

Surah Al-Fatiha (الفاتحة) and English Translators

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Abstract As an introduction to the Holy Qur'ān *Sūrah Fatīha* creates a strong desire in the heart of the reciter for seeking guidance from Allah Almighty, Who alone can grant it. Thus, *Sūrah al-Fatīha* clarifies that the best appeal/prayer (دعا) for a man is asking for guidance to the straight path. There are also other names that describe the virtuous status of this *Sūrah*, such as: “*Umm al-Qur'ān*” ام القرآن (The Mother of the Holy Qur'ān), “*Sab'a al Mathāni*” سبع المثاني (the seven often repeated verses), and many others.

In the following study different English translations of this Surah are being critically analysed to understand the English version of this Surah and also to know the approach of English Translators regarding its diction and message. The selected English Translators are:

Abdullāh Yūsuf'Ali, Abdalmājid Daryābādi, Mohammad Asad, Taqiuddīn Hilali and Mūhsin Khan, George Sale, A. J. Arberry, and Muhammad'Ali.

Key Words: Quran, Fatīha, *Sab'a al Mathāni*, seven often repeated verses, *Umm al-Qur'ān*

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Introduction

Sūrah AI-Fatīha has a distinct position in the Holy Qur'ān. It is a necessary part of the daily prayers. Every Muslim memorizes this Sūrah. It is at the beginning of the Holy Qur'ān. The Arabic word Fatīha means Opening, start, preface,¹ opener or that which opens a topic, a book, or anything.² According to T B Irving, "In other words, Sūrah AI-Fatīha is a sort of preface and it is named so because of its subject-matter. It is one of the very earliest revelations to Prophet Mohammed ﷺ. It was revealed after Sūrah Al-Mudathir المدثر (The Man Wearing a cloak) (74) and before Surah Lahab لهب (The Flame) (111)."³ Sūrah AI-Fatīha is one of the greatest gifts bestowed upon the Holy Prophet according to the following verse of the Holy Qur'ān:

" وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَاكَ سَبْعًا مِنَ الْمَثَانِي وَالْقُرْآنَ الْعَظِيمَ " ⁴

(Wa Laqad 'Ātaynāka Sab`āan Mina Al-Mathānī Wa Al-Qur'āna Al-'Aẓīma)

"We have given thee seven of the oft-repeated (verses) and the great Qur'ān"

And in a *Hadīth*, "By Him in whose hand my soul is, nothing like it has been sent down in Torah, the Injeel, the Zabur, or the Holy Qur'ān and it is seven of the oft-repeated verses and the mighty Quran which I have been given."⁵

As an introduction to the Holy Qur'ān This *Sūrah* creates a strong desire in the heart of the reciter for seeking guidance from Allah Almighty, Who alone can grant it. Thus, *Sūrah al-Fatīha* clarifies that the best appeal/prayer (دعا) for a man is asking for guidance to the straight path.

There are also other names that describe the virtuous status of this Sūrah, such as: "*Umm al-Qur'ān*" أم القرآن (The Mother of the Holy Qur'ān),

“*Sab'a al Mathāni*”⁶ سبع المثاني (the seven often repeated verses), and many others.

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TEXT

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

" الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ
إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ صِرَاطَ
الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ "

Transliteration

*"(Bismi Allāhi Ar-Rahmāni Ar-Rahīmi)
(Al-Ĥamdu Lillāhi Rabbi Al-`Ālamīn. Ar-Rahmāni Ar-Rahīmi. Māliki Yawmi Ad-Dīn.
'Īyāka Na`budu Wa 'Īyāka Nasta`īnu.
Ahdinā Aṣ-Ṣirāṭa Al-Mustaqīm. Ṣirāṭa Al-Ladhīna 'An`amta `Alayhim Ghayri Al-Maghḏūbi `Alayhim Wa Lā Aḏ-Ḍāllīn) "*

Comparative Analysis

Following key words will be discussed to compare the translations and exegeses:

1. *Rabbi Al-`Ālamīn* رب العالمين
2. *Rahmān and Rahīm* رحمن ، رحيم
3. *Maghḏūb* مغضوب and *Dhāllīna* ضالين

At first we shall view the difference in the translation of these words and

then discuss the interpretation of these words one by one.

1. *Rabbi Al-`Ālamīn* رب العالمين

The word Rabb is normally translated as ‘Lord’. Rāghib Asfahāni defines it as “someone who initiates something and makes it grow step by step until completion.”⁷ Ferozabadi gives other meanings, “master, governor, ruler, provider, guardian, and sustainer.”⁸ Therefore, Rabb means,

“The One Who provides sustenance, arranges growth and development, takes care, promulgates laws, dictates policies, and demands obedience.”

The term “Rabb” explained in details by many scholars. Sayyid Mawdūdī analysed this word as it is used in the Holy Qur’ān and he concludes that, “When all the various meanings of Rabb are considered, the word rather bridges a broad-based concept that covers the following range of meanings:

1. He who nourishes and dispenses needs, brings up morally and physically
2. He who takes care, supervises, and is responsible for improving the situation
3. He who has the axial position upon whom divergence converges
4. He who is the noblest and the source of power and authority; whose writ prevails and who is the wielder of dispensation
5. He who is the owner and the master”⁹

In the translation of Tafhim Al Qur’ān Zafar Ishāq Ansāri also followed this discourse of Sayyid Mawdūdī.

Abdullāh Yūsuf’Ali has translated this word as "the cherisher and sustainer," and explained further in his comments, “The Arabic word *Rabb*, usually translated Lord, has also the meaning of cherishing, sustaining, bringing to maturity. Allah cares for all the worlds He has created.”¹⁰ M.

Asad has translated it as "The Sustainer," while all others have translated it as "the Lord". M. Asad explained the word in footnote as,

“The Arabic expression *Rabb* - rendered by me as "Sustainer" embraces a wide complex of meanings not easily expressed by a single term in another language. It comprises the ideas of having a just claim to the possession of anything and, consequently, authority over it, as well as of rearing, sustaining and fostering anything from its inception to its final completion. Thus, the head of a family is called *rabb ad-dār* ("master of the house") because he has authority over it and is responsible for its maintenance; similarly, his wife is called *rabbat ad-dār* ("mistress of the house"). Preceded by the definite article *al*, the designation *rabb* is applied, in the Holy Qur'ān, exclusively to Allah as the sole fosterer and sustainer of all creation - objective as well as conceptual - and therefore the ultimate source of all authority.”¹¹

Others scholars have provided further explanatory detail about this word in their commentary. Hilali & Khan have provided an explanation of the meanings of this word and told why they have chosen to translate it as "Lord." Hilali & Khan wrote in their footnote, “There is no proper equivalent for *Rabb* in English Language. It means the One and Only Lord for all the universe, its Creator, Owner, Organizer, Provider, Master, Planner, Sustainer, Cherisher, and giver of security.”¹²

Daryābādī clarifies as, “Lord is but a poor substitute for Arabic *Rabb* رَبُّ which signifies not only the Sovereign but also the Sustainer, the Nourisher, the Regulator, and the Perfector. The relation in which the God

of Islam stands to all His creation is that of a righteous, benign Ruler, and not that of a mere father.”¹³

We can say that Daryābādi by giving this explanation of the word *Rabb* رب pointing finger at the concept of God in Christianity where Almighty is considered as ‘Father’.

M. ‘Ali used the word Lord and explains in commentary as, “Arabic word *Rabb* conveys not only the idea of fostering, bringing up or nourishing, but also that of regulating, completing and accomplishing.”¹⁴ He further clarifies, “but the word Lord has generally been adopted for the sake of brevity.”¹⁵

While translation of the word *Alamin* is opted as ‘worlds’ by Abdullāh Yūsuf ‘Ali, M. Asad, Daryābādi, and M. ‘Ali.

Abdullāh Yūsuf ‘Ali explains, “There are many worlds - astronomical and physical worlds, worlds of thought, spiritual world, and so on. In every one of them, Allah is all-in-all. We express only one aspect of it when we say: "In Him we live, and move, and have our being." The mystical division between (1) *Nasūt*, the human world knowable by the senses, (2) *Malakūt*, the invisible world of angels, and (3) *Lahūt*, the divine world of Reality, requires a whole volume to explain it.”¹⁶

M. Asad explained in footnote, “The term ‘worlds’ denotes all categories of existence both in the physical and the spiritual sense.”¹⁷

Hilali & Khan without translating the Arabic word provide description in parenthesis as “(mankind, jinns and all that exists)”. Further they justified their point of view in the footnote with a narration from Bukhāri.¹⁸

Daryābādi explains the word *Alamin* in his commentary as, “The Universal Patron, the All-in-all Guardian.”¹⁹

George Sale translated it as “all creatures” and Arberry as “all Being”.

George Sale in footnote further explained, “*alamina*, in this and other places of the Koran, properly means the three species of rational creatures, men, genii, and angels.”²⁰

M. 'Ali wrote, “In a restricted sense it applies to any class or division of created beings or of mankind”²¹

2. *Raḥmān, Raḥīm* رحمن ، رحيم

Both *Raḥmān* رحمن and *Raḥīm* رحيم, are the divine names. These are derived from “the noun *Raḥmah* رحمة which means mercy, compassion, and grace.”²² *Raḥmān* indicates plenty and concentration of kindness and elegance, the expression of which is unstoppable. *Raḥīm* shows the eternity of the attribute highlighting the devotion and stability of mercy that never weakens or diminishes. Following tables tells the variety of translations:

Name of Translator	Translation of the Words “ <i>Raḥmān</i> رحمن and <i>Raḥīm</i> رحيم”
Abdullāh Yūsuf'Ali	‘Most Gracious, Most Merciful’
M. Asad	‘The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace’
Hilali & Khan	‘the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful’
Daryābādi	‘The Compassionate, the Merciful’
George Sale	‘The most merciful’
Arberry	‘the All-merciful, the All-compassionate’
M. 'Ali	‘The Beneficent, the Merciful’

Abdullāh Yūsuf'Ali explained these words by saying, “the attribute *Raḥmān* (Most Gracious) is not applied to any but Allah, but the attribute *Raḥīm* (Merciful), is a general term, and may also be applied to Men.”²³

Hilali & Khan did not explain these words any more.

Daryābādi explained these two words as, “Both are intensive forms. The

former denotes tenderness towards all His creatures in general and latter towards His worshippers in particular.”²⁴

We can see that there is no notable difference except for M. Asad and George Sale.

M. Asad used ‘the Dispenser of Grace’ as the translation of Al Raĥīm الرحيم and explained under the comment for Bismillah as, “Both the divine epithets Raĥmān and Raĥim are derived from the noun Raĥmah, which signifies ‘mercy’, ‘compassion’, ‘loving tenderness’ and, more comprehensively, ‘grace’. From the very earliest times, Islamic scholars have endeavoured to define the exact shades of meaning which differentiate the two terms. The best and simplest of these explanations is undoubtedly the one advanced by Ibn al-Qayyim (as quoted in Manar I, 48): the term *Raĥmān* circumscribes the quality of abounding grace inherent in, and inseparable from, the concept of God’s Being, whereas Raĥīm expresses the manifestation of that grace in, and its effect upon, His creation - in other words, an aspect of His activity.”²⁵

George Sale used ‘The most merciful’ for the both words with no further explanation.

After explaining the meanings of both the words with reference from Masnad Ahmad, M. ‘Ali acknowledged the insufficiency of English language by saying, “I must admit that English language lacks an equivalent of *Al-Raĥmān*”²⁶

3. *Maghdūb* مغضوب & *dhallīn* ضالين

Abdullāh Yūsuf ‘Ali has translated [عَنِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَ لَا الضَّالِّينَ] (*Ghayri Al-Maghdūbi ‘Alayhim Wa Lā Ad-Ďallīna*) as, “those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray.” He explained in his commentary in a dialogue style as, “Are there two categories? - those who are in the darkness

of Wrath and those who stray? The first are those who deliberately break Allah's law; the second those who stray out of carelessness or negligence. Both are responsible for their own acts or omissions.”²⁷

M. Asad translated as “not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray!” He in footnote differed from other commentator quoting Zamakhshri, ‘the way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings - those who have not been condemned [by Thee], and who do not go astray’ and then quoting Al-Ghazali and Muhammad 'Abduh presented the other view, ‘the people described as having incurred "God's condemnation' - that is, having deprived themselves of His grace - are those who have become fully cognizant of God's message and, having understood it, have rejected it; while by ‘those who go astray’ are meant people whom the truth has either not reached at all, or to whom it has come in so garbled and corrupted a form as to make it difficult for them to recognize it as the truth.”²⁸

Hilali & Khan have given specific examples of these two categories inside the parenthesis as "such as Jews" and "such as Christians." They have also provided a Hadīth of Tirmidhi and Abū Dawūd to support this notion as a commentary to the last verse. Among them, there is one particular Hadīth in comments that directly refers to the particularization of *Maghdūb* and *Dhāllīn* as the ‘Jews and Christians’.²⁹

Daryābādī translated these as, “Not of those on whom is indignation brought down, nor of the astray.” and further explained the *Maghdūb* by providing quotations from the Old Testament and the New Testament and referring to Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon. He wrote, “A strictly literal rendering would be, ‘who are angered upon’³⁰ and *Dhallīn* as, ‘those who have deviated from the right course owing to their heedlessness and want of proper serious thinking.’³¹

George Sale translated these as, ‘not of those against whom thou art incensed, nor of those who go astray.’ He explained these two categories in the light of Zamakhshri and Jalalain as, “This last sentence contains a petition, that God would lead the supplicants into the true religion, by which is meant the Mohammedan, in the Koran often called the right way; in this place more particularly defined to be, the way of those to whom God hath been gracious, that is, of the prophets and faithful who preceded Mohammed; under which appellations are also comprehended the Jews and Christians, such as they were in the times of their primitive purity, before they had deviated from their respective institutions; not the way of the modern Jews, whose signal calamities are marks of the just anger of God against them for their obstinacy and disobedience; nor of the Christians of this age, who have departed from the true doctrine of Jesus, and are bewildered in a labyrinth of error. This is the common exposition of the passage; though al-Zamakhshri, and some others, by a different application of the negatives, refer the whole to the true believers; and then the sense will run thus: The way of those to whom thou hast been gracious, against whom thou art not incensed, and who have not erred, Which translation the original will very well bear.”³²

Arberry translated as, ‘not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray.’ Arberry gives no commentary at all and his numbering of verses is not in the classical Qur’ānic style. His style is poetic and he interpreted *Maghdūb* as ‘wrathful’ and ‘*Dhallīn*’ as ‘who are astray’.

M. ‘Ali translated as, ‘Not those upon whom wrath is brought down, nor those who go astray.’ In his commentary he is also considering Jews and Christians as ‘*Maghdūb*’ and ‘*Dhallīn*’. He referred to a Hadīth from

Tirmidhi and further explained by giving the example of the Jews' actions against 'Isā (ﷺ) and faith of Christians about 'Isā (ﷺ). He wrote, "Again, the Jews and the Christians afford an example of the two extremes, the Jews rejecting Jesus, a prophet of God, as liar, and doing their utmost to slay him, and the Christians raising a mortal prophet to the dignity of Godhood."³³

Conclusion

There is dissimilarity among Islamic scholars whether to number the first statement,

" بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ (In the name of Allah,)*Bismi Allāhi Ar-Rahmāni Ar-Rahīmi* ["

as the first verse of this Sūrah or not. With the exception of Sūrah 9, this statement happens at the opening of every Sūrah of the Holy Qur'ān. In all of the Sūrahs except the first Sūrah, all commentators agree that this verse must be written and read like an starter or headline at the beginning without numbering it. However, according to some scholars, it is considered an essential part of this specific Sūrah "al-Fatīha". Therefore, they numbered it as verse number one. While some scholars do not consider it as essential part of this Sūrah, so they do not count it as the first verse. Instead they separate Verse no. 7 into two verses and thus agree with others that this Sūrah is comprised of 7 verses. with the difference that verse number 7 of other translations is considered as two separate verses 6 and 7. But in these seven commentaries only one Muslim Scholar, Daryābādī, did not count Bismillah as the first verse of this Sūrah while other three Muslim commentators numbered it as the first verse of al-Fatīha. Arberry and M. 'Ali also did not consider Bismillah as a part of al-Fatīha.

In comments of Hilali & Khan at the end of verse 2, a Hadīth has been quoted that was about the importance of this Sūrah as a whole and it is not

particular to verse 2. Therefore, its placement at the end of verse 2 is not clear. The Hadīth that is narrated in their comment at the end of verse 7 does not seem to be related to the meaning and context of the verse.³⁴

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