

ON THE MAKING OF *THE STUDY QURAN*

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The publication of *The Study Quran* has been hailed as a ground-breaking event in Qur'ānic studies. A team of four scholars led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr produced a new English translation of the Qur'ān along with a verse-by-verse commentary based on classical scholarship. Each *sūra* begins with a short introduction that situates it within a broader thematic and historical context and provides an overview of its content. Essays by fifteen internationally renowned scholars on how to read and understand the Qur'ān and its role in shaping Islamic civilization further enhance the usefulness of the *The Study Quran*. Maps, a timeline of historical events, comprehensive indices, biographical notes and index of *ḥadīth* citations are other important features of this work which brings to the readers of English a vast amount of classical scholarship. *Journal of Islamic Sciences* is pleased to provide excerpts from a conversation with the Editor-in-Chief of this landmark publication. Seyyed Hossein Nasr sheds light on how the project was conceived and carried out over a period of ten years; he responds to some of the criticism that has appeared in social media and talks about the importance of this publication in the context of academic studies on the Qur'ān.

Keywords: *The Study Quran*; Qur'ānic Studies; Muslim understanding of the Qur'ān; Qur'ān and the modern world; classical commentaries on the Qur'ān.

JIS: How was the project for *The Study Quran* conceived? By whom? When?

SHN: *Bismi'illāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*. During the last two decades, Harper, which is also my publisher now, has brought out the *Study Bible* and the *Study Torah*. Both have become very successful and are being used in not only universities by students, but also in churches, synagogues, and so forth. About 11 years ago, they contacted me, and asked if I would edit a *Study Quran* along the lines of the previous two works. They wanted me to be its chief editor. I knew how important it would be both for Islamic

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Studies in the Western academy and also for the Islamic community in the English speaking world, but told them I am not a Qurʾān scholar. I have written about Islam in general, Islamic philosophy, Islamic science, and so on, but I am not a scholar of Qurʾānic studies *per se*, so, I turned it down. But when I went home, I had pangs of conscience. I told myself, what will God say on the Day of Judgment. He will say that that he put My Book down and did not undertake the task concerning it! So, I felt very unhappy.

The next day, they called again and they said that if you do not take the project, it will perhaps never happen and they will discontinue this idea. So, this was an added incentive for me to take this matter seriously. But still, I told them that there are many fine scholars of the Qurʾān you could invite, but they said no and added that if you do not do it, we are not going to undertake this project.

Over the last fifty years, I have written and edited some 50 or 60 books and hundreds of articles, but I am not a Qurʾān scholar as such. I say this but I need to add that everything I wrote pertains, in some way, to the Qurʾān, in fact, everything authentically Islamic relates to the Qurʾān. My books on the Islamic science and philosophy, or Sufism or spirituality, all are rooted in the Qurʾān, but I had never written on the Qurʾān except in some of my books such as *Ideas and Realities of Islam* and *The Heart of Islam* and I am not an expert of the Qurʾān. So I prayed to God for help and very reluctantly accepted the project, praying to Him that I would be worthy of carrying out such a task.

I started meditating on how to carry out the project. For the record, I must state that one condition I made to Harper was that the *Study Quran* would be done only by Muslims. There are so many Western scholars or orientalist who claim to be Qurʾānic scholars, but their work does not represent the “Islamic” Qurʾān, because most deny the authenticity of the Qurʾān as the Word of God and they do not look at the Qurʾān from an Islamic point of view. When I said that the people at Harper were a bit shocked, saying, but this is the West! We have free scholarship. I said in this case no; I do not see any Muslim or Jewish names among the collaborators in the *Study Bible*, or any Christian or Muslim names in the *Study Torah*, and I respect that very much. The *Study Quran* should also be done by Muslims only, but as chief editor, I will choose across the spectrum of Islamic scholarship and you have to leave that up to my choice. They accepted this proposal. It was a very important step. So I began to think about the structure of the board of editors. In the middle of all this, I had my open heart surgery and I did not know if I was going

to survive or not.

Before the anesthesia, I invoked the *shahādah* and prayed to God to do something about this project in case I did not come through. And so after I got well, *al-ḥamdu li-llāh*, the project began. I chose three editors, all born in the United States, all three being most gifted scholars of Islamic studies; all very young, all among my students in different ways over the years, all with very good command of Arabic, one of them with a PhD from Yale, the other two from Princeton. So they had academic training and fluency in Arabic at the highest level as far as Western scholarship is concerned. And all three are Muslims, one born Muslim, the other two having embraced Islam, and they are very devout Muslims as well as being very knowledgeable. So we formed a team of four people, and that is how the work began.

JIS: Was the overall structure of the *Study Quran* to follow the same pattern as that of the *Study Torah* and *Study Bible*? That is, was it conceived to be a verse by verse commentary, with explanatory notes and essays?

SHN: That is right. It is a verse by verse commentary on the whole of the Qurʾān.

JIS: Is that your conception, or was that already the pattern chosen by the publisher?

SHN: No, I do not know what the publisher had in mind. They never spoke with me about this matter. Maybe they also had this idea in mind; I do not know. But it was my own idea to choose this method.

JIS: Can you say something about the selection of the sources, some forty-one main exegeses listed at the beginning of the *Study Quran*, representing a broad spectrum of scholarship across the centuries and geographical regions. Was there any special consideration other than being inclusive and representing both Shiʿa and Sunni sources?

SHN: That is a very good question. Let me give you the major criteria that I and my colleagues used, on the basis of which we chose the commentaries. First of all, I told Harper and everybody else, that this is a contemporary work but it would represent traditional Islam and therefore it excludes both modernistic interpretations and fundamentalist interpretations of the Qurʾān. Therefore, it is not going to have figures like Sayyid Ahmad Khan or Mawdūdī in it; nor people like Muhammad Abduh. In fact, many of the well-known commentators of the late 19th century are not traditional.

Yet, we wanted to be as inclusive as possible. We tried to think about the categories of commentaries which were traditionally understood

to be important in Islamic civilization, that is, *lughawī* (linguistic or philological), *tārīkhī* (historical), *naḥwī* (grammatical), which is closely related to the linguistic, commentaries dealing with *kalām*, *fiqh*, *falsafā*, with Sufism (*ʿirfān*) and other categories. Taking these criteria into consideration, we chose some forty of the most important and basic *tafāsīr* that have been the backbone of the scholarly and also pious study of the Qurʾān over the centuries. And it was not a question of the time period when a commentary was written; we chose not only medieval *tafāsīr* but also *al-Mizān* of ʿAllāmah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1321-1402/1904-1981), probably the most important *tafāsīr* written in the 20th century.

We tried to be as inclusive as possible, and we consulted these different *tafāsīr*, but, of course, we did not have to consult every *tafāsīr* for every verse of the Qurʾān. For example, there are verses which deal with legal matters; for such *fiqhī* verses, such as the laws of inheritance, we did not have to consult mystical *tafāsīr*s. So, depending on the verse, we consulted the appropriate commentaries. Some verses we knew required a broad spectrum of interpretation. In such cases we consulted more *tafāsīr* and included the widest possible range within the traditional commentaries.

JIS: Two questions arise from this. One is related to the overall work. As your “Introduction” indicates, the work was divided between editors; so translations and commentaries have been written by different persons. How was a harmonious outcome achieved for this single-volume work? Second, what was your methodology to make it look like a unified vision is being presented although the text is written by four different people?

SHN: The work is without a seam; it is unified and you cannot find a “crack” in it, although it is written by four persons. In this respect it is like the King James version of the Bible. Let me start with that example. I have in mind this example because it is so famous in the English language. The King James version of the Bible is the most beautiful translation of the Bible in English. Many people think that after Shakespeare, it is the most important literary prose of the English language from the Elizabethan period—the peak of English eloquence. And the general public does not know who the translators were, but everybody knows that they were a team that worked together.

The translation displays an incredible unity. Whether you are reading the Book of John or the Book of Matthew, it is not like an ordinary collected book concerning which it is said that this was translated by Mr. A, this by Mrs. B, and you cannot tell that there were different translators. There is a unity. So, I knew that this was possible. In summary what I did consisted

of three things: The most important of all is that—in contrast to most works with multiple editors, each of whom has a different worldview of his or her own, not to talk about personal tendencies and so on—the people whom I chose as editors for this enterprise are not only my students, who intellectually all belong to the same world together with myself, but also they are spiritually close to me and we share the same spiritual universe. And so there existed a remarkable unanimity of worldview among us, but within that unity, oftentimes there were clashes over various verses, even letters, and in those cases, in fact, I would have the final say. They would come to me and I would make the final decision. The third thing, which helped to bring about this unity, was that before we began the translation, we went over the translation of some three to four hundred key Qurʾānic words. Different editors had their own views about how to translate them. We went over them and finalized the translation of these terms together. Again, the final responsibility was on my shoulders, but I did try to bring peace and accord between them. When they could not agree, however, I had to put my foot down, I said jokingly, that this text is to be composed on the basis of both democracy and dictatorship! As the chief editor, I had to dictate sometimes, but there was also a lot of consultation. For instance, we had discussion over several days on how to translate the word *taqwā*. Once we decided on such key words—and words which are related to them because of their common root—we had a pool of shared vocabulary.

So, these are three ways in which we tried to bring unity. Just to conclude this part of our discussion, I must add that the three editors were given specific parts of the Qurʾān and the details of who did what are in the work; the fourth editor, Muhammad Rustom, whom I brought on board towards the end, because things were being delayed, also did a lot of work and he helped with the last *sūras* during the last couple of years of the project. But the others worked for years, each one working on his or her one part of the Qurʾān. Each person would translate one particular *sūra*, send it over to the others, who would then comment on it and once what they thought was the final version was ready, they would send it to me and I would go over it and make any final corrections that I deemed to be necessary. If there was no agreement, then my opinion was needed to finalize the translation. I also had to intercede in case of differences of opinion, especially about certain sensitive phrases. So we had a criss-crossing of scholarly opinions. Since human beings are human beings, sometimes we had clashes, and academic clashes often become personal clashes, but this is something that we minimized. *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh* everyone came out of the process unscathed, and all the editors remain good friends.

JIS: *Al-ḥamdu li-llāh*. Was this process for both the commentary and the translation?

SHN: For both. The commentary would be sent to all the editors, who would make suggestions, but with the commentary, sometimes there would be fewer suggestions, because it was technical and one person was working with all the different *tafāsīr*, and so these would not usually be radical differences, but sometimes they would disagree on the commentary of certain verses. And then, again, the commentary would be sent to me and I would have the final say.

JIS: You mentioned a very important aspect, at the very beginning of our conversation—humility toward the Book of Allah *subḥānahu wa taʿālā*, the feeling that we are inadequate; even the greatest commentators on the Book have the same feeling. You said, you told the publishers that you are not a Qurʾān scholar *per se*, that is, you have not been trained in the sciences of the Qurʾān and you were hesitant to undertake the project. In this light, what to make of some of the criticism that has appeared in the social media about *The Study Quran*. For instance, there are several inaccurate *fiqhī* statements that have been pointed out. In particular, the statement about the position of various *madhāhib* about the recitation of the *basmalah* in the ritual prayer, which appears on page 5, the commentary on Q 2:158, stating, “The *ʿumrah* is a supererogatory visit to perform a shortened form of pilgrimage...”, whereas the Shāfiʿī and the Ḥanbali position is that it is a personal obligation (*farḍ/wājib*)....

SHN: Actually, we are assembling all the different criticisms that have been made. There are very few, but, we are assembling them. And I am going to talk to my editors about them when there is going to be a new edition. Of course, there are also a few typographical errors—in a 2000 page work, that is quite remarkable.

JIS: This is the first work in the English language that actually presents the source material in a scholarly manner—sources which are Islamic and which are not mixed up with Orientalism and non-Islamic material. So in this respect, *The Study Quran* is a very important project. But at the same time, there are two rather sensitive issues which have appeared in the social media with regard to how *The Study Quran* treats certain issues. The first is what has been called a conscious effort to tone down Qurʾānic judgement on the Jews and Christians.

SHN: First off, of course, we have been aware of this type of criticism in our work. Throughout *The Study Quran*, however, we have tried to highlight the universality of the message of the Qurʾān and bring out the full meaning of those verses which in fact address all of humanity, mankind

as such. Through all our commentary, Islam for us is submission to God and Muslims are those who have submitted themselves to God; this is the most expansive sense of the word in the Qurʾān itself. Therefore, in the Qurʾān, *muslim* includes both Jesus and Abraham, upon both of them peace, but they would not be called Muslim in the English language today, because people think that Islam begins in the seventh Christian century. But Muslim is not used in the Qurʾān only in this sense. So we are very much aware of this type of criticism. In fact, one of the most important points of this whole commentary on the Qurʾān is the highlighting of the universal character of the Qurʾān, how universal the Qurʾān is among all the sacred scriptures in the world.

But, to distort the truth and not to talk about verses that talk about battles and religious opposition is also not right. In fact, there are more verses like that in the Bible than there are in the Qurʾān! We cannot destroy the integrity of a sacred text because many today are opposed to reference to wars and violence in religion while our world is dominated by oppression and violence. Wars, battles and violence are part and parcel of human life. So every sacred scripture has to respond to these realities, has to mention and deal with them. Therefore, we of course were not being apologetic, but we sought to show the immense importance and the centrality of mercy, of love and of forgiveness that the Qurʾān brings forth, and the universality of its message, that in a sense addresses all human beings. Many verses deal with Islam in its universal sense and these do not refer only to the specific community of the Prophet Muḥammad, upon him blessings and peace. These verses concern religion as such and we have tried to bring this truth out while at the same time dealing fully with verses that concern Muslims as the *ummah* of the Prophet, whether these verses deal with peace or war.

In a sense, our book is the very opposite of all these tendencies that are going on right now, both literally and also unfortunately in battle fields, in newspapers and so on, tendencies that try to create an exclusivist form of Islam facing everyone else as the enemy.

JIS: The second important criticism of *The Study Quran* that has appeared so far is in reference to soteriological pluralism, where it departs from traditional understanding and, in the words of one reviewer, “such an understanding of soteriology is difficult to support within a full reading of the Qurʾān, and certainly impossible after taking into account the less accommodating *ḥadīth* tradition which contains unambiguous reports such as, ‘By the One in Whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, there is no one among this nation, Jew or Christian, who hears of me and dies

without believing in that with which I have been sent, but he will be one of the people of the Fire.’ Verses repudiating the *Kitābī* traditions are not scant—they compose a major constituent of the Qur’ān, including extensive passages in Surat al-Baqarah, Āl-‘Imrān, al-Nisā’, and Mā’idah. They include critiques of *Kitābī* theology, ecclesiastic authorities, alterations of sacred texts, and implores the People of the Book to submit to the message of the Qur’ān and the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace. Attempts to proffer an inclusivist soteriology requires, as has been shown, a reliance on the Qur’ān-alone absent the prophetic tradition, a subordination of the majority of verses addressing the *Kitābī* traditions beneath Q 2:62, dismissal of the scholarly tradition, and unsubstantiated historicizing. Such a conclusion can fairly be described as a departure from consensus and unfaithfulness to tradition.”¹

SHN: What you say has not been the view of all traditional commentators, but only of some. Our interpretations are still all within the traditional spectrum of the Qur’ānic commentary tradition. For example, there is the question of abrogation (*naskh*). If Christianity and Judaism have become *mansūkh*, why does Islamic Law force Muslims to protect the lives of Christians and Jews? This is just because of good will? This is a false interpretation. These people are not like the people of the *Jāhiliyyah* in Arabia before the coming of Islam, for whom the choice was either to accept Islam or go into battle. So, the fact is that according to Islamic teachings churches are to be protected, synagogues are to be protected. This means that God wants followers of these religions to be protected under Islam. There are so many verses of the Qur’ān referring to the Christians and Jews and Muslims together, and so on and so forth. So if you say that these religions have been abrogated, that is, they are no longer a way of salvation to God and in following them one can no longer go to Heaven, then half of the Qur’ān becomes distorted and we are left with the monstrous view that Muslims are to protect the *ahl al-kitāb* or the People of the Book so that they can go to Hell.

JIS: The way the classical scholars have put this question is somewhat different. They pose it at the level of personal choice. So, the discussion in classical *‘aqida* texts asks the following questions: When a human being has received the message of the Qur’ān in an authentic way—whether he or she is from the People of the Book or someone else—what is his or her personal obligation toward this message? This has been extensively dealt with by all *madhāhib*. In this sense, the question is of a legal nature; it is a *shar‘ī* question that has been dealt with in all *madhāhib*.

1. See Book Reviews section of the present issue.

SHN: But the necessity of the rejection of their own religion by the *ahl al-kitāb* when they come to know about Islam has also been rejected by a number of jurists (*fuqahā'*), not to talk about Sufis and so forth, who were very much against this view, but even among a lot of the *fuqahā'*. In Egypt, for example, where 10% of the population is Coptic, there were and are many Shāfi'ī '*Ulamā'*' who did not and do not say that these are people who know Islam, because Islam has been there, but did not or do not accept it; therefore they are for the Fire of Hell, or something like that, or that they have to be fought against and destroyed. No! Their churches have been protected. One of the arguments that is now being given by some fundamentalist Egyptians who have been attacking Copts in Egypt until very recently, was precisely this argument that you are presenting, which is a misunderstanding and is opposed by many Azharite scholars. So this is a very delicate matter. I understand this view, this triumphalist attitude that all religions had when they were dominating, claiming to be the only true religion. In days of old in most places like in Europe, people knew only their own religion, even if there were a few followers of other religions which were usually ignored theologically if not always socially. This was different from the situation that we have now; Islam has left the door open for accepting the authenticity of other religions, although many of the *fuqahā'* did not have to deal with this issue in days of old, although some did historically in such places as Andalusia and India.

First of all, with the continuous contact of followers of various religions this type of exclusivism is not possible to sustain in the modern world while still believing in Divine Mercy and Justice. Secondly, most of the *fuqahā'* of the past did not have to deal with what we have to face today. It is just like how they totally condemned music, although their intent was to prohibit *lahw* and *la'ib*. So they gave this carte blanche opinion on banning music. The same thing happened concerning this question of abrogation of previous Divinely revealed religions. But it was not always like that. For example, in the Ottoman Empire, where there were sizable number of Christians in Istanbul and also a sizable Jewish community; they were given their rights, even the right to collect taxes from their own community, to preach their religion to their own people, have their own schools, have their own synagogues and churches. We have had examples of this situation until Atatürk came to power and even later with the rise of secularism in Turkey.

JIS: The question is not of protection of individuals or places of worship, of course, they are both protected. The issue is of the legal status of previously revealed religions after Islam and consequently, of their salvific efficacy for the one to whom the message of Islam has reached.

SHN: This is a long argument into which I cannot go here. Anyway, my position is well-known; I stand with those who believe that *islām* in *inna dīna ‘inda-llāhi-l-islām* (Q 3:19) means “surrender to God,” and whoever surrenders to God and follows a Divinely revealed religion, God will accept it. There are so many other verses of the Qur’ān that confirm this view.

JIS: Two last questions: What do you think is going to be the impact of *The Study Quran* on the academic approaches to Islam in general and the Qur’ān in particular, and are there plans to translate *The Study Quran* into other languages.

SHN: I think that the impact of *The Study Quran* on Qur’ānic studies will be great. Many scholars are already talking about it. Of course, the Orientalist establishment in the West in general is probably not very happy, that there is now *The Study Quran* done by Muslims at the highest scholarly standards, so that they cannot criticize it from just a scholarly point of view and so they lose their monopoly. In fact, they have already lost their monopoly. So, there will be a long-term impact. *The Study Quran* has already been assigned in many university courses. I know of a dozen universities in the United States where the professors called me up and said that they had ordered this work for their classes. I am sure that it will have a major impact; no doubt about it.

As for its translation, already both the Turks and the Iranians, who are usually the first two Muslim peoples to translate such books, have shown interest and they have already approached the publisher. So, these translations will come out and the publisher is also talking about French and other European language translations. I am anxious to have it out in French, more than any other European language, because of the Francophone region of Africa that is Muslim. I am thinking of Senegal, Ivory Coast, and places like that in West Africa, as well as Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, a very large area. So to have a French translation will be very good. But I am sure that sooner or later it will come out also in German and Spanish, which are major European languages as well as perhaps other European and Islamic languages such as Bhasa Indonesian. There are even some Chinese Muslim scholars who are thinking of bringing it out in Chinese.