Book Reviews


The Tadabbur-i Qur’an is a monumental commentary of the Qur’an by Amin Ahsan Islahi (1322–1418/1904–1997), one of the most prominent pupils of the phenomenal Qur’anic scholar of the Sub-continent, Hamid al-Din Farahi (1280–1349/1863–1930). Covering nine volumes of about six thousand A-4 sized pages, this masterly work was completed in a span of twenty two years.

If Farahi formally enunciated the view that the Qur’an possessed structural and thematic na‘m (coherence), it is Islahi who established in this commentary that this was actually so. One of the far-reaching consequences of the na‘m principle is that instead of deriving multiple meanings from the Qur‘anic text, it effectively leads a Qur‘anic scholar to the one definitive meaning implied by God.

The main features of the na‘m elaborated by Islahi in this commentary may be summarized thus:

1. The surahs of the Qur’an are divided into seven discrete groups. Each group has a distinct theme. Every group begins with one Makkan surah or more and ends with one Madinan surah or more. In each group, the Makkan surahs always precede the Madinan ones. The relationship between the Makkan surahs and Madinan surahs of each group is that of the root of a tree and its branches.
2. In every group, the various phases of the Prophet Muhammad’s mission are depicted.
3. Two surahs of each group form a pair so that each member of the pair complements the other in various ways. Surah al-Fatiha, however, is an exception to this pattern: it is an introduction to the whole of the Qur’an as well as to the first group which begins with it. There are also some surahs which are an exception to this rule.
4. Each surah has specific addressees and a central theme around which the contents of the surah revolve. Every surah is composed of sections, subsections and paragraphs which are not connected in a linear way; the connection is generally through various literary devices like similes, comments, conditional statements, parenthetical statements, principal statements, warning statements, parallelism, conclusion of a theme, questions and their answers.

In the preface of the ninth and final volume of this exegesis, İslahi, while outlining some core statutes of the hermeneutics of this exegesis, writes:

The direct method has been employed for reflection on the Qur’ân and for solving difficulties encountered. In other words, the real source of the tafsîr [commentary] is the language of the Qur’ân, the context and placement of its verses and parallels drawn from within its text. Merely citing various opinions of the past has not been done, as is generally the case in current times. The Arabic language has been resorted to directly for researching out the meanings of words and stylistic features and for solving syntactical difficulties. Reliance has not been made merely on the opinions of scholars. Similarly, while interpreting verses, full importance has been given to the language of the Qur’ân, the context of the discourse and parallels found in the text. An opinion has not been adopted merely because it was proffered by an early authority. Consequently, instead of mentioning copious quotations from past works, each verse is distinctly interpreted on the basis of arguments.¹

Efforts have also been made to highlight the logic and wisdom of the Qur’ân in this tafsîr. The purpose is to bring to the foreground its intellectual arguments and reasoning in a forceful and appealing manner, and in this way the difference between the obsolete style of reasoning of the scholastics and the natural style of reasoning of the Qur’ân is also highlighted:

Full guidance has been sought from earlier tafsîrs, ancient scriptures, books of history and books which state the occasion of revelation of a verse. However, this guidance has always remained subservient to the import of the Qur’ân. These resources have never been given authority over the Qur’ân, and have not been allowed to govern the interpretation of the Qur’ân whether its words accept them or not.²

With this background, it would now be worthwhile to take a look at the first volume of the English translation of this commentary by Saleem Kayani

---

² Ibid.
(b. 1934–   ). The edge he holds even before he began the translation is that he remained a pupil of the author himself from 1963 to 1969. He studied the Qurʾān, the Hadīth and the Arabic language with him. He holds a double master’s degree in English and in Urdu.

Two things can be immediately noticed by any person who has read the original: the translator has tried to make the voluminous commentary reader-friendly by introducing very apt headings in the text and by providing copious footnotes where required. It contains no less than one-hundred and thirty valuable footnotes.

Critics unanimously agree that good translations are those which do not look like translations. They have a touch of originality in them. Mr Kayani seems to be well aware of this standard and has tried to do justice to this very difficult proposition. He has faithfully rendered the original Urdu text while at the same time adhering to the structure and ambience of the English language. The standard of the language is also very commendable. There are several portions which match the brilliance of the original in eloquence and lucidity. A translated passage, which occurs in the explanation of verse 164 of the sūrah, reads:

When humid and filled with water, they [the winds] help grow harvests, fruits and vegetation, and make flowers blossom and bloom. In autumn, these very winds rob them of life and freshness, striping these trees and turning gardens into wilderness. Diverse are their guises and many are their ways but in each instance they have a peculiar and fresh splendor, constituting in each case a new and a momentous sign of the beneficence, mercy, wisdom and providential care of their controller — Allah (p. 411).

At another place, thus is the translation of a portion which highlights the thematic continuity between verses 257 to 260:

Generally, to begin with, the Qurʾān presents rational and natural arguments concerning an issue and then reinforces them by historical and circumstantial examples. That is the method the Qurʾān has followed here. After describing the main principle concerning error and guidance, it offers three examples. The first of these deal with the kind of people who are beguiled by the devil; it shows how they can never escape his clutches and are destined to be lost forever in their misguided warp. The other two examples deal with the kind of people who are helped and guided by Allah, whose hearts He opens up for faith and shows them the light of faith and true belief (p. 604).

The translation has a very useful index at the end and is published on exquisite mat paper. Useful biographical information on Farāhī and Islāhī has
also been provided at the end. Proof reading has been thoroughly done, and typographical errors are almost non-existent.

It may be suggested that some further work needs to be done in the future editions of the work to make it more student-friendly. İslahi has pointed out many literary styles and constructions of Qur’anic Arabic as well as some very subtle linguistic usages. Indexing these will prove useful for serious students of the Qur’ān. Similarly, he has also referred to certain rhetorical principles of the Arabic language, which may also be indexed for the same purpose. Moreover, since the commentary of Sūrah al-Baqarah by Farāhi himself has been published some years ago in India, references can now be easily furnished where İslahi, without quoting the exact source, differs or builds upon the views of his illustrious mentor. These suggestions do not detract from the value of the present work and are simply being put forth to enhance the usefulness of the work.

All in all, the translator deserves special gratitude for making the first volume of this seminal exegetical work available to the English reader.

Shehzad Saleem

---


Rightly pointed out by Dr Jackson, theologians’ especially Muslim theologians’ primary concern has always been protecting the faith from errors, deviations and dilutions rather than tolerating the ‘other,’ (pp. 4–5) as liberals would have it! Thus far, however, this perpetual and crucial task of protecting the faith in an ever changing intellectual and social milieu has never been as daunting as it is today. With the advent of the modern period for Islamic societies, much has changed in their intellectual, social, cultural and religious texture. Among the numerous challenges that have surfaced is the setting in of the multicultural milieu which has made the question of pluralism more than simply a hypothetical theological puzzle for Muslim thinkers; today, it is one with real communal implications. The proposals made for pluralism reflect