it have any rhetorical purpose" (*ibid*, 42).

Second, the Qurʾān also possesses a *word order* or *naẓm* -- the special arrangement of words which signifies or highlights semantic and rhetorical communication. This too, according to Abdul-Raof, is inevitably lost in the process of translation.[134] Third, because English translators have a variety of tools for transliteration, they lack "a recognition of the untranslatability of the cultural voids and of the impossibility, in any other way, of introducing the foreign reader into the cultural world of the speakers of the language being translated."[135] Fourth, the untranslatability of the Qurʾān is also exhibited by *special syntactic structures.* These are peculiar characters not often encountered in any type of Arabic, whether Classical or modern. In order to offset elided or omitted information, some translators have "inserted 'within-the-text' exegetical information" so that the attention of target language readers will not be interrupted.[136]

Fifth, the Qurʾān also bears a type of *semantico-syntactic interrelation* which indicates its untranslatable character. When the "meaning of a qurʾānic

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[134] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 43 f. As an example, he cites Yūsuf ʿAlī's (also Pickthall's) rendition of a clause in Q 38:23, *inna hadha akhī lahu tisʿun wa-tisʿūna naʿjatan* into, "This man is my brother: He has nine and ninety ewes." ʿAlī, apparently, in "an attempt to preserve the original order" forced the target text to retain the source text style and thus, came up with an unnnatural and compromised syntax and style of the target text (*ibid.*, 43).

[135] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 47. Citing the word *al-ʿumra* in Q 2:196, he observes that there are, at least, four distinctive ways by which it is rendered: transliterated as such (*al-ʿumra*) without marginal note (Bell and Turner), or transliterated only as *ʿumra* with an extended commentary (Yūsuf ʿAlī), or rendered into a single word "visitation" without marginal note (Arberry), or given a periphrastic description of its semantic features ("pious visit") followed by a footnote explaining the source text meaning (Asad) (*Ibid.*, 47).

[136] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 48. In Q 16:8, Asad and Yūsuf ʿAlī decided to insert in brackets ("it is He who creates," and "He has created," respectively) exegetical information in order to clarify who the subject is and what the latter did to the sequence of animals. Others, however, like Arberry, do not make use of this strategy (*Ibid,* 48).

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structure is signaled through syntactic elements like prepositions," the accuracy

of the translation is compromised. These important semantic details are not

captured by the target text.[137] The sixth qurʾānic example of untranslatability is

the occurrences of semantically-oriented *qurʾānic particles* such as *idhā* and *in*.

For Abdul-Raof, drawing from al-Suyūṭī, the semantically-motivated pairing of

these particles signals their associative function. *Idhā,* for instance, precedes

"actions repeated frequently and for a variety of reasons." *In* precedes "actions

that do not take place frequently." In the target text, this distinction or nuance is,

at best, implicit, if not difficult to presume.[138]

Thus, no work of translation can be expected to be accurate as the

skewing or distorting of sensitive qurʾānic information is inherent in the process

of translation itself. Secondly, along with the loss of its original textual integrity,

Abdul-Raof says that translation, which is a human undertaking and expression,

simply cannot reproduce the sacred nature of the Qurʾān as divine revelation.[139]

"The beauty of the Qurʾān-specific language and style surpasses man's faculty to

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[137] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 48. He cites the latter clause of Q 34:24 as an example thus, *wa-innā aw iyyākum laʿalā hudan aw fī ḍalālin mubīnin* ("And, behold, either we [who believe in Him] or you [who deny His oneness] are on the right path, or have clearly gone astray!" [Asad]). In the structure of the source text, he says, the prepositions ʿalā and fī are semantically positioned "to indicate a change of meaning," thus each of them functions differently: ʿalā has the associative meaning, namely, people who are "on" this high place, that is, "the right path"; while fī in this structure is associated with the concept of "going astray" in the sense of people who are "in" these "low" conditions of narrow-mindedness. These details are basically voided in the target text "which needs to meet its syntactic norms and its communicative requirements" (*Ibid.*, 48-49).

[138] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 52 f. He gives the example of Q 7:131, *fa-idhā jā'athumu'l-ḥasanatu qālū lanā hādhihi wa-in tuṣibhum sayyi'atun yaṭṭayyarū* ("But when good (times) came, they said, "This is due to us;" When gripped by calamity, they ascribed it to evil omens" [ʿAlī]), where the particle *idhā* introduces a frequent bestowal of divine blessings, while *in* is used "to indicate the non-frequency of God's calamities brought on us" (*ibid.*, 53*)*.

[139] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 1.

reproduce the Qurʾān in a translated form."[140] Simply put, he believes that "the Qurʾān is untranslatable since it is a linguistic miracle with transcendental meanings that cannot be captured fully by human faculty."[141]

He argues that there is "no possible theoretical or practical solution to the Qurʾān translation problems for qurʾānic expressions as well as linguistic/rhetorical features remain Qurʾān-specific." He, nonetheless, supports the goal of producing a "crude approximation of the language, meaning and style of the Qurʾān."[142] By the latter, he means "a pragmatic translation of the surface meaning of the Qurʾān and the provision of linguistic and rhetorical patterns suitable for the target language."[143] This is, according to him, "the most we can hope for" if the purpose of the communication is to reach those who do not speak Arabic who want to appreciate the meaning of the Qurʾān.[144]

In conclusion, the main concern of Muslim scholars engaged in the debate on untranslatability is the doctrine of ʿijāz al-Qurʾān or "the inimitability or miraculousness of the Qurʾān." In their attempt to illustrate what actually makes the Qurʾān "inimitable" or "untranslatable," these scholars have pointed to the uniqueness of the Qurʾān's literary style, the prevalence of syntactically and semantically motivated linguistic gaps, the inevitable cultural "disconnects," and

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[140] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 2.

[141] Abdul-Raof, "Cultural Aspects in Qurʾān Translation," 162.

[142] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 2.

[143] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 2.

[144] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 13.

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the semantically, syntactically, and stylistically motivated Qurʾān-specific morphological forms.

Furthermore, these Qurʾān scholars also assert that translations of the Arabic Qurʾān, no matter how accurate, cannot be considered the Word of God. They have lost the sacredness proper to the unique and miraculous divine revelation that Muḥammad received through Gabriel. Reproducing the unique character of the Qurʾān, they say, is simply beyond human reach. Nonetheless, the same Muslim scholars agree that translating the meanings of the Qurʾān is possible. In fact, it is imperative so that more and more non-Arab-speaking people can become acquainted with its message.

3.3.3 The Praxis of Qurʾān Translation

With the influential doctrine of untranslatability shaping the theological appraisal of the Qurʾān, it is not surprising that most translators have adopted a source-centered orientation in their praxis of translation. This source-centered orientation is especially observable in the works of most English translators of the Qurʾān. That is because the point of departure for their undertakings is the dogma that the Qurʾān is the Word of God which cannot be reproduced by any human's word. These translators acknowledge that this divine Word assumed a specific, Arabic form, and "that form is as essential as the meaning that the words convey."[145]

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[145] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation*, 19.

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A variation in this source-centered orientation is a method of translation which Mannaʿ al-Qaṭṭān (d.1999) developed in his *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān,* and calls *al-tarjamah al-ḥarfiyyah* ("literal" or "word-for-word") translation.[146] His "word for word" method of translation is basically characterized by the transfer of the words from the language of origin to its equivalent in another language. Of course, the words should conform in meaning with one another. A primary consideration in this "word for word" effort is seeking and finding the best corresponding words from the target language. But, it is also crucial that the process preserves the order of syntax from the source text.[147]

The need to locate the correct textual match for source words being translated as well as their word order is crucial for translators, according to Hatim and Mason. These translators know the syntax, tone and style that were semantically intended by the text producer. It is these features precisely that the translator seeks to recover.[148] For this reason, this dynamic of preservation falls under the source-centered category. At all times, the first loyalty among these translators is to the same source text.[149] On the other hand, target-centered translation also raises some concerns. As it intends to cross linguistic boundaries and bring textural transformations to the source text target-centered

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[146] Mannaʿ al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān* (al-Qāhirah: Maktabah Wahbah, 1981), 307 (306-315).

[147] al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, 307-308.

[148] Hatim and Mason, *Discourse and the Translator*, 10

[149] Hatim and Mason, *Discourse and the Translator*, 16.

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translation is deemed risky and likely to cause "loss" and "distortion" in the translation.

Despite concerns about endangering the integrity of the source text, many scholars have acknowledged the social and moral necessity to translate the Qurʾān for the purposes of Islamic daʿwah or "missionary invitation." As Islām spread far and wide and reached new communities where other languages were spoken, it became imperative that everyone who entered into the fold would be able to respond to its call. Despite their language, neophytes needed to engage in the required ritualistic practices and perform other religious obligations.[150]

As a result, some Muslim scholars understandably concluded that, "the Qurʾān has to be translated in order for people to understand the essentials of Islam."[151] However, these same scholars were initially discouraged by the gross misinterpretation of the Qurʾān they found in the works of Western translators and interpreters. In his review of Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān*, Rashīd Aḥmad (Jullundhri) suggests that one of the reasons for the great dissatisfaction with other translators – in contrast to Asad – was that the others only had access to dictionaries and a few Arabic books.[152]

Moreover, "essential qualities such as a taste for Arabic poetry, a command of Arabic literature, and knowledge of the circumstances in which the

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[150] Thameem Ushama, "Issues in Translation of the Qurʾān," *Al-Bāyan: Journal of Qurʾān and Ḥadīth Studies* 9:1 (2011):168 (167-188).

[151] Ushama, "Issues in Translation of the Qurʾān," 168.

[152] Asad, *TMOQ*, vii

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Qurʾān was revealed were rare among these translators."[153] As a result, they unfortunately produced works of translation in which "the literary beauty of the Qurʾān, which had moved the hearts of its first listeners, and the freshness of the divine message, were lost."[154] According to Pickthall, because of the incompetency of many translators, many people were deprived of "The Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds which move men to tears and ecstasy."[155]

Aḥmad says that most of the responsibility for a lack of access to the Qurʾān lies with Muslims themselves. In fact, Muslims have not succeeded in producing a single standard work on the Qurʾān in English.[156] The irony, according to Aḥmad is that while Islamic studies were being seriously pursued by Western scholars, "Muslim religious institutions were indulging in their century-old meaningless dialectical discussions.[157]

At some point, signs of anxiety in some Muslim circles about the gravity of the situation may have led the University of al-Azhar in Cairo to translate the

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[153] Rashīd Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān, A New Translation with Explanatory Notes* by Muḥammad Asad," in *Muḥammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), Europe's Gift to Islām,* ed. & ann. M.I Chaghatai (Lahore, Pakistan: Sang-e-Meel Pub., 2014; 1st published in *Islamic Quarterly*, 1968), I: 355 (355-368).

[154] Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān...,*" in *Europe's Gift,* I:355.

[155] Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, "Introduction," *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (Hyderabad: Hyderabad Government Press, 1930).

[156] Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān...,*" in *Europe's Gift,* I:355.

[157] See Fazlur Raḥmān, "Some Recent Books on the Qurʾān by Western Authors," in *Journal of Religion* 64.1 (January, 1984); Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 25-31.

Qurʾān into several foreign languages in 1935. A committee of concerned

scholars, according to Aḥmad, decided to work on the following lines:

> "*first,* the technical terms (which were the product of dialectical discussion in the second century of *Hijrah*) would not be allowed to penetrate into the translation; *second,* scientific or astronomical opinion would not be discussed and the translation would be rendered in the light of linguistic rules; *third,* no particular school of Muslim thought would be followed. The translation would be made in such a way that it would convey the spirit of the Qurʾān to its readers. Interpretation of the verses concerning the miracles would be done according to their context."[158]

While the Committee failed to realize these guidelines, it, nonetheless,

"put an end to the old controversy about the legitimacy of translation."[159]

Renowned scholars such as Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī wrote articles on the necessity

for translation citing the Ḥanafī view on the legitimacy of translation. Al-Marāghī

was associated with Muḥammad ʿAbduh and was the rector of al-Azhar in Egypt

when Muḥammad Asad met him. Nonetheless, Aḥmad still believed that it was

regrettable that al-Azhar University failed to put its own plans into effect.[160]

Such a breakthrough in Islamic thinking opened more Muslim scholars to

the idea that the essentials of the Qurʾān could be conveyed in languages other

than Arabic. Translating the meaning of the Qurʾān paved the way for an

exegetical approach which al-Qaṭṭān calls *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* or *al-*

tarjamah al-tafsīrīyyah.[161] In contrast to *al-tarjamah al-ḥarfīyyah*, which is a literal

approach, *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* or *al-tafsīrīyyah* is an explanatory or

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[158] Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān...,*" in *Europe's Gift,* I:356.

[159] Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān...,*" in *Europe's Gift,* I:356.

[160] Aḥmad, "Review on *The Message of the Qurʾān...,*" in *Europe's Gift,* I:356.

[161] al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, 308 ff.

illustrative translation. The approach explains the meaning of the word with another word in another language without restricting the translation to a narrow understanding of the original word. For Thameem Ushama, the goal "is not translation of the Qurʾān, but it is a translation of the meaning of the Qurʾān or translation of *tafsīr* of the Qurʾān."[162]

According to scholars and experts of rhetorical sciences, *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* must still confront the fact that there is no single language that easily corresponds to Arabic in words, textual structures and meaning.[163] And there is also the concern about the multiple meanings to be found in a single Arabic term. This variety of meaning could potentially prompt translators to produce a distorted or erroneous interpretation. There are also metaphorical elements to be considered in the translating process. These could prompt either a literal rendition or equivalent expressions in the target language.

These perennial transformations are observable in some existing translations in which the translator has had to deal with the Arabic Qurʾān's "verbal constructions, clefted constituent structures, passive structures, or structures with metaphorical expressions, etc." These complex verbal elements have had to change when they were rendered into the target language, sometimes carrying shifts in tense, person and gender.[164]

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[162] Ushama, "Issues in Translation of the Qurʾān," 172

[163] al-Qaṭṭān, *Mabāḥith fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, 308.

[164] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation*, 14

Nevertheless, the imperative to translate the Qurʾān has made some groups of ʿulamāʾ support the notion that *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* or *al-tafsīrīyyah* is justified for Muslims who do not speak or understand Arabic at all. Without translation "it is not possible to make people realize and discover the greatness, magnanimity and supremacy of the *sharīʿah*, consciousness of the *dīn* and eloquence of the Qurʾān."[165]

Without translations of the Qurʾān today, according to Von Denffer, "there is no way of effective *daʿwa* either to non-Muslims or to Muslims themselves since those familiar with the language of the Qurʾān are few in number, and the vast majority of people have no opportunity to become acquainted with the meaning of the Qurʾān unless it is rendered into their own tongue."[166] Therefore, it is generally agreed by Muslims today that *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* or *al-tarjamah al-tafsīrīyyah* of the Qurʾān is permissible. It is, in fact, a duty and obligation to spread Islām to other peoples in the world.

Given the exceptional challenges of qurʾānic translation, some scholars have suggested prerequisites for the competent translator, a translator who effectively constructs a target text that serves the interest and needs of the reader. Abdul-Raof, for one, wants translators who possess not only a sound linguistic competence in both Arabic and English, but also have advanced knowledge of Arabic syntax and rhetoric. Only translators with this background

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[165] Ushama, "Issues in Translation of the Qurʾān," 172

[166] Von Denffer, ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 144

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can appreciate the complex linguistic and rhetorical patterns of qurʾānic structures.[167]

In addition, translators must be well acquainted with related sciences. They should compare and refer to major commentaries in order to derive and provide the accurate underlying meaning of a given qurʾānic expression, a simple particle or even a preposition.[168] Von Denffer also considers that the ideal translator is "someone with the correct belief, i.e. who is a Muslim."[169]

Having cited all the potential negative outcomes of a translated or interpreted Arabic Qurʾān, Abdul-Raof nonetheless sees a silver-lining in the way some translators have utilized new approaches to "penetrate this highly fortified text."[170] He refers to the efforts of explicating the intricate multi-layered meanings of the Qurʾān through "within-the-text" exegetical materials.

He also talks about the use of marginal notes and commentaries in order to plug cultural gaps and troubleshoot ambiguities.[171] In spite of his serious concerns about translating the Arabic Qurʾān, Abdul-Raof, apparently, favors an exegetical approach as a redeeming method of the translation praxis. In fact, he is convinced that by such an initiative, translation of the Qurʾān becomes very

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[167] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 2

[168] *Ibid.*, 2; Von Denffer, 145.

[169] Von Denffer, ʿ*Ulūm al-Qurʾān*, 144-5. From this principle, he believes that "all such translation by missionaries and their help-mates, the orientalists (even if excellent with regard to their English idiom) should be rejected." The same applies to all-non-Muslim translators and to those holding beliefs other than those based on the Qurʾān and *Sunnah*.

[170] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 40.

[171] Abdul-Raof, *Qurʾān Translation,* 40.

accessible. This type of translation effort espouses a method that attempts to dispel misconceptions among target language readers. As such, it is target-centered.

The following is a comparative look at six English translations of the Qurʾān. Certain verses of interest from the Qurʾān will be studied comparatively through the lens of previously discussed "theories of translation" and with respect to the doctrine of "untranslatability" of the Qurʾān. In particular, this comparative exploration intends to show which translational orientation each translator has used. Is it source-centered or target-centered? Or, can we discern some traits of a translator-centered orientation? Through the following translated verses, we shall also try to deduce whether it is really possible to label or assign just one style or orientation to each of these translators.

These works of translation are primarily selected because they have been published prominently and widely. To date, all of them are available digitally or in print throughout the English-speaking world. Before we proceed to the comparative analysis, we should review some introductory materials written by these select translators especially regarding their respective theologies of the Qurʾān and their translation methodologies. We should also become acquainted with their attitudes towards the issue of untranslatability of the Muslims' scripture and the mechanism they utilized to deal with it.

3.3.3.1 Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān* (1930)

Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936), a British scholar and author, became a Muslim in 1914. He became associated with the Druzes of Mount Lebanon during his visit to the Middle East to study Arabic.[172] The idea of translating the Qurʾān came to him while he was working as a local Imām and as an editor of *Islamic Review* in UK. Pickthall was dissatisfied with the existing Qādyānī Muḥammad ʿAlī's (1917) translation and the inaccuracies of the Orientalist's translations.[173]

He moved to the Subcontinent of India and his translation of the Qurʾān into English was completed and published in 1930. His project had the financial support of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and he received invaluable guidance from the scholars at al-Azhar University.[174] Since it was first published, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān* has enjoyed popularity in the Anglophone world, and has been reprinted more than eighty times.[175]

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[172] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 11.

[173] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 11.

[174] Kidwai identifies Muṣṭafā al-Marāghi as his main consultant. In his article of 1931, Pickthall recalls that in the 1920s he tried to gain permission from al-Azhar to translate the Qurʾān into English. He was disappointed that a dominant faction of traditionalist from the University flatly refused his request. Nonetheless, he went along with his efforst despite al-Azhar's reservations and thereafter published his translation in Great Britain under the current title ("Arabs and Non-Arabs, and the Question of Translating the Qurʾān," *Islamic Culture* 5 (1931): 422-433.

[175] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 11. In his 2005 article, Khaleed Mohammed ("Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān," *The Middle East Quarterly* 12.2 [Spring 2005]: [58-71]), for his part, says that while Pickthall's work was popular in the first half of the twentieth century and, therefore, may be thought to be historically important, its current demand is considered limited by its archaic prose and lack of annotation. But, perhaps the "death knell" for the Pickthall translation's use, he adds, has been the Saudi government's decision to distribute other translations free of charge (5).

In his foreword, Pickthall stresses the view that "the Qurʾān cannot be translated."[176] He does not claim that his work or that of other translators of the Qurʾān has produced an equivalent of the original Qurʾān. Nonetheless, he maintains that the qurʾānic message or its meaning can be presented in a foreign translation even if it cannot then be called "a glorious Qurʾān."[177]

Pickthall's translation is a basic example of a source-centered translation. His attempt to convey the Qurʾān's message prioritizes fidelity to the source-text over concern about its readability in the hands of an English audience. His translation of the Arabic Qurʾān, he says, is "rendered almost literally." However, he also says that he exerted every effort to choose language that would communicate most effectively in order to accommodate his readers. While he used a literal approach in his translation, he provided very few explanatory notes. His desire was to let the text speak for itself. This translator did not believe in heavily annotated works and said that they detract from a focus on the actual text.[178]

As mentioned, Pickthall's literalism may also have been prompted by his desire to defend and remedy the havoc brought about by flawed translations from the Orientalists and Christian missionaries. These translations, he says, included

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[176] Pickthall, "Arabs and Non-Arabs,"

[177] Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān*, 3.

[178] For some Muslim scholars like Kidwai, the absence of sufficient explanatory notes is a serious defect in his Pickthall's work. As a result, he adds, "it fails to advance the understanding of uninitiated readers about the meaning and message of the Qurʾān" (*Translating the Untranslatable,* 12).

"commentation offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which Muslims at once recognize as unworthy."[179]

Pickthall also proposes a base-line requisite for competent translators of any holy Scripture. He insists that the translator must be a believer. According to him, only one who believes in the inspiration and message of a holy scripture can fairly present it in another language.[180] For Pickthall, skill or proficiency in the language alone is not sufficient for the translator who hopes to produce a successful and accurate translation and interpretation. For him, authority of translation can rest only on a person of faith and a believer who can faithfully translate and transmit the teachings and message of the Qurʾān.[181]

While we may be able to describe Pickthall's work as generally employing the source-centered strategy, we cannot ignore that which is intricately woven into his unique strategy. He was a translator whose personal convictions and beliefs were actively engaged in his translation work. He alluded to this work as a personal apologetical reaction to the misrepresentations of the Qurʾān by

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[179] Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, vii.

[180] Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān*, 3.

[181] In his comment on the outsiders' or unbeliever's appreciation of the Qurʾān Farid Esack (*The Qurʾān: A User's Guide* [England: One World Publications, 2007]) says in his note, "when the reader is unfamiliar with Islām and unversed in Arabic picks up the standard English translation of the Qurʾān, that spirit (appreciation of the literary format of the Qurʾān) can be hard to find. What the person who learns the Qurʾān in Arabic experiences as a work of consummate power and beauty, most outsiders can find it difficult to grasp, confusing, and in some English translations, alienating (64, n.9); cf. B. Kateregga and D. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Virginia: Herald Press, 2011), 60. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (*Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* [England: Westminster, 1981]) also proposes that only such an insider can truly understand "religious behaviour," in other words one has to be an "insider" in order to understand "faith" and no "outsider" will ever fully grasp what it is (112).

missionaries. He also agreed that personal faith in revelation is essential, if not a necessity, for a successful translation of scripture.

3.3.3.2 Yūsuf ʿAlī's *The Holy Qurʾān* (1934)

Abdullah Yūsuf ʿAlī's work of translation appeared in the years 1934-37. Its official title is *The Holy Qurʾān, Text, Translation and Commentary.* His work was motivated by the desire to address the special need English readers have to understand the Qurʾān's meaning, to appreciate its beauty and to experience the "grandeur of the original."[182] His ultimate concern, therefore, was deciding how to render the original text into English so that its original message could guide its audience.[183]

The initial inspiration behind Yūsuf ʿAlī's work of translation was, as he put it, "to present the Qurʾān in a 'fitting garb in English'."[184] This motivation can be

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[182] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* iii. His work of translation, according to Khaleed Mohammed, enjoyed wide distribution and became the most popular English version among Muslims (as a matter of fact, several Muslim scholars have built upon this translation) from 1934 until very recently owing to the favor and sponsorship by Saudi Arabia.

[183] Khaleel Mohammed also cites as another reason why he undertook the work of translation was the social impetus of the growing Arab animosity toward Zionism and in a milieu that condoned anti-Semitism. To this fray, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Mohammed says, "constructed his oeuvre as polemic against the Jews" ("Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān," 5).

[184] This, Yūsuf ʿAlī undertook after he became confident that he had the necessary credentials to accomplish such a task. Foremost of which, he related, was his personal spiritual struggle which he called "an inner storm" (*The Holy Qurʾān,* iv). This experience led him to wander around and visit different Islamic places in search of meaning as an antidote to his personal existential crisis. Such journeys set off in him a desire to learn more about human behaviors in some Muslim societies which in turn provided him some intellectual materials useful to his later endeavor of translation of the Arabic Qurʾān (*Ibid.).* Another credential that he believed prepared him for this venture was his early education in the Arabic language which then made him confident to undertake the translation process. ʿAlī recalled that his father reminded him that like any other languages, qurʾānic Arabic is a vehicle which carries "ineffable message which comes to the heart in rare moments of ecstasy." Basically, these personal backgrounds became ʿAlī's impetus for his work of translation (*Ibid.*, iii).

initially characterized as a target-oriented vision. His efforts were directed towards clearly communicating the message to English readers.

Despite that basic target-oriented stance, Yūsuf ʿAlī᾽ also claimed to have embraced the "art of interpretation" which is governed by the principle of literalism. That is, this translating approach seeks to "stick as closely as possible to the text" one seeks to interpret.[185] Such an inclination to adhere to the source text also entails incorporating or reflecting the rhythm, music and the tone of the original. According to one of Yūsuf ʿAlī's reviewers, "he sought to convey the music and richness of the Arabic with poetic English versification."[186]

Yūsuf ʿAlī says that this literal approach to translation is certainly not the simple rendering of the qurʾānic Arabic into the English language. It means much more than "a substitution of one word for another." Rather, it should be a rendition that represents the fullest meaning of the source text. While admitting that he has not aired his own views,[187] Yūsuf ʿAlī believes that a well translated text should show an occasional departure from the literal translation in order to better express the spirit of the original. He implies that he encountered cases in which a literal approach was unsatisfying and insufficient. These occasions of difficulty occurred, according to Yūsuf ʿAlī, because since the time of Muḥammad

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[185] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* ix.

[186] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān*, iv; cf. Khaleed Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān," 6.

[187] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* v.

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and his Companions, Arabic words have gradually acquired new meanings. Arabic, just like "all living languages," has undergone such transformation.[188]

In the classical Arabic vocabulary, this translator reports, "the meaning of each root word is so comprehensive that it is difficult to interpret it in a modern analytical language word for word, or by the use of the same word in all places where the original word occurs in the text."[189] Yūsuf ʿAlī links the fluidity of meaning in some qurʾānic passages to later commentators who often abandoned the interpretation of earlier commentators without sufficient reason. Thus, these commentators interrupted the continuity of traditional interpretation. When one is faced with an interpretation challenge, it is necessary, he says, to exercise great exegetical judgment. The translator must choose the best equivalent expression to interpret the source text.[190]

While Yūsuf ʿAlī indicates his strong preference for a literal translation of the qurʾānic Arabic, he also acknowledges the intellectual burden this presents to non-Arabic speakers. As an additional aid to his English readers, he generously

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[188] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* x.

[189] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* x. For this reason, he cautions those who would attempt to translate not to confine one's attention to one particular meaning, lest the often "full ray of light" of meaning of the Arabic word is missed.

[190] Yūsuf ʿAlī admitted being guided by the following principles: in matters of philology and language, he accepted the best authority among those who were competent to deal with the issue in question; as to the matters of narration of events surrounding the Prophet, he relied on contemporary literatures who've offered a more verified information; as to particular occasions of revelation, he believed that while earlier writers impressively amassed ample material about them, he, nonetheless, adhered to the principle that the Qurʾān speaks to any moment of history, and, therefore, should not be necessarily dictated by the former. In addition, he also trusted results of latest researches and scholarships when illuminating remote Arab history and folklore; and finally, he believed that it is appropriate to go to Jewish or Christian sources in order to interpret Jewish or Christian legends or beliefs, but cautioned that they are for "illustration only," and should not be in the direction of incorporating such beliefs or systems (*The Holy Qurʾān,* xi-xii).

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incorporates brief footnotes. These notes, he feels, can give the English reader or scholar a fairly complete but concise view of what he understood to be the meaning of the text.[191] Overall, Yūsuf ʿAlī masterfully negotiates a balance between source-centered and target-centered translation. He seeks to preserve the integrity of the source text while presenting the best rendition for his English readers.

Critics have mixed views about this translator's work and its general currency among both Muslims and non-Muslims. One critic places Yūsuf ʿAlī's work above most, if not all, other English translations of the Qurʾān by Muslims. It has been reprinted more than two-hundred times.[192] Others believe that it has lost influence because of its dated language and the appearance of more recent translations that the Saudi government has subsidized.[193]

3.3.3.3 Qarāʾī's *The Qurʾān* (2005).

The same balanced view about translation is also found in ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī's *The Qurʾān, with a Phrase-by-Phrase Translation.* In his introduction, this translator states upfront that the Qurʾān is paradoxically both "untranslatable"

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[191] Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān,* v. While Kidwai is very appreciative of the quality of this current work, he also does not hold back chastising Yūsuf ʿAlī for his qurʾānic eschatology which, according to him, "far from representing the orthodox Muslim viewpoint." He accuses ʿAlī for succumbing to the modern Western viewpoint which almost always takes recourse to interpreting almost all the qurʾānic verses dealing with eschatology as "symbolic," "allegorical," or "figurative" (*Translating the Untranslatable,* 17).

[192] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 16.

[193] Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān," 6.

and "translation-friendly."[194] Because of the Qurʾān's "matchless literary elegance and eloquence"[195] Qarāʾī believes that no translation can ever hope to fully capture its "fleeting flashes of splendor."[196] Be that as it may be, he also considers the qurʾānic text translatable. It is, he insists, "astonishingly clear, simple and straightforward in its style." Its characteristic syntactical structure is made up of both short and longer sentences in which clauses and phrases are arranged in a logical, sequential order.

Qarāʾī, a Shīʿah scholar from Iran, seems to echo Yūsuf ʿAlī's goals for translating a literary text. The translator, he says, must be able to convey the meanings of the source text in an intelligible manner and be able to render them in a natural and easy form of expression.[197] In addition, a translator should convey the spirit and manner of the original which should evoke a similar response in the targeted reader. He admits that conveying the meanings of source texts and expressing them in a natural way may sound easy. But, accomplishing it also means conveying the spirit of the text. This usually presents insurmountable barriers for a successful translation, according to Qarāʾī.[198] Some Muslim critics see ʿAlī Qulī Qarāʾī's work as surprisingly balanced and moderate

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[194] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xiv.

[195] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xiv.

[196] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xv.

[197] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xv.

[198] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xv.

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in the area of sectarian issues. His is unlike other existing Shīʿite works of translation which have been imputed to be "disfigured by blatant sectarianism."[199]

There is a serious translation problem which is underscored by Qarāʾī. The translator must try to translate words from the Arabic Qurʾān into English even though there are no semantically equivalent terms for certain Arabic words in English. And some of these Arabic terms play a key role in the qurʾānic message.[200] In such cases, he believes, trying to achieve a strict equivalence of meaning is extremely difficult and impractical. Instead, he advocates for the principle of approximation.[201] He acknowledges its inability to convey the full semantic scope and richness of the original terms. In fact, this approach can only offer a truncated or lopsided sense to the message communicated.

Thus, Qarāʾī calls the method of translation that he has adopted formal equivalence. It basically follows what he calls a *phrase-by-phrase* approach. The latter is a technique that he calls "mirror-paraphrasing." Each phrase in the target or receptor language is mirrored in semantic importance with a phrase in the source text.[202] From this translation strategy he derives the title of his own work of translation. This mirroring approach sometimes requires grammatical,

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[199] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 178. He identifies earlier translations of the Qurʾān by Shīʿah scholars: S.V. Mir Aḥmad ʿAlī (1964), M.H. Shakir (1968), Muḥammad Baqir Behbudi (1977).

[200] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xv.

[201] We have seen this concept advanced earlier by the biblical theorist of translation Eugene Nida and which is supported by Hussein Abdul-Abdul-Raof.

[202] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xviii.

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structural, idiomatical or syntactical adjustments. Changes should be made in these areas for the sake of intelligibility, clarity and naturalness of expression.[203]

The treatment of qurʾānic idioms, for Qarāʾī, is an important part of his approach to translation. There are some Arabic idioms unfamiliar to the English-speaking audience which he has translated literally. That audience, he says, has usually managed to understand them.[204] When this literal translation process could not be applied to some idioms, he simply paraphrased them in order to be understood. In some cases, he simply supplanted the Arabic idioms with English idioms.

As he subscribed to the principle of "approximation," Qarāʾī's translation approach sometimes involved choosing an interpretation from earlier qurʾānic commentators. When the commentators he examined offered views that he saw as significant or helpful, he mentions their alternate interpretations in his footnotes.[205] Also in his footnotes appear explanations of ellipses in the Qurʾān verses. Those ellipses are omissions of words or phrases which, according to him, are necessary for a complete syntactical construction but not necessary for understanding. And finally, Qarāʾī used some of his notes to offer implicit references that were not explicitly mentioned in the text.[206]

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[203] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xviii.

[204] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xviii.

[205] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xviii.

[206] Qarāʾī, *The Qurʾān,* xxi

Qarāʾī's concept and application of formal equivalence appears to be quite flexible. His *phrase-by-phrase* or mirroring approach is seen by some as characteristically conservative. It seems that he is driven by the impulse of semantic preservation of the source phrase. Yet, he also allows some textual and structural manipulations for the sake of "intelligibility, clarity and naturalness of expression." As mentioned earlier, his dual orientation towards a source-centered and target-centered approach echoes the translating style of Yūsuf ʿAlī. Both of these scholars are aware of the wisdom in employing this two-pronged strategy throughout the translation process.

3.3.3.4   Abdel Haleem's *The Qurʾān* (2005)

The work of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* reflects the view that it is the translator's job to bring the reader as close as possible to the meaning of the original Arabic. This can be done, he advises, by utilizing the tools of solid linguistic analysis and choosing stylistic features that will allow the translation to communicate to the non-specialist majority.[207] He finds that absolute adherence to the original Arabic structure and idioms generates an unnatural and confusing message in English.[208] Thus, a literal approach to the process of translation that is slavish and imbalanced brings semantic and structural concerns. It often results in rendering Arabic idioms into English where they are meaningless.

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[207] M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xxvi (ix-xxxvi).

[208] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation*, xxxi.

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Another unique challenge in a literal approach to translation of the Arabic Qurʾān is addressed by Abdel Haleem. He points to the issue of elision where syntax and texture appear omitted, truncated and incomprehensible even to native Arabic speakers. Nonetheless, the translation can be understood by those informed about the context of the revelation. There is also a factor of historical exigencies. In these special cases of translation difficulties, scholars point to Arabic vocabularies which have accrued different meanings relative to the historical context.[209] And lastly, there is also the problem of punctuation which is inherent to the qurʾānic textural system.[210] All these, and other considerations, according to Abdel Haleem, pose serious difficulties. They can lead to the production of a crude literal translation of the Arabic Qurʾān which would ultimately not be beneficial to the target audience.

Having used a target-centered orientation, Abdel Haleem touts his translation of the Arabic Qurʾān into English as superior to its predecessors in terms of accuracy, clarity, flow and currency of language.[211] He says that it is written in a modern, easy style and avoids – wherever possible – the use of

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[209] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxii. Kidwai, however, criticizes Abdel Haleem when occasionally he succumbs to "the current notion of absolute gender equality in the West." This is illustrative, according to Kidwai, in his rendition of Q 2:282 where Abdel Haleem, he said, considers this qurʾānic directive as "applicable only to 'a cultural environment where women generally were less involved in money matters and calculations that men, less literate'... the cultural context is different now." In short, Kidwai rebukes Abdel Haleem for treating "the Qurʾān as a dated work, with its impractical and cumbersome baggage, born of its narrow cultural environment and specific cultural context" (Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 133).

[210] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxxiv.

[211] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxix.

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cryptic or archaic language that tends to obscure meaning.[212] In addition, he also believes that his footnotes and explanatory introductions are useful for reader comprehension. These footnotes, he reminds us, do not "overburden and overzealously guide the readers."[213] The notes explain the allusions, references, cultural background of passages, departures from "accepted" translations, or alternative interpretations, and cross-references.[214]

As we look at his work, Abdel Haleem is praised for providing "an excellent analysis of the context of certain verses," and for "the preciseness of English" translations he provides. Nonetheless, other scholars concede that even in the work of this scholar, they can identify "problems that show that Abdel Haleem has incorporated his doctrinal bias into his translation."[215]

3.3.3.5 Droge's *The Qurʾān, a New Annotated Translation* (2013)

A. J. Droge is a non-Muslim translator of the Qurʾān who seems to methodically build on earlier research that attempts to understand the Qurʾān on its own terms rather than through the traditional story of Islamic origins.[216] For this reason, there is significant presence of intratextual and intertextual

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[212] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxix.

[213] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxxv. But, his notes, Kidwai says, are *too* occasional and very brief, almost leaving his work "at best, a bare translation of the qurʾānic text" (Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 132)

[214] Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān, A New Translation,* xxxv.

[215] Mohammed, "Assessing English Translations of the Qurʾān." Cites Abdel Haleem's translation of *nafs* into "soul" despite what Fazlur Raḥmān showed that the Qurʾān contains no evidence of the corpus-soul dualism of later Islam.

[216] Cf. Daniel Madigan, *The Qurʾān Self Image* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

references throughout his work. *The Qurʾān, a New Annotated Translation* displays an intimate engagement with the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. References to a whole range of secondary literature can also be found in his work.

With the scriptural references he has included, Droge intends to show the extent to which the Qurʾān is now part of a much wider conversation.[217] He acknowledges that his approach is unpopular since "both religious and secular scholars are committed to the view that the Qurʾān corresponds to the career of Muḥammad."[218] To detractors of his method, he convincingly retorts that the Qurʾān does not require the reader to distinguish between different chronological periods or geographical places in order to understand the text.[219]

Furthermore, Droge appears to distinguish himself from Muslim translators who dogmatically embrace the nature and substance of the Qurʾān. Instead, he says, "reverence may be a religious virtue, but it should not be a scholarly one."[220] This does not necessarily mean that he dismisses the tradition altogether. Rather, throughout his translation, he refers to tradition for the sake of comparison and contrast. He does not favor "letting tradition (*sīra* and *tafsīr*) fill in the gaps or predetermine the meaning of the text."[221]

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[217] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation*, xxxvii.

[218] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation*, xi.

[219] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation*, xi-xii.

[220] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation*, xiii.

[221] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation*, xxxvi.

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Echoing Pickthall's source-centered orientation, Droge "aims not at elegance but strives for as literal a rendering of the Arabic as English will allow."[222] In his search for literal translation, he claims to maintain consistency in the rendering of words and phrases which means mimicking word order wherever possible.[223] The result, he says, is a kind of "Arabicized (or Qurʾānized) English" which strives to capture some of the power and pervasive strangeness of the original.[224] Risking criticism for being too literal and for occasionally sounding awkward, Droge appears determined to give his readers "not only a sense of what the Qurʾān says, but how it says it."[225] By so doing, he hopes more readers will gain access to the Qurʾān's distinctive idiom in a way that strives to remain as close as possible to the way it is expressed in Arabic.[226]

Like other translators, Droge uses annotations which he says "are not as commentary" but to provide further information about a term or phrase in question. In particular, like Yūsuf ʿAlī, Droge also strives to avoid imposing his own interpretation, but allows the Qurʾān to speak for itself. Furthermore, his notes contain a system of numerous cross-references to parallel passages within the Qurʾān, so that wherever possible the Qurʾān is able to elucidate the Qurʾān.

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[222] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation,* vii.

[223] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation,* xxxv. In his review on the Droge's work, Bruce Lawrence pays attention to the translator's invariant rendition of some terms (e.g. ʿabd as consistently "to serve") which proves awkward where the textual context requires a different meaning (instead of "to serve," "to worship" is more appropriate in some occurrences) ("Review on *The Qurʾān: A New Annotated Translation (Comparative Islamic Studies)* by A.J. Droge," in *Review of Middle East Studies* 48.1/2 (2014): 77-79.

[224] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation,* xxxv.

[225] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation,* xxxv.

[226] Droge, *The Qurʾān, A New Annotated Translation,* xxxv.

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3.3.3.6   Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* (1980)

The rationale that best describes Asad's work of translation is his oft-repeated citation of the qurʾānic locution *li-qawmin yatafakkarūna* or "for people who think."[227] He argues that the Qurʾān places a significant stress on reason. That is appropriate, he says, because reason is key to understanding the meaning of the qurʾānic text and its instructions. As such, reason is a "valid way of faith."[228] Simply put, this approach means that every qurʾānic verse or statement is "directed to man's reason and must, therefore, be comprehensible."[229]

Asad says that an emphasis on reason explains the qurʾānic assertion that it contains two types of verses: *āyat muḥkamāt* and *āyat mutashābihāt*.[230] The former are verses which are easy to understand in the literal sense. This applies to most texts and constitutes the essence of the scripture, or the *umm al-kitāb.* Verses in the second category have allegorical or symbolic meaning. They are often expressed through generalized metaphors and metaphysical subjects.

Without a proper grasp of what is implied by *āyāt mutashābihāt*, according to Asad, much of the Qurʾān can be "grossly misunderstood both by believers

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[227] Muḥammad Asad bases this qurʾānic expression from seven locations in the Qurʾān: Q 10:24; 13:3; 16:11, 69; 30:21; 39:42; 45:13.

[228] Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān, Translated and Explained* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), vii (i-viii). Here onward it shall be *TMOQ.*

[229] Asad, *TMOQ,* 991. Asad's correlation between the rationality of the Qurʾān and the human faculty of reason is discussed under the sections "Asad's Rational Dynamic of Ijtihād" and "Ijtihād and the Roots of Islamic Teaching" in Chapter One.

[230] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989, see *Q 3*:7.

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and by such as refuse to believe in its divinely-inspired origin."[231] Moreover, he adds, even an appreciation of what is meant by "allegory" or "symbolism" does not provide sufficient background to understand the worldview of the Qurʾān. It is therefore necessary to relate the qurʾānic use of *āyāt mutashābihāt,* (allegories, or symbolisms) with the qurʾānic concept of *al-ghayb*. The latter represents that sector of reality which lies beyond human perception and experience.[232] As it represents the unseen and intangible realities, *al-ghayb* is a concept that

> "constitutes the basic premise for an understanding of the call of the Qurʾān, and, indeed, of the principle of religion - every religion - as such: for all truly religious cognition arises from and is based on the fact that only a small segment of reality is open to man's perception and imagination, and that by far the larger part of it escapes his comprehension altogether."[233]

As mentioned in Chapter Two, there are times when the only way that the real meaning of the Qurʾān can be successfully conveyed to us is through "loan-images derived from our actual -- physical or mental -- experiences."[234] This is true because there are limitations built into human language that make it difficult to grasp some truths. For instance, "God's Being" necessarily call for a representation or translation of God's activity or creativeness into categories of thought, such as God's 'wrath,' 'condemnation,' 'love,' etc. Those are realities that humans can fathom.

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[231] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

[232] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

[233] Asad, *TMOQ,* 989.

[234] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990.

Asad's interpretive quest, however, is not aimed so much at deciphering *al-ghayb.* Those are metaphysical subjects and include such topics as "God's attributes," the "Day of Judgment," etc. Asad's goal is to comprehend those *al-mutashābihāt* passages of the Qurʾān which are expressed in allegorical language about the human condition. In principle, he must understand the concept of *al-ghayb* as the innermost purpose of the Qurʾān's use of *al-mutashābihāt*.

The Qurʾān indicates clearly, Asad explains, that many of its passages and expressions "must be understood in an allegorical sense for the simple reason that, being intended for human understanding, they could not have been conveyed to us in any other way."[235] As far as Asad is concerned, if every verse of the Qurʾān is taken only in its outward, literal sense with no attention paid to its potential allegorical meaning, the translation would contradict the very spirit of the Qurʾān.[236]

As a result, Asad attempts to interpret the Qurʾān for the modern world in a more comprehensive way. He looks at the linguistic usage of a term that was prevalent at the time of the revelation of the Qurʾān.[237] He also makes use of contemporary disciplines such as hermeneutics and psychological and socio-

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[235] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990.

[236] Asad, *TMOQ,* 990.

[237] Asad, *TMOQ,* iv.

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anthropological methods.[238] He brings all of these hermeneutical elements to bear especially on certain texts dealing with matters of a supernatural nature.

Asad also interprets the Qurʾān from a modernist perspective. His purpose is to explain the Qurʾān in terms that are relevant to the world in which we live. During the last couple of several centuries, this same modernist hermeneutic has been reluctantly accepted among Muslims.[239]

With this modernist agenda, Asad's translation managed to be coherent and brings a particular modernist discourse on the Qurʾān into sharper focus.[240] He makes expert use of the translator's strategy of picking and choosing meanings or interpretations that best suit the modernist project. Furthermore, Asad's approach can be distinguished from the Classical commentators as well as modern Muslim translators who are rendering the Qurʾān into English. The latter class of people attempted "to explicate the 'mythic' language of scripture as

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[238] Asad, *TMOQ,* ii.

[239] Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān: Muḥammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islām and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:1 (2004): 80. 79-89. This is the same modernist hermeneutic, according to Abdin Chande, that has been vying or, more accurately, struggling for acceptance among Muslims during the last couple of centuries. Chande further elaborates that modernists pose a challenge to both traditional Islām (Islām as it is practiced in various regions of the Muslim world) and revivalist Islām (with emphasizes a return to scripture, attacks deviations from Islamic doctrine, emphasizes the past and calls on modernity in the name of this past). Modernist Islām also rejects customary practices but, and more significantly, it calls upon the past in the name of the modernity. What this means is that Islām in the 20th century went through a process of redefining itself in response to both internal and external developments (*Ibid.*, 88). Other Muslim critics like, Kidwai relates that a number of Muslim scholars have expressed their disapproval of Asad's "departure from the mainstream understanding of Qurʾān in both his translation and explanatory notes" (*Translating the Untranslatable,* 70). Also, Nadvi accuses Asad of denying the miracles of the Qurʾān, and as such has led him to deviate from orthodox beliefs of the *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamaʿah*. Consequently, Nadvi continues, he has translated many Arabic words against the accepted linguistic usage of the Arabs (S. Habibul Haq Nadvi, "Review on *Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*" in *Muslim World Book Review* 10.1 (1989): 6.

[240] Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān...", 80. In his review on *TMOQ*.

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embodied in certain sacred stories or miracles which for Asad have purely metaphorical signification."[241] As a matter of fact, Asad's rendition became controversial because he believed that the Qurʾān contains legendary accounts or pre-Islamic antecedents, from both Judeo-Christian and Arab traditions.

Asad's basic approach to interpretation is also grounded by his principle that all qurʾānic injunctions and exhortations -- that is its ethical message -- should be viewed together "as one integral whole."[242] For him, this means that every verse and sentence of the Qurʾān has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, "all of them clarifying and amplifying one another."[243] Besides, he also sees the Qurʾān as providing general principles which are best understood as sermons intended for didactic purposes. This means, for instance, that "all its references to historical circumstances and events" should not be necessarily taken literally as constituting a factual record, but as being illustrations of the human condition.[244]

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[241] Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān...", 80. Kidwai, for his part, criticizes Asad's rationalist treatment of the miracles in Qurʾān as "deeply influenced, rather overawed by the pseudo-rationalistic Muʿtazilīte thought" which tended to deny supernatural elements in the Qurʾān by explaining it away in figurative terms (Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable,* 70). Kidwai's criticism seems to find support in Neal Robinson's analysis of Asad's work of translation. Robinson, for his part, point to Asad's Muʿtazilite leanings which, he says, have cast their shadow on both his translation and interpretation especially where the latter reads some metaphysical verses or phrases metaphorically or symbolically: for example, in his reading of Q 27:26, Asad replaces the divine throne titles with abstract expression such as "in awesome almightiness enthroned, or invariably renders *istawā ʿalā'l-ʿarshi* as "established on the throne of His almightiness" (Q 7:54, Q 10:3, etc.) (Neal Robinson, "Sectarian and Ideological Bias in Muslim Translations of the Qurʾān," in *Islām and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8.3 [1997]: 267 f. [261-278])

[242] Asad, *TMOQ.*, vii.

[243] Asad, *TMOQ.*, vii.

[244] Asad, *TMOQ.*, vii.

While the Classical commentators may have attempted to provide certain historical occasions to nuance or contextualize the revelation of a certain verse, it should not be allowed, Asad maintains, to obscure the underlying purport of a verse and its relevance to the ethical teaching of the Qurʾān. In fact, the latter oftentimes got lost sight in their explanations and unwarranted effort to embellish the qurʾānic narrative.[245]

Having underscored the basic principles that guided his work of translation, Asad also makes it clear at the beginning of his venture that the Qurʾān is "unique and untranslatable."[246] Asad, nonetheless, believes that the impossibility of reproducing the Qurʾān in any other languages does not mean that it is impossible to offer its message to people who know no Arabic at all.[247] The nature of its untranslatability is illustrated by the exceptional organic interconnection between its meaning and its linguistic presentation since they "form one unbreakable whole."[248] This interconnection, he explains, is demonstrated in

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[245] Asad, *TMOQ.*, vii.

[246] Asad, *TMOQ.*, v.

[247] Asad, *TMOQ.*, v.

[248] Asad, *TMOQ.*, v. Strongly implied in Asad's interpretative method of reading the Qurʾān is the principle of *naẓm* (lit. "order," "arrangement," "organization"). He reads the Qurʾān as a well-structured book, that is, its arrangement inhere a special wisdom. According to Muntasir Mir, it was probably al-Rāzī who was the first Muslim writer to apply the idea of *naẓm* (*Coherence in the Qurʾān* [Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1986], 17). The latter was convinced that the Qurʾān yields most of its *laṭāʾif* (subtle beautiful points') through the *naẓm* it possesses (*Ibid.*). Such a rudimentary concept and application of the exegetical principle of *naẓm*, however, only became systematized and nuance in the modern studies of al-Ḥamīd al-Farāhī (d. 1349/1930) and his student Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997). Both of them believed that *naẓm* is a fundamental characteristic of the Qurʾān; by providing abundant thematic and other kinds of parallels, the Qurʾān explains itself; what is unclear in one verse is made clear in another, and what is brief in one sūrah is elaborated elsewhere; the best guide to the Qurʾān is the Qurʾān itself (*Ibid.* 25-26). In other words, through such interpretive view of the Qurʾān, *naẓm* forms an

"the position of individual words in a sentence; the rhythm and sound of its phrases and their syntactic construction, the manner in which a metaphor flows almost imperceptibly into a pragmatic statement, the use of acoustic stress not merely in the service of rhetoric but as a means of alluding to unspoken but clearly implied ideas."[249]

Nonetheless, Asad does not claim to have translated the Qurʾān in the same way that many works of ancient Classical literature have been translated.[250] Nor does he claim to have reproduced any of the indescribably beautiful rhythm and rhetoric of the Qurʾān. He says that "no one who has truly experienced its majestic beauty could ever be presumptuous enough to make such a claim or even to embark upon such an attempt."[251]

As we saw earlier, Asad speaks highly of "reason" as the essential and effective medium for a successful work of translation of the Qurʾān. It is this very interpretive element, I argue, which distinguishes *The Message of the Qurʾān* from its counterparts. He believes that the application of "reason" means that the Qurʾān is a rational literature in spite of the *al-ghayb.* As such, it is certainly not impervious to the scrutiny of human reason. The rational interaction between this holy *writ* and the human intellect, in Asad's view, helps to protect both the

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integral part of the essential meaning or message of the Qurʾān; that it is important because it provides the only key to the proper understanding of the Qurʾān. It is *naẓm*, that by furnishing an integrated view of the Qurʾān, throws new light on every verse. Without *naẓm*, according to al-Farāhī and Iṣlāḥī, the Qurʾān is no more than an aggregate of verses and sūrahs; with *naẓm* it is transmuted into a real unity (*Ibid.*, 34). While Asad, in his own right, did not develop a more systematic and a nuanced concept of *naẓm* similar to that of al-Farāhī's and Iṣlāḥī, there is no evidence that he was directly influenced by these two authors. Associating him, however, with al-Rāzī's rudimentary concept of *naẓm* is a probability as the latter is one of the most cited classical figures in Asad's commentary of *The Message of the Qurʾān.*

[249] Asad, *TMOQ.*, v.

[250] Asad, *TMOQ.*, v.

[251] Asad, *TMOQ.*, viii.

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integrity of the source text and the production of a reader-friendly and target-centered translation. It is the principle of "reason" that dictates Asad's approach. It comes into play when he is rendering a word, phrase or verse into English whether the rendering is a literal or exegetical one. It is through this same principle of reason that he provides ample notes and commentaries in order to qualify or justify his renditions.

3.3.4 Comparative Analysis of Qurʾānic Translation

The following comparative analysis of sample qurʾānic verses attempts to demonstrate different translational approaches undertaken by the six interpreters or translators that we met earlier. Apart from the obvious individual character of each translator's work, we can also see two different interpretative orientations. These are the basic tendencies in the translation approach to which translators are drawn. These two tendencies, styles or methods are referred to as either source-centered or target-centered.

The following verses are randomly selected from various classifications of Arabic qurʾānic *āyat.* This category of verses concerns religious practices or rituals, other religions, religious diversity, qurʾānic stories, human and social relations, regulation of financial relations, ethical relations, political relations, eschatology, and science.

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But, the goal of our examination here is to take note of marked differences among the translators as they apply different hermeneutics to interpret a given text.

3.3.4.1   Q Baqarah 2:6

"*inna alladhīna kafarū …*"

Pickthall:	"As for the Disbelievers"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"As to those who reject Faith"
Qarāʾī:	"As for the faithless"
Abdel Haleem:	"As for those who disbelieve"
Droge:	"Surely, those who disbelieve"
Asad:	"Behold, as for those who are bent on denying the truth"

As far as the standard arrangement of the Qurʾān is concerned, the term *kafarū* appears for the first time [252] in Q Baqarah 2:6, "BEHOLD, as for those who are bent on denying the truth (*kafarū*[253]) -- it is all one to them whether thou warnest them or dost not warn them: they will not believe." In its textual context, *kafarū* serves as a contrast to the term *muttaqīn* (*muttaqūn*) or "God-conscious" in Q 2:2.[254] In fact, as it is presented in the subsequent four verses, some English translators attempt to conceptualize and render the term *kafarū* in a way that

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[252] It is traditionally held that the first occurrence of the word *kāfir* (or roughly as "disbeliever") in the chronological order of revelation is in Q Muddaththir 74:10, *ʿalāʾl-kāfirīn ghayru yasīrin* ("not of ease, for all who [now] deny the truth," [Asad, *TMOQ*]).

[253] Lexically, its first verbal form carries the following connotations: "to be irreligious, "be an infidel," "not to believe in God," "to blaspheme God, curse or swear," etc. (*The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 975).

[254] Also rendered variously in the following works of translation: Pickthall: "those who ward off (evil)"; Yūsuf ʿAlī: "those who fear God"; Qarāʾī: "Godwary"; Abdel Haleem: "those who are mindful of God"; Droge: "the ones who guard (themselves)"; Asad: "God-conscious."

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contrasts with *muttaqūn.* But these varying conceptualizations of the term seem to betray the translation orientations they adopted in this specific textual context.

Some of them, like Pickthall, Abdel Haleem and Droge adhere to the term's literal value. [255] In this case, they appear to adhere to the basic post-classical theological connotation of the term as "unbeliever" or "infidel," rather than according to its primitive meaning. As such it connotes a restricted sense of one who rejects the system of doctrine and law promulgated in the Qurʾān and amplified by the teachings of Prophet Muḥammad. While conscious of its etymological value, Pickthall's, Abdel Haleem's and Droge's loyalty is still to the literal meaning of the source text as it is institutionally circumscribed. Thus, their translational orientation may, nonetheless, be qualified as source-centered.

Yūsuf ʿAlī,[256] Qarāʾī and Asad, on the other hand, appear to provide an exegetical equivalence, which is target-centered. Asad, especially, asserts that his rendition of *kafarū* in its first appearance in the Qurʾān should read, "those who are bent on denying the truth." His rendering reflects a basic attitude and a "conscious intent" of this identified class of people.[257] The same class of people, he says, is described in Q Aʿrāf 7:179 as those individuals "who have hearts with

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[255] This literal rendition may also be argued as, in its etymological or lexical meaning, the word *kāfir* (from the verb *kafara*), may have an unpejorative agricultural sense as in the tiller of the soil in Q 57:20, that is, "one who covers" (i.e. the sown seed with earth) (Asad, *TMOQ,* 907, n. 4 on Q 74:10).

[256] Yūsuf ʿAlī, for his part, reads *kafarū* as implying "a deliberate rejection of Faith as opposed to a mistaken idea of God or faith" (Q 2, 18, n. 30).

[257] Asad, *TMOQ,* 4, n. 6 on Q 2:6. Asad's rendition finds support in al-Zamakhsharī's reading of this verse where the latter characterizes this class of people thus, *ʿalā kufrihi taṣmīman* or "those who have deliberately resolved upon their *kufr*" (Zamakhsharī, 1: 56 on Q 2:6). *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* also describes their unbelief thus "who remain firm in their disbelief" (II:6, on Q 2:6).

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which they fail to grasp the truth (*lā yafqahūna bihā*), and eyes with which they

fail to see (*lā yubṣirūna bihā*), and ears with which they fail to hear (*lā yasmaʿūna*

bihā)." Therefore, understood in this sense, Asad's rendition of *kafarū* -- arguably

along with Yūsuf ʿAlī and Qarāʾī -- is presented in the Qurʾān as a fundamental

human behavior as opposed to an institutionally imposed time-bound connotation

which the renditions of Pickthall, Abdel Haleem and Droge may suggest.

3.3.4.2   Q Baqarah 2:54

"… *fa'qtulū anfusakum* …"

Pickthall:	"and kill (the guilty) yourselves"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"and slay yourselves (the wrongdoers)"
Qarāʾī:	"and slay [the guilty among] your folks."
Abdel Haleem:	"and kill [the guilty among] you."
Droge:	"and kill one another."
Asad:	"and mortify yourselves."

This excerpt follows the account of the "worshipping of the calf"[258]

(*attakhadhtum al-ʿijla*) by the Israelites while God summons Moses to meet for

forty nights in Q 2:51.[259] The verse that follows implies that God has forgiven or

blotted out this very infraction or sin (*ʿafawnā ʿankum baʿdi dhālika*) (Q 2:52).

Yet, two verses later (Q 2:54), Moses makes a declaration to the people, saying,

> "O my people! Verily, you have sinned against yourselves by worshipping
> the calf; turn, then in repentance to your Maker and mortify yourselves
> (*fa'qtulū anfusakum*); this will be the best for you in your Maker's sight."

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[258] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 2:51. Literally, "you took the calf," but commonly rendered with an interpolation of the word "worship" in brackets.

[259] Asad and Abdel Haleem interpolate the phrase "on Mt. Sinai" in brackets to signify the location of the meeting; otherwise, ʿAlī, Pickthall, Qarāʾī, or Droge leave it unstated.

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And thereupon He accepted your repentance: for, behold, He alone is the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace."[260]

English translators disagree about the best way to render this locution in a target language as can be seen in the varying translations listed above. Part of the disagreement arises from questions about how the command of Moses should be read or interpreted. Should the translator adhere to literal meanings? Q 2:52 seems to ask the people to "kill themselves" after God has forgiven them. Is that an appropriate or valid translation?

At first glance, Pickthall, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarāʾī, Abdel Haleem and Droge appear to translate or render *fa'qtulū anfusakum* in the literal sense but disagree about how they should interpret *anfusakum* or who are to be killed.[261] The first four translators on the list seem to agree, as is indicated by their bracketed interpretations. For these translators, only some among the people will be killed, rather than all.[262] In his translation, Droge, while suggesting literally that people kill each other, also seems to obscure his explanation by proving a qualifier in his note, namely, "transgressors." Does he refer to all of Moses' interlocutors in this

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[260] Asad, *TMOQ*, Q 2:54.

[261] These literal renditions echo *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn's* interpretation thus, "slay one another, that is, let the innocent of you slay the guilty (I:8, on Q 2:54). Similarly, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* similarly reads this locution as that when Moses was asked "how to turn in penitence to Allāh," to which Moses replied, "and kill the guilty among yourselves, let those who did not worship the calf kill those who worshipped it. That penitence and killing will be best for you with your creator and He will relent towards you, He will forgive you" (II:12, on Q 2:54)

[262] Sayyid Quṭb somehow agrees that the offense of the people of Israel was great that it required "a thorough cleansing of ranks... a very stringent atonement; … thus, the order was given to kill those who went far astray as a means of cleansing for the whole community." It was therefore an inescapable ordeal for Israel, he adds, in order to preserve the purity and righteousness of the rest of the community (Quṭb, I:87, on Q 2:54). Similarly, Mawdūdī reads this expression as putting "to death those of their own number who made the calf an object of worship and actually worshipped it" (Mawdūdī, I:75, n. 70 on Q 2:54).

verse as such, or only some? Despite these slight differences, these translators appear to echo the literal meaning suggested by the following biblical passage from the Book of Exodus 32:26-27 which goes,

> "Moses then stood at the gate of the camp and shouted, 'Who is for Yahweh? To me!' And all the Levites rallied round him. He said to them, 'Yahweh, God of Israel, says this, "Buckle on your sword, each of you, and go up and down the camp from gate to gate, every man of you slaughtering (wə-hir-ḡū) brother, friend and neighbour."[263]

But, by choosing the method of *al-tarjamah al-harfīyyah*, or a word for word literal equivalent, these translators provide a rendition which appears to contradict the sense of being forgiven in the earlier verse. Yūsuf ʿAlī, for his part, appears ambiguous when he writes in his note that Moses may have meant it in spiritual rather than physical sense.

It is Asad who would render it exegetically. He applies *al-tarjamah al-maʿnawīyyah* or *tafsīriyyah* when he reads *fa'qtulū' anfusakum* and interprets the phrase with "and mortify yourselves." Interpreting it within its textual context, he believes, is the most appropriate rendition. This way, the translation logically follows from the preceding statement about divine forgiveness for the Israelites. According to his reading and translation, therefore, Moses is not ordering the Israelites who are guilty to kill themselves – in the physical sense. Rather, he is asking them to purify themselves now that they have been forgiven.[264]

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[263] *NJB*; the same Bible translation also cross-references this passage with that of the Gospels of Matthew 10:37 and Luke 14:26 which essentially relates the evangelical imperative of discipleship which not only demands total detachment but also "hating" (*miséō*) anyone or anything which may come in the way.

[264] Asad's reading finds support in ʿAbd al-Jabbār's interpretation, as quoted by al-Rāzī, that *fa'qtulū' anfusakum* is a metaphor (*majāzan*) which means "mortify yourselves" (Rāzī, 3:75, on Q 2:54). Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī likewise interprets "slay yourselves" as a command for the

3.3.4.3   Q Baqarah 2:213

"… fa-hadā'l-lāhu alladhīna āmanū limā ikhtalafū fīhi mina'l-ḥaqqi bi-idhnihi wa'l-lāhu yahdī man yashā'u ilā ṣirāṭin mustaqīmin."

Pickthall:	"And Allah by His Will guided those who believe unto the truth of that concerning which they differed. Allah guideth whom He will unto a straight path."
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"God by His Grace Guided the believers to the Truth, concerning that wherein they differed. For God guided whom He will to a path that is straight."
Qarā'ī:	"Then Allah guided those who had faith to the truth of what they differed in, by His will, and Allah guides whomever He wishes to a straight path."
Abdel Haleem:	"Then Allah guided those who had faith to the truth of what they differed in, by His will, and Allah guides whomever He wishes to a straight path."
Droge:	"And God guided those who believed to the truth concerning which they differed, by His permission. God guides whomever He pleases to a straight path."
Asad:	"But God guided the believers unto the truth about which, by His leave, they had disagreed: for God guides onto a straight way him that wills [to be guided]."

This excerpt similarly elicits varying renditions from our English translators. These renditions again reveal their respective translational orientations. In this case, all the renditions are straight-forward in their literal renditions of the source text. Each of them, however, seems to struggle to find the most appropriate placement for the dependent clause, *bi-idhnihi* (or "by His leave" [Asad, *TMOQ*]). Pickthall and Yūsuf ʿAlī choose to restructure the syntax by locating *bi-idhnihi* (Pickthall: "by His Will"; Yūsuf ʿAlī: "by His Grace") immediately after the subject of the first independent clause (i.e. *Allāh*). Qarā'ī,

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Israelites to slay their own egos in the spiritual sense of opposing their passions (Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt,* 655).

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Abdel Haleem, and Droge, for their part, leave the original syntax of the source text intact where the dependent clause, *bi-idhnihi,* ends the first independent clause.

By placing *bi-idhnihi* at a more prominent location in the sentence, Pickthall and Yūsuf ʿAlī are saying that it is the "Will" or the "Grace" of God which guides believers to the Truth even in the midst of different viewpoints. While *bi-idhnihi* is placed between the two independent clauses in Qarā'ī's and Abdel Haleem's translations, and at the end of the sentence in Droge's, they nonetheless convey a similar thought as Pickthall's and Yūsuf ʿAlī's.

Asad's rendition, however, marks a significant departure from the reading of the other five translators. He incorporates another layer of insight into this excerpt. Like Pickthall and Yūsuf ʿAlī, Asad also took the liberty of restructuring the syntax of the source text. The marked difference between Asad and the five other translators appears in the different ways they understand and interpret *bi-idhnihi --* more specifically, of what does it comprise or entail?

The five translators straightforwardly depict the divine act of guiding the believers from their divergent views to the Truth. Such a guidance, as far as they are concerned, constitutes the essence of the "will" or "grace" of God. Asad, on the other hand, deviates from that thinking and focuses on the "disagreement" believers have about the "Truth" (*limā ikhtalafū fīhi mina'l-ḥaqqi*) as the very substance of that *idhn* or "will" of God.[265] This explains Asad's decisive placement of *bi-idhnihi* immediately before "they had disagreed." While the other

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[265] Asad, *TMOQ,* 46, n. 197 on Q 2:213.

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five translators read *bi-idhnihi* as guiding the believers to the Truth, Asad reads it

in such a way that "the disagreement" itself constitutes the will of God.

For Asad the essential meaning of Q 2:213 is a humanity that has evolved

from "the relative homogeneity of instinctive perceptions and inclinations

characteristics of man's primitive mentality and the primitive social order in which

he lived in those early days" to a state of intellectual and emotional

differentiation.[266] In other words, human beings once lived in *ummatan*

wāḥidatan, that is, in "one single community" where there was a lack of

"intellectual and emotional" development. Humanity eventually became

individually conscious and more differentiated. Conflicting views and interests

naturally came to the fore, thereby, eventually ceasing to be "one single

community.[267]

According to Asad, it is into such a state of "differentiation" or

"disagreement" that God

> "raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and
> through them bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, so
> that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had
> come to hold divergent views...."[268]

Moreover, Asad also believes that such a state of "disagreement" is not to

be construed as totally problematic for the community. Asad recalls that the

Prophet said *ikhtilāfu ummatī raḥmātun li'l-nās* or "difference of opinion in my

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[266] Asad, *TMOQ,* 46, n. 197 on Q 2:213.

[267] Asad, *TMOQ,* 46, n. 197 on Q 2:213.

[268] Asad, *TMOQ*, Q 2:213. Most commentators reason that the purpose of sending prophets is to correct error and sin, and they would be superfluous if human beings were united in one true religion (Rāzī, 6:11-13, on Q 2:213).

community is a mercy for people."[269] Asad further cross-references the sense of

that verse with the second part of Q 2:253, especially the last sentence which

reads, "yet if God had so willed (*wa law shā'a*), they would not have contended

with one another (*mā iqtatalū*): but God does whatever He wills."[270]

To Asad, this locution suggests that

"man's proneness to intellectual dissension is not an accident of history
but an integral, God-willed aspect of human nature as such: and it is this
natural circumstance to which the words 'by His leave' allude."[271]

Applying this principle to differences of opinions among scholars in the

past, Asad believes that diversity of opinion is needed if human thinking is to

progress. Therefore, he suggests, it is a most potent factor in one's acquisition

of knowledge.

Finally, the second independent clause on the given excerpt also

deserves a quick analysis. It appears that Asad restructures the syntax of the

sentence. He renders it exegetically in a way that is different from the rest of the

other translators. The locution *wa-allāhu yahdī man yashā'u ilā ṣirāṭin*

mustaqīmin is commonly translated literally and straightforwardly such that of

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[269] Asad, *TMOQ*, viii, referencing a prophetic report in al-Bayhaqi's *al-Madkhal ilā ʿilmi al-Sunan.*

[270] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 2:253.

[271] Asad, *TMOQ,* 46, n. 198 on Q 2:213. Asad's reflection on the notion of "disagreement" finds support in Quṭb's commentary on Q 2:213. The latter says that it is in the nature of human beings to differ and disagree. Such a propensity, he continues, is fundamental to the human disposition, and essential for the fulfillment of a person's role as God's vicegerent on earth. "This task call for a divergence of functions, aptitudes and talents that are compatible and complementary to one another and come together in harmony, according to God's universal scheme and wisdom. Different needs require different abilities" (Quṭb, I:313, on Q 2:213).

Pickthall's, "Allah guideth whom He will unto a straight path."[272] Asad, however, refuses to ascribe arbitrariness to God, as though suggesting that human freedom or disposition is irrelevant in this divine-human dialectic. Rather, he rephrases the syntax to read, "for God guides onto a straight way him that wills [to be guided]."[273] In this rendition, divine guidance is given only to the degree that human beings are willing to be guided.

3.3.4.4 Q Āl ʿImrān 3:36

"… *wa-laysa'l-dhakaru ka'l-unthā …*"

Pickthall:	"the male is not as the female"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"And no wise is the male like the female"
Qarāʾī:	"and the female is not like the male"
Abdel Haleem:	"the male is not like the female"
Droge:	"(since) the male is not like the female"
Asad:	"and [fully aware] that no male child [she might have hoped for] could ever have been like this female"

This excerpt follows a verse that introduces a woman whose name, according to most commentators, is Ḥannah (Anne). She is identified as either "from the house of ʿImrān" or as "the wife of ʿImrān."[274] She is to become the mother of Mary who is the mother of Jesus. When she becomes pregnant, this woman makes a vow that *mā fī baṭnī* or "what is in my womb" is to be a

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[272] This rendition affirms interpretations by *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:32-33, on Q 2:213) and *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:44 on Q 2:213).

[273] Asad, *TMOQ*, Q 2:213.

[274] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 3:35, "a woman of [the House of] ʿImrān"; Yūsuf ʿAlī, "a woman of ʿImrān"; Pickthall, Qarāʾī, Droge and Abdel Haleem, "the wife of ʿImrān"; Quṭb, also the wife of ʿImrān "with a heart full of faith" (II:77 f., on Q 3:35). Some classical commentators putatively identify her as Ḥannah (Anne) the wife of ʿImrān (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, I:51, on Q 3:35).

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muḥarraran (or "consecrated").[275] This text is interpreted to mean that the child

will be dedicated or offered for temple service in Jerusalem (v. 35).[276] Some

opinions, however, state that in the Jewish tradition, only males could qualify for

this type of service.[277] This could explain or give credence to some reports that

the woman was surprised when she gave birth to a female child instead of a

male. The passage reads, *rabbi innī waḍaʿtuhā unthā* or "O my Sustainer!

Behold, I have given birth to a female" (Q 3:36).[278] Some commentators interpret

this reaction as one of sorrow. She is thought to be disappointed that she has not

delivered a male child.[279] Other than from sources outside the Qurʾān, there is no

useful information which could shed light on the reaction of the woman to the

birth of her female child and the suggestion of disappointment.

Almost immediately after the woman's reaction comes the clause which

contains the locution which we will analyze. It reads, *wa-laysa'l-dhakaru ka'l-*

unthā. Besides the fact that translators are divided about the most appropriate

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[275] *The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 194.

[276] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 3:35; Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Holy Qurʾān;* Quṭb, II:77 f., on Q 3:35; *Tafsīr ibn ʿAbbās,* II:68, on Q 3:35; al-Rāzī, 8:22-23, on Q 3:35. "She vowed to make her child concentrate on worship and service *bayt al-maqdis* (the *masjid* in Jerusalem), when she became aware that she was pregnant" (Ibn Kathīr, 2:148, on Q 3:35).

[277] Yūsuf ʿAlī, 132, n. 378; Quṭb, II:78, on Q 3:36; cf. Mawdūdī, Q 3:36, n. 34 cf. *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:51, on Q 3:36.

[278] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 3:36. Some commentators affirm that this is Ḥannah's remarks upon the gender of her child, meaning that it would not have been possible for a girl to have carried out the same responsibilities as a boy in the Temple. They cite differences in physical strength and endurance, but issue of ritual purity related to menstruation may also have been a barrier to service in the Temple (Ibn Kathīr, 2:148, on Q 3:36; Ṭabarī, 3:278-279, on Q 3:36).

[279] Cf. *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:51, on*, Q 3*:36*; Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās,* II:68, Q 3:36; Mawdūdī, I:249, n. 34 on Q 3:36; Quṭb, II:78, on Q 3:36.

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rendition of this expression in English, they also cannot agree on who is speaking. Is it the voice of the angel narrator or the woman?

Pickthall, Droge and Abdel Haleem opted for a literal equivalence of *wa-laysa'l-dhakaru ka'l-unthā.* They ascribe the voice to the narrating angel. Qarā'ī translates the passage literally but attributes the voice to the woman. Yūsuf ʿAlī's rendition is also basically literal. But, he attempts an exegetical interpretation by adding the adjective, "wise," to modify "the female offspring."

Among our English translators, it is Asad who provides a contrasting reading and interpretation of the locution. It is a rendition which we can certainly label as target-centered. He attributes *wa-laysa'l-dhakaru ka'l-unthā* to the narrating angel, and renders it exegetically with, "...and [fully aware] that no male child [she might have hoped for] could ever have been like this female...."[280] Looking beyond the common reading of the source text which attributes a sense of disappointment to the woman, Asad frames the message of the angel narrator with a positive declarative statement. The angel announces that something is being given that is beyond all expectations.

There is no hint in Asad's rendition that the birth of a female child is a disappointment. In fact, Asad's interpretation actually celebrates the fact that the female child (Mary) who was born to the woman is unlike any male in existence.[281] The implication is that Mary's excellence would go far beyond any

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[280] This reading echoes that of al-Zamakhsharī who reads *wa'l-lāhu aʿlamu bi-mā waḍaʿat wa-laysa'l-dhakaru ka'l-unthā* as forming part of the parenthetic sentence relating to God's knowledge, and explains them thus: "the male [child] which she had prayed for could not have been like the female which she was granted" (Zamakhsharī, 1:350, on Q 3:36)

[281] Some commentators mention that this verse could be interpreted as connoting the superiority of the female, in that, though she was expecting a male, God chose to give her a

hopes which her mother could have entertained.[282] In this case, Asad, adjusted

the textural and syntactical structure of the source text. He apparently had

decided to reach for a more positive translation for his target reader. At the same

time, he was mindful that he should not sacrifice the intended semantic value of

the text.

3.3.4.5   Q Āl ʿImrān 3:49

"… annī akhluqu lakum mina'l-ṭīni kahay'ati l-ṭayri
fa-anfukhu fīhi fa-yakūnu ṭayran bi-idhni'l-llāhi…"[283]

Pickthall:	"Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's leave."
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by God's leave"
Qarāʾī:	"I will create for you out of clay the form of a bird, then I will breathe into it, and it will become a bird by Allah's leave."
Abdel Haleem:	"I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God's permission, it will become a real bird."
Droge:	"I shall create for you the form of a bird from clay. Then I will breathe into it and it will become a bird by the permission of God."
Asad:	"I shall create for you out of clay, as it were, the shape of [your] destiny, and then breathe into it, so that it might become [your] destiny by God's leave."

The Arabic noun *ṭayr* (sing., *ṭā'ir*) in this verse is commonly interpreted as

"flying creatures," but it also takes on different meanings in different citations in

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female child (Qurṭubī, 4:69, on Q 3:36) who would bear and manifest knowledge of God (Rāzī, 8:24, on Q 3:36).

[282] Asad, *TMOQ*, 71, n. 25 on Q 3:36.

[283] This locution is treated in a more extensive way in a Christological context in Chapter Five, 5.2.3, "Confirmer of the Truth."

the Qurʾān.[284] For example, in Q Aʿrāf 7:131, its verbal and active participle forms convey the sense of "fortune" or "omens." The word can have a good or evil connotation as we see in the following verse in which the Jews of the Qurʾān are addressed with,

> "but whenever good fortune alighted upon them, they would say, 'This is [but] our due'; and whenever affliction befell them, they would blame their evil fortune (*yaṭṭayyarū*) on Moses and those who followed him. Oh, verily, their [evil] fortune (*ṭāʾiruhum*) had been decreed by God -but most of them knew it not."[285]

This term could also mean "destiny" or "augury" as in Q 3:19 which tells us, "[The apostles] replied: 'Your destiny (*ṭāʾirukum*), good or evil, is [bound up] with yourselves!'"[286]

When we focus on the way this term is used in Q 3:49, it is clear that all of our English translators, except Asad, adhere to the literal meaning and the textual structure of the source text. In their literal rendition of Q 3:49, the five translators render segments of qurʾānic locutions which introduce Jesus' reception of revelation, election and commission by God. Their rendition basically evokes a similar incident mentioned in the pages of the Christian apocryphal work, *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.[287]

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[284] In *The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, *ṭayr* can mean "birds," or also synonymous with "augury," and "omen," (677) just to name a few.

[285] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 7:131. Cf. Q 27:47. Many instances of this idiomatic usage of *ṭayr* or *ṭāʾir* are given in authoritative Arabic dictionaries, like Lane, V: 1904 f.).

[286] Asad, *TMOQ,* Q 3:19. Cf. Q 17:13.

[287] In the "Infancy Story of Thomas" (c. 2nd CE), Jesus, as a child, fashions twelve sparrows out of soft clay, and made them come to life and fly by clapping his hands and shouting "off with you" (2:1-5), (Oscar Cullmann, trans., in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher [Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 1:444 (439-451). Cf. Yūsuf ʿAlī, 135, 390; Droge, 35, n. 72 on Q 3:49.

Asad, for his part, reads the same excerpt but not through the lens of apocryphal Christian literature. He finds his interpretation in some traces of texts from pre-Islamic times. He also discovers some corroborating qurʾānic cross-references,[288] and some relevant themes in the New Testament which essentially serve as hermeneutical keys to understanding and rendering *ṭayr* as "destiny."

Through *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān*, Asad cites one of the texts mentioned earlier, Q 7:131, as an example of the use of triliteral root *ṭ-y-r* in a verbal form (*yaṭṭayyarū*). Here, the term, according to him, reflects a pre-Islamic custom of divining the future or interpreting an omen from the flight of birds. Thus, the noun *ta'ir* was often used in classical Arabic to denote "destiny" or "fortune" – both good and evil fortune.

Asad contends that Jesus could have also used words or concepts like the Arabic term *ṭayr* in the context of parables as he often does in the Gospels.[289] So, Asad translates *ṭayr* metaphorically as "destiny" rather than by its literal meaning as "bird." He renders the term in this way, perhaps imagining that

> "Jesus was intimating to the children of Israel that out of the humble clay of their lives he would fashion for them the vision of a soaring destiny, and that this vision, brought to life by his God-given inspiration, would become their real destiny by God's leave and by the strength of their faith."[290]

Consistent with this translation style, Asad offers his English readers a rationalist rendition of this interesting excerpt from the Qurʾān. In this case, he

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[288] Cf. Q 5:110 - *al-ṭayri, ṭayran*; Q 17:13 - *ṭā'irahu*; Q 27:47- *aṭṭayyarnā*; Q 36:18-19 - *taṭayyarna*

[289] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 37 on Q 3:49.

[290] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 37 on Q 3:49.

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demythologizes the miracle of the creation of a bird so that it communicates a

symbolic or spiritual meaning.[291]

3.3.4.6 Q Āl ʿImrān 3:55

"… *yā ʿīsā innī mutawaffīka wa-rāfiʿuka ilayya…* "

Pickthall:	"O Jesus! Lo! I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself"
Qarāʾī"	"O Jesus, I shall take you[r soul], and I shall raise you up toward Myself"
Abdel Haleem:	"Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me"
Droge:	"Jesus! Surely, I am going to take you and raise you to myself"
Asad:	"O Jesus! Verily, I shall cause thee to die, and shall exalt thee unto Me"

This excerpt has been a subject of a controversial debate. What does the

Qurʾān intend when it uses the active participle of form five (V) of the triliteral root

w-f-y? Does it mean that Jesus is "taken dead" or "taken alive" before he is

"raised up" or "exalted" to God. In the Qurʾān, to be raised up to God Himself

(*ilayya* or "unto me") is only said of Jesus. It is not said of Idrīs whom the majority

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[291] Criticizing Asad's translation of verse Q 3:49, Rashīd Aḥmad Jullundhri (*Islām and Current Issues* [Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1998], [135-152]) voices the following reservations on his rendering: first, it is hard to translate the word *ṭayr* as used in this verse as "destiny." The structure of the sentence does not allow it. The presence of the verbs "to fashion," "to breathe," and "to be" rule out the intended qurʾānic style or *majāz*; second, Jesus was described by his opponents as a sorcerer. One wonders about the justification for this if his miracles were merely spiritual miracles; third, Jesus' first listeners were common people and villagers. It would be difficult to claim, therefore, according to Rashīd Aḥmad, that Jesus employed highly idiomatic language; fourth, even by a 1922 a study called "Miracles and the New Psychology" was able to declare that in the Gospels the particulars of the miracles of healing, upon which most reliance can be placed, are not themselves incompatible with the view that such healing was accomplished by the agency of ascertainable psychological laws. In other words, according to Jullundhri, the healing miracles of Jesus were not merely of the spirit but were of both soul and body (147).

of commentators identify with the biblical Enoch.[292] Q Maryam 19:57 says that God has raised Idrīs to "a lofty station" (*makānan ʿaliyyan*)," rather than "to me" (*ilayya*). Nor is this said of Muḥammad. During his nocturnal journey, referenced to in Q Isrāʾ 17:1, Muhammad is said to be the one being transported to the "Remote House of Worship" (*alladī asrā... ilā'l-masjidi'l-aqṣā*), but, not *ilayya* ("to me"). Yet, here the debate is whether Jesus escapes death or not, and whether he is taken to heaven bodily or spiritually.[293]

This debate lingers as translators render this qurʾānic expression into English in different ways. By their translations, Pickthall, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Abdel Haleem and Droge appear to imply that adherence to the literal sense of the source text is a better approach than attempting to render it in an exegetical way. That latter approach would only obscure the meaning intended by the Qurʾān. As it turns out, however, their literal renditions of *yā ʿīsā innī mutawaffīka wa-rāfiʿuka ilayya* appear to leave us with more ambiguity than clarity.

Pickthall, for his part, produces the phrase "gathering thee" from *mutawaffīka.* In so doing, he has not only defied the common meaning of the form five (V) of the triliteral root *w-f-y* which means "to die" or "to pass away," he

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[292] Cf. the Book of Genesis 5:21-24 relates about the birth of Enoch, who is a distant generation of the lineage of Seth, son of Adam. (He is, therefore, distinguished from the Enoch who is the direct descendant of Cain in Gen 4:17). He fathered Methuselah and other sons and daughters, and lived for 365 years. In addition he is also described as having "walked with God, then was no more, because God took (Hb: *lā-qaḥ*) him (*NJB*).

[293] In this context, most commentators assert that *mutawaffī* does not refer to being taken in death, but rather to being taken from the world (Ṭabarī, 3:339, on Q 3:55), although others believe this does refer to God causing Jesus to die. Others say it refers to sleep, as in Q 6:60, "And He it is who causes you to be [like] dead at night"; Q 39:42, "It is God [alone that has this power - He] who causes all human beings to die at the time of their [bodily] death, and [causes to be as dead], during their sleep, those that have not yet died" (Ibn Kathīr, II:169, on Q 3:55).

has also made it difficult to determine if Jesus died or not. Later, however, he attempts to diminish the confusion when he uses the directional word "ascend" for *wa-rāfiʿuka*. Thus, he points to a physical relocation of Jesus towards God, "unto Me," but leaves his readers with another unanswered question. Did Jesus ascend bodily or spiritually?

Yūsuf ʿAlī, Abdel Haleem and Droge also appear to ignore the common meaning of form five (V) of the triliteral root *w-f-y* in their use of the phrase "take thee." That rendition also fails to tell us whether Jesus really died or not.[294] In a similar way, the translations of these scholars of *wa-rāfiʿuka* into "raise you up" do not offer any clarity about whether the body and/or the soul of Jesus is raised up. Qarāʾī does attempt to answer the question with a rather vague syntax, "I shall take you[r soul." But, this only betrays his ambivalence about what God means when he says to Jesus, "I take you." Is God referring to the body and/or soul, or simply saying, "I take your soul."[295] This scholar's ambivalence inevitably raises yet another question. It is the same question asked of his earlier counterparts. Does his rendition of *wa-rāfiʿuka ilayya* ("I shall raise you up toward Myself") mean the raising of Jesus bodily or spiritually?

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[294] Although Droge, in his note, provides a rather ambiguous explanation on his rendition thus, "*take you*: in death; there are conflicting views of Jesus' fate in the Quran" (*The Qurʾān,* 36), hence, the traditions that Jesus was asleep when he ascended to heaven.

[295] In his commentary on Q 3:55, Qarāʾī elaborates his rendition thus, "in this qurʾānic context it (the verb *tawaffā*) is used in the sense of taking away of the soul, either temporarily, as during sleep, or permanently, as at the time of death." Moreover, he also appeals to the interpretation of the eighth Shīʿite Imām, ʿAlī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā (d. 818) who wrote that "Jesus Christ was raised alive from the earth to the heaven. Then his soul was taken away between the earth and the heaven. After he was raised to the heaven his soul was restored to his body" (Qarāʾī, 79, n. 2, on Q 3:55).

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Again, it is Asad, who unhesitatingly renders *yā ʿīsā innī mutawaffīka wa-rāfiʿuka ilayya* into English in a more decisive fashion. Somehow, he throws this confusion about the raising of Jesus into sharp relief for his target audience. His rendition is founded in his belief that the physical death of Jesus is as categorical a principle as he was created "out of dust" (Q 3:59).

For this reason, he renders *innī mutawaffīka* explicitly into "I shall cause thee to die." He argues convincingly, stating that "nowhere in the Qurʾān is there any warrant for the popular belief that God has 'taken up' Jesus bodily, in his lifetime, into heaven."[296] So, *wa-rāfiʿuka ilayya*, according to Asad, may be appropriately understood in a metaphorical way. He contends that the text is used to exalt Jesus to the heights of glory and honor which a noble prophet deserves.[297]

3.3.4.7   Q Āl ʿImrān 3:85

"*wa man yabtaghi ghayra'l-Islāmi dīnan…*"

Pickthall:	"And whoso seeketh as religion other than the Surrender (to Allah)"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"If anyone desires a religion other than Islām (submission to God)"
Qarāʾī:	"Should anyone follow a religion other than Islam"
Abdel Haleem:	"If anyone seeks a religion other than [Islām] complete devotion to God"
Droge:	"Whoever desires a religion other than Islam"
Asad:	"For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God"

The verse in which this locution is found is as follows,

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[296] Asad, *TMOQ, Q 4*, 134, n. 172 on Q 4:158.

[297] Asad, *TMOQ, Q 4*, 134, n. 172 on Q 4:158.

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"For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender (*al-Islām*) unto God, it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost."[298]

Rendering the verbal noun of the triliteral root *s-l-m* in this excerpt again divides our list of English translators. As in the preceding examples, the decisions made by these translators appear to be dictated by their respective translational orientations. Three of them – Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarāʾī, and Droge – chose to carry over or "foreignize" (i.e. importing while maintaining its foreign literal and cultural construct) the Arabic term *Islām* into the target-text. ʿAlī, for his part, found it useful for his audience to add an exegetical interpolation in brackets to indicate "submission to God."[299] On the one hand, their decision to *foreignize* the

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[298] Asad, *TMOQ*, Q 3:85. It is reported that this verse was revealed in connection with one of the Companions (al-Ḥārith bin Suwīd, the brother of al-Julās bin Suwīd), along with twelve other people, who left "Islām" and went to Mecca (Qurṭubī, *al-Jamiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, 4:126, on Q 3:85). Moreover, some of the commentators also opined that this verse is an abrogation of Q 2:62, "all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer" (Qurṭubī, attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, *Ibid.*; Asad, *TMOQ*). However, this type of abrogation is not recognized by mainstream Islamic Law and Qurʾān interpretation as a widely accepted principle of abrogation is that only legal rulings or command can be abrogated, not descriptive statements, especially as regards one' status in the Hereafter (Dagli, "al-Baqarah," *The Study Qurʾān,* 32, on Q 3:85). Our English translators have also exhibited consistent translations in their rendition of *inna'l-dīna ʿinda'l-llāhi al-Islām* in Q 3:19, as in the following comparative view:

Pickthall:	"Lo! religion with Allah (is) the Surrender (to His Will and Guidance)"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"The Religion before God is Islām (submission to His Will)"
Qarāʾī:	"Indeed, with Allah religion is Islām,"
Abdel Haleem:	"True Religion, in God's eyes, is Islam: [devotion to Him alone]."
Droge:	"Surely the religion with God is Islām."
Asad:	"Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is [man's] self-surrender unto Him"

[299] In his notes, Yūsuf ʿAlī explains that by carrying over the word "Islām" in his rendition, it does not mean, however, that Muslims have a claim to "a religion particular to *themselves.*" Islām, he says, is "not a sect or an ethnic religion." According to this dispensation, he continues, "all Religion is one, for the Truth is one. It was the religion preached by all the prophets. It was the truth taught by all the inspired Books. In essence it amounts to a consciousness of the Will and Plan of God and a joyful submission to that Will and Plan. If anyone wants a religion other than that, he is false to his own nature, as he is false to God's Will and Plan. Such a one cannot expect guidance, for he has deliberately renounced guidance (*The Holy Qurʾān,* I:145).

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term in question can be seen as honoring the source text as they discerned it in the original syntax as being intended by the revelation itself. On the other hand, this decision could also be thought of as an affirmation of the post-Classical conception of the term "Islām" (along with "Muslim").[300] In other words, they could be referencing a juridically defined concept which refers to a set of rituals and practices, and canonical scriptures which are adhered to by a group of believers.

Pickthall, Abdel Haleem and Asad apparently follow the target-centered orientation with exegetical renditions of the Arabic term "Islām." It is true that their renditions of "Surrender (to Allāh)," "complete devotion to God," or "self-surrender unto God," respectively, may also be considered literal. Indeed, these terms are literal connotations, as a matter of fact, they are among some thirty possible choices of the root's literal meanings. The fact that these translators were engaged in a rational process in order to convey the meaning of Arabic words in English proves that their translational orientation may be characterized as a target-centered orientation.

While Pickthall and Haleem make no comments on their respective versions, Asad engaged in a process that went beyond finding the semantic equivalence between the source-text and the target-text. Guided by one of his exegetical tools, *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān,* Asad explains the etymology of the term *muslim* (or "one who surrenders or has surrendered"), a term which shares

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[300] If this is, indeed, the reason behind the *foreignization* of the term "Islām" into the target text (for we know nothing certain without any marginal notes of commentary by these translators), then it may be said that these translators intend to echo the opinion of some commentators who subscribe to the idea that this verse denies the "acceptability" of any form of religion other than that brought by the Prophet Muḥammad (Rāzī, 8:110, on Q 3:85; Ṭabarī, 3:394, on Q 3:85).

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the same triliteral root as the word *islām* ("submission") in Q Qalam 68:35.[301] He argues that these meanings are the "original connotations" of these terms. By original, Asad is referring to their pre-institutionalized meanings.

Here, Asad is, therefore, basically distinguishing two semantic epochs, as far as interpretation of the Qurʾān is concerned, that is, before and after the codification of the Islamic scriptures and the institutionalization and consolidation of Islām sometime in the ninth and tenth centuries.[302] Asad indicates that he prefers the pre-codification or pre-institutionalization meaning of the Arabic terms, *Muslim* and *Islām.* He believes that at that time both terms or their related cognates had broader and inclusive meanings. As such, they reflected more the universal message of the Qurʾān. Moreover, subscribing to such inclusive meanings helps communicate the message of the Qurʾān for all those who believe in the One God and affirm this belief by an unequivocal acceptance of its revealed messages.[303] On the contrary, in the post-codification and post-institutionalization era until the present, the meanings of these terms became more defined and exclusive. The implication is that the word "Muslim" or "Islam" no longer signified "one who surrenders" or "submission," but were now exclusively used to identify a follower or adherent of that religious belief and system, called Islam.

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[301] Asad, *TMOQ,* 885-886, n. 17, on Q 68:35.

[302] Asad, *TMOQ,* 885-886, n. 17, on Q 68:35.

[303] *Ibid.* 577, n. 94. Adis Duderija, in his recent article, categorizes Asad's rendition of this root (*s-l-m*) as suggestive of his pluralist position or orientation (i.e. according to Alan Race's definition of the term) ("The Question of Salvation of Non-Muslims: The Exegesis of Muḥammad Asad," in *Dialog* 54.3 (September 2015): 295 (289-295).

3.3.4.8 Q Nisāʾ 4:34

"al-rijālu qawwāmūna ʿalā'l-nisāʾi bi-mā faḍḍala baʿḍahum ʿalā baʿḍin…"

Pickthall:	"Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other,"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other"
Qarāʾī:	"Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others"
Abdel Haleem:	"Husbands should take good care of their wives, with [the bounties] God has given to some more than others"
Droge:	"Men are supervisors of women because God has favored some of them over others."
Asad:	"Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter"

The divergent renditions offered here on this qurʾānic locution highlight many legal and social interpretations about a man's role and authority where women are concerned.[304] Many commentaries consider this verse as "the clearest statement" about the proper relationship of men and women within a marital relationship in a household.[305]

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[304] While the meaning of the preposition *ʿalā* in this verse is dependent on the term *qawwāmūna*, it is nonetheless important to note how many possible meanings or synonyms it has in the Arabic dictionary and how each of them may be consequential to the semantic outcome of a given syntax. To mention a few, *ʿalā* can mean "upon," "over," "above," "by," "at," "on," "on top of," "in the manner of," "toward," etc. (*The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 747).

[305] Dakake, "al-Nisa'," *The Study Qurʾān,* 206, on Q 4:34.

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The debate centers on how the word *qawwām* might be interpreted.[306] Does the term refer to a sense of mutuality, to a hierarchy, or to responsibility? The reading and interpretation of this term in the context of the verse clearly relates to behavioral expectations not only of men, but also to how women in a household might relate to their men. As we examine the variation in interpretations of this term, *qawwām*, we can immediately see differences in translational orientations in these English translations of the Qurʾān.

Basically, most of these translations show respectful sensitivity for the source text. They adhere to the barest literal meaning of the word. For Pickthall, the rendition is "in charge." For Yūsuf ʿAlī, it is "protector." Qarāʾī translates the term as "managers," and Droge sees it as "supervisors." All of these interpretations can be described as subscribing not only to the principle of duty and responsibility, but also to the principle of a hierarchical relationship in which men are ascribed roles which position them ʿalā or "above" women.[307]

Abdel Haleem and Asad, for their parts, offer a more exegetical version of the term *qawwām.* Their views echo the current modernist sentiments that advocate for an acceptable status for women in society. Both of these scholars interpret *qawwām* as a moral duty for "husbands" (Abdel Haleem), and as a

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[306] In Arabic the word *qawwām* can mean "director," "manager," "superintendent," "caretaker," "keeper," "custodian," "guardian," etc. (*The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 936).

[307] These interpretations echo many classical commentaries which basically read *qawwām* as men being "in charge of women," having authority over them, disciplining them and keeping them in check (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:78, on Q 4:34); or, overseeing their proper conduct (*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, II:106, on Q 4:34); and others interpret the term as being "guardians," although not in the sense of guardians over minor or the mentally incompetent, but traditionally in possession of duty to supervise, educate, and discipline women (Ibn Kathīr, 2:442, on Q 4:34; Qurṭubī, 5:161, on Q 4:34; Ṭabarī, 5:70, on Q 4:34)

moral imperative for "men" (Asad). As a corollary, this vision changes the focus from how the role may be appropriately labeled to what it actually entails in a moral and social sense. Asad, in particular, justifies his rendition by distinguishing *qawwām* from the active participle *qā'im*. He says that the former "is an intensive form" and is "more comprehensive... [and] combines the concepts of physical maintenance and protection as well as of moral responsibility."[308]

Lastly, most of our English translators, except Abdel Haleem and Asad, adhere closely to the literal meaning of the next dependent clause, *bi-mā faḍḍala baʿḍahum ʿalā baʿḍin*. Apparently struggling to locate an appropriate position for the preposition *bi*, Pickthall, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarā'ī, and Droge end up by giving it a partitive function. As a result, they try to clarify the underlying thesis of this qur'ānic locution. Their literal adherence to the phrase *baʿḍahum ʿalā baʿḍin* (within the same dependent clause) leads them to a vague referential articulation about who are being compared with whom.

Both Abdel Haleem and Asad provide an almost seamless rendition. They render the second clause so that it is syntactically linked to the first through the help of the particle *bi.* As such, their translations explain how men have a moral responsibility towards women. But, Asad's translation parts with that of Abdel Haleem by saying that men are "bestowed more abundantly" than women.[309] In

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[308] Asad, *TMOQ, Q 4*, 109, 42. Cf. Lane, VIII: 2995 (Supplement).

[309] Asad's explicit interpretation on this expression finds echoes in Mawdūdī's which says that "God has endowed one of the sexes (i.e. the male sex) with certain qualities which He has not endowed the other sex with, at least not to an equal extent. Thus it is the male who is

Asad's view, Abdel Haleem resorts to vague hierarchical principles in his claim

that some husbands are endowed with more "bounties" than other husbands.

3.3.4.9 Q Anʿām 6:100

"*wa-jaʿalū lillahi shurakā' al-jinna…*"

Pickthall:	"Yet they ascribe as partners unto Him the jinn"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"Yet they make the Jinns equals with God"
Qarāʾī	"They make the jinn partners of Allāh"
Abdel Haleem:	"They make the jinn partners of Allāh"
Droge:	"They make the jinn associates with God"
Asad:	"And yet, some [people] have come to attribute to all manner of invisible beings a place side by side with God"

In the Qurʾān, *al-jinn* (sing. *jinnī*) has several connotations or meanings.

Perhaps, the most commonly encountered meaning is that of "created beings"

which are invisible to human beings. Among these created beings are "satans,"

and "angels."[310] This term can also be applied to a wide range of phenomena

"which... indicate *sentient organisms* of so fine a nature and of physiological

composition... that they are not normally accessible to our sense-perception."[311]

Occasionally, *al-jinn* is also used in the Qurʾān to signify those elemental

forces of nature – including human nature -- which are also concealed from the

human senses since they manifest themselves only in their effects but not in their

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qualified to function as head of the family. The female has been so constituted that she should live under his care and protection" (Mawdūdī, II:35, n. 57 on Q 4:34).

[310] According to Asad, in order to make it quite evident that these invisible manifestations are not of a corporeal nature, the Qurʾān states parabolically that the *jinn* were created from "fire of scorching winds" and not from "sounding clay" as humans were (Q 15:26-28). Cf. or out of "a confusing flame of fire" (Q Raḥmān 55:15), or simply "out of fire" (Q 7:12 and Q 38:76) (Asad, *TMOQ,* 994).

[311] Asad, *TMOQ,* 994.

intrinsic reality (Q 37:158 ff. and Q 6:100, and Q 114:6). It is also probable that the Qurʾān uses *jinn* either as "a symbolic personification" of a person's relationship with "satanic forces" (evident in Q 6:112, Q 7:38, Q 11:119, Q 32:13), or as "a metonym" for a person's preoccupation with occult powers, whether real or illusory. Occult practices such as sorcery, necromancy, astrology, soothsaying, etc., all earn condemnation in the Qurʾān (Q 2:102, Q 6:128, 130, Q 72:5-6).[312]

The frequent objectification of this concept by the Qurʾān, perhaps, makes it a convenient decision for most of our English translators to *foreignize* it in the target text. This is true in the renditions of Pickthall, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarāʾī, Abdel Haleem, and Droge, not only in this verse, but throughout the Qurʾān. Their renditions are grounded in the way the concept had been commonly understood in the Islamic tradition.[313]

Not surprisingly, Asad refuses to go along with the common signification and does not *foreignize* the concept in the target text. Rather, he believes, that in order to have a better understanding of the term in the qurʾānic context, a

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[312] Asad, *TMOQ,* 995. There are also occurrences of *jinn* in the Qurʾān which are purposely meant to recall certain legends deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people to whom the Qurʾān was addressed in the first instance (Q 34:12-14, in conjunction with Q 21:82), though, according to Asad, these are "not the legend as such but the illustration of a moral or spiritual truth" (*Ibid.*).

[313] Yūsuf ʿAlī, for his part, while acknowledging that the Arabic *jinn* can be generally understood as "spirit," or "an invisible or hidden force," he nonetheless adhere to what he believes as the position of the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth that *jinns* are definite species of living things, that "they are not merely a hidden force, or a spirit, they are personalized beings who enjoy a certain amount of free will and thus will be called to account" (Yūsuf ʿAlī *,* 319, n. 929 on Q 6:100).

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translator should "dissociate from the meaning given to it in Arabian folklore."[314]

He argues that in this folklore, the concept was restricted and typically meant

"demons." Eventually, this "demon" rendering obscured the original connotation

of the term and its highly significant verbal derivation."[315] If we look at the

meanings given by authoritative philologists of the past, we see Asad's point.

According to Asad, learning what the philologists know is helpful in

understanding distinctive meanings given to the term in the Qurʾān.[316] As a

result, an appropriate definition of *jinn* should be gleaned from the meaning of its

verbal root, *janna.*[317] This verb's literal meaning is "he [or "it"] concealed," or

"covered with darkness."[318] And so, according to Asad, Classical philologists say

that,

> "*al-jinn* signifies intense or confusing darkness and, in a more general
> sense, that which is concealed from human senses, that is, things, beings,
> or forces which cannot normally be perceived by man but have,
> nevertheless, an objective reality, whether concrete or abstract, of their
> own."[319]

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[314] Asad, *TMOQ,* 994.

[315] Asad, *TMOQ,* 994.

[316] The most commonly encountered meaning of *jinn* is that of "spiritual forces or beings" which are concealed from human sense, and which includes "satans," and "satanic forces" as well as "angels" and "angelic forces"; it is also applied to a wide range of phenomena "which... indicate *sentient organisms* of so fine a nature and of physiological composition... that they are not normally accessible to our sense-perception";

[317] Asad, *TMOQ,* 994.

[318] As in Q 6:76, which speaks of Abraham "when the night overshadowed him with its darkness" (*janna ʿlayhi*). Interestingly, the rest of our English translators also provide an exegetical rendition of the latter.

[319] Asad, *TMOQ,* 994.

Asad interprets the concept in Arabic as more of a mass or common noun than a personalized proper noun. Therefore, it should be carried into English with an expanded exegetical meaning, such as "all manner of invisible beings."[320] *Foreignizing* the concept by simply importing into English would have perpetuated a restricted connotation or meaning. So, Asad decided to render *jinn* metaphorically or symbolically in the target text.

3.3.4.10   Q Tawbah 9:100

"wa'l-sābiqūna'l-awwalūna mina'l-muhājirīna wa'l-anṣāri…"

Pickthall:	"And the first to lead the way, of the Muhajirin and the Ansar"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"The vanguard (of Islam)- the first of those who forsook (their homes) and of those who gave them aid"
Qarāʾī:	"The early vanguard of the Emigrants and the Helpers"
Abdel Haleem:	"God will be well pleased with the first emigrants and helpers"
Droge:	"The foremost - the first of the emigrants and the helpers,"
Asad:	"And as for the first and foremost of those who have forsaken the domain of evil and of those who have sheltered and succoured the Faith"

Our English translators do disagree on how to render these two terms, *al-muhājirīn* and *al-anṣāri* in the qurʾānic locution just cited. Their differing approaches to rendering the term into the target text provide a good look at what distinguishes a source-centered translator from a target-centered one.

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[320] Asad, *TMOQ*, 187, n. 86 on Q 6:100. Asad's rendition finds support in the meaning given by some Arab philologists, who commonly signify the term *jinn* as "beings that are concealed from [man's] senses." Such as in al-Fīrūzābādī's (d. 1414) *al-Qāmūs*, or Ibn Manẓūr's *Lisān al-ʿArab*, or al-Rāghib's *al-Mufradāt* (*TMOQ*, 187, n. 86 on Q 6:100).

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Translators who read the two Arabic terms as proper nouns -- that is, concepts that have historically achieved an institutionalized level of acceptance within a community -- are likely to import them into the target language either by *foreignizing* them or giving them an approximate but literal, word-for-word equivalent. In the resulting work of translation, it is clear that the translator's main concern is not so much interpreting a concept as it is transmitting it. On the other hand, translators whose primary objective is didactic are particularly motivated to impart moral instruction. These translators are more determined to read Arabic terms as concepts with important contextual information. All of this becomes vital for the teaching of moral lessons or values.

Pickthall's decision to *foreignize* "Muhajirin and the Ansar" into English demonstrates a typical source-centered rendition. As an afterthought, he may have realized that his readers needed to understand the meaning of the terms used. So, Pickthall provides a very short explanatory annotation for each term.[321] Under the same category are the renditions of Qarāʾī, Abdel Haleem and Droge. They chose to carry over the proper nouns or concepts into their target text without their specific cultural-linguistic texture. These translators seem to feel that an approximate word-for-word equivalent in English would be more appropriate

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[321] Critics bemoan the absence of sufficient explanatory notes in Pickthall's work of translation, something which is considered by one as "a serious defect in his work... as it fails to advance the understanding of uninitiated readers about the meaning and message of the Qurʾān" (Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable*, 12). But, among the very few notes provided are for these two terms: "the Muhajirin" as "the fugitives from Mecca to Medina," (*The Glorious Qurʾān...* n. 3) and , "the Ansar" as "the Muslims of Medina who welcomed the fugitives from Mecca and helped the Prophet with their wealth and defended him with their lives" (*Ibid.*, n. 4).

for their audience. Abdel Haleem and Droge[322] provided only a basic annotation

for the translated term, but Qarā'ī's rendition would require further explanation for

uninitiated English-speakers even if the proper terms are already known in the

English language.

The renditions of Yūsuf ʿAlī and Asad on these two Arabic terms belong to

the second category – a target-centered translation. With their primary objective

geared towards a didactic presentation, both scholars seem to see translation as

an opportunity to provide exegetical renditions on these terms. Each of these

men gives a substantial commentary. Asad broadens the discussion by

employing *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān.* From the occurrences of the root *h-j-r* in Q

2:218 and Q 4:97, he finds that it has at least two useful meanings in the Qurʾān.

The first usage of *hajara* is "historical" in nature, and this citation denotes

the exodus of Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina.

The second connotation, however, is "moral." It refers to one's "exodus" from evil

towards God.[323] Similarly, the term *anṣār,* according to Asad, has two levels of

meaning. It refers to the people themselves, and to the expression of their moral

responsibility. The latter is best defined by sheltering and helping the Muslim

emigrants.

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[322] Droge, for his part, writes his brief annotations for these terms under the first word of the verse, *al-sābiqūna* ("the foremost").

[323] Asad, *TMOQ,* 124, n. 124 on Q 4:97; 278, n. 132, on Q 9:100; 47, n. 203 on Q 2:218. In addition, a *ḥadīth* also indicates that those who migrate for the sake of preserving and practicing religion share a special bond with both Abraham and the Prophet Muḥammad (Qurṭubī, V:329-330, on Q 4:97; Zamakhsharī, I:543, on Q 4:97). Migration to Medina was also considered essential in order for the newly converted to attain full status within Muslim community from the period of between 622, when Prophet Muḥammad migrated there, until the conquest of Mecca in 630 (Dakake, "Al-Nisa'," in *The Study Qurʾān,* 238, on Q 4:97)

3.3.4.11   Q Maryam 19:21

"… wa-linajʿalahu āyatan li'l-nāsi wa-raḥmatan minnā…"

Pickthall:	"And (it will be) that We may make of him a revelation for mankind and a mercy from Us"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"and (We wish) to appoint him as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us?"
Qarāʾī:	"And so that We may make him a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us"
Abdel Haleem:	"We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us."
Droge:	"And (it is) to make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us."
Asad:	"so that We might make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of grace from Us."

The Arabic lexicon offers several literal equivalences for the qurʾānic term

āyah.[324] But for English translators, the commonly employed synonym for this

term is "sign."[325] The excerpt cited here is drawn from the qurʾānic narrative of

the Annunciation to Mary. After telling her that God is bestowing her with a child

(Q 19:17), Mary's interlocutor tells her further that the child is to become an *āyah*

for humanity, "a mercy from us" (v. 21).

How translators render *āyah* in this textual context shines a light on their

theological viewpoint. Our English translators chose their respective

approximate equivalence for the term *āyah* quite deliberately. Their translations

do not exhibit arbitrary choices made after perusing multiple alternatives.

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[324] In his *āyah* entry, Wehr provides as its synonyms in English: "token," "mark," "miracle," "wonder," "marvel," "prodigy," "model," "exemplar," "paragon," "masterpiece," also "Qurʾān verse," "passage" (in a book), "utterance," "saying," "word" (*The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 46).

[325] Asad, himself, would argue that the sense in which *āyah* is frequently used in the Qurʾān is "a divine message." Considering that he is not referring to English renditions, his opinion might be right in so far as reading the text is concerned.

The literal equivalence chosen by Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarāʾī, Abdel Haleem and Droge, is an intentional and a methodical one. From the source-centered perspective, these translators are apparently guided by the principle that readers should come to the source, and not the other way around. In this case, *āyah*, should be appropriately read and rendered according to how it is understood in its original linguistic ecology. It is seen there simply as "sign." In English, the word "sign" is commonly understood as an object, quality or event whose presence or occurrence is essentially distinct from the probable presence or occurrence of something else which it indicates.

According to this definition, these four translators obviously intend to interpret Jesus as that personified physical presence of an immaterial presence of divine reality. The veracity of Jesus as a "sign" is verified and substantiated by most commentators in the way Jesus is portrayed in the Qurʾān.[326] He serves as a proof of God's power as Creator,[327] since his birth shows that God is capable of bringing a child into being without a father.[328] In that same way, God brought Adam into being without a mother and a father.[329] Through his miraculous conception and birth and his speaking as an infant, Jesus is also a sign or proof of his own identity as a prophet and of his mother's innocence.[330]

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[326] Yūsuf ʿAlī, for his part, employs the category "sign" for Jesus by virtue of the latter's "wonderful birth and wonderful life" and his "mission (was) to bring solace and salvation to the repentant" (Q 19, II, 2473).

[327] Ibn Kathīr, 6:242, on Q 19:21.

[328] Ibn Kathīr, 6:243, on Q 19:21; Rāzī, 21:171, on Q 19:21.

[329] Ibn Kathīr, 6:242, on Q 19:21; Mawdūdī, V:152 f., n. 15 on Q 19:21)

[330] Ṭabarsī, 6:330 f., on Q 19:21.

As such, therefore, our four translators have adhered to both the literal and philosophical signification of *āyah*. The other reason for the choice to render this term as "a sign" is that this term implies that there is a distinct difference between a sign and what it signifies. Applying this English word to Jesus helps to maintain a Christology consistent with the theology of the Qurʾān. According to the Qurʾān, he has neither a filial nor a hypostatic relationship with God, as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches he does. Jesus is like the rest of the prophets in the Qurʾān. He possesses "a distinct reality" from God who created him. Hence, he could be "a sign."

Pickthall and Asad also render the term *āyah* with a theological intent in mind. Asad argues that his use of the word "symbol" is more theologically appropriate than the word "sign" because in this context, Jesus is referred to as "a vehicle of God's message to man. In other words, he is a prophet and, thus, a symbol of God's grace."[331] In his commentary of Q 171:1, he also uses the word "symbol" to render *min āyātinā* in reference to what Muḥammad saw during his "Night Journey" (and "Ascension"). So, by "symbol," Asad means "any perceivable phenomenon (irrespective of whether it is apparent to the senses or only to the intellect) connected with a thing that is not, by itself, similarly perceivable."[332] Asad says that in the context of Muḥammad's "Night Journey,"

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[331] Asad, *TMOQ*, 459, n. 16 on Q 19:21.

[332] Asad, *TMOQ*, 417, n. 2 on Q 17:1. based on the characterization of al-Raghib al-Iṣfahānī.

these symbols were not necessarily "perceivable phenomena," but represented the "insights... into some of the ultimate truths."[333]

Pickthall's usage of the word "revelation" instead of "sign," also calls for further reflection. The term revelation is a central concept in the Qurʾān that is also used as the approximate theological equivalence to a range of qurʾānic terms, principal among them *waḥy* or *tanzīl*.[334] There is no explanation for why Pickthall renders *āyah* as "revelation" in reference to Jesus. Why doesn't he use the term "sign" instead? One could only speculate what this Christian convert to Islām thought about Jesus.[335] We do know that in his *Glorious Qurʾān,* Pickthall predominantly and almost exclusively employs the word "revelation" when rendering *āyah*, especially when the term refers to the sense of scriptures or the message of God. Questions remain about the author's intent. When he renders *āyah* into "revelation" while referring to Jesus in Q 19:21, does Pickthall intend to equate Jesus with the scripture? Or, does he mean that the miracle of Jesus' birth points to the action of God?

3.3.4.12   Q Yā Sīn 36:38

"*wa'l-shamsu tajrī li-mustaqarrin laha…*"

Pickthall"   "And the sun runneth on unto a resting-place for him"
Yūsuf ʿAlī: "And the sun runs his course for a period determined

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[333] Asad, *TMOQ*, 417, n. 2 on Q 17:1.

[334] Cf. Daniel Madigan, "Revelation," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 4:437-447.

[335] Pickthall's rendition finds echoes in the English translation of *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* where it also says of Jesus "we may make him a revelation, a token and admonition for mankind" (I:51, on Q 3:36).

	for him"
Qarāʾī:	"And the sun runs on to its place of rest:"
Abdel Haleem:	"The sun, too, runs its determined course"
Droge:	"And the sun: it runs to a dwelling place (appointed) for it."
Asad:	"And [they have a sign in] the sun: it runs in an orbit of its own."

In the current excerpt, the Qurʾān describes the behavior or position of the sun as a sign of God's creative might. The issue at hand is how our English translators make sense of a source text which even divided Classical commentators. Those commentators disagreed about how to read the expression, *tajrī li-mustaqarrin lahā*. On the one hand, form ten (X) of triliteral *q-r-r*, from which the passive participle form *mustaqarrin* is derived, could be interpreted with synonyms that convey a sense of stasis. Among these substitutes are such phrases as "to settle down," "to come to rest," "to be stationary." On the other hand, this term could also be interpreted with terms or phrases that suggest movement. It could be rendered as "to be restless or restive," "wavering," "undecided."[336] Given this lexicographical ambivalence, one can imagine how some commentators would read the Qurʾān as describing a

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[336] *The Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 880-881.

"moving sun,"[337] while others perceive "a resting sun,"[338] the generally accepted interpretation.

Indeed, this excerpt has also elicited a variety of renditions from our translators. There are two possible sources of interpretive information which could have influenced them. First, there is the thinking or works of the Classical commentators. Secondly, they could be influenced by the notion that the Qurʾān contains a scientific awareness of Creation's natural order with regard to astronomy, biology, and human reproduction. According to this scientific interpretation, it was not until the modern times, centuries after the revelation, that scientific discoveries validated many of these Qurʾān's teachings. This thus buttressed the evidence on the miraculous nature of the Qurʾān.[339] So, Pickthall,

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[337] By this interpretation, *li-mustaqarrin lahā*, according to Ibn Kathīr, refers to the sun's "fixed course of location, which is beneath the Throne, beyond the earth in that direction. Wherever it goes, it is beneath the Throne, it and all of creation, because the Throne is the roof of creation and it is not a sphere as many astronomers claim. Rather it is a dome supported by legs or pillars, carried by the angels, and it is above the universe, above the heads of people. When the sun is at its zenith at noon, it is in its closest position to Throne, and when it runs in its fourth orbit at the opposite point to its zenith, at midnight, it is in its furthest position from the Throne. At that point it prostrates and asks for permission to rise, as mentioned in the Hadiths" (Ibn Kathīr, 8:196, on Q 36:38).

[338] By this interpretation, *li-mustaqarrin lahā*, according to Ibn Kathīr, "refers to when the sun's appointed time comes to an end, which will be on the Day of Resurrection, when its fixed course will be abolished, it will come to a halt and it will be rolled up (Ibn Kathīr, 8:197, on Q 36:38). Al-Rāzī, for his part, describes the sun going "to its point of rest," which may be understood as the time or point of the daily sunset, the place of rest or quiescence (Rāzī, 26:62, on Q 36:38).

[339] A well-known contemporary proponent of this argument was the French physician, Maurice Bucaille (d. 1998). In his book, *The Bible, The Qurʾān, and Science*, trans. A. D. Pannell (Paris: Seghers, 1980) he wrote that after searching for "the degree of compatibility between the qurʾānic text and the date of modern science" he concluded saying, "I had to acknowledge the evidence in front of me: the Qurʾān did not contain a single statement that was assailable from the modern scientific point of view" (18 f.) This then led him to believe that no human author in the seventh century could have written "facts" which "today are shown to be keeping with modern scientific knowledge (Aḥmad Dallal, "Science and the Qurʾān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, eds. J. D. McAuliffe et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 4:540-557). But according to Dallal, despite the contemporary interest in the relationship between Qurʾān and science, "this aspect of exegesis had not received much scholarly attention in the classical period" (542). This "neglect" may be explained, he adds, by the fact that "collectively, these traditional materials do not add up to what

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Qarāʾī and Droge may have considered that this locution reveals qurʾānic knowledge on astronomy when they opted to translate *li-mustaqarrin laha* with phrases that suggest a "resting sun." These scholars therefore interpreted the phrase in this more conventional way, suggesting that the sun is going to "a resting-place," or "to its place of rest," or "to a dwelling place (appointed) for it."

On the other side of the spectrum, Yūsuf ʿAlī, Abdel Haleem and Asad disagreed with the static characterization of the sun in this excerpt. Instead of describing its resting state, they say that the sun, according to the Qurʾān, is moving. Their renditions tell us that the sun "runs his course for a period determined for him," or "runs in an orbit of its own," or "runs its determined course," respectively. To justify his rendition, Asad, especially cites one of the early readers of the Qurʾān, ʿAbd Allah ibn Masʿūd (c.594-c.653), who read the locution in question different from what is conventional. Ibn Masʿūd believed that it should be read, instead, as *lā mustaqqara lahā*. Thus, it could be understood that the sun runs on its course without having any rest, or not having a dwelling place.[340]

By their renditions, our translators have apparently encountered some lexicographic or idiomatic challenges on how to render the source text in

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might be legitimately called a scientific interpretation of the Qurʾān" (*Ibid.*). Some critics have accused modern interpretations in this regard as subscribing to scriptural literalism, an ideology that reverses the process of aligning scientific observation with scriptural reading rather than aligning scriptural reading with scientific observation, a tendency, like Bucaille's, that "bends the meaning of the Arabic words to suit (their) own ideas" (Michael Robert Negus, "Islām and Science, " in *God, Humanity and the Cosmos*, ed. Christopher Southgate (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 332 (321-339).

[340] Zamakhsharī, 4:16, on Q 36:38.

question meaningfully into English. What proved to be useful to all of them are the opinions of the earlier *mufassirūn.* These authorities offered two possible explanations for our translators to choose from. While these views may not be theologically consequential, as far as the teachings of the Qurʾān are concerned, they, nevertheless, illustrate how translators are intellectually involved in choosing the most appropriate equivalence.

3.3.4.13   Q Qāf 50:38

"wa-laqad khalaqnā l-samāwāti wa'l-arḍa baynahuma fī sittati ayyamin wa-mā massanā min lughūbin."

Pickthall:	"And verily We created the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them, in six Days, and naught of weariness touched Us."
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"We created the heavens and the earth and all between them in Six Days, nor did any sense of weariness touch Us."
Qarāʾī:	"Certainly We created the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them, in six days, and any fatigue did not touch Us."
Abdel Haleem:	"We created the heavens. The earth, and everything between, in six Days without tiring"
Droge:	"Certainly We created the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them, in six days. No weariness touched Us in (doing) that."
Asad:	"and [who knows that] We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six aeons, and [that] no weariness could ever touch Us."

The issue at hand in evaluating this verse is how our English translators

read and render the qurʾānic term *ayyam* (sing. *yawm,* commonly used for

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"day").[341] We can see the variety in their interpretations for the target text. Except for Asad, these scholars translate *ayyam* into "days." Pickthall, Yūsuf ʿAlī and Abdel Haleem, for their parts, nuance their renditions by writing the term in the upper case which tells readers that the translator intends to enunciate another layer of meaning for the word. Unfortunately, with the absence of explanatory notes, readers of these translations could only speculate about those meanings. Qarā'ī's and Droge's renditions, however, are straightforward. There is nothing left for the imagination to consider with respect to the meaning of the word "days."

Nonetheless, both of these groups adhere to the source text with their literal equivalence. This does raise questions about the semantic context or "the linguistic ecology" from which they drew their understanding of the term *ayyam.* Is their interpretation consistent with the notion that the Qurʾān teaches about the creation of the heavens and the earth with sensitivity to scientific truths?[342] Is it

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[341] Besides the synonym "day" for *yawm*, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary* also adds the connotation "age," "era," "time," etc. (1300).

[342] Although creation for *six days* has been interpreted literally by some (Ṭabrisī, on Q 7:54), the occurrence of the same expression such as in Q 7:54 is not necessarily meant to be understood as six twenty-four-hour periods, since the Qurʾān also states in Q 22:47, "behold, in thy Sustainer's sight a day (*yawm*) is like a thousand years (*alfa sanatin*) of your reckoning (Asad, *TMOQ*, see also Q 32:5); some commentators thus consider each "day" to be as thousand years (*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, II:699, on Q 50:38; Ibn Kathīr, 4:77, on Q 7:54; Qurṭubī, 7:195, on Q 7:54; Suyūṭī (Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr al-ma'thūr* [Bayrūt, Lubnān : Dār al-Kutub al-Almiyah, 2009], III:169, on Q 7:54).

consistent with mainstream Islamic tradition?[343] Does it reflect the ancient Arabic

usage? Or, does it echo the popular reading of the biblical "days of creation."[344]

In his commentary, Asad believes that his rendition of *ayyam* into "aeons"

in this excerpt is appropriate. His rendering, according to him, reflects its usage

in the ancient Arabic milieu, including the era when "the term *yawm* does not

always denote the twenty-four hours of the earthly 'day,' but it is also applied to

any period of time, however long or short."[345] It is also consistent, he adds, with

the cosmic sense in which it is used in this verse and elsewhere in the Qurʾān.[346]

Our analysis of the six English renditions of this excerpt reveals a clear

distinction between the source-centered and target-centered orientations. Asad's

translation of this specific verse involves a philological and an etymological

consideration and commentary. His work appears to be consistent with the

nature of a target-based orientation. His obvious priority is offering a more

comprehensible and accessible understanding of the term to his Anglophone

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[343] In the Islamic tradition, the "six days" are said to have begun on Sunday and continued through Friday (*al-jumuʿah*) when God created Adam and gathered together (*jamaʿah*) all creation (Ibn Kathīr, 4:77, on Q 7:54; Ṭabarī 8:242, on Q 7:54), although the name *jumuʿah* seems more directly related to the fact that Friday was the day of congregational prayer. The tradition that Adam was created on this day nonetheless gave Friday a particular religious preeminence in Islām.

[344] The qurʾānic version of God's creation of the heavens and the earth in six days is similar in certain ways to the biblical creation narrative in which God creates the world in six days, but then rests on the seventh. The Quran, however, as it mentions, for example in Q 2:255, does not believe that God rested, for "Neither slumber overtakes Him, nor sleep" (Asad, *TMOQ*), and in the current excerpt, God says, "no weariness could ever touch Us" (*Ibid.*); thus, there is no such thing as Islamic Sabbath, in the Judaic or Christian sense. Moreover, the Qurʾān also differs from the Bible in that it provides no specific sequence for the creation of various phenomena on different days, although some Muslim commentators do associate certain days with the creation of various orders of creatures (Ibn Kathīr, 4:77, on Q 7:54).

[345] Asad, *TMOQ,* 800, n. 29, on Q 50:37.

[346] Asad, *TMOQ,* 800, n. 29 on Q 50:37.

readers. In Asad's mind, this qurʾānic term, *ayyam*, cannot be taken for granted. It should not be uncritically translated and over-simplified with the approximate or a generally-accepted English equivalence – "days."

3.3.4.14 Q Najm 53:1

"*wa'l-najmi idhā hawā*"

Pickthall:	"By the Star when it setteth"
Yūsuf ʿAlī:	"By the Star when it goes down"
Qarāʾī:	"By the star when it sets"
Abdel Haleem:	"By the star when it sets"
Droge:	"By the star when it falls"
Asad:	"CONSIDER this unfolding [of God's message], as it comes down from on high!"

Even a cursory look at this comparative translation shows that Asad's rendition of the opening verse of sūrah al-Najm stands out from those of the other English translators. At the center of this analysis is the rendition of the Arabic term *najm*. At first glance, this term can easily be substituted with the synonym, "a star." That appears to be its most popular meaning or synonym, as evidenced in the renditions the other five English translators.[347]

It could be said that their option for a source-centered approach is driven by popular acceptability of this literal equivalence. But, what appears to be more important to their translation is that this very rendition serves or determines the overall theme of sūrah al-Najm. Hence, the imperative to render *najm* into "a star."

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[347] Also Ibn Kathīr, 9:306, on Q 53:1; *Tafsīr Al-Jalalayn* I:512, on Q 53:1; Mawdūdī, n. 1 on Q 53:1, digital edition by *Islamic Foundation, UK*, accessed Feb 2018; Quṭb, XVI:208, on Q 53:1.

The generally accepted reading of this sūrah is that it opens with the oath of the Divine One swearing by every one of "the stars" (indicated by the initial adjurative particle *wa,* which is commonly rendered into "by") as they descend and disappear beneath the horizon (v.1). Such a celestial behavior of "the stars" is understood not only as a celebration and an affirmation that Muḥammad indeed is God's awaited Messenger. But, it also confirms the divine source of his message (vv. 2 ff.).[348] With this theme at the opening of the sūrah, one could only deduce that rendering *najm* into "a star" makes sense. Indeed, it also highlights and celebrates Muḥammad as a prophet. As a matter of fact, the most popular English translation of the name of this sūrah is, "the Star."

While not denying that *najm* popularly connotes "a star," Asad advances its other connotations in English. These include "it appeared," "began," "ensued," or "proceeded."[349] According to Asad, these terms denote the sense of "unfolding of something that comes or appears gradually, as if by installments."[350] This notion of unfolding, according to Asad, is consistent with the traditional understanding of "each of the gradually-revealed parts (*nujum*) of the Qurʾān."[351]

Thus, it can be applied to the process of its gradual revelation, or its unfolding, as such. For this reason, it is not only compelling for Asad to render *al-*

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[348] Ibn Kathīr, 9:306-307, on Q 53:1.

[349] *The Hans Wehr Dictionary* adds to this list, "to begin to show" (1110).

[350] Asad, *TMOQ,* 812, n. 1, on Q 53:1.

[351] Asad, *TMOQ,* 812, n. 1, on Q 53:1. "Stars" translated into *nujūm,* a number of early commentators read this verse as a reference to the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān, or portions of progressive installments: one, two, three or four verses at a time over a period of twenty-three years (610-532; *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās,* II:714, on Q 53:1; Ṭabarī, 27:50, on Q 53:1; Zamakhsharī, 4:407, on Q 53:1; Rāzī, 28:241, on Q 53:1).

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najm into "this unfolding." Thus, he also gives the whole *sūrah* the English title,
"The Unfolding." While adhering to the literal equivalence of the source text,
Asad, nonetheless, provides a commentary in order to justify his decision. And
yet, what really makes his rendition depart from an accepted standard for
translation is that the opening verse, instead of drawing the reader's attention to
the messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad, is now suggesting a celestial
trumpeting of the gradual revelation of the Qurʾān.

3.4   Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to contextualize Asad's work of translation
within the larger discussion of the theories of translation, particularly the
translation of the Qurʾān. What this analysis has contributed are several
important hermeneutical tools. These tools act as lenses providing a better way
to view the basic issues and factors connected with the Qurʾān's translation.

Of special interest are the tripartite interpretive categories for these works
of translations. These key categories include the source text, the target text and
the translating agent. All interpretative considerations surrounding each of these
categories have proved to be very useful in analyzing these six works of English
translations of the Arabic Qurʾān.

Also, inseparably related to these three categories are the three
orientations which characterize the translational dynamics and tendencies of
translators of the Qurʾān. They also determine the general literary tenor of their
work of translations, namely, source-centered, target-centered and translator-

centered. In the light of these analytical tools, Asad's *The Message of the Qurʾān* qualifies as predominantly a target-centered work.

It fundamentally affirms what his rationalistic approach set out to do. In his foreword, he said that he wanted to bring "the Qurʾān nearer to the hearts or minds of people raised in a different religious and psychological climate." He attempted to achieve this goal even, at times, at the expense of the original structure of the source text, as he did, for example, with the "creation of a bird" in Q 3:49; or, even if it required him to demythologize certain qurʾānic locutions when they obscured the human faculty of reason from understanding the qurʾānic messages, as he did, for instance, with *fa'qtulū anfusakum* (lit. "kill yourself") in Q 2:54.

Asad's rationalist orientation will be given further in-depth analysis in Chapter Four which demonstrates his praxis of demythologizing the miracles of the Qurʾān, while Chapter Five undertakes a rationalist exposition of two themes in the Qurʾān that are highly valued by Asad.

CHAPTER 4:

DEMYTHOLOGIZING THE MIRACLES OF THE QURʾĀN

4.1   A Demythological Reading

In order to express and convey their truths, different religions employ

myths. As such, they serve as paradigms for understanding or interpreting the

origins of the world, how the world came to exist, or even how a culture's system

of thought and values developed. In his study of mythology, William Paden

describes the function of myth in the following words,

> "...myth... posits ostensibly real times and places, real heroes and
> ancestors, real genealogies and events. No matter how imaginative these
> may seem to an outsider, mythic settings are intended by believers to
> represent an account of the actual world."[1]

So, myths are expressed through symbols or representations that may

take the form of sacred stories. These stories hold great religious or spiritual

significance for those who narrate them.[2] Since they tell about important events

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[1] W. Paden, *Religious Worlds the Comparative Study of Religions* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 72 (69-92). Cf. Peter S. Inglott, "The Popular Genres of Mass-Media Press; Or, Pagan Mythology in Modern Dress," in *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* 5.4 (1974): 276-304.

[2] R. G.A. Buxton and K. W. Bolle, "Myth," *in Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Jan 3, 2017), accessed Jan 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/myth.

or characters, Mircea Eliade says that they can also serve prototypical functions by presenting inspiring models of great accomplishments.[3]

This chapter studies Asad's treatment of sacred stories in the Qurʾān. These are stories which he interprets as symbols, allegories and myths. Asad maintains that the Qurʾān contains legendary accounts of pre-Islamic antecedents, both Judeo-Christian and Arab, which serve certain functions. He encourages readers of the Qurʾān, especially Muslims, to reflect on this allegorical material and look beyond its literal meaning. These stories, he says, should be read in the light of an underlying qurʾānic message revealed in its ethical and social teachings.

Asad argues that all qurʾānic injunctions and exhortations should be viewed together as communicating an ethical and practical message. His hermeneutic brings into focus a unique modernist discourse on the Qurʾān's sacred stories. As we shall see in the following eight samples, Asad's hermeneutical method to unlock the message of these sacred stories -- a method which I call "demythologization"[4] – is based on his view that the Qurʾān contains

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[3] See M. Eliade, "Myths and Mythical Thought," in *Myths*, ed. A. Eliot (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 12 ff.

[4] Demythologization is an epistemological method which is not unfamiliar to modern and contemporary rationalist biblical exegesis. In fact, it was adopted by Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) which he introduced as *Entmythologisierung* in his 1941 work *New Testament and Mythology*. Bultmann describes the New Testament as a mythical world that speaks of "earth in the middle, heaven above it and hell below it ... it, too, is a theater for the working of supernatural powers, God and his angels, Satan and his demons" (1). These supernatural powers, he says, intervene in natural occurrences and in the thinking, willing, and acting of human beings; wonders are nothing unusual. In fact, the presentation of the salvation occurrence, which constitutes the real content of the New Testament proclamation, corresponds to this mythical world picture (2). Bultmann, therefore, raises the basic question, "can Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true?" That would be pointless, he argues, as "there is nothing specifically Christian about the mythical world" (3). For the NT proclamation, therefore, to retain its validity, there is nothing to do but to demythologize it (9). It is not a new

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mythic material which should not be taken literally as accounts of actual historical events.[5] Asad, himself, never mentions this hermeneutical method in the *TMOQ.* But, he alludes to an interpretative approach that treats references to scriptural circumstances and events as illustrations of the human condition and not as factual records.[6]

Abdin Chande distinguishes Asad's interpretative method from that of the Classical commentators, including modern Muslims who translate the Qurʾān into English. He arguess that Asad attempts to explain the mythic language of scripture embodied in certain sacred or miracle stories as figurative speech. These stories, according to Asad, have metaphorical or allegorical signification.[7] For this reason, Asad's method of interpretation makes his work controversial within the Muslim community.[8]

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task at which theology today is the first to work, Bultmann says. On the contrary it was performed in an "inappropriate way" by critical theologians of the nineteenth century who by eliminating mythology in the gospel the kerygma itself was also eliminated (11). The task today is to interpret NT mythology by deriving its interpretative criterion not from the modern world view, but from the understanding of its existence in the NT itself (12). By demythologization, it is no longer a mythology in the old sense but rather as historical occurrence in space and time. And by presenting it as such, stripping away the mythological garments, Bultman explains that "we have intended to follow the intention of the NT itself and to do full justice to the paradox of its proclamation -- the paradox, namely, that God's eschatological emissary is a concrete historical person, that God's eschatological act takes place in a human destiny, that it is an occurrence, therefore, that cannot be proved to be eschatological in any worldly way" (41) (*New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. & trans. S. M. Ogden [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984]).

[5] Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān: Muḥammad Asad's Modern Translation," in *Islām and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15:1 (Oct 2004) 81 (79-89).

[6] Asad points out in his introduction that the preoccupation by classical commentators with the historical occasion when a particular verse was revealed should not be allowed to obscure the underlying purpose of a verse and its relevance to the total message of the Qurʾān. This is something he thought that they sometimes lost sight of in their explanations and unwarranted details to embellish the qurʾānic narrative (Asad, *TMOQ,* vii.

[7] Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān," 80.

[8] Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān," 80.

In his attempt to demythologize certain texts dealing with supernatural matters, Asad brings into play two interpretive principles. First, he examines the linguistic setting prevalent at the time of the Qurʾān's revelation. Secondly, he applies contemporary disciplines such as hermeneutics as well as psychological and socio-anthropological methods to the material being studied.

Asad operates with the view that insights from modern disciplines could help in the interpretation of Scripture, especially with the Creation narratives. From a modernist perspective, Asad seeks to make such narratives from the Qurʾān comprehensible and relevant for the modern era.

Furthermore, he advances the view that the Qurʾān may only be effectively communicated if it is interpreted within the domain of reason. For him, reason is a hermeneutical lens through which the Qurʾān's supernatural or miraculous elements are discerned as literary tools and are thus to be read as metaphors or allegories. Reason is, therefore, Asad's hermeneutical key for demythologization. By means of it, he filters the mythical casing from the "message" he believes intended by the Qurʾān. This demythological method not only challenges the literal interpretation of the supernatural elements in the Qurʾān, but also illustrates how much Asad wanted to reveal the Qurʾān's underlying spirit and transcendental message.

As such, Asad's hermeneutical method is most likely inspired by a similar rationalist discipline of the Islamic Classical period, the so-called *taʾwīl* or allegorical interpretation. It also reflects the modern rationalist impulse as he intends to make the message of the Qurʾān accessible through rational

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exposition and scientific interpretation of the verse. In other words, his approach essentially echoes the principle of *ijtihād* or independent reasoning.

4.2 Demythological Exposition

4.2.1 Moses and the "Burning Bush"

The biblical scenario of an angel of God or God himself speaking directly to Moses through a burning bush in the book of Exodus[9] is alluded to three times in the Qurʾān,[10] though in some oblique and elliptical fashion. For one, not one of the latter versions speaks explicitly about a "bush" or a "tree" that is burning. All of them, however, mention that Moses sees "a fire" (*nāran*) from a distance in the desert. Nonetheless, apparently motivated to render more semblance of the biblical drama in his translation, Asad interpolates the word "burning" immediately next to the word *al-shajarah* ("the tree") in his rendition of Q Qaṣaṣ 28:30 which states,

> "but when he came close to it (fire on the slope of Mount Sinai), a call was sounded from the right-side bank of the valley, out of the tree [burning] on blessed ground: "O Moses! Verily, I am God, the Sustainer of all the worlds!"

Thus, in his exegesis of the current verse, Asad explicitly refers to this qurʾānic incident as "obviously identical with the 'burning bush' of the Bible."[11] Nonetheless, common to the three versions is a voice that is heard calling for Moses who has come closer to the "fire." On the one hand, while Asad does not

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[9] The Book of Exodus 3:2 ff.

[10] Q 20:10 f., Q 27:7 f., and Q 28:29 f.; cf. Q 19:52, Q 20:80.

[11] Asad, *TMOQ,* 593, n. 25 on Q 28:30.

hesitate to link this qurʾānic phenomenon to the biblical theophany of the "burning bush," he, on the other hand, takes pains to filter the former from all its miraculous connotation in order to achieve his epistemological goal.

In his exegesis of Q Ṭā Hā 20:10,[12] Asad demythologizes Moses' encounter with the "fire" by interpreting it as "a symbolic allusion to his dawning awareness that he was in need of spiritual guidance."[13] In conjunction with Q Naml 27:7, Asad presupposes the latter need for "guidance" by virtue of Moses' perceived moral posture of being "lost in the desert"[14] after a long period of wandering after his flight from Egypt (Q 28:14 ff.). This interpretation, according to him, is consistent with an interpretation offered by early and modern commentators. In their exegeses of Q Naml 27:8,[15] they render *nāran* as synonymous to *nūr* or "light" which represents "illumination which God bestows on his prophets."[16]

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[12] "Lo! he saw a fire (*nāran*) [in the desert]; and so, he said to his family: "Wait here! Behold, I perceive a fire (*nāran*) [far away]: perhaps I can bring you a brand therefrom, or find at the fire some guidance" (*ʿalāʾl-nāri hudan*).

[13] Asad, *TMOQ,* 471, n. 7 on Q 20:10. In his commentary of Q 27:8, Yūsuf ʿAlī defers to "Commentators" who construe this "fire" as not a physical fire, but "it was the glory of the Angels, a reflection of the Glory of God" (Yūsuf ʿAlī, II:979, n. 3245).

[14] Asad's bracketed interpolation in verse Q 27:7, where it says, "LO! [While lost in the desert,] Moses said to his family: "Behold, I perceive a fire [far away]; I may bring you from there some tiding [as to which way we are to pursue], or bring you [at least] a burning brand so that you might warm yourselves."

[15] "But when he came close to it, a call was sounded: "Blessed are all who are within [reach of] this fire, and all who are near it! And limitless in His glory is God, the Sustainer of all the worlds!"

[16] See al-Ṭabarī's commentary on Q 27:8 (Ṭabarī, 19:154-155); al-Qurṭubī describes the "fire" (*nār*) in this verse as actually "light" (*nūr*); Moses deemed it "fire" but the Arabs are said to have sometimes used the word "fire" (*nār*) in the place of "light" (*nūr*) (13:145, on Q 27:8); and Ibn Kathīr, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, said that it was not fire, but flickering light, and in another statement he refers to it as the "Light of the Lord of the worlds" (Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* [trans., abridged] [Houston, TX: Darussalam Pub & dist., 2000], 7:304, on Q 27:8). For Quṭb, the clause "blessed are those in the fire and those around it" speaks of a different fire, not the earthly fire that human makes. Rather "it was a fire coming from on high, lit up by angels who are pure, so as to give perfect guidance." Moreover, the whole event, Quṭb

Moreover, the expression *man fī'l-nār wa man ḥawlahā* ("blessed are all who are within [reach of] this fire, and all who are near it!") in the latter verse further leads Asad to infer that it characterizes some mystical presence of "God's own light." The phenomenon of the burning bush expands to symbolize a light that "encompasses, and is the core of, all spiritual illumination."[17] In other words, what sounds like a supernatural biblical occurrence is interpreted by Asad as a spiritual experience, not an actual biblical event. As such, it lends itself to the recurring qurʾānic trope of prophetic call and inspiration. What we also see is Asad's consistent impulse to demythologize any supernatural element that tends to obstruct the use of human reason. As we have seen earlier, Asad is committed to avoid translations that would preclude believers from fully participating and fulfilling what the Qurʾān teaches.

4.2.2   Moses and His Staff

Asad applies the same demythological approach to the qurʾānic incident involving Moses and his staff. In the Bible, a similar incident follows the story of the "burning bush." It serves as the first of the two divine signs that God shows

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adds, basically illustrates the elevation of Moses to "an extraordinary position." It was for Moses, he says, an unexpected discovery of divine insight and guidance to the right path; it was a moment of confirmation that Moses was indeed "chosen by God, but such a choice entails a duty to carry a message to the most wicked of tyrants. Hence, his Lord began to prepare and equip him for his mission" (XIII:114, on Q 27:8).

[17] Asad, *TMOQ,* 577, n. 7 on Q 27:8. In his commentary on Q 27:7, Dagli writes that in Sufism, this verse symbolizes the levels of certainty envisioned as progressive stages in the spiritual life: "having conceptual knowledge of the fire, seeing that fire, and being burned or consumed by it symbolize (1) theoretical knowledge about spiritual matters, (2) direct vision of spiritual realities, and (3) the realization attained when the substance of the soul is transformed by being consumed by the Truth" (Dagli, "An-Naml," in *The Study Qurʾān,* 929, n.7 on Q 27:7).

Moses in answer to his question: "but suppose they will not believe me or listen to my words, and say to me, 'Yahweh has not appeared to you'."[18] God then commands Moses to throw his staff on the ground; "the staff turned into a snake and Moses recoiled from it." And then God said, "reach out your hand and catch it by the tail." When Moses did what God instructed him to do, the snake turned back into a staff.[19]

This account about a staff turned into a snake appears three times in the Qurʾān -- in three different *sūrahs*.[20] Just as he has done with the burning bush text, though in a less categorical tone,[21] Asad reads this "miraculous transformation" in a rational and mystical sense. While he neither denies nor affirms that the staff has turned into a snake, he believes, nonetheless, that God uses this phenomenon as a metaphorical tool to impart spiritual insight to Moses. That insight, according to Asad, would help Moses to discern the "intrinsic difference between appearance and reality," a wisdom that is fittingly endowed to servants who are called by God.[22]

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[18] Exodus 4:1.

[19] Exodus 4:2-4.

[20] See Q 20:17-21; Q 27:10; Q 28:31. A similar transformation is found in Q 7:108 which is not contiguous to the "burning bush" segment, but rather in front of the Pharaoh.

[21] On Q 28:31, for example, he indicates his uncertainty of the import of this incident when he comments that "the miracle of the staff has, possibly, a symbolic significance" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 594, n. 26 on Q 28:31). Cf. Asad, *TMOQ,* 577, n. 9 on Q 27:10. Nonetheless, Asad's tendency to spiritualize or rationalize a supernatural or miraculous occurrence --- that is, apart from the imperceptible elements or attributes (*al-ghayb*) of the Divine realm -- is nowhere muffled or restrained here.

[22] Asad, *TMOQ,* 472, n. 14 on Q 20:21. Asad's interpretation finds resonance with Quṭb's who describes this event as "part of his (Moses) preparation for his task" (Quṭb, XI:405, Q 20:21). According to *The Study Qurʾān,* some philosophers and mystics read this verse as alluding to various aspects of the human being's lower nature (Maria Massi Dakake, "Ṭā Hā," 792 (788-808), on Q 20:21). Moses' staff, it adds, is seen as the unrefined human soul which must be conquered

To further shed light on this spiritual interpretation, Asad, by applying the method of *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān* or "interpreting the Qurʾān by means of the Qurʾān" directs his readers to the parable of Moses and his quest for knowledge with the unnamed mysterious sage spoken of as ʿ*abdan min* ʿ*ibādinā* or "one of Our servants" (Q Kahf 18:66-82).[23] Asad reads this parable as an allegorical presentation which employs a series of symbols that signify a deep spiritual knowledge that is "inexhaustible." It is the "divine knowledge of life eternal."[24]

The Qurʾān relates how Moses desires to follow this particular servant, *al-Khaḍir,* in the hope of receiving knowledge with which the servant was divinely

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in order for the soul's true nature to be actualized, as it is explained in Mulla Ṣadrā's (d. 1640) *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* thus, "there is no serpent like your soul; so, slay it and purify it of the stain of its false beliefs and ugly opinions; or subjugate it until it becomes a *muslim* in your hand. First cast it aside like the staff of Moses; then pick it up with your right hand after it has returned to its *former way* and primordial disposition. It shall then live an intellectual life, striving for the Return and the Final Abode (*Ibid*).

[23] Asad, *TMOQ,* 449, n. 73 on Q 18:65. In the Tradition on the authority of Ubayy ibn Kaʿb (d.649), recorded in several versions by Bukhārī, Muslim and Tirmidhī), this mysterious sage is spoken of as *al-Khaḍir or al-Khiḍr* ("the Green One). The latter, according to Asad, is an epithet rather than a name, implying (according to popular legend) that his wisdom was ever-fresh ("green") and imperishable: a notion, he surmises, which bears out the assumption that this is "an allegorical figure symbolizing the utmost depth of mystic insight accessible to man" (*Ibid.*)

[24] Asad prefaces this qurʾānic parable by citing certain *aḥādīth* which describe Moses being reprimanded by God for arrogantly claiming to be the "wisest of all men" (Bukhārī, 1:122; Tirmidhī, 828 f., no. 3149). He was then subsequently told through a revelation that a "servant" who lived at the *majmaʿa l-baḥrayni* or "junction of the two seas" (Q 18:60) was far superior to him in wisdom. Moses eagerly expressed a desire to meet this "servant." So, God commanded him to "take the fish in a basket" and to go on and on until the fish would disappear: and its disappearance was to be a sign that the goal had been reached, which is "the divine knowledge of life eternal" (Asad, *TMOQ*, 448 f., n. 67 on *Q 1*8:60). In his commentary of Q 18:60, al-Rāzī observes that the account of Moses and Khiḍr makes it clear that even great prophets, such as Moses, do not possess all knowledge (Rāzī, 21:122, on *Q 1*8:60). Although a little beyond the focus of Asad's reflection -- but definitely not unrelated -- al-Kāshānī's (d.1329) spiritual analysis of the story of Moses returning to the place where the fish disappeared is insightful. If it is read as a symbolic narrative for the journey of the soul, he said, Moses retracing his steps represents the spiritual journey back to God, reversing the "fall" into worldly existence and separation from God -- a return to the *fiṭrah ūlā* (see Q 30:30), or primordial nature, in which the human being was created (Feras Hamza, trans. *Tafsīr al-Kāshānī, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qurʾān* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), V: 449, on Q 18:64).

endowed (v. 66). At first, the sage doubts Moses' patience and determination. He appears reluctant to the latter's persistence to come with him. Finally, the servant agrees but makes Moses promise that he would never question him along the way (vv. 67-70).

Then, after crossing the sea, the two disembark from a boat at the seashore where the sage proceeds to make a hole in the boat. Moses vigorously protests, insisting that the deed will endanger anyone who would later sail on the boat. (v. 71). After he is rebuked for questioning the sage, Moses travels on with *al-Khaḍir* only to see him killing an innocent young man (v. 74). Again, Moses protests what he witnesses and is reprimanded again.

Now, the two travel to a village where they beg for food but are refused and offered no hospitality. Noticing a crumbling wall in the village, the sage rebuilds it. Moses again protests, insisting that the sage should be compensated for his labor. (v.77). At this point, the sage has run out of patience with Moses. But, he begins to reveal the meaning of these three events.

In the first incident, as the sage explains, he rendered the boat temporarily unserviceable because a tyrant king was about to forcibly seize it from the poor owner with "brute force." [25] In the second case, the life of the young man was taken because he was about to bring evil and "unbelief" to his parents.[26] Finally, the sage revealed the meaning of the restored wall described in the third story. There was a treasure buried beneath the wall, he explained. The treasure

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[25] Asad, *TMOQ,* 451, n. 77 on Q 18:79.

[26] Q 18:80 f.

belonged to a righteous man who buried it before he died in order to provide for his boys who would soon be orphans. If the wall collapsed completely, the treasure would have been exposed and then stolen by the greedy village folk.[27]

Asad asserts that both the staff and snake parable and this parable about Moses with *al-Khaḍir* illustrate the pedagogical power of allegory. Moses had to journey and struggle to acquire the prophetic wisdom he would later need as a prophet.[28] Divine inspiration, mediated by both allegorical accounts, allows Moses to acquire mystical insight. As a result, Moses is able to discern

> "the two sources of knowledge -- the one obtainable through observation and intellectual coordination of outward phenomena (*ʿilm al-ẓāhir*), and the other through intuitive, mystic insight (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*) -- the meeting of which is the real goal of Moses' quest."[29]

Here, as in the "burning bush," Asad regards less the actual occurrences of the supernatural elements in the story. Instead, he privileges the rational messages that the stories communicate to the Qurʾān's readers. For him, this message

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[27] Q 18:82.

[28] While not alluding to an allegorical or metaphorical interpretation of the Khiḍr and Moses story (i.e. unlike Asad), al-Kāshānī, in his exegesis of Q 18:78, relates the parting between Khiḍr and Moses, recalls what Khiḍr actually has done unto Moses. He said that Khiḍr's ability to share the *taʾwīl* or the esoteric interpretation or meaning to all phenomena and events indicates that Moses' soul had been purified and strengthened enough for the reception of the spiritual meaning and the encounter with the Unseen that had been veiled from Moses up to this point and about which he was forbidden to ask (Kāshānī, V:451 f., on Q 18:78). In a sense, both Asad and al-Kāshānī, while they differ in their hermeneutics, nonetheless, arrive at a similar outcome to wit, prophetic sapiential training and inspiration.

[29] Asad, *TMOQ,* 448 f., n. 67 on Q 18:60. Asad's interpretation of the expression *majmaʿa l-baḥrayni* or "junction of the two seas," which for him is a metaphor for the "two sources of knowledge," finds resonance with al-Kāshānī's interpretation of Q 18:67, where he says that in this narrative, Moses has only been taught what is just and righteous with regards to the outward and apparent reality of things, and he has no knowledge of the Unseen -- a knowledge that has been granted to Khiḍr. Moses, unlike Khiḍr, is bound by time and the limits of the material body, which according to some Ṣūfī commentators, is what veiled him from knowledge of the unseen realities and spiritual truths that had been granted to Khiḍr (Kāshānī, V:449, on Q 18:67).

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could be moved front and center in the discussion and could be appreciated by his readers if read rationally and filtered from its metaphorical layers – a process of demythologization.

4.2.3   Moses and His Unblemished Hand

The second divine sign that God shows to Moses in the biblical "burning bush" setting is the transformation of his hand. In the Book of Exodus, God tells Moses, "put your hand inside your tunic (Hb. *bə-ḥêqeḵā* or "into your bosom")." Moses does and then draws it out again, "and his hand was diseased (*mə-ṣōraʿat* or "leprous"), white as snow." Then God tells him, "put your hand back inside your tunic," which he does. When he draws it out, the hand is restored (Hb: *šā-ḇāh* or "turned again"), "just like the rest of his flesh."[30]

Similar stories are mentioned four times in the Qurʾān. Three occur immediately after the "burning bush,"[31] while one occurs separately in the presence of Pharaoh.[32] In each case, however, the miracle is identified by the Qurʾān as an *āyah* or "sign" which is to be shown to Pharaoh, as in the Exodus version. Furthermore, three of these mention a hand that is inserted or put either in his "bosom" (Q 27:12 and Q 28:32) or in his "armpit" or "side" (Q 20:22) while one (Q 7:108) does not.

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[30] The Book of Exodus 4:6-7.

[31] *Q 20:22, Q 27:12, Q 28:32*

[32] Q 7:108.

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All these accounts also mention that Moses draws his hand and it becomes *bayḍā min ghayri sū'in* or "[shining] white, without blemish," or simply *bayḍā'u* or "[shining] white." None of these qurʾānic versions describe it as being "diseased" or "leprous," as does the Book of Exodus.[33] The "shining white" hand of Moses is not inserted back in the Qurʾān account, as it is in the Bible where the "white as snow" leprosy is said to be healed. In both narratives, it appears that the pretext of insertion is to set the stage for a miraculous transformation. In the Bible, the hand miraculously becomes diseased, setting the stage for God's intervention and healing. In the Qurʾān narrative, the hand that becomes *bayḍā min ghayri sū'in* or "[shining] white, without blemish," is itself the manifestation of God's omnipotence, as far as Asad is concerned. At that moment of transformation, he says, Moses was "endowed with transcendent luminosity in

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[33] *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, however, appears to echo the biblical narrative as it seems to presuppose that the hand which was inserted was diseased and once it's taken out, it "will emerge white in contrast to the skin-colour that it was without any fault, that is, without any sign of leprosy radiating like the rays of the sun blinding to the eyes of onlookers" (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, I:286, on Q 20:22); it makes similar comment on both Q 27:12 and Q 28:32 thus, "it will emerge not in its usual skin color but white without any blemish any vestige of leprosy" (*Ibid.*, I:357; I:370). Similarly, *Tafsīr ibn ʿAbbās* also alludes to the same biblical premise of a diseased hand when it says "it will come forth white shining (without hurt) it is not touched by leprosy" (*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, II:394, Q 20:22). These comments inevitably raises the question as to whether Moses' hand had a pre-existing leprosy before he was commanded to insert it. Rather than a leprous hand, al-Qurṭubī describes Moses' skin to be reddish brown and that when he removed his hand from his side, it was white without blemish, meaning it was completely luminous, with no dark spots (Qurṭubī, 11:174, on Q 20:22). Mawdūdī, for his part, is in agreement with Asad that no "diseased hand" nor some kind of "leprosy" is implied elliptically by these verses. In fact, he chides not only Bible interpreters or Talmud authors, but also comments "it is a pity that the same interpretation has been adopted by our own commentators." Mawdūdī's contention is that it is bad to attribute to a prophet leprosy, which is repugnant (Mawdūdī, V:186 f., n. 13 on Q 20:22). Quṭb, in his comment on Q 20:22, apparently reacts to the notion that this verse implies a "diseased hand" when he says that "this hand came out shining white, but its whiteness indicates no illness or malignancy" or when he categorically comments on Q 27:12 after Moses hand is drawn thus, "he had no skin disease." Rather, for Quṭb, this hand coming out shining white account basically symbolizes the clear truth: one supported by undeniable, irrefutable evidence (Quṭb, XI:406, on Q 20:22; XIII:115, on Q 27:12; XIII:228 f., on Q 28:32).

token for his prophethood."[34] For Asad, all the qurʾānic versions of this story can be summarized and linked to that interpretation.

As he does with the story of Moses and his staff, Asad demythologizes the hand which "come[s] forth [shining] white, without blemish" (*takhruj bayḍāʾa min ghayri sūʾin*). In so doing, he finds that the allegories signify moments of divine inspiration and mystical knowledge given to Moses. Here, again, we see Asad's proclivity to de-emphasize a literal interpretation of supernatural accounts in the Qurʾān in order to emphasize their symbolic or spiritual meaning. These stories function as literary vehicles of messages that can show readers how God raised his prophets to wisdom and virtue.[35]

4.2.4 Moses and "the Crossing of the Red Sea"

One of the most defining biblical events during Israel's wandering in the desert is the crossing of the Red Sea.[36] As the fourteenth chapter in the Book of Exodus tells us, the people of Israel were camping "in front of Pi-Hahiroth ... beside the sea" when they see Pharaoh and his army pursuing them. Afraid for

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[34] Asad, *TMOQ*, 219, n. 85 on Q 7:107.

[35] Asad, *TMOQ,* 472, n. 15 on Q 20:22. But, Mawdūdī, in his commentary on Q 7:108, has some words of caution for rationalist interpreters of the Qurʾān, like Asad, those who tend to play down the supernatural character of such signs or miracles, and those who try to explain them in terms of natural laws of causation. He accuses them of building a "mid-way house between believing and disbelieving in the statements of the Qurʾān." He considers such a method as hardly reasonable (Mawdūdī, III:65 f., n. 87 on Q 7:108). While Mawdūdī nowhere mentions the name of Asad in his commentary on this subject, Prof. Gabriel Reynolds has suggested that it may not be a far-fetched idea to think that he has Asad's rationalist exegetical tendency in mind. In Chapter One (1.5.3, "The League Controversy"), we recall that both of them had a fluctuating relationship in the 1940s and early 1950s. Both of them worked on their respective projects almost simultaneously: Mawdūdī's translation and commentary into Urdu began in 1942 and was completed in 1972.

[36] The Book of Exodus 14:15-31.

their lives, the Israelites complain to Moses. God instructs Moses to, "raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites can walk through the sea on dry ground" (v. 16). Moses did as he was commanded and "the Israelites went on dry ground right through the sea, with walls of water to right and left of them" (v. 22).

This biblical event is alluded to in six passages in the Qurʾān. Four of these passages (Q 2:50, Q 7:138, Q 10:90, Q 44:24,)[37] omit the act of the parting and simply relate that the people crossed the Red Sea. Two qurʾānic passages describe how God commands Moses to split the sea:

Q20:27, "and strike out (*fa-iḍrib*) for them a dry path through the sea (*ṭarīqan fī'l-baḥri*)," and

Q26:63, "'strike (*iḍrib*) the sea with my staff' -- whereupon it parted (*fa-anfalaqa*), and each part appeared like a mountain vast."

In his exegesis of verse Q 26:66, Asad explicitly admits the actual occurrence of this supernatural phenomenon when he says, "from various indications in the Bible, it appears that the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea took place at the north-western extremity of what is known today as the Gulf of Suez."[38] His initial affirmation of the miracle, however, appears to be attenuated

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[37] Q 2:50, "and when We cleft (*faraqnā*) the sea before you"; Q 7:138, "and we brought (*jāwaznā*) the children of Israel across the sea"; Q 10:90, "and we brought (*jāwaznā*) the children of Israel across the sea"; Q 44:24, "and leave (*utruki*) the sea becalmed (*rahwan*)." Asad adds an alternative literal translation to *rahwan* as "cleft." Cf. Other allusions Q 8:54; Q 17:103; Q 28:40; Q 43:55; Q 51:40.

[38] Asad, *TMOQ*, 565, n. 35 on Q 26:66.

by a follow-up statement about the Red Sea. He says, "in those ancient times it was not as deep as it is now."[39]

In fact, Asad compares this ancient phenomenon of a dry path in the Red Sea to the tidal behaviour of the Frisian Islands. These islands are located on the southeast shores of the North Sea, where the ebbing of the tide can "lay bare the sandbanks and make them temporarily passable."[40]

As in the earlier interpretations, Asad's reading of the qurʾānic narrative about the parting of the Red Sea betrays his consistent tendency to demythologize stories where supernatural elements are involved.[41] In this case, he particularly challenges the literal merit of this narrative as a miraculous event; he suggests that none of the supernatural occurrences that are graphically and dramatically illustrated in the Qurʾān may have actually taken place. These include the qurʾānic depiction of Moses raising his staff to effect a powerful divine intervention which commanded a headwind to slice the sea in two so that the seabed appeared between the two walls of water, and through this corridor Israel could walk dry-shod.

Instead, Asad suggests, the people of Israel must have made their way through a passable portion of the sea, thanks to tidal timing. With this

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[39] Asad, *TMOQ*, 565, n. 35 on Q 26:66.

[40] Asad, *TMOQ*, 565, n. 35 on Q 26:66.

[41] Asad's interpretation may find resonance with some commentators who seem to devalue the theological significance of this event when they say that the miracle lay not so much in the parting of waters, since water can disappear from its usual place for natural reasons such as the presence of currents or evaporation, but that the water was made to stand tall like mountain (Rāzī, 24:120, on Q 26:63).

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interpretation, he demonstrates a revisionist tendency that tends to defer to Classical commentators. Their alternative explanation of the locution *iḍrib lahum ṭarīqan fī'l-baḥri* (or "strike for them a dry path through the sea") suggests that instead of *iḍrib* or "strike," the term could be read as *ittakhidh* or "choose."[42]

And so, this alternative reading suggests that a portion of sea floor was already dry and available for the Israelites' passage through the sea. Thus, this revisionist notion inevitably raises a possibility as to whether this story could be interpreted differently. Perhaps God instructed Moses "to choose for them a dry path," because there was a visible and dry isthmus where the people could cross the sea. Moses may have heard God's counsel and interpreted that way. And thus, Israel walked dry-shod in the sea.[43]

Unlike his demythologization of the abovementioned phenomena, here Asad considers the supernatural language of the "crossing of the Red Sea" as less of a metaphor and more of a literary incident that requires a critical-historical reading and scrutiny of what may or may not actually have happened. While it cannot be unequivocally established from his rendition and commentary that Asad denies the occurrence of this miracle, his interpretation, however, demonstrates a tendency to attenuate its theological significance in the Qurʾān.

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[42] Asad, *TMOQ,* 477, n. 61 on Q 20:77. For example, al-Ṭabarī says *fa'takhidh lahum fī'l-baḥri ṭarīqan yābasan* ("choose for them a dry path in the sea") (Ṭabarī, 16:222, on Q 20:77).

[43] After recounting the biblical event of the "crossing of the Red Sea" in a very graphic and spatial fashion, Mawdūdī concludes his commentary on Q 26:63 thus, "obviously, this was a miracle, and the view of those who try to interpret it as a natural phenomenon, is belied" (VII:72 f., n. 47 on Q 26:63). He also concludes his commentary on Q 20:77 in a similar way saying that it is quite clear and plain that it was a miracle, and not the result of a windstorm or tide, for when the water rises in this way it does not remain standing like two high walls, leaving a dry path between them (Mawdūdī, V:207, n. 53 on Q 20:77).

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4.2.5 Casting Abraham into the Fire

A well-known story in Midrash pertains to the early life of Abraham and his miraculous deliverance from a fiery furnace. Abraham had been thrown into the furnace by Nimrod, the notorious Babylonian figure mentioned in the Bible.[44] One of the earliest rabbinic versions of this story is preserved in Genesis Rabbah.[45] It is part of a larger narrative about Abraham who destroys his father's idols. After destroying these idols, he is then brought to King Nimrod who throws him into the fire after he insults the king's worship of the fire.

A similar story occurs three times in some oblique way in the Qurʾān (Q 21:52-68, Q 29:24-25, Q 37:83-97). All three stories mention an altercation about the idols between Abraham and his father or between Abraham and idol worshippers. In these stories, Abraham is finally cast into the fire by the people (Q 21:68, Q 29:24, Q 37:97) but there is no mention of any king involved.[46]

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[44] Probably the same figure mentioned in the Book of Genesis (10:9) as the grandson of Noah through Ham and Cush. He is identified as "the first potentate on earth." In addition, he is also considered as "a mighty hunter in the eyes of Yahweh, hence the saying, 'Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter in the eyes of Yahweh." The *New Jerusalem Bible* identifies him as "a character of popular story derived from a Mesopotamian hero of uncertain identity (*NJB*, 29, n. d on Gen 10:8).

[45] The story relates that while Abraham is tending his father's store or shop of idols, he hacks the smaller ones with a club and after that places the club in the hands of the biggest idol. When his father returns and sees the mayhem, Abraham explains that the idols were fighting over food and the big one hacked the rest of them with a club. To which his father is angry at Abraham and sends him to King Nimrod who in turn throws Abraham into the fire, but he survives and is saved (Freedman, "Genesis I," *The Midrash Rabbah*, I:310-311, on 38:13).

[46] Some commentators point out that some of the popular stories attached to this incident, such as the assertion that it was *nimrūdh* or Nimrod who commanded that he be burned, have no basis in the Qurʾān (Rāzī, 22:162, on Q 21:68).

In fact, all three versions of the story agree that Abraham is finally cast into the fire. But two of the accounts, (Q 21:69 and Q 29:24), explicitly state that he is saved by God. "[But] We said: 'O fire! Be thou cool (*bardan*), and [a source of] inner peace (*salāman*) for Abraham!'," and "but God saved him (*anjāhu*) from the fire (*mina'l-nāri*)," respectively. In Q 37:98, the Qurʾān obliquely states *fa-jaʿalnāhum al-asfalīna* or "we brought them low (my translation)."[47] The latter qurʾānic locution might imply that Abraham was indeed thrown into the fire but that he ultimately escaped from the harm intended for him.

Apparently, Asad faces conflicting textual evidence in these qurʾānic accounts about Abraham. While he, definitely, knew about a similar incident mentioned in the Judaic documents, he, nonetheless, asserts that the Qurʾān denies the event. He writes that, "nowhere does the Qurʾān state that Abraham was actually, bodily thrown into the fire and miraculously kept alive in it."[48] He then directs his readers' attention to a particular clause in Q 29:24 which says, "God saved him from the fire." Asad claims, "it points. . . to the fact of his *not*

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[47] Asad, *TMOQ, Q 37*:98 "… we [frustrated their designs, and thus] brought them low."

[48] Asad, *TMOQ*, 495 f., n. 64 on *Q 21:69*. In his exegesis of verse Q 29:24, Mawdūdī outrightly challenges Asad's position as he raises a logical argument saying that "evidently, if he (Abraham) were not cast into the fire, the command to the fire to become cool and safe would be meaningless" (Mawdūdī, VIII:26 f., n. 39 on Q 29:24). While Quṭb rationally struggles to understand how "fire" can assume a property of "coolness," which does not naturally belong to it, he nonetheless counsels believers, in his exegesis of Q 21:69, to "believe that this actually took place, because the One who did it is able to make it happen. What God did to the fire to make it cool so that it gave Abraham inner peace, and what He did to Abraham so that the fire did not burn him are points the Qurʾān does not explain because our limited minds fall short of understanding them. On the other hand, we have no source of evidence other than the qurʾānic text" (Quṭb, XII:56, on Q 21:69). With regards to the existence of the other sources, it is either that Quṭb is unaware of the existence of non-qurʾānic narratives or he is here writing for Muslims to whom he does not endorse reading non-Islamic sources.

having been thrown into it."[49] In addition, he reports, there are "many elaborate (and conflicting) stories" with which the *mufassirūn* have embroidered their interpretation of this incident. Many of those stories are likely traceable to the Judaic "legends." All of these accumulated narratives seem to support the argument that the "casting into the fire" was not completed. He argues that this account about Abraham should be disregarded."[50]

Asad, however, seems to ignore that even by an uncritical reading, the preposition *min* or "from" in verse Q 29:24 could also mean that Abraham did not perish in the fire due to the divinely sent *bardan* or "cool" sensation which gave him *salām* or "peace."[51] In other words, Abraham may have been really thrown into the fiery pit but delivered later by the cooling sensation sent by God. Readers could reasonably draw the same conclusion from the passage "God saved him from the fire."[52]

Muḥammad Asad's denial here should probably be linked to his long-standing tendency to demythologize any miraculous element in the Qurʾān. And he reacts the same way to passages where divine causation is implied or

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[49] Asad, *TMOQ*, 495 f., n. 64 on *Q 2*1:69.

[50] Asad, *TMOQ*, 495 f., n. 64 on Q 21:69.

[51] Q 21:69. *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* expressly establishes the manner by which God delivered Abraham "from the fire," that is "by making it cool and harmless for him" (I:378, on Q 29:24).

[52] Furthermore, a reader of this incident may also be reminded by the nature of the fire of the furnace in the Book of Daniel (3:19 ff.), into which the three young men: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were cast by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, because of their refusal to worship an idol. "But the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace beside Azariah and his companions; he drove the flames of the fire outwards form the furnace and, in the heart of the furnace, wafted a coolness to them as of the breeze and dew, so that the fire did not touch them at all and caused them no pain or distress" (Daniel 3:49-50). Thus, a similarity can be drawn that just as the three young men were saved by the "coolness" even if they were cast into the fiery furnace, so was Abraham possibly by the *bardan*, as elliptically implied by verse Q 21:69.

suggested. Here, Asad interprets the fire allegorically as alluding to "the fire of persecution which Abraham had to suffer."[53] By dint of the intensity of the fire, Asad says, it seems to prefigure the travails which Abraham would have to face in his journey. These hardships were difficult, he says, but they eventually "become ... a source of spiritual strength and inner peace."[54]

4.2.6 "Stones of *Sijjīl*" or "Brimstone"

In the Qurʾān, there are three occurrences of the expression *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin* or "stone of *sijjīl*." Two of these reflect the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Q Hūd 11:77-83 and Q Ḥijr 15:62-77), while the other one is associated with the flying creatures in *sūrat* al-Fīl (105). As in the preceding cases, Muḥammad Asad again demythologizes the expression each time it occurs. This leads him to a rendition that conveys a meaning which is rather different from what the source text literally signifies.

In the Book of Genesis, we read, God "rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire of his own sending."[55] The story behind this event is probably one of the most popular dramas in the Bible. God sends men[56] as two

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[53] Asad, *TMOQ*, 495 f., n. 64 on *Q 21:69.*

[54] Asad, *TMOQ*, 495 f., n. 64 on *Q 21:69.*

[55] The Book of Genesis 19:24.

[56] The Book of Genesis 18:22; Hb., *hā-ʾănāšîm*. As to whether it was God himself who went down to Sodom and Gomorrah, as indicated in the preceding verse -- "I shall go down (*ʾêrăḏāhnā*) and see (*wə-ʾerʾeh*) whether or not their actions are at all as the outcry reaching me would suggest. Then I shall know (*ʾê-ḏā-ʿāh*)" -- is being debated.

angelic manifestations[57] to Sodom to visit Lot, Abraham's nephew. They are sent in order to mete out judgment upon this sinful city (18:20-21). As soon as the townspeople hear of this visit, they surround Lot's house and order him to send his two guests, "so that we can have intercourse with them."[58] Thus, the punishment comes down upon that town in the form of raining of "brimstone and fire" (Hb: *gāp̄ərîṯ wā-ʾêš*). All of the members of Lot's family survive this catastrophe except his wife who looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt (19:26). One biblical interpreter of this catastrophe describes it as a historically verifiable "earthquake accompanied by an eruption of gas" in the southern part of the Dead Sea.[59]

But, as it is narrated in the Bible, however, this phenomenon is not brought about by natural causes. Like other stories of wonders in the Bible, the punishment of "raining of brimstone and fire" is related in the Book of Genesis as a supernatural occurrence inflicted by God.

The same event is alluded to four times in characteristically oblique or elliptical versions in the Qurʾān (Q 7:81-84, Q 11:77-83, Q 15:62-77, Q 26:161-175).[60] While none of these *pericopes* exactly mirrors the biblical narrative, they all refer to the miraculous destructive rain as a punishment and to what happened to Lot's wife. Two of these occurrences in the Qurʾān describe the rain

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[57] The Book of Genesis 19:1; Hb., *šǝnê ham-mal'āḵîm*

[58] The Book of Genesis 19:5.

[59] *NJB*, 39, note g on Gen 19:25; Cf. Mawdūdī, IV:123, n. 91 on Q 11:82; VII:108, n. 114 on Q 26:173.

[60] Q 66:10 also mentions Lot's wife, along with Noah's wife, who betrayed their husbands (*fa-khānatāhumā*) and are thus sentenced to "enter the fire" (*udʿkhulāʾl-nāra*).

that fell from the sky with the expression *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin (Q 11:82* and *Q 15:74).* The other two passages simply mention *maṭar* or "rain" *(Q 7:84* and *Q 26:173).* Nonetheless, all four of these *pericopes* are unmistakably enunciated in the Qurʾān as miraculous. They are presented as examples of direct divine intervention akin to the story found in the Book of Genesis.

On the one hand, Asad agrees with some commentators who asserted that the term *sijjīl* is the Arabized form of the Persian *sang-i-gil* ("clay-stone" or "petrified clay"). Thus, *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin*, they say, could safely be translated as "stones of petrified (hard) clay." According to Asad, this interpretation would be a close synonym to "brimstone."[61] On the other hand, he also strongly believes that *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin* means more than its literal translation as "brimstones."

Asad hypothesizes that the word *sijjīl* may actually be of Arabic origin. As such, it is synonymous with or related to the term *sijill*. This term, he says, "primarily signifies 'a writing,' and secondarily, 'something that has been decreed.'"[62] In which case, Asad maintains, the expression *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin* – the substance that rained down upon the wicked townspeople of Sodom and Gomorrah -- can be interpreted as a metaphor or an allegory. And, in this context, it is employed by the Qurʾān to convey the divine message of "doom."[63]

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[61] Asad, *TMOQ,* 328, n.114 o Q 11:82. Cf. Rāzī, 18:32, on Q 11:82; Zamakhsharī, 2:367, on Q 11:82; Ibn Kathīr, 5:94, on Q 11:82.

[62] Asad, *TMOQ*, 328, n. 114 on Q 11:82. The term *sijill* appears once in the Qurʾān (Q 21:104) where it is commonly translated as "a written scroll," an illustration used by the Qurʾān to describe how God "shall roll up the skies" on the Day of Judgment.

[63] Asad, *TMOQ*, 328, n. 114 on Q 11:82. This interpretation also finds resonance with al-Ṭabarī's commentary on Q 7:84, although not particularly on the expression above, where he says that this verse and similar passages were meant as a warning that the people of Mecca could expect the same fate, should they persist in their denial of Muḥammad's prophethood (Ṭabarī, 8:277, on Q 7:84). Ibn Kathīr interprets the "stone" in verse Q 11:82 as marked, since it is

This interpretation, thus, explains or justifies Asad's rendition which goes, "and (we) rained down upon them stone-hard blows of chastisement pre-ordained (*ḥijāratan min sijjīlin*[64])."[65]

Like the preceding miracles studied above, Asad prefers to read this supernatural event in a demythological fashion. That is, he views it as a metaphor. Whether such a biblical phenomenon really took place or not, and whether a punishment actually took place or not appears to be irrelevant in the context of Asad's hermeneutical view. Rather, the importance of the passage rests on the message of the "God-willed doom," a message which the Qurʾān intends to communicate to evil doers.[66]

Here, Asad's demythological method is basically applied first by a philological analysis of the expression. After that, he then makes a conscious decision about reading it metaphorically before he renders the source text exegetically. While the resultant translation moves beyond the literal equivalence of the source text, Asad sees the result as more meaningful for his readers. As always, it is more important for Asad that his audience read a rationalized or

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believed that each stone had inscribed upon it the name of the person for whom it was intended; or that the stones were arranged in the heavens and prepared for that destruction, in a sense decreed (Ibn Kathīr 5:94, on Q 11:82). al-Nasafī (d. 1310) also interprets these "stones" as falling in accordance with God's judgment ('Abd Allāh ibn Aḥmad Nasafī, *Tafsīr al-Nasafī: Madārik al-tanzīl wa ḥaqāʾiq al-taʾwīl* [Beirut, Lebanon: Dār al-Nafāʾis, 1996], 2:286, on Q 11:82).

[64] Contained in these identical verses Q 11:82 and Q 15:74.

[65] Other English translations would go as the following:
Yūsuf ʿAlī: "and rained down on them brimstones hard as baked clay"
Pickthall: "and rained upon it stones of clay"
Qarāʾī: "and We rain on it stones of laminar shale."

[66] Asad, *TMOQ*, 328, n. 114 on Q 11:82. Moreover, in his exegesis of Q 11:83, Asad defers to early Qurʾān-commentators who interpreted such a punishment as the ultimate doom which generally applies to evil doers of "of all times." Cf. Asad, *TMOQ*, 571, n. 73 on Q 26:173.

exegetical rendition than to be simply offered a mythical account, which would blur the intended message.

Asad also demythologizes the appearance of *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin* in *sūrat al-Fīl* or The Elephant (Q 105:4). He does this, first of all, by setting the context of the *sūrah* which he says is a reference to events that happened in 570 CE, the year of the birth of Prophet Muḥammad. As recounted by Ibn Ishaq (d. 768 CE), these events tell the story of the invasion of Mecca in 570 CE by the Abyssinians from Yemen who were led by a certain Abraha al-Ashram.[67] Abraha intended to divert the annual pilgrimage in Mecca to his newly erected cathedral in Sanʿāʾ. Thus, Abraha was determined to destroy the Kaʿbah.

The troops of Abraha, with their train of elephants, marched towards Mecca. However, they were foiled by "God (who) sent upon them birds from the sea like swallows and starlings; each bird carried three stones, like peas and lentils, one on its beak and two between its claws."[68] Everyone who was hit by these stones, according to Ibn Ishaq, died, though not all were hit. Abraha himself "was smitten in his body" and later died on his way back to Sanʿāʾ.[69]

By inserting Ibn Ishaq's narrative into the background, Asad could have simply adapted the literal meaning of Q 105:4 as his counterparts did. But, he chooses to render *tarmīhim bi-ḥijāratin min sijjīlin* into "which smote them with

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[67] A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad, a Translation of the Ibn Ishaq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 [25th ed.]), 20-30.

[68] A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad,* 26.

[69] A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad,* 27.

stone-hard blows of chastisement pre-ordained."[70] It appears that the supernatural or miraculous manifestation of the phenomenon must have triggered Asad's rationalist impulse to relegate its significance to that of a metaphor. Divinely sent stone-pelting flying creatures? For Asad, this was a figure of speech that conveyed more than its apparent literal meaning. Thus, by translating *ḥijāratin min sijjīlin* into "stone-hard blows of chastisement pre-ordained," Asad defies the literal meaning of the source text – just as he does with the story about Lot. He does so to assert the existence of an overarching qurʾānic theme of "pre-ordained doom" against those whom God reckons as doers of evil.

Though Asad's demythological treatment of this phenomenon may have attenuated the supernatural sense about the stone-pelting flying creatures as direct agents of doom,[71] he still sees the birds as "carriers of infection."[72] These

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[70] Other English translations are as following:
Yūsuf ʿAlī: "Striking them with stones of baked clay."
Pickthall: "Which pelted them with stones of baked clay."
Arberry: "hurling against them stones of baked clay."
Abdel Haleem: "pelting them with pellets of hard-baked clay:"

[71] In his commentary of Q 105:4, Quṭb addresses the tendency of some rationalists (which arguably includes Muḥammad Asad as one of them) to limit the field of the supernatural and the imperceptible to the human senses when explaining the Qurʾān. For him this is understandable and commendable, and as a matter of fact, they preserve the place of religion taking the standpoint that whatever it says is compatible with reason. Hence, they strive to keep religion pure from any association with any kind of legend and superstition. Such mentality (al-ʿaqlīyah), Quṭb adds, is, in essence, the qurʾānic mentality. On the other hand, however, their resistance to the pressure of superstition has dominated the school. They became extra cautious, says Quṭb. They tend to make familiar natural laws the only basis for the divine laws of nature. Citing the qurʾānic interpretations of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and his two disciples Rashīd Riḍā and ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Maghribī, Quṭb observes how they had a strong desire to reduce the greater number of miracles to only the more familiar of God's natural laws rather than the preternatural. They explain some of these miracles, Quṭb adds, in a way that would be in line with what is called al-maʿqūl or "rational," and they are excessively cautious (al-iḥtirās al-shadīd) in accepting what is imperceptible to human senses (Quṭb, XVIII:343 f., on Q 105).

[72] In his exegesis of Q 105:4, Asad argues that while the noun *ṭā'ir* may easily be construed as a bird, as in Guillaume's translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sīra* (26), it generally denotes "any flying creature," and thus an "insect" may also fall under this category (Asad, *TMOQ,* 976, n.

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brought about "a sudden epidemic of extreme virulence,"[73] and therefore were still agents of doom. In the end, however, Asad does not hesitate to concede that some sort of miracle took place. He says that overall, "whatever the nature of the doom that overtook the invading force, it was certainly miraculous in the true sense of this word -- namely, in the sudden, totally unexpected rescue which it brought to the distressed people of Mecca."[74] It is no surprise that he felt compelled to demythologize the figure of speech employed by the source text. By doing so, it aimed at producing a rational message which involves disease, and not flying creatures with stones.

4.2.7 Muḥammad's "Night Journey" and "Ascension to heaven"

One of the most noteworthy applications of Asad's demythological approach is his reading of the so-called *al-isrā'* ("the Night Journey"). This event is related in Q Isrā' 17:1 thus,

> "Limitless in His glory is He who transported (*asrā*) His servant (*bi-ʿabdihi*) by night from the inviolable House of Worship (*al-masjid*) [at Mecca] to the Remote House of Worship (*al-masjid*) [at Jerusalem] -- the environs of

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2 on Q 105:4), as in al-Zabīdī's (Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1205) *Tāj al-ʿArūs min jawāhir al-Qāmūs* (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), 7:153 ff.

[73] Asad, *TMOQ,* 976, n. 2 on Q 105:4. In a sense Asad defers to Ibn Ishaq's narrative which tends to link the phenomenon of the "flying creatures" and the year which "was the first time that measles and smallpox had been seen in Arabia" (A. Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad,* 27). Cf. Quṭb, XVIII:339, on Q 105. Mawdūdī presents another interpretation of the incident by Hamīd al-Dīn Farahī (1863-1930), which he admits goes against the sequence and syntax of *sūrat* al-Fīl, but nonetheless found it worthy to be mentioned in his exegesis. Farahī said that it was actually the Arabs who pelted the army of Abraha with stones, and only when God sent a stormy wind charged with stones that the latter were completely destroyed. It was only then that the birds were sent to eat the dead bodies of the soldiers (Mawdūdī, n.6 on *Q 1*05:4, digital edition by *Islamic Foundation, UK*, accessed Feb 2018).

[74] Asad, *TMOQ,* 976, n. 2 on Q 105:4.

which We had blessed -- so that We might show him some of Our symbols (*āyātinā*): for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all seeing."

In Islamic tradition, this event is always coupled with the extra-qurʾānic event, the so-called *al-miʿrāj* ("the Ascension"). This double-event is richly elaborated in the *sīra* or "biography" of the Prophet[75] and also in several Traditions like *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*[76] and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*[77] or *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*.[78]

According to these traditions, Muḥammad, accompanied by the angel Gabriel, found himself transported by night to the site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. There, he led a prayer with a congregation of many of the earlier, long since deceased prophets. Some of these personalities he later encountered again in heaven. According to Asad, the "Ascension," in particular, is important from the viewpoint of Muslim theology. This experience is associated with how the five daily prayers were instituted by God's ordinance. As such, they constitute an integral part of the Islamic faith.[79]

Unlike his counterparts, Asad finds it necessary to interpolate in brackets the two physical locations – Mecca and Jerusalem -- next to his translations of the two "houses of worship," namely, *al-masjid al-ḥarām* and *masjid al-aqṣā*,

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[75] Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad,* 181-187. Also extensively quoted and discussed in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (5:552-576, on Q 17:1*).

[76] Asad, trans., "Beginnings of Islām, Section XVIII," in *Sahil al-Bukhārī*, 188-194. Cf. Bukhārī: 5:3886; 6:4709-10, 4716; 7:5576; 8:6613, etc.

[77] Abul Hussain Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Arabic-English)*, trans., Nāsiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh, KSA: Darussalam, 2007), 6:6157-8 etc.

[78] Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb Nasāʾī, *Sunan An-Nasāʾi*, trans., Nāsiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh, KSA: Darussalam, 2007), 2:1631, 1634, 1635, 1637; 6: 5660, etc.

[79] Asad, *TMOQ,* 996.

respectively.[80] Additionally, in his introduction to this *sūrah* and in his supplemental explanation in the appendix of *The Message of the Quran*, Asad explicit states that the date of the aforementioned events was "almost exactly one year before the exodus to Medina (622 CE)."[81] By explicitly mentioning and affirming these two physical locations and insisting on the date of the occurrence of this double-event, Asad is obviously setting their spatial and temporal context in history. This observation is significant as it appears to contrast (as we shall discuss below) his demythological method of interpretation. Usually, Asad ascribes less importance to the purported details of an event and certainly does not frame or cast them in a historical context as he does with the "Night Journey" and the "Ascension."

Be that as it may be, according to Asad, the Prophet himself did not leave any clear-cut explanation about how these two events should be interpreted.[82] For this reason, Muslim thinkers have always widely differed as to its true nature. There are two Classical but opposing interpretations that dominate this

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[80] Yūsuf ʿAlī, for his part, relegates these two places to his notes in less categorical descriptions, thus "here it refers to the Kaʿbah at Mecca. It had not yet been cleared of its idols and rededicated exclusively to the One True God. It was symbolical of the new Message which was being given to mankind," and of the second place, he writes, "The Farthest Mosque must refer to the site of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem on the hill of Moriah, at or near which stands the Dome of the Rock...." (Yūsuf ʿAlī, 693, n. 2167-8 on Q 17:1).

[81] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996. In his introduction of *sūrat* al-Isrā', Asad indicates that "the Night Journey" shows that "it cannot have been revealed earlier than in the last year before the hijrah" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 417). To support this assertion, he cites the Arabian biographer, Ibn Saʿd who chronicled that "on the night of Saturday, 27 Ramadan, eighteen months before Hijra, while the Apostle of Allāh was sleeping alone in his house, Gabriel and Michael came to him and said: Come..." (*Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr* [New Delhi: Kitāb Bhavan, 1990] 1.I.55.1).Cf. al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī said *kāna dhalika al-layla qabla'l-hijratu bi-sanati* ("it was that night a year before the Hijrah") (Rāzī, 2:117, on Q 17:1; Zamakhsharī, 2:622, on Q 17:1).

[82] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996.

discussion. One is the account believed by "the great majority of the Companions." It teaches that both of these events were physical occurrences. They said that the Prophet was borne bodily to Jerusalem and then to heaven.[83] Those promoting this interpretation put an emphasis on the phrase, *asra' bi-ʿabdihi* (or "He who transported His servant by night"). These scholars assert that the term *ʿabd* (or "servant") "denotes a living being in its entirety."[84] Asad, for his part, criticizes this argument. He contends that it ignores the probability that this expression simply means the human nature of the Prophet "who was but a mortal servant, and was not endowed with any supernatural qualities."[85] Besides, he

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[83] Ibn Kathīr, 5:572-574, on Q 17:1). In his exegesis of verse Q 17:1, Mawdūdī argues that the opening words of this verse: "Glory be to Him, who transported His Servant..." clearly show that it was a supernatural event which was brought about by the unlimited power of God. It is quite obvious that if the event had been merely a mystic vision, it would not have been introduced by the words which imply that the Being who brought about this event is free from each and every kind of weakness and defect. The words "carried His servant by night" also show that this was not a dream or a vision but a physical journey in which God arranged that the Holy Prophet should make observation of His Signs with his physical eyes. He adds that it is strange that some people are of the opinion that this extraordinary journey could not be possible, but now when a person with his limited-very limited power has been able to reach the moon, it is absurd to deny that God with "His limitless powers" could enable His Messenger to make this journey in the extraordinary short time it took. Mawdūdī concludes that one is bound to admit that this was not a mere spiritual experience but a physical journey and visual observation which God arranged for His chosen Prophet (Mawdūdī, V:6, n. 1 on Q 17:1). Similarly, Muḥammad Shāfi asserts that "the entire journey of the *Isrā'* and *Miʿrāj* was not simply spiritual, instead it was physical -- like the journey of anyone else." This is, he adds, attested in the Qurʾān, Sunnah and Ijmāʿ. On the one hand, Shāfiʿ acknowledges that there are existing authentic Traditions (reported by Ibn ʿAbbās and ʿA'ishah) that reported the Prophet having a dream about his journey, but he also argues that "it does not necessarily imply that physical *Miʿrāj* did not take place" prior to the dream (Shāfi, 5:454 f., on Q 17:1). The same position is held by Shams Pirzada's *Dawatul Qurʾān* who -- based on the starting words of the sūrah "Immaculate is He" which means that "it is not beyond the power of Allāh to arrange such a miraculous journey. This infers that the Night Journey of the Prophet was physical and it was undertaken in a state of wakefulness (Shams Pirzada and Abdul Karim Shaikh, trans., *Dawatul Qurʾān [Translation and Commentary]*, [Bombay: Idara Dawatul Qurʾān, 1983], 907 f., n.1 on Q 17:1).

[84] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996.

[85] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996.

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adds, the angels who are presumed to be spiritual beings are addressed in the Qurʾān as ʿibād.

The other interpretation is espoused by "a minority" convinced that the experience of the Prophet was purely spiritual.[86] This group includes ʿĀ'ishah (the Prophet's widow) who, reportedly, emphatically declared that the Prophet "was transported only in his spirit (bi-rūḥihi), while his body did not leave its place."[87]

For Asad, al-isrā' and al-miʿrāj are "two stages of one mystic experience."[88] By that, he means that these experiences are essentially of a spiritual kind rather than physical. He attributes the most convincing support for

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[86] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996.

[87] Asad, *TMOQ,* 996. The *sīra* has ʿĀ'ishah say, "The apostle's body remained where it was but God removed his spirit by night" (Guillaume, trans., *The Life of Muḥammad*, 183). Cf. Ṭabarī, 15:21, on Q 17:1; Zamakhsharī, 2:622-623, on *Q 1*7:1; Ibn Kathīr, 5:572-574, on Q 17:1). Even the great al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who belonged to the next generation, also held the same position (Asad, *TMOQ,* 996). In his discussion of "spiritual ascension," Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350 CE) narrates that, "'Ā 'ishah and Masʿūd maintained that the [Prophet's] Night Journey was performed by his soul (*bi-rūḥihi*), while his body did not leave his place. The same is reported to have been the view of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. But it is necessary to know the difference between the saying, 'the Night Journey took place in dream (*manāman*)', and the saying, 'it was [performed] by his soul without his body'. The difference between these two [views] is tremendous ... What the dreamer sees are mere reproductions (*amthāl*) of forms already existing in his mind; and so he dreams [for example] that he ascends to heaven or is transported to Mecca or to [other] regions of the world, while [in reality] his spirit neither ascends nor is transported..." (*Zād al-Maʿād* [*Provisions for the Hereafter]* trans., Ismāʿīl Abdus Salaam [Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmīyah, 2010], 275 [273-276]).

[88] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996. Quṭb, for his part, also weighed the conflicting interpretations of the past commentators and concluded that both events "certainly took place." He qualifies that "whether it was a physical or spiritual trip, or a vision he saw while awake or asleep, does not make much difference. It does not alter much of the nature of this event to say that it was an act of unveiling that enabled the Prophet to see remote places and worlds in a brief moment. Those who understand even a little of the nature of God's power and the nature of prophethood will find nothing strange in this event. To God's power and ability, all matters, which appear easy or difficult by our human standards and according to what is familiar to us, are the same" (Quṭb, XI:122 f., on *Q 1*7:1).

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his conclusion to the "highly allegorical descriptions"[89] found in the authentic

Traditions. These descriptions, he adds, are obviously symbolic that this double-

event precludes any possibility of interpreting them literally, in "physical" terms.[90]

The same goes with the Tradition quoted by al-Bukhārī on the authority of

Hudbah ibn Khālid. This source describes "the ascension" story where the

Prophet introduces his narrative by saying,

> "someone came and cut open [my breast] from here to here.... Then he
> took my heart out. And a golden basin full of faith was brought unto me,
> and my heart was washed [therein] and was filled [with faith]; then it was
> restored to its place."[91]

For Asad, the reference, in this present Tradition, to the washing and filling

of the heart with faith "clearly shows that the Prophet himself regarded this event

as a spiritual experience." "Faith is an abstract conception," he argues, and

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[89] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996

[90] Asad, *TMOQ*, 996, Asad cites, for example, Ibn Kathīr quoting a Tradition on the authority of Anas bin Mālik which describes the Prophet Muḥammad visiting Moses in his grave, and found him praying (Ibn Kathīr, 5:559 ff., 563, on Q 17:1). And, from another Tradition, also from the authority of the latter, the prophet describes how, on his "Night Journey," he encountered an old woman, and was thereupon told by Gabriel, "this old woman is the mortal world (*al-dunyā*)"(*Ibid.*). In the words of yet another Tradition, on the authority of Abū Hurayra, the prophet reportedly "passed by people who were sowing and harvesting; and every time they completed their harvest, the grain grew up again. Gabriel said, 'These are the fighters in God's cause(*al-mujahidūn*).' Then they passed by people whose heads were being shattered by rocks; and every time they were shattered, they became whole again. [Gabriel] said, 'These are they whose heads were oblivious of prayer ... Then they passed by people who were eating raw, rotten meat and throwing away cooked, wholesome meat, [Gabriel] said, 'These are the adulterers'" (Ibn Kathīr, 5:559 ff., 563, on Q 17:1). All of these examples, according to Asad, support his argument that the *isrā'* and *miʿrāj* of the Prophet were spiritual experiences.

[91] Asad, "Beginnings of Islām," in *Sahil al-Bukhārī*, 188. M. Muhsin Khan (trans.) translates the same tradition as follows, "someone came to me and cut my body open from here to here.... He then took out my heart. Then a gold tray of Belief was brought to me and my heart was washed and was filled (with Belief) and then returned to its original place" (al-Bukhārī, 5:3887).

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"could not by any stretch of imagination be regarded as possessing bodily substance."[92]

For this reason, Asad finds it difficult to understand how Muslim theologians could take this occurrence in the literal, physical way. In relation to the double-event, this Tradition, Asad asserts, is an "obvious allusion to the Prophet himself regarding this as prelude to the Ascension -- and therefore the Ascension itself and, *ipso facto*, the Night Journey to Jerusalem – as purely spiritual exercises.[93] This explains why Asad would see a spiritual reading of the double-event as more convincing than visualizing it in a physical, literal way.

Be that as it may be, Asad carefully qualifies his conclusion. He does not want to be perceived as diminishing the extraordinary value attached to this experience of the Prophet. He says that while there is no cogent reason to believe in a "bodily" Night Journey and Ascension of the Prophet, there is also no reason to doubt "the objective reality of this event."[94] Nor could this account be categorized simply a dream.

Asad takes pains to say that both of these experiences are spiritual by nature. That is, no human organ or biological function connected with a person's body has a role to play in the event. Nonetheless, these experiences are not necessarily subjective manifestations of the "mind."

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[92] Asad, "Beginnings of Islām," in *Sahil al-Bukhārī*, 188 f.

[93] Asad, *TMOQ*, 997.

[94] Asad, *TMOQ*, 997.

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For instance, one interpretation, according to Asad, is that it was possible that the Prophet's "soul itself which actually went on the Night Journey and ascended to heaven, and that the soul witnessed things which it [otherwise] witnesses after death."[95] Moreover, what the Prophet experienced, Asad adds, is superior to the ordinary experiences of the soul after death and far greater in significance than anything a person might experience in a dream. He reasons that these experiences were "real or factual in the objective sense of the word"[96] similar to anything that one could tangibly experience in a physiological way. This heralded event, Asad says, is "vastly superior to anything that bodily organs could ever perform or record."[97] It "transcends any miracle of bodily ascension, for it presupposes a personality of tremendous spiritual perfection -- the very thing which we expect from a true Prophet of God."[98]

Asad supports his position by appealing to certain observations from modern psychologists. He says that these scientists have "confirmed the possibility ... of a temporary 'independence' of a man's spirit from his living body."[99] It is a kind of experience, he explains, which is not unfamiliar to mystics of all persuasions from time immemorial. In the event of such a temporary independence, Asad explains,

> "the spirit or soul appears to be able freely to traverse time and space, to embrace within its insight occurrences and phenomena belonging to

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[95] Asad, *TMOQ*, 998.

[96] Asad, *TMOQ*, 997.

[97] Asad, *TMOQ*, 998.

[98] Asad, *TMOQ*, 998.

[99] Asad, *TMOQ*, 997.

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otherwise widely separated categories of reality, and to condense them within symbolical perceptions of great intensity, clarity and comprehensiveness."[100]

In communicating his spiritual experience, the Prophet, according to Asad, was obliged to resort to figurative expressions. On this foundation, the Traditions later attempted to transmit the Prophet's mystical vision of the Night Journey and the Ascension, using an allegorical style to tell the story.[101]

The above analysis of the qurʾānic "Night Journey," along with the extra-qurʾānic "Ascension" once again illustrates Muḥammad Asad's proclivity to read supernatural occurrence in the Qurʾān in a rational or spiritual way. This is clearly manifested here in his depiction of the Prophet's experience as a spiritual event. He promotes this view despite influential Traditional voices which held firm to the theory that the Prophet's journey was a physical one. Asad's rational or spiritual appraisal of the double-event is consistent with his demythological agenda vis-à-vis miracles or supernatural elements in the Qurʾān. Just as God called Moses as a prophet, so too did God initiate and instruct Muḥammad, preparing him with insights and spiritual visions in aid of his vocation as a Prophet to the Arabs.[102]

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[100] Asad, *TMOQ*, 997.

[101] Asad, *TMOQ*, 998.

[102] *TMOQ*, 998. Moreover, Asad also defers to the interpretations of early Traditions which considered the "Night Journey," in particular, as purposely intended to show that "Islām is not a new doctrine but a continuation of the same divine message which was preached by the prophets of old, who had Jerusalem as their spiritual home." Asad particularly cited Ibn Ḥajar's *Fatḥ al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī* which posits that the Prophet's encounter with other prophets in this Night Journey, and leading them in prayer in the Temple of Jerusalem, although expressed in a figurative manner, enunciates the doctrine that Islām, as preached by the Prophet Muḥammad, is the fulfillment and perfection of humanity's religious development and that Muḥammad was the last and the greatest of God's message-bearers (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī [d.1449 CE] *Fatḥ al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī* [Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Khayrīah, 1901], Hathi Trust Digital Library, VII: 158).

Careful not to compromise the objective reality of this double event, Asad's demythologization simply intends to teach and impart to his readers the rational qurʾānic message embedded in the narrative's metaphorical style. Without directly challenging the literal message of this narrative, Asad contends that the human faculty of reason could not fully comprehend spiritual experiences of this kind. He asserts that the human mind can only operate within the domain of reason.

4.2.8   Gog and Magog and Dhu'l-Qarnayn

The Bible offers vague references to "Gog and Magog" (Hb:גּוֹג וּמָגוֹג or Gk: Γὼγ καὶ Μαγώγ). The terms can be vaguely interpreted to mean an individual, peoples, lands, or a nation which would become an enemy of God's people.[103] The oracle in the Book of Ezekiel chapters 38-39 says that Gog, the king of the country Magog,[104] and his army are a threat to the post-exilic and restored Israel.

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[103] In the Book of Genesis 10:2 and the First Book of Chronicles 1:5, Magog is a descendant of Noah's third son, Japheth, and related to the tribe of people mentioned in the Book of Ezekiel 38:2 and who are condemned in the Book of Ezekiel 39:6. In the First Book of Chronicles 5:4, Gog is mentioned as a descendant of Jacob's (Israel) first-born, Reuben; In the Book of Ezekiel chapter 38, Gog is described as an enemy of God's people (v.3), a divinely ordained apocalyptic army (vv. 14-23) "I myself (God) shall bring you to attack my country, so that the nations will know who I am, when I display my holiness to them, by means of you, Gog"; its defeat is prophesied in the Book of Ezekiel chapter 39:1-11. As a tandem, the Hebrew form גּוֹג וּמָגוֹג ("Gog u-Magog"), but with unclear context, is found only in a fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q523), instead of "God in the land of Magog." The third book of Sibylline Oracles mentions "Gog and Magog," they are symbolic names to the Ethiopians of the Upper Nile, and unrelated to Book of Ezekiel's prophecy, though this text borrows the latter's words and images to describe its own view (Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, "The Gog and Magog Tradition in Revelation 20.8," in *The Book of Ezekiel and Its Influence,* eds. H. J. de Jonge and J. Tromp [New York: Routledge, 2007], 165-183.)

[104] Also a "paramount prince of Meshech and Tubal," countries of Asia Minor (Ezek. 38:2 and 39:1). "The 'country of Magog' is an invented name, meaning 'country of Gog.' It seems useless to try to identify Gog. Doubtless deriving features from several contemporary

But these enemies will be destroyed. After that, God will establish the new

Temple and dwell with his people for a period of lasting peace. In the Book of

Revelation (20:7-10; cf. 19:17-21), the prophecy about Gog in the Book of

Ezekiel appears to be fulfilled at the approach of the "end of days." Here, the

names of Gog and Magog are said "to symbolize all the gentile nations leagued

against the Church at the end of time."[105]

In the Qurʾān, the epithet "Gog and Magog" is introduced in Arabic as

ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj, such as in Q al-Kahf 18:94:

> "They said: "O thou Two-Horned One! (*Dhu'l-Qarnayn*) Behold, Gog and
> Magog are spoiling this land. May we, then, pay unto thee a tribute on the
> understanding that thou wilt erect a barrier between us and them?"

These names also appear in Q Anbiyā' 21:96:

> "until such a time as Gog and Magog (*ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj*) are let loose [upon
> the world] and swarm down from every corner [of the earth]"

In both of these occurrences *ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj* is described as a people,

rather than a single individual as it is in the Book of Ezekiel. In Q 18 they threaten

to invade another people living between the two mountain-barriers (*bayna'l-*

saddayni).[106] After these people have called for help to the conqueror, the "Two-

Horned One" (*Dhu'l-Qarnayn*),[107] he builds an impenetrable rampart (*radman*)

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personalities, he figures here as the type of victorious barbarian who in an unspecified distant
future will inflict the final ordeals on Israel" (*NJB,* 1453, n. b).

[105] *NJB*, 2049, n. e on Revelation 20:8

[106] Q 18:93

[107] Also translatable as "he of the Two Epochs" as the noun *qarn* has the meaning of
"horn" as well as of "generation" or "epoch" or "age" or "century." Asad opines that the classical
commentators incline to the first, "the Two Horned,"due to the influence by the ancient Middle
Eastern imagery of "horns" as symbols of power and greatness, although, according to him, this
is not warranted by the Qurʾān (Asad, *TMOQ,* 451 f., n. 81 on Q 18:83).

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between them and their prospective invaders.[108] While the Qurʾān reckons such physical protection as mercy from God,[109] it also warns of its impending collapse at future time appointed and only known by God.[110] Such a time also appears to be alluded to in Q 21:96. This verse explicitly says that Gog and Magog are "let loose [upon the world] and swarm down from every corner [of the earth]." In this sense, the qurʾānic understanding of *ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj*, appears to align more with the Book of Revelation. In that book too, an eschatological group of people or a nation brings chaos and mayhem at the "end of days."

As already mentioned, in Q 18:94, the occurrence of the concept of *ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj* in the Qurʾān is juxtaposed with the figure of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn*, "the two-horned one."[111] There are nineteen verses in *sūrat* al-Kahf that provide a *dhikr* ("record," or "remembrance," or "story") of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* (v. 83). This is a story which the Prophet Muḥammad is instructed to convey. It says that God has endowed *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* with knowledge (*sabab*)[112] to achieve anything righteous

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[108] Q 18, 95 ff.

[109] Q 18:98

[110] Q 18:98.

[111] A tradition identifies *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* as a youth from Rūm (*kāna shāban mina al-rūm*) that is, from the western lands who built the Egyptian city of Alexandria (Ṭabarī, 16:24, on Q 18:94), and al-Rāzī identifies him as the Greek Alexander son of Phillip (21:145, on Q 18:94). Some Muslim scholars of the modern period have identified him with the ancient Persian king Cyrus the Great (Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1981 CE), *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* [Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 1997], 13:359, on Q 18:94). In his exegesis of verse Q 18:94, Mawdūdī is also favorable to the notion that *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* must have been the Persian ruler, Cyrus whose reign began about 546 BC and was responsible for conquering Babylon in 539 BC (Mawdūdī, V:127 ff., n. 62 on Q 18:83). Furthermore, he also cites the Bible saying that Prophet Daniel saw in his vision that the united kingdom of Media and Persia was like a two-horned ram before the rise of the Greeks (Dan 8:3, 20) (*Ibid.*). The Jews had a very high opinion of Cyrus because it was his invasion which brought about the downfall of the kingdom of Babylon and the liberation of the Israelites (*Ibid.*).

[112] According to reports quoted by Ibn Kathīr in his exegesis of verse Q 18:84, *sabab* denotes, in this context, the knowledge of the right means for the achievement of a particular end

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to whichever he set his eyes on (v. 84). He travels far and wide until he reached *maghriba al-shams* (or "place of the setting of the sun") and finds a people over whom God made him an arbiter to punish evil-doers and favor the righteous with kindness (vv. 86-87). And, finally, he stumbles upon a group of people who live between two mountain-barriers (v. 93). They complain to him about the impending attack of the barbarians. "Gog and Magog" are living on the other side and are dangerously close unless a wall or rampart is built to keep them out (v. 95).

Both of these figures, Gog and Magog, are interpreted by Asad demythologically. Some commentators attempted to make the concept of "Gog and Magog" as a historical figure whom they link to their purported early ancestors, including Noah's son Japheth.[113] Others speculate that they were either the ancestors or distant relatives of the Turks[114] or the Daylamites (who hailed from regions to the north of Iran).[115] For Asad, however, this concept is referential. He views it as both a literary vehicle for instruction or as an apocalyptic warning in and from the Qurʾān.[116] In other words, it serves as both

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(Ibn Kathīr, 6:204, on Q 18:84). Some consider him to be simply a ʿabdun ṣāliḥun ("righteous servant") of God to whom God granted sovereignty over the world along with knowledge and wisdom (Rāzī, 21:141, on Q 18:84).

[113] Ibn Kathīr, 6:209, on Q 18:94.

[114] Zamakhsharī, 2:717, on Q 18:94.

[115] Rāzī, 21:145, on Q 18:94.

[116] From a Ṣūfī perspective, "Gog and Magog" represent, at the level of spiritual symbolism, the preoccupations, tumult, and impressions that assault the soul, causing it to become corrupted and vulnerable to satanic influences (Dakake, "Ṭā Hā," in *The Study Qurʾān*, 826 on Q 18:97).

an allegory and an eschatological reality. Both of these connotations are not necessarily exclusive of each other.

As far as Asad is concerned, this passage can be properly interpreted as apocalyptic, as its textual contexts in both *sūrat* al-Kahf and sūrat al-'Anbiyā' may suggest. *Ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj*, in this sense, is a symbolic image that breaks through at "the coming of the Last Hour."[117]

Asad understands that the expression, "the coming of the Last Hour," could refer to an indefinite and seemingly endless span of time. He demythologizes *ya'jūj wa-ma'jūj* as a metaphor and interprets it as the eruption of a "series of social catastrophes which would cause a complete destruction of man's civilization before the coming of the Last Hour."[118]

The whole narrative of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* is, for Asad, an allegory which serves the central message of the Qurʾān. What is crucial in his analysis is the

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[117] Asad, *TMOQ*, 454, n. 100 on Q 18:98. Mawdūdī is of the opinion that as regards "Gog and Magog" it has been nearly established that they were the wild tribes of Central Asia who were known by different names: Tartars, Mongols, Huns and Scythians, who had been making inroads on settled kingdoms and empires from very ancient times (Mawdūdī, V:129, n. 62 on Q 18:83).

[118] The same interpretation, according to Asad, was espoused by some classical commentators who believed that Gog and Magog was a qurʾānic prediction of a definitive, historic event. They regard this historic event as the future breakthrough of the savage tribes of "Gog and Magog" (Ṭabarī, 16:34-36, on Q 18:98). These predictions, according to Asad, are most likely based on a dream by the Prophet Muḥammad reported in the Traditions such as in the following in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, for example, on the authority of Zainab bint Jahsh, "The Prophet got up from his sleep with a flushed red face and said, "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah. Woe to the Arabs, from the Great evil that is nearly approaching them. Today a gap has been made in the wall of Gog and Magog like this." (Sufyan illustrated this by forming the number 90 or 100 with his fingers.) It was asked, "Shall we be destroyed though there are righteous people among us?" The Prophet said, "Yes, if evil increased" (Bukhārī, 9:7059); Cf. Muslim, 7:2881). In the post-classical period, the Muslim world entered the Middles Ages with a developed and validated body of apocalyptic doctrine that appeared to leave little room for either informed speculations or fantastical departures from orthodoxy. Dakake appears to echo Asad's interpretation when she writes that "esoterically or symbolically, Gog and Magog may be identified with the various negative psyches and religious cultures that Islamic tradition foretells as coming about near the end times, when the traditional barriers against such tendencies have been weakened or broken (Dakake, "Ṭā Hā," in *The Study Qurʾān*, 759 on Q 18:94).

qurʾānic stress on this figure as a person of faith. For this reason, Asad finds it impossible to identify *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* with historical characters such as Alexander the Great,[119] with someone of the pre-Islamic period, or with one of the Himyaritic kings of Yemen. "All those historic personages were pagans and worshipped a plurality of deities as a matter of course, whereas *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* is depicted as a righteous and firm believer in the One God," he explains.[120] It is this very aspect of his personality, Asad argues, that provides the key to this qurʾānic allegory. Thus, Asad infers that the figure of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* "has nothing to do with history or even legend, that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power."[121]

Asad's allegorical reading of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* allows him to demythologize the figure as a non-historical character who represents an important qurʾānic

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[119] Alexander, Asad says, is represented on some of his coins with two horns on his head (Asad, *TMOQ*, 451 f., n. 81 on Q 18:83). In his article "The *Alexander Legend* in the Qurʾān 18:83-102," Kevin van Bladel attempts to establish a more substantial "affiliation" between the qurʾānic figure *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* and the Christianized character of Alexander the Great in the Syriac work called *Neṣḥānâ dîleh d-Aleksandrôs* (The Glorious Deeds of Alexander) written around 629-630 CE. Van Bladel builds on an earlier research by Theodor Nöldeke who used the Syriac literature and theorized that the latter was "in fact the source for an episode in the Qurʾān, specifically the qurʾānic story of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* Q 18:83-102." Van Bladel concludes his paper by saying that the qurʾānic account must have adapted extracts from the then current Syriac text (in *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel S. Reynolds [New York: Routledge, 2008], 175-203). In light of the discussion above, where Asad asserts the un-historicity and the paganness of the figure, the soundness of Nöldeke's or van Bladel's main argument would inevitably establish a link between *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* with the historical "Alexander" character that the Syriac, or the Greek literatures for that matter, have introduced. Thus, it challenges Asad's position that *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* has no historical basis as it is purposely employed by the Qurʾān as a parable.

[120] Asad, *TMOQ*, 451 f., n. 81 on Q 18:83. Asad's argument against the likely identification of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* with the Greek Alexander finds explicit support with Quṭb who says that the linkage between the qurʾānic figure and some suspected historical characters is unverifiable. Moreover, he concurs with the idea that it is not possible to undertake research based on documented history with the aim of establishing the real personality of the *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* (Quṭb, XI:304, on Q 18:83).

[121] Asad, *TMOQ*, 451 f., n. 81 on Q 18:83.

message. This figure demonstrates how one who is endowed with worldly might

and prestige should comport himself with spiritual strength gained from one's

faith in God. He alludes to this notion in his introduction to the *sūrat al-Kahf*

saying that the symbolism of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn*, or "the Two-Horned One" teaches a

proper integration of the material and the spiritual domains. Thus, it

> "tells us that world-renunciation is not, in itself, a necessary complement of
> one's faith in God: in other words, that worldly life and power need not in
> conflict with spiritual righteousness so long as we remain conscious of the
> ephemeral nature of all works of man and of our ultimate responsibility to
> Him who is above all limitations of time and appearance."[122]

As one may observe, while Asad's demythological treatment of both of the

qurʾānic narratives -- Gog and Magog and *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* -- is not explicitly

reflected in the main text of his translation, his commentary expounds extensively

on them. Asad's demythological interpretation does not in any way diminish their

importance in the Qurʾān. Rather, he attempts to offer a rationalist way of reading

so that they convey a meaning which corroborates the overarching ethical and

social prescriptions of the Qurʾān.

4.3   Conclusion

The thesis that this Chapter set out to provide is that Muḥammad Asad's

reading and interpretation of the supernatural elements or miracles in the Qurʾān

is a rationalist one. This hermeneutical method is clearly manifested in his

demythological treatment of the aforementioned qurʾānic stories or narratives.

We have seen in Chapter Two that the working principle of Asad's rationalistic

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[122] Asad, *TMOQ*, 437, on Q 18.

praxis is his strong belief in the two key elements of the Qurʾān. One qurʾānic principle is ʿalā baṣīratin (Q 12:108) or "resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason." The other is the premise that the human being is *khasīmun mubīnun* (Q 16:4) or "endowed with the power to think and to argue." This chapter has demonstrated Asad's unwavering preference for faculty of reason. He invariably sees it as the primary interpretive tool for unlocking and then generating the "message" latent in those aforementioned qurʾānic stories. Critics of Asad's rationalist approach have accused him of *rationalism.* They charge that his excessive and unfettered use of reason eventually led him to consciously reject or deny the metaphysical merits of these sacred stories in the Qurʾān.

On the contrary, having thoroughly examined and closely studied his interpretative analysis on those narratives, this Chapter concludes with a contrasting assessment. Nowhere does Asad mention that these stories did not take place as reported. Nor does he categorically affirm that they ever took place either. The thrust of his demythological approach is not to affirm or deny any story. Rather, it is to present an epistemological method in order to deduce the intended message embedded in these stories. By treating the stories as metaphors or allegories, Asad does not mean to harm the integrity and validity of the source texts. Instead, he uses an interpretative strategy that lets the stories function as a sort of pulpit from which readers and believers of the Qurʾān can hear the "message" they need to hear.

THEMATIC EXPOSITIONS

5.1 Debunking the Jewish Doctrine of "Chosenness"

In his commentary in *The Message of the Qurʾān,* Muḥammad Asad extrapolates a qurʾānic polemic against a "persistent Jewish belief"[1] that they are God's "chosen people." Through his reading of the Qurʾān, he identifies several verses which, he argues, project such a belief which the Qurʾān consistently refutes as spurious. In one commentary, for example, he asserts that the Qurʾān alludes to such a claim as *shaṭaṭ,* an "outrageous" assertion ascribed to God.[2] By broaching this argument in his work of translation, Asad exposes a qurʾānic counter-narrative that debunks this persistent claim. This claim, he says, explains the resistance of the Jews to the preaching and message of the Arabian Prophet.

This chapter examines Asad's rationalist interpretation of those verses and locutions in the Qurʾān that he identifies as *loci disputandi* or locations where the qurʾānic polemic on this subject are found.

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[1] Asad, *TMOQ,* 10, n. 32 on Q 2:41.

[2] Asad, *TMOQ,* 899, n. 2 on Q 72:4.

5.1.2 The Jewish Traditional Understanding

That the Jews are God's chosen people is a most distinctive and foundational doctrine of Judaism. As such, according to Jon Levenson, it "attracted so much attention and generated so much controversy."[3] According to Arthur Hertzberg, "the essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people; all else is commentary."[4] This concept, says Jerome Gellman, is too entrenched and ubiquitous in Jewish religious literature to be ignored or excised from a theology of Judaism.[5] Leyla Gürkan, however, wrote that this expression, which can be rendered in modern Hebrew as *haʿam hanivhar* "is found almost nowhere in the Hebrew Bible."[6] The term which is found in the Torah is "holy people" (*ʿam qadosh*) (Deut. 7:6; 14:2) or "holy nation" (*goy qadosh*) (Exo. 19:6). It is usually associated with the people of Israel. It is the use of the modifier "holy," or *qadosh* that contributes to the sense of Israel's "chosenness." That idea of being chosen can certainly be derived from this word since its precise meaning is "to separate or set apart from common use to the divine purpose."[7]

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[3] Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. M.G. Brett (New York, NY: E.J. Brill, 1996), 143 (143-169).

[4] Arthur Hertzberg, "The State of Jewish Belief," *A Symposium Compilation in the Commentary Magazine* (Aug 1, 1966), accessed August 2017. www.commentarymagazine.com/author/arthur-hertzberg-2/.

[5] Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us, A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 10.

[6] S. Leyla Gürkan, *The Jews as a Chosen People, Tradition and Transformation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 9 (7-33).

[7] Gürkan, *The Jews as a Chosen People*, 9. This term appears in the often-repeated locution uttered by God, "you shall be holy (*qedushim*) to me; for I the Lord am holy (*qadosh*), and I have separated (*hadvil*) you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev. 20:26). This, and in other similar expressions (most of the repetition takes place between chapters 17 and 26 Of Leviticus;

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The idea of "chosenness" or election is first expressed in the story of Abraham. He is elected and called by God to leave his people and settle in Canaan.[8] But, it could not be more clearly identified, says Gellman, than in what chapter seven of the Book of Deuteronomy declares,[9]

> "Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you not because you were the most numerous of all peoples -- for indeed you were the smallest of all -- but because he loved you and meant to keep the oath which he swore to your ancestors: that was why Yahweh brought you out with his mighty hand and redeemed you from the place of slave-labour, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (7:7-8).[10]

The chosen status of the Jews came with responsibility or accountability, as is mentioned in Amos 3:2. "You alone have I intimately known of all the families of earth, that is why I shall punish you for all your wrong-doings." Thus, this special calling required the Jewish people to guard, preserve, and obey the Torah.

The rabbinic literature also repeatedly celebrates the Jews as the chosen people, as can be seen in this Talmudic passage:

> Rabbi Elazar... said, "Today you have obtained this declaration from Yahweh: that he will be your God... and today Yahweh has obtained this declaration from you: that you will be his own people -- as he has said" (Deut. 26:17-18). "The Holy One... said to the Jewish people: 'You have

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what is known as Holiness Code [11:44-5; 19:2; 20:7; 20:26]), demonstrates that Israel's holiness consists in her being set apart for a specific purpose, namely, "the service of God, according to which Israel's entire life is directly regulated by God" (*Ibid.*). Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this whole document, either in the main text or in the notes, are from *The New Jerusalem Bible* (*NJB*) (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

[8] Steve Lundgren, "Election of Israel," in *Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2005), 1:718 (718-729).

[9] Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us,* 11.

[10] Also in the Book of Deuteronomy 14:2 where it says, "For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your God, and Yahweh has chosen you to be his own people from all the peoples of the earth" (*NJB*). Cf. Deut. 10:15; 26:19; Psalm 135:4; 33:12;

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made Me the sole object of your love and I have made you the sole object of My love. You have made Me the sole object of love, as it is written, *'Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one'*" (Deut. 6:4). And I will make you the sole object of love, as it is said, "Is there another people on earth like your people Israel...?" (1 Chr 17:21).[11]

The midrash says that the election of Israel was predestined before the creation of the world.[12] Some rabbis believed that this divine choice was absolute and independent of any conceivable circumstances.[13] What this meant was that no failure of the Jewish people could alter the fact that they were the chosen ones, the children of the one and only God forever.[14] Being chosen, according to the midrash, was also a burden as "He" who chose and loved Israel also multiplied their suffering.[15]

The Torah was supposedly offered to other peoples but Israel alone accepted or chose it and God.[16] Another tradition also asserted that Israel was

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[11] I. Abrahams, trans., "Ḥagigah," *The Babylonian Talmud (Hebrew-English Edition)*, ed. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1984), IX:3a-b.

[12] H. Freedman, trans., "Genesis I," *The Midrash Rabbah*, eds. H. Freedman & M. Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), I:6, on Gen. 1:4.

[13] Lundgren, "Election of Israel," 720 (718-729)

[14] H. Freedman, trans., "Kiddushin," *The Babylonian Talmud (Hebrew-English Edition)*, ed. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1977), XV:36a; "Sifrei Devarim," *Sefaria.org,* 308-309, accessed on Jan. 2018, www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Devarim.308?lang=bi.

[15] S. M. Lehrman, trans., "Exodus," *The Midrash Rabbah*, eds. H. Freedman & M. Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), III:5, on Exo. 1:1.

[16] Judah Slotki, trans., "Numbers II," *The Midrash Rabbah*, eds. H. Freedman & M. Simon (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), VI:612, on Num. 14:10; "Sifrei Devarim," *Sefaria.org,* 343-347, Jan. 2018, www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Devarim.343?lang=bi.

chosen for its merit. That is, it was strongest among the nations,[17] and was morally superior to all the Gentiles by virtue of its acceptance of the Torah.[18]

The Jewish doctrine "chosenness" is also a consistent *topos* or theme in traditional Jewish prayer. It appears in the daily prayers which thank God for having "chosen us" and for giving "us his Torah."[19] In traditional prayer books, a Jew also blesses God for not making him or her a Gentile. One prayer thanks God for lovingly "separating" the Jews from the "wayward" nations. The *aleinu* prayer, contained in the three daily prayers, declares that God has not, "made us like the nations of the world," and has not made "our lot like theirs."[20]

Abraham Cohen believed that the concept of the "chosen people" became especially prominent as an "important source of strength" when the Jews grappled with the destruction of the temple, the disappearance of their state or with their dispersion.[21] In the face of a reality which seemed to contradict the chosen status, the rabbis saw a need to reaffirm the age-old and unique relationship which existed between God and His people.

The Jews of the Medieval period believed that Israel was pre-eminently chosen by God who prepared them for a long time. According to Judah Halevi (d.

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[17] M. Ginsberg, trans., "Beẓah," *The Babylonian Talmud (Hebrew-English Edition)*, ed. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1990), VI:25b.

[18] H. Freedman, trans., "Shabbath," *The Babylonian Talmud (Hebrew-English Edition)*, eds. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1987), III:145b-146a.

[19] Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us,* 12.

[20] Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us,* 12.

[21] Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1995), 59 (58-68).

1141 CE), election was considered as a merit simply because Jews were Jews.[22] Maimonides (d. 1204 CE), however, did not believe that election was hereditary or innate. Instead, he thought that the Jews were superior to non-Jews because they possessed the Torah.[23] As Judaism became more heterogenous in the nineteenth century, the interpretation of "chosenness" also became divergent. Hasidic Jews, for example, embraced Halevi's idea about the superior quality of the Jewish people. That outlook, according to Lundgren, inspired some Reformists, such as Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) to promote a sense of Jewish mission or vocation -- *tiqqum olam.* This mission conferred upon "Torah-true Jews" the role of promoting "ethical monotheism" to the world.

In this sense, the diaspora is not seen as a catastrophe[24] though the Zionists later vehemently rejected that view. In the 20th century, the idea that the Jews were chosen took on explicit political significance. It became central to the movement to secure a state of Israel for the Jews because God had promised Abraham that his people would inherit it (Deut 4:37f.).[25]

This traditional understanding of the concept, however, had its contemporary opponents. The Lithuanian founder of Reconstructionism, Mordecai M. Kaplan (d. 1983) was one of them. Throughout his long career, this

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[22] Lundgren, "Election of Israel," 721.

[23] David Novak, *The Election of Israel. The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 226.

[24] Novak, *The Election of Israel.*, 724-725

[25] "Because he loved your ancestors and, after them, chose their descendants, he has brought you out of Egypt, displaying his presence and mighty power, dispossessing for you nations who were larger and stronger than you, to make way for you and to give you their country as your heritage, as it still is today"; Novak, *The Election of Israel.,* 719.

rabbi fought all attempts to defend this traditional doctrine. Kaplan wrote that the doctrine of "chosenness" had a value during the times of humiliation and oppression. But, he could not see how it could be ethically upheld and defended in modern times. It implied -- despite all claims to the contrary -- that Jewish people were superior.[26]

In an early work, Kaplan criticized a post-Holocaust interpretation about the chosen status of the Jews. This doctrine suggested that Jews were endowed superior hereditary traits that also made them superior in the realm of religion and ethics. Kaplan called this view "the most pernicious theory of racial heredity yet advanced to justify racial inequality and the right of a master race to dominate all the rest of mankind."[27] This doctrine, he said, was not only immoral, it was impossible to defend because of the way it portrayed God. Kaplan's God was an impersonal force for good. To answer this "pernicious theory," Kaplan introduced the idea of "vocation." Every nation and every individual has a "vocation," he said. This vocation is a calling to fulfill some purpose, to contribute to the common good of humanity in its or his or her own way.[28]

Gellman offers a new characterization of the doctrine which he hopes could be seen as unbiased and even useful in cultivating better relationships

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[26] Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization. Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (London: Forgotten Books, 2015), 42 f.

[27] Mordecai M. Kaplan*, The Future of the American Jew* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), 215 f.

[28] Kaplan*, The Future of the American Jew*, 229-230.

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between Jews and non-Jews, and between Judaism and other world religions. According to him, the Jews are "God's chosen people" in the sense that,

> "God has created a permanent, non-revocable relationship with the Jews that God neither has created nor will create with any other nation. This relationship is of supreme value relative to any type of relationship God may have created or will create with any other specific nation. The religion of the Jews is integrally related to this special relationship with God."[29]

5.1.3 Jewish Doctrine of "Chosenness" in the Qurʾān

It is against this traditional Jewish understanding that Asad's exegesis on the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" can be introduced and contextualized. The expression, "chosen people," is not found in its Arabic form in the Qurʾān. And even though the Jewish audience of the Qurʾān does not explicitly declare to be a "chosen people," this did not prevent Asad from scouring the Qurʾān for relevant verses which are supportive of this Jewish doctrine.

What is found in the Qurʾān, however, are verses which explicitly recognize the idea of the distinctiveness of Israel's election. Among those citations are the following verses:

> Q Baqarah 2:47 (or 122), "O children of Israel! Remember those blessings of Mine with which I graced you (anʿamtu ʿalaykum), and how I favoured you (faḍḍaltukum) above (ʿalā) all other people." Or,
>
> Q Dukhān 44:32, "and, indeed, We chose them knowingly above (ikhtarnāhum ʿalā ʿilmin) all other people," Or,
>
> Q Anʿām 6:86, "and [upon] Ishmael, and Elisha, and Jonah, and Lot. And every one of them did We favour above (faḍḍalnā ʿalā) other people."[30]

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[29] Gellman, *God's Kindness Has Overwhelmed Us*, 12.

[30] Cf. Q Āl ʿImrān 3:33, "Behold, God raised (aṣṭafā) Adam, and Noah, and the House of Abraham, and the House of 'Imran above (ʿalā) all mankind." Or, Q Aʿrāf 7:140, "[And] he said: "Am I to seek for you a deity other than God, although it is He who has favoured you above (faḍḍalkum ʿalā) all other people?" Or, Q Jāthīyah 45:16 "And, indeed, [already] unto the children

Interestingly, Asad is relatively silent about these references as far as the qurʾānic polemic against the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" is concerned. In his commentary of Q 44:32, for example, he does not believe that being chosen "above all other people" signifies that they were elevated to the status of being *the* "chosen people." [31] And, the stress on God's having "chosen them knowingly" (*ikhtarnāhum ʿalā ʿilmin*) alludes to the divine foreknowledge that in later times "they would deteriorate morally and thus forfeit His grace." [32] In short, Asad denies the notion that the Qurʾān corroborates the Jewish claim that they are "the chosen people of God."

Asad pursues his argument by laying bare *loci disputandi* or counter-narratives in the Qurʾān that seek to deconstruct or deny the veracity of this controversial Jewish belief. As he identifies these verses, Asad is conscious of the fact that the literary structure of the Qurʾān sometimes behaves in an elliptical fashion. This means that in its narratives, the Qurʾān occasionally leaves out or drops parts of words or utterances. Thus, at face value or at the textual level, it not only presents a challenge for readers' comprehension, but it also opens itself to a number of interpretations. In the absence of any explicit mention of this contested Jewish doctrine, Asad thoughtfully applies a method of deduction

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of Israel did We vouchsafe (*ātaynā*) revelation, and wisdom, and prophethood; and We provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them above (*faḍḍalnāhum ʿalā*) all other people [of their time]."

[31] Asad, *TMOQ,* 762, n. 15 on Q 44:32.

[32] Asad, *TMOQ,* 762, n. 15 on Q 44:32.

which meticulously scrutinizes textual contexts in order to be able to identify these elided or unstated doctrine.

From his commentary, Asad attempts to understand the foundational arguments which undergird this controversial Jewish claim. There are three notions that can be extrapolated from Asad's qurʾānic exegesis that explain rationally the provenance of the Jewish claim that they are "God's chosen people."

The first is rooted in their designated identity as the earliest recipients of revelation. According to this notion, the Jewish people are conscious of having received the Torah which chronologically predates revelation received by the Christians or Muslims. That Jewish distinction, in the mind of Asad, had become the foundation for their claim to a special divine election.

The second foundational argument for the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" is linked to their being the descendants of Abraham, the proto-confessor of monotheism. According to Asad, strongly implied in the elliptical locutions of the Qurʾān is the claim that by virtue of their being the direct offspring of Abraham -- whom the Qurʾān speaks so reverently of as a *ḥanīf* – the Jews have inherited the legacy as the favored people among all the nations.

The third provenance of this Jewish claim is from an inherited distortion of the biblical text made by early Jewish scholars.[33] According to this theory, the claim of "chosenness" made by the Jews of the Qurʾān is an offshoot of earlier

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[33] Asad, *TMOQ,* 863 f., n. 4 on Q 62:5.

deliberate tampering of a text. As a result, the Jews of the post-biblical times inherited a distorted and deceptive narrative.

All three of these reasons are argued by Asad as foundational to the psychological and intellectual formation of this Jewish consciousness of "chosenness" in the Qurʾān.

5.1.3.1   As Early Recipients of the Message

According to Asad, reading Q 2:40-41 and adjacent texts help to sort out the qurʾānic polemics related to this investigation. These verses read,

> [40]"O Children of Israel! Remember (*udhkūr*) those blessings (*niʿmah*) of Mine with which I graced you, and fulfill your promise (*ʿahd*) unto Me, [whereupon] I shall fulfill My promise unto you; and of Me stand in awe.

> [41]Believe (*āminū*) in that which I have [now] bestowed from on high, confirming the truth already in your possession, and be not foremost among those who deny its truth; and do not barter away (*tashtarū*) My messages for a trifling gain (*thamanan qalīlan*); and of Me, of Me be conscious!"

Asad argues that these verses generate two conclusions. First of all, they evoke a qurʾānic refutation of the Jewish belief that they are God's chosen people. Second, the Jews have understood this election as an inherent entitlement by virtue of the fact that they were the early recipients of divine revelation.

Asad points out that Q 2:40 is specifically addressed to the *Banī Isrāʾīl* ("Children of Israel"). As such, it is a direct and not a random appeal to this people. This passage functions as a syntactical tool to effect a qurʾānic polemic that reminds its Jewish audience that "their religious beliefs represented an earlier phase of the monotheistic concept which culminates in the revelation of

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the Qurʾān."[34] Here, Asad interprets *niʿmah* or "blessings" in this verse as a reference to the concept of monotheism which Israel had been given.[35]

The same endowment of monotheism is implied in Q 44:32, according to Asad's exegesis on this verse. He agrees that such *niʿmah* of monotheism made Israel stand out "above all people of their time, because at that time the children of Israel were the only people who worshipped the One God."[36] The text, says Asad, does not, in any way, suggest that they have become *the* elected or *the*

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[34] Asad, *TMOQ,* 10, n. 31 on Q 2:40.

[35] Asad, *TMOQ,* 10, n. 31 on Q 2:40. In contrast to Asad's focus on monotheistic belief, Yūsuf ʿAlī's interprets this appeal simply as a reprimand for being unmindful of the covenant with which God made to Israel, especially for bringing them out of the land of bondage to the land of "flowing with milk and honey" (*The Holy Qurʾān,* I:27, n. 58). According to Caner K. Dagli, the term *niʿmah* (blessing) here relates to a much more "general sense" of the word "beginning with the gift of creation" and continues with God's intervention throughout Israel's ordeal during the exodus ("al-Baqarah," in *The Study Qurʾān*, eds. S. H. Nasr, et al [USA:HarperOne, 2015], 25). Cf. Gabriel Said Reynolds also echoes Dagli's point when he comments that this "may follow from the manner in which God... asks the Israelites to remember God's favors to them, above all in rescuing them from the grip of Pharaoh (as the waters of the sea) in Egypt and in inviting them to form a special covenant with him on Mt. Sinai." (*The Qurʾān and the Bible, Text and Commentary*, trans. A. Q. Qarāʾī [USA: Yale University Press, 2018], 40, on Q 2:40). Some commentators interpret it to mean that they should be true to the predicted coming of the Prophet, whom they find inscribed in Torah and the Gospel that is with them (Qurṭubī, 1:372 f., on Q 2:40).

[36] Asad, *TMOQ*, 762, n. 15 on Q 44:32. Similar interpretation was also espoused by some commentators who likewise premised Israel's election upon their being the recipient of revelation and religion (Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* [abridged] [Houston, TX: Darussalam Pub & dist., 2000], 8:685, on Q 44:32); Qurṭubī, 16:124, on Q 44:32; Ṭabarī, 25:149, on Q 44:32). While *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* more or less holds the same argument that they were chosen "over all the worlds of their time those of the rational beings" (*Great Commentaries of the Holy Qurʾān,* trans. Feras Hamza [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008], I:475, on Q 44:32), it does not echo Asad's premise of being the first recipient of monotheistic revelation. Similarly, Sayyid Quṭb explains that God chose them in preference to all other people "in their own time. God knew that they were, at that time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qurʾān about their deviation and slow response" (*Fī Ẓilāl al-Qurʾān* [*In the Shade of the Qurʾān*]*,* trans. & ed. A. Salahi, A. Shamis [Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001], XV:289, on Q 44:32). Quṭb conjectures that while the Jews fail by God's standard, they were, however "under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight" (*Ibid.*). Likewise, Muḥammad Shāfi also contextualizes this verse of election as "superiority over all the people of their time" since they cannot be "superior to the Ummah of Muḥammad" (*Maʿariful-Qurʾān,* trans., M.H. Askari and M. Shamim [Karachi, Pakistan: Maktaba-e-Darul-Uloom Karachi, 1996], VII:757, on Q 44:32). Much like the merit of Mary in the Qurʾān in which she is considered to be superior to the women of her time only (*Ibid.,* II:69, on Q 3:42).

chosen people. Instead, such *niʿmah* should be understood as a "spiritual mission" given to the Jews to act "as God's message-bearers to the world."[37]

But, the Jews, according to Asad, distorted the true significance of this *niʿmah* of monotheism. Instead of accepting it as a "spiritual mission" -- a divine dispensation to be propagated to the whole world -- they understood it as a divine gesture of election. In other words, they believed that by virtue of their being the earliest recipients of that *niʿmah*, they have become "the chosen people of God." Moreover, Asad adds that it is their "persistent belief that they alone among all nations have been graced by divine revelation"[38] which fundamentally underlies this conviction of "chosenness."

Asad asserts that it is basically this foregoing distortion which warranted the above-mentioned two strong qurʾānic injunctions, namely, to *āminū* ("to believe") in Q 2:41 and to *udhkūr* (to remember) in Q 2:40. These commands are commonly used as polemical formulae in the Qurʾān. With these injunctions, the Qurʾān is therefore accusing its Jewish audience for being unmindful and unbelieving of the truth of the revelations which they had received.

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[37] Asad, *TMOQ,* 762, n. 16 on Q 44:33. In his doctoral dissertation published as *Was hat Muhammed aus dem Judentum aufgenommen?* Abraham Geiger (d.1874) attempts to redefine the position of Judaism on the map of Western civilization, from a despised deviant to the source and generator of Christianity and Islām. Using the rabbinic literature as a valuable tool for his historical analysis, Geiger removes the origins of Islām from the world of Christian heretical movements in Arabia and placing it squarely in the context of rabbinic tradition. The Qurʾān became, in his dissection, a repository of midrashic and talmudic stories and teachings, just as he later analyzed literary elements within the New Testament as similar outgrowths of midrashic influence (Susannah Heschel, "Judaism, Christianity, and Islām: Prelude of Revisionist Configurations," in *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 50-51 [50-75]).

[38] Asad, *TMOQ,* 10, n. 32 on Q 2:41.

Moreover, for Asad, this distortion by the Jews is referenced metaphorically in the latter part of Q 2:41. This clause warns the Jews, saying, "do not barter away (*tashtarū*) My messages for a trifling gain (*thamanan qalīlan*)." Occurring nine times in the Qurʾān, the expression *thamanan qalīlan*, according to Asad, is a metaphor which signifies the Jews' erroneous interpretation of the divine revelation.[39] In other words, by distorting the authentic meaning of *niʿmah* of monotheism into thinking that it was exclusively intended for them alone as a sign of election, is tantamount to bartering away the divine revelation for a *thamanan qalīlan* or trifling gain. This act, if we may put this in simpler mercantilistic language, is much like selling a thousand dollars gold Rolex watch for a few pennies!

In Q 3:187, Asad identifies a similar qurʾānic polemic against the Jews. This time, they are rebuked for failing to carry out their *mīthāqa* ("pledge"). In his interpretation, Asad particularly refers to the mission to "make it (message) known unto mankind, and do not conceal it."[40] The verse states,

> "And lo, God accepted a solemn pledge (*mīthāqa*) from those who were
> granted earlier revelation [when He bade them]: "Make it known unto

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[39] *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* interprets *thamanan qalīlan* as a parable alluding to "the small price for a trivial and temporary affair of this world" which the Jews bartered for the "description" of Muḥammad in the Torah (I:7, on Q 2:41). Quṭb vaguely and generally refers to this expression as the rejection of the Qurʾān as the final message in favor of "temporal gain or narrow interest, such as the privileges and status enjoyed by the rabbis through their religious function in the community" (I:81, on Q 2:41). The rabbis, Quṭb continues, in order to cling to their power had to urge their people to reject Islām and refuse to recognize it (*Ibid.*). In a more or less similar tone, Mawdūdī interprets *thamanan qalīlan* as reflecting the materialism of the Jewish people who were wont to exchange divine guidance for "worldly gains" (*Tafhīm al-Qurʾān* [*Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*], trans. & ed., Ẓ. I. Ansarī [Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1988], I:70, n. 57 on Q 2:41).

[40] Yūsuf ʿAlī's interpretation echoes that of Asad. He indicts the Jews for erecting a barrier so that "God's message" is prevented from spreading to the rest of humanity (I: 172-173, n. 494).

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mankind (*la-tubayyinunnahu li'l-nāsi*), and do not conceal it!" But they cast this [pledge] behind their backs, and bartered (*wa'shtaraw*) it away for a trifling gain (*thamanan qalīlan*): and how evil was their bargain! (*fa-bi'sa mā yashtarūna*)"

This verse repeats the accusation already leveled against the Jews for "bartering away" the pledge to propagate the message of God for "a trifling gain."[41] The verse, he maintains, repeats the complaint that the Jews distorted or misinterpreted the "pledge" to propagate the message. Instead, they settled into the erroneous belief that the message was intended solely for them because they are the favored "chosen people."[42] According to Asad, this omission by the Jews constitutes a gross cheapening of a lofty divine enterprise. And so, it is an act which the Qurʾān condemns with, *fa-bi'sa mā yashtarūna* or "how evil was their bargain!"

A similar polemic, according to Asad, is elliptically attested to in the first part of Q Jumuʿah 62:5. It states,

> "the parable of those who were graced with the burden of the Torah (*ḥummilū al-tawrāta*), and thereafter failed to bear this burden (*thumma lam yaḥmilūha*), is that of an ass that carries a load of books [but cannot benefit from them]."

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[41] Asad similarly interprets this expression in Q 3:187 to include "the Christian conviction that their belief in Jesus' 'vicarious atonement' automatically assures to them salvation" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 97, n. 144 on Q 3:187).

[42] Asad, *TMOQ,* 97, n. 144 on Q 3:187. *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* interprets *thamanan qalīlan* as that "small price of this world" namely, the joy of "supremacy" which the Jews, by concealing it from others, felt they have more knowledge than the rest of humanity (I:70, on Q 3:187). *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās,* on the other hand, reads the same expression as a lowly, deplorable act by the Jews in "hiding the traits and description of Muḥammad in their scripture" (*Great Commentaries of the Holy Qurʾān,* trans., Mokrane Guezzou [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2008], II:94, on Q 3:187). Neither of these two classical commentaries resonates with Asad's linking *thamanan qalīlan* to the polemic on the doctrine of "chosenness."

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Asad interprets this "burden" as none other than God's "message of His oneness and uniqueness" which is intended for the world to know.[43] He maintains his argument that

> "they failed in this task inasmuch as they came to believe that they were 'God's chosen people' because of their descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that, therefore, the divine message was meant for them alone and not for people of other nations."[44]

That the people of Israel were the early recipients of divine revelation is cited by Asad as one of the foundational arguments of the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness." The Jews mistakenly believed that the message was intended only for them. This view warranted a qurʾānic polemic denouncing not only the Jewish claim of being "God's chosen people," but also their failure to propagate the divine message to the rest of humanity.

5.1.3.2   As Descendants of Abraham

Another notion that undergirds the Jewish belief of being the "chosen people," according to Asad, is by virtue of their being the children of Abraham.

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[43] Asad, *TMOQ,* 863, n. 4 on Q 62:5. While Asad's argument rests on the failure of the Jews to communicate the monotheistic message, Yūsuf ʿAlī argues that it was their deliberate corruption of the message and their failure to live up to the ethical message they received is the object of reprimand here (II:1546, n. 5457). Mawdūdī's interpretation too, resonates with Asad's but falls short linking it with latter's concern the doctrine of "chosenness" (*Towards Understanding the Qurʾān* (The Islamic Foundation) *Tafheem.net,* Jan. 2018, n. 7 on Q 62:5). In a relatively echoing interpretation, *The Study of the Qurʾān* generally interprets this "burden" in the ethical and practical sense, that is, a call to act out the injunctions of the Torah (1370-1371). On this "burden," Quṭb says that the Jews "neither understood its nature nor were they true to it" (XVII:12, on Q 62:5). *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:766, on Q 62:5) and *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:547, on Q 62:5), on the other hand, basically read this "burden" as the truthful revelation of the description of Muḥammad contained in the Torah.

[44] Asad, *TMOQ,* 863, n. 4 on Q 62:5. According to some commentators, that they are as "an ass that carries a load of books" means that they have no true knowledge of what their scripture contains (Qurṭubī, 18:84 f., on Q 62:5; Ṭabarī, 28:110 f., on Q 62:5), which in a sense is more excusing of the Jews rather than accusative.

He argues that some verses in the Qurʾān engage the Jewish audience about an unstated claim, namely, that they are "God's chosen people" because they are the descendants of Abraham.[45] He finds Q 2:124 as the *locus classicus* for this notion, particularly the latter portion of the text which relates a dialogue between God and Abraham thus,

> "He said: "Behold, I shall make thee a leader (*imāman*) of men." Abraham asked: "And [wilt Thou make leaders] of my offspring (*dhurriyyatī*) as well?" [God] answered: "My covenant does not embrace the evildoers (*al-ẓālimīna*)."

According to Asad, the word *ẓālimūn* or "evildoers" in this verse refers to the attitude of unmindfulness of the Jews which is implied in Q 2:122-123.[46] As a matter of fact, the three consecutive verses (Q 2:122, 123, 124), says Asad, draw a moral contrast of attitudes between Abraham and his descendants. The former is being identified in Q 2:124 as one who *atamma* or "fulfilled" the commandments of God. The latter, his descendants, however, are implicitly portrayed as unmindful and derelict in Q 2:122 and Q 2:123, respectively. According to Asad, it is on account of this unstated attitude of negligence or insolence on their part -- vis-à-vis the divine revelation -- that verses 122 and 123 strongly enjoin the Jews to "remember" or to "remain conscious."

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[45] Asad, *TMOQ,* 26, n. 101 on Q 2:124.

[46] [122]"O children of Israel! Remember (*udhkurū*) those blessings (*niʿmah*) of Mine with which I graced you, and how I favoured you above (*faḍḍaltukum ʿalā*) all other people." [123]"and remain conscious of [the coming of] a Day when no human being shall in the least avail another, nor shall ransom (*ʿadlun*) be accepted from any of them, nor shall intercession (*shafāʿatun*) be of any use to them, and none shall be succoured."

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But, what really warranted this strong, judgmental tone directed against the "offspring" of Abraham is to refute a claim they make.[47] According to Asad, here it is being made clear to them that

> "the exalted status of Abraham was not something that would automatically confer a comparable status on his physical descendants, and certainly not on the sinners among them."[48]

Moreover, while the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" is not specifically found in Q 2:124, Asad, nonetheless, finds clues for the qurʾānic rejection of an implicit Jewish claim. Here, he says, the Qurʾān implicitly refutes the Jewish claim that physical heritage or lineage with Abraham undergirds the doctrine that they are "God's chosen people." Furthermore, the Qurʾān implicitly repudiates them for believing that this belief would give them refuge when Judgment Day comes.

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[47] Asad, *TMOQ,* 26, n. 101 on Q 2:124.

[48] Asad, *TMOQ,* 26, n. 101 on Q 2:124. Yūsuf ʿAlī discriminates, rather than generalizes, the fate of Abraham's *dhurriyyah (*as the verse may imply at face value) when he says that some actually shall inherit it, while the "false" offsprings will not (I:52, n. 123). Dagli provides a spiritual explanation vis-à-vis the "offspring," that is any "wrongdoer or tyrant would not deserve a covenant with God; as such, it therefore denies exclusive application to the Jewish people ("al-Baqarah," *The Study Qurʾān,* 57). The same generalization is held by both *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:25, on Q 2:123) and *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:18, on Q 2:123) and thus ignores exclusive reference to the Jews. Asad's emphasis on moral rather than physical criterion is echoed, though not framed within the "chosenness" discussion, by Quṭb who writes that such inheritance is "purely on merit... they are not inherited through ancestral lineage" (I:157, on Q 2:124). But it is with Shāfi's exegesis that Asad's reading of the verse in question finds some resonance. The former also explicitly identifies the Jews as the addressees whose conduct "in the course of history, and their hostility to Islām" is being called out (Shafi, I:308, on Q 2:123). "They were proud of being the children of Jacob and of Abraham, and believed that, being the chosen people of God, they had the exclusive privilege of being the leaders of humanity, and hence the station of prophethood could not be conferred on anyone who did not belong to their race" (*Ibid.,* I:309, n. 34 on Q 2:124). Both he and Asad also agree that the last portion of verse Q 2:124 is a refutation of such a notion. The difference is that Asad's argument aims at debunking the logic of election as premised upon ancestral lineage, and therefore nullifies the doctrine of "chosenness" in the first place, in contrast with Shāfi's argument citing an inordinate or misguided conviction of being the "chosen people."

Asad infers that it is about these claims or assumptions that the Qurʾān rebukes the Jews with such strong injunctions and a morally-laden term *ẓālimūn* or "evildoers." The Qurʾān thereby reminds them that it is moral worthiness that determines divine favor or election. It is the only measure by which one fares well on the day of reckoning.

In a sense, according to Asad, the Qurʾān invalidates the Jewish presupposition that they are "God's chosen people" just because they are children of Abraham. It was God himself who made it clear that not all of the patriarch's offspring are good. The criterion for divine election, therefore, is not heredity but moral acuity.

Asad's carefully analyzes Q 14:40, which says, "[hence,] O my Sustainer, cause me (*ijʿalnī*) and [some] (*min*) of my offspring (*dhurriyyatī*) to remain constant in prayer." This locution, he says, further supports his argument that "not all" of Abraham's progeny merit divine favor. Moreover, the use of the word *min* or "some of,"[49] he adds, is an "obvious allusion to Q 2:124. In that verse, God answers Abraham's question about his descendants: "My covenant does not embrace the evildoers." In this passage, therefore, the patriarch, according to Asad,

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[49] Yūsuf ʿAlī: "among my offspring,"; Qarāʾī: "and my descendants [too]"; Arberry: "and of my seed": Droge: "and (also) some of my descendants." Asad's interpretation echoes that of *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* which says that the use of this partitive particle is intended to inform Abraham that "some of them, his seed, would be disbelievers" (I:228, on Q 14:40).

"has been given to understand that not all of his posterity would be righteous and that none can claim to belong to a 'chosen people' by virtue of his or her descent from an apostle of God."[50]

The stark difference between the moral status of Abraham and some of his descendants is further attested to in Q 16:118[51] and Q 16:120.[52] The word *ummah* is applied to Abraham in the latter verse, indicating that the Qurʾān characterizes the patriarch as "a man who combined within himself all virtues."[53] On the other end of the moral spectrum, however, Q 16:118 portrays the Jews as *kānū anfusahum yaẓlimūna* or those "who persistently wronged themselves." Instead of embracing the "creed of Abraham," as we hear in Q 16:123,[54] the Jews are faulted for deviating from it and becoming complacent with their misguided conviction that they are "God's chosen people."

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[50] Asad, *TMOQ,* 54, n. 54 on Q 14:40. Yūsuf ʿAlī reads this verse as though Abraham is already conscious of his two branches of posterity: one through Isaac, the other through Ishmael. And thus "having a wider vision than some of the later Children of Israel." (631, n. 1918).

[51] Q 16:118, "And [only] unto those who followed the Jewish faith did We forbid all that We have mentioned to thee ere this; and no wrong did We do to them, but it was they who persistently wronged themselves."

[52] Q 16:120, "Verily, Abraham was a man who combined within himself all virtues (*ummatan*), devoutly obeying God's will, turning away from all that is false, and not being of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God."

[53] Yūsuf ʿAlī: "model"; Pickthall: "by nature upright"; Qarāʾī: "a nation"; Droge: "community." *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* similarly predicates Abraham as "a leader who was emulated (obedient to Allāh, by nature upright) sincerely surrendered to Allāh" (II:346, on Q 16:120). Asad's rendition finds echoes in some commentators who suggest that Abraham constituted *a community* unto himself insofar as all good qualities were combined and perfected in him (Rāzī, 20:107 f., on Q 16:120; Zamakhsharī, 2:616, on Q 16:120) or he was the only believer on earth, or at least in his land, at a time when all others there were disbelievers (Rāzī, 20:107 f., on Q 16:120; Zamakhsharī, 2:616, on Q 16:120; Ṭabarsī, 6:165 f., on Q 16:120)

[54] Q 16:123,"And lastly, We have inspired thee, [O Muhammad, with this message:] "Follow the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God."

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Asad labels this attitude as "spiritual arrogance." It is a spirit which is punished by the imposition of severe restrictions and rituals.[55] The Jews' moral status is further negatively described by Asad in his exegesis of Q 2:62. This verse states,

> Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians -- all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.

While the verse is rendered affirmatively, Asad argues that the mention of the fundamental doctrines of Islām -- belief in God, the Last Day, and righteous action – highlights the Jewish denial of these same doctrines. In Asad's analysis, with their belief that they are "God's chosen people" by virtue of their relationship to Abraham, the Jews apparently consider these teachings unnecessary or unimportant.[56]

Furthermore, Asad also identifies a similar qurʾānic polemic against this Jewish claim in Q 2:134 (and in an identical passage, Q 2:141). This verse says,

> "Now those people (*tilka ummatun*) have passed away (*khalat*); unto them shall be accounted (*kasabat*) what they have earned, and unto you, what you have earned (*kasabtum*); and you will not be judged on the strength of what they did."

This verse, Asad claims, speaks of the ancestors of the Children of Israel who have "passed away." The Qurʾān explicitly states that they "shall be accounted what they have earned, and unto you (the Jews), what you have

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[55] "Of which the obligation to refrain from all work and even travel on the Sabbath was one" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 415 f., n. 147 on Q 16:124) All God-imposed observances, Asad explains, are meant towards spiritual development and never as an end in itself (*Ibid.*).

[56] Asad, *TMOQ,* 14, n. 49 on Q 2:62

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earned." This locution, according to him, is considered to be "the fundamental

Islamic tenet of individual responsibility."[57] The mention of this Islamic tenet in

this context, Asad argues, is polemical. It is warranted to counter some Jewish

beliefs that because they are descendants of Abraham, or offsprings of *tilka*

ummatun ("that community"), they are "God's chosen people." And, by virtue of

such identity, the Jews have a sense of entitlement that they shall be saved or

immune from the punishment on the Last Day of Judgment.[58] Hence, the Qurʾān,

in the mind of Asad, challenges them with the Islamic tenet of individual

responsibility, namely, *lahā mā kasabat wa-lakum mā kasabtum*. Translated, the

verse means, "unto them shall be accounted what they have earned, and unto

you, what you have earned." In other words, as far as the Day of Judgment is

concerned, the Jews cannot rely on their hereditary link with ancestors who

found favor with God and even entered covenant with Him.[59]

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[57] Asad, *TMOQ,* 28, n. 109 on Q 2:134. Yūsuf ʿAlī has a relatively similar reading of this verse, though not in the context of Jewish doctrine of "chosenness." He interprets that Jews (including Christians) should not rely on the "merits of Father Abraham and the Patriarchs or of Jesus; he echoes Asad's notion that this is about the "doctrine of personal responsibility" (55, n. 133). *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* also agrees that this doctrine of responsibility is specifically addressed to the Jews telling them in a sense, "you shall not be asked about what they did in the same way that they will not be asked about what you did (I:19, on Q 2:134)

[58] In his interpretation of Q 2:48, Mawdūdī explains that the major reason of the "degeneration of the Israelites" is their misguided conviction that through the merits of the venerable saints and pious men of the past they are assured of forgiveness, and their adherence to those saints of God "would become impossible for God to punish them" (I:72-73, n. 63 on Q 2:48). Both Asad and Mawdūdī are therefore agreed that this verse intends to refute false ideas that are elliptically implied.

[59] In the Jewish literature, this reverential link is called the doctrine of the "merits of the fathers" or in Hebrew, *zechut avot*. This doctrine is explicitly attested in the Hebrew scriptures and in rabbinic literatures where upon the invocation of the names, especially of the tripartite figures: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Israelites believed that punishment exacted against them on account of their sins could be averted. We read this doctrine, for instance, towards the end of chapter four of the Book of Deuteronomy where Moses recounts to the Israelites the marvels God has done for them in the past and reminds them how God dealt with erring and righteous behaviors. He said, "Because he loved your ancestors and, after them, and chose their descendants, he has brought you out of Egypt, displaying his presence and mighty power,

The Qurʾān, therefore, argues against the salutary value of that physical association with their ancestors.[60] In his interpretation of Q 2:134 or Q 2:141, Asad says that the Qurʾān categorically denies a causal relationship between the notion of "the descendants of Abraham" and the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness." Divine election, according to the Qurʾān, is based on morality and not on physical heredity.

5.1.3.3   Early Jewish Scholars' Distortion of the Biblical Text

Asad has identified a number of verses which he strongly argues corroborate his argument that the distortion by early Jewish scholars of some biblical texts paved the way for the emergence and perpetuation of the Jewish

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dispossessing for you nations who were larger and stronger than you, to make way for you and to give you their country as your heritage, as it still is today" (Deut. 4:37-8). The same "merits of the ancestors" is appealed by Moses in the Book of Exodus (32:11b, 12b, 13), "...why should your anger blaze at your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt by your great power and mighty hand?... Give up your burning wrath; relent over this disaster intended for your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom you swore by your very self and made this promise: 'I shall make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and this whole country of which I have spoken, I shall give to your descendants, and it will be their heritage forever'." In the Talmud, the same doctrine is cited in the tractate *Aboth* where R. Gamaliel declares, "and all who labor with their community, let them labor with them for the [sake of the] name of heaven, for the merit of their fathers sustains them, and their righteousness endures forever" (J. Israel Stam, trans., "Aboth," *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein [London: The Soncino Press, 1988], 21:7a); or, in the tractate *Soṭah* where the merits of Judah's rescuing Tamar and her two sons from the fire, resulted in his descendants Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah being saved from the fiery furnace in book of the prophet Daniel. (B.D. Klien, trans., "Soṭah," *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein [London: The Soncino Press, 1985], 13:10b.)

[60] Although not necessarily in the context of discussion of Jewish election, Shāfi echoes Asad's reading of this verse that it basically "refutes the claim of the Jews that irrespective of what they had been doing they would go to Paradise on account of the good deeds of their forefathers" (I:351, on Q 2:134). But, unlike Asad, he also explicitly extends such a warning to "those Muslims" not to delude themselves with the hope that their sins would go unpunished in consideration of their privilege as the descendants of the Holy Prophet (*Ibid.*).

belief about their status as "a chosen people." His commentary on Q 2:79 explicitly alludes to this distortion while the verse condemns

> "... those who write down, with their own hands, [something which they claim to be] divine writ, and then say, 'This is from God,' in order to acquire a trifling gain (*thamanan qalīlan*) thereby...!"

Asad argues that there is a clear reference in this verse to "the scholars responsible for corrupting the text of the Bible" who were also responsible for "misleading their ignorant followers."[61] By followers, he refers to the post-biblical Jews who inherited such an inaccurate text. Now, combined with his consistent reading of *li-yashtarū' bihi thamanan qalīlan*, this verse, according to Asad, uncovers the intended distortion. The goal of some early Jewish scholars was to advance another distinctive narrative that the Jews are pre-eminently "the alleged 'chosen people.'"[62] As far as the Qurʾān is concerned, succeeding in this enterprise of falsification is tantamount to a blatant degrading of the value of divine revelation. Thus, for Asad, the metaphor *li-yashtarū' bihi thamanan qalīlan* (or "in order to acquire a trifling gain thereby") appropriately characterizes the end goal of this conspiracy.

Moreover, he also links this argument with his exegesis of the latter portion of Q 5:44, which goes,

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[61] Asad, *TMOQ,* 17, n. 64 on Q 2:79.

[62] Asad, *TMOQ,* 17, n. 64 on Q 2:79. In contrast to Asad's focus on the doctrine of "chosenness" as the underlying tone of this verse, *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:18, on Q 2:79) and *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:11, on Q 2:79), for their parts, basically underscore the alteration or falsification of the accounts foretelling the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad in the Bible. Similarly, al-Wāḥidī, for his part, relates that this verse was about the alteration of the description of the Prophet in the Hebrew Scripture (III:9, on Q 2:79)

"Therefore, [O children of Israel,] hold not men in awe, but stand in awe of Me; and do not barter away (*tashtarū*) My messages for a trifling gain (*thamanan qalīlan*)."

In this verse, it becomes more evident to Asad that the doctrine which was blotted out or altered, in favor of the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," was connected with "the biblical prophecies concerning the advent of Muhammad."[63] In this polemical verse, the Qurʾān chides the Jews for not following the generations of people before them who bore witness to the coming of the Arabian prophet. Instead, they undermined or bartered away the true message with a *thamanan qalīlan*, namely, a "spurious belief that the children of Israel are 'God's chosen people,' and, therefore, the sole recipients of God's grace and revelation."[64]

The locution, *law annahum aqāmu' al-tawrāta wa-l-injīla* or "if they would but truly observe the Torah and the Gospel"[65] in Q 5:66, according to Asad, is also a polemical response necessitated by the same persistent Jewish belief. What the Qurʾān basically implies here, according to Asad, is

"an observance of those scriptures on their genuine spirit, free of the arbitrary distortion due to that 'wishful thinking' of which the Qurʾān so often accuses the Jews and the Christians such as the Jewish concept of

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[63] *TMOQ,* 152, n. 60 on Q 5:44.

[64] *TMOQ,* 152, n. 60 on Q 5:44. While Asad categorically links again the expression *thamanan qalīlan* with the doctrine of "chosenness," Yūsuf ʿAlī only vaguely interprets that the end goal of "twisting" the meaning of the books was "to suit their own purposes," whereas Asad identifies it as promoting their "election."

[65] Asad indicates that the occurrence of the term Gospel obviously takes the Christian audience as the respondent or interlocutor. They also possess beliefs that, according him, the Qurʾān consistently refutes as spurious, namely, "the divinity of Jesus" and the "vicarious redemption." By juxtaposing these Christian doctrines with the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," he intended to show a convincing theological parallelism which are polemicized in the Qurʾān (Asad, *TMOQ,* 158, n. 84 on Q 5:66).

'the chosen people,' or the Christian doctrines relating to the alleged divinity of Jesus and the 'vicarious redemption' of his followers."[66]

The reason behind this defiant attitude, Asad infers, could only be attributed to their stubborn conviction that they are God's chosen people. By itself, that belief is more than sufficient for them to prosper in this life and on the Day of Judgment. The qurʾānic locution that evokes an even sharper polemic against this Jewish belief is found in Q 5:80. This locution states, *la-bi'sa mā qaddamat lahum anfusahum* or "[So] vile indeed is what their passions make them do." Asad argues that this expression acutely captures the intensity of denunciation with which the Qurʾān engages or condemns the "stubborn belief" of the Jews of their doctrine of "chosenness." Asad cross-references this locution to an earlier echoing expression in Q 5:30 which describes what led Cain to kill his brother. The murder took place because, *ṭawwaʿat lahu nafsuhu* or his "passion drove him." With this strong tone, one can imagine, according to Asad, the seriousness with which the Qurʾān treats this issue. The unwarranted claims of the Jewish people to being God's chosen ones are tantamount to the "rejection of any revelation that may have been vouchsafed to others."[67]

5.1.3.4 Concomitant Entitlement of the Doctrine of "Chosenness"

Asad asserts that by the time the Arabian prophet appeared in their midst, the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" was already deeply ingrained in their

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[66] Asad, *TMOQ,* 158, n. 84 on Q 5:66.

[67] Asad, *TMOQ,* 158, n. 84 on Q 5:66.

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consciousness. This explains their resistance to the preaching and message of the Prophet Muḥammad.

According to his interpretation, Asad knew that the Jews confidently rejected the Prophet's message. They denied that they needed a new message from a prophet outside of their clan because, as *the* "chosen people," they already possessed a divine revelation. What reason would there be to fear the day of judgment? As *the* "chosen people," they knew that there will be a "ransom" ("*ʿadl*")[68] rightfully prepared for them. They believed that they would be protected even if the balancing scale tipped against them on the Day of Judgment. Even if they were to be punished for their sins, the Jews believed that it would last only for "a limited number of days."[69]

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[68] Q 2:48 (or 123),"and remain conscious of [the coming of] a Day when no human being shall in the least avail another, nor shall intercession (*shafāʿatun*) be accepted from any of them, nor ransom (*ʿadlun*) taken from them, and none shall be succoured (*yunṣarūna*)." Asad interprets the word ʿ*adl* in this verse as also an "obvious allusion to the Christian doctrine of vicarious redemption as well as to the Jewish idea that they are "chosen people" -- as the Jews considered themselves -- would be exempt from punishment on the Day of Judgment" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 11, n.35 on Q 2:48). Cf. Qarāʾī and Abdel Haleem also render ʿ*adl* into "ransom"; Yūsuf ʿAlī, Pickthall, and Droge render it into "compensation," which basically echoes that of *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:7, on Q 2:48) and *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:12, on Q 2:48); Arberry renders it to "counterpoise." *The Study Qurʾān*, also rendering ʿ*adl* into "ransom," defines it as a "substitution" that can include anything one would seek to give in exchange for deliverance from punishment (Dagli, "al-Baqarah, 27).

[69] Q 2:80; Q 3:24. "And they say, 'The fire will most certainly not touch us for more than a limited number of days.'" On this clause, Asad comments that according to popular Jewish belief, even the sinners from among the children of Israel will suffer only very limited punishment in the life to come, and they "will be quickly reprieved by virtue of their belonging to 'the chosen people'" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 17, n. 65 on Q 2:80). *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās* (II:18, on Q 2:80) and *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (I:11, on Q 2:80) both define *ayyāman maʿdūdatan* as "only forty days as commensurate to the number of days in which our fathers worshiped the calf." Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr relates other interpretations of the same expression: forty years, or still others, only seven days, one day for each thousand years of the world's existence (1:274-275, on Q 2:80).

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Asad argues that the Qurʾān strongly refutes this attitude of entitlement as baseless, or as Q 4:123 describes it, *amānīy* or "wishful thinking."[70] He reads a similar sense of entitlement in Q 7:169 where the Jews, accused of repeated offenses, nonetheless confidently utter *sayughfaru lanā* or "we shall be forgiven." They maintain, he says, a

> "persistent belief that they are 'God's chosen people and that, no matter what they do, His forgiveness and grace are assured to them by virtue of their being Abraham's descendants,"[71]

The same Jewish posture of entitlement is compared by Asad to the attitude of the Quraysh (Q 8:34) who, "owing to their descent from Abraham ... considered themselves entitled to the guardianship of the *Kaʿbah*."[72] For this reason they could arbitrarily *yaṣuddūna* ("bar" or "hinder") the Muslims from entering *al-Masjid al-Harām*.[73]

Furthermore, Asad also interprets the Arabic word *lafīf*, which he rendered into "motley crowd," in verse Q 17:104.[74] It was warranted, he says, to refute not only the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," but also their claim of entitlement that on the Day of the Resurrection they are "*a priori* and invariably destined for God's grace."[75] In other words, the Qurʾān, according to Asad, not only debunks the

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[70] Asad, *TMOQ,* 128 f., n. 143 on Q 4:123, "It may not accord with your wishful thinking (*amāniyyikum*) - nor with the wishful thinking (*amāniyyi*) of the followers of earlier revelation...."

[71] Asad, *TMOQ*, 229, n. 135 on Q 7:169.

[72] Asad, *TMOQ,* 243 f., n. 34 on Q 8:34.

[73] Asad, *TMOQ,* 243 f., n. 34 on Q 8:34.

[74] Q 17:104, "And after that We said unto the children of Israel: 'Dwell now securely on earth - but [remember that] when the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you forth as [parts of] a motley crowd! (*lafīfan*)."

[75] Asad, *TMOQ,* 435, n. 125 on Q17:104. An echoing interpretation is found in al-Rāzī's understanding of the term *lafīf* which is an expression denoting a "human crowd composed of

Jewish claim to be "God's chosen people." It also insists that they will not earn special treatment at the Day of Judgment.

5.2   A Qurʾānic Christology

Along with the refutation of the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," another theme prominently found in Asad's rationalist exegesis of the Qurʾān is his Christology. Surveying some ninety-three verses that refer directly to Jesus in Asad's translation and qurʾānic commentary reveals a rationalist portrait of Jesus.

The following section, therefore, presents a thematic exposition of Jesus according to Asad's reading and interpretation of the verses. It is subdivided into five subsections. The subsections examine: the definition of the personhood of Jesus; the characterization of his work and ministry; the debate on his persecution and death; the accusation of Christian "overstepping the bounds of truth;" and finally, the polemics against the Christian doctrine of "vicarious atonement."

5.2.1 "Created out of dust"

For Asad, the creation of Jesus "out of dust" (*min turābin*) is a categorical qurʾānic presupposition. He basically deduces this thesis from his reading and rendition of Q Āl ʿImrān 3:59, which says,

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innumerable heterogeneous elements, good and bad, strong and weak, fortunate and unfortunate" (21:56, on Q 17:104).

"Verily, in the sight of God, the nature (*mathala*) of Jesus is as the nature (*ka-mathali*) of Adam, whom He created out of dust (*min turābin*) and then said unto him, "Be" - and he is."

By rendering the word *mathal*[76] into "nature" and the particle *ka* into "as" in this verse, Asad establishes what he believes to be the Qurʾān's teaching about Jesus. According to the Qurʾān, Jesus and Adam were both created out of an identical substance.[77] By translating the term this way, Asad suggests that the expression *mathal* is used metaphorically here "to denote the state or condition (of a person or a thing), and is in this sense synonymous with *ṣifa* ("quality" or "nature" of a thing).[78] Secondly, he, obviously, intends to affirm the qurʾānic polemic which denies the Christian assertion about the divinity of Jesus.[79] Asad

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[76] Asad himself relates that he could have also opted for its more literal translation thus, "The parable of Jesus is as the parable of Adam," (Asad, *TMOQ,* 76, n. 47 on Q 3:59). However, it is also to be noted comparatively that in its occurrence in Q 30:27as *al-mathalu al-ʿalā* Asad renders it into "the essence" of God. Here, he distinguishes his two contextual usages or interpretation of the word *mathal*: the former, as noted earlier, can be synonymous with *ṣifa* which "signifies the intrinsic 'attribute,' 'quality' or 'nature' of a thing, concept or living being" thus, useful to describe the constitution of Jesus or Adam (Asad, *TMOQ,* 620, 620, n. 19 on Q 30:27); the latter, according to him, serves as an imperfect device to attempt to circumscribe what is utterly and remotely undefinable, incomparable, for "any attempt at defining Him or his 'attributes' is a logical impossibility and, from the ethical point of view, a sin" (Asad, *TMOQ,*187, n. 88 on Q 6:100). Thus, in verse Q 30:27, while most of his counterparts generally apply the first category, Asad distinguishes himself by explicitly linking *al-mathalu al-ʿalā* to God's essence with a qualifying prepositional clause "of all that is most sublime in the heavens and on earth."

[77] Other translations:
Abdel Haleem, "In God's eyes Jesus is just like Adam";
Yūsuf ʿAlī, "the similitude of Jesus before God is as that of Adam";
Pickthall, "Lo! The likeness of Jesus with Allāh is as the likeness of Adam";
Arberry, "Truly, the likeness of Jesus, in God's sight, is as Adam's likeness";
Qarāʾī, "Indeed the case of Jesus with Allāh is like the case of Adam";
Droge, "Surely the likeness of Jesus is, with God, as the likeness of Adam."

[78] Asad, *TMOQ,* 76, n. 47 on Q 3:59.

[79] Many commentators believed that the context that warranted verse Q 3:59 is the *mubāhala* or the disputation in Madinah between the Prophet Muḥammad and the Christian delegation from Najran. The latter reportedly claimed that the Divinity of Jesus is premised upon his being born without a father. Indeed, the Qurʾān acknowledges the miraculous nature of his birth, but rejects the implication that this makes him Divine. Quṭb also comments that if being without a father is the basis of Jesus' divinity, then how does one categorize Adam who was born without both parents; could he also be called Divine? (II:99f., on *Q 3*:59). If it is possible for God

writes that, like Adam, who symbolizes the whole human race, Jesus, "was only

mortal, 'created out of dust,' that is, out of substances, both organic and

inorganic, which are found in their elementary forms on and in the earth."[80] He

identifies the same principle touching on Jesus' identity in Q Mā'idah 5:75. It

says,

> "The Christ, son of Mary, was but an apostle: all [other] apostles had
> passed away before him; and his mother was one who never deviated
> from the truth; and they both ate food [like other mortals]. Behold how
> clear We make these messages unto them: and then behold how
> perverted are their minds!"

The point of this verse, according to Asad, is simply to establish that "Jesus was

but a mortal like all the other apostles who lived before him, and that Mary never

claimed to be 'the mother of God,'"[81] and that they both "ate food."[82]

(the Most High) to create Adam from dust could it not also be possible for Him to create Jesus from the blood of Mary? (Rāzī, 8:66, on Q 3:59). The word *ka-mathala* ("as the nature") means that certain attributes of Adam and Jesus are alike (*Ibid.*). With this, Quṭb infers, "we can, then, appreciate the simplicity of the creation of Jesus, Adam and all creatures. We find ourselves accepting it with ease and clarity. We indeed wonder why the birth of Jesus should lead to all these disputes and arguments when it took place according to God's law which applies to all creation" (II:100, on Q 3:59).

[80] Asad, *TMOQ,* 76, n. 47 on Q 3:59. Cf. In their interpretation of Q 23:12, some commentators elaborated the meaning of *min sulālatin min ṭīnin* saying that "the frequent qurʾānic references to man's being "created out of clay" or "out of dust" or (as in this instance) "out of the essence (*sulalah*) of clay" point to the fact that his body is composed of various organic and inorganic substances existing on or in the earth, as well as to the continuous transmutation of those substances, through the intake of earth-grown food, into reproductive cells (Rāzī, 23:74, on Q 23:12) - thus stressing man's humble origin, and hence the debt of gratitude which he owes to God for having endowed him with a conscious soul." Other occurrences are found in Q 18:37; Q 22:5; Q 30:20; Q 35:11; Q 40:67.

[81] Asad's intended argument on Mary here resonates with some commentators who link Mary's title as *ṣiddīqah* to her role as one of those who affirmed the truth of Jesus' prophethood and message, just as the Prophet Muḥammad's close Companion Abū Bakr was given the title al-Ṣiddīq, because he affirmed the truth of Muḥammad's miraculous Night Journey (Zamakhsharī, 1:651, on Q 5:75).

[82] Asad, *TMOQ,* 159, n. 89 on Q 5:75. Asad generally agrees with many commentators that the Qurʾān here employs a biological or physiological logic to reinforce its argument which debunks the claim of Jesus' divinity (Quṭb, IV:202 f., on Q 5:75; Shāfi, 3:227 f., on Q 5:75; Mawdūdī, II:180 f., n. 100 on Q 5:75) *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* brings this a little further when it says "one who is such (human beings) cannot be god because of his compound being and fallible nature

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In Asad's mind, the preceding Christological presupposition should be more than sufficient to dispel doubts *qawla'l-ḥaqqi alladhī fīhi yamtarūna,* "about whose (Jesus') nature they (Christians) so deeply disagree."[83] More specifically, his nature should not be confused nor muddled when reading qurʾānic narratives about the annunciation of Mary and about the birth of Jesus. Asad is referring to his reading of some verses like Q 3:45, which says,

> "Lo! The angels said: "O Mary! Behold, God sends thee the glad tiding (*yubashshiruki*), through a word (*bi-kalimatin*) from Him, [of a son] who shall become known as the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, of great honour in this world and in the life to come, and [shall be] of those who are drawn near unto God."

In this rendition, one notices that Asad deliberately inserts an interpolation of the phrase "of a son" in brackets. He wants to establish that the "son" refers back to the "glad tidings" rather than to the "word." For this reason, it is also intentional that he renders the Arabic phrase *bi-kalimatin* by using "through" instead of "of" for the *bi* preposition. He also writes the term "word" in lower-case in order not to

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and because of the impurities such as urine and excrement that he produces" (I:107, on Q 5:75). Also allusive to one of the New Testament's negative definition of *pneuma* ("ghost" or "spirit") when it bids Jesus' disciples to "see by my hands and my feet that it is I myself. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has not flesh and bones as you can see I have. Their joy was so great that they still could not believe it, as they were dumbfounded; so he said to them, Have you anything here to eat" (Luke 24:39-42; cf. John 21:9-10,13). While the gesture of "eating" here may advance the Qurʾān's Christological polemic, namely, that Jesus the Christ, the son of Mary is but a prophet and human in all his features, the latter biblical passage, however, strengthens the orthodox reading of the NT Christological argument that the glorified Jesus was not only divine (i.e. spiritual, transcendent) but was also a true embodied divinity. In other words, for the disciples, the corporeal manifestation of Jesus in this passage ascertains the truth of the resurrection of the flesh. However, the naturality of Jesus' gesture of eating is somehow relativized by St. Thomas Aquinas (cf. Commentary on John 21 lecture 2; ST III, q. 45, a.6) who affirms that this food was not transformed into Christ's body by the natural process of digestion, but was rather dissolved into pre-existing matter by the divine power.

[83] Q 19:34; Cf. Q 19:37, *fa-khalafa al-aḥzābu min baynahim ...* or "And yet, the sects [that follow the Bible] are at variance among themselves [about the nature of Jesus]!"

reify *kalimah* inordinately.[84] Thus, Asad deontologizes its import and aligns it with the term "announcement." In this case, the verse would have the same sense as someone saying, "Can I have a word with you?"

Moreover, the natural constitution of Jesus should not be confused either. According to Asad, the clause in verse Q Nisā' 4:171 says,

> *... innamā al-masīḥ ʿīsā ibnu maryama rasūlu'l-lāhi wa-kalimatuhu al-qāhā ilā maryama wa-rūḥun minhu...*

Literally, this clause may be translated thus, "Christ Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and His word [which] He cast upon Mary, and a spirit or soul from Him" (my translation). But, Asad renders it exegetically, using the aforementioned verse Q 3:45 as a reference. It tells us,

> "... the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, was but God's Apostle -- [the fulfilment of] His promise which He had conveyed unto Mary -- and a soul created by Him..."[85]

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[84] Cf. Yūsuf ʿAlī's rendition of *yubashshiruki bi-kalimatin minhu ismuhu'l-masīḥu ʿīsā ibnu maryama* into "glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus" may, to a Christian reader, feel like reading the prologue of the Gospel of John, as opposed to Asad's intentional use of it as not more than an "announcement." Yūsuf ʿAlī identifies Jesus as a "Word" bestowed on Mary, a spirit proceeding from God (ʿAlī, 234, n. 676). Pickthall, "glad tidings of a word from him"; Qarā'ī, "the good news of a Word from Him"; Abdel Haleem, "news of a Word from Him." While Asad is dismissive of any relational connection between *bi-kalimatin* and *al-masīḥu ʿīsā ibnu maryama*, other commentators, on the other hand, tend to suggest that since Jesus was created "directly" by the word "Be" one might also say that his association with *the Word* is stronger and more unmediated, in the way one says that a generous person is generosity itself, or pure nobility, and the like (Rāzī, 8:42, on Q 3:45). *Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, for its part, interprets Jesus' description as "a Word from Allāh" to mean that Jesus was a means by which God's Word became manifest in the world (*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, II:70, on Q 3:45). Quṭb, on the one hand, equivocates when he says that Mary "receives the news in a word from God, namely the Christ, Jesus, son of Mary"; on the other hand, he also qualifies that "in the construction of the sentence, the name 'Christ' is a substitute for the term 'a word.' Yet, he is indeed the 'Word.'" Quṭb, however, at the end humbly admits that he does not fully comprehend the meaning of this expression and thus simply designates it under the second category conveyed by Q 3:7, namely, the *mutashābihāt* or "those matters which lie beyond our human perception" (Quṭb, II:85, on Q 3:45).

[85] Cf. Mawdūdī's rendition, "The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was only a Messenger of Allah, and His command that He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him (which led to Mary's conception)" (Mawdūdī, II:116, Q 4:171). Quṭb also tries to explain *kalimatuhu al-qāhā ilā maryama* thus, "God created Jesus through a direct command which is described in various

Asad's decision not to mention the phrase "his word" for *kalimatuhu*, was made in deference to al-Ṭabarī's interpretation. This commentator maintains that this phrase actually refers to the "announcement which God bade the angels to convey to Mary, and God's glad tiding to her,"[86] which according to Asad, is made in verse Q 3:45.

Designating the latter verse as the *locus* of the "announcement" allows Asad to interpret the portion of Q 4:171 as an appropriate locus to enunciate the fulfillment of the announcement or promise. Hence, he brackets "the fulfillment of." But, by conflating these two verses, Asad has found a way to dispel what he considers to be a potentially erroneous reading when Jesus is equated with the "word." This would have affirmed or validated the Christian reading of the *logos* of the Gospel of John, which ascribes divinity to Jesus. With this syntactical maneuver, it may appear that Asad has successfully demythologized any supernatural sense associated with the birth of Jesus.

Furthermore, Asad also argues against the notion that the mention of *rūḥun minhu* in verse Q 4:171 signifies Mary's supernatural conception of Jesus. Rather, he says that this *rūḥ* can actually carry various meanings in the Qurʾān. In this verse, however, it implies nothing more than an endowment upon Mary's embryo "a conscious soul which represents God's supreme gift to man and is,

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places in the Qurʾān and which means that when God wants to create something He only says to it 'Be'" (Quṭb, III:404, on Q 4:171)

[86] Asad, *TMOQ,* 137, n. 181 on Q 4:171. Al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of *bi-kalimatin minhu* in verse Q 3:45 is *bi-risālatin mina'llāhi wa khabarin min ʿindihi* or literally, "a message from God and a news from Him" (Ṭabarī, 3:315, on Q 3:45).

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therefore, described as 'a breath of His spirit.'"[87] Asad categorically insists that the expression *rūḥun minhu* or other expressions like *fa-nafakhnā fīha min rūḥinā,* or "We breathed into her of Our spirit" in Q Anbiyāʾ 21:91 is not mentioned exclusively at the birth of Jesus in the Qurʾān. In fact, the Qurʾān uses the same expression in three other places with reference to the creation of human beings in general, namely,

> in Q Ḥijr 15:29 (which is repeated in Q Ṣād 38:72), "and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration,"[88] or,

> in Q Sajdah 32:9, "and then He forms him in accordance with what he is meant to be, and breathes into him of His spirit."

Qurʾānic Christology, therefore, Asad insists, maintains that "like all other human beings" Jesus was "a soul created by Him."[89]

However, in his exegesis of the annunciation of Mary in Q Maryam 19:19-21, Asad struggles to demythologize the supernatural elements of the event. After all, Mary herself raises as a practical concern to the angel in Q 19:20 with the question, "How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me? -- for, never have I been a loose woman!"[90] As a rationalist reader of the Qurʾān, Asad

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[87] Asad, *TMOQ,* 137, n. 181 on Q 4:171.

[88] Asad, *TMOQ,* 500, n. 87 on Q 21:91.

[89] Asad, *TMOQ,* 137, n. 181 on Q 4:171. This interpretation echoes that of some authoritative commentators who interpreted that the breathing of the spirit of God into every human being signifies the endowing it with life (Rāzī, 25:152, on Q 32:9; Zamakhsharī, 3:493, on Q 32:9). To breathe spirit into a human body means to cause it to have life, as mentioned in verses Q 38:72 or Q 15:29 above (Rāzī, 25:152, on Q 32:9; Zamakhsharī, 3:493, on Q 32:9).

[90] Mary's response is understood to be an inquiry as to how the conception of the child would come about, for example, through marriage to someone or in another way, rather than an expression of doubt regarding the message the angel has brought (Ibn Kathīr, 6:242, on Q 19:20; Ṭabarī, 16:73, on Q 19:20).

would have typically interpreted a so-called miraculous conception metaphorically. But, in this case, he sounds restrained and unwilling to demythologize the miracle when he admits that,

> "since neither the Qurʾān nor any authentic Tradition tells us anything about the chain of causes and effect (*asbāb*) which God's decree 'Be' was to bring into being, all speculation as to the 'how' of this event must remain beyond the scope of a Qurʾān commentary."[91]

Therefore, Asad, defers to the literal value of the source-text *kadhālik* or "thus it is" in the beginning of Q 19:21 just as he did with the same expression in Q 3:47, *kun fa-yakūn* or "be -- and it is." Justifying his deference for the supernatural sense of the text, Asad, therefore, suggests that "God can and does bring about events which may be utterly unexpected or even inconceivable"[92]

Nonetheless, Asad persists in reinforcing the qurʾānic narrative about the absolute humanity of Jesus. He feels compelled to delineate a clear ancestral pedigree for Jesus, drawing pertinent information from both the Qurʾān and the New Testament. This is illustrated in his exegesis of Q 3:33-34, which relates a shortened form of genealogy thus,

> "Behold, God raised Adam, and Noah, and the House of Abraham, and the House of ʿImrān above all mankind, in one line of descent. And God was all-hearing, all knowing."

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[91] Asad, *TMOQ,* 459, n. 15 on Q 19:20. That the conception of Mary is a supernatural event is affirmed by al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1154 CE, or al-Ṭabrisī) who, while refusing to call Mary a female prophet, argued that her miraculous conception of Jesus is nonetheless proof that inimitable evidentiary miracles (*muʿjizāt*), usually given to the prophets in order to serve as proof of their prophethood, may also be given to those who are not prophets (Ṭabarsī, 6:326, on Q 19:20). As we learned in Chapter Four, one of Asad's goals of demythologization echoes that of al-Ṭabrisī's reading of miracles, that is, to enrich the experience of those who are called to be prophets; the only difference, perhaps, is that the former demythologizes these miracles as spiritual experiences rather than read them as they are, as al-Tabrisi does.

[92] Asad, *TMOQ,* 459, n. 15 on Q 19:21.

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In this verse, Asad traces the lineage of Jesus back to Aaron, the brother of

Moses and the son of ʿImrān. The descendants of Aaron became "the priestly

caste among the Israelites."[93] Asad says that Jesus' lineage from Aaron is

supported by both the Gospel of Luke and the Qurʾān. In the former, Elizabeth,

who is the cousin of Mary, the wife of Zechariah and the mother of John the

Baptist, is described as a descendant of Aaron.[94] In the Qurʾān, Mary, the mother

of Jesus, is spoken of as "sister of Aaron."[95]

According to Asad, this association is not uncommon in the ancient

Semitic tradition. There was an established custom of "linking a person's or a

people's name with that of an illustrious forebear."[96] Despite this notion of

relationship, however, Asad is unclear about whether both Elizabeth and Mary

should be identified as Aaron's direct descendants (that is, by blood). Instead, he

may have considered simply associating them symbolically with the ancient

priestly tradition of Aaron through their respective connections to the priestly

service: Elizabeth, by her husband's (Zechariah) role as a priest in the Temple,

and Mary's spending time in the *miḥrāb* (likely recognized as the "holy of Holies"

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[93] Asad, *TMOQ,* 71, n. 22 on Q 3:34.

[94] The Gospel of Luke 1:5, "In the days of King Herod of Judaea there lived a priest called Zechariah who belonged to the Abijah section of the priesthood, and he had a wife, Elizabeth by name, who was a descendant of Aaron."

[95] Q 19:28, "O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a wicked man, nor was thy mother a loose woman!"

[96] *TMOQ*, 71, n. 22 on*, Q 3*:34.

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sanctuary in Jerusalem) as mentioned in Q 3:37[97] (and implied 19:16).[98] That is the place where Zechariah may have fulfilled his priestly duties.[99]

But, in his exegesis of Q 3:45, Asad comments on the etymology of Jesus' title, *al-masīḥ* or "the Anointed." Here, he appears to insist on the genealogy by blood that links Aaron and Jesus. On the one hand, he notes that the Bible frequently refers to the practice of anointing the Hebrew kings. Why was Jesus called "the Anointed"? The title's application to Jesus, Asad explains, "may have been due to the widespread conviction among his contemporaries that he was descended in direct -- and obviously legitimate -- line from the royal House of David."[100]

After having acknowledged the rationale for calling Jesus "the Anointed," Asad immediately refutes this thinking. He reminds his readers that "this could not have related to his mother's side, because Mary belonged to the priestly class descending from Aaron, and thus to the tribe of Levi, while David

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[97] Also appears in the tradition found in the *Protoevangelium of James* which relates Mary being brought to the temple in Jerusalem, under the guardianship of Zechariah. There, she remains in one of the chambers of the temple "nurtured like a dove and received food from the hand of an angel" (See Oscar Cullmann, trans., "The Protoevangelium of James," in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher [Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 1: 429 [421-439]).

[98] It is suggested that the locution "she withdrew from her family to an eastern place" in Q 19:16 "could reflect an awareness that the temple (with which Mary was associated) is in the east of Jerusalem. The next verse speaks of how Mary hid behind a curtain or barrier [*ḥijāb*; Qulī Qarāʾī renders "seclude herself"], which could suggest that she was in the temple when she conceived Jesus" (Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible*, on Q 19:16-17).

[99] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 145 (130-147).

[100] Asad, *TMOQ*, 73, n. 32 on Q 3:45.

descended from the tribe of Judah."[101] Asad's interpretation indicates that another conclusion is possible as the "ancient Semitic custom" of bloodline association. He points out that Elizabeth was considered a "descendant" while Mary was seen as "sister" of their distant forebear, Aaron. This allows Asad to infer that the two women shared direct genealogical lineage with Aaron. The two genealogical designations given to these two women in the two scriptures are not randomly given, he believes. They provide even more compelling reasons for the two women truly shared a common bloodline with Aaron.

In tracing the ancestry of Jesus back to Aaron, Asad's interpretation may be seen as an attempt to revise a standard narrative. It debunks the Christian or New Testament teaching that Jesus was a direct descendant of King David.[102] Christian theology acknowledges that a nexus between Jesus and David not only establishes a pedigree for the humanity of Jesus. It also identifies the mysterious incarnation of Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of a divine promise to Israel that was first made to Abraham and passed on to his descendants.

St. Paul, for example, writes to Timothy saying "remember the gospel that I carry, 'Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David (σπέρματος Δαυίδ).'"[103] Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew begins by providing a long list or "roll of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of

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[101] Asad, *TMOQ*, 73, n. 32 on Q 3:45.

[102] Asad, *TMOQ*, 73, n. 32 on Q 3:45.

[103] 2 Timothy 2:8. In the New Testament Jesus is identified as υἱὸς Δαυίδ ("son of David) 12x; ῥίζα καὶ τὸ γένος Δαυίδ (root and/or spring of David)2x; κλεῖν Δαυίδ (key of David) 1x; σπέρματος Δαυίδ (race or seed of David) 3x.

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Abraham."[104] However, while Asad may be right about linking Jesus and Aaron by lineage through Mary in the qurʾānic context,[105] Christian theology argues that the Davidic lineage of Jesus is traced through his foster father, Joseph.[106]

Asad's exegetical hypothesis here may offer a solution to a persistent textual quandary observed by many scholars. These scholars "logically suggest that the Qurʾān has confused the Mary of the New and Mary of the Old Testament when it makes Mary the mother of Jesus the daughter of ʿImrān."[107]

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[104] The Gospel Matthew 1:1.

[105] Christian tradition, nonetheless, tells us that Mary was a descendant of David. This argument is based on the Book of Numbers (36:6-12) where an only daughter had to marry within her own family so as to secure the right of inheritance. After Justin Martyr's commentary on why Jesus claimed to be "the Son of man," where he said that "because of his birth by the Virgin, who was, as I said, of the family of David and Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham" in *Dialogue with Trypho* (Alexander Roberts et al., eds. in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers), 1:249, CHAP. C), and Ignatius' *Epistle to the Ephesians* where he says that Jesus Christ, was "conceived in the womb by Mary, according to the appointment of God, of the seed of David, and by the Holy Ghost" (Roberts et al., in *ibid.,* 1:57 CHAP. XVIII), the Fathers generally agree in maintaining Mary's Davidic descent. John Damascene, for his part, states that Mary's great-grandfather, Panther, was a brother of Mathan; her grandfather, Barpanther, was Heli's cousin; and her father, Joachim, was a cousin of Joseph, Heli's levirate son (Philip Schaff, et al., "John of Damascus' Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1978], 9:85, CHAPTER XIV). Here, tradition therefore presents Mary as descending from David through Nathan.

[106] Unknown to the Qurʾān and surprisingly never mentioned in Asad's commentary, Joseph is identified in the Gospels as a son of Jacob in the Gospel of Matthew 1:16 and Heli in the Gospel of Luke 3:23 (one tradition explains that both of these names were uterine brothers from the Davidic line: after Heli's death, his widow became the levirate wife of Jacob who then both became the parents of Joseph, who was a legal son of Heli). According to Saint Augustine, if by virtue of Joseph's marriage with Mary, Jesus could be called the son of Joseph, he can for the same reason be called "son of David" (S.D.F. Salmond, trans., "Augustine's On the Harmony of the Gospels, Book II," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* eds. P. Schaff and H. Wace [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 6:103, CHAP II).

[107] Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, 144.

5.2.2 An Apostle with a Message

Asad affirms the qurʾānic narrative that states that Jesus' call to prophethood came very early in his life. He verifies this claim, pointing to Q 3:46. The texts states that, as a baby, Jesus "shall speak (*yukallimu*) unto men in his cradle (*al-mahdi*) ...." On the one hand, Asad admits that this ability of the infant Jesus is presented as an unnatural event. But, determined to demythologize it, he interprets it as a "metaphorical allusion to the prophetic wisdom which was to inspire Jesus from a very early age."[108] It is by reading this as a metaphor, he argues, that the sense of the current verse connects meaningfully to the opening locution of Q 3:49. Opening this verse, the Qurʾān explicitly pronounces that this child is destined to be a *rasūlān* or "an apostle unto the children of Israel" *bi-āyatin* or "with a message".

The same call is worded more explicitly in Q 19:30 where the Qurʾān seemingly has Jesus speak from the cradle saying, "Behold, I am a servant of God. He has vouchsafed unto me revelation and made me a prophet." It is

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[108] Asad, *TMOQ,* 73, n. 33 on Q 3:46. That Jesus spoke as a child is also found in one of the infancy legends in the West called *pseudo-Matthew* (c. early 7th century CE) (Oscar Cullmann, trans. in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003], 1: 462-465)*.* As a new-born baby, Jesus is carried by Mary and Joseph on their flight to Egypt, and he spoke at several moments along the way: 1) while subduing the dragons in the cave where they are resting, Jesus says to his parents, "have no fear, and do not think that I am a child; for a I have always been and even now am perfect; all wild beasts must be docile before me"; 2) in front of "lions and leopards" in the desert, Jesus says to Mary, "do not fear, mother; for they do not come to harm you, but they hasten to obey you and me"; 3) on account of his parents hunger and thirst, Jesus tells the palm tree, "Bend down your branches, O tree, and refresh my mother with your fruit," then shortly after, he tells the tree to "Raise yourself, O Palm... and open your beneath your roots a vein of water which is hidden in the earth, and let the waters flow so that we may quench our thirst from it," and the next day, he rewards the palm-tree saying, "I give you this privilege, that one of your branches be carried by my angels and be planted in the paradise of my Father'"; 4) as the journey tarries long under the scorching sun, Jesus says to Joseph, "I will shorten your journey: what you are intending to traverse in the space of thirty days, you will complete in one day" ("Extracts from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," 462-4).

commonly suggested that the child Jesus may have, indeed, spoken from the cradle as is reported in this and in the aforementioned verse. But, Asad approaches this phenomenon in a rationalist way. He reasons that it is "not conceivable that anyone could be granted divine revelation and made a prophet before attaining to full maturity of intellectual experience"[109] For this reason he agrees with some commentators who interpret this passage to mean, "God has decreed (*qaḍā*) that He would vouchsafe unto me revelation...."[110] This suggests instead, an allusion to the future of Jesus.

Therefore, by reading the phenomenon of "speaking from the cradle" demythologically, Asad can interpret it as an "anticipatory description of the ethical and moral principle which was to dominate the adult life of Jesus and particularly his deep consciousness of being only 'a servant of God.'"[111] As such, the cluster passage of Q 19:30-33 can then be understood as "having been

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[109] Asad, *TMOQ,* 460, n. 24 on Q 19:30. For some commentators this is indeed a miracle of bestowing the infant Jesus a temporary gift of speech in order to absolve his mother of any blame or suspicion (Qurṭubī, 11:97, on Q 19:30); it also conveys that the first words spoken by Jesus in the cradle were significant because they were assertions of his servanthood in relation to God (*Ibid.*). Al-Ṭabarsī's interpretation affirms Asad's reading that Jesus' call to prophethood came very early in his life when he comments that some claimed that Jesus' intellect was perfected and he was a prophet from this time onward, in which case his miraculous ability to speak as an infant continued beyond this encounter with his mother's family (6:333, on Q 19:30). Shāfi, for his part, reads this "spectacle" as a plain miracle and certainly a special blessing from God. He says that if a child were to start talking in the cradle or on the laps of the mother, that would be a particular distinction of the child (6:40 f., on Q 19:30). It can therefore be suggested that Asad's view on this subject is unique.

[110] Al-Ṭabarī quoting ʿIkrima (d. 729 CE) and Al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 720 CE), but he himself applies this same interpretation to the next verse, explaining thus, "He was decreed that He would enjoin upon me prayer and charity" (Ṭabarī, 16: 95, on Q 19:30).

[111] Asad, *TMOQ,* 460, n. 24 on Q 19:30.

uttered by Jesus at a much later time -- namely, after he had reached maturity and been actually entrusted with his prophetic mission."[112]

With respect to the title *al-masīḥ* or "the anointed" which the Qurʾān gives to Jesus in Q 3:45, Asad affirms in his exegesis that this title is not *sui generis* to the Qurʾān. Rather, it is an Arabicized form of the Aramaic *měshīḥa*, which in turn, is derived from the Hebrew *māshīaḥ* of the same meaning.[113] This title, according to Asad, was applied to Jesus in his own lifetime. But, since the advent of the Greek version of the Gospels, the word *Christos* was used, even achieving currency in all Western languages. For this reason, Asad adapts the Greek form as the basis of his translation of *al-masīḥ* or "Christ Jesus" in Q 3:45.

5.2.3 Confirmer of the Truth

According to the Qurʾān, one of the purposes of the existence of Jesus is that he was to be a symbol or sign of God for humanity. Asad basically extrapolates this *telos* from his reading and exegesis of Q 19:21, which states,

> "[The angel] answered: 'Thus it is; [but] thy Sustainer says, 'This is easy for Me; and [thou shalt have a son,] so that We might make him a symbol unto mankind (*āyatan li-ʾl-nāsi*) and an act of grace from Us.' And it was a thing decreed [by God]"

This verse is God's reply to Mary's query in Q 19:20, "How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?" One notices that God gives her more information than she needs. This verse conveys a sense of urgency to inform her

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[112] Asad, *TMOQ,* 460, n. 24 on Q 19:30.

[113] Asad, *TMOQ,* 73, n. 32 on Q 3:45. Cf. Zamakhsharī, 1:356, on Q 3:45.

of the purpose of her pregnancy. Mary is given a *ghulāman zakiyyan* or "the gift of a son endowed with purity" (Q 19:19), namely, "so that We may make him an *āyatan li-'l-nāsi* or "a symbol unto mankind."

While the term *āyah*, when associated with Jesus, may be easily associated with different kinds of meanings, Asad cautions about the risk of misinterpreting it, and reading into it beyond what the Qurʾān intends. He writes that in this context, *āyah* has a "metonymic application to Jesus" and suggests that he is "destined to become a vehicle of God's message to man."[114] In short, this verse, Asad reports, enunciates that the fundamental role of Jesus is one of a messenger or a prophet. The prophets who came before Jesus, were also "symbols of God's grace."[115]

Asad's understanding of the mission of Jesus, as far as the Qurʾān is concerned, may be gleaned from his interpretation and rendition of the qurʾānic locution *li-mā bayna yadayhi.* In the sample verses that follow, he reads this phrase idiomatically, rather than literally. This is especially true in his reading and rendition of Q 5:46 which says,

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[114] Asad, *TMOQ,* 459, n.16 on Q 19:21. In contrast to Asad's angle of Jesus as God's messenger, other commentators interpret *āyatan li-'l-nāsi* as Jesus being a proof of God's Power as Creator, since his birth manifested the capability of God to bring a child into being without a father, just as God was capable of bringing Adam into being without a mother or a father (Ibn Kathīr, 6:242, on Q 19:21). Asad, however, finds echo to his interpretation in al-Ṭabarsī's reading of the verse. The latter says that through Jesus' miraculous conception and birth and his speaking as an infant (vv. 30-33), Jesus is a sign or proof of his prophethood and of his mother's innocence (Ṭabarsī, 6:330, on Q 19:21).

[115] Asad, *TMOQ,* 459, n. 16 on Q 19:21. Also, in his interpretation of verse Q 23:50 (and Q 21:91), Asad affirms that Mary is equally ascribed as an *āyah* (also translated as "symbol") alongside Jesus, and both are predicated as "symbols [of Our grace]," for they too, along the lines of those apostles, messengers, and prophets before them, were persecuted (Asad, *TMOQ,* 524, n. 25 on Q 23:50). Other commentators also say that Jesus, as "sign unto mankind," is *raḥmātan minnā* or "a mercy from God" to Mary and to those who believe in him and are guided by him (Ṭabarī, 16:74, on Q 19:21).

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"and We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow in the footsteps of those [earlier prophets], confirming the truth of whatever there still remained of the Torah (*li-mā bayna yadayhi mina'l-tawrāti*); and We vouchsafed unto him the Gospel, wherein there was guidance and light, confirming the truth of whatever there still remained of the Torah, and as a guidance and admonition unto the God-conscious."

Asad extrapolates that the mission of the prophet Jesus to the Israelite[116] was, as the verse says, "to follow the footsteps of the earlier prophets, confirming the truth of whatever there still remained of the Torah." For him, a literal interpretation of *li-mā bayna yadayhi mina al-tawrāti* could be roughly translated to read, "that which was between his [or "its"] hands." As such, it would not make any sense in an English translation vis-à-vis the Torah. The only way for this to convey a more accurate and meaningful message, Asad suggests, is to read it idiomatically or exegetically.

In this context, *li-mā bayna yadayhi* could only mean that Jesus was not confirming all the contents of the Torah. Considering that, according to the Qurʾān, some of the teachings contained in the Torah had been distorted or falsified by early Jewish scholars, Asad argues that part of the mission of Jesus could have been to simply ignore these inherited "untruths."[117] Thus, the Qurʾān speaks of Jesus as confirming *li-mā bayna yadayhi mina al-tawrāti*, that is, only those teachings in the Torah which remained consistent with the truth of the

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[116] In his exegesis of verse Q 7:158, Asad affirms that the designation of the Prophet Jesus to the Israelites reflected the qurʾānic norm of prophethood that "each of the earlier prophets was sent to his, and only his, community: thus, the Old Testament addresses itself only to the children of Israel, and even Jesus, whose message had a wider bearing, speaks of himself as 'sent only unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24)"

[117] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66 f., n. 3 on Q 3:3 citing a similar expression.

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revelations. Asad finds a parallel meaning of this expression in Q 5:48, which describes the mission of Muḥammad as

> "setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains (*li-mā bayna yadayhi*) of the earlier revelations and determining what is true therein."

Here, Asad again promotes the interpretation that, like Jesus, the Prophet Muḥammad's mission was to validate only the remaining truths of the *tawrāh* and *Injīl*. Both Jesus and Muḥammad were, therefore, commissioned to "set forth the truth," according to Asad. Another occurrence of this expression is found in Q 3:3 where it also serves as parallel to the mission of Jesus. As such, it corroborates Asad's interpretation, stating,

> "step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there still remains (*li-mā bayna yadayhi*) [of earlier revelations]: for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel."

In this verse, it is the "divine writ" or the Qurʾān -- rather than any prophet or messenger -- which has the function to confirm the elided "earlier revelations" (in brackets) namely, the *tawrāh* and *Injīl.* In this sense, Jesus and the Qurʾān have relatively parallel functions. As the former confirms the Torah, the latter also confirms *li-mā bayna yadayhi*, or those teachings from the *tawrāh* and *Injīl* which remain uncorrupted and in which "the basic truths still discernible." It sifts these "truths" from what Asad calls the "time-bound legislation" or from the "arbitrary alteration" to which the Bible was subjected by early Jewish codifiers over the course of millennia.[118] In particular, we see in his exegesis of Q Zukhruf 43:63

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[118] Asad, *TMOQ,* 65, n. 3 on Q 3:3. Asad's interpretation of "confirming not the whole corpus of the Bible or the Torah" was also the position of some commentators who said that Jesus "confirming the Torah" means that he upholds the validity of all Torah rulings not

that Asad appears to further specify what particular teaching God may have

actually commissioned Jesus to confirm. The verse states,

> "Now when Jesus came [to his people] with all evidence of the truth, he said: "I have now come unto you with wisdom, and to make clear unto you some of that (baʿda'l-ladhī) on which you are at variance: hence, be conscious of God, and pay heed unto me."

From this verse, Asad deduces that Jesus was especially sent to confirm baʿda'l-

ladhī ("some of that"). That could only refer to the spiritual and ethical teachings

and guidance which is embodied in the Synoptic Gospels.[119]

In his exegesis of Q 3:4, Asad mentions Jesus as the recipient of the

revelation called al-injīl. The verse states,

> "aforetime,[120] as a guidance unto mankind (hudan li-'l-nāsi), and it is He who has bestowed [upon man] the standard by which to discern the true from the false (al-furqān). Behold, as for those who are bent on denying God's messages -- grievous suffering awaits them: for God is almighty, an avenger of evil."

By rendering the word al-furqān into "the standard by which to discern the true

from the false,"[121] Asad renders it as the second modifier (that is, after "as a

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specifically abrogated by the Gospel (Ṭabarī, 3:195, on Q 3:3). In other words, like Asad, they also acknowledge that not everything in the Torah was confirmed by Jesus, and for that matter, by the Gospel.

[119] Asad, *TMOQ,* 756, n. 50 on Q 43:63. Asad echoes Ṭabarī's interpretation which gives a restrictive allusion of baʿda alladhī or "some of that" as referring to the realm of faith and morals alone, since it was not a part of Jesus' mission to deal with problems of his people's worldly life (Ṭabarī, 25:109-110, on Q 43:63).

[120] Like many of his counterparts, Asad presumes that verse Q 3:4 is syntactically contiguous to Q 3:3, that is, as the latter ends with the clause ... wa-anzala'l-tawrāta wa'l-injīla ("for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel") the former begins by saying min qablu hudan l-l-nāsi wa-anzala'l-furqān ... ("aforetime, as a guidance unto mankind, and it is He who has bestowed [upon man] the standard by which to discern the true from the false").

[121] Besides its common denotation as "criterion," the term al-furqān is also interpreted in different ways by some commentators: it can mean faṣl "discernment" or "judgment" that which things are distinguished, or some have also seen it as God's indication of what is true and false regarding Jesus (Ṭabarī, 3:196-197, on Q 3:4). But, Asad's interpretation closely echoes those

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guidance unto mankind") of the two early revelations: *al-tawrāh* and *al-injīl* (Q

3:3), rather than a separate revelation alongside the latter two.[122] With this

characterization, he, moreover, distinguishes *al-injīl* from what is known today as

the Four Gospels in the New Testament.[123] He says that the Gospel which is

frequently mentioned in the Qurʾān actually refers to "an original, since lost,

revelation bestowed upon Jesus and known to his contemporaries under its

Greek name *Evangelion* ("Good Tidings")." It is this "original" Gospel version,

says Asad, on which the Arabicized form *injīl* is based.[124]

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commentators who understood *al-furqān* to be that power to distinguish truth from falsehood, or more specifically that can modify or characterize the preceding scriptures as containing what separates truth from falsehood, forbidden from licit, and so forth (Rāzī, 7:40, on Q 3:4). Another argument for Asad's rendition is Muḥammad ʿAbduh's interpretation. The latter explains that *al-furqān* can also be applied to human reason, which enables a person to distinguish the true from the false (Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III:160, on Q 2:53).

[122] It is suggested that the qurʾānic *furqān* betrays a terminological form (like *qurʾān*) that is familiar in the Syro-Aramaic morphology where the triliteral root *f* (or *p*)-*r*-*q* relates to "salvation" (Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and the Bible*, 45). Reynolds also cites A. Jeffery, following Geiger, who points out that "*furqān* is particularly close to the Aramaic *purqānā,* which is used by the Targums for Psalm 3:8, meaning 'salvation'" (*Ibid.*). While Reynolds observes that *furqān* "seems to have the meaning of "revelation," thus, a "book," in the qurʾānic usages, Asad, in contrast, reads its occurrence in Q 3:4 and Q 2:53 not as a separate revelation, but a functional character or nature of the *tawrāh* and *injīl*, namely, "the standard by which to discern the true from the false." But, Reynolds's observation is substantiated by most English translators who render it as a separate revelation alongside the *tawrāh* and *injīl*:

> Yūsuf ʿAlī: (attached to Q 3:3) "and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the criterion (of judgment between right and wrong)"
> Pickthall: "Aforetime, for a guidance to mankind; and hath revealed the Criterion (of right and wrong)"
> Arberry: "aforetime, as guidance to the people, and He sent down the Salvation."
> Qarāʾī: "before as guidance for mankind, and He has sent down the Criterion."
> Droge: "before (this) as guidance for the people, and He sent down the Deliverance."
> Abdel Haleem: "earlier as a guide for people and He has sent down the distinction [between right and wrong]."

[123] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66, n. 4 on Q 3:4.

[124] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66, n. 4 on Q 3:4.

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The state of the original Gospel as having been lost and forgotten, according to Asad, is alluded to in Q 5:14. This verse says in reference to its Christian interlocutors, "... and they, too, have forgotten much (*fa-nasū ḥaẓẓan*) of what they had been told to bear in mind (*mimmā dhukkirū bihi*) ...."[125] Asad, however, is not explicitly clear about how this disappearance took place. Nonetheless, he alludes to the process of compilation or codification of scriptures so that the *injīl*, according to him, "was probably the source from which the Synoptic Gospels derived much of their material and some of the teachings attributed to Jesus."[126]

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[125] An Arabic translation of the Bible, most likely, did not exist at the time of the qurʾānic revelation; such a translation only appeared at least a century later (See Sidney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic the Scriptures of the "People of the Book" in the language of Islām* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013]). It is doubtful that in the early seventh century the texts in circulation would have been significantly different from the texts approved by Christian authorities at the end of the fourth century, when the Gospels were formally codified. The possibility is raised that the *injīl* given to Jesus maybe conveyed by the existing canonical Gospels, but is "not coterminous with it, yet is still recognized and sanctioned by God" (Dagli, "Āl ʿImrān," *The Study Qurʾān,* 129). It illustrates the case of the monks who are praised in Q 5:82 who, though not prescribed, initiated and asserted monasticism for themselves (Q 57:28) (*Ibid.*). The existing Gospel, unlike the Qurʾān, is a Divine Book "constituting a work of Divinely inspired or approved authors rather than a message delivered directly through Gabriel" (*Ibid.*) As such, it is agreeable with the Christian notion that the text is guided and sanctioned by God, but not directly revealed. In this way, the teachings and commands of the *injīl* given to Jesus are communicated to Christians through "the truth already in their possession" (Q 2:89) and "whatever there is still remains [of earlier revelations]" (Q 3:3). While Asad focuses on the issue of *taḥrīf* or the distortion done to the *injīl* by those who compiled and codified the Gospels, Dagli concludes on an irenic and conciliatory tone when it says that "one could thus hold that the Qurʾān, when referring to the *injīl* that the Christians have with them, includes both the text and the normative tradition around that text insofar as they convey Christ's original message to his apostles, which was given to him by God" (*ibid.*).

[126] Asad, *TMOQ,* 66, n. 4 on Q 3:4. With this theory, Asad basically advances a Muslim perspective that contrasts the mainstream Biblicists' two-source hypothesis. The latter hypothesizes that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written independently, each using the Gospel of Mark and a second hypothetical document called "Q" as a source (derived from the German word "Quelle"). Q was conceived as the most likely explanation behind the common material, primarily Jesus' sayings called *logia* found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. According to this hypothesis, this material was drawn from the early Church's Oral Tradition. See Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 54-99.

With this speculation, Asad implies that *taḥrīf* or "falsification" was committed during the process, and that some parts of the *injīl* were altered, eliminated, distorted or, perhaps perverted.[127] In his exegesis of Q Shuʿarāʾ 26:197,[128] he asserts that this very *taḥrīf* of the *injīl* may explain why many learned Christians, at the dawning of Islām, did not embrace the Prophet and his message. By that time, they no longer had credible "evidence of the basic identity of his (Jesus) teachings with those of the Qurʾān."[129]

Besides the *injīl,* Asad also interprets the conjunction *wa* connecting *al-tawrāh* and *al-injīl* in Q 5:110 to mean "the fact that both the Torah and the Gospel were included in the revelation vouchsafed to Jesus."[130] It is true that the Torah was an earlier revelation. For Asad, however, the Qurʾān maintains that it too was imparted to Jesus since his prophetic mission was based on the Law of Moses, something which he was going to confirm, not abrogate.[131] Thus, this verse also reinforces Jesus' confirmation of the role of the Torah. In his exegesis of Q Tīn 95:1-3, Asad implies the significance of confirming the earlier revelation. It was a function that Jesus himself assumed, namely, to preserve the

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[127] In his exegesis on Jesus creating a bird out of a clay in verse Q 3:49, Yūsuf ʿAlī similarly hypothesizes about this *taḥrīf* or falsification by commenting that "the original was not the various stories written afterwards by disciples, but the real Message taught directly by Jesus" (Yūsuf ʿAlī, 135, n. 390 on Q 3:49). Simply put, Yūsuf ʿAlī is suggesting that the non-existence of the aforementioned miracle of Jesus in the current canonical Gospels indicates that some elements of the "real Message" of Jesus did not make its way into them.

[128] "Is it not evidence enough for them that [so many] learned men from among the children of Israel have recognized this [as true]?"

[129] Asad, *TMOQ,* 573, n. 85 on Q 26:197.

[130] Asad, *TMOQ,* 167, n. 133 on Q 5:110. "... and how I imparted unto thee revelation and wisdom, including the Torah and the Gospel (*al-tawrāta wa'l-injīla*) ...."

[131] Asad, *TMOQ,* 167, n. 133 on Q 5:110.

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"fundamental ethical unity underlying the teachings -- the genuine teachings -- of all the three historic phases of monotheistic religion."[132]

According to Asad, the Qurʾān says that the prophet Jesus was much more than a *muṣaddiqun* or "a confirmer" and recipient of revelation. He was a miracle worker, distinguished for his works among all the prophets. But, Asad understands that the miracles of Jesus, especially those mentioned in verses Q 3:49 or Q 5:110, are meant to be read as metaphorical tools or parables in the context of his preaching. In the Christian tradition, however, these performances by Jesus, as related by both verses, are commonly understood as authentic miracles. Because of his divine nature, Jesus was thought to be capable of performing miracles.[133] The verse in question states,

> "I have come unto you with a message (*āyah*) from your Sustainer. I shall create for you out of clay (*mina al-ṭīni*), as it were, the shape (*ka-hay'ati*) of [your] destiny (*al-ṭayri*, instead of "the bird"), and then breathe into it, so that it might become [your] destiny (*ṭayran*, instead of "a bird") by God's leave;[134] and I shall heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's leave; and I shall let you know what you may eat and what you should store up in your houses. Behold, in all this there is indeed a message for you, if you are [truly] believers."

A critical reading of Asad's rationalist exegesis of this verse can help us to see his difficulty in offering a proper rendition of the term *āyah*. In this context, does Jesus come with "signs" or with "a message?" In his deliberation about

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[132] Asad, *TMOQ,* 961, n. 1 on Q 95:1

[133] Oscar Cullmann, trans., "Infancy Story of Thomas" in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1:444 (443 -451), 2:1-5.

[134] This locution is briefly treated in a comparative fashion among other English translations in Chapter THREE, 3.3.4.5.

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Jesus, Asad must have also drawn from the New Testament. As far as he was concerned, the English word "sign" may convey a limiting connotation when referring to the deeds of Jesus in this verse. Here, the word "sign" could only function to signify the occurrence of something else toward which it points. But, Asad decided to label these miracles as "message." It appears, therefore, that Asad believes that Jesus is not simply performing these miracles, or signs. He is also proclaiming *a* message to his audience through the linguistic or literary tools at his disposal. Hence, Asad acknowledges the imperative Jesus likely felt to announce his "message" alongside the performance of these miracles. For this reason, Asad opens the verse with the assertion, "I have come unto you with a message."[135] Then, he closes the passage with, "there is indeed a message for you, if you are truly believers."

According to its literal meaning, this verse says that Jesus creates a bird out of clay by breathing into it. On this level of reading, in the mind fo Asad, what is only conveyed is nothing more than the supernatural character of the performance itself. It does not enunciate the underlying or intended message. In other words, there is no doubt that the power of God appears to be working through Jesus. As it is, however, it fails to communicate the ultimate message underlying this miracle.

For this reason, Asad contends that it warrants a literary or linguistic demythologization. By the latter, he means to read this miracle as a figure of

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[135] This is unique to Asad, as most of the English translators, if not all, render *āyah* in this context into "signs."

speech in a metaphorical or allegorical style. He pursues this approach by

offering a substantial rationalist comment about it in the footnotes. In addition, he

also rewrites the syntax in the main text in an exegetical expression that some

critics would describe as "awkward."[136] Asad reads and translates the passage

with, "I shall create for you out of clay, as it were, the shape of [your] destiny by

God's leave" (Q 3:49).[137]

To justify his rendition of ṭayr into "destiny," he pays attention to the

occurrences of its triliteral root, ṭā-yā-rā (ṭayr; sing. ṭā'ir) and incorporates them in

his footnotes to prove that his version more accurately expresses the intended

qurʾānic signification. According to him, the noun ṭayr or its cognate verbal

permutation, ṭāra, which means "birds," can be properly interpreted both in a pre-

Islamic context and in relationship to the Qurʾān.[138] In both contexts, he

illustrates that ṭayr or ṭā'ir "often denotes 'fortune' or 'destiny,' whether good or

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[136] "Muḥammad Asad's rendering of the text itself is marked by an awkward archaism and formality and by many idiosyncratic interpretations that choose a symbolic or abstract meaning over the more obvious physical or literal one." Paula Youngman Skreslet and Rebecca Skreslet, "The Qurʾān: Text and Translation," *The Literature of Islām* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006), 8-9 (1-24).

[137] Noticeably, while the syntax of verse Q 3:49 is framed in the first person and in the future tense with Jesus apparently conscious of God as the ultimate source of creative power with the expression "by God's leave," verse Q 5:110, however, rehearses it in the second and in the past thus, "and how by My leave thou didst create (*wa-idh takhluqu*) out of clay, as it were, the shape of [thy followers'] destiny, and then didst breathe into it (*fa-tanfukhu fīha*), so that it might become, by My leave, [their] destiny"). Both narratives though are related either by God or by the angel.

[138] For instance, Asad cites verse Q 7:131 thus, "But whenever good fortune alighted upon them, they would say, "This is [but] our due"; and whenever affliction befell them, they would blame their evil fortune (*yaṭṭayyarū*) on Moses and those who followed him; or verse Q 27:47, "They answered: 'We augur evil (*aṭṭayyarnā*) from thee and those that follow thee!' Said he: 'Your destiny, good or evil (*ṭā'irukum*), rests with God: yea, you are people undergoing a test!'"; or verse Q 36:19, "[The apostles] replied: 'Your destiny, good or evil (*ṭā'irukum*), is [bound up] with yourselves!'"; or still more clearly in verse Q 17:13, "And every human being's destiny (*ṭā'irahu*) have We tied to his neck."

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evil."[139] He also appeals to several authoritative Arabic dictionaries which have

defined the word in the same way.[140] Essentially, the miracle of the creation of a

bird from clay, Asad asserts, intends to communicate more than its literal value. It

is an allegory which allowed Jesus to intimate

> "to the children of Israel that out of the humble clay of their lives he would
> fashion for them the vision of a soaring destiny, and that this vision,
> brought to life by his God-given inspiration, would become their real
> destiny by God's leave and by the strength of their faith."[141]

In a similar demythological style, Asad treats the fourth miracle of Q 3:49

(or of Q 5:110), namely, "and [I shall] bring the dead back to life (*wa-uḥyī'l-*

mawtā)." He leaves the syntax in the main text as it is, but again describes the

verse in metaphorical terms in the commentary. It functions, he says, as a

"metaphorical description" of Jesus giving new life to the people of Israel who

were spiritually dead.[142] This allegorical interpretation, he adds, echoes that of Q

6:122 which tells us about "He who was dead [in spirit] and whom We thereupon

gave life." When understood in its textual context, Asad says, the passage could

refer to "people who become spiritually alive through faith and are thereupon able

to pursue their way through life unerringly."[143]

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[139] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 37 on Q 3:49.

[140] Asad cites Edward Lane's definition, as an example, "*ṭā'ir* also signifies a thing from one augurs either good or evil; an omen, a bodement of good or of evil; also fortune, whether good or evil, and especially evil fortune; ill luck; as also, etc." (*An Arabic-English Lexicon,* (Beirut: Libraire du Liban, 1997), V: 1904 f.)

[141] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 37 on Q 3:49.

[142] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 38 on Q 3:49.

[143] Asad, *TMOQ,* 191, n. 108 on Q 6:122. According to some commentators God's giving "life" to one "who was dead" is a metaphor for spiritual awakening, and it is followed by the mention of God's making for him or her a light whereby he or she might see his or her way among all, that is, a source of religious guidance, or perhaps the Qurʾān specifically (Ṭabarī, 8:28-30, on Q 6:122). Mawdūdī likewise affirms Asad's allegorical reading as he reads "death" here as

Building on the latter treatment, Asad logically imposes a similar rationalist interpretation of the other two miracles of Q 3:49 (or of Q 5:110). This one tells us, "I shall heal (*ubri'u*) the blind and the leper." Asad characteristically demythologizes both of them as metaphors to convey the message of "inner regeneration of people who were spiritually diseased and blind to the truth."[144] Explaining his rationalist treatment of these miracles further, Asad argues that the figure of speech employed by the Qurʾān should be construed as consistent with that used by Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus often used several parables to strengthen the message offered in his preaching.[145]

What appears to be consistent in Asad's reading of these preceding miracles is his tendency to demythologize them as metaphors or allegories. On the one hand, he relegates any concomitant supernatural sense in the narrative to a literary tool. Simultaneously, he extrapolates its attendant spiritual meaning.

Recalling the models of translations discussed in Chapter Three, it is obvious that Asad's hermeneutical methodology typifies the target-centered model. His demythological treatment is consistent with such a model because it seeks to adhere to the presupposition that the Qurʾān carries an inherently

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signifying "the state of ignorance and lack of consciousness" whereas "life" denotes "a state of knowledge and true cognition, the state of awareness of Reality" (Mawdūdī, II:271, n. 88 on Q 6:122). Quṭb also interprets "death" in this verse metaphorically as characterizing the situation of the Muslims before they came to embrace Islām, and "before faith breathed life into their souls to release within them their great store of ability, action and forward-looking qualities." He adds that "their hearts are dead, and their spirits were in darkness, but when faith touched their hearts they quickened and light brightened their souls" (Quṭb, V:300, on Q 6:122). Yūsuf ʿAlī too, reads this section as an allegory of the good man who before he got his spiritual life, was like one dead; It was God's grace that gave him spiritual life (325, n. 945 on Q 6:122).

[144] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 38, on Q 3:49.

[145] Asad, *TMOQ*, 74, n. 37, on Q 3:49.

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rational message. That message employs symbolic language to communicate its insights to its audience.

In considering the "creation of the bird from clay," Asad decides to radically change the syntax in the main texts as he imposes vocabulary that may sound inappropriate or awkward to some critics. When it comes to the textual rendition of the other miracles, he defers to the literal equivalence while he demythologizes them in his commentary. Above all, by performing this rationalist interpretation, he has further purged any sign of supernatural element associated with the humanity of Jesus.

By so doing, he also invites strong criticism for revising or reducing a popular characterization held by other Muslim commentators. Jesus was seen as a miracle worker by many. He was much more than an efficiently artistic preacher. This criticism would not have mattered for Asad. He strongly believed that his attempt to demythologize these miracles was consistent with the qurʾānic agenda of purifying the identity of Jesus from any dross of divinity conferred by erroneous theology.

5.2.4 His Helpers

Asad also affirms the qurʾānic narrative that Jesus was not going to be alone in his mission, especially during the times when he encountered *kufr* or "unbelief" from his audience, the people of Israel. This, according to him, is conveyed, for example, in Q 3:52, which states,

> "and when Jesus became aware of their refusal to acknowledge the truth, he asked: 'Who will be my helpers (*anṣārī*) in God's cause?" The white-

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garbed ones (*al-ḥawāriyyūna*) replied: "We shall be [thy] helpers (*anṣāru*) [in the cause] of God! We believe in God: and bear thou witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto Him!"

Jesus was to have *anṣār* or "helpers," whom the Qurʾān seems to properly call as *al-ḥawāriyyūn*.[146] Asad's interpretation of this concept resonates with that of many scholars and translators of the Qurʾān. They simply render this term as "apostles" or "disciples."[147] As already mentioned in Chapter Two, Asad tries to contextualize the meaning of this vocabulary within the three semantic sources: the *mufassirūn,* the Essene Brotherhood, and the *aḥādīth*. We have also seen that Asad's exegetical rendition of the four occurrences of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* into "white-garbed ones"[148] distinguishes him from his counterparts.

Initially, it may appear that his rendition is motivated by a desire to maintain a consistency with the basic meaning of the noun *ḥūr* (pl. of *aḥwar* and *ḥawrāʾ*). Asad renders that term as "companions pure" in later verses.[149] In Q 56:22, for example, he characterizes these "companions" as individuals distinguished by *ḥawār*, which primarily denotes "intense whiteness (*shadīdatu'l-bayāḍi*) of the eyeballs and lustrous black of the iris." These are individuals

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[146] This concept is discussed etymologically and philologically in Chapter Two, 2.3.1.4, "Interpretive Context." Some commentators interpret *anṣārī ilā'l'lāhi*, or in Asad's rendition, "helpers in God's cause" to mean "helpers along with God" (Ṭabarī, 3:332, on Q 3:52), so that the question means more specifically, "who will add their help to that of God?" or "who will be my helpers *in my fleeing* unto God" (Rāzī, 8:55, on Q 3:52).

[147] Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* II, 666; Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostles of Jesus," 5.

[148] Cf. *TMOQ,* Q 5:111, 112; and twice in Q 61:14; Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostles of Jesus," 2-3; Ṭabarī, 3:336, on Q 3:52.

[149] See Q 44:54, Q 52:20, Q 55:72.

whose moral qualification can be described as "purity."[150] With this philological

consideration, Asad, therefore, connects the concept of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* with the

spiritual and ethical notions of goodness within a person's heart. As far as the

Qurʾān is concerned, this quality appropriately characterizes those who are

called to help the prophets.

Moreover, unlike other interpretations of *al-ḥawāriyyūn*, Asad uniquely

links its signification with the Essene Brotherhood in the Judaean desert. This

linkage is primarily based on the connection of morality to "whiteness." It is a

connotation associated with the cognates of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* and the highly valued

moral symbolism that the Brotherhood gave to the color "white."[151] With this in

mind, Asad has inadvertently placed the qurʾānic concept of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* into a

Jewish and Christian semantic context. It is rewarding, from the perspective of

hermeneutics, to see this term exegetically treated in light of information we have

about this ascetic community in Palestine. It is also noteworthy that Asad's

exegesis of *al-ḥawāriyyūn* does not only apply an inter-textual attempt to nuance

the concept's meaning. It also attempts to avoid simply casting the "helpers," or

Jesus for that matter, as Muslims by situating them properly in their biblical

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[150] Asad, *TMOQ,* 831, n. 8 on Q 56:22. In *al-Qāmūs*, *ḥawār* denotes intense whiteness of the eyeballs and lustrous black of the iris (Muḥammad ibn Yaʿqūb Fīrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* [Bayrūt, Lubnān: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1996], 486). Zamakhsharī defines *ḥawār* in a general sense as simple "whiteness" or, morally speaking, a sense of "purity" (Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar Zamakhsharī*, Asās al-Balāgha* [Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣrīyah al-ʿĀmmah liʾl-Kitāb, 1985], 1:215. As regards the term *ḥūr*, in its feminine connotation, quite a number of the commentators understood it as signifying no more and no less than "the righteous among the women of humankind" (*ṣawāliḥu nisāʾu banī ādam*) (Ṭabarī, 27:208, on *Q 5*6:22).

[151] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 42 on Q 3:52.

milieu.[152] Asad's inter-textual exegesis on this concept, therefore, allows him to appropriately acknowledge the *ḥawāriyyūn* of Jesus as Jewish people.[153]

In addition to the foregoing epithet, namely, *al-ḥawāriyyūn*, Asad also extrapolates another meaning for the "helpers" of Jesus from Q Hūd 11:27, which states,

> "But the great ones among his people, who refused to acknowledge the truth, answered: 'We do not see in thee anything but a mortal man like ourselves; and we do not see that any follow thee save those who are

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[152] Asad may be one of the first (or perhaps, the only) modern translators or scholars who interprets *al-ḥawāriyyūn* not through the lens of the classical *mufassirūn* (Reynolds, "The Qurʾān and the Apostle of Jesus," 3, n. 13), but associates or links it with the Essene Brotherhood. That Jesus was associated in some way with the latter group was a hypothesis proposed by Edward Planta Nesbit in his 1895 book entitled *Christ, Christians and Christianity* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., Ltd, 1895). 1-209). In Book 1, "Jesus an Essene," Nesbit surveys some fragments from the work of Philo and Josephus and relates that at the period in which John the Baptist and Jesus were born the Essenes were scattered all over Palestine. Both of these accounts have attached high regard and reverence of this sect, and its virtuous members (*Ibid.,* 1). Nesbit argues that many features characterizing this community's way of life and discipline are illustrated in the New Testament. Their calling to becoming a member, their abandoning livelihoods, properties and families and gave them to the poor or taking care of the sick among them, their preaching around the city, their notion of renunciation and detestation of the wealth of the world, etc., all of these, Nesbit asserts, are illustrated in some explicit manner in the New Testament (*Ibid.,* 9). In addition, the Essenes also wore white raiment and white veils, much like how Jesus is portrayed at his transfiguration, or the angels at the sepulcher, or how the color "white" is the eschatological preference in many parts of the Book of Revelation, or how it is adapted as the color of purity for those newly baptized (*Ibid.,* 32-34). Other scholars also argue that the Jewish origin of the Essenes, and that it was founded and led by the Teacher of Righteousness who was identical, at least in position, to the original Jesus about one hundred-fifty years before the time of the Gospels (Alvar Ellegard, *Jesus - One Hundred Years Before Christ: A Study in Creative Mythology* [New York: The Overlook Press, 1999], 123 [108-124]). As far as Fred G. Bratton is concerned, "the Teacher of Righteousness of the Scrolls would seem to be a prototype of Jesus, for both spoke of the New Covenant; they preached a similar gospel; each was regarded as a Savior or Redeemer; and each was condemned and put to death by reactionary factions... We do not know whether Jesus was an Essene, but some scholars feel that he was at least influenced by them" (*A History of the Bible* [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967], 79-80).

[153] Moreover, by attempting to identify *al-ḥawāriyyūn* and Jesus with the aforementioned Jewish community of Essenes, Asad is also advancing the universal message of the Qurʾān, that is, while it was specifically revealed to the Arabs, its teachings are universally oriented. This universal sense is illustrated in Asad's exegesis of verse Q Qalam 68:35, where he asserts "the earliest occurrence of *muslimūn* (sing. *muslim*) in the history of qurʾānic revelation," Asad bemoans the fact that instead of perpetuating its original connotation (which he renders thus throughout his translation) -- namely, "one who surrenders [or 'has surrendered'] himself to God" -- post-qurʾānic development, he said, institutionalized a narrower, more exclusivist understanding of the concept (Asad, *TMOQ,* 885, n. 17 on Q 68:35).

quite obviously the most abject among us; and we do not see that you could be in any way superior to us: on the contrary, we think that you are liars!'"

This verse, according to Asad, corroborates the histories of all the

prophets, verifying that

> "most of their early followers belonged to the lowest classes of society -- the slaves, the poor and the oppressed -- to whom the divine message gave the promise of an equitable social order on earth and the hope of happiness in the hereafter."[154]

It is for this reason, Asad observes, that prophets like Muḥammad and

Jesus, and their followers were "distasteful to the upholders of the established

order and the privileged classes of the society concerned." It is because the

messages and mission of both Muḥammad and Jesus were revolutionary.[155]

In Q 5:112, the same *al-ḥawāriyyūn* or "the white-garbed ones" raise a

question to Jesus which, according to Asad, appears to challenge the

omnipotence of God.[156] They asked, "Could thy Sustainer (*hal yastaṭīʿu rabbuka*)

send down unto us a repast from heaven?"[157] Such a question prompts Asad to

consider the underlying qurʾānic intent. How should this clause be properly read?

Is there any variant *qirāʾa* (reading) that was considered by earlier

commentators?

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[154] Asad, *TMOQ,* 316, n. 47 on Q 11:27.

[155] Asad, *TMOQ,* 316, n. 47 on Q 11:27.

[156] Asad, *TMOQ,* 168, n. 137 on Q 5:112.

[157] Asad's counterparts translate this question thus,
Yūsuf ʿAlī: "can thy Lord send down to us a table set (with viands) from heaven?"
Pickthall: "is thy Lord able to send for us a table spread with food from heaven?"
Arberry: "is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?"
Qarāʾī: "can your Lord send down to us a table from the sky?"
Abdel Haleem: "can your Lord send down a feast to us from heaven?"

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It should be noted, however, that while Asad has concerns about the syntax of the *textus receptus*, he, nonetheless, defers to the source text by producing a literal equivalence. The phrase in question here is *hal yastaṭīʿ rabbuka*, which can be rendered literally into, "Can He, your Lord" or "Could He, thy Sustainer" or "Is your Sustainer able." At face value, this phrase presents two theological challenges, according to Asad. First, its syntax casts a "fundamental doubt" upon God's omnipotence. Secondly, it is unlikely and incongruous that this expression would be uttered by *al-ḥawāriyyūn* whom the Qurʾān speaks as "firm believers."[158]

Surveying the positions of some classical and modern commentators on this subject, Asad additionally discovers conflicting views in their interpretations. Nonetheless, most commentators finally defer to the *textus receptus* or the received text while making sure that the translation would not compromise the fundamental truth about God.[159] Instead of interpreting it as an expression of doubt about God's ability to provide, these commentators read it as to whether or not God is willing to provide.

In contrast, Asad relates that "several of the most outstanding Companions of the Prophet"[160] read this text with the spelling, *hal tastaṭīʿ*

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[158] Asad, *TMOQ,* 168, n. 137 on Q 5:112; *in kuntum mu'minīn* or "if you are [truly] believers' (Q 5:112) is read by Asad as though there is a conscious presumption of their belief, at least, in the context of the Qurʾān.

[159] Ṭabarī, 7:152 ff. on Q 5:112; al-Ḥusayn ibn Masʿūd Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī al-musammá Maʿālim al-tanzīl* (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmīyah, 1993), II:63, on Q 5:112; Rāzī, 12:107 f. on Q 5:112; Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qurʿān* (Bayrūt: al-Dār al-Shāmīyah, 2011), 530-531); also Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VII: 250 ff. on Q 5:112.

[160] Ṭabarī, (7:152-154, on Q 5:112), Zamakhsharī (1:677, on Q 5:112), al-Baghawī (II:63, on Q 5:112), Rāzī (12:107-108, on Q 5:112), Ibn Kathīr (3:300, on Q 5:112) cite the perspectives

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rabbaka, which is in the second person voice -- instead of *hal yastaṭīuʿ rabbuka*, which is in the third person. The intent of this variant reading is, obviously, to deflect the subject being addressed in the question. Instead of challenging the omnipotence of God, now it puts the ability of Jesus to the test. The passage can now be read, "Can you (Jesus) ask your Lord?" or "Are you able, or Do you have the ability to ask your Lord?" or even, "Couldst thou prevail upon thy Sustainer?"

In this reading, therefore, the disciples are now casting uncertainty upon the ability of Jesus to make the above appeal or request to God.[161] Asad for his part, says, "to my mind, the weight of evidence points to this second alternative; but in view of the more general reading, I have rendered the phrase as above." His translation reads, "Could thy Sustainer send down unto us a repast from heaven?" Asad's theoretical or theological preference for the second alternative is consistent with his reading of the qurʾānic Jesus whom he portrays as an absolute human being.

The debate over which one is the correct *textus receptus*, that is, whether it is *hal yastaṭīuʿ rabbuka* or *hal tastaṭīʿu rabbaka* has become an opportunity for Asad to deflect the readers' attention from a risky theological query which would have challenged God's omnipotence. Determined to enunciate the qurʾānic thesis on the humanity of Jesus, Asad is compelled to refocus the challenge from

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of the Companions (*al-Ṣaḥābah*): ʿAlī; Ibn ʿAbbās, "could you pray to your Lord" (*Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās*, II:154, on Q 5:112) ʿĀ'isha and Muʿādh ibn Jabal.

[161] In al-Rāzī's commentary, ʿĀ'isha refuses to accept the more common reading, namely, *hal yastaṭīʿ rabbuka* as she said, "the *ḥawāriyyūn* of Jesus knew better than to ask whether God is able to do anything: they merely asked [of Jesus], 'Are you able to request your Sustainer'" (Rāzī, 12:108, on Q 5:112).

God's omnipotence to Jesus' ability to make an appeal or request God for favor. Casting this doubt on Jesus, however, further implies a theological reframing of his personal relationship with God. As far as the Qurʾān is concerned, that relationship is erroneously conceived by Christians. As the Qurʾān presents him, Jesus is a person without undue divine favor or affection and is just like anyone else in front of God.

5.2.5 His Message

In his exegesis of a portion of Q 2:286, which says, "O our Sustainer! Lay not upon us a burden (*iṣr*) such as Thou didst lay upon those who lived before us! (*alladīna min qablinā*)," Asad characterizes "those who lived before us"[162] as referring specifically to the pre-Islamic Jews and Christians who suffered onerous *iṣr* ("burden"). That burden was supposedly imposed upon them by their respective prophets: Moses and Jesus.[163] The Law of Moses had imposed upon the children of Israel a "heavy burden of rituals," while Jesus had set forth the teachings or discipline of "world-renunciation."[164]

In other words, Asad compares the "burden" of Jesus' teachings to that imposed by Mosaic Law which had weighed down on the people Israel.

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[162] Some commentators also understood "lay not upon us burden" as referring to the covenant or pact that was made with different conditions with other religious communities, such as the Jews and Christians (Ṭabarī, 3:184, on Q 2:286).

[163] Asad, *TMOQ,* 64, n. 278 on Q 2:286.

[164] Asad, *TMOQ,* 64, n. 278 on Q 2:286. In contrast to Asad's accusation of the prophets or their teachings, *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn*, for his part, consistently ascribed to God who "lay upon those before us," or He who "used to take to task those before us," but who has also eventually "lifted this burden from this community" (I:46, on Q 2:286).

Interestingly, it was the same kind of imposed burden that Jesus strongly criticizes in the Gospel.[165] Furthermore, Asad also reads the Qurʾān as implicitly accusing the teachings of Jesus, and the Law of Moses as unlike that of the Qurʾān. In contrast to the burden imposed by Jesus and Moses, the Qurʾān proposes that God's people carry a different kind of load. This load, the Qurʾān says, *lā yukallifu'l-lāhu nafsan illa wusʿahā* or "does not burden any human being with more that he is well able to bear" (Q 2:286).[166]

And yet, Asad, feels compelled to rectify what he thinks was an erroneous teaching associated with Jesus. For this error, he blames the so-called "post-Pauline followers of Jesus"[167] for promoting a notion that Jesus allegedly cancelled the Jewish dietary laws. He broaches this correction through his interpretation of a clause in Q 5:5 which says,

> "today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime (*al-ladhīna ūtū'l-kitāba*) is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them...."

Asad asserts that this clause is particularly polemical towards the aforementioned "post-Pauline" Christians who distorted the dietary teachings of

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[165] The Gospel of Matthew 23:4, "They tie up heavy burdens (Gk. *phortia*, sing. *phortion*) and lay them on people's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they!"; or the Gospel of Luke 11:46, "But he said, 'Alas for you lawyers as well, because you load on people burdens (Gk. *phortizete*) that are unendurable, burdens (*phortia*) that you yourselves do not touch with your fingertips." Somehow Asad's blunt accusation of Jesus' teaching as oppressive is contradicted by the latter himself who said in the Gospel to those who are weighed down by the prescriptions of Moses, "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened (Gk. *pephortismenoi*), and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden (Gk. *phortion*) light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

[166] According to Ibn Kathīr, this expression is usually interpreted to mean that in many ways Islām represented an alleviation and reduction of the ritual and legal obligations placed on people's past (2:103, on Q 2:286).

[167] Asad, *TMOQ,* 142, n. 14 on Q 5:5.

Jesus. He argues that, as a noble prophet of God, Jesus would have faithfully adapted the dietary teachings of Moses and enjoined them to his followers.[168] As a matter of fact, it was Jesus himself, Asad reminds, who said, "Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them."[169] What Asad is arguing here is that the dietary tradition[170]

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[168] With these comments, Asad is, first of all, plainly acknowledging the unstated group of Christians who putatively belonged to the qurʾānic circumlocutory *al-ladhīna ūtū'l-kitāb*. Second, he is implying that these Christians were those followers of Jesus before the time of the Apostle Paul or those who have not known the latter, hence, the distinction that Asad is drawing in his interpretation between their respective dietary observance or regiment: those who follow Jesus' original unfalsified rules and those who abide by Paul's innovations. What Asad has left unexplained, however, is the basis of his reading or presumption that, indeed, the Qurʾān is referencing a pre-Paulinian community, rather than diverse "Christians" confessional community at the time of the revelation or codification of the Qurʾān. In his philological study of the Arabic term *naṣārā* in the Qurʾān, one of De Blois' inferences is that the etymological usage of the term or its cognates before the time of the Qurʾān almost always carried a pejorative connotation vis-à-vis the followers of Jesus, that is, compared to the currency of the word "Christian" (François de Blois, "Naṣrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and ḥanīf (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islām," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65:1 [2002], [1-30]). The accusatory characterization that the Qurʾān has towards its *naṣrānī* audience (for their tritheism and anthropomorphism) strongly suggests to de Blois that the beliefs of these so-called "followers of Jesus" are anything but consistent with the fundamental doctrines or confessions of the catholic (Nicene) Christian denominations (*Ibid.,* 14). He conjectures that a combination of "the Elchasite material with the Nazorean" unorthodox Christian doctrines must have been "a widespread notion in 'Jewish Christian' circles" (*Ibid.,* 15-16).

[169] To stress Asad's point here, Jesus actually continues by saying that "In truth I tell you, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, is to disappear from the Law until all its purpose is achieved. Therefore, anyone who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of Heaven; but the person who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:18-19). Cf. Asad, *TMOQ,* 597, n. 49 on Q 28:49.

[170] A notable exception to Asad's interpretation is found in the early Shīʿite commentary tradition which considered "the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime" to refer to vegetables, grains, or other foods that did not require ritual slaughtering ('Alī ibn Ibrāhīm Qummī, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* [Bayrūt, Lubnān: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlāmī l'il-Maṭbūʿāt, 1991], 1:171, on Q 5:5; Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan Ṭūsī, *al-Tibyān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* [Bayrūt: al-Amīrah, 2010], 3:418 ff. on Q 5:5). Yet, others also argue that even food that has been presented as an offering to a church (Ṭabarī, 6:125, on Q 5:5) or slaughtered in the name of the Messiah (Qurṭubī, 6:75, on Q 5:5) is licit. Some early Companions, however, including ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and ʿĀʾishah, held that if one heard a Jew or Christian slaughtering an animal in the name of the something other than God, one should not eat it, as indicated in Q 6:121 which commands, "eat not of that over which God's name has not been pronounced" (Qurṭubī, 6:75, on Q 5:5).

-- the same tradition the Qurʾān enjoins Muslims to observe[171] -- which was handed down uninterrupted from those who received the earlier revelation is now effectively disrupted by those who undermined the original teachings of Jesus.[172]

Furthermore, Asad may also be reacting to some passages in the New Testament in which Mosaic laws appeared to be abrogated.[173] As such, therefore, this abrogation corroborates with his accusation of *taḥrīf* against the *injīl* relative to the compilation and codification of the Gospels or the New Testament.

Asad's exegesis on Q 5:45 also broaches another teaching from Jesus. It is one that Christians consider to be a fundamental moral and spiritual teaching. Addressing "forgiveness," this verse states,

> "and We ordained for them in that [Torah]: A life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and a [similar] retribution for wounds; but he who shall forgo it out of charity (*fa-man taṣaddaqa bihi*) will atone thereby for some of his past sins (*kaffāratun lahu*). And they who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed -- they, they are the evildoers!"

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[171] Some commentators interpret the word *al-yawm* ("today") in the beginning of the Q 5:5 refers not to the day the verse was revealed, but to the era of Islām (*awānu ẓuhūrikum wa-shuyūʿi al-Islām*) itself) (Qurṭubī, 6:74, on Q 5:5), meaning this prescription is applicable to Muslims of all times.

[172] If Asad understands the implied "Christians" of Q 5:5 to be the "Nazoreans" according to the hypothesis of de Blois ("Naṣrānī [Ναζωραῖος] and ḥanīf [ἐθνικός]...," 15-16) -- who observed the Jewish dietary laws of purity -- then it would make sense for him to be favorable of these "Christians" and criticize the so-called dietary innovations of the post-Paulinian Christians who embraced the Jesus who "declared all food clean" (Mark 7:15) and "notorious for their parcophagy." In other words, there is a possibility that the Christians of those "vouchsafed revelation aforetime" were the latter category.

[173] As in Acts of the Apostles 10:15 where, in a dream, a voice spoke to Peter saying, "what God has made clean, you have no right to call profane"; or in the Gospel of Mark 7:15 where Jesus teaches that "nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean"; Cf. Mark 7:17-23, 1 Tim 4:4, Rom 14:17, or Eph 2:8-10.

In this verse, the Qurʾān recalls the famous biblical *lex talionis.* This law is more commonly known as the "eye-for-an-eye" code of justice mentioned in the Old Testament.[174] It is also recounted by Jesus in his "Sermon on the Mount" in the Gospel of Matthew, and implicitly in the Gospel of Luke.[175] Although the qurʾānic verse in question contains no explicit mention of Jesus or Christianity, Asad takes a hint from the verses that follow. These share the qurʾānic *telos* or vision for Jesus' prophethood, giving credit to Jesus, alongside the Qurʾān, for not only teaching but also reviving the virtue of forgiveness. Asad argues categorically that the latter teaching, which is embedded in the verse in question is not included or even emphasized in the Torah.[176] The locution reminds us,

> "… but he who shall forgo it out of charity (*fa-man taṣaddaqa bihi*) will atone thereby for some of his past sins (*kaffāratun lahu*) …."

This teaching of forgiveness "was brought out with great clarity not only in the Qurʾān but also in the teachings of Jesus," Asad points out in *The Message of the Qurʾān.*[177] Therefore, in the context of Q 5:45, foregoing a retribution "out of charity" and thereby meriting atonement for one's past sins was, according to Asad, was one of the Torah's original teachings. The teachings, however, "have

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[174] The Book of Exodus 21:23ff, the Book of Leviticus 24:19-21, the Book of Deuteronomy 19:21.

[175] The Gospel of Matthew 5:38-42, the Gospel of Luke 6:27-30.

[176] al-Rāzī reads this verse as one of reminder for the Jews about the Law of the Torah regarding retribution for murder and injury (12:8, on Q 5:45).

[177] Asad, *TMOQ,* 153, n. 62 on Q 5:45. According to some commentators, if anything the true ruling in the Torah regarding retribution, "a life for a life," makes no accommodation based on the social status of killer or killed and makes no provision for the payment of compensation (*dīyah*) -- an alternative allowed in Islamic Law. According to this verse, the laws of the Torah allow only equivalent retribution or outright forgiveness (Qurṭubī, 6:196, on Q 5:45; Rāzī, [12:8, on Q 5:45]).

been subsequently corrupted or deliberately abandoned by its followers, whom

the Qurʾān accuses of 'distorting the meaning of the revealed words.'"[178]

5.2.6 His Persecution and Death

According to the Qurʾān, the prophethood of Jesus was not without

challenges and detractors. Like the prophets before and after him, Jesus faced

opposition, at times, hostility. He ultimately died at the hands of his own people,

people who had listened to him preach. Exploring this theme, Asad critically

examines Q 3:54, which says, "and the unbelievers schemed (*makarū*) [against

Jesus]; but God brought their scheming to nought: for God is above all

schemers." Here, Asad identifies the schemers as coming from a particular group

"among the Jews." He juxtaposes it with his reading of Q 3:52, "and when Jesus

became aware of their (*minhum*) refusal to acknowledge the truth." Asad

proposes that the latter verse most likely refers to the same group, a group he

identifies as "the Pharisees."[179] In turn, the Pharisees are likely to be the

unstated and implied subject of the plural verb *makarū* in Q 3:54. These

Pharisees are the same people who "refused to acknowledge Jesus as a

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[178] Asad, *TMOQ,* 153, n. 62 on Q 5:45. Cf. Q 5:41, as a matter of fact, some of the commentators suggest that verses Q 5:41-44 are referring not only to the Jews altering the penalty for adultery, but also to their neglect of the proper retribution and penalty for killing. Al-Rāzī, for example, relates how the Jewish clans of Madinah, the Banū Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓah, would reportedly alter the required retribution in accordance with the relative social standing of the killer and the victim (Rāzī, 12:8, on Q 5:45). As the Banū Naḍīr were of higher social standing than the Banū Qurayẓah, if a member of the former killed one of the latter's, he would not face retribution, but merely be required to pay compensation; in the reverse situation, however, the perpetrator would be killed or required to a much higher amount of compensation (*Ibid.*).

[179] Asad, *TMOQ,* 75, n. 41 on Q 3:52.

prophet and tried to destroy him."[180] Moreover, it is probably the same group of people implicated by Asad for spreading *buhtānan ʿaẓīman* or "awesome calumny" in Q 4:156. According to Asad, this calumny must have referred to "the popular Jewish assertion that Jesus was an illegitimate child."[181]

A couple of insights may be generated from this hypothesis. First, by uniquely identifying this Jewish group by name, Asad is basically using information from the New Testament to nuance his interpretation of the Jesus of the Qurʾān. As such, for him, the latter scripture ironically functions as a hermeneutical context despite his strong opinion on the issue of *taḥrīf*, which is associated with the Christian scripture. Second, in so doing, Asad is suggesting we avoid generalization of the whole Jewish audience of the Qurʾān as directly culpable for the persecution and death of Jesus.

In addition, Asad cites another reason why the Children of Israel were inhospitable to the latter prophets, like Jesus and Muḥammad. Asad's explanation emerges from his exegesis of Q Jinn 72:7, which says, "so much so that they came to think, as you [once] thought, that God would never [again] send forth anyone [as His apostle],"[182] Asad hypothesizes that this mindset emerged

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[180] Asad, *TMOQ*, 75, n. 44, on Q 3:54.

[181] Asad, *TMOQ,* 134, n. 170 Q 4:156.

[182] Except *Ṣaḥīḥ International* which renders Q 72:7 into "and they had thought, as you thought, that Allah would never send anyone [as a messenger]," most translators understand this verse as enunciating the theme of "resurrection" as the following versions:
    Yūsuf ʿAlī: "And they (came to) think as ye thought, that God would not raise up any one (to Judgment)."
    Pickthall: "And indeed they supposed, even as ye suppose, that Allah would not raise anyone (from the dead)"
    Droge: "And that they thought as you (also) thought, that God will not raise up anyone"
    Abdel Haleem: "They thought, as you did, that God would never raise anyone from the dead."

because "an overwhelming majority of the Jews was convinced that no prophet would be raised after those who were explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament."[183] The hostility of the Jews towards their prophets is a common qurʾānic *topos* that Asad affirms.

Within this narrative, Asad provides a context for the eventual death of the prophet Jesus. He suggests that Jesus was a victim of the *kufr* or unbelief and resistance of the people whom he came to teach. Asad's discussion on this subject begins in his exegesis of Q 2:61. In this passage, the Qurʾān recalls the Jews being rebellious against Moses in the desert and describes their predicament thus,

> "... ignominy and humiliation overshadowed them, and they earned the burden of God's condemnation: all this, because they persisted in denying the truth of God's messages (*yakfurūna bi-āyātin'l-lāhi*) and in slaying the prophets (*wa-yaqtulūna'l-nabiyyina*) against all right: all this, because they rebelled [against God], and persisted in transgressing the bounds of what is right."[184]

That the Qurʾān accuses the Jews retrospectively of apparent "persistent repetition" in "slaying the prophets"[185] is understood by Asad as factual. He writes

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The Study Qurʾān: "They thought, as did you, that God would resurrect no one." Otherwise, Asad's reading resonates with that of Mawdūdī's who interprets it as "raising a messenger" (Mawdūdī, n. 8 on Q 72:7, digital edition by *Islamic Foundation, UK*, accessed Feb 2018).

[183] Asad, *TMOQ*, 900, n. 5 on Q 72:2, citing al-Ṭabarī (30:131, on Q 72:7) and Ibn Kathīr (10:198-199, on Q 72:7). Asad may also be alluding to the belief of "the Cessation of Prophecy" which has occupied not only the minds of Jews since the second temple era but also early Christians. See. Stephen L Cook, *On the Question of the "Cessation of Prophecy" in ancient Judaism* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 1-194.

[184] Cf. Q 4:155, Q 3:181, 183

[185] Asad, *TMOQ,* 13, n. 48 on Q 2:61.

that, "the Jews actually did kill some of their prophets."[186] As an example, he

brings in the story of the killing of John the Baptist.[187] More notably, and for the

first time in *The Message of the Qurʾān,* he mentions the name Jesus and

includes him in a long line of prophets who were allegedly slain by the Jews.

A similar approach to the same theme is alluded to in the New Testament

where Jesus himself accuses the Jews by saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you

that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you!"[188] And, by then

adding in a passage from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians as a

parallel in the same commentary, Asad makes the point clearly. The Jews,

indeed, killed "the Lord Jesus."[189]

For Asad, the physical death of the prophet Jesus is as unassailable

presupposition as the Qurʾān's teaching that he was created "out of dust." Both

statements, in the mind of Asad, fundamentally support the qurʾānic claim that

the nature and constitution of the prophet Jesus was anything but divine. He was

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[186] Asad, *TMOQ,* 13, n. 48 on Q 2:61. Cf. Asad, *TMOQ,* 96, n. 142 on Q 3:183.

[187] *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* cites John (without "the Baptist epithet) and Zechariah as examples of those slain prophets (I:9, on Q 2:61). Mawdūdī provides a list of eight (8) crimes that Israel committed throughout their own history, in which, he mentions names of slain prophets like Zechariah, John the Baptist and Jesus (I, n.79 on Q 2:61).

[188] The Gospel of Matthew 23:37; cf. the Gospel Luke 11:47-51, "Alas for you because you build tombs for the prophets, the people your ancestors killed! In this way you both witness to what your ancestors did and approve it; they did the killing, you do the building. And that is why the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles; some they will slaughter and persecute, so that this generation will have to answer for every prophet's blood that has been shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the Temple.' Yes, I tell you, this generation will have to answer for it all."

[189] 1 Thessalonians 2:15, "Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men."

born naturally and was subjected to death, according to the Qurʾān. Asad found and relates several verses that support and validate this Qurʾānic belief.

The first verse is Q 3:55, and it says, "lo! God said: 'O Jesus! Verily, I shall cause thee to die, and shall exalt thee unto Me...'." According to Asad, this verse is polemical against those "Christians, who believe him (Jesus) to be 'the son of God,' and the Muslims, who regard him as a prophet."[190] These people, he says, supposed that God had "taken up" Jesus bodily, in his lifetime, into heaven.[191] The latter phrase may allude to the doctrine of Jesus' "Ascension," a doctrine that Christians and some Muslims believe in.[192]

But, "nowhere in the Qurʾān is there a warrant" for that popular belief in the bodily Ascension of Jesus, says Asad.[193] The confusion about the meaning of Q 3:55, according to him, is the misleading pairing of the two active participle words: *mutawaffī* and *rāfiʿu*. The former is commonly rendered as "to take." But, Asad pointedly translates this term as "to cause to die."[194] The latter, which is

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[190] Asad, *TMOQ*, 75, n. 45 on, on Q 3:55.

[191] Asad, *TMOQ*, 135 f., n. 172 on *Q 4*:158.

[192] None of the four Muslim translators mentioned in the third chapter, for example, categorically stated that Jesus physically died. All four strongly indicated, rather, that he ascended (Pickthall), or was raised to God (Yūsuf ʿAlī, Qarāʾī, Abdel Haleem).

[193] Asad, *TMOQ*, 135 f., n. 172 on *Q 4*:158.

[194] In contrast to Asad's interpretation, some commentators read it as "I am gathering you seizing you and raising you to me away from the world without death" (*Tafsīr al-Jalalayn,* I:54, on Q 3:55; Ṭabarī, 3:339, on Q 3:55). *Tafsīr al-ʿAbbās* reads it a little vaguer as, "I am gathering thee and causing thee to ascend unto Me" (II:71-72, on Q 3:55). Ibn Kathīr reads this word as sleeping as in Q 6:60, "It is He Who takes your souls by night (when you are asleep)," or Q 39:42, "It is Allāh Who takes away the souls at the time of their death, and those that die not during their sleep" (2:169, on Q 3:55). Mawdūdī, for his part, understands it as "seizing a person's soul" with the connotation of being "recalled," but unclear as to whether that entails an explicit experience of death (Mawdūdī, I:258 f., n. 51 on Q 3:55). Shāfiʿ's interpretation almost offers the closest meaning of *mutawaffī* as an experience of explicit bodily death; though understanding it from its lexical meaning, "to take in full," he begins to describe it as, like any other human creature who has completed one's appointed time, God has taken away "fully and conclusively" the spirit or

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commonly rendered as "to raise" is translated by Asad into "exalt." It is the

common misinterpretation of the second term, according to Asad, that has

distorted an accurate sense of the former.

Perhaps another possible reason for erroneous interpretations of these

terms can be linked to a qurʾānic passage that suggests that Jesus remained

alive in order to maintain the theologically consequential non-crucifixion narrative

in verse Q 4:157. The latter verse states,

> "and their boast, 'Behold, we have slain (*qatalnā*) the Christ Jesus, son of
> Mary, [who claimed to be] an apostle of God!' However, they did not slay
> him (*wa-mā qatalūhu*), and neither did they crucify him (*wa-mā ṣalabūhu*),
> but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so (*shubbiha lahum*); and,
> verily, those who hold conflicting views thereon are indeed confused,
> having no [real] knowledge thereof, and following mere conjecture. For, of
> a certainty, they did not slay him (*wa-mā qatalūhu*):"

Asad agrees with the qurʾānic position that Jesus was only made to appear to be

crucified before the Jews (*shubbiha lahum*). As he puts it bluntly, "the Qurʾān

categorically denies the story of the crucifixion of Jesus."[195] This, however, does

not preclude him from asserting that Jesus, indeed, died, nonetheless, as normal

human beings do. Asad maintains this same position in his exegesis of Q 5:116-

117. He argues that the past tense structure of *fa-lammā tawaffaytanī* or "... since

Thou hast caused me to die" in Q 5:117 indicates that this conversation took

place after the physical death of Jesus.[196]

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soul of Jesus at the hour of his death; but then, he makes it vague when he adds that, "in that
context this word is also used figuratively in the sense of death. A simple form of death is the
daily sleep of human beings" (Shāfi', 2:77, on Q 3:55).

[195] Asad, *TMOQ*, 134, n. 171 on Q 4:157.

[196] Asad, *TMOQ,* 169, n. 139 on Q 5:116.

The import of *rāfiʿu*, when properly understood in its textual and theological context, is that it does not signify "Ascension," that is, in a sense of bodily elevation. We recall in Chapter One, that when Asad responded to critics who did not agree with his interpretation of *rāfiʿu*,[197] he referred them to the authority of Muḥammad ʿAbduh. ʿAbduh said that the qurʾānic expression, "God exalted him unto Himself" referred to the elevation of Jesus into the realm of God's special grace[198] -- "a blessing," he said, "in which all prophets partake."[199]

Thus, for Asad, the Qurʾān's narrative of persecution and references to the death of Jesus reveal fundamental insights. They are consistent with the Qurʾān's doctrine of prophethood and the portrayal of Jesus' absolute humanity. Asad advances this position by attempting to purge the Christian concept of "Ascension," from the Qurʾān. It is a notion, he argues, which is foreign to the doctrines of the Qurʾān though it nonetheless found its way into the thinking of influential interpreters of this Islamic holy writ.

5.2.7 Overstepping the Bounds of Truth

For Asad, the qurʾānic locution that best describes the tendency to ascribe divinity to Jesus is *la taghlū fī dīnikum*. He renders this passage with, "do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs" (Q 4:171 and Q 5:77). As such, this expression serves as a warning particularly to Christians "whose love

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[197] Chapter One, 1.5.3, "The League Controversy."

[198] Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III:316 f. and VI:20 f.

[199] Asad, *TMOQ*, 134, n. 172 on Q 4:158.

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for Jesus," according to him, "has caused them to 'overstep the bounds of truth'

by elevating him to the rank of divinity."[200] This tendency to misinterpret the

status of some prophetic figures, he explains, could have been spurred on by

one of the false presumptions implied by the polemical verse, Q 2:253. Speaking

about the choice of Muḥammad to be one of the messengers or apostles,[201] the

Qurʾān describes the latter's predecessors in these words,

> "Some of these apostles (*tilka'l-rusul*) have We endowed more highly than others (*faḍḍalnā baʿḍahum ʿalā baʿḍin*): among them were such as were spoken (*kallama*) to by God [Himself], and some He has raised yet higher (*rafaʿa baʿḍahum darajātin*). And we vouchsafed (*ātaynā*) unto Jesus, the son of Mary, all evidence of the truth (*al-bayyināti*), and strengthened him (*ayyadnāhu*) with holy inspiration (*bi-rūḥiʾl-qudusi*) ... (Q 2:253)."

Asad reads this verse as more of a polemic than a warning about misconstruing

the gift of revelation to *tilka al-rusul* or "these apostles" as ascribing to them

divinity. Not even Jesus who received "all evidence of the truth (*al-bayyināt*)"[202]

and was "strengthened ... with holy inspiration (*birūḥi al-qudus*)," was

categorically different from other prophets. And, though it is said that Jesus was

"spoken to by God [Himself]" (*minhum man kallama allāhu*)[203] and was one of

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[200] Asad, *TMOQ,* 159, n. 91 on Q 5:77.

[201] Asad, *TMOQ,* 56, n. 243 on Q 2:253.

[202] The same plural nominal noun is repeated more than fifty times, and it is noteworthy that Asad's rendition of *al-bayyināt* all throughout the Qurʾān into "all evidence of the truth" -- (Yūsuf ʿAlī: "clear [Signs]"; Pickthall: "clear proofs"; Qarāʾī: "manifest proofs") -- echoes an oft-repeated New Testament marker of Jesus' divinity such as in John 3:35, "The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything (Gk. *panta dedōken*) to his hands"; 13:3, "Jesus knew that the Father had put everything (Gk. *panta edōken*) into his hands"; the Gospel of Matthew: 28:18, "All authority (Gk. *pasa exousia*) in heaven and on earth has been given to me"; 11:27, "Everything has been entrusted to me (Gk. *panta moi paredothē*) by my Father"; Cf. John 17:2. Whether Asad had these biblical expressions in mind or not when he rendered *al-bayyināt*, his rendition could be construed that he is polemicizing or challenging the Christian reading or interpretation of its parallel expression found in the above citations from the Gospels.

[203] As in Q 5:110, Q 3:55, but Asad notes that, here, it is Moses who is specifically referred to as *minhum man kallama allāhu* or "such as were spoken to by God" as indicated in the

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those God had "raised yet higher" (*rafaʿa darajātin*), he should not be thought of as being deified.[204] Rather, the latter characterization should be correctly understood, says Asad. It claims nothing more for Jesus than "the fact of his having been a prophet."[205]

Moreover, in his commentary of verse Q 2:87, Asad explains that these endowments to Jesus, particularly his reception of the "holy inspiration," are not uniquely associated with him in the Qurʾān.[206] The *rūḥ al-qudus* is a recurring qurʾānic phrase, used to describe the sense of "divine inspiration," just as Q Mujādilah 58:22 speaks of all believers as being "strengthened by inspiration (*rūḥ*) from Him."[207] Whether or not Asad's straightforward rendition of Q 43:59 helps to clarify dogmas about the identity of Jesus in the Qurʾān, is not clear. Nevertheless, he articulates this doctrine carefully as he renders it thus,

> "[As for Jesus,] he was nothing but [a human being -] a servant [of Ours] whom We had graced [with prophethood], and whom We made an example for the children of Israel."

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last sentence of Q 4:164 (Asad, *TMOQ,* 56, n. 243, on Q 2:253). Many assert that Moses is the one referred to here as "such as were spoken to by God"; cf. see Q 7:143.

[204] Asad, *TMOQ,* 56, n. 244 on Q 2:253.

[205] Asad, *TMOQ,* 56, n. 244 on Q 2:253.

[206] Asad, *TMOQ,* 19, n. 71 on Q 2:87. Some commentators usually identify the *rūḥ al-qudus* in the present verse as the Archangel Gabriel (Ibn Kathīr, 1:287, on Q 2:87); or it could be the name by which Jesus raised the dead or that it could refer to the Gospel itself (Ṭabarī, 1:465, on Q 2:87); But, what these interpretations have in common is the sense of "bestowing life," be it signifying bodily quickening or the nourishment of the heart and intelligence (Rāzī, 3:161-162, on Q 2:87)

[207] Asad, *TMOQ,* 19, n. 71 on Q 2:87. Asad, for example, cites the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* where the Prophet invokes the blessing of the *rūḥ al-qudus* on his Companion, the poet Ḥassān bin Thābit: on the authority of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin ʿAwf that he heard the poet asking "O Abu-Huraira! I beseech you by Allah (to tell me). Did you hear Allah's Messenger saying 'O Hassan! Reply on behalf of Allah's Messenger' 'O Allah! Support him (Hassan) with the Holy Spirit (Gabriel)?' Abu Huraira said, 'Yes'" (Bukhārī, 8:6152).

Closely related to the preceding discussion about "overstep" is the doctrine of divine generation or progeny. The doctrine also refers to the "incarnation," and the Qurʾān vehemently polemicizes it in several locations. The short verse Q 19:88 explicitly spells out this accusation of theological distortion. It tells us, "As it is, some assert, 'The Most Gracious has taken (*attakhadha*) unto Himself a son (*waladan*)!'" In his exegesis on this text, Asad believes that this text confronts the Christian belief in Jesus as "the son of God." It also challenges those who, according to him, "while believing in God, deify prophets and saints too, in the subconscious hope that they might act as 'mediators' between them and the Almighty."[208]

Seeing Jesus as God, according to Asad, seriously contradicts the Qurʾān's principle of God's transcendent oneness and uniqueness. He warns that "if consciously persisted in, this constitutes an unforgivable sin."[209] The theological implication of the doctrine of divine progeny, he explains, is, therefore, much deeper and injurious to the core concept of God in the Qurʾān. He raises this argument again in his exegesis of verse Q 19:92. This verse says, "it is inconceivable that the Most Gracious should take unto Himself a son."

He comments that "either in the real or in the metaphorical sense of this term," the idea that God might have a son, nonetheless, presupposes a certain

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[208] Asad, *TMOQ,* 468, n. 76 on Q 19:88.

[209] Asad, *TMOQ,* 468, n. 76, on Q 19:88. Cf. Asad, *TMOQ,* 113, n. 65 on Q 4:48. According to many commentators the claim that God has a child, which is rejected throughout the Qurʾān, has caused the heaven and the earth *well-nigh rent* (Q 19:90) indicates that all creatures, except certain human beings and *jinn*, are rooted in the awareness of God's Oneness and are terrified of *shirk,* or the associating of partners with God (Ibn Kathīr 6:313, on Q 19:88, 90; Ṭabarī, 15:149-150, on Q 19:88, 90).

degree of "innate likeness" between the "father" and "the son."[210] As such, the latter "likeness" goes against the fundamental qurʾānic belief in the unicity of God, as it is stressed in verse Q Shūrā 42:11. The verse reminds us, "there is nothing like unto Him (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un*)."[211] Verse Q Ikhlāṣ 112:4 concurs adding, "and there is nothing that could be compared with Him (*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥadun*)."

What these verses are defending, according to Asad, is that God is fundamentally different from anything that exists or could exist. He does not resemble anything that anyone can conceive of, or imagine or define. Any attempt to compare God with anything else or interpret "how" God is different is unproductive. The reality of God exceeds the categories of human comprehension or imagination.[212]

It goes without saying that, for Asad any attempt to depict God figuratively or with abstract symbols must be judged as a "blasphemous denial of the truth."[213] Moreover, the doctrine of divine progeny, Asad adds, implies an "organic continuation of the progenitor, or part of him, in another being."[214] As

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[210] Asad, *TMOQ,* 468, n. 77 on Q 19:92.

[211] This expression is among the most famous phrases of the Qurʾān, as it provides a succinct and unequivocal assertion of God's complete and utter transcendence or *tanzīh*. Ibn al-ʿArabī observes that God says "there is nothing like unto Him" (Q 42:11) in many different ways. The highest of these ways, is that there is nothing in existence that resembles God or is likeness of God, since existence is nothing but God's own Self-Disclosure ("On the Mysteries of Fasting," in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* (*Meccan Revelations*), trans. A. Bewley, ed. L. Bakhtiar [Chicago, IL: Great Books of the Islamic World, Inc, 2009], 3 (1-216).

[212] Asad, *TMOQ,* 741, n. 10 on Q 42:11; Asad, Q 112, 985, n. 2 on Q 112:4.

[213] Asad, Q 112, 985, n. 2 on Q 112:4.

[214] Asad, *TMOQ,* 468, n. 77 on Q 19:92.

such, he infers, it presupposes a degree of incompleteness[215] before the act of procreation or incarnation. These presuppositions about Jesus essentially negates the qurʾānic concept of God.[216] Furthermore, the idea of "sonship" that Christians are espousing in the dogma of the Trinity is similarly condemned by the Qurʾān as blasphemous. This is true if these theological dogmas address just one of the different "aspects" of the One Deity. According to Asad, professing belief in the divinity of Jesus amounts to an attempt to define Him who is "sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by way of definition" (Q 6:100).[217]

Asad also takes on the doctrine of "mediation" or "intercession." This belief is also seen as "overstepping the bounds of truth." In the latter portion of Q 11:63 which says, "what you are offering me is no more than perdition (*fa-mā tazīdūnanī ghayra takhsīrin*)," Asad finds a platform for arguing against the Christian doctrine of Jesus as a "mediator." He illustrates this point by citing the account of the prophet Ṣāliḥ who returns to his tribe Thamūd.

As most prophets did, he brings a startling message to his people. He urges them to abandon their traditional polytheistic beliefs and devote

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[215] Cf. Asad, *TMOQ*, 436, n. 133 on Q 17:111.

[216] However, in his exegesis of verse Q 39:4, Asad seems to struggle in answering the question, "does divine incompleteness necessarily presuppose divine progeny? Or could it simply flow out willfully from divine sovereign will?" Does the whole of creation reflect or reveal an incomplete Creator? Instead of projecting "incompleteness" or "imperfection" this verse rather appears to enunciate the sovereignty of God to *la-'aṣṭafā mimmā yakhluqu mā yashā'u* or to "have chosen anyone that He wanted out of whatever He has created (Q 39:4)" (Asad, *TMOQ,* 705, n. 4 on Q 39:4.

[217] Asad, *TMOQ,* 468, n. 77 on Q 19:92.

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themselves to the worship of the One God.[218] As a reaction, the leaders of the

Thamūd tribe replied in Q 11:62, saying,

> "O Salih! Great hopes did we place in thee ere this! Wouldst thou forbid us to worship what our forefathers were wont to worship? Because [of this], behold, we are in grave doubt, amounting to suspicion, about [the meaning of] thy call to us!"

Disappointed, the people begin to denigrate him for betraying their hopes and

expectations. They are a people mired in their idolatry or *shirk* (Q 11:62).[219]

According to Asad, this story is a profound demonstration of the

> "intrinsic impossibility of reconciling belief in the One God, whose omniscience and omnipotence embraces all that exists, with an attribution of divine or semi-divine qualities and functions to anyone or anything else."[220]

Asad, therefore, deduces in the "subtly-veiled suggestion" of the people of

Thamūd in Q 11:62. There is a reason why they do not want to abandon the

polytheistic faith of their ancestors. These people cling to "religious attitudes"

rooted in a desire to "bring God closer to man" through the "interposition" of

certain "mediators."[221] The same "interposition," he argues, was practiced in the

primitive religions that led followers to the

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[218] Asad, *TMOQ*, 324, n. 92 on *Q 1*1:62. According to Asad, the gods of the pre-Islamic Arabs, including their angels (whom they believe to be "God's daughters") were regarded as legitimate "mediators" between themselves and God, whose existence as such they did not deny; They were greatly disturbed by their prophets, like Ṣāliḥ, who demanded that they abandon their worship of those allegedly divine or semi-divine beings. They could have probably welcomed their prophet as long as they were not required to abandon their deities (*Ibid*.). Hence, we hear of Ṣāliḥ's retort in Q 11:63.

[219] The appeal made by the Thamūd to the religious ways of their "forefathers" is a common qurʾānic theme, namely, that when prophets bring the message of God's Oneness to an idolatrous people, they reject it on the grounds that it does not conform to the ways of their ancestors. See Q 5:104, Q 10:70, Q 21:53, Q 31:21.

[220] Asad, *TMOQ,* 324, n. 94 on Q 11:63.

[221] Asad, *TMOQ,* 324, n. 94 on Q 11:63.

"deification of various forces of nature and, subsequently, to the invention of imaginary deities which were thought to act against the background of an undefined, dimly-perceived Supreme Power."[222]

Through his study, Asad persistently tries to understand the genesis of the concept of mediation or intercession as it appears in other religions. In particular, he believes that the Christian doctrine of "incarnation" is an evolved concept of "interposition." The mediator (Jesus) assumes the form of a personified manifestation of God. The doctrine is not uncommon in other religions, but is more developed in Christianity.[223] Therefore, in Asad's phenomenological analysis, the interposition of Jesus, or saints for that matter, God is supposedly "brought closer to man" through his function as "mediator" or as an "intercessor."

Consequently, this doctrine constitutes a serious theological overstep since it contradicts the qurʾānic concept of *tawḥīd* or the unity of God. It also promotes the heretical idea that anyone or anything "could share in God's qualities or have the least influence on the manner in which He governs the universe."[224]

Be that as it may be, in his exegesis of Q 5:82, Asad affirms the Qurʾān's more positive view of Christianity in the Qurʾān. The verse states,

> "Thou wilt surely find that, of all people, the most hostile (*ashadda... ʿadāwatan*) to those who believe [in this divine writ] are the Jews as well as those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught beside God (*alladhīna ashrakū*); and thou wilt surely find that, of all people, they who say, "Behold, we are Christians," come closest to feeling affection (*aqrabahum mawaddatan*) for those who believe [in this divine writ]: this is so because

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[222] Asad, *TMOQ,* 324, n. 94 on Q 11:63.

[223] Asad, *TMOQ,* 324, n. 94 on Q 11:63.

[224] Asad, *TMOQ,* 324, n. 94 on Q 11:63.

there are priests (*qissīsīna*) and monks (*ruhbānan*) among them, and because these are not given to arrogance."

As far as Asad's reading of this verse is concerned, the Qurʾān does not include Christians among "those who are bent on ascribing divinity to aught beside God (*alladhīna ashrakū*)." The apparent exclusion of the Christians from the guilt of the sin of *shirk*[225] demonstrates a rare testimonial from Asad for the Christian doctrine. Asad explains that the underlying reason of the Qurʾān's position here is that

> "the Christians do not consciously worship a plurality of deities inasmuch as, theoretically, their theology postulates belief in the One God, who is conceived as manifesting Himself in a trinity of aspects, or 'persons,' of whom Jesus is supposed to be one."[226]

Asad does not totally acquit the Christians from their supposedly erroneous deification of Jesus. In fact, the Christian doctrine, according to him, remains "repugnant" to the teachings of the Qurʾān. As Q 4:171 strongly warns,

> "O followers of the Gospel! Do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs (*lā taghlū fī dīnikum*) ... Believe (*āminū*), then, in God and His apostles, and do not say, '[God is] a trinity' (*lā taqūlū thalāthatun*) Desist [from this assertion] for your own good (*intahū khayran lakum*). God is but One God; utterly remote is He, in His glory, (*subḥānahu*) from having a son (*an yakūn lahu waladun*): unto Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and none is as worthy of trust as God."

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[225] Asad is aware that in other contexts, the Qurʾān is very explicit in its denunciation of the Jewish and supposed Christian tendency to divinize personalities or religious leaders such as, of the former, assigning a quasi-divine authority to Ezra as "God's son" and even to some of their scholars, or of the latter, attributing divinity to Jesus and certain aspects of divinity to the Christian saints (Cf. Q 9:31, even their "rabbis and their "monks") (Asad, *TMOQ*, 76 f., on Q 3:64); and in Q 5:75, the Qurʾān accuses Christians *annā yuʾfakūna* or "how perverted are their minds," for turning away from the truth or lying about their understanding of the nature of Jesus and Mary (Asad, *TMOQ*, 159, n. 90 on Q 5:75), as the passive form of *ufika* often means "he was turned away from his opinion or from his judgment" and thus, tantamount to saying that, "his mind became perverted" or "deluded" (cf. *Taj al-'Arus*, 13:485 ff.; Lane, 1:69).

[226] Asad, *TMOQ,* 160, n. 97 on Q 5:82.

Asad insist on qualifying this Christian tendency. He points out that it is "not based on conscious intent, but rather flows from their 'overstepping the bounds of truth' in their veneration of Jesus."[227] In his reading of Q 6:23,[228] he renders the word *fitna* with the phrase "in their utter confusion,"[229] reveals his tendency to absolve an unconscious ascription of divinity to beings or forces other than God.[230] In his commentary on this verse, Asad appears to vindicate the Christian dogma of the Trinity. It is, he says, not necessarily in "conflict with the principle of God's oneness inasmuch as it is supposed to express a 'threefold aspect' of the One Deity."[231] This, he expresses personally, notwithstanding his unambiguous deference to the Qurʾān's emphatic rejection of this belief.

His apparent leniency towards Christian belief in the Trinity may have been inspired by a story involving the Prophet Muḥammad. In his exegesis of Q 3:61, Asad explains that the account comes from "reliable authorities" that this was revealed in the context of a disputation between the Prophet and Christian representatives from Najran.

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[227] Asad, *TMOQ,* 160, n. 97 on Q 5:82.

[228] "Whereupon, in their utter confusion (*fitna*), they will only [be able to] say: 'By God, our Sustainer, we did not [mean to] ascribe divinity to aught beside Him!'"

[229] Cf. Yūsuf ʿAlī: "There will then be (left) no subterfuge for them"; Pickthall: "Then will they have no contention"; Arberry: "Then they shall have no proving,"; Droge: "Then their only excuse"; Abdel Haleem: "in their utter dismay," which he attaches to the preceding verse, Q 6:22.

[230] Asad's qualified appraisal of this Christian belief resonates with some commentators whose interpretation of verse Q 6:23, in a sense, excuses those who, while objectively guilty of *shirk*, are, nonetheless, "not subjectively" visualizing that they actually denied the Oneness of God (Rāzī, 12:151-153, on Q 6:23).

[231] Asad, *TMOQ*, 174, n. 16 on Q 6:23.

While the Prophet was reportedly well aware of the latter's beliefs that Jesus, the God incarnate, and the "son of God," and Mary as "the mother of God," he, nonetheless, gave them free access to his mosque.[232] With the Prophet's full consent, the Christians from Najran celebrated their religious rites there in spite of the fact that they were fundamentally at variance with Islamic beliefs.[233] Moreover, although these Christians are said to have refused the *mubāhala* or "trial through prayer" proposed by the Prophet, they were, according to Tradition, accorded a treaty guaranteeing all their civil rights and the free exercise of their religions.[234]

5.2.8. Vicarious Atonement

In his qurʾānic exegesis Asad broaches a Christian notion that provides a parallel to the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness." Asad calls this belief in Jesus' "vicarious atonement" or "vicarious redemption." Neither appellation is found in the text of the Qurʾān because they represent Asad's unique attempt at a rational explanation of some elliptical qurʾānic polemics against Christians teachings.

Just as the Jews were committed to the view that they were "God's chosen people," Christians professed belief in "the vicarious atonement" granted to them through the suffering and death of Jesus. Asad contends that this

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[232] Asad, *TMOQ,* 24, n. 95 on Q 2:114.

[233] Asad, *TMOQ,* 24, n. 95 on Q 2:114. Citing the Arabian biographer, Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd Ibn Maniʿ al-Zuhrī al-Basrī (d. 845 CE) *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr,* trans. S. M. Haq, et al. (New Delhi: Kitāb Bhavan, 1990), I:418-420.

[234] Ibn Saʿd, I:418-420.

doctrine underlies the resistance of the Qurʾān's Christian audience to the Arabian Prophet and his message. And to explain the rationale for this topic's inclusion here, it is important to see that Asad vigorously argues that the doctrine is an erroneous understanding of the prophet Jesus – according to the Qurʾān.

Asad mentions the Christian concept of "vicarious atonement" for the first time in his exegesis of Q 2:48[235] As previously stated, in its textual context, this verse belongs to a series of verses that specifically call on *Banū Isrāʾīl* or "children of Israel" to be mindful and truthful about the blessings and revelation bestowed upon them by God. They are also reminded that they should not forget that at the Day of Judgment

> "no human being shall in the least avail (*tajzī*) another, nor shall intercession (*shafāʿatun*) be accepted from any of them, nor ransom (*ʿadlun*) taken from them, and none shall be succored (*yunṣarūna*)."

Taking a cue from the qurʾānic noun *ʿadl*, which Asad renders as "ransom," he argues that, along the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," the Christian "vicarious atonement" are implicitly denied in this verse. In other words, just as the Jews of the Qurʾān claimed that their "election" would have a ransoming effect at the Day of Judgment, Christians claim that the merits of the passion of Jesus would ransom them from punishment and damnation.[236]

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[235] Cf. Q 2:123.

[236] The term "ransom" is specifically a distinctive Christian theological vocabulary, about which Asad is obviously aware. It is an analogical concept of paying a price employed in the New Testament to explain the death of Christ: "For the Son of man himself came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (Gk. *lytron*) for many" (Mk 10:45). According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia 2nd* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2003), the word *lytron* "means a payment for the release of a prisoner or a criminal (Num. 35:31)" (11:909). A cognate notion is that of a bondsman, a role that Yahweh plays with respect to Israel (Exo. 6:6; Hos 13:14). St. Paul also uses this metaphor to remind the people that they do not belong to themselves but to God (1 Cor 6:19-20; Acts 20:28). And, St. Peter writes: 'For you know that the price of your ransom (*elytrōthēte*) from the futile way of life handed down from your ancestors was paid, not in anything

Asad repeatedly identifies the Jewish claim to a "chosen" status and this Christian doctrine as unstated targets in Q 3:187, the previously mentioned qurʾānic locution that warns about *thamanan qalīlan* or "trifling gain." By adhering to their belief in "vicarious atonement," Christians have "bartered away" the revelation and truth about Jesus in exchange for what the Qurʾān says is an erroneous and illusory theology of redemption. The Qurʾān, therefore, accuses some of its Christian audience for assuming that this atonement or exemption "automatically assures them salvation"[237] on the Day of Judgment.

This persistent falsehood, Asad says, is condemned by the Qurʾān as cheap "bargain" or "trifling gain." Furthermore, in his exegesis of Q 4:49,[238] Asad insists that, in addition to the Jewish doctrine of chosenness, this verse also polemicizes the same Christian doctrine of "vicarious atonement." According to Asad, Christians deceive themselves for believing that in Jesus' "vicarious atonement" the sins of humanity have been forgiven and eliminated, thus they have become purified (*yuzakkūna anfusahum*).[239]

Asad interprets these beliefs as arbitrary[240] and points out that they are denounced by the Qurʾān as *yaftarūna al-kadhaba* or "lying inventions." Both

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perishable like silver or gold, but in precious blood as of a blameless and spotless lamb, Christ" (1 Pt 1:18).

[237] Asad, *TMOQ*, 89, n. 144 on Q 3:187.

[238] "Art thou not aware of those who consider themselves pure (*yuzakkūna anfusahum*)? Nay, but it is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity (*yuzakkī*); and none shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth."

[239] Asad, *TMOQ*, 113, n. 66 on *Q 4*:49.

[240] Alongside what Asad considers as the Christian arbitrary definition of God in a Trinitarian sense, with Jesus as its "second person"; or the Jewish assertion that they are "the chosen people."

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Christians and Jews are accused of harboring such baseless beliefs in Q 4:50.[241] Alongside the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness," "vicarious atonement" is vigorously condemned in verse Q 4:123.[242] It is elliptically referred to as *amāniyyi* or "wishful thinking"[243] that "promises salvation to all who believe in Jesus as 'God's son.'"[244] The same Christian doctrine, says Asad, is also elliptically implied as *sā'a* or a "vile" act of distortion in verse Q 5:66.[245]

Perhaps the most damning categorical rejection of the doctrine of "vicarious atonement," according to Asad, is found in Q 53:38. It states, *wa-lā taziru wāziratun wizra ukhrā* which he translates with the declaration "that no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden."[246] In the mind of Asad, this verse succinctly dismisses the doctrine of "vicarious atonement." It denies the fact that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross removes or absorbs the sins of the world.[247] Thus, he adds, it categorically rejects its concomitant doctrine which teaches that the ultimate outcome of the crucifixion is the "removal of original sin."[248] This verse also refutes the idea that a person's sins

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[241] *"*Behold how they attribute their own lying inventions (*yaftarūna al-kadhaba*) to God -- than which there is no sin more obvious."

[242] "It may not accord with your wishful thinking (*bi-amāniyyikum*) -- nor with the wishful thinking (*amāniyyi*) of the followers of earlier revelation -- [that] he who does evil shall be requited for it, and shall find none to protect him from God, and none to bring him succour."

[243] Yūsuf ʿAlī, Pickthall: "desire"; Arberry: "fancies"; Qarā'ī and Abdel Haleem: "hopes."

[244] Asad, *TMOQ,* 128 f., n. 143 on Q 4:123.

[245] "... Some of them do pursue a right course; but as for most of them- vile (*sā'a*) indeed is what they do!" See Asad, *TMOQ*, 158, n. 84 on Q 5:66.

[246] Cf. Q 6:164, Q 17:15, Q 35:18, Q 39:7

[247] Asad, *TMOQ,* 816, n. 31 on Q 53:38.

[248] Asad, *TMOQ,* 816, n. 31 on Q 53:38.

could be "atoned for" by a saint's or a prophet's redemptive sacrifice. This is what Jesus reputedly accomplished.[249] Finally, by implication, the Qurʾān denies the possibility of any "mediation" or "intercession" between the sinner and God.

In his exegesis of Q 4:157 and Q 43:80, Asad also hypothesizes that the Christian doctrine of "vicarious atonement" or "vicarious redemption" can be attributed and traced to influential Persian "mithraistic beliefs" on salvific sacrifices.[250] He writes that

> "long after the time of Jesus, a legend had somehow grown up to the effect that he had died on the cross in order to atone for the 'original sin' with which mankind is allegedly burdened."[251]

Asad speculates that the Mitraistic form of the salvific "sacrifice of the bull" may have subconsciously influenced early Christian thinkers, just when Christological controversies first developed. These pagan beliefs, he says, may have paved the way for the formulation of the Christian doctrine. Belief in Christ's divinity was the foundation of Christian belief.[252] In short, the locution, "that no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden" in Q 53:38 is particularly appropriate in this discussion. It denounces the Christian doctrine of "vicarious atonement." At

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[249] Asad, *TMOQ,* 816, n. 31 on Q 53:38.

[250] The Mithras mysteries are believed to have mostly originated from the Old Persian religion, and was believed to have been later introduced in Rome in the beginning of the first century B.C. The standard feature of this male-dominated oriental cult is "the sacrifice of the bull." A myth relates that Mithras kills the animal, which was considered to be the most precious gift to the gods. This deed, in addition to promoting the welfare of humanity and the earth, also symbolically assures salvation for mankind, who gained the benefit of the blood of the bull. See. Britt-Marie Näsström, "The Sacrifices of Mithras," in *PECUS -- Man and Animal in Antiquity*, ed. Barbro Santillo Frizell (Rome: Swedish Institute, 2004), 1:108-111.

[251] Asad, *TMOQ,* 134, n. 171 on Q 4:157.

[252] Asad, *TMOQ,* 758, n. 56 on Q 43:80.

the same time, the Qurʾān maintains its fundamental tenet about Individual responsibility, or what Asad calls "the basic ethical law," as the governing criterion at the Day of Judgment.[253]

5.3 Conclusion

This Chapter set out to present two rationalistic expositions which, as far as Asad is concerned, are among the most critical theological themes embedded in the Qurʾān. This means the refutation of the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" and the purging of the prophet Jesus from all reported claims to divinity which were associated with him before the revelation of the Qurʾān.

This exposition has tried methodically to survey relevant qurʾānic verses and their corresponding commentaries as they illustrate Asad's consistent rationalist arguments. Overall, it has demonstrated that his persistent promotion of the faculty of reason has served as a superior strategy in generating and clarifying the message of the Qurʾān. In plain sight, these themes and some of their concomitant presuppositions are not always apparent or easily discovered in the Qurʾān. The qurʾānic arguments against the Jewish doctrine of "chosenness" and the "vicarious atonement" provided through Jesus are examples of those elements. Asad devoutly maintains that these doctrines were not only theologically controversial, but that they also contradicted fundamental teachings of the Qurʾān.

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[253] Asad, *TMOQ,* 816, n. 31 on Q 53:38.

From the start, Asad was also consciously aware of a semantic behavior of the Qurʾān which uniquely leaves out or drops parts of words or utterances. This property or rhetorical function, many Muslims scholars argue, enhances the *ʿijāz* or inimitability of the Qurʾān. It was, therefore, one of the objectives of this chapter to characterize the unique way that Muhammad Asad undertook a rationalistic quest to analyze this unusual attribute of Qurʾān. He has unearthed and explored critical scholarly assertions along with theological arguments intrinsic to the teaching mission of the Qurʾān. Asad's rationalist analysis and deliberation have showcased his remarkable gifts for scholarship and deductive reasoning. Equipped with these, he has been able to discern and analyze concordant qurʾānic premises. A deep scholarly grounding in both Judaism and Islām has also enriched and contributed to his conclusions.

Asad also generously applies *tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi'l-Qurʾān* an investigative method which subscribes to the principle that the Qurʾān is its own commentary. This approach has supported the utility of cross-referencing from other related verses in the Qurʾān. *A*dditionally and always prevalent in Asad's rationalist strategy is his confidence in locating inter-textual connections between the Qurʾān and the Bible. The Bible became for him a very important interpretive source in particular discussions. Ultimately, these thematic expositions give witness to Asad's enduring rationalist agenda: positioning the Qurʾān in its proper place as the "confirmer" and "adjudicator" of the early revelations.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Muḥammad Asad's contribution to Islām and qurʾānic exegesis may be
encapsulated in an epithet given by Murad Wilfried Hofmann (b. 1931).[1] A
convert from Christianity to Islām himself, Hofmann honored Asad in his article,
Al-Islām: Zeitschrift von Muslimen in Deutschland in 2000, calling Asad, "Europas
Geschenk an den Islām" or "Europe's Gift to Islām."[2] The same accolade for
Asad later came from the Pakistani author, M. Ikram Chaghatai, in his 2014 two-
volume compilation of Muhammad Asad's work. Chaghatai titled his work
Muḥammad Asad (Leopold Weiss): Europe's Gift to Islām. In his introduction,
Chaghatai attempts to explain what this "gift" means when he says,

> "If I am allowed to make a minor alteration in Abraham Geiger's pioneering
> *Preisschrift* under the title *Was hat Muḥammad auf dem Judentum
> aufgenommen?* And replace 'Muḥammad' with 'Islām,' I would like to put
> the name of Leopold Weiss *alias* Muḥammad Asad on top of the list of
> those selective borrowings which Islām has taken from Jewish sources."[3]

Both of these characterizations could not have stated more positively what

these scholars believe Asad brought to his adoptive religion. But, what exactly is

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[1] Hofmann served in the German foreign service in the NATO (1979-1987) and as
Ambassador to Algeria (1987-1990) and Morocco (1990-1994).

[2] Murad Wilfried Hofmann, "Muḥammad Asad: Europe's Gift to Islām," in *Al-Islām:
Zeitschrift von Muslimen in Deutschland* 5 (2000), 11-19; also reprinted in English in *Muḥammad
Asad (Leopold Weiss), Europe's Gift to Islām*. Ed. M. Ikram Chaghatai. Vol. 1. Lahore: Sang-e
Meel Publications, pp. 221-238.

[3] Chaghatai, "Introduction," *Europe's Gift to Islām,* I:i.

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this "gift" that Hofmann is referring to? And, what did Chaghatai think Islām actually borrowed from Europe or from Judaism? These questions are addressed in a particular and exhaustive way in this dissertation.

Admirers of Muḥammad Asad would most likely remember him as "a breath of fresh air" within the social, political and religious discourse surrounding Islam. His scathing critique of the state of Islām in his *Islām at the Crossroads,* which he carried over into his other minor works, often provoked substantive and reactive conversations among some circles of scholars in the Muslim world. In a sense, his reformist critiques sparked widespread reactions. Some scholars believed that Asad's "wake-up call" was an appropriate nudge on Islam's state of "spiritual and intellectual lethargy". Asad's revivalist advocacy thus echoed the campaigns of earlier Muslim reformers.

With the threat or onslaught of modernism and western ideologies upon Islamic civilization, Asad took Islamic scholars to task. He criticized them for their persistent, erroneous, and faulty jurisprudence as well as for their "petrified" hermeneutics of fundamental Islamic texts. Thus, he prescribed and advanced what believed was the antidote *par excellence* that could restore Islām to its former glory – namely, the reawakening of the rational spirit or independent thinking (*ijtihad*). It was, for him, a basic reactivation of a fundamental and inherent component in the Islamic system. That rational spirit and independent thinking were hallmarks of the scholarship of the great Islamic scholars of the past which, later in history, suffered a great decline. For these reformist initiatives, therefore, Asad was rightfully credited as "a gift to Islām."

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The ultimate embodiment of Asad's advocacy for the reinstatement of *ijtihād* is his *magnum opus, The Message of the Qurʾān.* Seventeen years in the making, this work exemplifies Asad's assiduous and unwavering devotion to the task of bringing the language and spirit of the Qurʾān closer to the hearts and minds of his readers. While he studied and learned from different methods of interpretation from both Classical and modern scholars, he, nonetheless, was able to maintain intellectual independence to pursue the outcome he wished to accomplish. At the heart of this inherited hermeneutical legacy was the central role of reason as the singular interpretive key that could unlock the Qurʾān's intended "message."

Thus, Asad's *TMOQ* demonstrates a rationalist orientation which subscribes to the principle that while the Qurʾān is a divinely-inspired book, it is, by nature, a rational literature accessible *li-qawmin yatafakkarūn* or "to people who think." This oft-repeated slogan or rallying cry became the consistent governing principle of Asad's praxis of translation and interpretation.

The samples of Asad's interpretation and rendition of the Qurʾān into English provided in the latter chapters of this dissertation bear the earmarks of a rationalist work. As we have seen, he is not constrained by exegetical conventions or traditions. At times, he defies standard or commonly held interpretations and translations. Moreover, *TMOQ* betrays a hermeneutical approach which constitutes a marriage between a Western rationalist persuasion and a textualist-traditionist orientation. Added to his command and facility with the Arabic language of the Bedouins of Arabia, these two exegetical lenses made

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Asad "uniquely equipped to undertake *the* difficult task" of interpreting and translating the Qurʾān, especially for the Anglophone audience. For this endeavor, Asad was rightly credited as "a gift to Islām."

One of the implications of Asad's rationalist method is his rejection of a *taqlīdī* adherence to the time-bound conclusions of the Classical period. He was quite suspicious and highly critical of the rich Classical *tafsīr* corpus. This, however, in no way signifies that Asad was oblivious of their invaluable contributions to qurʾānic exegesis. Rather, he used these Classical works as foils which could contrast, confirm or corroborate his own reading of a certain text or verse.

Another corollary of this rationalist hermeneutic which caught the attention of many critics is his demythological treatment of certain supernatural or miraculous elements in the Qurʾān. Contrary to the charge that his preference for demythologizing was a byproduct of his excessive rationalism, or for being "under the spell of pseudo-rationalism and Muʿtazilite thought,"[4] Asad's demythological approach was, rather, arguably consistent with his rationalist orientation.

By reading some of these miracles as metaphors or allegories, Asad intended to dispel any literary obstructions presented by the mythical configurations of these supernatural narratives. He wanted to generate a more meaningful message that was accessible to the faculty of human reason. In other words, the thrust of this demythologization was not about rejecting the literary

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[4] Kidwai, *Translating the Untranslatable*, 72.

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merits of these narratives. He also was not really concerned about whether these literary events even occurred or not. It was, instead, a rationalist attempt to bring Anglophone readers to an "intangible communion with the spirit and of the language" of the Qurʾān.[5]

It is for these foregoing considerations that I concluded in Chapter Three that *The Message of the Qurʾān* is predominantly a target-centered text. This, however, does not in any way signify infidelity towards the source text. As a matter of fact, Asad utilizes an "interlinear format" in which the original Arabic text is displayed alongside the English rendition. This translation model, according to Travis Zadeh, "privileges the presence of the charismatic original while relegating translation largely to the realm of exegetical expansion."[6]

At the outset, Asad was fully cognizant of the inimitable (*ʿijāz*) character of the Qurʾān. But, theoretical consideration of the "loss and gain" in the praxis of qurʾānic translation did not outweigh his personal mandate to propagate the "message" of the Qurʾān to his prospective readers.

Finally, amidst the increasingly suspicious scrutiny into Islām and its followers in our world today, Asad's translation and commentary of the Qurʾān offers a worthy and rich alternative which help provide a deeper understanding of the principles and fundamentals of Islām, as well as the Muslims' way of life. As such, *The Message of the Qurʾān* also stands prominently as a contrast to and

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[5] Asad, *TMOQ,* iii.

[6] Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾān*, 16.

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critique of other existing ideologically-based voices claiming to present the

Islamic worldview.

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