

COME TO KNOW THE *QUR'AN*

Dr. Waleed Bleyhesh al-Amri

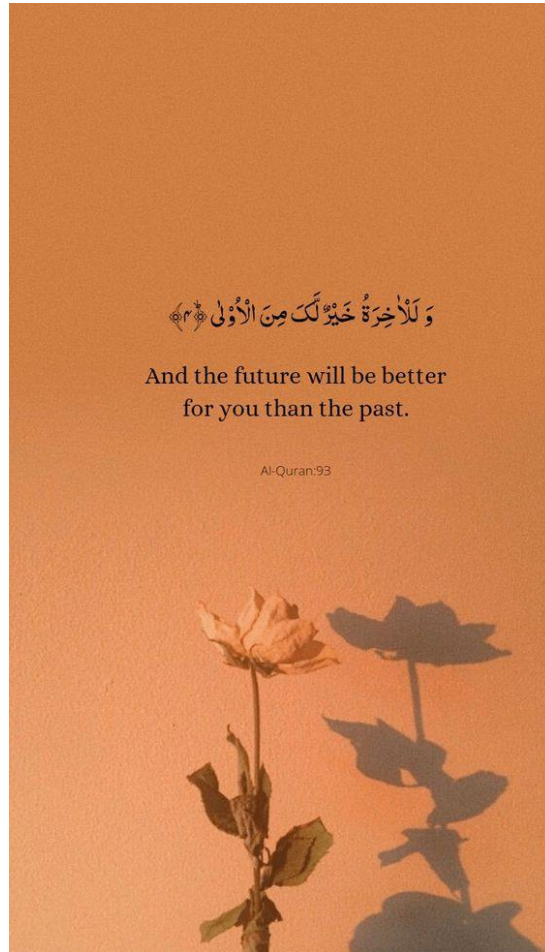
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What is the Qur'an?

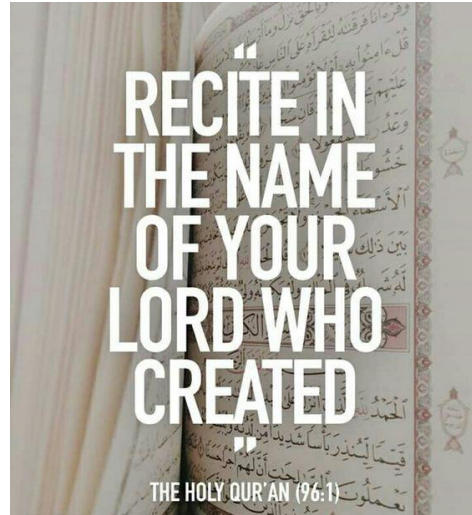
The Qur'an is, the inimitable, verbatim Word of God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as an everlasting miracle, ever-present to guide those who seek the Truth and the way to felicity in this life and the great reward of God in the Hereafter. It is Islam's foundational text which encapsulates its message; it is the foremost source of guidance and legislation for Believers. Believers' lives are directed by it and their actions find grounds in it. The tenets of Islam cannot be grasped without a proper understanding of the Qur'an. A great many Muslims learn it by heart, and it is used as a reference book, a book of rules and guidelines, and as an ethical textbook for

hundreds of millions the world over. Its authenticity and the binding nature of its dictates are authoritative across the board. Unlike the other previously revealed Scriptures, which underwent major alterations through editing, translations in and out of Greek, Syriac, Hebrew Latin Aramaic and Ethiopic, amendments by scribes and religious leaders, loss of some of the books, the Qur'an remains in its Original authentic form as known at the time of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). This is because guardianship of these Books was left to the learned among the people: *"They were entrusted with the protection of the Book of Allah, and they were witnesses to it"*, (4: 44); whereas God



Almighty made the pledge to preserve the Quran Himself: “*We have sent down the Reminder [Qur’an] Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it*”, (15: 9).

The word “Qur’an” relates directly to the act of reading and reciting. In fact, the first word revealed in the Qur’an was the command: *Iqra’ (Read!)*. This great word is the key to unlocking the doors of knowledge and enlightenment, emancipating the human mind, and breaking the shackles of ignorance. Through ‘reading’ the Qur’an humans find their way to the Truth and take their surest steps on the Straight Path that leads to the Pleasure of



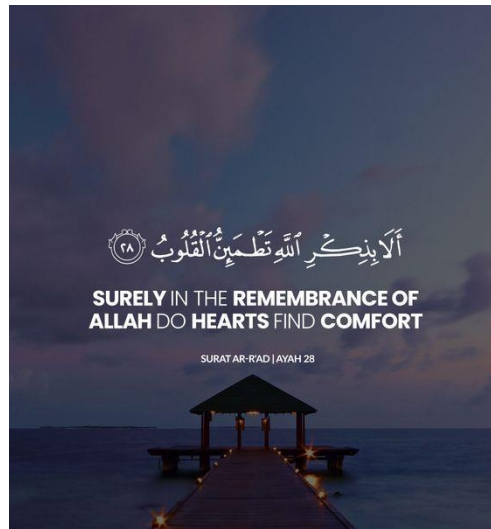
God and deliverance. Each Qur’anic surah is preceded by the statement “*In the Name of Allah, Most Beneficent, Most Merciful*”¹, thus one engages in this act of profound reading with the resolution of seeking God’s own help and assistance; and who is a better guide than God! But whatever may be said about the Qur’an, none can say it better than God Himself.

¹ With the exception of Sura 9, *at-Tawbah* (Repentance)

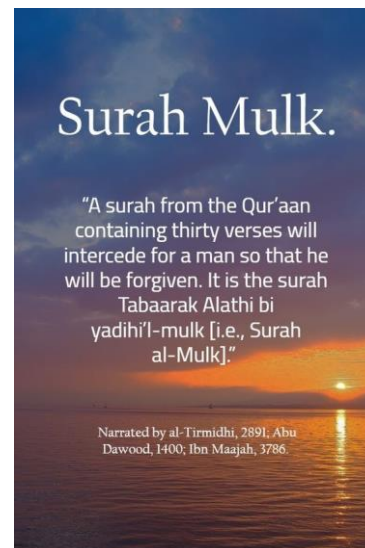
What does God say about the Qur'an?

God directly speaks to us through and in the Qur'an which is His Final Message to humanity. He urges humans to consider this Message with great attention, read it with deliberation and delve into its deep and multifarious meanings: *“Will they not contemplate the Qur'an? Had it been from anyone other than Allah, they would have found much inconsistency in it”*, (4: 82); *“Will they not contemplate the Qur'an? Do they have locks on their hearts?”* (47: 24). To this effect God speaks of the Qur'an in a number of ways:

- The Qur'an is to the heart what the spirit is to the body. It is a beacon of light and guidance: *“We have thus revealed a Spirit to you [Muhammad] by Our command: you knew neither the Book nor the Faith, but We made it [the Qur'an] a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You are indeed guiding to the straight path”*. (42: 52)
- It is a guidance that's not to be doubted: *“That Book [the Qur'an]— no doubt – in it is guidance to the Mindful”*. (2: 2)
- *“And those that have been given knowledge will see that what has been sent down to you from your Lord is the Truth, and that it guides to the path of the Noble, the Praiseworthy.”* (34: 6)
- A guidance to uprightness: *“Truly this Qur'an guides toward that which is most upright, and gives glad tidings to the Believers who perform righteous deeds that theirs shall be a great reward”*. (17: 9)
- *“The month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was sent down as guidance for mankind, [containing] clear indicators of guidance and a criterion [for distinguishing between right and wrong]”*. (2: 185)

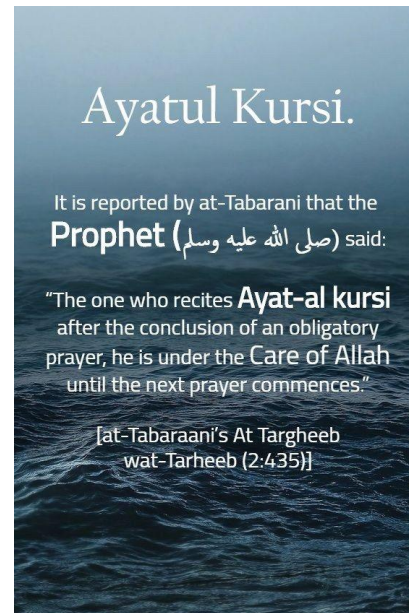


- “Say [Muhammad]: *‘The Holy Spirit [Angel Gabriel] has brought it [the Qur’an] down from your Lord with Truth to strengthen those who Believe, and as guidance, and glad tidings to those who submit’*”. (16: 102)
- “*When We sent a group of jinn your way to listen to the Qur’an. Then, upon hearing it, they said [to one another], ‘Listen attentively!’ Then when it was over, they returned to their fellow jinn as warners. They said: ‘Our people, we have heard a Book which was sent down after Moses, confirming what came before it, guiding to the Truth and to a straight path’*.” (46: 29-30)
- Guidance and a healing! “Say [Muhammad]: *‘It [the Qur’an] is guidance and healing for those who Believe’*”. (41: 44)
- A criterion with which to distinguish between Truth and falsehood: “*Blessed be He Who has revealed the Distinguisher [the Qur’an] to His servant that he may warn the whole world’*”. (25: 1)
- A proof and a clear light, a way of deliverance: “*O mankind! Verily there has come unto you a proof from your Lord. And We have sent down unto you a clear light [the Qur’an]*”. (4: 174)
- “*A light has now come to you from Allah and a clear Book, with which Allah guides to the ways of peace those who follow what pleases Him, bringing them from darkness out into light, by His will, and guiding them to a straight path.*” (5:15-16)
- It is a Truth which bears Truth. A harbinger of good news and warnings which is to be studied with much attention and dedication: “*We sent down the Qur’an with the Truth, and with the Truth it has come down, We sent you [Muhammad] only to give good news and warning; [bearing] a recitation [a Qur’an] that We have revealed gradually so that you may recite it to people slowly and with deliberation. [This is why] We sent it down by stages’*”. (17: 105-106)
- A favour to the Believers along with the favour of the Prophet (ﷺ): “*Allah has favoured the Believers when He sent among them a Messenger of their kind; He recites His Signs [ayahs] to them,*



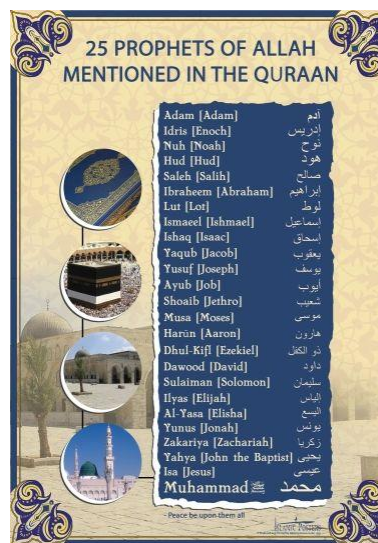
purifies them, and teaches them the Book [the Qur'an] and Wisdom—indeed they were utterly lost before”. (3: 164)

- It is a blessed Book: *“This is a blessed Book We have sent down”. (6: 92)*
- *“This is a blessed Book We have sent down. So follow it and be Mindful [of Allah], so you may be shown mercy.” (6:155)*
- *“[This is] A blessed Book which We have sent down to you [Muhammad] so that they may contemplate its Signs [ayahs], and people of reason may pay heed.” (38: 29)*
- It is to be listened to attentively: *“When the Qur'an is recited, listen to it attentively and be silent, so you may be shown mercy”. (7: 204)*
- It is an inimitable miracle of Divine source: *“Nor could this Qur'an have been devised by anyone other than Allah. It is a confirmation of what was revealed before it and an explanation of the Scripture – let there be no doubt about it – it is from the Lord of all beings. Or do they say, “He has made it up?” Say [Muhammad], “Then produce a surah like it, and call on anyone you can beside Allah if you are telling the truth”.” (10: 37-38)*
- *“Or do they say: “He [Muhammad] has invented it [the Qur'an] himself,” say: “Then produce ten invented surahs like it, and call in whoever you can beside Allah, if you are truthful. If they do not answer you, then you will all know that it is sent down with Allah's Knowledge, and that there is no god but Him. Then will you submit to Him?” (11: 13-14)*
- *“Say: “If the whole of mankind and jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support”.” (17: 88)*
- It explains matters plainly to people: *“Alif, Lām, Rā’; these are the Signs [ayahs] of the Book that makes things clear”. (12: 1)*
- God is its Guardian: *“We have sent down the Reminder [Qur'an]*



Ourself, and We Ourself will guard it". (15: 9)

- There is no crookedness in it. It is totally upright: *"All gratitude be to Allah Who has sent down to His servant [Muhammad] the Book [the Qur'an] and has not placed therein any crookedness—[He made it] perfectly upright, to warn of a severe punishment from Him; to give good news to the Believers—who do good—that they will have a fine reward"*. (18: 1-2)
- It is a glory to its companions: *"We have surely sent down to you a Book [the Qur'an], in which there is glory for you. Will you not then understand?"* (21: 10)
- A mighty Book with no falsehood: *"Truly it is a mighty Book; which falsehood cannot touch from any front, a Revelation sent down from the Wise One, Worthy of All Praise"*. (41: 41-42)
- A noble, well-guarded Book: *"Truly it is a noble Qur'an; in a Book well-guarded"*. (56: 77-78)
- It is a weighty Word, even a mountain would crumble had the Qur'an been sent to it: *"If We had sent this Qur'an down to a mountain, you[Muhammad]would have seen it humbled and split apart in its awe of Allah: We offer people such illustrations so that they may reflect"*. (59: 21)
- *"Truly We shall soon cast upon you a weighty Word."* (73: 5)
- The most beautiful and consistent of all teachings, whereby those who ponder upon it will rightly shiver: *"Allah has sent down the most beautiful of all teachings: a Book that is consistent and often repeated; that causes the skins of those in awe of their Lord to shiver. Then their skins and their hearts soften at the mention of Allah: such is Allah's Guidance. He guides with it whoever He wills; no one can guide those Allah leaves to stray"*. (39: 23)



The merit of the Qur'an

For Muslims the merit of the Qur'an is indisputable. Indeed innumerable tomes have been penned by Muslim scholars throughout the ages, invariably titling their works *Faḍā' al-Qur'ān* (Merits of the Qur'an)².

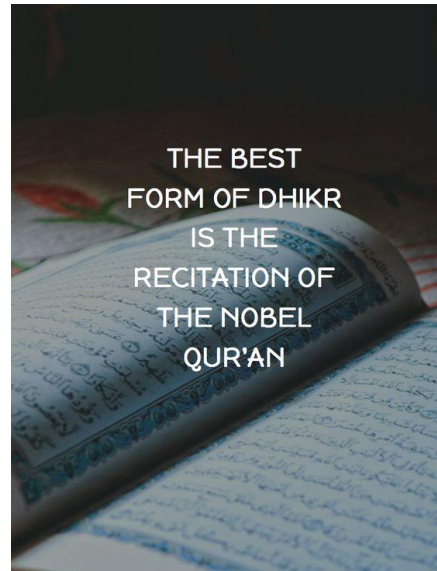
Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) speaks of the Qur'an thus:

The Book of Allah: in it is news of those who came before you and what will come after you and, judgement regarding your affairs; it is the most serious of matters, no tyrant will cast it aside without Allah destroying him, whoever seeks guidance by any other

besides it will be misguided by Allah; it is the enduring rope of Allah, the Wise Mention, and the Straight Path; it will not be swayed by whims, distorted by tongues; the knowledgeable cannot have enough of it, nor will it become cumbersome by repetition and its wonders are never ending; it is the recitation that when the jinn heard it, they could not but say: *"We have heard a wondrous Recitation that leads to guidance"* (72: 1-2); whoever cites it has spoken the Truth, whoever acts by it will be rewarded, whoever judges according to it will pass a fair judgement and whoever invites to it will be guided to a straight path.(Al-Tirmidhī: 2906)

There are a number of hadiths (or Prophetic sayings) that encourage Believers to read the Qur'an—reciting it is an act of worship and for which the reciter is generously rewarded. Here are some of the best-known of them:

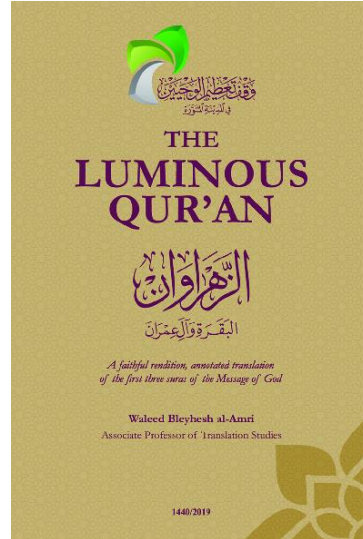
- 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ūd (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: "Whoever reads a letter of the Qur'an receives one *ḥasanah*-reward for it then each reward is multiplied by ten. I shall not say



² Of these, for instance, are those by: Ibn Kathīr, al-Qāsim Ibn Sallām, al-Nasā'ī.

that: “*Alif-lām-mām*” is one letter. But *alif* is a letter, *lām* is a letter and *mām* is a letter”. (al-Tirmidhī: 2910)

- Abū Umāmah al-Bāhilī (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “Read the Qur’an for it comes on the Day of Judgement to intercede on behalf of those who associate themselves with it. Read *Al-Zahrāwān* (The Two Luminous Surahs), *Al-Baqarah* and *Āl ‘Imrān*, as they come on the Day of Judgement as if they were two clouds, or shades or two flocks of birds, keeping closely together arguing on behalf of the one who owns them”. (Muslim: 1910)
- ‘Ā’ishah (رضي الله عنها) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “Whoever reads the Qur’an while being accomplished at it will be among the generous obedient messengers [the most revered angels]. And the one who reads the Qur’an haltingly and with difficulty will have two rewards”. (Muslim: 798)
- Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “The likeness of the Believer who reads the Qur’an is that of a citrus fruit, it both smells and tastes good. Yet the likeness of a Believer who does not read the Qur’an is that of a palm date fruit, it has no smell but its taste is sweet. While the likeness of a hypocrite who reads the Qur’an is that of a basil leaf, it smells good but its taste is bitter. Yet the likeness of the hypocrite who does not read the Qur’an is that of bitter apple, it has no smell and its taste is bitter”. (Al-Bukhārī: 5427)
- Ibn ‘Umar (رضي الله عنهما) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “One should only be covetous of two people: a man who has been given the Qur’an—he recites it during the day time and during the night time. And a man who has been given wealth—he spends [charitably] out of it during the day time and during the night time”. (Muslim: 815)
- Anas (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “Allah has His Own people among people”. They said: “Messenger of Allah! Who are



they?” He replied: “[They are] the people of the Qur’an—the people of Allah and His closest [friends]”. (Ibn Mājah: 215, Aḥmad: 11870)

- ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Amr (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “It will be said to the companion of the Qur’an [on the Day of Judgement]: “Recite and elevate and recite beautifully as you used to do in the worldly life for your station [in Paradise] will coincide with the last ayah you recite”. (Aḥmad: 6799)
- Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “No group of people shall gather in one of the houses of Allah [a mosque] reciting and studying the Book of Allah without tranquility descending upon them, mercy engulfing them, angels encircling them and Allah mentioning them among His audience”. (Muslim: 6863)
- ‘Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (h) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: “Indeed Allah elevates by this Book some people stations [above others], and downgrades with it others”. (Muslim: 817)

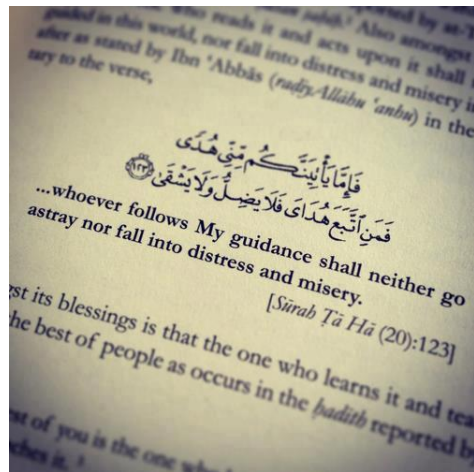


Keys to understanding the Qur'an

Although the Qur'an can be seen and read as a 'book', in as much as it is put down in book format, is not, however, to be thought of as a 'book' that follows the usual rules and maxims of text building and book composition. Rather, the Qur'an urges us to read it with careful attention focusing on its deep and various meanings. The relatively difficult language of the Qur'an, lack of access to mainstream Muslim commentaries (particularly as they are not widely translated into other languages), and inadequate Qur'an translations, among many other reasons, may, however, constitute a barrier blocking the channels of communication between the Qur'an and the reader. Muslims read the Qur'an on a daily or weekly basis and, especially during the month of Ramadan. It should be emphasized here though that a mechanical reading of the Qur'an cannot unravel the meanings underpinning the Qur'anic messages in each surah, and which would leave their hidden treasures locked away.

Furthermore, uninitiated readers will find it difficult to read through the Qur'an unless they are equipped with the right keys to understanding it. Some of these are as follows:

- **Key 1:** *The Qur'an is a book of guidance.* Indeed, God speaks of the guidance of the Qur'an as a life-line and a source of light that dissipates the darkness of doubt and expunges other diseases of the heart: *"Would the one who was dead and We caused him to come alive and bestowed upon him a light to walk in among people be like the one who is plunged in complete darkness; there is no way for him to emerge out of which!"* (6: 122). The main purpose of the Qur'an is to guide people to eternal bliss and happiness which is gained through adherence to God's commands. To this effect it employs



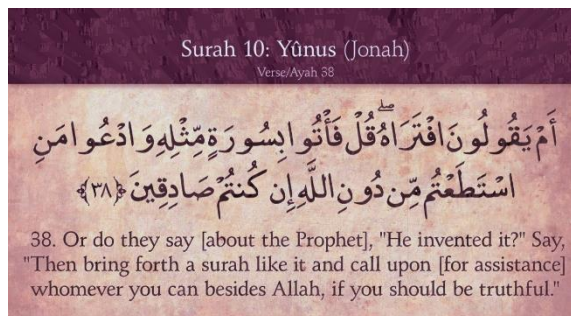
such discursive tools as storytelling, admonition, encouragement in a manner not found in other books.

- **Key 2:** *The Qur'an is first and foremost a constitution of high morals.* It establishes the standards of morality that sound human nature embodies: justice, equality, moral integrity, fair and equitable laws and rulings, and good governance and administration of justice. Through the Qur'an, we find these highlighted, underlined and repeated in different forms and guises. They are projected as the elements which, when strung together, lead to the Pleasure of God.
- **Key 3:** *The Qur'an came to us through revelation from God to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).* Angel Gabriel was the conduit of this revelation and it did not happen all at once but went on for an extended period of 23 years. It came gradually and in sections at intermittent stages, rather than all at once. Thus, so as to maintain Allah's guidance, consolidate the Prophet's mission with Godly Signs (ayahs), smooth the gradual legislation of the new code of life, and to make the Qur'an easy for the Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions to learn by heart.
- **Key 4:** *The expanse of time over which the Qur'an was revealed is traditionally divided into two broad periods, i.e. those of Makkah (86 surahs) and Madinah (28 surahs).* The Makkan period, which lasted for 13 years, saw the tender growth of the seedling of Faith in an extremely harsh environment of ignorance. The ayahs revealed during this period talk about: matters of creed, Belief, resurrection and the Day of Judgement, Prophethood, the evil of Denial and Associating other deities in worship with God, the call to return to the pristine creed of Abraham and stories of earlier nations who incurred God's Wrath and destruction for their rebelliousness against their Prophets. Qur'anic Signs (ayahs) kept on coming until it was absolutely clear what Belief and what lack



of it exactly entail. In the face of the unrelenting persecution that they were subjected to, the Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions had to migrate to Madinah. This move heralded a new definitive phase in the history of Islam, the Prophetic mission, and the nature of the revealed ayahs themselves. Here, the earlier themes also carried on, yet with a new emphasis along with the introduction of new laws for the community: rulings that bear on different circumstances, the penal code, religious obligations and how to deal with the People of the Book and the hypocrites. Indeed, a whole way of life was laid out quite distinctly, thus culminating in the final, most perfect Message that came from God: *“Today I have finalized your religion for you, perfected My Favour on you and I approve Islam as a religion for you”*.(5:3) It is very telling that the last ayah of the Qur’an that was revealed was: *“Be Mindful of a Day on which you shall be returned to Allah and every soul shall be paid in full what it earned—they will not be wronged!”*(2: 281)—a person’s mission in life is to be prepared for judgement by God, the Most Just of all judges.

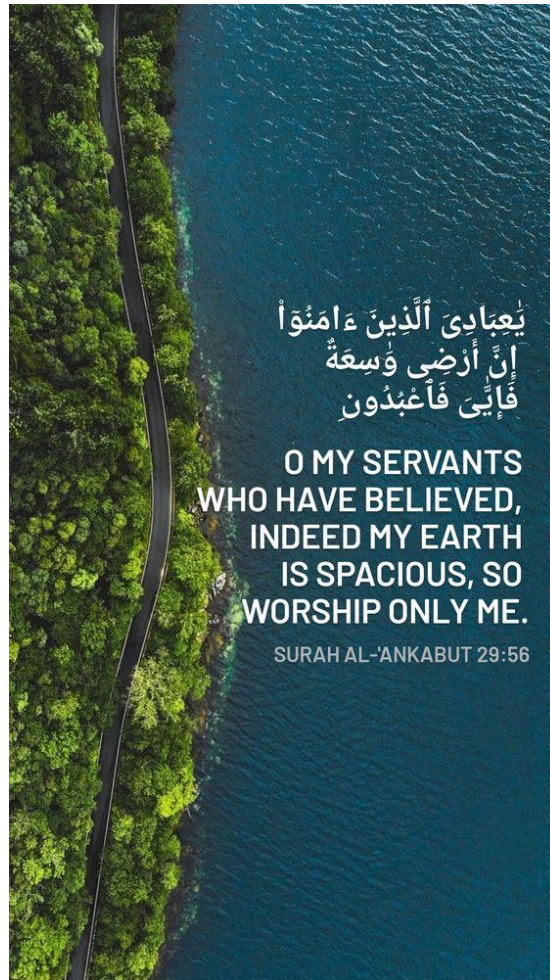
- **Key 5:** *The language of the Qur’an is indeed unique in its style. It is neither prose nor poetry. Instead, it masterfully employs all what language has to offer to achieve the highest effect on the*



human psyche. Armstrong (1994, p. 168) describes the effect of the Qur’an on its immediate recipients as follows: “The early biographers of Muhammad constantly described the wonder and shock felt by the Arabs when they heard the Koran for the first time. Many were converted on the spot, believing that God alone could account for the extraordinary beauty of the language. Frequently a convert would describe the experience as a divine invasion that tapped buried yearnings and released a flood of feelings. Muslims like Umar seem to have experienced a similar unsettling of sensibility, an awakening and a disturbing sense of significance which enabled them to make the painful break with

the traditional past. Even those Qurayshis who refused to accept Islam were disturbed by the Koran and found that it lay outside all their familiar categories: it was nothing like the inspiration of the *kahins* [soothsayers] or the poets; nor was it like the incantations of a magician. Some stories show powerful Qurayshis who remained steadfastly with the opposition being visibly shaken when they listened to a surah”.

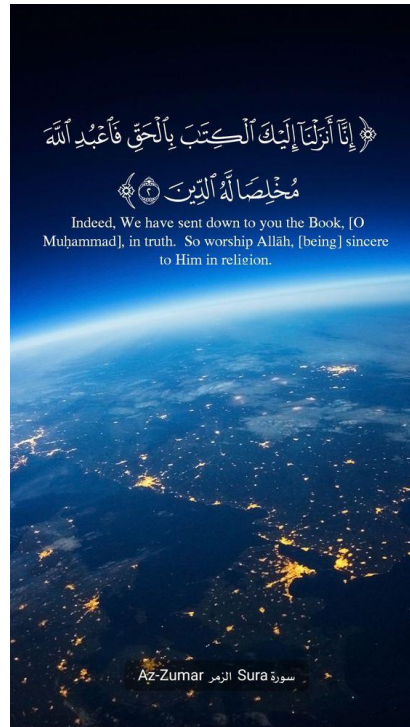
- **Key 6:** *The Qur'an mainly deals with three themes: belief, laws and manners.* Each theme comprises an array of interrelated and lesser ones that together constitute a complete whole. *Belief* entails how a Believer is to perceive matters such as the Unseen (*al-Ghayb*-what lies beyond the realm of human perception), Paradise, Hellfire, the origin of creation, the essentials of religion, the truth of God's Oneness (Monotheism), the Prophets and what they really stood for, and the truthfulness of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and the Qur'an. A Muslim is to Believe in these in



accordance with the Qur'an and the Sunnah (which, in a sense, is the Prophetic example of how the Qur'an is to be interpreted); they are the creedal foundations of Faith. *Laws*, on the other hand, are the practical foundations of Faith on which Islam is built. They revolve around three types of relationship: a person's relationship with God (acts of worship), a person's relationship with other

humans (financial dealings, laws of inheritance, communal affairs) and each person’s relationship with themselves (those of food and drink and personal conduct). *Manners* abound in the Qur’an. Throughout its surahs, the Qur’an establishes a very high standard code of morality, one that encourages people to strive to embody sterling manners. Indeed, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), whose manners and conduct took their roots in the Qur’an (Muslim: 746), was set by God as a moral example to be emulated by all humans: “Indeed for you in the Messenger of Allah there is a sterling example”. (33: 21) God praised His Messenger (ﷺ) and extolled his virtuousness by saying: “Indeed you are of great moral character!” (68: 4)

- **Key 7:** *Qur’anic surahs are of different length, content and unique character.* The length of Qur’anic surahs varies significantly: the longest surah in the Qur’an is Surah 2 (*al-Baqarah*) in which there are 286 ayahs and the shortest is Surah 108 (*al-Kawthar*) in which there are only 3 ayahs. In terms of length, Qur’anic surahs fall into four categories: *al-tiwāl* (the lengthy) of which there are seven, *al-mi’īn* (the hundreds-numbered) the ones in which there are more than one hundred ayahs, *al-mathānī* (the oft-repeated) in which there are less than a hundred ayahs, and *al-mufaṣṣal* (the detailed) which begin with Surah *Qāf* until the end of the Qur’an. These categories follow the order in which they are to be found in the Qur’an with the exception of the opening surah, *al-Fātiḥah* (which is considered as a preface that encompasses the totality of the Qur’anic message).
- **Key 8:** *Overall, there are 114 surahs, 6,236 ayahs, 77,437 words, and 321,000 letters in the Qur’an.* The first revelation was Surah 96 (*al-‘Alaq*) in which there is the command “Read!” and the last



revelation was Surah 110 (*al-Naṣr*) which foretells the conquest of Makkah and the culmination of the Prophetic mission.

- **Key 9:** *The surahs of the Qur'an, and the ayahs within them, do not follow the chronological order in which they were revealed; they are ordered as we find them today in the printed muṣḥafs (or written Qur'an copies) at the behest of the Prophet (ﷺ). This arrangement, however, is unique in terms of the logical and thematic coherence of the content of each surah and how they interrelate with the following and preceding surahs. As a whole, they provide a seamless, intellectually engaging read. It is a person's mission in life to ponder these and try to discover the gems they offer to the curious mind.*
- **Key 10:** *Thematic unity in the Qur'an can be found in either one of two aspects. The first whereby every surah deals with a unique theme right from its beginning to its end. In this respect, Surahs *al-Infīṭār*, *al-Inshiqāq*, and *al-Zalzalah* deal solely with the tribulations of the Day of Judgement. The second type, the more common of the two, is that whereby a surah may deal with more than one theme. Yet no matter how many themes are dealt with in the same surah, one finds a commonality that binds them together to form a complete whole. A certain theme might also be dealt with recurrently throughout a number of Qur'anic surahs. Each occurrence of such theme is context-bound and is meant to serve the purpose for which it is mentioned in that particular instance. 'Patience,' is one of these themes. It is dealt with in Makkan and Madinan surahs in instances where laws, manners, matters of faith, stories of old, and the call to Believe are spoken of. This no doubt reflects its importance as also the defining nature of how life is projected in the Qur'an, i.e. as an ongoing struggle. The Qur'anic field of knowledge that deals with thematic wholesomeness is known as *ʿIlm al-Munāsabah* (the Science of*



Relevance). It focuses on how the beginning of the surah sets the essential scene, the connection between the various ayahs, how the different thematic units within the surah are relayed and the relation between that surah and the ones preceding and following it.

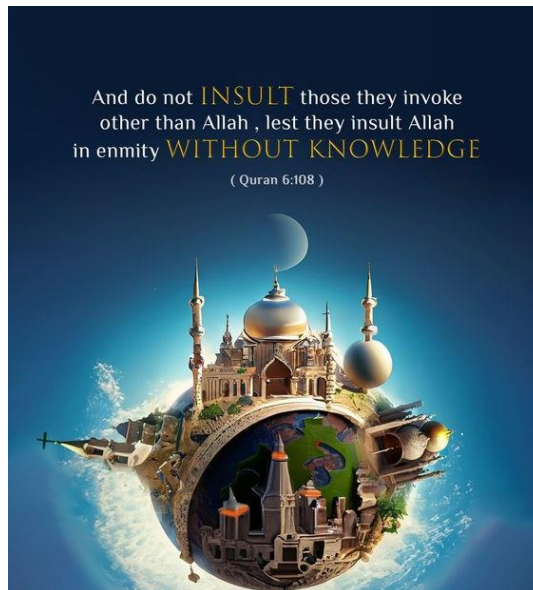
- **Key 11:** *Historical accounts and stories of old found in the Qur'an are cited as examples to take heed from. Although one may find snippets of a story told in one place, other events relating to that same story may be found in another place but in more or less detail and presented from a different angle. In order to unlock the full meaning of these accounts they should be read within their immediate context. In this way, the overall purport of the surah most certainly affects*



the story's interpretation. Sometimes, a complete story is told in full in one place. For example, Surahs *al-A'rāf*, *al-Shu'arā'* and *Yūsuf*, each tells a complete story. Besides, there are three types of stories that are told in the Qur'an. The most common are stories of the Prophets of God. The other two being: accounts of persons and peoples of ancient times (the companions of the cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*) the companions of the pit of fire (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*), the companions of the Sabbath (*aṣḥāb al-sabt*), the two sons of Adam (Cain and Abel)); and accounts of the events that took place during the time of the Prophet (ﷺ), such as the battles the Prophet (ﷺ) waged. Stories in the Qur'an are intended for various

purposes among which are: to highlight the bond that exists between the followers of the Truth with each other and those of falsehood with each other throughout different times and circumstances; so that Believers follow the example of their predecessors, especially their steadfastness in the face of relentless opposition; to give concrete examples of how Divine laws and canons came to pass; to prove the truthfulness of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and to soothe the hearts of the Prophet (ﷺ) and his Companions. Some stories are repeated in different places in the Qur'an to achieve a number of aims: to highlight the uniqueness of the Qur'an in its ability to tell the same story from a number of different angles without showing any discrepancies; to underline the importance of the story itself and the many lessons that can be drawn from it and to constantly remind people of certain stories that are of particular significance (take for example the various events that took place during Prophet Moses' lifetime and mission).

- **Key 12:** *Those who were given earlier Divine Scriptures are referred to in the Qur'an with the honorary title, the People of the Book. The 'People of the Book', namely, the Jews and Christians, and their religious symbols are a recurrent Qur'anic theme, particularly in the Madinan surahs. Overall, they are spoken of as nations who have diverged from the correct path. They are constantly*



reminded of their wrong and are gently called to mend their ways. The Qur'anic principle of how to engage in debate with the People of the Book is to be considerate and draw on shared values: *“Do not argue with the People of the Book unless gently, except with those of them who act wrongfully. And say: “We believe in what*

has been sent down to us and what was sent down to you. Our God and your God is [the same] One. And to Him we [fully] submit". (29: 46)

- **Key 13:** *Each surah in the Qur'an is unique in its own way. The blueprint of a surah is defined by its theme, employment of discourse, style, markedness of lexis, length of ayahs and sound of pauses (with which each ayah ends). All of these make up the special character of each surah.*
- **Key 14:** *Some would willingly look at the Qur'an through the narrow eyes of 21st century secular values and eventually take issue with certain of its dictates. Knowing that these so-called values are lacking and, more often than not, detrimental to humans and disastrous to their planet at large, the fact of the matter is that such a Divinely revealed Book of guidance as the Qur'an should be the yardstick against which all these 'values' should be judged. But then, "Is one who walks with his face stooped down more guided, or one who walks upright upon a straight path?" (67: 23)*
- **Key 15:** *The Qur'an is only befittingly interpreted within context. Each word is to be read within the ayah, each ayah within the thematic unit, and each thematic unit within the surah in which it occurs if the deep meaning is to be got at. Needless to say, context is of central importance to understanding any given message and no word or string of words should be taken out of context, if it is to be understood properly.*
- **Key 16:** *Although we were not among the immediate audience addressed by the Qur'an or players in its stories, we are nonetheless encouraged to take heed from them, and try to bring personal insights drawn from them to bear on our circumstances. This obviously comes with the caveat of doing so with full realization of the proper meaning we choose to apply to our lives. In this respect, those with particularly receptive hearts, will usually feel as if what is being*



recited is meant for them personally.

- **Key 17:** *Finally, the most important of the keys to approaching the Qur'an is that it is to be read contemplatively (c.f. 4:82, 38:29, 47:24), with an open heart and a receptive mind. It is a dignified text that remains aloof and will only yield its fruits to those who approach it with the best of intentions. But for those who come to it with their hearts smitten with doubt, it remains insurmountable and its terrains rugged. 'Buts and ifs' will only work as hurdles preventing the reader from getting to the core of the Message.*

The Qur'an known through translation: translating the untranslatable!

The issue of Qur'anic translation is critical. For Muslims, the Qur'an, the inimitable Word of God, is unarguably untranslatable. Therefore, any text other than the Arabic Original—no matter the translation's professed adherence to the original 'spirit'—will necessarily *be a particular interpretation rather than a transparent representation*. One of the most respected Qur'an translators into English, M.M. Pickthall ([1930] 1999: xiii) sums up the issue in the introduction to his translation:

The Qur'an cannot be translated. That is the belief of old-fashioned Sheykhs and the view of the present writer. The Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the *meaning* of the Qur'an - and peradventure something of the charm - in English. It can never take the place of the Qur'an in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.

Another translator puts it so:

Briefly, the rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic of the Koran are so characteristic, so powerful, so highly emotive, that any version whatsoever is bound in the nature of things to be but a poor copy of the glittering splendour of the original.... My chief reason for offering this new version of a book which has been 'translated', many times already is that in no previous rendering has a serious attempt been made to imitate, however imperfectly, those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and the sublimity of the Koran. (Arberry: 24-25)

The material form of the Qur'an, its stylistic patterns and their

semantically-oriented manifestations, are as critically important as its Message. The Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064; *al-Aḥkām*, 2: 88) has it that:

The opinion of leading scholars is unanimous about the inimitability of the Qur'an. We know for sure that if the Qur'an is translated into another language, or even were its words to be replaced by other Arabic words, such translation would not be inimitable; what is not inimitable is not a Qur'an.

Ibn Ḥazm's unequivocal statement derives from the fact that there are some eleven ayahs expressly confirming the Arabic revelation of the Qur'an (12:2, 13:37, 16:103, 20:113, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 41:44, 42:7, 43:3, 46:12).

Besides this there are other reasons that challenge the notion of the translatability of the Qur'an. Meaning and form in the Qur'an are intertwined and multi-layered. The language of the Qur'an is extraordinarily vigorous. Its style reaches noteworthy heights, particularly in: affirmations of the Oneness, Uniqueness, and Omnipotence of God, in forceful descriptions of the Day of Judgement, in moralizing passages, and in admonitions against polytheism. It is, to a large measure, revealed in dense and highly allusive, elliptical speech. The great exegete Ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) remarks in his commentary:

It is obvious that there is no discourse more eloquent, no wisdom more profound, no speech more sublime, no form of expression more noble, than [this] clear discourse and speech with which a single man challenged a people at a time when they were acknowledged masters of the art of oratory and rhetoric, poetry and prose, rhyme and soothsaying. It reduced their fancy to folly and demonstrated the inadequacy of their logic.... It let them know that the evidence of the truth of what he [Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)] said, the proof of the genuineness of his Prophethood, was the *Bayān* (Discourse), the *Hikmah* (Wisdom), the *Furqān* (Distinguisher which he conveyed to them in a language like their language, in a speech whose meanings conformed to the meanings of their speech. Then he told them all that they were incapable of

bringing anything comparable to [even] a part of [what he had brought], and that they lacked the power to do this.

In a self-referential assertion of its own uniqueness, the Qur'an describes its effect on Believers in the following manner: *“Allah has sent down the most beautiful of all teachings: a Book that is consistent and often repeated; that causes the skins of those in awe of their Lord to shiver. Then their skins and their hearts soften at the mention of Allah: such is Allah’s Guidance. He guides with it whoever He wills; no one can guide those Allah leaves to stray”*. (39: 23). According to many well-accomplished translators, any translation of the Qur'an not only betrays the meaning of the original, but also loses much of its poetic and affective force. Anyone who has read it in the original is forced to admit that this caution is well justified; no translation, however faithful to the meaning, has ever been fully successful or even remotely close. Arabic, when masterfully put to use, is a remarkably terse, rich and forceful language, and the Arabic Qur'an is by turns striking, soaring, vivid, shaking, tender, melodic and breathtaking. It is not surprising, then, that a skilled reciter of the Qur'an can reduce his audience to helpless tears.

The untranslatable nature of the Qur'an does not stop at its language and style. There are also interpretational issues that pose serious questions to its translatability. Ibn Kathīr (d. 1372) begins his widely-acclaimed *Tafsīr* (/commentary) with an account of the early Muslims' discretion (including the most prominent Companions) with regard to interpreting the Qur'an. Abū Bakr (رضي الله عنه), for instance, when asked about the meaning of fruits (*fākihātān*) and *abbā* (grass, pasture, fodder, herbage) (80:31) replied piously: “What sky shades me, and what earth holds me, if I say about Allah’s Book that of which I have no knowledge?” Umar’s (رضي الله عنه) laconic reply, in turn, was: “We were told not to be pedantic”. This pious generation remained extremely cautious about imposing any kind of external reading on the Qur'an, demonstrating an acute awareness of the fraught relationship that exists between the text and its supplementary texts.

The Qur'an itself, after all, was accessible to its immediate community of revelation by virtue of linguistic and contextual proximity. The core message of the Qur'an was available to them and its immediate

historical referential and semantic fields were familiar to them. On the other hand, instances of *tafsīr* by the Companions and even by the Prophet (ﷺ) himself are well-documented. It remains that parts of the Qur'an were not always transparent to everyone. Indeed, the honoured Companion Ibn 'Abbās (رضي الله عنه), known as *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān* (Interpreter of the Qur'an), said:

The Qur'an has four aspects (*awjuh*): *tafsīr* (exegesis), which the learned know; *al-'arabiyyah* (language) which the Arabs understand; *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* (permitted and forbidden things), of which no one is allowed to be ignorant; and *ta'wīl* (explanation), which only Allah knows.

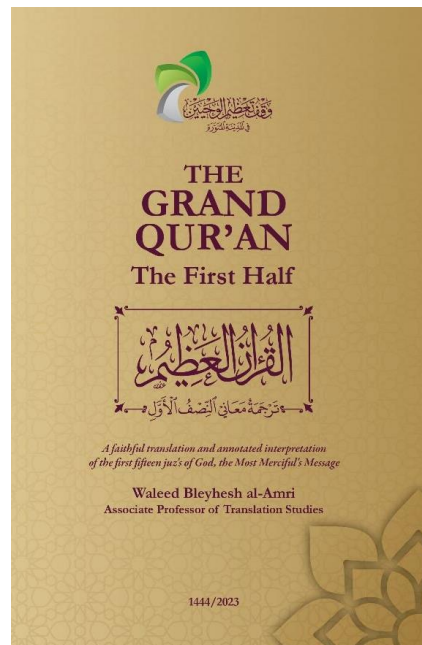
Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān (d. 767), an early Qur'an commentator, further expounds in his *Tafsīr* (1: 27) what is at stake in understanding the Qur'an:

The Qur'an contains references to particular and general things (*khāṣṣ* and *'āmm*), particular references to Believers and particular references to Deniers, and general references to all people; it contains unequivocal and ambiguous passages (*muḥkam* and *mutashābih*), explained and unexplained passages (*mufassar* and *mubham*); it contains elisions and explicit utterances (*iḍmār* and *tamām*); it contains cohesive devices; abrogating and abrogated ayahs (*nāsikh* and *mansūkh*); it contains changes in word order; it contains similar utterances with many different aspects (*ashbāh*); it contains passages that are continued in a different surah; it contains accounts of earlier generations and accounts of what there is in Paradise and Hell; it contains a reference to one particular Denier; it contains commandments, laws, ordinances; it contains parables by which Allah Almighty refers to Himself, parables by which He refers to Deniers and idols, and parables by which He refers to this world, to resurrection and to the world to come; it contains accounts of what is in the hearts of Believers, and accounts of what is in the hearts of Deniers, polemics against the Arabian polytheists, and it contains explanations, and for each explanation there is a [further] explanation.

Anyone who is to truly understand the Qur'an must be able to recognize multiple levels of interpretation. Added to this is the exegetical overlay that has accumulated through the passage of time. Since its modest beginnings, the *tafsīr* corpus has evolved into a sea of writing that has been expanding for almost the last millennium and a half. On the one hand, the inexhaustibility of God's Word was matched by the inexhaustibility commentators saw in its meaning. On the other hand, every group in the Muslim community has its own corpus of *tafsīr* supporting and justifying its reading. Thus sectarian and doctrinal *tafsīr* has evolved. It is not only the immense volume that makes this literature of interest, but also the pivotal role it has played in shaping and reflecting specific rationalities throughout Islamic history. This became more acute as the spatio-temporal gap separating the text receiver from its original context increased and more meaning-making agents became involved.

This is why more often than not translators resort to *tafsīrs* to understand and, in turn, render certain Qur'anic passages. However, this has proven to be used as a vehicle to juxtapose and superimpose certain ideological leanings and exegetical views thereby clouding further the message of the Qur'an and setting up added barriers between the reader of the translation and original Arabic Writ. Translators being no more than modern-day readers and, more often than not, adherents of any of the different Islamic schools of thought out there, inevitably find that a

relationship of confluence holds between their translations and commentary. On the one hand, there is a great exegetical tradition built around this most sacred Book, which cannot be simply ignored if the end product of a translation is to be of any success. This tradition arose from either different interpretational standpoints or from sincere intentions to make its language, which is shrouded in the veil of time, explicit and penetrable. However, the translator, while drawing on this



wealth of scholarly subtexts that run along the prime text should not fall into the trap of making himself captive to them by allowing his translation to become overloaded or the representation to be so permeated by them that it would only be seen through their kaleidoscope. Such awareness, if existent in the first place, is seldom realized in the actual and mentally demanding act of translating.

While carrying out their task, two types of interventions are identifiable in translators' works:

Translational intervention: can take place both within the body of the text and outside it. Examples of translational intervention take shape in the form of: accounting for cultural and linguistic equivalence; compensating for loss; aiding reading; pronouncing pronoun referents; explaining translational choice (as in the case of diverting from certain inherited translation choices); answering for failings in translation.

Exegetical intervention: may materialise in the following examples: further expounding the meanings of certain lexical items; providing the reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); explaining a *shar'ī* ruling; highlighting the relevance between ayahs and surahs; explaining the ambiguous (*tawdīh al-mubham*); spelling out the inclusive (*tafsīl al-mujmal*); precisely identifying the unrestricted (*taqyīd al-muṭlaq*); pinpointing the generalized (*takhṣīṣ al-‘āmm*), and adding their own exegetical remarks.

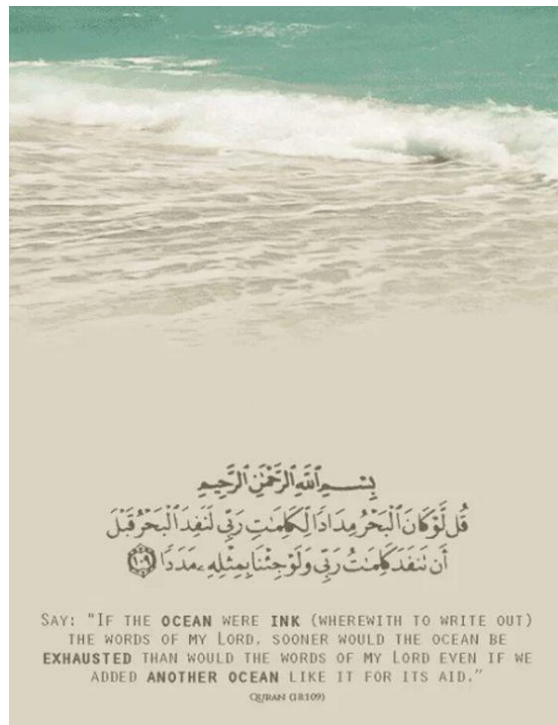
One may yet divide intervention into two further types:

random intervention: involves putting a *tafsīr* in place of a direct translation serving no obvious agenda. Further they can be divided into: (a) necessary transposition dictated by the nature of the Qur'anic text itself as in the case of not being able to actually visualize the meaning and having a mental picture of it. And (b) unnecessary transposition attributed to carelessness or incompetence on the part of the translator.

Pre-meditated intervention: mostly aimed at controlling the text and to manipulate its authority. These either come as part of the translator's strategy; or as a part of his bias (partiality).

It remains to be said that at surface level, taken at face value, the Qur'an can be striking for some whilst daunting for others, especially to those whose hearts are not possessed of the sweet, blessed Faith. Yet, much of the Quran's beauty and real significance is to be found in what lies beneath. One can only begin to have a feel of this deep meaning once the surface is left behind and one dives deep to explore what intricate mesh of relationships ties with what hits the eyes at first appearance. Such is the life-long quest that has engaged many a celebrated scholar and many a sincere person in search of the Truth: *"Would they not ponder the Qur'an or are there on some hearts their locks!"* (47: 24)

The Quran is an incredibly deep text. Deeper than oceans, indeed God says: *"Had all the trees of Earth been pens and the sea been supplied by seven [other] seas, the Words of Allah would not have been exhausted"* (31: 27). This depth is indicated, to name but a few, by the relationship that holds each surah with the preceding and following ones, the relevance of each ayah to the next, semantic chunking of ayahs into passages, parallel ayahs which are similar, or slightly different, and that are to be



found in different places, how the same word is strategically deployed along the surahs, stories told many times over from different angles, the judicious use of synonymous and near-synonymous words, homographs, dialectical variations, pronoun shifts, grammar and syntax as also graphic representations. If at all, this translation only manages to allude to such depth, direct the inquisitive mind to it, but it would be weaving a tall story indeed to say that it has got to its bottom.

This can only be found in the many centuries of scholarship that have permeated the past and will continue to do so throughout many future ones.

For reference to authentic Quran translations, please check:

<https://quranenc.com/en/>

