

T a h r i f

Investigating Distortions in Islamic Texts

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Qur'an commentary, the deletion of the merits of Imams Hasan and Husayn [a], and other changes

Synopsis:

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was a renowned Sunni translator and commentator of the Qur'an. His translation and commentary has been very popular in the Islamic and Western world, wherever English is read and understood.

A comparison of the explanatory notes between the old versions and the newer 'revised' versions of his Commentary reveals many discrepancies. These 'revisions' include the deletion of merits of Imams Hasan and Husayn [a], who were the grandchildren of the Prophet Muhammad [s], members of his Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*), and the second and third Shi'a Imams. In addition, certain other interesting changes have taken place!



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Source of the Allegation

[Miscellaneous Sources]

Evidence, Analysis and Conclusion

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was a renowned English translator and commentator of the Qur'an. He lived many years of his life in England where he died in 1952. His translation and commentary has been published many times and is used widely in the English speaking world as well as in places where English is read and understood.

A couple of 'revised' editions have appeared within the last fifteen years or so. An investigation into the changes made in these new editions reveals a pattern which may be educational to the readers of this case study.

Three editions of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's work were used to research and document this case study. The details of these are:

Original

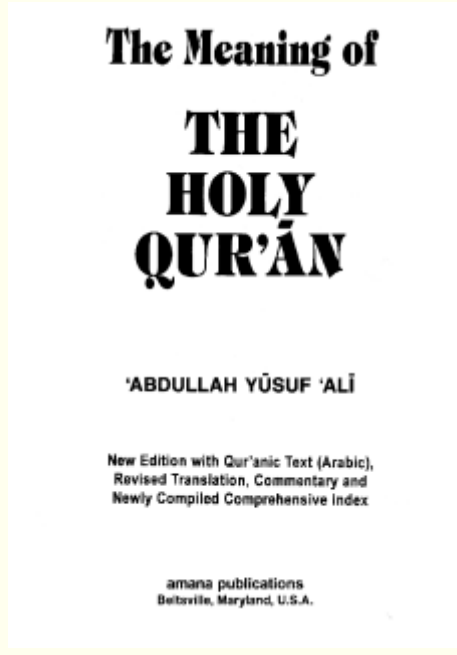
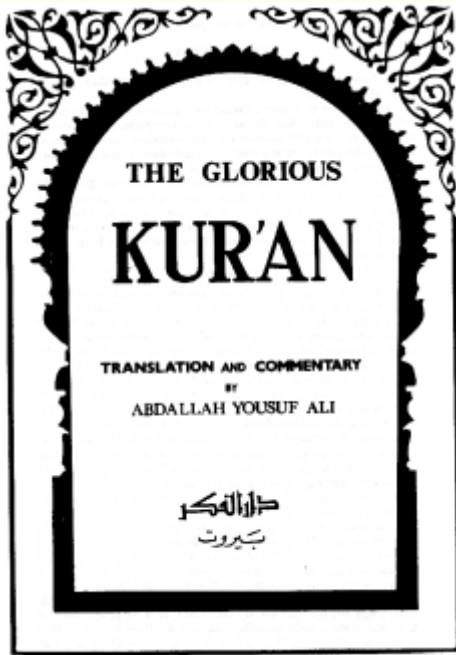
The Glorious Kur'an - Translation and Commentary
(Dar al-Fikr, Beirut)
(n.d.)

Amana

The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an
New Edition with Revised
Translation, Commentary and Newly
Compiled Comprehensive Index
Amana Publications
First edition, 1408 AH/1989 AC by
Amana Corporation

IFTA

The Holy Qur'an - English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary
Revised and Edited by The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance
King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex



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Both the revised editions make it clear in their introductory pages that the original translation and commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali has been modified. For example the Amana edition, in its 'Preface to the New Edition' (page ix), states:

The explanatory footnotes and the appendices, however, were subject to more frequent, and occasionally more substantial, changes than those in the translation and the commentaries. The reason being there was a greater need of general updating of information and clarification of certain explanations which were subject to misinterpretation. There were also a few instances in which certain portions of the material were deleted, either due to its outdatedness or due to its proneness to misinterpretation.

This edition also puts an "(R)" next to the passage it modifies in most, but not all, cases.

The IFTA edition, after acknowledging on page vi that it was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's work that was chosen for revision, states on page vii:

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 finalise 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.

This edition does not attempt to show where it has changed the commentary from that of the original Abdullah Yusuf Ali or even that of the already revised Amana edition, which it changes further in some places!

The changes selected for this case study are only some of the large number of both minor and major alterations present in the revised editions. Throughout this case study, a red line is used to indicate deleted or changed text.

Martyrdom of Imams Hasan and Husayn [a]

The two Imams were members of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the Family of the Prophet, and are respected by both the Ahl al-

Sunnah and the Shi'a with the latter believing in their *imamah* (leadership) after Imam 'Ali [a]. Imam Hasan [a] was poisoned on the instigation of Mu'awiyah, the Umayyad despot, in 50 AH and his son Yazid was responsible for the massacre of Imam Husayn [a] and his family and friends in Karbala in the year 61 AH. The fact that they were martyred is undisputed by those who have studied history.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali gives the example of their martyrdom in the commentary to two different verses of the Qur'an. Both the revised editions have deleted this reference!

Chapter 3, Verse 140

If a wound hath touched you, be sure a similar wound hath touched the others. Such days (of varying fortunes) We give to men and men by turns: that Allah may know those that believe, and that He may take to Himself from your ranks Martyr-witnesses (to Truth). And Allah loveth not those that do wrong.

Commentary footnote 457

Original

457. These general considerations apply in particular to the disaster at Uhud. (1) In a fight for truth, if you are hurt, be sure the adversary has suffered hurt also, the more so as he has no faith to sustain him. (2) Success or failure in this world comes to all at varying times: we must not grumble, as we do not see the whole of God's Plan. (3) Men's true mettle is known in adversity as gold is assayed in fire; Cf. also in 154, n. 467. (4) Martyrdom is in itself an honour and a privilege: how glorious is the fame of Hamza the Martyr, and in later times, of Hasan and Husain? (5) If there is any dross in us, it will be purified by resistance and struggle. (6) When evil is given rope a little, it works out its own destruction: the orgies of cruelty indulged in by the Pagans after what they supposed to be their victory at Uhud filled up their cup of iniquity; it lost them the support and adherence of the best in their own ranks, and hastened the destruction of Paganism from Arabia. Cf. iii. 127 and n. 448.

Amana

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In this instance, the Amana edition failed to indicate that a revision had taken place with an "(R)" at the end of the passage.

Chapter 4, Verse 69

All who obey Allah and the messenger are in the company of those on whom is the Grace of Allah,- of the prophets (who teach), the sincere (lovers of Truth), the witnesses (who testify), and the Righteous (who do good): Ah! what a beautiful fellowship!

Commentary footnote 586

Original

586. A passage of the deepest spiritual meaning. Even the humblest man who accepts Faith and does good becomes at once an accepted member of a great and beautiful spiritual Fellowship. It is a company which lives perpetually in the sunshine of God's Grace. (This passage partly illustrates Q. i. 5) It is a glorious hierarchy, of which four grades are specified: (1) The highest is that of the Prophets or Apostles, who get plenary inspiration from God, and who teach mankind by example and precept. That rank in Islam is held by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā. (2) The next are those whose badge is sincerity and truth; they love and support the truth with their person, their means, their influence, and all that is theirs. That rank was held by the special Companions of Muḥammad, among whom the type was that of Ḥaḍhrat Abū Bakr Ṣiddiq. (3) The next are the noble army of Witnesses, who testify to the truth. The testimony may be by martyrdom, as in the case of Imāms Hasan and Husain. Or it may be by the tongue of the true Preacher or the pen of the devoted scholar, or the life of the man devoted to service. (4) Lastly, there is the large company of Righteous people, the ordinary folk who do their ordinary business, but always in a righteous way. They are the rank and file of the beautiful Fellowship, in which each has his place and yet all feel that they derive glory from the common association.

Amana

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586. A passage of the deepest devotional meaning. Even the humblest man who accepts Faith and does good becomes an accepted member of a great and beautiful company in the Hereafter. It is a company which lives perpetually in the sunshine of God's Grace. (This passage partly illustrates Q. i. 5). It is a glorious hierarchy, of which four grades are specified: (1) The highest is that of the Prophets or Apostles, who get plenary inspiration from God, and who teach mankind by example and precept. That rank in Islam is held by Muḥammad Al-Muṣṭafa. (2) The next are those whose badge is sincerity and truth: they love and support the truth with their person, their means, their influence, and all that is theirs. That rank was held by the special Companions of Muḥammad, among whom the type was that of Ḥadh̄rat Abū Baker As-Siddiq. (3) The next are the noble army of Witnesses, who testify to the truth. The testimony may be by martyrdom, Or it may be by the tongue of the true Preacher or the pen of the devoted scholar, or the life of the man devoted to service, (4) Lastly, there is the large company of Righteous people, the ordinary folk who do their ordinary business, but always in a righteous Way.

Chapter 37, Verse 107

And We ransomed him with a momentous sacrifice.

Commentary footnote 4103

Original



4103. The adjective qualifying "sacrifice" here, 'aẓīm, (great, momentous) may be understood both in a literal and a figurative sense. In a literal sense it implies that a fine sheep or ram was substituted symbolically. The figurative sense is even more important. It was indeed a great and momentous occasion, when two men, with concerted will, "ranged themselves in the ranks" of those to whom self-sacrifice in the service of God was the supreme thing in life. This was a type of the service which Imām Husain performed, many ages later, in 60 A.H., as I have explained in a separate pamphlet. But note that the ransom, i.e., the commutation of sacrifice, was made not by the men, but by God. God wants our will and devotion, not necessarily our lives in a physical sense. He will find means, if we offer ourselves, to use us not for our destruction, but for our further advancement. In this sense, said Jesus, "he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. x. 39).

Amana



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Abdullah Yusuf Ali was clearly very touched, like any good Muslim of any school of thought would be, by the history and significance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn [a]. In the passage above he mentions a separate pamphlet by him that discussed this in detail. Although the revised editions have taken out references to it, the pamphlet does exist in many libraries and has been made available on the web. It is called:

- [Imam Husain and His Martyrdom](#)

It should be read by all those who wish to know what Abdullah Yusuf Ali wished the readers of his Qur'an translation and commentary to know about Imam Husayn, but which the publishers of the revised editions were not keen for them to discover!

In this instance, the revised Amana edition itself seems to have been edited further and the last sentence "In this sense..." is also deleted by the IFTA edition.

To find out more about Imams Hasan and Husayn [a], their martyrdom, and their rank and importance in Islam, please see:

- [The Excellences of Imam Husayn In Sunni Hadith Tradition](#)
- [The Revolution of Imam Husayn](#)
- [Karbala, an enduring paradigm of Islamic revivalism](#)

- [Imam Husayn's Concepts of Religion and Leadership](#)

"The Righteous Imam"

Another area where revision was carried out was to delete references to the term 'righteous Imam' although the author, being Sunni, is clearly not using the term in the sense it is used by the Shi'ah. A couple of examples are given below:

Chapter 2, Verse 191

And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith.

Commentary footnote 205

Original

205. This passage is illustrated by the events that happened at Hudaibiya in the sixth year of the Hijra, though it is not clear that it was revealed on that occasion. The Muslims were by this time a strong and influential community. Many of them were exiles from Mecca, where the Pagans had established an intolerant autocracy, persecuting Muslims, preventing them from visiting their homes, and even keeping them out by force from performing the Pilgrimage during the universally recognised period of truce. This was intolerance, oppression, and autocracy to the last degree, and the mere readiness of the Muslims to enforce their rights as Arab citizens resulted without bloodshed in an agreement which the Muslims faithfully observed. The Pagans, however, had no scruples in breaking faith, and it is unnecessary here to go into subsequent events.

In general, it may be said that Islam is the religion of peace, goodwill, mutual understanding, and good faith. But it will not acquiesce in wrong-doing, and its men will hold their lives cheap in defence of honour, justice, and the religion which they hold sacred. Their ideal is that of heroic virtue combined with unselfish gentleness and tenderness, such as is exemplified in the life of the Apostle. They believe in courage, obedience, discipline, duty, and a constant striving, by all the means in their power, physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, for the establishment of truth and righteousness. They know that war is an evil, but they will not flinch from it if their honour demands it and (a most important condition) a righteous Imām, such as Muhammad was par excellence, commands it, for then they know they are not serving carnal ends. In other cases, war has nothing to do with their faith, except that it will always be regulated by its humane precepts.

Amana

205. This passage is illustrated by the events that happened at Hudaibiyah in the sixth year of the Hijrah, though it is not clear that it was revealed on that occasion, The Muslims were by this time a strong and influential community. Many of them were exiles from Makkah, where the Pagans had established an intolerant autocracy, persecuting Muslims, preventing them from visiting their homes, and even keeping them out by force from performing the Pilgrimage during the universally recognised period of truce. This was intolerance, oppression, and autocracy to the last degree, and the mere readiness of the Muslims to enforce their rights as Arab citizens resulted without bloodshed in an agreement which the Muslims faithfully observed. The Pagans, however, had no scruples in breaking faith, and it is unnecessary here to go into subsequent events. (Cf. 5:2).

In general, it may be said that Islam is the religion of peace, good will, mutual understanding, and good faith. But it will not acquiesce in wrongdoing, and its men will hold their lives cheap in defence of honour, justice, and the religion which they hold sacred. Their ideal is that of heroic virtue combined with unselfish gentleness and tenderness, such as is exemplified in the life of the Prophet. They believe in courage, obedience, discipline, duty, and a constant striving by all the means in their power, physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, for the establishment of truth and righteousness. They know that war is an evil, but they will not flinch from it if their honour demands it and a righteous Imām (such as Muhammad was par excellence) commands it, for then they know they are not serving carnal ends. In other cases, war has nothing to do with their faith, except that it will always be regulated by its humane precepts. (R).

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In general, it may be said that Islam is the religion of peace, goodwill, mutual understanding, and good faith. But it will not acquiesce in wrong-doing, and its men will hold their lives cheap in defence of honour, justice, and the religion which they hold sacred. Their ideal is that of heroic virtue combined with unselfish gentleness and tenderness, such as is exemplified in the life of the Prophet. They believe in courage, obedience, discipline, duty, and a constant striving by all the means in their power, physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, for the establishment of truth and righteousness.

In this case, the Amana edition did not delete this reference to a righteous Imam although they removed the phrase "(a most important condition)". The IFTA edition removed the whole underlined section!

In another place, both the Amana and IFTA editions deleted the reference:

Chapter 2, Verse 216

Fighting is prescribed for you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for

you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and ye know not.

Commentary footnote 236

Original

236 To fight in the cause of Truth is one of the highest forms of charity. What can you offer that is more precious than your own life? But here again the limitations come in. If you are a mere brawler, or a selfish aggressive person, or a vainglorious bully, you deserve the highest censure. If you offer your life to the righteous Imam, who is only guided by God, you are an unselfish hero. God knows the value of things better than you do.

Amana

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Perhaps it was felt that the term "righteous Imam" may lead readers to start thinking about how a Muslim leader may be righteous or unrighteous, and how to distinguish between the two, which would lead to a re-appraisal of accepted history. To understand the Shi'ah point of view on Imamate and righteous leadership, please see the following resources:

- [Imamate: Vicegerency of the Prophet \[s\]](#)
- [Imamate and Leadership](#)
- [Master and Mastership](#)

Those who caused much sorrow to the Holy Prophet [s]

Chapter 66, Verse 1

O Prophet! Why holdest thou to be forbidden that which Allah has made lawful to thee? Thou seekest to please thy consorts. But Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Commentary footnote 5529

Original



5529. The Prophet's household was not like other households. The Consorts of Purity were expected to hold a higher standard in behaviour and reticence than ordinary women, as they had higher work to perform. See n. 3706 to xxxiii, 28. But they were human beings after all, and were subject to the weaknesses of their sex, and they sometimes failed. The imprudence of Hadhrat 'Aisha (see n. 2962 to xxiv, 11) once caused serious difficulties: the holy Prophet's mind was sore distressed, and he renounced the society of his wives for some time. This renunciation seems to be referred to here. The situation was none the less difficult for him because she was a daughter of Hadhrat Abū Bakr, one of the truest and most intimate of his Companions and lieutenants. Hadhrat Umar's daughter Hafsa was also sometimes apt to presume on her position, and when the two combined in secret counsel, and discussed matters and disclosed secrets to each other, they caused much sorrow to the holy Prophet, whose heart was tender and who treated all his family with exemplary patience and affection.

Amana



5529. The Prophet's household was not like other households. The Consorts of Purity were expected to hold a higher standard in behaviour and reticence than ordinary women, as they had higher work to perform. See n. 3706 to 33:28. But they were human beings after all, and were subject to the weaknesses of their sex, and they sometimes failed. The behavior of 'Ā'ishah once caused serious difficulties: the Holy Prophet's mind was sore distressed, and he renounced the society of his wives for some time. This renunciation seems to be referred to here. The situation was none the less difficult for him because she was a daughter of Abū Bakr, one of the truest and most intimate of his Companions and lieutenants. The commentators usually cite the following incident in connection with the revelation of these verses. It is narrated from 'Ā'ishah, the wife of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) by al Bukhārī, Muslim, al Nasa'ī, Abū Dawud and others that the Holy Prophet usually visited his wives daily after 'Aṣr Prayer. Once it so happened that he stayed longer than usual at the quarters of Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, for she had received from somewhere some honey which the Holy Prophet liked very much. "At this", says 'Ā'ishah, "I felt jealous, and I, Hafṣah, Sawdah and Ṣafiyah agreed among ourselves that when he visits us each of us would tell him that a peculiar odour came from his mouth as a result of what he had eaten, for we knew that he was particularly sensitive to offensive smells". So when his wives hinted at it, he vowed that he would never again use honey. Thereupon these verses were revealed reminding him that he should not declare to himself unlawful that which Allah had made lawful to him. The important point to bear in mind is that he was at once rectified by revelation, which reinforces the fact that the prophets are always under divine protection, and even the slightest lapse on their part is never left uncorrected. (R).

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The Amana edition is different from the original, and the IFTA edition has further deletion! The changes can be analysed as follows:

The criticism of A'ishah

In order to tone down the criticism of A'ishah, daughter of Abu Bakr b. Abi Quhafa, the Amana edition replaces the word 'imprudence' with 'behavior' and deletes the cross reference to footnote 2962 which talks about an example of such imprudence. IFTA deletes the whole comment about her which spanned several lines!

The criticism of Hafsa

Both Amana and IFTA completely delete the reference to inappropriate behaviour by Hafsa, wife of the Prophet [s] and daughter of 'Umar b. al-Khattab.

The cause of sorrow for the Prophet [s]

The fact, as stated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, that these two wives of the Prophet [s] caused much sorrow to the Holy Prophet [s] is now gone! Although it may seem to some readers that Abdullah Yusuf Ali's judgement on the two wives of the Holy Prophet [s] was rather harsh, it is actually reflected in many commentaries and books of *hadith* and is supported by solid historical evidence. For details see:

- [Shi'a Encyclopedia - Chapter 1a \(part iv\)](#) and [\(part v\)](#)
- [Al-Muraja'at - \(Letter 78\)](#)

The *Ahl al-Bayt* of the Holy Prophet [s]

Chapter 33, Verse 33

And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former Times of Ignorance; and establish regular Prayer, and give regular Charity; and obey Allah and His Messenger. And Allah only wishes to remove all abomination from you, ye members of the Family, and to make you pure and spotless.

Commentary footnote 3715

Original



3715. Notice the transition in this clause to the masculine gender, while before this the verbs and pronouns were in the feminine gender as referring to the consorts. The statement in this clause is now more general, including (besides the Consorts) the whole family, namely, Ḥadhrat Fāṭima the daughter, Ḥadhrat 'Alī the son-in-law, and their sons Ḥasan and Ḥusain, the beloved grandsons of the Prophet. The masculine gender is used generally, in speaking of a mixed assembly of men and women.

Amana



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3715. Ahl al-Bait: *i.e.* the household of the Prophet (S.A.S) which includes his wives as well as his daughter Faṭima, his son-in-law 'Alī and his grandsons, Ḥasan and Ḥusain generally in accordance with the narrative of Umm Salama.

Although the Amana edition kept the wording intact from the original commentary, the IFTA edition decided to re-write a condensed passage. As in the other cases, the reader is given no clue that any change has taken place.

In fact, three changes of substance have taken place:

Deletion of the grammatical argument

Abdullah Yusuf Ali believed that the wives of the Holy Prophet [s], by default, are members of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, in addition to Imam Ali [a], Lady Fatimah [a], and Imams Hasan and Husayn [a]. Although most Sunnis either agree with this position or the Shi'a position that states that the wives were excluded from the *Ahl al-Bayt*, a group within the Ahl al-Sunnah believe that the *Ahl al-Bayt* were *only* restricted to the wives. Their view would become indefensible on account of the grammatical argument that Abdullah Yusuf Ali mentioned, and which has now been deleted from the IFTA edition.

Inclusion of doubt

The phrase included by the IFTA edition, "... generally in accordance with the narrative of Umm Salama" introduces an element of doubt in the mind of the reader by attributing the inclusion of the four individuals solely to, what appears to be, a single narrative by Umm Salama, a very noble wife of the Holy Prophet [s]. Nothing could be further from the truth! The inclusion of the Holy Prophet [s] and the four, to the clear exclusion of all the

wives, is reported not only by Umm Salama through reliable chains of narration, but also through other wives of the Prophet [s].

Deletion of merit

As if this was not enough, the IFTA edition also deletes the mention of Imams Hasan and Husayn [a] as the 'beloved' grandsons of the Prophet [s]!