

# News Journal

Muslim Community of North America  
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## Acknowledgments:

This issue consists of one article contributed by Mr. Sabir Abdur Rahman who is an Islamic Scholar and a specialist in Interfaith Dialogue.

**Disclaimer:** Views expressed in the articles are those of their authors and do not necessarily represent the Muslim Planet Project.

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## Announcements

1. Independence days in October Mubarak to Nigeria, Fiji, Iran, and Turkey.
  2. Muslim Planet has started a series on [Spirituality](#).
  3. “Migration from East to West Punjab: A Personal Recollection” was presented to a group of Jewish and Muslim artists in MD. If interested, please contact us for a copy.
  4. You can send us announcements of countrywide interest for inclusion in this News Journal.
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# Translation of the Holy Quran

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By

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## **Abstract:**

*The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary was published in 1934. This work by Abdullah Yusuf Ali has since become widely accepted around the world as a most scholarly work on the topic in recent history. It is by far the best known, most studied, and most respected English translation of the Qur'an. After half a century of this superlative work, the Saudis Government decided around 1980 to create a 'better' English translation of the Qur'an. They ended up using the work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. However, they made some modifications to the work of the original*

*writer. The modified version of the translation and Tafsir, notwithstanding the changes, was again attributed to the name of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. This made the transparency of the process less visible with respect to what was actually the original work by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and what were the changes made by the Saudi Government. Attribution of the revised edition to Abdullah Yusuf Ali helped to carry over the original prestige and reverence of the work in some ambiguous way, and no clarifications were offered regarding the significance and impact of the changes that had transpired. As a result, most people pick up a copy of the translation believing that they are studying the original work, while remaining unmindful of the changes that the Saudi Government had implemented. Qur'an being the most fundamental text for Muslims, this non-transparency has thus caused some confusion.*

*The research reported in this article therefore reviews how the effort by the Saudi Government came about. This analytical evaluation of the Saudi modifications of the translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali seeks to clarify an understanding of the goals of the gigantic effort by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, to which he dedicated 40 years of his life, versus the goals of the Saudi Government in making modifications to it.*

## **Introduction**

Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) is a renowned Muslim scholar from India. He worked diligently and devotedly on the translation and Tafsir of the Holy Qur'an in English. It was published under the title *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* by Taj Company in Lahore in 1934. It has since become widely accepted around the world as a most scholarly work on the topic in recent history. It is by far the best known, most studied, and most respected English translation of the Qur'an. After half a century of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's superlative work, the Saudi Government decided around 1980 to create a 'better' English translation of the Qur'an. They therefore ended up using the work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. However, they made some modifications to the work of the original writer. The modified version of the translation and Tafsir, notwithstanding the changes, was again attributed to the name of Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

This made the transparency of the process less visible with respect to what was actually the original work and what were the changes. Attribution of the revised edition to Abdullah Yusuf Ali carried over the original prestige and reverence of the work in some ambiguous way, and no clarifications were offered regarding the significance and impact of the changes that had transpired. As a result, most people pick up a copy of the translation believing that they are studying the original work, and they remain unmindful of the changes that the Saudi Government had implemented.

Qur'an being the most fundamental text for Muslims, this non-transparency has thus caused some confusion.

The research reported in this article therefore reviews how the effort by the Saudi Government came about. This analytical evaluation of the Saudi modifications of the translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali seeks to clarify an understanding of the goals of the gigantic effort by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, to which he dedicated 40 years of his life, versus the goals of the Saudi Government in making modifications to it. Therefore we also analyzed the stated goals of the Saudi effort with a view to assess how impactful was that effort in accomplishing those goals.

The Saudi Authorities, desirous of a perfect English translation of the Qur'an, selected the translation and commentary of Abdullah Yusuf Ali and revised it to 'correct' what they considered to be 'errors'. The revised edition was first published under the Saudi Authority without credit to the original translator. However, it is now being published all over the world under the name of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, and they have restored some or all of the introductory and explanatory notes of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, which the Saudi edition had removed. The contents are nevertheless the Saudi revised version, versus the original work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. In addition, Abdullah Yusuf Ali had included fourteen (14) Appendices to discuss and elaborate various subjects. Saudi Editors deleted three of them, namely appendices 6, 8 and 12. All current editions are also missing those three Appendices. The waters have thus become muddier, instead of increasing the transparency of the work.

For record we assert the titles of these appendices which are no longer available in the revised edition.

Appendix VI: Allegorical Interpretation of the Story of Joseph  
Appendix VIII: Mystic Interpretation of the Verse of Light  
Appendix XII: The Muslim Heaven

## Historical Background

During the first couple of hundred years of Islam, there were no translations of Qur'an into any other language except the translation of the first chapter into Persian made by Salman Farsi. Perhaps there was no need because Arabic was widely spoken, being the lingua Franca of the time. Some translations were finally made into Sindhi and Hindi during the latter part of the ninth century, as Muslim population began to grow in some parts of India. A Greek translation is believed to have been made in the ninth century; it is not available now though it is known to have been used by Nicetas Byzantius, a scholar from Constantinople, in his 'Refutatio' written between 855 and 870.

Qur'an has now been translated into just about every language of the world, but many among the Muslims are not at ease with the idea of translation; because only the original Arabic text is acknowledged as Qur'an. Most Muslims are opposed to referring to any translation as the Qur'an. Many insist on using some other descriptive term such as 'the meaning of the Qur'an' or something similar. That is what Pickthal, an Englishman, called his translation, 'The Meanings of the Glorious Qur'an'. As a historical note, the Catholic Church had taken a similar stance when it did not permit any translation of the Bible from Greek or Latin into a local language such as German or English.

However, the expanding Muslim population way beyond the Arabic speaking people has made it necessary to translate the Holy Qur'an, so as to make it accessible to those who do not know Arabic. By now the Muslims outside the Arabic speaking population account for 85% of all Muslims. Indeed, they need to know the teachings of their Holy Book. Therefore, translations are made into all languages because Muslims are living all over the world and are speaking just about every language.

In his Note on 'Translation of the Qur'an'<sup>1</sup>, Abdullah Yusuf Ali has noted the Urdu translations by Shah 'Abdul Qadir of Delhi (d 1826), Shah Rafi'-ud-din of Delhi, Shah Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, and Maulvi Nazir Ahmad (d. 1912).

He has provided in more detail the European attempts to translate the Qur'an in various European languages. A Latin translation was made about 1143 but not published at that time because it was for the internal use of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Clugny. It was entitled *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete* ("The law of Mahomet the false prophet"). It was finally published in 1543 with a preface by Martin Luther and was later translated into Italian, German, and Dutch. Salomon Schweigger made a German translation which was published at Nuremburg in 1616. A French translation by Andre Du Ryer was published at Paris in 1647. It was re-translated into other languages, most notably into English by Alexander Ross in 1649. Savary's French translation appeared in 1783, and Kasimirski's French translation first appeared in 1840. The Germans followed up Schweigger with Boysen's translation in 1773, Wahl's in 1828, and Ullmann's in 1840. Ludovico (or Luigi or Lewis) Maracci (1612-1700) was Confessor to Pope Innocent XI and a teacher of Arabic. His translation of the Qur'an was published in 1698. It included the Arabic text along with translation into Latin and annotations. He added an essay titled "Refutation of the Qur'an", in which Marracci attempted to disprove Islam from the Catholic point of view.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali noted that Marracci's work contained "quotations from various Arabic commentaries, carefully selected and garbled, so as to give the worst possible impression of Islam to Europe. Maracci was a learned

man, and there is no pretense about the object he had in view, viz., to discredit Islam by an elaborate show of quotations from Muslim authorities themselves. Maracci was himself a Confessor to Pope Innocent XI; his work is dedicated to the holy Roman Emperor Leopold I; and he introduces it by an introductory volume containing what he calls a “Refutation of the Qur’an.”<sup>2</sup> Marracci’s translation also became a source of many other European renderings of the Qur’an, including the French rendering by Savary and one in German by Nerreter. It was also the source of the English version prepared by George Sale in 1734.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali did not think that the Urdu translations were very good; and he had the following to say about the European renderings of the Qur’an. “The first English translation by A. Ross was but a translation of the first French translation of Du Ryer of 1647, and was published a few years after Du Ryer’s. George Sale’s translation (1734) was based on Maracci’s Latin version, and even his notes and his Preliminary Discourse are based mainly on Maracci. Considering that Maracci’s object was to discredit Islam in the eyes of Europe, it is remarkable that Sale’s translation should be looked upon as a standard translation in the English-speaking world, and should pass through edition after edition, being even included in the series called the Chandos Classics and receiving the benediction of Sir E. Denison Ross. The Rev. J. M. Rodwell arranged the Suras in a rough chronological order. His translation was first published in 1861. Though he tries to render the idiom fairly, his notes show the mind of a Christian clergyman, who was more concerned to “show up” the Book than to appreciate or expound its beauties.

George Sale’s translation and commentary was re-printed in 1764 and a copy was acquired by Thomas Jefferson. That copy is in the Library of Congress now and was used by Congressman Keith Ellison to take his oath of office when he was elected to the Congress. Prof. E. H. Palmer’s translation (first published in 1876) suffers from the idea that the Qur’an ought to be translated into colloquial language. He failed to realize the beauty and grandeur of style in the original Arabic. To him that style was “rude and rugged”: we may more justifiably call his translation careless and slipshod.”<sup>3</sup> European attempts at the translations of the Qur’an were made with the specific purpose to discredit it by trying to show it to be ‘false’, and a priori they were forcefully opposed to the message of the Qur’an.

The “amount of mischief done by these versions of non-Muslim and anti-Muslim writers has led Muslim writers to venture into the field of English translation.”<sup>4</sup> English translation of Dr. Muhammad ‘Abdul Hakim Khan, of Patiala, was published in 1905; that of Mirza Hairat of Delhi published in Delhi in 1919; Nawwab ‘Imadul-Mulk Saiyid Husain Bilgrami of Hyderabad, Deccan, translated a portion, but did not live to complete his work; Ahmadiya Sect’s Qadiyan Anjuman published a version of the first

Sipara in 1915; and its Lahore Anjuman published Maulvi Muhammad ‘Ali’s translation in 1917.

Mr. Marmaduke Pickthall’s translation was published in 1930. Abdullah Yusuf Ali lamented that Mr. Pickthall “has added very few notes to elucidate the Text. His rendering is “almost literal”: it can hardly be expected that it can give an adequate idea of a Book which (in his own words) can be described as ‘that inimitable symphony the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy.’

Perhaps the attempt to catch something of that symphony in another language is impossible. Greatly daring, I have made that attempt. We do not blame an artist who tries to catch in his picture something of the glorious light of a spring landscape.”<sup>5</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali had an important goal to remedy the damage done by the European translators; and present Quran to the European audience with the depth of its meanings along with the supremacy of its style and the impactfulness of its musicality. He used his words and elaborative style, among other things, to achieve this goal. The Saudi Government did not realize the goals that Abdullah Yusuf Ali had set out to achieve, and they defeated his goals and nullified his achievement when they made the changes to his epic work. For example, Saudis had been attached to many Arabic words which they use routinely in writing or speech in any language, regardless of the reader’s or listener’s faith or ability or inability to understand these words.

## **Purpose of Abdullah Yusuf Ali Translation**

Abdullah Yusuf Ali approached the task of translating the Qur’an with a mission and dedicated his life to it. That journey took him 40 years and finally culminated in 1934 with the publication of his wonderfully accurate translation and highly comprehensive commentary. He observes that “I felt that with such life-experience as has fallen to my lot; my service to the Qur’an should be to present it in fitting garb in English. That ambition I have cherished in my mind for more than forty years.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on, “I have collected books and materials for it. I have visited places, undertaken journeys, taken notes, sought the society of men, and tried to explore their thoughts and hearts, in order to equip myself for the task. Sometimes I have considered it too stupendous for me, – the double task of understanding the original, and reproducing its nobility, its beauty, its poetry, its grandeur, and its sweet practical reasonable application to everyday experience. Then I have blamed myself for lack of courage, – the spiritual courage of men who dared all in the Cause which was so dear to them.”<sup>7</sup>

He familiarized with the subject matter on a personal level. For that purpose, he travelled extensively to all the places that Qur’an may be understood to mention or even allude to. He studied archeological records

and visited archeological sites to learn about the people, ancient or contemporary, mentioned in the Qur'an. He studied the scriptures and other writings of the world religions and made a scholarly comparison with the contents of the Qur'an. He studied literatures in multiple languages and drew on what he read heavily in his Commentary on the Qur'an. He intended for his work "to give to the English reader, scholar as well as general reader, a fairly complete but concise view of what I understand to be the meaning of the Text"<sup>8</sup>.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali admires the high quality of voluminous work generated in earlier times from the study of the Qur'an on which "so much talent, so much labor, [and] so much time and money have been expended"; and he laments that "the quality of the later literature on the subject leaves much to be desired". The causes of the decline in this quality are well known. "With the retrogression of the Islamic nations in original work in science, art, and philosophy, and the concomitant limitation in their outlook and experience in various phases of intellectual and spiritual life, has come a certain limitation in the free spirit of research and enquiry. The new Renaissance of Islam which is just beginning, will, it is hoped, sweep away cobwebs and let in the full light of reason and understanding."<sup>9</sup> His work was a big step in that direction; to expand the outlook and shine the light of reason and understanding. He appeared to express a desire to avoid "theological controversies or enter into polemical arguments" and to concentrate on "more important matters on which present-day readers desire information. In this respect our Commentators have not always been discreet."<sup>10</sup>

*Tafsir* refers to the exegesis of the Qur'an. In the course of an extensive effort in the science of *Tafsir* by scholars, other scientific disciplines were developed, such as *Kalam*, formal logic, *Ilm-ul-'Aqāid*, the philosophical exposition of the grounds of our belief, and *Taawil*, esoteric exposition of the hidden or inner meanings. However, "many of the non-Sufi writers on *Taawil* indulged in an amount of license in interpretation which has rightly called forth a protest on the part of the more sober 'Ulama."<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali agreed with that protest.

Regarding the ancient and the modern Abdullah Yusuf Ali observes, "It is not only our right but our duty to seek honestly our own solutions, and while we respect authority, we must not neglect or despise the gifts which God has accumulated for us through the ages."<sup>12</sup> World has changed and the humanity has made tremendous strides in learning and understanding their environment. We are better equipped to know our needs and our problems. Our enhanced knowledge should enable us to gain a better understanding of the Quranic teachings and to employ God's guidance in solving our problems and advancing our station on this earth. "In the application of spiritual truths to our own times and our own lives, we must use every kind of knowledge, science, and experience which we possess, but we must not obtrude irrelevant matter into our discussions."<sup>13</sup>



With strong commitment to ‘use such language as is current among the people to whom we speak’ Abdullah Yusuf Ali proceeded to prepare an English translation of the Qur’an in which he used words only of English. Departing from the earlier Muslim translators, he did not retain a single Arabic word in his English translation. Where the previous two had retained Allah as the name of God, Abdullah Yusuf Ali used the English word God throughout.

He strongly advocated, in his commentaries on the Qur’an, to avoid theological controversies and polemical arguments and to concentrate on ‘more important matters on which present-day readers desire information’. He expressed hope that the new Renaissance of Islam would ‘sweep away cobwebs and let in the full light of reason and understanding’. He favored ‘progressive interpretation’ where the interpreter would refrain from devising ‘new verbal meanings’ and from mixing up ‘his own theories and conclusions, however reasonable, with the interpretation of the Text itself’. But it must be a testimony to the prevailing environment of the time and the literalistic tendencies of his contemporary Muslims that this bold and courageous scholar par-excellence felt the need to hedge. “It will be found that every verse revealed for a particular occasion has also a general meaning. The particular occasion and the particular people concerned have passed away, but the general meaning and its application remain true for all time. What we are concerned about now, in the fourteenth century of Hijra, is: what guidance can we draw for ourselves from the message of God?”<sup>14</sup>

## **Saudi Revision: Purpose and Methodology**

Saudi Government desired to make the message of the Qur’an available to those who lacked the knowledge of Arabic, but they had some concerns. “Given the depth as well as the sublimity of the Qur’anic text, a faithful translation of it into another language is virtually impossible. The various translations that exist today, however accurate they may be, can never hope to imitate the diction or the style of the Book of Allah. But as translation is one of the few ways to export the message of the Qur’an to allow those lacking in knowledge of Arabic to share this priceless gift, it becomes a duty for those in a position to fulfil this task”<sup>15</sup>. Saudi Editors were aware of the various existing English translations of the Qur’an but they did not consider any of them adequate or free of prejudice. “A number of individuals have in the past ventured to translate the Qur’an, but their works have generally been private attempts, greatly influenced by their own prejudices”<sup>16</sup>. They felt the need for a translation that would be free from prejudices of the translators and would receive an official sanction from so high an authority as the Saudi King. “In order to produce a reliable translation free from personal bias, a Royal decree (No. 19888, dated 16/8/1400 AH) was issued by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz, at the time the deputy prime minister, authorizing the General Presidency of

the Department of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and Guidance to undertake the responsibility of revising and correcting a particular translation which would be selected for this purpose and made publicly available later”<sup>17</sup>. For this purpose, committees of well-qualified scholars were appointed. “The first committee was given the task of examining the existing translations and to choosing the most suitable among them. The committee discovered that there was no translation free from defects and so there were two options open for consideration: the first was to select the best translation available and to then adopt it as a base for further work as well as a source of reference, with the objective of revising its contents and correcting any faults in view of the objections raised against it; the second was to prepare a fresh and independent translation, starting from scratch”<sup>18</sup>. After some study it became obvious to the committee that “the second option demanded much time and effort, neither of which was available at the time”<sup>19</sup>. The committee decided to follow the first option, as a practical matter. “The translation by the late Ustadh ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI was consequently chosen for its distinguishing characteristics, such as a highly elegant style, a choice of the words close to the meaning of the original text, accompanied by scholarly notes and commentaries.”<sup>20</sup>

As the committee began to ‘revise’ and ‘correct’ *The Holy Qur’an, Text, Translation and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, it stated that it “was fully aware of all the criticism that had been directed against this translation and which had been carefully brought to the notice of the presidency by a number of academic bodies and other involved parties”<sup>21</sup>. It was not explained exactly what that criticism was. The completed work was “referred to a number of individuals and organizations who then augmented any deficiencies in the work of the committee”<sup>22</sup>. After the completed work was examined and re-examined by a number of bodies and individuals on multiple levels, the committee “arrived at a text as authentic and defect-free as was humanly possible”<sup>23</sup>.

## High Level Changes Made by Saudi Editors

It was realized that there were “some Arabic words which could not be translated correctly”<sup>24</sup>. They were retained in transliteration and explained in the notes. A list of all such words was also appended. That list begins with Allah and contains 15 more words.

“Finally, a fourth committee was formed to look into the findings of the second and third committees and to implement the recommendations made by them. Furthermore, this committee had to finalize the text by adopting the most accurate expression where needed, besides checking the notes vigilantly so as to clear any misconceptions regarding the articles of faith, varying juristic opinions and thoughts not in conformity with the sound Islamic point of view”<sup>25</sup>. Thus, it would appear that the effort which was

claimed to achieve a product ‘free from personal bias’ was really aimed at promoting the orthodoxy according to the Saudi concept of Islam.

Another Royal decree was issued on 16 July 1985. “According to the Royal decree (No. 12412 dated 27/10/1405 AH), this translation is printed at King Fahd Holy Qur’an Printing Complex in Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah and also with coordination of the General Presidency of the Department of Islamic Researches, Ifta Call and Guidance.”<sup>26</sup> It was directed to be distributed to all Muslims and those seeking spiritual light among English-speaking people. The Saudi Edition acknowledged in the Preface, as quoted above, that it was the translation and commentary of Abdullah Yusuf Ali from which this edition was produced, but his name was not mentioned anywhere else. The edition was published as THE HOLY QUR’AN, English translation of the meaning and Commentary, Revised & Edited by THE PRESIDENCY OF ISLAMIC RESEARCHES, IFTA CALL AND GUIDANCE.

The Saudi edition remained the only one available for some time but then many publishers began to publish it also. They slowly began to place the name of Abdullah Yusuf Ali on the cover to credit him for the translation and commentary and included some or all of his original introductory notes and comments. But his original translation and commentary have not been restored; every current edition printed anywhere in the world, under the name of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, contains the translation and commentary as revised by the Saudi Editors. There is report that someone somewhere in the USA has now begun to print the original.

## **Extent and Impact of Changes**

Saudi Editors wanted to “produce a reliable translation free from personal bias” because they had examined the existing translations by a ‘number of individuals’ and found them ‘greatly influenced by their own prejudices’. They desired ‘a translation that would be free from prejudices of the translators’ because among the currently available ones “there was no translation free from defects”. They did not elaborate as to what prejudices of the individual translators they were talking about or what defects they found in those translations. They selected the work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali to ‘revise’ and ‘correct’ about which the committee ‘was fully aware of all the criticism that had been directed against this translation’. Here again they failed to specify the criticism. After about five years of effort, the Saudi Editors completed their work and declared it to be ‘as authentic and defect-free as was humanly possible’.

Was it ‘as defect-free as humanly possible’? What defects did the Saudi Editors find and rectified in the work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali which they ‘revised’ and ‘corrected’? What errors were in that work which required to

be 'corrected'? Was the final publication by the Saudi Editors really free from personal bias?

These questions are hard to answer, and, in a way, even these questions might be seen as biased. Saudi Editors saw personal bias and defects in the existing translations, even that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, which they selected for their revision because they found it to be the least biased and the least defective, but biased and defective nevertheless. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, following his declared goal of using only English words in his translation, had used the English word God for the name of the Supreme Being. There is a practical reason for it. When one addresses an audience in the language of the audience, one must stay within that language to communicate the intended information. If one includes words of another language which are not familiar to the current audience, one is creating a situation in which the audience would assume that the speaker or writer is talking about something entirely different. When a Muslim addressing an audience of another faith, such as Christianity or Judaism, in another language, such as English, keeps referring as Allah to what the audience knows as God, he is creating an opportunity for the audience to assume that Muslims do not believe in God, but believe in some other Divine Entity known as Allah. In America one often hears people saying that Muslims do not believe in God; they believe in Allah, who is their own God. Abdullah Yusuf Ali was aiming to overcome that confusion by strictly following the universal message of the Qur'an which repeatedly emphasizes that its message is for all humanity and for all the worlds. By overcoming the linguistics variations, he was trying to bring understanding and harmony to the world, which is the core message of the Qur'an. The Saudi Editors, who complained about the 'personal bias' of other translators did exactly what they declared they wanted to eliminate; they introduced their own bias by insisting to use the Arabic word Allah as the name of the Supreme Being rather than the English word God in their English translation. By doing that, they confused their English audience and created a barrier between Islam and the faith of their audience. By that implication they created an impression in the minds of the English readers of the Qur'an who belonged to another faith that Allah is different from God and is exclusively the Deity of the Muslims. At the same time, they impressed upon the Muslims that there is something wrong in referring to the Supreme Being by any word other Allah, regardless of what language one might be speaking. They found this word in 3,222 places in the Qur'an, in all of which Abdullah Yusuf Ali had written the English word God. Saudi Editors replaced God with Allah in all of those places. In addition, they replaced God with Allah in 7,143 places in the commentary and elsewhere; they 'corrected' them all. That was the biggest 'error' the Saudi Editors considered to be made by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and 'corrected' it all 10,365 times.

The Saudi Editors also found the word ‘Apostle’ as translation for *Rasul* unacceptable. They changed it to either Messenger or Prophet. It was found 248 times in the translation and 540 times in commentary and elsewhere. They ‘corrected’ all 788 by changing to either Messenger or Prophet.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali had made a promise to his readers that in his translation the ‘English shall be, not a mere substitution of one word for another, but the best expression I can give to the fullest meaning which I can understand from the Arabic Text’. With his almost perfect knowledge of both English and Arabic, and 40 years of effort, he did come up with words that in his opinion were the ‘best expression’ of what he was trying to translate. Apostle comes from Greek *apostolos* or *apostellein*; *apo-* + *stellein* to send. Apostle can be translated as messenger but it is a whole lot more comprehensive in meanings than messenger. Abdullah Yusuf Ali selected it to translate the Arabic word *Rasul* which means a messenger in common usage but Qur’an uses it in two ways; to designate God’s Messengers such as Moses and Muhammad, and also in its common meaning. Wherever it was used for God’s Messengers, he translated as Apostle, and in common usage he translated it as messenger. But the Saudi Editors did not like this word perhaps because of its association with the 12 Apostles of Jesus. They found this word 248 times in the Translation and 540 times in the Commentary and elsewhere. They ‘corrected’ it in all 788 places by changing Apostle to either Messenger or Prophet. This was the second biggest ‘error’ they considered Abdullah Yusuf Ali to have made. But in fact they were expressing their own prejudice, and once again they violated their own goal to eliminate bias.

Beyond changing God to Allah and changing Apostle to either Messenger or Prophet, Saudi Editors did not change much. Qur’an is divided into 114 chapters of various lengths. Chapters 103, 108, and 110 contain 3 verses each and are the smallest in number of verses. Chapter 2 is the longest with 286 verses. Total number of verses in Qur’an is 6,259. Thus, there are 114 chapters in the Qur’an containing 6,259 verses. Saudi Editors made only fifteen changes in 15 verses contained in 3 chapters. None of these changes can be designated as corrections because they all involve replacement of words with other words of similar meaning selected to convey a particular effect. Saudi Editors had stated about personal prejudices and defects; and they had stated that they were ‘fully aware of all the criticism that had been directed’ against the translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. However they actually found rather very little to change in the work of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. What they changed does not amount to ‘corrections’; rather it is their attempt to promote the orthodoxy according to the Saudi doctrine.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali had actually attempted to keep his translation free of any attempt to promote a particular doctrine and had succeeded in keeping his work free of biases. Saudi Editors undermined that achievement in order to promote their official doctrine and its bias.

## Enumeration of the Changes

The most obvious changes were the global find-and-replace. Specifically the Saudi Editors globally replaced the words God and Apostle; thereby making them less comprehensible to the European audience for which Abdullah Yusuf Ali had directed this work, as we have explained in the Historical Background.

The other changes are to the Notes. These are few in number but represent the Saudi bias. For example, Abdullah Yusuf Ali discussed Imam Hasan and Imam Hussain which discussion was removed by the Saudis.

In addition there are fifteen changes to as many Ayahs in three chapters, namely chapters 2, 3 and 14. Abdullah Yusuf Ali uses words such as mystic, metaphor, allegory and their derivatives and refers to Sufi mysticism occasionally. He also likes to refer to people chosen and/or guided by God as ‘man of God’ or ‘men of God’. Saudi Editors displayed a disliking for such expressions, including a mention of Sufis. They showed a bias for literalism and their narrow doctrine. Abdullah Yusuf Ali had expressly wanted to avoid doctrinal bias or narrowness of views. He sought wider meanings in the Text, and used words for a wider audience.

The following nine ‘corrections’ made by the Saudi Editors are from Chapter 2. Please note that item #1 below represents two such ‘corrections’, namely to 2:31 and 2:33.

1. In 2:31 and 2:33, as part of the story of the creation and the education of Adam, God taught Adam Al-Asma’a Kullaha. Then God told Adam to tell the angels Asma’a-e-him. Asma’a is plural of the word Ism which means name. The first phrase literally translates ‘the names of all things’; the second phrase translates as ‘their names’. God had told Adam to display his knowledge of things he had been taught. So Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated it as ‘the nature of all things’ and ‘their nature’ respectively. Saudi Editors considered it to be an ‘error’ and ‘corrected’ it to ‘the names of all things’ and ‘their names’.
2. In 2:85 the word is *Udwan*. It could mean enmity, rebellion, disobedience or some other hostility. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated it as ‘rancor’. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it to ‘transgression’.
3. In 2:114 the phrase ‘in places for the worship of God’ is followed by a phrase in which God is not explicitly mentioned but is implied. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated *Asmuhu* as ‘God’s name’, perhaps for clarity and emphasis, but the Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it to the literal translation ‘His name’.
4. In 2:115, the phrase is *Waj-hullah*, literally meaning ‘face of God’. The verse declares that God is everywhere, east or west or wherever one turns. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated it as the ‘Presence of God’.

- in every place and space. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it to ‘Allah’s countenance’. They could have capitalized that word – countenance – as Presence was capitalized in the original, but they did not.
5. In 2:132, the context is the legacy of Abraham for his sons and grandsons and the word being translated is *Muslimun*. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates it as Abraham telling his children to remain in ‘the Faith of Islam’. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it so that Abraham was telling his children to remain ‘in the state of submission’ to God.
  6. In 2:151, the phrase being translated is *yu-zakkikum*. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated it as ‘sanctifying you’. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it to ‘purifying you’.
  7. In 2:165 the word ‘*a’zab*’ occurs twice. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated as ‘Penalty’ both times. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it to ‘Punishment’ in both places.
  8. In 2:221 the subject is marriage and the commandment is against marriage between believers and non-believers. Abdullah Yusuf Ali translated the word *al-mushrikat* as ‘unbelieving women’ and parenthetically added (idolaters), perhaps for clarification because the Arabic is really the feminine version of polytheists. Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it by removing the parenthetical addition, but retained the translation as ‘unbelieving women’ perhaps in order to widen the scope of the commandment.

The following five ‘corrections’ made by the Saudi Editors are from Chapter 3. Again please note that item #1 below represents two such ‘corrections’, namely to 3:3 and 3:4.

9. The numbering system of the verses in the Qur’an is almost universal but not 100%. There are a few variations; their number is so small that it is not usually noticed or discussed. Abdullah Yusuf Ali did make an appeal for a universally accepted single system of numbering. The first difficulty he faced was when he reached the beginning of the third chapter. Verses 3 and 4 break differently in various schools, and he had to pick one. He made his choice and explained it in Note 344. Saudi Editors changed the arrangement by going to a different break. They retained first part of the Note 344 and deleted the second part. But the part of the Note that the Saudi Editors retained says that the break would be where Abdullah Yusuf Ali made it. Saudi Edition has the break in a different point. Therefore, in the Saudi Edition, the arrangement of verses 3 and 4 does not agree with the Note. This is not a correction; it would rather add confusion.
10. Verse 3:7 confirms the impression that Saudi Editors did not like certain words. This verse contains a profound statement about the contents of the Qur’an. In it God tells that Qur’an contains clear statements which are the foundation of the Book, but it also contains

statements whose meanings are known only to God and may become understandable to humans in the future when knowledge attains an advanced level. The words of interest here are *mutashabihaat*, *tashabaha*, and *tawilihi*, which Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates as allegories and hidden meanings. It occurs three times in the same verse and Saudi Editors ‘corrected’ it as follows;

Allegorical changed to ‘not of well-established meaning’ (*mutashabihaat*)

Allegorical changed to ‘not of well-established meaning’ (*tashabaha*)

Hidden meanings changed to ‘true meaning’ (*tawilihi*)

11. In 3:173, the reference is perhaps to the battle of Uhud in which the Muslims suffered a setback. The focus of this verse appears to be on the dedicated Muslims who remained steadfast in the face of the danger. When they were warned about a great army that was gathering against them in order to frighten them, they became more determined and more steadfast instead. Here the same phrase *fakhshauhum* is rendered to the same impact with a slightly different approach. Literally it might be rendered as ‘then fear them’. Abdullah Yusuf Ali went for the impact of the phrase by taking it out of the quotation marks and translating its effect as ‘and frightened them’ meaning those who were warning about the great army tried to frighten them. Saudi Editors took the literal approach and kept it in the quotation marks by continuing the warning in rendering ‘so fear them’. Both say the same thing.
12. In 3:184, *zubur* is a word on the meaning of which Abdullah Yusuf Ali has stated that the Commentators are not in agreement. The common belief is that it refers to the Book of Psalms. He translated it as ‘books of dark prophesies’ and explained his reasoning in Note 490. Saudi Editors took the safe route and translated it simply as ‘the Scripture’. Both achieve the desired goal.
  - There is an additional change made in the Translation by the Saudi Editors. That is in chapter 14 verse 45. The last sentence was translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali as: ‘We put forth (many) Parables in your behoof’. Saudi Editors changed ‘behoof’ to ‘behalf’; behalf is more common and easy to understand by most readers, though the English speaking audience would be as comfortable with the word behoof which conveys a more succinct meaning, given the command of Abdullah Yusuf Ali on Arabic and English.

## CONCLUSION

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was trying to make the message of Qur’an accessible to the English speaking people of any and all faiths, using their own literary



expressions, metaphors, and similes. Abdullah Yusuf Ali had stated: “In translating the Text I have aired no views of my own, but followed the received Commentators. Where they differ among themselves, I have had to choose what appeared to me to be the most reasonable opinion from all points of view. Where it is a question merely of words, I have not considered the question important enough to discuss in the Notes, but where it is a question of substance, I hope adequate explanations will be found in the Notes. Where I have departed from the literal translation in order to express the spirit of the original better in English, I have explained the literal meaning in the Notes.”

Saudis claimed that they were desirous of an English translation of the Qur’an which would be “free from personal bias”. However, they proceeded to transform the translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali which was free from biases and ended up introduced their own bias narrowness and orthodoxy. Saudi Editors have not followed the cautions in their work that Abdullah Yusuf Ali had adhered to.

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- 17 Ibid, page vi.
- 18 Ibid, page vi.
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- 22 Ibid, page vii.
- 23 Ibid, page vii.
- 24 Ibid, page vii.
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