

TRANSLATABILITY OF THE QUR'ĀN: THEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

ISMAIL K. POONAWALA

ABSTRACT

This article investigates early Muslim views about the translatability of the Qur'ān and scrutinizes their arguments, especially with regard to theological and literary problems. It seems that Muslim orthodoxy's objection to translation stems mainly from doctrinal consideration. Orthodox Muslim doctrine holds that the Qur'ān is the word of God. Doctrine also holds that the Qur'ān is the miracle of Muḥammad and that it is unique and inimitable both in its composition and its contents. Those who permit translation argue that the Qur'ānic message is universal, as it states, "It is merely a reminder for the whole world." The reason it was revealed in Arabic is explained in the Qur'ān: "And we never sent a messenger save with the tongue of his folk." Hence the very verse used to justify the belief that the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic implies an obligation to translate and transmit its message to non-Arabs.

No jurist permitted the recitation of a tafsīr in prayers, but Abū Ḥanīfa, the founder of the Ḥanafī school of jurisprudence, allowed the reciting of Qur'ān in translation for a non-Arab Muslim. This was the main reason for disapproval of translation by all other schools of jurisprudence, i.e., that it might be used in prayer, might be taken as the inspired version, and might even replace the original. Many jurists and theologians therefore permit translation for the purpose of explaining the meaning of the text to non-Arabs. Their objection is to recitation of the translation for both liturgical and nonliturgical purposes.

Literary problems, on the other hand, remain formidable. The Qur'ān has its lexical subtleties, its perplexities of grammar, its cadences and rhymes, its metaphors and poetry. All these qualities not only tax the ingenuity of the translator but make it almost impossible to avoid interpretation. No translation can do justice to the original, and the unique quality of its i'jāz is lost in translation.

For Muslims the Qur'ān is the direct word of God dictated to his Prophet Muḥammad through the angel Gabriel. It is not simply a theological dogma inherited from generation to generation but also a living conviction which renews itself in the heart and mind of the Muslim whenever he recites or reflects on the

sacred text of the Qur'ān. Muslim orthodoxy, therefore, maintains that a translation of the Qur'ān is in the true sense of the word not possible, and it has generally been opposed to such translation even into other Islamic languages.¹ Despite this orthodox opposition there has been a different view, beginning from an early period, about whether a Muslim who does not know Arabic may be allowed to use a translation in his prayers. It is also reported that a number of translations into Persian, Berber, Sindhi, and Turkish were attempted during the early centuries of Islam.²

The formulation and development of both the orthodox position and that of those who permit translation were the result of intense debates among jurists (*fuqahā*), traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*), commentators (*mufasssīrūn*), theologians (*mutakallimūn*), and philologists during the early centuries of Islam. In the 1920s the debate about the translatability of the Qur'ān was touched off once again by the extreme secular measures adopted by the Turkish Republic, including Muṣṭafā Kamāl's attempts to substitute a Turkish translation of the Qur'ān for the original.³ The *ʿulamā* of Egypt and Syria were vehemently opposed to any

¹ H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago, 1946), pp. 3-4.

² One of the oldest surviving is the Persian translation of al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* made during the reign of the Sāmānid prince Maṣṣūr b. Nūḥ (350-365/961-976). This translation is literal and equivalent Persian words are written under the Arabic text without regard for the Persian word order. The first Turkish translation was based on this Persian version and was either contemporaneous with it or was done in the first half of the fifth/eleventh century. Ḥabīb Yaghmāʿī, *Tarjomān-e Tafsīr-e Ṭabarī* (Tehran, 1339/1961), 1:5-6; Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, 1968), p. 149; Antonio Pagliaro and Alessandro Bausani, *La letteratura persiana* (Milan, 1968), pp. 490-491.

According to Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, *Le Saint Coran: Traduction integrale et notes* (Beirut, 1980), a Syriac translation was made during the second half of the first/early eighth century; a Berber one, around the beginning of the second/eighth century; and a Sindhi one, during the second half of the third/ninth century, but none of these have survived. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition), s.v. "al-Qur'ān, Translation of the Qur'ān"; Ismet Binark and Halit Eren, *World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'ān: Printed Translations 1515-1980* (Istanbul, 1406/1986), pp. xxviii ff.

³ See Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal, 1964), pp. 486-490; Fazlur Rahman, "Translating the Qur'ān," *Religion and literature* 20 (1988): 26.

translation.⁴ In 1925 the Mufti of Egypt issued a *fatwā* to the effect that it was permissible to translate the Qurʾān and he was supported in this view by some *ʿulamāʾ* of al-Azhar.⁵ The latter generally took the view that the use of translation for nonliturgical purposes by non-Arab Muslims was permissible. In 1936 the Egyptian government announced that in collaboration with al-Azhar it would undertake a translation of the Qurʾān into major European languages; however, the project never got off the ground.⁶ The following study aims at examining the early Muslim views about the translatability of the Qurʾān and scrutinizing their arguments with regard to theological and literary considerations.

⁴ See Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār* (Cairo, 1342/1923–1924), 9:314–363; this section was originally published in *al-Manār*, a periodical edited by him. Riḍā's attack is directed mainly against the Turkish Republic and the Turkish translation.

Muḥammad al-Khiḍr Ḥusayn (editor of *Nūr al-Islām*), "Naql maʿānī al-Qurʾān ilā al-lughāt al-ajnabiyya," *Nūr al-Islām* 2 (1931): 122–132; Maḥmūd Abū Daqīqa, "Kalima fī tarjamat al-Qurʾān al-karīm," *Nūr al-Islām* 3 (1932): 29–35; 66–67; Ibrāhīm al-Jibālī, "al-Kalām fī tarjamat al-Qurʾān," *Nūr al-Islām* 3 (1932): 57–65. These Azharī shaykhs permit translation in the sense of an exegesis for better understanding of the text.

Muḥammad Shākir's article labeling the translators as "a band of heretics" is translated by Sir T. W. Arnold, "On the Translation of the Koran into Foreign Languages," *The Muslim World* 16 (1926): 161–165. For other publications see Ṣubḥī Maḥmasānī, *Falsafat al-tashrīʿ fī al-Islām*, 3rd ed. (Beirut, 1380/1961), pp. 147–150; Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Bundāq, *Al-Mustashriqūn wa-tarjamat al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Beirut, 1400/1980), p. 65.

⁵ For the details of the *fatwā* see *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936): 130. Articles supporting translations of the Qurʾān were written by Shaykh al-Azhar Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī, "Baḥṭh fī tarjamat al-Qurʾān al-karīm wa-aḥkāmihā," *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936): 77–112 (First published in 1351/1932 and again reprinted in Beirut in 1401/1981 with a foreword by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid); Maḥmūd Shaltūt (who later became Shaykh al-Azhar), "Tarjamat al-Qurʾān wa-nuṣūṣ al-ʿulamāʾ fīhā," *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936): 123–134; and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥajūrī al-Thaʿālibī (he was a Moroccan minister of education), "Tarjamat al-Qurʾān al-karīm," *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936): 190–198. See also A. L. Tibawi, "Is the Qurʾān Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion," *The Muslim World* 52 (1962): 4–16.

⁶ The committee, headed by the Mufti of Egypt, had also issued the guidelines for translation which were published in *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936), 648–649. It would have been a collaborative effort of several scholars specialized in Arabic, exegesis, Islamic law, and European languages.

To begin with, let us examine the Qur'ān. For the Qur'ān itself, and consequently for Muslims, the Qur'ān is the word of God (كلام الله)⁷ revealed to his prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad, too, was unshakably convinced that he was the recipient of the message from God. The Qur'ān states, "Truly, it is a revelation from the Lord of the universe. The trusted spirit has brought it down upon your heart, so that you may be a warner."⁸ It further states that it was revealed expressly as an "Arabic Qur'ān" (قرآناً عربياً)⁹ and in "clear Arabic tongue" (بلسان عربي مبين)¹⁰ "to warn the mother of towns [i.e., Mecca] and those around her."¹¹ The significance of these statements, repeated several times in different places, is that the Qur'ān was revealed verbally and not merely in its meaning and ideas. Muslims also believe that the Qur'ān is the faithful reproduction of the original word of God preserved on a guarded tablet (في لوح محفوظ)¹² in heaven.¹³ The word *qur'ān*, meaning 'recitation' or 'reading',¹³ given to the collection of revelations, further strengthens the above-cited belief that it was revealed to be read and recited.

⁷ Qur'ān 9:6.

⁸ Ibid., 26:192–194; see also 2:97. The following translations were consulted: M. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation* (London, 1930); A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Lahore, 1934); R. Bell, *The Qur'ān: Translated with a Critical Rearrangement of the Sūrah*s (Edinburgh, 1937); A. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955); and T. Irving, *The Qur'ān: The First American Version* (Brattleboro, VT, 1985).

⁹ It states: "These are the verses from the clear book. We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ān so that you may understand" (Qur'ān 12:1–2). This pronouncement is repeated in several places; see 13:37, 20:113, 39:28, 41:3, 44, 43:3, 46:12.

¹⁰ It states: "We know very well that they say: 'It is merely a mortal who is teaching him.' The tongue of the person whom they hint at is foreign, while this is clear Arabic speech" (Qur'ān 16:103; see also 26:195, 46:12).

¹¹ Ibid., 6:92, 42:7.

¹² It states: "Nay, but it is a majestic Qur'ān on a guarded tablet" (ibid., 85:21).

¹³ "And [We have sent down] a Qur'ān [i.e., recitation] which We have divided, so that you can recite it to people at intervals" (ibid., 17:106). "And chant the Qur'ān distinctly" (ibid., 73:4). "It is up to Us to collect it, as well as to recite it. So when We recite it, follow its recitation" (ibid., 75:17–18). For the origin of the word *qur'ān* and various views about its meaning see Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1376/1957), 1:277–278.

The Qurʾān also declares itself to be unique and inimitable. When Muḥammad was accused of fabricating the revelation, he challenged the Arabs, who excelled in eloquence, to produce something like the Qurʾān, equaling it so much as in a single sura. It states: "This Qurʾān is not such [a book] that could be invented by anyone except God. . . . Or do they say that he [the Prophet] has made it up? Say: 'Bring a sura like it, and appeal to anyone you can [for help] except God, if you are truthful.'" ¹⁴ The Arabs were unable to take up the challenge and so they were told that it was beyond their power and that they would never be able to do it. It states: "Say: 'Even if men and jinns get together to produce the like of this Qurʾān, they would never bring anything like it no matter how much assistance they lent to one another.'" ¹⁵ The total effect of all these Qurʾānic pronouncements on the believer is that a translation of the word of God is not possible and that any translation, even if attempted, is no more than an approximation of its meaning.

Although the Qurʾān was primarily intended for the Arabs, it is obvious from the biography of Muḥammad that he would not have kept Islam to the confines of Arabia. Muḥammad's mission was not only to the Arabs but also to mankind as a whole. The Qurʾān itself states: "Say, [O Muḥammad]: O mankind! Lo, I am the messenger of God to you all," ¹⁶ and "We have not sent you, [O Muḥammad], save as a bearer of good tidings and warner unto all mankind." ¹⁷ Its message is universal, as it states, "It is merely a reminder for the whole world." ¹⁸ The reason why it was revealed in Arabic is explained in the Qurʾān: "And We never sent a messenger save with the tongue of his folk, that he might make [the message] clear for them." ¹⁹ Thus the question arises

¹⁴ Qurʾān 10:37-38. See also 2:23, 8:31, 11:13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17:88; see also 2:24. For the development of the theory of the *iʿjāz* see below.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7:158.

¹⁷ Ibid., 34:28. See also 4:79. Muḥammad is reported to have said that he was sent to all [mankind], red, black, and white. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:63. A similar tradition in al-Bukhārī, al-Dārimī, and al-Nasāʾī states: "I am sent to all people." See A. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden, 1936-69), s.v. بعث.

¹⁸ Qurʾān 81:27; see also 21:106 and 25:1.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14:4.

how Muḥammad and his immediate successors faced the problem of preaching the divine message of the Qur'ān to non-Arabs who did not understand Arabic. Those non-Arabs with whom Muḥammad had contact in Mecca and Medina seem to have had sufficient knowledge of Arabic to understand the Qur'ānic message, so that for them there was no need of translation. However, with regard to non-Arabs who lived beyond the boundaries of Arabia, with whom Muḥammad was in contact, it is reported that he did not object to some verses being translated into foreign languages.

The first such report concerns the Muslims who had emigrated to Abyssinia. When they were asked by the Negus to read something from the Qur'ān, Ja'far b. Abī Ṭālib read from the beginning of *Sūrat Maryam*.²⁰ The report does not state categorically that those verses were translated into Ethiopic, but this is obvious, unless we assume that the Negus knew Arabic.

The second report is the historical account about Muḥammad's alleged letters to foreign rulers.²¹ It is reported by several early historians, such as Ibn Ishāq (d. ca. 150/767),²² Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845),²³ and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923),²⁴ that Muḥammad sent envoys carrying letters to the Negus of Abyssinia, the governor of Bostra as representative of the Byzantine emperor,²⁵ the Persian emperor, and the Muqawqis (ruler) of Alexandria, inviting them to accept

²⁰ For details see Ibn Ishāq, *al-Sīra al-nabawīya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā et al. (Cairo, 1355/1936), 1:360; English translation in A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad* (London, 1955), p. 152.

²¹ W. Montgomery Watt (*Muhammad at Medina* [Oxford, 1956], pp. 345–347) considers the material authentic and states that it contains a kernel of fact. However, he adds that the story, as it stands, cannot be accepted because it has become distorted in the course of transmission due to its theological interest. See also Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London, 1966), pp. 24–25. R. B. Serjeant ("Early Arabic Prose," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. Beeston et al. (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 141–142), considers that the letters were concocted probably sometime during the reign of 'Umar II (99–101/717–720).

²² Ibn Ishāq, *al-Sīra al-nabawīya*, 4:254–255; English translation in A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, pp. 652–659.

²³ Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. E. Sachau et al. (Leiden, 1917–1940), 1, 2:15–38.

²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1961), 2:644–657. For the text of these letters see also Muḥammad Ḥamid Allāh, *Majmū'at al-wathā'iq al-siyāsīya* (Cairo, 1969), pp. 77, 81, 82.

²⁵ This letter is reproduced by al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut, n.d.), 1:8–9, with additional information.

Islam. Those letters contained some verses of the Qurʾān, and it is stated that every one of those messengers was able to speak the language of the people to whom he was sent. Therefore, it is self-evident that Muḥammad anticipated that his letters, containing the verses of the Qurʾān, would be translated into Ethiopic, Greek, and Old Persian.

While citing a long report from Abū Sufyān on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, the well-known traditionist al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) states that Muḥammad's letter to the governor of Bostra, containing some verses of the Qurʾān, was translated into Greek.²⁶ By analogy, can one infer from these reports that it was permissible to translate the whole Qurʾān into a foreign language? Later authorities have indeed used these earlier reports to justify translation.

Let us consider another report by al-Bukhārī which is widely used to justify translation. Because of the Qurʾānic verse, "Say: Bring the Torah and recite it if you have been truthful,"²⁷ al-Bukhārī has devoted a separate section (*bāb*) entitled "That which is lawful to explicate [or, to translate] of the Torah and of other heavenly books into Arabic and other languages" (ما يجوز من تفسير التوراة وغيرها من كتب الله بالعربية وغيرها). He relates three traditions. First, he mentions Muḥammad's letter, as stated above, to the governor of Bostra. Second, he explains that since the Jews used to read the Torah in Hebrew and expound it (يفسرونها) to the Muslims in Arabic, Muḥammad had said: "Neither give credence to what they say nor disprove [what they say]; rather 'say: We believe in God and what has been sent down to us.'"²⁸ Third, he mentions the case of a Jewish man and woman who had committed adultery and were brought before Muḥammad. He asked them what was the punishment prescribed in the Torah. They said that their faces should be blackened and they should be disgraced. Thereupon the Jews were told to bring the Torah, if they were truthful. The Torah was brought and a person was asked to read it. When the reader came to a particular passage he covered it with his hand. He was asked to lift his hand, and lo, it

²⁶ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 1: 8-9, 4:307.

²⁷ Qurʾān 3:93.

²⁸ Qurʾān 2:136. Ibn Ḥajar (*Fath al-bārī bi-sharḥ al-Bukhārī* [Cairo, 1387/1959], 18:300) reports that those who permit recitation of the Qurʾān in Persian base their ruling on this tradition.

was the stoning verse. The reader, therefore, told Muḥammad that the prescribed punishment was stoning, but that the Jews were covering it up.²⁹

Although al-Bukhārī does not express his opinion explicitly, it is obvious from his presentation that it is lawful to translate the Qur'ān for non-Arabs, since he did not report any tradition to the contrary. Translation serves an important purpose, and later scholars, such as the Shāfi'ī jurist, traditionist, and commentator on al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1448), have inferred from this report that it is lawful to translate the Qur'ān in order to expound its message to non-Arabs. Commenting on the Qur'ānic verse and the section-heading of al-Bukhārī, Ibn Ḥajar states that since the Torah was in Hebrew and God had commanded that it be recited to the Arabs who knew not Hebrew, this indicates permission to express it in Arabic. He then adds that the converse is also permissible, that is, what is in Arabic may be expressed in Hebrew.³⁰ Regarding on the first tradition about Muḥammad's letter, Ibn Ḥajar states that it serves to inform us that the Prophet did rely on translation to convey the Qur'ānic message to non-Arabs.³¹ In regard to the second tradition, he states that it is permitted to explain the Qur'ānic message and its precepts to a new, or a potential, convert in his own native tongue.³²

Commenting on verse 14:4, the Mālikī exegete Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) states: "This verse cannot be cited as evidence against non-Arabs, because it applies to him for whom the Prophet's message was translated [into a language] understood by him (ترجم له ما جاء به النبي ترجمة يفهمها)." He then

²⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* 4:307. About the second tradition see also *ibid.*, pp. 270–271. The third tradition is also reported by Muslim; see al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ*, ed. M. al-Albānī (Damascus, 1961–62), 2:288; English translation James Robson, *Mishkāt al-Masabih* (Lahore, 1975), 1:758.

³⁰ والحاصل أن الذي بالعربية مثلا يجوز التعبير عنه بالعبرانية وبالعكس (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 17:299).

³¹ فيه إشعار بأنه اعتمد في إبلاغه ما في الكتاب على من يترجم عنه بلسان المبعوث إليه (ibid.).

³² فمن دخل في الإسلام أو أراد الدخول فيه فقرأ عليه القرآن فلم يفهمه فلا بأس أن يعرب (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 17:300). Rashīd Riḍā (*Tafsīr*, 9:344–345), who is opposed to translation, argues that translation of the Qur'ān does not help to propagate Islam.

cites a tradition which states that Muḥammad was sent to all mankind, implying that the Qurʾānic message has to be translated for non-Arabs.³³

As a result of the Arab-Muslim conquests, the influence of Islam extended beyond the boundaries of the Arabic-speaking world. Hence the task of preaching and expounding the message of the Qurʾān to the newly converted non-Arab Muslims fell on the shoulders of the early Muslim-Arab community. It was their duty to explain the Qurʾān to non-Arabs and even to Arabs with imperfect knowledge of Arabic. In preaching to the masses various verses of the Qurʾān had to be translated into the native language understood by them. Thus there is little doubt that oral translation of the various portions of the Qurʾān by preachers and Qurʾān teachers was inevitable.

A story narrated by al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) corroborates the above assumption. He states:

Among the story-tellers Mūsā b. Sayyār al-Uswarī was a prodigy. He was equally eloquent in Persian as he was in Arabic. When he sat for his audience, the Arabs sat on his right while the Persians sat on his left. He would recite a verse from the Qurʾān, expound its meaning in Arabic for the Arabs, and then turn his face toward the Persians and expound it in Persian.

Al-Jāḥiẓ concludes the story by expressing his wonder at al-Uswarī's eloquence: "It was difficult to know in which of those two languages he was more eloquent."³⁴

The story shows that oral translation of the Qurʾān must have been a widely prevalent pattern of preaching and story-telling from the very beginning. Later on, when Muslim authors began to write books about Islamic subjects in their native languages, it was natural for Qurʾānic passages to be translated and cited in those languages.

It is reported by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim that ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb heard Hishām b. Ḥakīm reciting *Sūrat al-furqān*³⁵ in a different manner than what he himself had been taught by

³³ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (Cairo, 1381/1962), 9:340.

³⁴ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *al-Bayān wal-tabayīn*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām M. Hārūn, 3rd ed. (Cairo, 1968), 1:368.

³⁵ Qurʾān, Sura 25.

Muḥammad. So seizing his cloak at the neck, ʿUmar brought him to Muḥammad and said, "I heard this man reciting *Sūrat al-furqān* in a manner different from that in which you taught me to recite it." Muḥammad told ʿUmar to let him go and asked Hishām to recite the sura. After he recited it, Muḥammad said, "Thus was it revealed." He then asked ʿUmar to recite it, and when he had done so, Muḥammad said, "Thus was it revealed. The Qurʾān was revealed in seven modes of reading, so recite according to what comes most easily."³⁶

Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) reports several traditions (including the above) indicating that Muḥammad tolerated different readings. Explaining the seven modes of reading, he makes it clear that the differences were in the reading of words but not in their meanings. He further states that variant readings did not affect legal regulations.³⁷ This early period of flexibility and tolerance came to an end after the adoption of the ʿUthmānic text. ʿUthmān's instruction to the committee that in cases of doubtful readings they should adopt the reading according to the Qurayshī dialect, because the Qurʾān was revealed in their dialect, runs counter to Muḥammad's tradition. Al-Ṭabarī notes that at the time of his writing, except for one reading, the other six modes of reading had disappeared. Hence he raises various questions: "Were the other modes of reading abrogated (*nusikhat*)? If so, is there any evidence to support this? Or were the other modes of reading neglected by the community and subsequently fell into oblivion?" Al-Ṭabarī's answer to this query is that the Muslim community was enjoined to preserve and recite the Qurʾān, and for that reason it was given the choice to select one reading; it chose the Qurayshī dialect.

The above report indicates that Muḥammad permitted variant readings according to the prevailing tribal dialects of his time,

³⁶ *إنّ هذا القرآن أنزل على سبعة أحرف، فاقروا ما تيسر منه.* Muslim commentators and traditionists differ widely about the meaning of *ahruf*; however, the most commonly accepted interpretation is that it means seven modes of reading (قرآت), or seven tribal dialects (لغات من قبائل العرب). Al-Ṭabarī, *Mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ*, 1:679; English translation James Robson, 1:466. It is so reported by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

³⁷ *إنّ اختلاف الأحرف السبعة إنّما هو اختلاف ألفاظ كقولك "هلم و تعال" باتفاق المعاني* لا باختلاف معاني موجبة اختلاف أحكام. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1969), 1:50.

provided the meaning of the text was preserved. By analogy, can we extend this license to translate the Arabic Qurʾān into another language provided the spirit of the text was preserved? Al-Ṭabarī considers seven modes of reading the Qurʾān as a special favor conferred by God on Muḥammad, because all the earlier Scriptures were revealed in one dialect (*bi-lisānⁱⁿ wāḥidⁱⁿ*). He further states that when any of those earlier Scriptures is rendered into a language other than its language of revelation, it no longer remains a recitation (*tilāwa*) but rather becomes an explanation, interpretation (*tarjama*), and exegesis (*tafsīr*). But because the Qurʾān was revealed in seven dialects (*alsun*), in whichever of these dialects it is recited, it always remains recitation (*tilāwa*). He adds that if someone renders the Qurʾān into a language other than those seven dialects, and still succeeds in conveying its meaning, he becomes an interpreter (*mutarjim^{an} lahu*).³⁸ Can it be deduced from the above passage of al-Ṭabarī that translation is permitted provided the meanings (*maʿānī*) are rendered correctly?

Muslims employed Arabic almost exclusively from the start in their writings, both theological and secular. The main reason for this was that the Islamic empire was a creation of the Arabs. They held sway in the crucial first decades and in time they secured an appropriate status for their language even in the conquered territories. They were able to achieve this all the more easily since the Scripture of Islam, which they championed and propagated, was in Arabic. Non-Arab Muslims who embraced Islam were obliged, like Arab Muslims, to recite the *Fātiḥa* (the first sura) and certain other short suras of the Qurʾān in their daily prayers.³⁹ All those who were converted to the new faith

³⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 1:70–71:

مَنْ حَوَّلَ إِلَى غَيْرِ اللِّسَانِ الَّذِي نَزَلَ بِهِ، كَانَ ذَلِكَ لَهُ تَرْجُمَةٌ وَتَفْسِيرٌ لَا تِلَاوَةٌ لَهُ عَلَى مَا أُنْزِلَهُ اللَّهُ. وَأُنْزِلَ كِتَابُنَا بِاللُّسْنِ سَبْعِيَّةٍ، بِأَيِّ تِلْكَ الْأَلْسُنِ السَّبْعَةِ تَلَاهُ التَّالِي كَانَ لَهُ تَأْوِيلٌ عَلَى مَا أُنْزِلَهُ اللَّهُ لَا مُتَرْجِمًا وَلَا مُفَسِّرًا، حَتَّى يَحْوِلَهُ عَنْ تِلْكَ الْأَلْسُنِ السَّبْعَةِ إِلَى غَيْرِهَا، فَيَصِيرُ فَاعِلٌ ذَلِكَ حِينَئِذٍ، إِذَا أَصَابَ مَعْنَاهُ، مُتَرْجِمًا لَهُ.

³⁹ The tradition reported by al-Bukhārī and Muslim states: "He who does not recite *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb* is not credited with having observed prayer." Another tradition reported by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasāʾi states that a man came to Muḥammad and said, "I am unable to learn any of the Qurʾān, so teach me something which will suffice me." Muḥammad told him to say, "Glory be to God; Praise be to God; There is no God but God; God is most great; There is no might

were thus compelled as a matter of principle to learn at least enough Arabic to be able to recite the Qur'ānic text in their daily prayers. However, there were some who did not know Arabic and were unable to recite the Qur'ānic text. Thus the question arose whether it was permissible for those who did not know Arabic to recite the Qur'ānic text in their native tongue instead of Arabic. Moreover, those non-Arab Muslims were interested in knowing other suras of the Qur'ān not used in prayer. Hence the question of translation persisted.

Let us first consider the question of prayer. It is reported by Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ja'far al-Narshakhī (d. 348/959) that Qutaybah b. Muslim, the governor of Khurasan, seized the city of Bukhara for the fourth time and established Islam there after much difficulty. In the year 94/712-713 he built a grand mosque inside the citadel and ordered the people of Bukhara to assemble there every Friday, for he had proclaimed that "Whosoever is present at the Friday prayer, I will give him two dirhams." Al-Narshakhī further states that the people of Bukhara, at the beginning of their conversion to Islam and during prayer, read the Qur'ān in Persian, for they were unable to understand Arabic.⁴⁰ This historical report confirms that it was permissible for those who did not know Arabic to recite the Qur'ānic text in translation during prayer.⁴¹ Later, however, with the rise of Islamic schools of jurisprudence, the debate on this issue took a different shape. It is to this question that we now turn.

and no power except in God." Al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāṭ al-maṣābih*, 1:262, 271; English translation Robson, 1:169, 175.

Commenting upon the second tradition, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī states that if a person is unable to recite the Qur'ān, he should pray by glorifying God but should not recite anything in translation. Al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī bi-sharḥ al-ḥāfiẓ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī* (Beirut, n.d.), 2:143.

⁴⁰ Al-Narshakhī, *Tārīkh-e Bukhāra*, ed. Mudarris-e Riḍawī, 2nd ed. (Tehran, 1363/1984), p. 67; English translation Richard Frye, *The History of Bukhara: Translated from a Persian Abridgment of the Arabic Original* (Cambridge, MA, 1954), p. 48; Arabic translation Amīn 'Abd al-Majīd Badawī and Naṣr Allāh al-Tarazī, *Tārīkh Bukhāra* (Cairo, 1385/1965), p. 74.

⁴¹ It is reported that Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), a prominent figure in early Muslim mysticism, used to recite the Qur'ān in Persian during prayers because he was not fluent in Arabic (لعدم انطلاق لسانه باللغة العربية). Cited by al-Marāghī, *Baḥīth*, p. 93; Maḥmasānī, *Falsafat*, p. 149.

It is reported that Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), the founder of the Hanafī school of jurisprudence, was of the opinion that a non-Arab Muslim may recite Arabic texts in his own native tongue. The founders of all other Sunnī schools of jurisprudence, on the other hand, adopted the rigorous view and did not allow the use of translation; they insisted that prayers must be recited in Arabic.⁴² Unfortunately, Abū Ḥanīfa's opinion on this matter is known only indirectly through the glosses of his followers. Al-Sarakhsī (d. 483/1090) says that Abū Ḥanīfa's ruling in permitting the Persian translation was based on a report which stated that the people of Persia wrote to Salmān al-Fārisī asking him to write out the *Fātiḥa* in Persian. Salmān complied with their request, and they recited it in prayer until their tongues became used to Arabic.⁴³

The above report clearly implies that Abū Ḥanīfa allowed the use of Persian translations merely as a stepping stone to the original Arabic. Perhaps in allowing this concession he was guided by religious concern and practical consideration in order to solve an obvious problem faced by the new converts to Islam who were growing in number in Iraq. In any case he did not pronounce a decision on the use of translations of the Qurʾān as a whole;⁴⁴ however, some later sources add to the report that Salmān submitted his translation to Muḥammad and the latter did not disapprove of it.⁴⁵ This addition is not reliable evidence and cannot be taken to imply that Muḥammad approved of reciting translations in prayer.

⁴² Al-Nawawī, *al-Majmūʿ* (Cairo, 1966), 3:342; ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jazīrī, *Kitāb al-fiqh ʿalā al-madhāhib al-arbaʿa* (Cairo, n.d.), 1:228–230.

⁴³ فكان يقرؤون ذلك في الصلاة حتى لانت ألسنتهم للعربية see al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-mabsūṭ* (Beirut, 1398/1978), 1:37. The Shāfiʿī jurist al-Nawawī (*al-Majmūʿ*, 3:342) reports this story quite differently. He states that the people of Persia asked Salmān al-Fārisī to write for them something from the Qurʾān, and he wrote down the *Fātiḥa* in Persian because it was read as an invocation (*li-annahu dhikr*). Al-Nawawī then adds that Salmān's translation became a substitute for the *Fātiḥa* like the confession of faith. Al-Nawawī also contends that what Salmān produced was not a true translation but a *tafsīr* (إنه كتب تفسيرها لا حقيقة) (الفاتحة).

⁴⁴ Rashīd Ridā (*Tafsīr*, 9:333) also reiterates that the two issues, viz., recitation of Persian translations of the *Fātiḥa* in prayer and translation of the whole Qurʾān, are quite different.

⁴⁵ Cited by Maḥmūd Abū Daqīqa, *Kalima*, pp. 33–34.

Al-Sarakhsī elaborates Abū Ḥanīfa's arguments further:

According to Abū Ḥanīfa it is permitted to recite [the Qur'ān] in Persian, provided that the reciter is certain that [what he recites in Persian conveys] the meaning of the [original] Arabic.⁴⁶ But if he prays by reciting the exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'ān, it is not valid, because the exegesis is not definite (*ghayr maqtū'*).⁴⁷

Al-Kāsānī (d. 587/1191), on the other hand, reports that Abū Ḥanīfa permitted the use of Persian translation irrespective of whether one was able to recite the Qur'ān well in Arabic or not. Abū Ḥanīfa's argument, according to al-Kāsānī, runs as follows:

The obligation to recite the Qur'ān in prayer is [established] not because of its Arabic language but because the words of the Qur'ān are the speech of God in what they contain of admonition and exhortation, awakening a desire [for good deeds] and warning [against doing bad deeds], as well as praise of Allāh and his exaltation. The meanings of these words [of the speech of God] do not vary [when] they are expressed in different languages, as God himself states: "It [i.e., the meaning of the Qur'ān] is in the Scriptures of the ancients,"⁴⁸ and, "Surely this [i.e., the meaning of the Qur'ān] is in the ancient

⁴⁶ Quoting another Shāfi'ī scholar, al-Kawāshī (d. 680/1281–1282), al-Zarkashī states that considering the nature of the Arabic language, this condition of Abū Ḥanīfa almost amounts to disallowing translation. Then, without citing the exact source, he quotes al-Zamakhsharī to the effect that Abū Ḥanīfa did not know Persian well, hence his ruling in allowing Persian translations was issued without due reflection (Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 1:466–467).

⁴⁷ Unlike the Qur'ān, the word of God, exegesis is not an exact science (Al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-mabsūṭ*, 1:37). Later jurists state that the translated text, in order to be recited in prayer, must be an invocation, or a denial of human form of the deity, and should not concern a story, a command, or an interdiction. Al-Marāghī (*Baḥth*, pp. 103, 111) states that prayers are valid only with literal translation of those verses which are capable of being translated that way, and that there should be no difference of opinion about their meaning. All the jurists are unanimous in holding that prayers are not valid if one recites a *tafsīr*.

⁴⁸ Qur'ān 26:196. Rashīd Riḍā (*Tafsīr*, pp. 338–341) does not agree with this meaning. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) states that pronouns could refer to special information, or description of the Qur'ān, or of the Prophet himself, as contained in those Scriptures: see *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Cairo, 1357/1938), 24:169.

Arabic, non-Arabs cannot comprehend its warning unless it is translated into their language.⁵⁵ Second, the tradition states, "The Qur'ān was revealed in seven modes of reading" (أنزل القرآن على (سبعة أحرف)). This argument implies that Abū Ḥanīfa considered translation a different mode of reading, provided that the meaning of the text was conveyed faithfully.⁵⁶

In order to grasp the full import of Abū Ḥanīfa's views and the arguments presented by the jurists and theologians who came after him, it is necessary to present a brief outline of the theory of the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān, which raises both theological and literary problems about its translatability. As noted above, the basis of this theory, which became an important dogma in Islam, lies in the Qur'ān itself. The theory as expounded by its most celebrated exponent, al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), states that although Muḥammad performed several miracles at different times in different situations, his greatest and most enduring miracle (*mu'jiza*), on which his prophethood is established, is the Qur'ān.⁵⁷ From the beginning, as this theory was developed and formulated, scholars have disagreed among themselves as to what there is in the Qur'ān that makes it *mu'jiz* (i.e., gives it its miraculous character).⁵⁸ Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869) emphasized that the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān rests in its *naẓm* (i.e., the choice and arrangement of words), and wrote a book about it entitled *Naẓm al-Qur'ān*.

⁵⁵ The line of argument is that this Qur'ānic verse cannot be cited as evidence against non-Arabs, and that they cannot be considered warned unless the warning is conveyed to them in their own language. Thus it becomes inevitable that the Qur'ānic message should be translated. See also Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, 17:300; he states that this argument was presented by those who permit recitation of translations.

⁵⁶ In refuting these arguments, al-Nawawī (*al-Majmū'*, 3:342) states that the seven modes of reading suggested in the tradition are the seven [tribal] dialects of Arabic and not other languages, as implied by the followers of Abū Ḥanīfa. Additional arguments ascribed to Abū Ḥanīfa by al-Nawawī might have been developed by the Ḥanafī jurists.

⁵⁷ Al-Bāqillānī, *I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr, 5th ed. (Cairo, 1981), pp. 10–32. Al-Bāqillānī states that *i'jāz* is not claimed for any other Scripture, such as the Torah or the Gospels. The Qur'ān is unique in this respect.

⁵⁸ See *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition; Leiden, 1971), s.v. "I'ḍjāz," *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, (New York and London, 1987), ed. Mircea Eliade, s.v. "I'ḍjāz."

Subsequently, the rhetorically unsurpassable style of the Qurʾān became the foremost argument for the *iʿjāz*. But al-Bāqillānī and a number of other theologians felt that to erect the theory of the *iʿjāz* on an aesthetic foundation would be to rest it on an empirical basis. There was also the problem of an element of human opinion being injected into the standard of valuation of the revealed text. They therefore maintained that the rhetorical figures represent one of the elements of literary excellence and one of the types of eloquence, and that the Qurʾān cannot be dissociated from them; but that the *iʿjāz* cannot be connected with those special aspects of rhetorical excellence. It cannot be based on them, nor can it be tied to them. It is correct to say that these rhetorical forms have left their marks on the Qurʾān as a whole and have contributed their share to its beauty and elegance. Hence they insisted on the inability of men to match the linguistic and stylistic uniqueness of the Qurʾān, but they did not propose to base the theory of the *iʿjāz* on aesthetic foundations alone. They further maintained that in addition to its *naẓm* (i.e., verbal eloquence and purity of diction) the concept of *iʿjāz* includes several other aspects, such as the Qurʾān's *maʿnā* (meaning, content), its prophecies of the future, and information about the distant past. The Qurʾān's divine character is also confirmed by the fact that Muḥammad was *ummī*, (unlettered). To sum up their arguments, these theologians insisted that the *iʿjāz* of the Qurʾān consists both of its language and its meaning, and these twin aspects cannot be considered separately.⁵⁹

It is obvious from this that the theory of *iʿjāz* has been woven intrinsically into the essential fabric of orthodox Muslim dogma. All the objections to translation stem from it. Except for the Ḥanafī school, all Sunnī schools of jurisprudence maintain that the Qurʾān ceases to be the word of God and loses its character as the holy Qurʾān once it is translated into another language. To support this doctrine, justified in a way by the Qurʾān itself, the superiority of the Arabic language was brought into the argument.

In his *Risāla*, while discussing the Arabic character of the Qurʾān, al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), the founder of the Shāfiʿī school

⁵⁹ See Ismail K. Poonawala, "An Ismāʿīlī Treatise on the *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*," *JAOS* 108 (1988): 381, where older sources are indicated.

of jurisprudence, upholds the supremacy of the Arabic language on religious grounds and states:

Of all the tongues, that of the Arabs is the richest and the most extensive in vocabulary. We do not know of any man except a prophet who apprehends all of it.⁶⁰

As the followers of other religions are invited by al-Shāfi'ī to embrace Islam because the Qur'ān is the final revelation and the repository of ultimate truth, non-Arab Muslims are called upon to accept Arabic. He states:

It is obligatory upon every Muslim to learn the Arab tongue to the utmost of his capacity, so that he may be able to profess through it that "there is no God but Allāh, and Muḥammad is his servant and messenger," and to recite in it the book of God.⁶¹

Al-Shāfi'ī stresses the Arabic character of the Qur'ān and refutes those who maintain that there are foreign words in it.⁶² To support his contention that the Qur'ān was revealed in a pure Arab tongue he cites several verses from it. One of those verses reads, "And We never sent a messenger save with the tongue of his folk."⁶³ Apparently this verse could be interpreted to mean that Muḥammad's mission was to the Arabs, yet another verse states that he was sent to all mankind. Al-Shāfi'ī resolves the difficulty in the case of another divine message in Arabic addressed both to Arabs and to non-Arabs alike by proposing two possibilities:

This may mean either that Muḥammad was sent with the tongue of his people, and that all others must learn his tongue, or as much as they were capable of learning of it, or that

⁶⁰ Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo, 1358/1940), p. 42; English translation Majid Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence: Shāfi'ī's Risāla* (Baltimore, 1961), pp. 88-89.

⁶¹ Al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, p. 48; English translation Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 93.

⁶² Like al-Shāfi'ī, al-Ṭabarī also maintains that the Qur'ān was revealed entirely in pure Arabic and rejects the suggestion that it contains some non-Arabic words. Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* 1:13-21, 73.

⁶³ Qur'ān 14:4.

Muḥammad was sent with the tongues of all [mankind, i.e., in different languages].⁶⁴

He then adds: "The proof that Muḥammad was sent with the tongue of his own people is obvious in more than one place in the Qurʾān." The obvious conclusion one can draw from this argument is that all others must learn Arabic.⁶⁵

It is both interesting and illuminating to compare al-Shāfiʿī's view with that of al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), a Muʿtazilī theologian and philologist. In his exegesis of the Qurʾān, rich in rhetorical analysis of the Qurʾānic style, al-Zamakhsharī faced the same difficulty as was faced by al-Shāfiʿī in explaining verse 14:4. He adopts the same arguments as those of al-Shāfiʿī but draws a diametrically opposite conclusion. Explaining the reason why the Qurʾān was revealed in the Arab tongue, al-Zamakhsharī states:

So that the Arabs would understand what the Prophet was summoning them to, and so that they could neither plead ignorance to God nor say that "we did not understand what we were spoken about," as God states: "If We had made it a foreign Qurʾān, they would have said, 'If only its verses were expounded distinctly.'"⁶⁶

The fact that the Qurʾān was revealed in Arabic while Muḥammad was sent to all mankind implies therefore that the others (i.e., non-Arabs) could plead ignorance. If the Qurʾān had been revealed also in a foreign language, neither Arabs nor non-Arabs could have pleaded ignorance. Like al-Shāfiʿī, al-Zamakhsharī proposes two possibilities in resolving the dilemma:

The Qurʾān could have been revealed either in all the tongues or in one of them. There was no need for its revelation in all the tongues, because translation could substitute for it (فلا حاجة) إلى نزوله بجميع الألسنة لأن الترجمة تنوب عن ذلك).

⁶⁴ Al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Risāla*, p. 45; English translation Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 90.

⁶⁵ This argument is reiterated in modern times by those who are opposed to translation; see Muḥammad al-Thaʿālibī, "Tarjamat," pp. 195–196; Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, 9:310–313; he states that Arabic is the language of Islam.

⁶⁶ Qurʾān 41:44; see al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* (Cairo, 1367/1948), 2:171.

He then concludes:

Without elaborating [this point] it remains that the Qur'ān was revealed in [only] one tongue. And the worthiest tongue was the tongue of the Prophet's own folk, because they were closer to him. Once they comprehend [his message] and expound it, the Qur'ān will be transmitted and spread, and translations would be made elucidating [its meaning].⁶⁷

This illustrates the Mu'tazilī position that it is permitted to translate the Qur'ān.⁶⁸

Al-Jāhīz, who emphasized the stylistic superiority of the Qur'ān, explains the difficulties involved in translating Arabic poetry and the religious scriptures. Enumerating the problems involved in translating the Qur'ān, he states:

One of the conditions for translating scientific works is that the translator should be equally proficient in both languages, the source language and the target language. However, with regard to holy books this qualification is not sufficient because they deal with divine matters. It is very difficult for the translator to comprehend all the nuances of meaning implied in various figures of speech. When he fails to understand such fine shades of meaning, he commits an error, and an error of interpretation with respect to religion is more harmful than an error in mathematics, chemistry, or philosophy. Moreover, since Scriptures are revealed by God, they are unlike other books, and the translator cannot learn about the subject from an expert teacher. In addition to the translator's errors, translation is further exposed to the errors of scribes who copy it. As copies multiply, errors multiply. The book of Galen, the

⁶⁷ He further states that because the Qur'ān was revealed in only one language, all Muslims, both Arabs and non-Arabs, are in agreement about the text. This has preserved the Qur'ān from corruption and alteration. Al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2:171.

⁶⁸ Al-Nazzām (d. ca. 230/846) maintained that men were capable of producing something equal to the Qur'ān in style, but they were prevented from doing so by *ṣarfa* (i.e., God's turning them away from challenging it). Abū Mūsā 'Isā b. Ṣabīḥ, on the other hand, held that men can produce something equal to, or even better than, the Qur'ān. See Poonawala, "An Ismā'īlī Treatise," where older sources are listed.

book of Euclid, and the Almagest [astronomical work of Ptolemy] are good cases in point. The texts of those books not only vary widely but are also corrupt.⁶⁹

He therefore concludes that translations of the Qurʾān had better not be attempted at all. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), a philologist of Persian descent, also asserts the uniqueness of the Arabic language. Explaining the *iʿjāz* of the Qurʾān he states:

The Qurʾān was revealed with all those [rhetorical devices], hence no translator (ليس أحد من المترجم) is able to translate it into any other language, as the Gospels were translated from Syriac into Ethiopic and Greek, and the Torah and Psalms, and the rest of the books of God were translated into Arabic. [The reason is] that non-Arabs are not very rich in metaphor (*majāz*), as are the Arabs.⁷⁰

Coming back to jurists, both Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) and al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805), the two well-known disciples of Abū Ḥanīfa, restricted the license given by their teacher only to those who were unable to recite the Qurʾān well in Arabic (لا يجوز إذا كان لا يحسن العربية وإذا كان لا يحسنها يجوز al-Sarakhsī, runs as follows:

The Qurʾān is a miracle (*muʿjiz*), and its *iʿjāz* consists both in its composition (*naẓm*) and in its meaning (*maʿnā*). If [the faithful] is able to fulfill his obligation by complying with both aspects [of the *iʿjāz*], it is incumbent on him to fulfill his obligation in that way [i.e., by reciting the original Arabic]. However, if he is unable to recite it in its original composition (*naẓm*), he should fulfill his obligation by reciting according to his ability, like a person who is unable to perform the bowing (*rukūʿ*) and prostration (*sujūd*) in prayers is allowed to offer his prayers simply by making gestures (*bil-īmāʾ*).⁷¹

⁶⁹ This is a summary; for details see Al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-hayawān*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Hārūn, 2nd ed. (Cairo, 1385/1965), 1:75–79.

⁷⁰ He deals with the subject in detail, citing numerous examples from the Qurʾān under various categories of metaphor. Ibn Qutayba, *Taʾwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān*, ed. Aḥmad Ṣaqr (Cairo, 1373/1954), p. 16.

⁷¹ Al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-mabsūṭ*, 1:37.

It is worth noting that within a generation after Abū Ḥanīfa, the argument of *iʿjāz* had come to the forefront. Moreover, both Abū Yūsuf and al-Shaybānī held that the form (i.e., the Arabic language) and the substance (i.e., the meaning), the twin aspects of *iʿjāz*, cannot be separated from each other.

Al-Sarakhsī, immediately after reporting the above-cited opinion of Abū Ḥanīfa and of his two disciples, injects his own views and states, "Consequently [i.e., after a non-Arab Muslim had learned enough Arabic], it is obligatory on him to recite the *muʿjiz* [i.e., the Arabic Qur'ān] in the prayer." He then adds:

The *iʿjāz* of the Qur'ān consists in its meaning, because the argument of the Qur'ān from this aspect prevails over all mankind. The Persians were unable to produce the like [i.e., in its meaning] in their language. The Qur'ān is the word of God (*kalām Allāh*), uncreated (*ghayr makhluq wa-la muḥdath*), while all languages are created (*muḥdatha*). Thus we know that it is not permissible to say that the Qur'ān is in a particular language. How could it be permissible to say this when God himself states, "It [i.e., the meaning of the Qur'ān] is in the Scriptures of the ancients?"⁷² And those Scriptures are in their language. If a person embraces Islam by pronouncing the confession of faith (*shahāda*) in Persian, he is a Muslim. Likewise it is permitted to invoke the name of Allāh in Persian while slaughtering an animal . . . and recite the Qur'ān in Persian during prayers.⁷³

To support his argument that it is the objective and not the means which matter, al-Sarakhsī then cites Abū Ḥanīfa:

It is related from Abū Ḥanīfa that when a call to prayer (*adhān*) is given in Persian and the people know that it is the call to prayer, it is valid, but if they do not know, it is not valid. The reason for the [latter's invalidity] is that the objective [of the call to prayer], which is to notify [the people], was not achieved.⁷⁴

⁷² Qur'ān 26:196. According to al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī, one of the interpretations of this verse is that the meaning of the Qur'ān is in those sacred books.

⁷³ Al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-mabsūt*, 1:37.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Al-Sarakhsī disagreed with Abū Yūsuf and al-Shaybānī and supported Abū Ḥanīfa. He also elaborated the argument that the *iʿjāz* of the Qurʾān consists in its meaning rather than in its style. His statement that the argument of the *iʿjāz* from the point of view of meaning rather than of linguistic form prevails, is quite interesting. It seems that he did not agree with those scholars according to whom the argument of the Qurʾān's linguistic and stylistic inimitability, by inference, applies to non-Arabs also. Those scholars state that non-Arabs, by seeking information, would learn that Muḥammad was sent to the Arabs, who were known for their verbal eloquence. They would further learn that Muḥammad did challenge them to produce the like of the Qurʾān, but they were unable to produce anything equaling so much as a single sura. This implies that if language experts themselves failed to meet the challenge, others (i.e., non-Arabs) stand no chance of doing so. Hence the latter should admit their inability to imitate the Qurʾān.⁷⁵

Al-Sarakhsī is therefore more in agreement with those scholars who state that the argument of stylistic beauty applies only to those whose language is Arabic, and does not apply to non-Arabs. Since it does not apply to them, it cannot prevail over them, and they can plead ignorance before God. But, those scholars add, this is not possible, since the Qurʾān is Muḥammad's greatest miracle and proof of his prophethood, and it prevails over all, Arabs as well as non-Arabs. Thus it is necessary that the Qurʾān should contain something besides its formal aesthetic qualities which would apply to non-Arabs, that is, the meanings embodied in its words.⁷⁶

The later followers of Abū Ḥanīfa extended his permission to recite Persian translations to other languages, such as Turkish, Hindi, Syriac, and Hebrew.⁷⁷ Some of his followers even approved of readings from the Torah, the Gospel, or the Psalms in prayer, provided that the reciter was sure that they were not corrupted (*muḥarraf*).⁷⁸ The Ḥanafī view seems to have alarmed

⁷⁵ See Poonawala, "An Ismāʿīlī Treatise," where older sources are listed.

⁷⁶ Al-Sarakhsī supports further his definition of the *iʿjāz* by deducing evidence from the Qurʾān.

⁷⁷ See al-Nasafī, *Kanz al-daqaʾiq* (Delhi, 1309), 1:53.

⁷⁸ See note 50 above. Later Ḥanafī authorities are cited by Shaltūt, "Tarjamat al-Qurʾān," pp. 128-129.

other schools of law and hardened the orthodox point of view not only about the use of translation in prayer but also about translation of the Qur'ān in general. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is often claimed by later authorities that Abū Ḥanīfa himself had later on revoked his earlier ruling and forbade the use of translation because it deprived the Qur'ān of its *i'jāz*.⁷⁹

Al-Shāfi'ī's position with regard to the Arabic language has already been noted. Al-Sarakhsī's statement that al-Shāfi'ī does not permit the use of translation in prayer under any circumstances seems to be correct and is corroborated by his works.⁸⁰ According to al-Sarakhsī, al-Shāfi'ī held the position that if the faithful are unable to recite the Qur'ān in Arabic because they are illiterate, they should pray without reciting it.⁸¹ Similarly, he was opposed to the confession of faith (*shahāda*) being recited in Persian.

Al-Kāsānī reports that al-Shāfi'ī's objection to the use of translation stemmed from two considerations. First, the obligation to recite the Qur'ān in prayer was derived from God's command, "Recite whatever seems feasible from the Qur'ān,"⁸² and the Qur'ān, as stated, was revealed expressly as an "Arabic Qur'ān." Persian translation was therefore not the Qur'ān. Second, the Qur'ān is the miracle of Muḥammad, and this miracle consists of its wording (and composition). In translation, therefore, it ceases to be a miracle.⁸³

After stating al-Shāfi'ī's position, al-Kāsānī refutes the latter's line of reasoning thus:

As for the argument that the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic, [our] rebuttal is twofold. First, the [fact of] Arabic being

⁷⁹ See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Beirut, 1973), 1:109; al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 1:465. Most Ḥanafī jurists refute this argument and state that الصلاة إن حالة مناجاة لا حالة إعجاز. See al-Marāghī, *Baḥṭh*, p. 98.

⁸⁰ Al-Sarakhsī, *Kitāb al-mabsūṭ*, 1:37. See also al-Shāfi'ī, *al-Risāla*, pp. 48–49; English translation Khadduri, *Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 93; idem, *Kitāb al-umm*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhri al-Najjār (Cairo, 1381/1961), 1: 102–103.

⁸¹ Al-Shāfi'ī, *Kitāb al-umm*, 1: 102–103: فيمده أن يذكر الله تعالى فيمده: من لم يحسن يقرأ أن يذكر الله تعالى فيمده. His position seems to be supported by tradition, see note 39 above.

⁸² Qur'ān 73:20.

⁸³ Al-Kāsānī, *Badā'ī*, 1:329. This is the main argument of the Shāfi'ī jurists; see also al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū'*, 3:342–343.

[called the language of] the Qurʾān does not negate that a non-Arabic [language] can also be [called the language of] the Qurʾān. There is nothing in the Qurʾānic verse ["We have sent it down as an Arabic Qurʾān"] to negate [our assumption]. The Arabic [text] is called the Qurʾān because it denotes that it is the Qurʾān [i.e., recitation], and the word "Arabic" is [used in this verse as] an adjective (*ṣifat*) [qualifying the Qurʾān] because it is the essence of speech (*ḥaqīqat al-kalām*). It is for this reason that we maintain that the Qurʾān is not created (*ghayr makhluq*), in the sense that it is an eternal attribute without regard to its Arabic language. Persian [translation therefore] does indicate [that it also is the speech of God], hence it is permissible to call it the Qurʾān. The Qurʾānic statement, "If We had made it a foreign Qurʾān,"⁸⁴ establishes that if [the meaning of the Qurʾān] is expressed in a foreign language, it too can be called the Qurʾān.

Second, if nothing except the Arabic recitation can be called the Qurʾān, what qualifies the Arabic for that designation is that it indicates that it is an eternal attribute of God [i.e., the speech of God]. For this reason, if someone recites something in Arabic which does not convey that it is the speech of God, his prayer is invalid. The indication [in Persian translation that it is the speech of God] does not change, hence the ruling about it does not change.⁸⁵

Granted that [al-Shāfiʿī's second] argument, that the miracle of the Qurʾān consists of its wording (*lafẓ*) and that it ceases in Persian, is correct, it should be pointed out that according to him recitation of what is of miraculous composition is not the condition, because the obligation [of recitation in prayer] is mentioned in a general sense and is not recitation of [only] what is miraculous. For this reason it is permitted to recite a short verse even if it does not possess a miraculous character.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Qurʾān 41:44. The second half of this verse, "They would have said, 'If its verses were only spelled out distinctly!' A foreign [Qurʾān] and an Arab [prophet]!" is cited by the Mālikī commentator al-Qādī Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī as invalidating Abū Ḥanīfa's ruling. Cited by Tibawī, "Is the Qurʾān Translatable?", p. 9.

⁸⁵ He disagrees with Abū Yūsuf and al-Shaybānī and states that Abū Ḥanīfa's ruling is correct.

⁸⁶ Al-Kāsānī, *Badāʾiʿ*, 1:329-330.

Although the Shāfi'ī jurists do not approve of reciting prayers in translation, they are not opposed to translations as such for the purpose of expounding the meaning of the text to non-Arabs. Their objection is to recitation (*qirā'a*) of the translations for both liturgical and nonliturgical purposes.⁸⁷ This is evident from al-Nawawī, who after elaborating his main argument against the use of translation in prayer, states:

According to the consensus of Muslims, translation of the Qur'ān cannot be [called] the Qur'ān. Any attempt to argue conversely is to act under constraint. No one disagrees that if someone expresses the meaning of the Qur'ān in a Hindu language, it does not become the Qur'ān, and whatever he utters in that language cannot be called the Qur'ān. Whoever disagrees with this position refuses to acknowledge [the obvious fact]. [If] explication (*tafsīr*) of Imru' al-Qays's poetry is not considered the same as his poetry, how can exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'ān be deemed the same as the Qur'ān? It is an accepted fact that a person in a state of major ritual impurity cannot be deprived of remembering the meaning of the Qur'ān, and that a person in a state of ritual impurity cannot be prevented from carrying a book which contains the meaning of the Qur'ān and its translation (*tarjama*).⁸⁸ It is thus evident that [what is mentioned in both the above cases] is not the Qur'ān. There is no disagreement [among the Muslims] that the Qur'ān is the miracle (*mu'jiz*) while its translation is not. It was the Arabic Qur'ān, as described by God, that the Prophet challenged the Arabs [to produce the like of it]. When it is established that a translation cannot be called the Qur'ān, it is evident that prayer is not valid except [when reciting] the Arabic Qur'ān.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 1:466; he allows translation out of necessity, provided that it is confined to the basic teachings of Islam and its devotional aspects. If a person wants to know more, he should learn Arabic. For this reason Muḥammad did not include more than a verse or two in his letter to the Byzantine emperor.

⁸⁸ It should be noted that the Ḥanafīs, unlike the Mālikīs, do not permit a person in a state of ritual impurity to touch a translation of the Qur'ān.

⁸⁹ Al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū'*, 3:343. Al-Kāsānī, *Badā'i'*, 1:329, also states that according to al-Shāfi'ī the miraculous character of the Qur'ān, which resides in its composition, ceases when it is translated. A Persian translation of it is,

The Shī'īs, as far as I am able to ascertain, also do not permit the recitation of translations of the Qur'ān in prayers.⁹⁰ *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* ("The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity"), whose Ismā'īlī character seems undeniable, maintain the superiority of the Arabic language over all other languages:

The perfect language is the language of the Arabs and the eloquent speech is that of the Arabs. [All other languages], except it, are imperfect. Among the languages Arabic [occupies a place] similar to that of a human form in the animal [kingdom]. As the emergence of human form is the final animal form, so too Arabic language is the perfection of human speech and [Arabic] writing is the termination of the art of writing.⁹¹

The "Epistles" envisage that Islam will be victorious over all other religions and its language over all other languages, because the Qur'ān is the noblest book revealed by God, and because no one from the other nations, despite their differences in language, is able to translate it. In conclusion the "Epistles" state:

Indeed, because of its [the Qur'ān's] brevity and succinctness, it is not possible to translate it. And this [fact, i.e., its untranslatability] is not hidden [from anyone].⁹²

In one of his treatises al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) presents theological proof that the Qur'ānic verses dealing with the divine attributes should not be translated. He insists that the faithful must abstain from making any changes in the original wording transmitted to them. One of the ways in which the original is changed, according to al-Ghazālī, is through *tafsīr*. He then explains that what he means by it is change of the wording into another language, substituting for the Arabic or its meaning the

therefore, not the Qur'ān, hence a person in a state of ritual impurity, as well as a menstruating woman, cannot be restrained from reading the translation. For differing opinions see al-Marāghī, *Baḥth*, pp. 104–105.

⁹⁰ Al-Muḥaqqiq al-Hillī, *Sharāḥ al-Islām*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad 'Alī (Najaf, 1389/1969), 1:81.

⁹¹ *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (Beirut, 1377/1957), 3:144.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 3:164–165.

Persian or Turkish. Explaining his insistence on reciting the original Arabic, he explains that

[there are some] Arabic words which do not have equivalents in Persian, while [there are other] Arabic words which do have equivalents in Persian, but the Persians are not accustomed to using them metaphorically as are the Arabs. [Then there are some] words which are common [for two or more things] in Arabic, but are not so in Persian.⁹³

It is worth noting that the Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328), permits translation of the Qur'ān for those who cannot understand the Arabic original.⁹⁴

Finally, let us consider the late Mālikī jurist al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), who is frequently cited by Azharī scholars as an authority permitting translation of the Qur'ān.⁹⁵ His much cited passage, which occurs in the context of his discussion of the view that the Qur'ān was revealed in pure Arabic, is merely a reordering in a logical form of what the earlier scholars had stated rather loosely. He states that

the Arabic language is considered as [consisting of] words denoting meanings which can be viewed from two aspects. First, [it] consists of absolute words and phrases conveying absolute meanings (*ma'ānīn muṭlaqatīn*). Second, [it] consists of restricted (*muqayyada*) words and phrases conveying auxil-

⁹³ Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-ʿawāmm ʿan ʿilm al-kalām* (Cairo, 1351/1932), p. 13; see also Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr*, 9:327–328. Shaltūt, "Tarjamat al-Qur'ān," p. 127, quotes a passage from al-Ghazālī—without indicating the source—to justify translation. Unfortunately, the passage does seem to deal not with translation of the Qur'ān but with conveying the meaning of the *sharīʿa* and the *sunna* to non-Arabs.

⁹⁴ He states: ولذلك يُترجم القرآن والحديث لمن يحتاج إلى تفهمه إياه بالترجمة، وكذلك يقرأ المسلم ما يحتاج إليه من كتب الأمم كلهم بلغتهم ويترجمها بالعربية كما أمر النبي زيد بن ثابت أن يتعلم كتاب اليهود ليقرأ له ويكتب له ذلك حيث لم يأتمن اليهود عليه. Ibn Taymīya, *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-ʿaql wal-naql*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Sālim (Cairo, 1971), 1:43–44.

⁹⁵ They were Shaykh Muḥammad al-Khiḍr, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Marāghī, and Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt; see notes 4 and 5, above.

iliary meanings (*ma^cānⁱⁿ khādimatⁱⁿ*). [The auxiliary meaning] is the secondary meaning (*al-dalāla al-tābi^ca*).⁹⁶

Elaborating his explanation further he states that the first aspect is shared by all languages, hence it is possible to express in other languages what is expressed in Arabic and vice versa. The second aspect, derived from Arabic rhetoric and figures of speech, is on the other hand, peculiar to Arabic. Expounding this point with a number of illustrations, he adds:

If the second aspect is admitted, then it is not possible at all to translate Arabic speech into foreign speech, let alone [to translate] the Qur^ʿān into a non-Arabic [language] unless it is assumed that the two languages are equal with regard to this second aspect. . . . If this [equality] is proved with regard to Arabic and the language in which [the Qur^ʿān] is to be translated, then it is possible to translate. To prove the equality unequivocally, however, is very difficult . . . but it is possible [to translate the Qur^ʿān] from the first aspect.

Since he has argued that it is possible to translate the Qur^ʿān in its absolute meaning, what remains for al-Shāṭibī is to present his final justification. He states:

Exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the Qur^ʿān and explanation of its meaning to the commonalty . . . is permissible from the first aspect. Since *tafsīr* is lawful by common consent of the Muslims, [this consent] becomes an evidence for the permissibility of its translation.

Tafsīr and translation are not alike as argued by al-Shāṭibī, and his analogy was severely criticized by the Shāfi^cī scholars. This criticism is poignantly expressed in the words of an early Shāfi^cī jurist al-Qaffāl (d. 365/975–976). The latter maintained that recitation of the Qur^ʿān in Persian was unthinkable (إِنَّ الْقُرْآنَ بِالْفَارْسِيَّةِ لَا يُقْرَأُ), hence it was said to him, “Then [it follows that] no one is able to explicate the Qur^ʿān (فَإِذَا لَا يَقْدِرُ أَحَدٌ أَنْ يَفْسِّرَ الْقُرْآنَ).” Rejecting this analogy, he replied:

⁹⁶ Al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn (Cairo, 1969), 2:46.

It is not like that, because [in *tafsīr*] one can capture some meaning of God's words and miss the rest. But if one intends to recite it in Persian, it is not possible for him to convey all the meaning of God's words, because translation means substituting the original word with another word. This is not possible, hence it is different from *tafsīr*.⁹⁷

No jurist permitted reciting a *tafsīr* in prayers, but the Ḥanafīs allowed reciting translation (*tarjama*). This is precisely the main reason for disapproval of translation, that it might be used in prayer, might be taken as the inspired version, and might replace the original Qur'ān. Thus the license given by Abū Ḥanīfa remained more or less a theoretical license.⁹⁸ The practice of reciting the Qur'ān in translation during prayer is rare. In order to safeguard against the use of translation in prayers, the jurists of Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, and Ḥanbalī schools permit translation of the Qur'ān for nonliturgical purposes with so many reservations that it almost amounts to outright prohibition. Those who agree that the use of translation to explicate the meaning of the text, like *tafsīr*, is allowed, agree further that translation cannot be the authority for any legal judgment (*aḥkām*) to be based on it or be derived from it.⁹⁹

It is also evident from the above review that it was not possible to have "authoritative" or "official" translations of the Qur'ān. Commenting on this fact Fazlur Rahman remarks:

Many theological and legal differences in Islam claim to be rooted in the Qur'ān. Any translation of the Qur'ān is thus, by necessity, made partial by the translator's theological pre-

⁹⁷ لأن الترجمة إبدال لفظة بلفظة تقوم مقامها، وذلك غير ممكن بخلاف التفسير. As quoted by al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:109, and al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān*, 1:465.

⁹⁸ The Ḥanafīs allow recitation from memory of a short sura in prayer. Writing about the Qur'ān and its translation into another language, however, raises a different question, viz., may the Qur'ān be written in non-Arabic letters? All the schools of law are unanimous in saying it may not because of practical orthographical difficulties and because this issue is connected with another theological question, that is, whether the Qur'ān is eternal or created. The Ḥanafīs allow the writing of the translation provided that it is accompanied by the Arabic original. Probably this is the origin of the practice of the interlinear translations used by the Muslims.

⁹⁹ Very little has been added to the earlier arguments by either side during modern debate.

dilection and his exclusion of other possible translations. If given "official" status, such translations will suppress the richness and variety in Islam. It is much better to leave the Qur^ʿān translations in the hands of private individuals and groups who can go on improving upon earlier ones forever.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion it can be stated that Muslim orthodoxy's objection to translation arises mainly from doctrinal consideration. Doctrine holds that the Qur^ʿān is the word of God revealed to his Prophet Muḥammad in Arabic. Doctrine also holds that the Qur^ʿān is the miracle of Muḥammad and that it is unique and inimitable. Those who permit translation argue that the Qur^ʿānic message is universal. The reason it was revealed in Arabic is that the Arabs could understand it. Viewed from this perspective, the very verse used to justify the belief that the Qur^ʿān could be only in Arabic implies a duty to translate its message for the non-Arabs.

Literary problems still remain. Translation is not merely a subject of debate for theologians but also an exacting task for scholars, and it can never be fully satisfactory.¹⁰¹ The Qur^ʿān is essentially untranslatable in the same way that great poetry is untranslatable. The Qur^ʿān is a collection of revelations revealed over a period of twenty-three years. Inspired language can never be satisfactorily translated. The seer can never communicate his vision in ordinary language. Besides the intimate union of meaning with form, as argued in the theory of the *iʿjāz*, the Qur^ʿān has its vocabulary subtleties, its perplexities of grammar, its cadences and rhymes, its metaphors and poetry. All these qualities not only tax the ingenuity of the translator but make it almost impossible to avoid interpretation. No translation can do justice to the original.

Moreover, with regard to the Qur^ʿān oral tradition has served as the final arbitrator. It was delivered orally to Muḥammad and he spread the message by sending out reciters. The orality of the revelation lies also in the name al-Qur^ʿān given to it, which conveys the sense of recitation. *Qur^ʿān* in the text is used as a

¹⁰⁰ Fazlur Rahman, "Translating the Qur^ʿān," p. 26.

¹⁰¹ H. A. R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1963), p. 36; Kenneth Cragg and R. Marston Speight, *The House of Islam*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA, 1988), pp. 30-32.

synonym for *qirāʿa* ("recitation, reading"). The pervasive sound of melodic recitation (*tajwīd*, *tartīl*) is basic to a Muslim's sense of his culture and religion even before he can articulate that sense. It is this mysterious power and charm of its inimitable music, the very sounds of which create a captivating effect in the heart of its listener and move him to tears and ecstasy.¹⁰² No doubt this unique quality is lost in translation.

¹⁰² See Kenneth Cragg and M. Speight, *Islam from Within: Anthology of a Religion* (Belmont, CA, 1980), pp. 11–17; Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'ān* (Austin, Texas, 1985).