

Introduction by Dr. Hadi Jatlaoui

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When Mr. Mazhar Mallouhi asked me to review the adaptation of the Gospel into Arabic which was recently done by scholars for publication I was overcome – as a Muslim who usually deals with the Qur'an – with a strange feeling mixed with apprehension of a great responsibility placed on my shoulders, apprehension of what could slip into the text through faulty presentation or expressions. This might drive the reader away from the holy text at the same time when it is necessary, on the contrary, to have the reader attracted to the text and convinced to devote time to it and to interact with it. I was gripped by an even greater awe of causing an error from my position as a weak and finite human falling short of the eloquence and enchanting power of divine revelation, revelation that cannot be adequately expressed in human terms. How can one in this position consider himself able to evaluate the Holy Bible?

Perhaps a Christian reader would find it hard to understand this awe and find it hard to justify, since he is accustomed to reading the Gospels recorded by the Apostles, the companions of the Lord Christ, and his followers who lived with him, those who learned from his example and way of life. So these texts usually agree and sometimes differ in a way that simply enriches these texts, so that each one complements the other, and these differences are not really the cause of any division between them. The awe I am speaking of is something that a Muslim reader will understand since in the teachings of his religion the Qur'an is miraculous in its words and meanings, being God's revelation to his Prophet and a gift from him to the believers. They are not to innovate by adding or taking away anything as they recite it, or by editing or changing it.

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Someone may say that there is no reason to be so awestruck when one is dealing with a translation of the holy text, since any translation is simply an expression of one person's understanding, his interpretation in a new form that he has composed in language differing from the original language, with the translation taking the risk of correctly presenting the meaning in its wording, style and meaning. Just as the Gospel has been translated, so also the Qur'an and other holy texts may be translated, so that the Qur'an becomes diverse with the diversity of its translators.

These translations of the Qur'an all resemble one another in attempting to present the meaning in a form that cannot possibly attain the loftiness of the original Arabic, but of course they do not aspire to do so. Rather, the translated presentation attempts to be as faithful and honest as possible in transmitting the meaning, falling short in communicating the beauty and enchanting power of the original language. The reality is that communicating the meaning in a complete sense is an elusive dream. This in itself is one of the greatest causes of such awe in undertaking translation in a general sense; how should one feel when the text to be translated is Holy Scripture?

Perhaps one might belittle this awe that grips the translator of a holy text (no matter what that text is) in that a holy text in its very origin is linguistically diverse, even if this diversity or variety seems only partial. The diversity of the "Gospels" (in the plural) is something obvious not needing to be demonstrated, and so we have the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Matthew and so on. The reader of these Gospels doesn't miss the fact that there are many places of similarity and difference. This is a matter worthy of attention, and the one studying must overcome first impressions, looking deeply into the reasons for such similarities and differences and what results from them, in the context of a comparative study of the several texts deriving from one source.

As for the diversity of the Qur'an, if it is not as evident as the diversity of the Gospels, it does exist in the different readings and even different texts of the Qur'an. For example, Abu Bakr Sajistani (who died in the year 316 of the Hijra) authored a book on the "Qur'ans" in the plural. We find in the Qur'an the attestation that it was inspired in seven forms, and in the Prophetic Tradition there are Hadiths indicating several readings, just as in Islamic tradition these several readings are regulated, and the conditions for their use are delineated, as well the particular passages in question and their distinguishing features, all this in spite of the Caliph Uthman's unifying the diverse Qur'anic text into one Uthmanic recension.

So the diversity of readings of religious texts is evident, and they derive their legitimacy from historical circumstances surrounding their creation and connected with their reception and being put in writing. This is because a religious text is always in its origin an oral text, oral in its divine inspiration, oral also in its transmission and dissemination as a message. At this point it is necessarily a diverse text, with a diversity coming upon it during its transmission with changes and distortion either great or small, whether intentional or not.

In addition to these tangible historical reasons, there is the change of the holy text into the form of technical mechanical writing. Metaphor is an inherent feature of the Gospel, just as it is in the Qur'an, even if it exists in different forms. So the Lord Christ in the Gospel continually tells parables to people and tests their cleverness in solving puzzles and drawing the morals out of stories, stories that are not to be taken at face value, but which demand interpretation to discover what they contain of allusion and divine guidance. As for the Qur'an, the issue of its interpretation is more complex, having just as the Gospel does differing interpretations in the Prophetic Traditions in the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, having symbolic import in determining religious laws if they came from Muhammad and are supposed to be followed in practice or abstention from certain actions. Muhammad, just like Jesus, was a model and leader to others, and there are things in the Qur'an not found in the Gospel that have been studied for indications and hints and expressions which are deliberately ambiguous.

The way a text can be read ranges from a surface understanding of its meaning, to a broader understanding of allowing and granting choice, or a narrower understanding which focuses on warning and prohibition.

The nature of the religious text can be interpreted in diverse ways, in its form and meaning, and this makes it easier for the translator or interpreter to understand the text as they do, just as Mazhar Mallouhi does in his generous spirit and belief in the value of cooperation, an openminded approach to texts, the knowledge of the horizons of religion with multiple borders, the one religion dialoguing with the other and searching for grounds for friendship by means of the elements of separateness. These are some of the elements that also made it easier to bring together Christianity as a religion and Arabic as a language.

I have had the opportunity to closely examine the Arabness of the Gospel, to note the points of similarity and overlap between the Arabic of the Gospel and the Arabic of the Qur'an in expression and metaphor, which has made me desire to investigate in the near future (God willing) the distinctiveness and similarity of

religious expression in the language of the Gospel and the language of the Qur'an in their composition, and the reasons for this overlap.

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