

BOOK REVIEW

Abdur Raheem Kidwai. 'What is in the Qur'an? Message of the Qur'an in Simple English'. Revised and Expanded Edition. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2019. xiv+421 pp.; ISBN: 978-93-88653-23-7; Price: 1250 (INR) (hbk)

Reviewed by Tauseef Ahmad Parray

Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies, Government Degree College for Women, Pulwama

(Higher Education Department), Jammu & Kashmir—(India)

tauseef.parray21@gmail.com

مراجعة كتاب

ما هو القرآن؟ رسالة القرآن بأسلوب إنجليزي سهل

تأليف: عبد الرحيم قدوائي

مراجعة: توصيف أحمد برى

أستاذ مساعد في الدراسات الإسلامية، كشمير، الهند

Cite this article as: Tauseef Ahmad Parray, "Book Review: 'What is in the Qur'an? Message of the Qur'an in Simple English' by Abdur Raheem Kidwai", *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 2, 2021.

<https://doi.org/10.29117/jcsis.2021.0278>

© 2021, Tauseef Ahmad Parray, Published in *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*. Published by QU Press. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits non-commercial use of the material, appropriate credit, and indication if changes in the material were made. You can copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format as well as remix, transform, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

Numerous English translations of the Qur'an appeared in the 20th century, and the trend continued into the 21st century as well. In recent years, many simple and enlightening translations have been published by Muslims and non-Muslims across the globe. From the subcontinent, too, there has been significant contributions to the field of Qur'anic studies in general and to translations of the Qur'an in Urdu and English in particular. One recent example is Abdur Raheem Kidwai's *What is in the Qur'an? Message of the Qur'an in Simple English* (first published in 2013; a revised and expanded edition published in 2019).

Abdur Raheem Kidwai (Professor at *Aligarh Muslim University* [AMU], India) is a well-known author of many works on the Qur'an and Islam. Having obtained advanced degrees in English from AMU and the *University of Leicester*, UK, he has published extensively on English translations of the Qur'an (in various forms), literary Orientalism, English studies and Urdu literature. *What is in the Qur'an?*, the work under review, was originally published in 2013 and was reprinted in 2014 and 2016 (see, for example, Parray, 2013; Siddiqui, 2013; and Hassan, 2013 below). A revised and expanded edition was published in 2019, with 400 footnotes/explanatory notes, which is double the number of notes in the first edition. Below is an assessment of this recent edition of the translated work.

What is in the Qur'an? is intended to help promote wider readership of the Qur'an among English readers. Presently, there are hundreds of complete English translations of the Qur'an, but on the basis of his experience of reviewing approximately 70 translations of the Qur'an since 1985, Kidwai claims that past translations are addressed mostly to specialist readerships, presupposing and taking for granted that readers will have some background knowledge of comparative religion, theology, history, geography, and Qur'anic Arabic terms (p. ix). On such grounds, Kidwai points out that some translations, under "the pretext" of producing a Qur'an translation, "seek to express, justify and even sanctify their whimsical and tendentious sectarian, polemical designs or beliefs and practices" (pp. x-xi). He describes the translations of Alexander Ross (1649), George Sale (1734), Rodwell (1861), N. J. Dawood (1956), Alan Jones (2007), etc. as "the most outrageous ones" (p. xi). He also argues that the English translations of the Qur'an by some "newly converted Muslims", such as Muhammad Marmuduke Pickthall (1930), Muhammad Asad (1980), T. B. Irving (1985), Aisha Bewley and Abdulhaqq Bewley (1998), underscore their sincere commitment to their new faith and their grappling with the meaning and message of the Qur'an" (p. xi). Moreover, Kidwai describes the translations of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934-1937), Abdul Majid Daryabadi (1957), M. M. Khattab (1989), Ahmad Zaki Hammad (2007), Tarif Khalidi (2008), etc., as being "largely faithful to the original" and as being fairly successful "in conveying the import of the Qur'an" (p. xi).

Keeping in view these facts, Kidwai's own translation, rather than offering a *literal* translation of the Qur'an, presents and paraphrases the content, as clearly revealed by the subtitle of the work, "*Meaning of the Qur'an in Simple English*", while striving to retain its original message. This translation, not being presented alongside the Qur'anic text in Arabic, is preceded by the original preface (pp. ix-xii) and a preface to the revised and expanded edition (p. xiii). One of the significant points highlighted by Kidwai in the preface is that almost all English translations "offer a literal translation" and thus do not provide a "coherent, fluent account of things [that are] Qur'anic" (p. xi). In the preface for the revised edition, Kidwai mentions that he "received a good feedback response", and many readers had asked him to include "more explanatory notes". In response to this request, to cater to the needs of readers, the 2019 edition "contains another 200, albeit brief, and thus in all 400 explanatory notes on a range of issues with a view to bringing into sharper light the Qur'anic guidance directed at

the entire humanity” (p. xiii). Varying in nature, most of these explanatory notes bring “into sharper light the Qur’anic guidance directed at the entire humanity” and confirm that the Qur’an provides “divine guidance for all time[s] and place[s]”; thus, “it addresses and resolves the issues of our time as well”, including gender justice and peaceful coexistence (p. xiii). It also contains a bibliography and a lengthy and helpful index. He explicitly points out that the present work neither provides the literal meaning of the text nor is an English translation of the Qur’an; in his own words:

the present work is *not*, strictly speaking, an English translation of the Qur’an. It attempts to present in simple, fluent English the paraphrase of the meaning and message of the Qur’an. For achieving this reader-friendly feature, taking some liberty in a few places was inevitable by way of filling the gaps and choosing such pronouns which fitted in with the context. ... [T]his is a modest attempt at presenting the meaning and message of the Qur’an in clear, easy to understand language, supplemented with brief explanatory notes especially for those [who are] new to the Qur’an and Islam (pp. xi-xii; *Italics in original*).

It is important to note that many reviews were published on the first edition of this translation. For example, in a review published in *The Muslim World Book Review* (London) by Abdur Rashid Siddiqui (2013: 20-22), the first edition is described as “accurate” and a “very commendable effort”, as it “tries to capture the beauty of the Qur’an”. Another review by Professor Masoodul Hassan (2013: 85-88) published in *Hamdard Islamicus* (Pakistan) described it as “a fluently readable English version of the Qur’an with a deliberate ‘reader friendly’ approach”. He praises Kidwai’s translation, for it “promises to enlarge the reach of the pristine message of the Qur’an, [and] correct some grave misconceptions about it”, and thus “promises to be equally beneficial and educative” for readers. In my review of the 2013 edition of Kidwai’s translation (published in *Al-Bayan*), I concluded that “Kidwai’s book clearly merits its title and justifies his claim that it is not an English translation but is a ‘paraphrase of the meaning and message of the Qur’an’... [and] indeed, stands apart from other English translations of the Qur’an, produced from the last many decades of last century and in 21st century as well” (Parray, 2013: 108).

However, to evaluate and gauge Kidwai’s claim that he has attempted to present in simple, fluent English a paraphrase of the meaning and message of the Qur’an, translation of selected verses with some prominent and most widely read English translations of Qur’an, namely, Marmuduke Pickthall’s *Holy Qur’an* (1992; 3rd ed.), Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s *The Holy Qur’an* (1977 [1934]), Abdul Majid Daryabadi’s *The Glorious Qur’an* (2001), and Abdel Haleem’s *The Qur’an: A New Translation*, are presented below. A comparison showing both the similarities and differences between Kidwai’s translation and four other selected translations is provided in the table below.

<i>Surah: Verse</i>	<i>Kidwai’s Translation</i>	<i>Yusuf ‘Ali’s Translation</i>	<i>Pickthall’s Translation</i>	<i>Daryabadi’s Translation</i>	<i>Abdel Haleem’s Translation</i>
2: 233	“after consultation , mutually decide”	“by mutual consent and after due consultation”	“by mutual consent and (after) consultation”	“by agreement between them and mutual counsel ”	“by mutual consent and Consultation”
3: 159	“ Consult them in collective affairs”	“and consult them ”	“and consult with them ”	“and take counsel with them ”	“ Consult with them about matters”

4: 34	"men are the protectors and maintainers of women"; "and (at last) beat them (lightly) "	" protectors and maintainers "; "(and last) beat them (lightly) "	" in charge "; and " scourge them "	" overseers "; "and beat them "	" take good care of "; "then hit them "
4: 59	obey "those given authority among "you	"those charged with authority "	" who are in authority "	"men of authority "	" those in authority "
17: 1	" Glory to God who carried His servant (Prophet Muhammad) by night"	" Glory (to God) who did take His Servant"	" Glorified be He Who carried His servant"	" Hallowed be He! Who translated His bondsman"	" Glory to Him who made His servant"
2: 187	"They are your garments and you their garments"	" your garments "	"They are raiment for you "	"They are a garment for you "	"they are [close] as garments to you"
3: 54	"They (the unbelievers) plotted (against Jesus) and God too plotted "	" plotted and planned , and God too planned "	" schemed , and Allah Schemed (against them)"	"and they plotted and Allah plotted "	" schemed but God also schemed "
4: 157-58	" not kill or crucify him [Jesus], but the matter was made dubious to them"; "But God raised him (Jesus) to Him"	" killed him not , nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them"; "Nay God raised up unto Himself"	" slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them"; "But Allah took him up unto Himself"	" killed him not , nor did they sent him to the cross, but it was made dubious to them"; "But Allah raised him unto Him"	"They did not kill him , nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them"; "God raised him up to Himself"
24: 30	"lower their gaze and guard their private parts "	"lower their gaze and guard their modesty "	"to lower their gaze and be modest "	"lower their sights and guard their private parts "	"to lower their glances and guard their private parts "

From this comparison, we can deduce the following points:

- *Q. 4: 34* is translated as "*protectors and maintainers*" by Kidwai and Ali, while Pickthall and Abdel Haleem use the words "*in charge*" and "*take good care*", respectively.
- In translating *Q. 3: 159*, the translators show minor variations: Kidwai, Pickthall, Ali, and Abdel Haleem use the phrase "*consult (with) them*", and Daryabadi uses "*take counsel with them*". While in *Q. 42: 38*, Kidwai simply uses "*consultation*", Ali and Abdel Haleem prefer "*mutual consultation*", and Pickthall and Daryabadi use "*a matter of counsel*" and "*counsel among themselves*", respectively.
- With regard to *Q. 24: 30*, Kidwai, Ali, and Pickthall use "*gaze*"; while "*sights*" and "*glance*" are used by Daryabadi and Abdel Haleem, respectively; "*private parts*" is used by Kidwai, Daryabadi, and Abdel Haleem; and the same is translated as "*modesty*" and "*be modest*" by Ali and Pickthall, respectively.
- The word "*makaru*" in *Q. 3: 54* is variedly translated as "*plotted*" by Kidwai and Daryabadi, "*plotted and planned*" by Yusuf Ali, and "*schemed*" by Pickthall and Abdel Haleem.
- In *Q. 4: 59*, *Ulil Amr* is translated differently in all versions, and the same is the case with *Q. 9: 20* and *Q. 4: 157-58*.

There are many other such examples of minor and major changes/variations in the translation as well as of similarities between these translations. Moreover, Kidwai occasionally adds parentheses

to clarify the meaning of some terms and phrases: “*So repent to your Creator and kill yourselves (the wrongdoers among you)*” (Q. 2: 54); “*Do they (these Hypocrites) not know even this much*” (Q. 2: 77); “*(The guided ones are) in houses (mosques) which God has allowed to be raised for mentioning His name*” (Q. 24: 36); “*(Are these false gods better) or He Who created everyone in the first place*” (Q. 27: 64); “*By the star when it sets, Your companion (Prophet Muhammad) is not in error. Nor is he misled (by anyone)*” (Q. 53: 1-2); “*(The agreements) for the protection of the Quraysh. (These agreements) cover their (trade) journeys) in winter and summer*” (Q. 106: 1-2); and “*There is no one (at all) like Him*” (Q. 112: 5).

As mentioned above, Kidwai complements the translation with ample footnotes that help in comprehending the content and context of the specific verse. Some examples are provided below.

- i. *Ar-Rahman* is translated as the ‘Most Compassionate’ (in Q. 1: 1) but is explained in the footnote as follows: “In the opening lines of His book, the Qur’an, God introduces Himself as Most Compassionate and Most Merciful. That mercy is His dominant attribute is asserted at other places also in the Qur’an. The entire creation, numerous blessings granted to us ... reflect God’s mercy to mankind” (Q.1, fn.4, p.1).
- ii. *Al-ghayb* (in Q. 2: 2) is translated as ‘the Unseen’ and is explained as follows: “Many matters lie outside man’s sense perception. Islam asks man not to pursue these. Life, death, the Afterlife, Angels, the Last Day and the Day of Judgment belong to this category” (Q. 2, fn. 10, p. 2).
- iii. *Khalifah* (in Q. 2: 30) is translated as ‘vicegerent’ and is discussed as follows: “According to Qur’an, man is God’s vicegerent. God has made him a trustee, endowing him with a range of faculties and resources” (Q. 2, fn. 27, p. 5).
- iv. In the explanation of Q. 4: 1, he adds: “Islam emphasizes the idea of unit of mankind. All human beings, irrespective of their gender, colour and ethnicity, are Allah’s creatures and servants. He provides sustenance to all of them, including die-hard unbelievers and atheists” (Q. 4, fn. 103, p. 44). Similarly, in the explanation of Q. 49: 13, Kidwai adds a similar note: “This Qur’an[ic] verse strikes at the roots of racism, jingoism, and all false notions of superiority related to one’s colour, ethnicity, nation-state or linguistic group. In God’s eye, everyone is equal” (Q. 49, fn. 351, p. 313).
- v. The explanation of Q. 4: 7, which reads, “*There is a share for men in what their parents and close relatives leave behind*”, is given by Kidwai as follows: “Islam grants women for the first time the same economic rights which men have. It was a major step towards gender justice, as women were allotted their share in inheritance and economic rights to earn independently” (Q. 4, fn. 105, p. 44). Another footnote highlighting the theme of gender justice/parity is found in Q. 4: 19, which states that “a strong note of gender justice permeates this passage, especially the directive to the believers to treat their wives kindly and to overlook their lapses, if any” (fn. 108, p. 46). Similar notes can be seen in Q. 2: 228 (fn. 67, p. 22), Q. 4: 35 (fn. 112, p. 47), and Q. 24: 9 and 26 (fn.s 232 and 236, pp. 201, 203).
- vi. In the explanation of Q. 4: 34, “*Men are protectors and maintainers of women, ..., and (at last) beat them (lightly)*”, one of the most hotly debated and misconstrued passages, is interpreted by Kidwai as follows: “Regrettably those hostile to Islam misconstrue this verse, alleging that Islam sanctions wife beating. ... Wife beating ... is totally discordant with the moral code prescribed by Islam. For the Qur’an speaks of husband and wife like garments for each other, underscoring their

close bonding” (Q. 4, fn. 111, p. 47; see also, footnote on Q. 2: 187, fn. 58, p. 19).

What is remarkable about these explanatory notes is that they truly substantiate his claim that these bring into sharper light the fact that Qur’anic guidance is indeed appropriate to all times and places; it is “directed at the entire humanity”; and it “addresses and resolves the issues of our time as well” (p. xiii), including tolerance, harmony, gender justice/parity, equality, and peaceful coexistence.

Though the author claims to have made “efforts to ensure an error-free version” and to have corrected the “typographical errors in the earlier edition” (p. xiii), some typos are still found. For example, in the explanation of Q. 20: 43, “*Both of you go to Pharaoh. He has crossed the limits*”, instead of the Prophet Musa (AS), Kidwai writes that the “Qur’an directs Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to speak politely to Pharaoh, a great enemy of God” (fn. 216, p. 178). Further, in the footnote on Q. 49: 13, he writes, “this Qur’an verse strikes” instead of “Qur’anic verse” (fn. 351, p. 313).

In sum, keeping in view all the features of this translation, it is fair to say that Kidwai’s translation clearly merits its title. It also justifies his claim that it is not a *literal* translation but is a ‘paraphrase of the meaning and message of the Qur’an’ presented in simple and fluent English. It, indeed, stands apart from other well-received English translations of the Qur’an. Though it has many similarities with other translations (as shown in the above table), it is also unique in many ways. Moreover, its reprints in 2014 and 2016 and the present revised edition attest to its warm reception and popular demand among English-language readership. As a lucid and eloquent paraphrasing of the meanings and messages of the Qur’an, *What is in the Qur’an? Message of the Qur’an in Simple English* is a substantial, valuable, and highly interesting venture.