Chapter – 6

A Critique of Asad’s Methodology and Inferences
Need for a Critique

Among scores of contemporary English renderings of Holy Qurʾān Asad’s is perhaps the most controversial of them all. On the one side is the orthodoxy, which has serious reservations against some of his inferences. On the other side is a substantial number of people, particularly constituted of neo-reverts to Islam in the West who seem, largely influenced by Asad. The second group is more articulation in its observations and assessments of Muḥammad Asad’s life, works and particularly his exegesis of the Holy Qurʾān. What is the true worth of Asad’s exegesis? How far is it superior or otherwise to the earlier works? What exactly are the positive and negative points of this work? What could be the future field of exegesis keeping in view Asad’s strengths and limitations, if any. There could be scores and scores of such questions, quite legitimate in their place, whose correct answers are bound to help all the scholars of the Qurʾān.

Another reason for a critique of Asad’s work is necessitated by his own claims about his work. It is worthwhile to assess the tenability of his claims. Claims are rather very big! One of them is:

“The work which I am now placing before the public is based on a lifetime of a study and of many years spent in Arabia. It is an attempt – perhaps the first attempt – at a really idiomatic explanatory rendition of the Qurānic message into a European language”.

Muḥammad Asad has formulated certain methodological principles, it is worthwhile to assess the merit of those principles and judge the inferences Asad has come out with.
Not least is the need for the seeker after the truth, who is inclined to the Holy Qur’ān, but is unable to understand the language of the Qur’ān – Arabic. The problem of the Western educated Muslims in the Muslim countries including the immigrant Muslim communities in Europe and America is confounded for their severed links with the Arabic language and the mainstream Muslim tradition as such. No less serious is the problem of neo-reverts to Islam in the West and the large body of western educated people across the globe whose lingua franca is English, a substantial section of which, seems lately, serious enough to study the Holy Qur’ān.

It is no less pertinent to note that in the post September 11 the traditional Islam, along with the so-called fundamentalism is under serious attack and the global powers led by the U.S.A. are very keen to float a “moderate and progressive version” of Islam. Renewed interest in Muḥammad Asad in the West and the East perhaps the part of the attempts at “searching the moderate and the progressive voices from among the Muslims”. “Muḥammad Asad is the voice of conscious Muslims” – declared Hasan Zillur-Rahím. Noted Pakistani columnist, Irshad Ahmad Haqqānī looks at Asad’s relevance in the recent debate in his country on “enlightened moderation.”

The contemporary usage of the terms like ‘moderation’, “moderate”, “progressive”, “obscurantist”, “backward”, “sub-born”, “fundamentalism”, “extremisms”, “fanaticism”, etc. are loaded expressions and need to be used with appropriate qualifications only, lest the confusion of the contemporary mind regarding the reality and its manifestations are likely to be confounded.
An academic exercise to ascertain the real position of Muḥammad Asad’s "The Message of the Qurān", is well in place to help remove the confusions, if only some of them, in the contemporary minds about the worth or otherwise of his work.

Parameters of the Critique

Exegesis *per se* is not a new branch of ‘Ulūm al-Qurān’ (Qurānic Sciences) as such. There is a long tradition of *Tafsīr* in Islam. Exegetical principles have been formulated and classification of the most classical exegetical works are now an established part of the Islamic heritage. Naturally the qualification of an exegete as such have been discussed in many of the classical books of *Tafsīr* literature.

However, with the advent of modernism and the Orientalist involvement with the Qurānic exegesis, people seem to be infatuated with the ‘new’ principles of hermeneutics and exegesis. Yet the validity of any ‘new’ principle of exegesis cannot *per se* be accepted or rejected without analyzing its merits or otherwise.

The most important merit of a *Tafsīr* in any language, perhaps, can be judged by the extent of its success in conveying the primary goals of the Holy Qurān. Qurān is the biggest blessing of Beneficent God sent through His blessed Prophet, Muḥammad (S), for mankind. Its primary objective remains to help man approximate to the Ultimate Reality as such. Thereby man’s world-view is informed of the perception of the Ultimate Reality. Man’s goal remains to develop himself in conformity with the Ultimate Reality. Prophet Muḥammad (S) is, as per the Qurān, the model which ought to be emulated by the believers:
In God's messenger you have a fine model for someone who looks forward to [meeting] God and to the Last Day, and mentions God frequently.

(The Conferederates 33:21)

To appreciate Islam's position vis-à-vis, what it considers the central problem of man, one is apt to agree with the following observation: The central problem of human life and society according to Islam, hinges on man's relationship to Hidayah (Divine Guidance). Man is not self-sufficient. He needs Divine Guidance to have a correct perception of Reality and to fashion his life, individual as well as collective, in that light. Man, unaided by Divine Guidance, is incapable of solving all the riddles of creation, of having a world-view based on Reality as it is, or of deriving those values and principles whose application in life can produce peace and harmony in man's soul and personality, create equilibrium and balance within human society and harmonize human behavior with the movements of cosmic forces and overall dynamics of existence. All the means of knowledge available to man (instinct, habit, reason, intuition, experience) and all the sources of guidance he has developed over the ages (Philosophy, history, law and science, to name only the major ones among them) are unable to yield unimpeachable knowledge of Reality and of the Ultimate values to which human behavior should conform. Increases in the knowledge of the means of life fail to equip man with understanding of the ends of life and the true norms of moral behavior, both individual and social. The predicament of man - of the man who sees himself not in relation to God and His Guidance, but as self-sufficient - lies in having torn himself asunder from the Divine arrangement for human evolution and devoted himself to the service of means to the neglect of ends. His investigations,
observations and deductions do not necessarily lead him to a realistic understanding of physical and socio-moral phenomena, for he has lost his true sense of perspective and the interrelatedness of different elements of existence. Nor do they yield him an objective analysis within human society, for the observer and deducer is himself a human being, and subject to the limitations which keep Ultimate Reality beyond his reach.²

That is why the central quest of men is for guidance and not just for physical survival and economic advancement. This is borne out by the invocation, which a Muslim makes in Sūra al-Īfīḥa (The Opening), which is recited in every prayer and is crucial to the understanding of the spirit of Islam:

Praise be to God, Lord of the Universe,
The Merciful, the Mercy-giving!
Ruler of the Day of Repayment!
You do we worship and from You do we seek help.
Guide us along the Straight Road,
The Road of those whom You have favoured,
With whom you are not angry nor who are lost!

(Qur'ān: 1:1-7)

Man is being invited to seek what he needs most for his human existence and growth, as against his mere physical or animal existence, and this is Guidance to the Straight Road – to the way of the Prophets and the righteous. The Qur'ān is God's response to this supplication of the human soul:

This is the Book, which contains no doubt,
[it is] guidance for the heedful
Who believe in the Unseen, keep up prayer,
And spend from what We have provided them with;
Who believe in what has been sent down to you,
as well as what was sent down before you,
While they are certain about the Hereafter:
such people hold guidance from their Lord,
such will be successful.

(Qur'ān: 2:2-5)

In prayer as well as in the response to prayer, guidance is sought and offered in two forms - the Book of God and the Prophet of God. The book contains the Divine Word, uncreated, unaltered and intact. The Book reveals those aspects of Divine Reality whose knowledge is required to develop a correct relationship with God and His creation, even through the Totality of the Divine Reality remains beyond human comprehension.³

Hence the first and the foremost parameter for assessing the merit of the exegetical work of Asad shall be to see what dominates his notes – Mā‘rifah (Gnosis) of the Absolute or other concerns including social ones. In the twentieth century under the impact of modernism, new concerns were created and the modernists found little choice but to interpret the scripture in the way, which suited the parameters of modernity. That way modernist interpretation has the following characteristics:

The attempt is made to interpret the Qur'ān in the light of reason (“to interpret the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān”, as it is frequently phrased) rather than the material which they termed ‘extraneous’ provided by the tradition in the form of hadīth reports and earlier commentaries; “Back to the source” often becomes the motto of such approaches;

The attempt is made through the expediency of interpretation to strip the Qur'ān things which they call “legendary traits, primitive
ideas, fantastic stories, magic fables, and superstition”; symbolic interpretation is the primary means for such resolutions;
The attempt is made to rationalize a doctrine found in or as justified by reference to the Qur’ān.4 Whatever justifications for relating the Qur’ānic injunction to the issues of dynamic existence of men, it cannot be allowed to occupy a space more than its due in the overall scheme of things.
The Universality and eternity of the Qur’ān—which is the manifestation of the Reality cannot be subsumed to that aspect of the Reality which is relativistic and ephemeral taking into the consideration the total gamut of the Reality.
The parameters of exegetical interpretation which dominate the modern Qur’ānic exegesis cannot be taken to be valid a priori without subjecting them an analysis to judge their merit or otherwise.
While some sample from Asad’s treatment to certain Qur’ānic verses shall be selected for understanding his exegetical methodology and inferences, yet the list would not be exhaustive but only intended to be indicative of the general pattern followed by Asad.
Hence their study of Exegetical methodology of Asad shall leave good scope for further studies for future.
Again Asad’s claims and his formulations of exegetical methodology shall be taken for a study along with his inferences in the rest of the chapter.
A glimpse of other major exegetical works of the 20th century and their relative merit or otherwise with that of Asad has been shown in an exclusive chapter of this work.
Prophet’s Sunnah is a very important source for understanding the purport of the Qur’ān. However, the simple affirmation of this source (Sunnah) is not enough for appreciating the worth of such a
work. The treatment of the exegete and the selection methodology of him in the application of Sunnah model is very crucial. Has Asad been selective in his recourse to the Sunnah for elucidation of the areas where Sunnah guidance is available or not, shall be looked into.

Again the place of Tradition in the understanding of the Divine Scripture cannot be over emphasized. While it is not sacrosanct yet minimizing its place and disregarding it is fraught with grave dangers. We must not forget that Qur‘ān’s and Islam’s continuity in history is directly attached to the Tradition which has preserved it for posterity. Spirituality remains the ethos of Islamic tradition and reservations of the modern mind with spirituality cannot be taken as a positive value per se.

Qur‘ānic validation for the Prophet, for the Sahāba and for the Ummah cannot be ignored or disregarded;

Muḥammad is God’s messenger, while those who are with him are strict with disbelievers, merciful among themselves. You will see them bowing, kneeling, and seeking bounty and approval from God. Their sign [shows] on their faces from the effect of bowing down on their knees [in worship].

Such is their description in Torah, while their description in the Gospel is like a field crop which put forth its shoots so that it swells up, till it grows thick on its stalk in the way farmers admire, so that unbelievers are exasperated by them. God has promised forgiveness and splendid earnings to any of those who believe and perform honorable deeds.⁵

About the continuity of the core in the Ummah being on the right path, thereby upholder of the truth in the time space framework, the Qur‘ān speaks of their excellence in the earlier times in more numbers than in the later times. But important to note is that the later times the Ummah is not devoid of the excellent elements. The
decrease in numbers in the later periods does not warrant any disregard for the Ümmah as such. Qur’ān says:

And ye shall be sorted out
Into three classes,
Then (there will be)
The companions of the Right Hand:
What will be the companion of the Right Hand?
And the companions of
The Left Hand:
What will be
The companion of
The Left Hand?
And those Foremost
(in Faith) will be
Foremost (in the Hereafter)
These will be
Those Nearest of God:
In Gardens of Bliss:
A number of people
From those of old,
And a few from those
Of later times.6

The divergences from the tradition by an exegete on the point of, ‘tradition not being a binding’ does not seem to be a sufficient ground for so called innovations in meanings of the Divine Scripture.

Also the modernistic principles of hermeneutics and exegesis, too, do not as such provide a legitimacy of its own and need to be subjected to a thorough analysis for determining any merit or otherwise in them.
While discussing some of the inferences of Asad in his exegetical notes, an attempt shall be made to decipher the reasons of behind Asad’s particular inferences.

Shah Walī Allāh of Delhi (1703-1762), in his book al-Fauz al-Kabeer fi ‘Usūl al-Tafsīr, (The Principles of Qur’ān commentary, translated of G.N. Jalbani), in which he has discussed about the issue of exegesis in detail and continues to serve as a reference book for the exegesis of the Qur’ān. Some of his principles too shall be brought to light while discussing Asad’s works. It is in the fitness of things that Shah Walī Allāh, has inter-alia discussed about the issue of Gharāʾib al-Qurʾān (Rarities of the Qurʾān), to which the blessed Prophet has alluded People, in the modern phase of the Qurʾānic exegesis, tend to justify their so called innovation and novel meanings of the Qurʾānic words, expressions and concepts by alluding to the said tradition. It shall be worthwhile to see how the tradition look at this aspect of the Qurʾān and how does modernity differ with them in this respect.

Hence the most important issues pertaining to Qurʾān commentary like Nāsikh Wal Mansūk (Abrogator and Abrogated), Shāni Nazūl (Occasion of Revelation), Hurūf al-Muqatṭā’at (Abbreviated letters), Ahkām al-Qurʾān (Science of Injunctions), Allegory and Symbolism, the term and concept of Jinn.

A cursory look at the difference between the use of ‘Aql in the classical and modern periods shall help appreciate the fields of apprehension and vision created as a result of the difference.

Muḥammad Asad’s work is dedicated “to those who think” – hence worth the study by those who think for all at all times – present
and the future. The present work is humble attempt in this direction.

Asad's Unique Position

Among the Western interpreters of the Qur'ān, Asad occupies a unique position. His birth into a Jewish family and early years of his youth and childhood in the West and later his migration to the East and his embracing Islam and learning Arabic and Islamic sciences make him a man of 'two worlds' – as it were. Did this vast and varied exposure of Asad place him in an advantageous position as regards his task of interpreting the Holy Writ? This is a question which is primarily relevant to our discussion.

For long Muslims had been feeling that there does not exist a befitting interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān in English, notwithstanding very sincere efforts of some pious Muslim scholars in this direction. The need was felt more because of Orientalist distortions of the Holy Book. Another reason, legitimate enough, has been for propagation purposes to let the ignorant in the West know the book which is universal in its appeal. No less has been the need of the Westernized section of the Muslim community for whom English remains the language of intellectual discourse.

To meet such a need, it seems a believing Muslim, who is proficient in both the languages, Arabic and English and is familiar with both the cultural trends would be competent enough to accomplish the task. Asad belonged to Europe and was proficient in many languages of Europe. Though English was not his mother tongue yet his command over English was demonstrated by his most famous works, 'The Road to Mecca' – which won
acclaim from the English readership across the globe. He did not look at the West from far off distance. He was rather reared in the Western culture. He studied Western sciences, art and philosophy. He heard discussions of Freud and other doyens of Western philosophy and sciences.

Later Asad was exposed to Muslims in Arabia, got impressed by their life style, thinking and everything they possessed, learnt Arabic language and embraced Islam. He lived among the Bedouins of Arabia – the alleged repositories of the purest form of Arabic language in which the Qur'ān was revealed. So Asad’s familiarity with the Arabic language was not like that of a person who acquires knowledge about Arabic only through academic means. Asad was quite conscious of this fact and writes:

When we look at the long list of translations – beginning with the Latin works of the high Middle Ages and continuing up to the present in almost every European tongue – we find one common denominator between their authors, whether Muslims or non-Muslims: all of them were – or are – people who acquired their knowledge of Arabic through academic study alone: that is, from books. None of them, however great his scholarship, has ever been familiar with the Arabic language as a person is familiar with his own, having absorbed the nuances of its idiom and its phraseology with an active, associative response within himself, and hearing it with an ear spontaneously attuned to the intent underlying the acoustic symbolism of its words and sentences.⁸

As, Asad thought, only such a capability could help the translator deliver the goods, he explains:
For, the words and sentences of a language – any language – are but symbols for meaning conventionally, and subconsciously, agreed upon by those who express their perception of reality by means of that particular tongue. Unless, the translator is able to reproduce within himself the conceptual symbolism of the language in question – that is, unless he hears it “sing” in his ear in all its naturalness and immediacy – his translation will convey no more than the outer shell of the literary matter to which his work is devoted, and will miss, to a higher or lesser degree, the inner meaning of the original: and the greater the depth of the original, the farther must such a translation deviate from its spirit.  

While Asad admits the high scholarship of some earlier translators of the Qur’ān, yet he insists that they lacked the intangible communion with the Arabic language. He asserts:

No doubt, some of the translators of the Qur’ān whose works are accessible to the Western public can be described as outstanding scholars in the sense of having mastered the Arabic grammar and achieved a considerable knowledge of Arabic literature; but this mastery of grammar and this acquaintance with literature cannot by itself, in the case of a translation from Arabic (and especially the Arabic of the Qur’ān), render the translator independent of that intangible communion with the spirit of the language which can be achieved only by living with and in it.  

Such a mastery and command of Arabic language along with the indispensable intangible communion with the spirit of the language put Asad definitely above his predecessors on this count. But the question is, does this qualification of a person alone guarantee that he delivers the goods in a better way? No doubt, the
vast resources of *Tafsîr* literature, books on traditions, history and lexicography were now not only accessible to Asad, but intelligible also. That is why in his long list of works of reference, among others we see books of traditions like Abû Dâ‘ûd’s, *Kitâb as-Sunnan*, Bukhârî’s *Al-Jâmi‘ as-Šâhid*, Darimi’s *Kitâb as-Sunnan*, Darqutnî’s *Kitâb as-Sunnan*, Fâth al-Bârî bi-Sharî al-Bukhârî, Ibn Hanbal’s *Al-Musnad*, *Al-Muwatta*, Nasâ‘î’s *Kitâb as-Sunnan* and Muslim’s *Kitâb as-Sunnan*. Among the classical and modern *Tafsîrs*’ Asad consulted include Tabârî’s *Jâmi‘al-Bayân ‘an Ta‘wil al-Qur‘ân*, Zamakshari’s *Al-Kashshâf ‘an Haqâ‘iq Ghawâmid at-Tanzîl*, Ibn Taymiyyah’s *Tafsîr Sitt Suwar*, Ibn Kathîr’s *Tafsîr al-Qur‘ân* and Rashîd Ridâ’s *Tafsîr al-Qur‘ân* (known as *Tafsîr al-Manâr*). Standard books on history, criticism and philology too were consulted, among them were: Zamakhshari’s *Asâs al-Balâghah*, Ibn Khalikân’s *Wafâyât al-A‘yân wa-‘Anbâ’ Abnâ‘ az-Zamân*, Ibn Ḥazm’s *Al-Muhallâ*, Taj al-‘Arûs, Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon, Jawhari’s *Tâj al-Lughah wa-Šihâh al-Arabiyyah*, *Al-Qur‘ân*, *Al-Mufraddât fi Gharîb al-Qur‘ân*, Ibn Sa‘d’s *Ṭabaqât*, and *Lisân al-‘Arab*.

Another important field, Asad was familiar with, was his knowledge of Bible, biblical sources, exegesis of Torah and knowledge of Hebrew. Asad’s interest in Islamic sciences and his learning at the libraries in Makkah and Medina, where he spent couples of years in his youth, together with his interaction with Islamic scholars gave him a good opportunity to know Islam and the issues related to it. But over and above all this is the ideological disposition of Asad, which is very crucial in determining his attitude and preferences. Surely, his personality and his personal inclinations must have had a significant influence on the course of his thought and intellectual undertakings.
Modernism had swayed Muslim intellectual thought across the globe, when Asad encountered the Islamic world with the tradition under attack to ‘adapt’ to the ‘modern needs.’ Asad was influenced by the ideas and personality of Shaykh Mustafā al-Marāghī in Cairo, in Asad’s earliest interactions with the prominent personalities of Muslims. Shaykh Marāghī happened to be an ardent follower of Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), who is regarded as the tallest figure and the pioneering personalities of the so-called ‘Islamic Modernism’ in the Muslim world. In this stream of thought, reason and its power was over emphasized. Muslim modernism has been greatly impressed by the power of reason, and kept on being fascinated by it, even when in Europe rationalism had long given place to vitalism and existentialism.¹¹

Asad’s life took a significant turn, when he migrated to Indo-Pak subcontinent and engaged himself with the translation of great book of traditions, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī – this certainly provided him a chance of acquainting himself with another important source of Islam – the Prophet’s Sunnah – one crucial subject whose knowledge is one of the pre requisites of an exegete.

However Asad’s life in Europe before embracing Islam was mostly marked by upheavals. After he embraced Islam Asad remained on a virtual move from Arabia to Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, back to Europe and America, then Africa and again to Europe. This does not mark just the adventurous trips of an adventurer but, it seems, speaks something of his personality traits as well. His intellectual engagements too depict something of a fluctuating mind. His book Islam at the Crossroads and translation of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī show him closer to the tradition. Later his engagement in the reconstruction of Pakistan as an Islamic ideological state put him in the category of an ideologue, keen enough to see his
vision of Islamic polity and governance being adopted by an emerging Muslim state. His being director of the Islamic ideological department of Punjab, Pakistan and later his appointment in the foreign department of Pakistan, which Asad says largely ignored his Islamic recommendation in its constitution making, does not reflect a personality with consistency in his thought. Being an ideologue and an ambassador of a state, which negates one's ideology does not seem to be fair. If a person is primarily an ideologue, whose commitment to his ideology is absolute, whatever it is, then he can not be supposed to offer services to a state, in such a capacity like that of an ambassador, which negates his ideological stance. His severance of relations with Pakistan foreign office, later his divorce to his Arab wife after 22 years companionship, his remarriage with an American girl, then his other intellectual undertaking from *The Road to Mecca* to the last of his books *On Homecoming*, one sees him drifting away from the tradition to something one could call, modernistic trend.

It is pertinent to see how such a vast and varied exposure and influences on Asad operated while he took upon the giant task of interpreting the Book of God. Did all these varied experiences Asad have had, contributed positively or negatively to his Qur'ān interpretations. Because all that glitters is not gold. Everything new is not good. Every new information and experience does not necessarily make one wiser or pious. Very crucial question is ‘how’ a person makes use of the information and experiences. This largely depends on the personality of the person involved. No less important is the question of assessing the worth of ‘new information’ and ‘new experience.’
It is high time for such a study of Asad’s treatment to the Book of God, as that shall, hopefully, pave the way for better undertakings in the days to come to yield better results.

Methodology

Prior to the proper discussion on the issue of ‘Methodology’ adopted by Asad in the interpretation of the Qur’an, it is pertinent to record some observations on some of the views of Asad regarding the language of the Qur’an.

Qur’ānic Arabic

Muḥammad Asad, in his plea, that a non-Arab can master Qur’ānic Arabic only when he lives among the bedouins of Central and Eastern Arabia, who have preserved the pristine Qur’ānic Arabic as it was spoken fourteen hundred years ago at the time of the revelation of the Qur’an, explains: ... This does not, however, mean that a non-Arab can never understand Arabic in its true spirit: it means no more and no less than that he, cannot really master it through academic study alone, but needs, in addition to philological learning, an instinctive “feel” of the language. Now it so happens that such a “feel” cannot be achieved by merely living among the modern Arabs of the cities. Although many of them, especially the educated ones, may have subconsciously absorbed the spirit of their language, they can only rarely communicate it to an outsider – for the simple reason that, however high their linguistic education, their daily speech has become, in the course of centuries, largely corrupted and estranged from pristine Arabic. Thus, in order to obtain the requisite ‘feel’ of the Arabic language, a non-Arab must have lived in long and intimate association with people whose daily speech mirrors the genuine spirit of their
language, and whose mental processes are similar to those of the Arabs who lived at the time when the Arabic tongue received its final colouring and inner form. In our day, such people are only the bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly those of Central and Eastern Arabia. For, notwithstanding the many dialectical peculiarities in which their speech may differ from the classical Arabic of the Qur’ān, it has remained – so far – very close to the idiom of the Prophet’s time and has preserved all its intrinsic characteristics. In other words, familiarity with the bedouin speech of Central and Eastern Arabia – in addition, of course, to academic knowledge of classical Arabic – is the only way for a non-Arab of our time to achieve an intimate understanding of the diction of the Qur’ān. And because none of the Scholars who have previously translated the Qur’ān into European languages has ever fulfilled this prerequisite, their translations have remained but distant, and faulty, echoes of its meaning and spirit.

Though Asad, in the above passage, has referred to the European translators of the Qur’ān, yet the fact remains, perhaps most of the translators of the Qur’ān, in other languages have had not lived among the bedouins of the Arabia. So the question is, do all of them have failed in rendering the Qur’ān into the respective languages? Or do their translations and interpretation suffer from being “faulty” because they did not live among the bedouins of the Arabic?

The question, that way, is not restricted to the exegetes of the Qur’ān only, but extends, by implication to all the non-Arab scholars of Islam, down the ages, who did not live among the bedouins of Arabia, yet were considered outstanding scholars of Islam and Qur’ānics? While it has been accepted by many scholars
that the purity of language used to be maintained by the bedouins, who usually remained away from cities and towns, yet the question remains to be discussed in particular reference to the Qur’ānic Arabic.

The fact remains that the Prophet Muhammad (S) was a man living in Makkah, an urban center of great significance of the then Arabia. He belonged to the tribe Quraysh. The first recipient of the Qur’ān therefore, was a man of the city, speaking and understanding the language of the Quraysh. Therefore, it is quite logical, as has been pointed out by eminent scholars, that Qur’ān was revealed in the Arabic language, which was spoken and understood by the Quraysh. Yet there are instances, when for a better understanding of certain phrases of the Qur’ān, Ṣaḥaba (R) benefited from the bedouin usages, e.g. ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās is reported to have said that he did not know the meaning of ḥā’ir al-samawat, until two of the bedouins came to him quarreling about a well and one of them used the word ḥā’ir in the sense of “beginning.”

The words Khāliq and Fāṭir are synonymous in their general meanings – yet connote different nuances. The meaning of the first word is creator (with a model) and the meaning for the second word too is ‘creator’ – (without a model). Al-Qur’ān has adopted many of the phrases of the pre Islamic times, but modified the meanings of many and created new phrases with special meanings.

The point is; has the proverbs, idioms, phrases and the diction of the Arabic language, as it was spoken, when the Qur’ān was revealed, not been preserved in the recorded form? The answer is big ‘yes.’
Another point worth considering is the contributions of the very rich Islamic tradition, is it not a repository of the meanings and connotations of the linguistic intricacies of the Qur’ān. One can hardly deny the role of the tradition in the preservation of the most valuable of the Islamic heritage – the Qur’ān, its language, linguistic nuances of its word and phrases etc. etc.

Muḥammad Asad has not talked about the so-called faulty interpretations of the Qur’ān into other languages as such, yet has put such a pre condition for a translator of the Qur’ān and exegete, which leads one to the conclusion that there could not be a correct interpretation of the Qur’ān in other language unless the interpreter has had the “feel” of Arabic language which could be obtained as per Asad, only by living among the bedouins of Central and Eastern Arabian Peninsula.

If one is acquainted with some of the very good translations of the Qur’ān in Persian and Urdu, like that of Shah Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762) Fath al-Rehmān fī Trajamāt al-Qur’ān, (in Persian), Shah Abdul Qadir’s and Shah Muḥammad Rafi’s translations of the Qur’ān in Urdu – One will certainly disagree with the position adopted by Asad on this count.

Certainly due importance must be given to the language issue, yet for the correct understanding of the language and diction of the Qur’ān, other factors too must not be ignored. The most important of them is the position of the tradition vis-à-vis the Qur’ānic phraseology and diction. If at all, such a mastery of the Arabic language cannot be obtained without having lived among the bedouins of the Arabia, certainly this deficiency, if it can be so called, can be made up with the help of the records of the language usages of the prophetic period i.e. the time of revelation of the
Qur’ān and also the way the tradition understood it over the centuries.

We have tafsīr-i-mathūr as distinct trend in the tafsīr literature which represented the traditional school of the Qur’ānic interpretation in which a verse was usually interpreted with the help of other Qur’ānic verses and the hadiths of the Prophet (S) has been entrusted by the Qur’ān to explain it to the people, it says:

*God has shown favour to believers when He sent them a messenger from among themselves, to recite His verses to them and purify them, and teach them the Book and wisdom, whereas previously they had been in plain error.*


*He it is who hath sent among the unlettered ones a messenger of their own, to recite unto them His revelations and to make them grow, and to teach them the scripture and wisdom, though heretofore they were indeed in error manifest.*

[Sūrah 62, Al-Jumu‘a Āyah 2, Pikthall’s translation]

The Prophet’s Sunnah is the Qur’ān exemplified in time-space framework and is a model for all those, who believe in the Day of Judgment. Qur’ān says:

*In God’s messenger you have a fine model for someone who looks forward to [meeting] God*
and to the Last Day, and mentions God frequently.

[The Confederates 33:21]

Shah Walī Allāh, as many other distinguished scholars, have stressed that there is the basic purport of a word and phrase of the Qur’ān, which was understood by all in the similar way – be he an urbanate or a rural person, an educated or an uneducated, a thinking man and an average person. He says:

Let it be remembered that the Qur’ān was revealed in the language of the Arabs proper. They possessed the required taste and understood the implied meanings without any difficulty, as God has said about the Qur’ān, “And the clear Book” (Sūrah Yūsuf, V.1) and “its verses are unambiguous and clear” (Sūrah Hūd, V.1). The intention of the law-giver was to avoid going deep into the interpretation of the allegorical verses of the Qur’ān, in drawing the picture of the realities of God’s attributes, in determining the doubtful and in the narration of the stories in minuteness. This was why the companions asked few questions from the Holy Prophet, very little is traceable in this connection.16

On the impact of non-Arab interactions on the Arabic language and the needs for the preservation of the original Arabic Shah Walī Allāh elaborates:

But when that age passed away and the non-Arabs mixed up with the Arabs, the original language became obsolete. At certain places difficulties arose in understanding the intended meanings, and a need was felt to investigate into the language and its grammar. This was followed by the course of asking questions and giving their answers, and thus were composed books on the
exegesis. It, therefore, became necessary, of summarily and explained properly, so that, while reflecting over them, there may arise no further need for explanation, and one may not be compelled to indulge in exaggeration in the elucidation of difficult points.\textsuperscript{17}

On the issue of possible misunderstandings regarding the Qur'\textacuteacute{n}, Shah enumerates some such probable occasions and instances and the ways to overcome them; He writes:

Thus, the failure to grasp meaning of a word is, at times, due to the use of a rare, strange word. The way to overcome this difficulty is to accept the meaning, which was taken by the companions, their immediate followers and other men of learning. Sometimes, this failure arose out of lack of understanding the abrogated and the abrogating. On certain occasions, the cause of not understanding the meaning implied in the word is that the occasion of revelation of relevant verses are not known. At times the reasons are the omission of the noun governing another (\textit{Mu\textdoubleslash{d}af}) and of the noun adjectified and the like. Sometimes the reason for not understanding the meaning is that one thing is substituted for the another, or one letter is substituted in place of another, or one noun in place of the other noun, or one verb in place of the other verb or a plural in place of a singular or a singular in place of the plural. Or it may be due to the use of the third person in place of the second person. And on some other occasion, the cause for not understanding the intended meaning is, placing as the first what deserves to be placed last and vice-versa. On certain occasions, it is due to the dispersion of the pronoun and the multiplicity of meanings intended by one word. At times, the reason for the failure to understand the intended meaning is the repetition and the amplification of the discourse. Sometimes the
reason is the brevity and abridgement, the use of metonymy and an allusion, allegory, simile and the trope. It, therefore, behoves the commentators to remain well-informed of the reality of these things, and of some other cases, when beginning to write a commentary where clarification is required they should content themselves with hints and allusions.  

From the above discussion, the primary inference is that the Qur’ān, in general, is in a language which conveys the same basic meanings to all those who understand the language. However, there could be reasons for explanations and elucidations, which has been taken care of by the traditions. This premise does not exclude the possibility of other and higher layers of meanings of the Qur’ānic words and phrases, and the nuances of the meanings, which could be explored by the more capable ones for a better or excellent understanding of the text. Even this field of Qur’ānic study is very rich. Very outstanding personalities in history have devoted the best of their talents for understanding and getting some insights into the Gharāib al-Qur’ān (Rarities of the Qur’ān). Two instances, in this regard are forthcoming. Imam al-Ghazali’s Kitāb Jawāhir al-Qur’ān [Its English version is The Jewels of the Qur’ān: Al-Ghazali’s Theory by Muḥammad Abul Quasem (London, Kegan Paul International, 1983)] and Shah Waliyullah’s treatment to Gharāib al-Qur’ān (Rarities of the Qur’ān in an exclusive chapter in his book Al-Fauz al-Kabir fi ‘Usul al-Tafsīr.

Modern interpreters show almost total disregard to the traditional explorations in this field and their plea for regarding their novel exploration as the valid explorations smack of some sort of arrogance, which does not befit Qur’ānic scholars. Here it would not be out of place to mention that the divergences from the tradition by the modern Qur’ān scholars, is not necessarily from
some valid insights they have achieved in the understanding of the Qur'ānic text.

The reasons for such divergences may be sought elsewhere. More probably in the mental framework, which has been mostly informed of the swaying influences of the Western rationality and its aversion to tradition and spirituality.

Notwithstanding other lacunas in their renderings, one is apt to say that even in English, renderings of Abdul Mājīd Daryābādī’s and that of Muḥammad Marmaduke Pickthall have succeeded in being closer to the traditional stances. However, the scope for improving the rendering in English, as stated elsewhere also, is still immense for various reasons.

The Qurʾān: “Its Own Best Commentary”

Asad, at the very outset, states that his first principle of interpretation has been to treat the Qurʾān, not comprised of individual injunctions and exhortations, but as one integral whole: that is an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, all of them classifying and amplifying one another.19

Treating the Qurʾān an ‘ethical doctrine’ does not seem to be befitting to its grandeur, which is multifaceted and multidimensional with ethical teachings/doctrine forming only part of the whole not the whole as such. However, letting one part of the Qurʾān elucidate the part of it, has been the principle of exegesis adopted by the classical interpreters like Ibn Kathīr, who regards it the first principle. Al-Qur’ān yaḏaṣiro baʿdaw haw baʿdana has been an age-old practice among the interpreters of the Qurʾān.
Ibn Taymiyyah too has, in his *Muqaddimah fi 'Usul al-Tafsir* made it as the first principle.

However, in the modernist trend, with their motto of ‘going back to the Qur’an’ and their ways of judging what is general, and what is specific, and what elucidates what is the main area where they seem to diverge from their predecessors. Asad, while talking about the operation of this principle, refers to doyen of the modernist interpreters of the Qur’an Muḥammad ʿAbduḥ, and explains:

Consequently, its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of its statements with what has been stated elsewhere in its pages, and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross-references, always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic. Whenever this rule is faithfully followed, we realize that the Qur’an is – in the words of Muḥammad ʿAbduḥ – “its own best commentary.”

**Ahistorical Approach – Need for a Balance**

Asad states about the second fundamental rule that he says he has tried to observe consistently while interpreting the Qur’an:

Secondly, no part of the Qur’an should be viewed from a purely *historical* point of view: that is to say, all its references to historical circumstances and events – both at the time of the Prophet and in earlier times – must be regarded as illustrations of the *human* condition and not as ends in themselves. Hence, the consideration of the historical occasion on which particular verse was revealed – a pursuit so dear, and legitimately so, to the hearts of the classical commentators – must never be allowed to obscure the underlying purport of that verse and its inner relevance to the ethical teaching which the Qur’an, taken as a whole, propounds.
The Qur'an being universal and for all times to come seems to suggest for some to reduce its content of historicity. While some commentators have had engaged themselves with what one could call 'too much of the historicity of Qur'anic verses – Ashabī Nuzūl and Shānī Nuzūl and also of the Qur'anic incidents of the Prophet's time and of earlier Prophets and peoples and events and occurrence therein. There seems to be reaction against that exaggeration, that too to another extreme. The inherent dangers in this extreme reaction include reducing Qur'anic descriptions to abstract concept and so-called ethical teachings only.

Qur'an's revelation (Nuzūl) some fourteen hundred years ago, and its messenger who is its first recipient (Maḥbati Waḥī), his 'being the practical Qur'an', its transmission in history – all taking place in the full light of history is in Allah's Ultimate Wisdom very significant in many respects of the Qur'anic phenomenon. Acceptance of the historical dimension of the Quranic personalities, events and occurrences do not necessarily diminish its universal validity. So on escapist attitude to the historical events, occurrences and personalities of the Qur'an are not justified. Giving due weightage to the issues relating to Shānī Nuzūl (occurrence of Revelation) has throughout been considered very helpful in understanding better the various Qur'anic verses, Shah Waliyullah, in his treatise, Al Fauz al-Kabīr fi 'Usul al-Tafsīr, has devoted a full chapter to its significance and justifiably so by almost all the interpreters of the Qur'an.

No understanding of the Qur'an in isolation can be considered complete or desirable or possible enough, ignoring the messenger of the message – who is called by the Qur'an, the noble model. Again 'Ummah too, in general, embodies, the essentials of that heritage where Qur'an formed the core. So all these factors
together shall be helpful for achieving what Qur’ān has to offer to the mankind. Notwithstanding the scope for the examination and reformation of the *Ummatic* heritage. But from a standpoint which is from within and not from without. Much of the criticism of the tradition is based on the assumptions generated by the swaying influences of the outside – the Western modes of thought.

**Translating the Untranslatable**

Asad has attempted at, what he calls ‘perhaps the first attempt at a really idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Qur’ānic message into European language.’

While Asad is fully conscious of the almost impossible task of translating the Qur’ān into any other language, yet he feels that if a person acquires the necessary capabilities he can make attempts in this direction, which no way can be called final or the best. He seems, obviously, overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Word of Allah. He says: I make no claim to having reproduced anything of the indescribable rhythm and rhetoric of the Qur’ān. No one who has truly experienced its majestic beauty could ever be presumptuous enough to make such a claim or even to embark upon such an attempt.

And I am fully aware that my renderings do not and could not really “do justice” to the Qur’ān and the layers upon of its meanings for,

> *If all the sea were ink for my Sustainer’s words,*  
> *the sea would indeed be exhausted ere my Sustainer’s words are exhausted.*

* (The Qur’ān 18:109)
Asad lays more stress in depicting nuances of the meanings, what he considers, appropriate in conveying the message. In this process, most often, he does not find fully equivalent nouns and verbs in both languages. Asad resorts to the use of qualifying adjectives and adverbs, absent in the Qur'ānic text, or even to the duplication of noun-renderings, for instance, *Shir'ah* in 5:48 as "law and way of life." As a result Asad’s translation of a few Arabic words sometimes covers two whole lines. Consequently Asad’s translation does not reflect the terse, compact even laconic style of the Qur'ān, which Marmaduke Pickthall caught so much better in his translation of 1930.24

Asad, like Abdullah Yūsuf Alī uses Christian vocabulary and violates the simplicity of the Qur'ānic language. The *basmallah* is a good case in point. Pickthall translates it as; “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful”; Asad as: “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace” (Emphasis added). Not only is the choice of “Dispenser” unfortunate, the very idea of putting *al-Rahmān* (or, in other places, *al-Hakim, al-'Azīz, al-Qādir*, etc) into superlative form clearly smacks of Christian vocabulary.25

Asad says about the style of his translation: As regards the style of my translation, I have consciously avoided using unnecessary archaisms, which would only tend to obscure the meaning of the Qur'ān to the contemporary reader. On the other hand, I did not see any necessity of rendering the Qur'ānic phrases into a deliberately “modern” idiom, which would conflict with the spirit of the Arabic original and jar upon any ear attuned to the solemnity inherent in the concept of revelation.26
Hofmann has a point in this regard and one is apt to agree with his view. He retorts:

Many translators of the Qur’an can be faulted today for the use of a high classical language which sounds both dated, let alone the fact that it is biblical. Shakespeare simply is not contemporary. I am not pleading for an “American” version (à la Irving) or a pedestrian, “cool”, colloquial style. The language of the Qur’an also in translation must reflect that it is Allah Who is speaking. At the same time, readers must not be put off by a level of speech that sounds so stilted and artificial that it loses credibility. The difference can be slight, but remains relevant, as when in 17:40 we either read “Verily, you are uttering a dreadful saying!” or “Verily, you speak an awful word” (Pickthall).27

In some cases, Asad departed from orthodoxy in the text of the translation itself. For instance, Asad eliminated the word jinn in his translation in favour of notions like good or bad impulses (derived from psychology and even psychiatry so fashionable during his youth). In Sūrat an-Nās 114:6 Asad renders jinn as “invisible forces”, in 41:26 and 55:33 as “invisible beings” and in 72:1 and 46:29 as “unseen beings.”28

Another instance where Asad has departed from orthodoxy, in translating an important Qur’ānic term ‘riba’, which has tremendous implications on spiritual, moral, social and economic life of the people. Allah has given stern warning to those who deal in ‘riba.’ Sayyid Ameenul Hasan Rizvi, says in this matter, in his book, Three Major Errors in Twelve English Translations of the Qur’ān (New Delhi, Markazi Makaba Publishers, 2001) that the erroneous translation of this word ‘riba’ which occurs in 2:275, 276, 278; 3:130; 4:161 and 30:39, distorts a very important law of
Islam. The correct translation of word ‘riba’ would be ‘interest’ and not ‘usury’ which erroneously has been done by Asad. The issue becomes more serious when the relevant footnote speaks of Asad’s deliberate choice of the word, which distorts and disturbs the almost consensus of all the jurists of all the ages on the meaning and connotations of the word ‘riba.’

Asad’s translation of the Zānía and Zānī in 24:2-3 as “adulterer” and “adulteress” whereas the correct translation should have been “fornicator” and “fornicatress” because in the said verses punishment of one hundred lashes are declared which as per the Islamic Law is the punishment for fornicator/formicatress and not for “adulterer” and “adulterers” for whom stoning to death is the punishment in Islamic law. While Asad has sought a refuge in the use of the words adulterer/adulteress ‘for simplicity’, he has not cleared it in his footnote that there is a difference in punishment in Islamic law for fornication and adultery.29

Ahmad Nezar Kobeisy has asked for the substitution of a word, “niggardly”, used among others by Muḥammad Asad in his translation of the Qur’ān (47:38) because “it is offensive to most African Americans.30

Some Instances of Good Translations

Muḥammad Asad’s work gives accurate meaning to certain terms, with the force of their original precision. For example the Arabic word ‘Muttaqi’ in conventional translation means God fearing. Asad translates the term as “God-Conscious.” He argues that the conventional translation of Muttaqi as “God-fearing” does not adequately render the positive content of this expression – namely, the awareness of His all-presence and the desire to mould one’s
existence in the light of this awareness. He also disapproves of the translation of *Muttaqī*, adopted by some interpreters as, “one who guards himself against evil” or “one who is careful of his duty”, because it does not give more than one aspect of the concept of God-Consciousness.\(^{31}\)

Similarly the term *al-ghayb* is commonly translated as the unseen. Asad calls it erroneous and says that the term is used to denote all those sectors or phases of reality which lie beyond the range of human perception and cannot therefore be proved or disproved by scientific observation. Asad translates the term “*al-Ghayb*” as “that which is beyond the reach of human perception.”\(^{32}\)

Asad’s translation of the term ‘*Zakāt*’ is very saluting. He translates it “the purifying dues” when referring to Muslims. If it refers to others he uses alms and charity.\(^{33}\)

Asad’s translation, its blemishes apart, has rightfully been considered a notable addition to the body of English translations couched in chaste English and being highly readable by critics of the Qur’ān Translations in English.\(^{34}\)

**A Note on the Use of Biblical English Expressions**

Some recent studies conducted in the West, have once more highlighted the need for avoidance of Biblical English expressions in translating the Book of God. It has been seen that such usages more often completely distort the most essential Qur’ānic ideas and expressions. Again many of the most fundamental dimensions of the Qur’ān are simply not getting across to their audiences. In this regard James W. Morris writes: ... it suffices to observe that virtually nothing in the contemporary semantic fields of English Biblical vocabulary corresponds to the affective, symbolic and
wider semantic field of Qur'anic Arabic. The natural result is that the recurrent usage of a few basic English terms such as 'belief' (a notion which is completely non-existent in the Qur'an), 'faith' (semantically assumed to be the opposite of knowing and reason), 'slave' or 'hell' can be guaranteed to render serious understanding of the Qur'an, not to mention all the other dimensions of Islamic civilization rooted in the language and world-view of the Qur'an, utterly impossible. 

Though Muhammad Asad, in his translation of the book of God has tried to get rid of lot of archaisms, yet his renderings could not be totally free from them. Asad does not seem to have made any effort in the direction of Islamicisation of the English language. While he has tried to modify the conventional translation of a few Qur'anic terms, and attempted at highlighting some more dimensions of those terms in his exegetical notes, yet the fuller connotations of the actual terms have still evaded the reader. The fact remains there are no accurate equivalents of the terms like 'Imān, Ṣabr, Taqwa, Tawhīd, Wālī, Kufr, etc. etc. Were it not preferable to retain these terms as such and explain their connotations as best as possible in the exegetical notes!

**Biblical References**

With his command on the biblical resources and the knowledge of Hebrew, one comes across many interesting discussions with references to the Bible in Asad's exegetical work. Though Asad makes it clear that the Gospel frequently mentioned in the Qur'an is not identical with what is known today as the Four Gospels, but refers to an original, since lost, revelation bestowed upon Jesus and known to his contemporaries under its Greek name of Evangelion ('Good Tiding'), on which the Arabicized form Injīl is
Asad is of the opinion that it was probably the source from which the Synoptic Gospels derived much of their material and some of the teachings attributed to Jesus. Asad says that the fact of it having been lost and forgotten is alluded to in the Qur'ān in 5:14.

Asad has beautiful explanation of the verse which says of Qur'ān confirming the earlier revelation (3:3). He *inter alia* says:

... Now this, taken together (a) with the fact—frequently stressed in the Qur'ān and since established by objective scholarship— that in the course of millenia the Bible has been subjected to considerable and often arbitrary alteration, and (b) with the fact that many of the laws enunciated in the Qur'ān differ from the laws of the Bible, brings us forcibly to the conclusion that the "confirmation" of the latter by the Qur'ān can refer only to the basic truths still discernable in the Bible, and not to its time-bound legislation or to its present text— in other words, a confirmation of whatever was extant of its basic teachings at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān and it is this that the phrase *mā bayna yadayhi* expresses in this context as well as in 5:46 and 48 or in 61:6 (where it refers to Jesus’ confirming the truth of “whatever there still remained [i.e., in his lifetime] of the Torah”).

While interpreting verse 6 of *Sūrah as-Saff* (61) regarding Jesus giving glad tidings about the advent of the Prophet— Aḥmad (S), Asad writes in an impressive way, demonstrating his knowledge of the bible and biblical sources:

The prediction is supported by several references in the Gospel of St. John to the Paráklētos (usually rendered as "Comforter") who was to come after Jesus. The designation is almost certainly a
corruption of Periklytos ("the Much-Praised"), an exact Greek translation of the Aramaic term or name Mawḥamana (It is to be borne in mind that Aramaic was the language used in Palestine at the time of, and for some centuries after, Jesus, and was thus undoubtedly the language in which the original – now lost – texts of the Gospels were composed). In view of the phonetic closeness of Periklytos and Paráklētos it is easy to understand how the translator – or, more probably, a later scribe – confused these two expressions. It is significant that both the Aramaic Mawḥamana and Greek Periklytos have the same meaning as the two names of the last Prophet, Muḥammad and Aḥmad, both of which are derived from the verb ḥamida ("he praised") and the noun ḥamd ("praise"). And even more unequivocal prediction of the advent of the Prophet Muḥammad – mentioned by name, in its Arabic form – is said to be forthcoming from the so-called Gospel of St. Barnabas, which, though now regarded as apocryphal, was accepted as authentic and was read in the churches until the year 496 of the Christian era, when it was banned as "heretical" by a decree of Pope Gelasius. However, since the original text of that Gospel is not available (having come down to us only in an Italian translation dating from the late sixteenth century), its authenticity cannot be established with certainty.⁴⁰

Asad’s quoting from the biblical sources seems to be aimed at either for some elucidation of the Qur’ānic description of that material from the bible which in his view is not contradictory to the Qur’ānic purport. Also there are quotes from the bible which are similar to the Qur’ānic descriptions. For example, Asad renders verse 2 of the Sūrah Maryam (19:2) as:
An account of the grace which thy Sustainer bestowed upon His servant Zachariah.

In the corresponding note Asad writes:
Lit., “An account of thy Sustainer’s grace upon...”, etc. According to the account in the Gospels, not contradicted by the Qur’ān (Emphasis added by the author, AMK), Zachariah’s wife Elisabeth was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Cf Luke i, 36).

Another example in this regard, can be cited from the note 12 of the Sūrah ‘Ankabūt (29:14), in which Asad quotes biblical statement which is in conformity with the Qur’ānic description and gives his comments on the issue. Verse 14 of Sūrah 29 is rendered by Asad as:

\[
\text{And, indeed, [in times long past] We sent forth Noah unto his people, and he dwelt among them a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them while they were still lost in evil doing.}
\]

Asad in note one of the notes on the above quoted verse explains: Sc., “and despite this great length of time was unable to convince them of the truth of his mission.” The identical figure – 950 years – is given in the Bible (Genesis IX, 29) as Noah’s life span. By repeating this element of the Biblical legend, the Qur’ān merely stresses the fact the duration of a Prophet’s mission has nothing to do with its success or failure, since “all true guidance is God’s guidance” 3:73 and, as we are often told in Qur’ān, “God guides [only] him that wills [to be guided].” Thus, the reference to Noah is meant to reassure the believer who may be distressed at seeing
the majority of his fellow-men refuse to accept, all at once, a truth which appears self-evident to him.42

From the above notes, it becomes clear how Asad uses biblical informations to elucidate his understanding of the Qur'ānic purports.

Nevertheless, quoting biblical sources in the interpretation of the Qur'ān remains debatable. The modernist trend lead by ‘Abduh and others have been repugnant to the uses of Irā‘īlīyyāt (Jewish legends) when expounding what they call Qur'ānic tales. Baljon in his book, Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation has quoted Gibb’s Modern Trends in Islam (1947), p. 3, about the issue and writes:

H.A.R. Gibb and others have already noticed the modernist’s repugnance against the traditional use of Irā‘īlīyyāt (Jewish legends) when expounding Koranic tales.43

But Asad makes frequent references to Bible in his exegetical notes. Hofmann says that among other reasons for the reservations and the opposition Asad faced from the orthodoxy is his use of the biblical sources for the elucidation of Qur'ānic descriptions.44

**Selection and Preference of Classical Sources**

As has been noted elsewhere, Asad’s exegesis is full with the quotations from the classical commentators, philologists and lexicographer’s along with his most favorite Tafsīr al-Manār. Rarely one comes across such a rich collection of opinions and exegetical comments of the classical commentators in one place along with the exegete’s comments in English language, notwithstanding, the recent work of Maḥmoud Ayoub in which he quotes from some of the classical commentaries – Shi‘ī and Sunni
under relevant Qur'ānic verses (The work, probably is not complete as yet). Asad usually quotes them verbatim, yet at times says that the particular idea he has derived from their commentaries Asad’s selection of the classical commentaries is selective, he uses them and makes a comparison of them when needs them for the elucidation of any point. It is not that he quotes them equally in each and every verse. Though Asad quotes from wide range of the classical Tafsīr, yet he is very conspicuous in ignoring or avoiding references or quotations from Mystic interpreters for, obviously, his aversion to such interpretation. As Asad, lays lot of stress on the use of reason, rather over emphasized its utility, so, consequently he quotes and prefers the explanation offered by the Crypto-Mu‘atāzilīte interpreter Zamakhshārī. He is similarly generous in quoting philosophical interpretations of Imam Rāzi. Yet at times he gives preference to Ibn Kathīr and Ṭabarī when his point of view is elucidated or confirmed by their interpretations. Two instances in this regard are quoted below; verse 2 of the Sūrah Yūnus (Jonah) is rendered by Asad as:

These are the messages of divine writ, full of wisdom.

In the exegetical note on the above quoted verse Asad explains: The term ḥakīm – which, when qualifying an animated being, may be translated as “wise” – has here the connotation of a means of imparting wisdom. Some of the classical commentators (e.g. Ṭabarī) are of the opinion that the “divine writ” (Kitāb) mentioned here is the Qurʾān as a whole while others (e.g., Zamakshārī) see in it a reference to this particular Sūrah. In view of the sequence, it seems to me that the former interpretation is preferable.45
Again, Asad renders V.40 of the *Sūrah Yūnus* as:

> And there are among them such as will in time come to believe in this [divine writ], just as these are among them such as will never believe in it; and thy Sustainer is fully aware as to who are the spreaders of corruption.

In the corresponding exegetical note, Asad explains:

The verb *Yu'menūn*, which occurs twice in this verse, can be understood as connoting either the present tense – “[such as] believe”, resp. “[such as] do not believe’ – or the future tense. The future tense (adopted by me) is the meaning unequivocally attributed to it by Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr; some of the other authorities, like Zamakhsharī and Rāzī, prefer the present tense, but nevertheless regard the other interpretation as legitimate (See also *Manār* XI, 380).

Among the modern sources, Asad often quotes ‘Abdūh and *Tafsīr al-Manār*, demonstrating, beyond any shadow of doubt, his preference for rationalistic school of interpretations – that way his exegesis too becomes susceptible to the pitfalls of the modernistic interpretation of the book of God.

**Revelation, Reason and Rationality**

The debate regarding the place of reason in comprehending Revelation has taken a significant new turn with the advent of Renaissance in the West and consequent debates on the subjects related to religion *per se*. In the course of Islamic intellectual history, the discourse had taken the center stage in the wake of influx of Greek thought in the Muslim intellectual realm. Under the influence of the West’s intellectual sway, the modernist trend
in the Muslims started to reformulate their response to the debate. Though, among the Muslim modernists, in the words of Baljon, 'more or less in line with traditional thought of Islam, the relation of reason and revelation is not regarded as antipodal, but as complementary... yet their understanding of reason seems to be considerably different from that of the classical period.

In the classical period of Islam, those who talked of 'Aql and stressed on its full utilizations seem to be quite comfortable with the spiritual world and the spiritual dimensions of the reality. For them, miracles and supernatural phenomena were not 'unreasonable.' Qur'ānic position regarding the use of 'Aql is very significant to the discussion. It must be noted that the word 'aql as noun is never used in the Qur'ān: its synonyms like lubb (pl. albāb), hilm (pl. ahlām), hijr, nuha, qalb, fu'ād and alike are used. The derived forms from the root 'aql are used in forty nine verses: all in the form of verb:

The form 'aqaloohu one time (2:75)
The form n'aqilu one time (67:10)
The form yaqiluha one time (29:43)
The form yaqliün 25 times

In the perspective, it is the proper direction of the use of 'aql when it becomes an appreciative tool. Al-Qur'ān's usages of even the synonymous works of 'aql lead us to the firm conclusion that unless it is God-directed, it loses all its validity and even becomes a curse in place of being a blessing. Qur'ān in unequivocal terms has condemned the arrogance of reason.

Rationality, as it has developed in the West, has taken a space in the intellectual discourse of the modernist Muslims which far exceeds its legitimate place in a religious discourse. Needless to overemphasize that in the epistemology of the West, there is total
denial of any other channel of knowing the truth or the Ultimate Reality except the ‘reason’, the rational faculty of man. Modernism has made rationality as coordinate of materialism, thus this-worldly. Reason and rationality has been made the only criteria of knowing the Truth. Right from Muḥammad ‘Abduh, to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muḥammad Asad, all seem to be under tremendous influence of modernism and stretch the role of reason to unacceptable limits and try to understand the Truth or the Reality with overstretched reason. Though all the three had significant variations in their intellectual capacities, personal dispositions and historical peculiarities, yet they shared the common basic denominator of being excessively impressed by the West. They tried to impress upon their coreligionists to understand the Qur’ān in the light of their newly found, so-called rational arguments. They, in their enthusiasms tried to reconcile the religious truth and their rationalistic thought. Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, following in the footsteps of Muḥammad ‘Abduh, distinguishes four stages of guidance for man: i) by instinct; ii) by the senses; iii) by reason; iv) by revelation and Prophets. Each of the first three stages is in need of a higher one for check and correction. If, for instance, our senses tell us that the sun has size of a golden fish, correction by the intellect is required. Thus revelation ‘perfects’ the guidance, offered by reason...

Sir Syed’s *Tafsīr* of the Qur’ān and his attempts at stripping the miracles recorded in the Qur’ān of their supernatural elements and re-creating these as ordinary events conforming to the laws of nature are now part of the past history — largely considered 19th century phenomenon.

But it seems, a bit strange when we see Muḥammad Asad, whose contributions to the Qur’ānic interpretation come to us almost a
century later, when the sway of rationalism in the West had already given way to romanticism, being unduly obsessed by the rationalism. On the intellectual plane, at times, he admits the limitations of reason, yet at the operational level he succumbs to it. As is the case with the Pseudo-rationalists, they are uncomfortable with the miracles; just observe the tone and tenor and the argument reflecting Asad’s evasion from the conventional understanding of the meaning of miracle in the exegetical note on verse 109 of the Sūrah 6 (Al-An‘ām) Asad’s version of the verse is:

Now they swear by God with their most solemn oaths that if a miracle were shown to them they would indeed believe in this (divine Writ) Say: “Miracles are in the power of God alone.”

Lit., “Miracles are only with God.” It is to be noted that the Qur’ānic term āyah denotes not only a “miracle” (in the sense of a happening that goes beyond the usual – that is, commonly observable – course of nature), but also a “sign” or “message”: and the last mentioned significance is the one which is by far the most frequently met with in the Qur’ān. Thus, what is commonly described as a “miracle” constitutes, in fact, an unusual message from God, indicating – sometimes in a symbolic manner – a spiritual truth which would otherwise have remained hidden from man’s intellect. But even such extraordinary, “miraculous” messages cannot be regarded as “supernatural”: for the so-called “laws of nature” are only a perceptible manifestation of “God’s way” (Sunnat Allah) in respect of His creation – and, consequently, everything that exists and happens, or could conceivably exist or happen, is “natural” in the innermost sense of the word irrespective of whether it confirms to the ordinary course of events or goes beyond it. Now since the extraordinary messages
referred to manifest themselves as a rule, through the instrumentality of those specially gifted and divinely elected personalities known as "Prophets", these are sometimes spoken of as "performing miracles" - a misconception which the Qur'ān removes by the words, "Miracles are in the power of God alone" (See also 17:59 and the corresponding note 71). It is interesting to contrast the above explanation by that of Martin Lings and Schuon, again remarkable in the difference in tone and tenor and the nature of their argument: Ling's writes:

One aspect of the transcendent, which is most frequently called in question, is the miraculous. To deny miracles is thought to be intelligent and even intellectual. In reality such a denial results from an exceedingly unintelligent rationalism. A glimmering of intellectuality would make it clear that miracles are inevitable if there is to be any operative bond or link - and that is what the word religion means between God and the man. Schuon elaborates:

“If we term ‘natural’ that which simply obeys the logic of things, the supernatural is also natural, but it is so on a scale far vaster than that of physical causality, that of this lower world. The supernatural is the “divinely natural” which, irrupting into an eminently contingent and limited plane of the natural, contradicts the laws of this plane... in virtue of a far less contingent and limited causality. If “God exists” - really and fully and not as some unconscious and passive power as the naturalists and diests would have it - then miracles cannot not be.

How the words “intellect” and “reason” have been related to each other in the course of West’s history, Martin Lings sheds light:
In the 'Dark Ages' students were taught that the faculties are ranged in hierarchy, of which the summit is Intellect, in as much as it is concerned with transcendent realities, whereas reason, which ranks as a subordinate second to it, is limited to this world. Since 'the Enlightenment' however the Intellect in its original sense has been withdrawn from the attention of the students; but the word itself, brought down from the supernatural level, has been retained in virtue of its high-sounding effect. In particular, its much used adjective has now taken on the sense of 'mentally active'; and since much of the activity is concerned with questioning the existence of the transcendent, many of the so-called 'intellectuals' are at the opposite pole from true intellectuality. The confusion is so widespread that it would seem great paradox – and yet it would be true – to say that religious faith of all that is now 'officially' recognized as a human possibility, comes nearest to intellectual awareness, though it must be admitted that the two do not coincide unless we understand faith in its higher sense of certitude.\textsuperscript{55}

Martin Lings stresses for the re-establishment of the normal hierarchical relationship and \textit{inter alia}, says:

The reason must become once more conscious of its need for the guidance of a higher authority – one authority which is not, however, subjectively other than it, inasmuch as both intellect and reason are different reaches of the same intelligence, the same ray of light proceeding from the Divine Truth. But the theoretic or virtual restoration of the hierarchy is no more than a beginning, albeit a necessary one. As to it actualizations, that is possible only on certain conditions, which cannot be set aside...\textsuperscript{56}
Science is adamant in excluding all the references to metaphysical dimensions of the reality. It insists that physical senses only provide the necessary truths about the matter. Reason is the sole criterion. Qur'ānic epistemology not only affirms the proper significance of physical senses and reason but speaks of Qualb and Fu'ād and Revelation. It warns mankind against entertaining wrong notions based on speculations. It highlights the inborn, innate, intrinsic faculties of man, which fathom the larger part of the reality, which is beyond the physical aspect of it. It concludes that the lowest level of that innate faculty is rationality while the highest part is represented by the faculty to which is addressed Wahi-Illahi (The Revelation).

Inferences

(a) Jinn

Asad has devoted an exclusive appendix (III) to ‘On the term and Concept of Jinn’, where in he has tried to give an explanation which is a clear departure from the Orthodoxy. He explained in detail what jinn (and Shaytān) might mean in specific context: spiritual forces, angelic forces, satanic forces, occult powers, invisible or hitherto unseen being (994 p.). Thus in Sūrat an-Nās 144:6 Asad renders jinn as “invisible forces”, in 41:26 and 55:33 as “invisible beings”, and in 72:1 and 46:29 as “unseen beings.” In the Appendix and in his footnotes to both 46:29 and 72:1 Asad goes so far as to imply that jinn here might refer to humans, i.e. strangers.

Asad, in exegetical note, on the verse one of the sūrah al-Jinn (The seventy-second Sūrah), where he translates Jinn as the unseen beings, refers to the incident when Qur'ān says, that a
group of *Jinn* listened to the Qur’ān. Asad, here ignores all the hadith description and the opinions of the classical commentators. And, *inter alia*, says: ... As pointed out there, the *jinn* are referred to in the Qur’ān in many connotations. In a few cases – i.e., in the present instance and in 46:29-32 – this expression may possibly signify "hitherto unseen beings", namely, strangers who had never before been seen by the people among and to whom the Qur’ān was then being revealed. From 46:30 (which evidently relates to the same occurrences as the present one) it transpires that the *jinn* in question were followers of the Mosaic faith... All this leads one to the assumption that they may have been Jews from distant parts of what is now called the Arab world, perhaps from Syria or even Mesopotamia. I should, however, like to stress that any explanation of this occurrence is purely tentative.\(^{57}\)

In contrast to the Asad’s assumptions, the traditional concept about *Jinn*, as seems to be predominantly reflective of its Islamic usage – including that of the Qur’ān is that *Jinn* are an independent species of creation about which little is known except that unlike men, who were created out of earth, they were created out of fire. But like men, God’s message has also been addressed to them and they too have been endowed with the capacity to choose between good and evil, between obedience and disobedience.\(^{58}\)

(b) **Isrā’and Mi’rāj**

Appendix IV (996-998), has been devoted to the discussion “The Night Journey.” Asad saw in *isrā’* and *mi’rāj* a mystical experience of purely spiritual nature, not a physical occurrence: a real vision (and therefore an objective reality and not a physical occurrence: a real vision and therefore an objective reality and not
just a dream) performed by Muḥammad’s soul without his body. Asad mainly argues that the entire occurrence happened in the non-material world.

While overwhelming majority of Muslims believe, corresponding to the belief of the most of the companions of the Prophet, and very strong arguments in their favour, that the ‘Ascension’ and ‘the Night Journey’ was with body and soul, yet a small number hold that the journey was of the Prophet’s spirit only, not along with body.⁵⁹

One may argue with Asad that his aversion to accepting the majority view and forwarding argumentation and explanation in favour of the contrary view is not convincing, yet this whole discourse hinges on the modernist consternations. More curious is Asad’s bringing in the Western psychology to aid his argument – a science which has its basis in the materialist philosophical assumptions – which renders it incapable of gaining insights into the greater realm of truth which lies beyond the matter.

(c) Dhū’l-Qarnayn an unhistorical personality

Asad in his usual refrain from the tradition, takes shelter in extending his oft-used ‘allegory’ to Dhū’l-Qarnayn as well. Perhaps to avoid historical controversies as to the identity of his person, Asad calls him as allegorical. ‘The allegory of Dhū’l Qarnayn’, in verse 18:83, “is meant to illustrate the qualities of a powerful and just ruler, it is possible to assume that this designation is an echo of the above-mentioned ancient symbolism, which being familiar to the Arabs from very early times – had acquired idiomatic currency in their language long before the advent of Islam.”⁶⁰
Is it quite academic, to call a person Qur’ān alludes to, and tradition affirms, as allegory, perhaps for want of a definitive opinion concerning Dhū’al-Qarnayn’s identity? While Qur’ān basic aim is not to reveal history, and in its historical allusions and illustration it has definite purpose – of approximating to man insights into the realm of truth, yet it must not necessarily engender a tendency of refrain from the historical veracity of the incidents, occurrence and events. Mawdūdī’s approach, in this regard, seems quite appropriate; he, while trying to decipher the purport of the narration, does not seem to refrain from the obvious existence of the phenomenon, unless there is some sufficient indication suggesting allegorical interpretation. As to the conflicting reports in the tradition, he tries to sift the material, weigh the arguments for and against the various versions, makes a judgment and speaks about the nature of his judgment. For example Mawdūdī gives a very plausible explanations of the issue of Dhū’al-Qarnayn. In his note and appendix on the relevant verse, Mawdūdī inter alia, says:

The identity of Dhū’al-Qarnayn has long been a contentious issue, early commentators of the Qur’ān were generally inclined to believe that it referred to Alexander. The characteristics attributed to Dhū’al-Qarnayn in the Qur’ān, however, hardly apply to Alexander. In the light of the latest historical evidence, contemporary commentators on the Qur’ān are inclined to believe that Dhū’al-Qarnayn signifies the Persian Emperor, Cyrus. This, in any case, seems more plausible. Nevertheless, the information available to date does not enable us to form a definitive opinion concerning Dhū’al-Qarnayn’s identity.61
(d) Both Luqmān and Al-Khidr are mythological figures

Luqmān, referred to in verse 31:12, is, we are told a "mythical figure." The Holy Qur'ān uses it as "long before the advent of Islam the person of Luqmān had become a focal point of innumerable legends, stories and parables expressive of wisdom and spiritual maturity... as it uses the equally mythical figure of Al-Khidr in Sūrah 18."  

While Qur'ān does not mention the name of al-Khidr, only alludes to him a person, whose true identity whether he was an angel or a human has remained debatable among the scholars of the Qur'ān, Ḥadīth names him al-Khidr Mawdūdī, in his exegetical note on the issue, has quoted traditional opinion and arguments revolving the matter, and concluded that Al-Khidr was an angel. It is rather strange that Asad, calls him a mythical figure.

More serious seems to be the case of Luqmān, who is mentioned by name in the Qur'ān and his counseling to his son quoted, clearly to impress upon those who believe and experience wise people giving the most wise counseling to one's children, to learn from him, how he emphasises on the Oneness of Allah and total abstinence from polytheism etiquettes of obedience to parents etc. Doesn't it seem quite outrageous to term Luqmān a mythical figure by Asad for his allegedly not being fully satisfied over the arguments and evidence in supports of his identity.

Does Qur'ān encourage myths and talk of mythical figures to convey the great messages and insights of very high value? No definitely not. And why a refrain from accepting the clear cut reference to a person who has all through been known as a historical figure?
(e) Jesus did not speak in the cradle

Asad with regard to verse 3:45, writes that "it is a metaphorical allusion to the Prophetic wisdom which was to inspire Jesus from a very early age." For him, these verses "seem to be in the nature of a trope, projecting the shape of things to come... using the past tense to describe something that was to become real in the future." Alternatively, Asad suggests that Jesus' declarations in 19:30-33 might have been spoken at a much later time, after he had reached maturity, so that these verses were "an anticipatory description..." Asad's admirer, like Murad Hofmann, too feel uncomfortable with Asad's evasion to accept the miraculous nature of the incidents and said: "Here again, a miracle is ruled out on merely rationalistic grounds".

Another divergence not only from the tradition, but from the explicit meanings of the Qur'anic description. If one looks at the relevant verses in the Sūrah al-İmran and Sūrah an-Nisā' and Sūrah Maryam; there seems to be overwhelming evidence pointing to Allah's unlimited power on creating things and bringing forth phenomena which normally people think impossible; Asad's avoiding the obvious meaning of the verses of the Qur'ān which speak of miracles seems to be a case of rather obsession with Pseudo-rationalism.

(f) Jesus not taken up bodily

In his comments on verse 4:155, Asad writes: "Nowhere in the Qur'ān is there any warrant for the popular belief that God has taken up Jesus bodily in his life time, into heavens. The expression God exalted him unto Himself...denotes the elevation of Jesus to the realm of God's special grace..."
In the rationalistic disposition, bodily Ascension of Jesus is simply not possible, hence the refrain!

(g) Ibrāhīm was not thrown into fire

On this issue Asad’s admirer Murad Hofmann feels constrained to admit: But with Ibrāhīm (21:69; 29:24) Asad finds himself on thinner ice when he deduces that he was not only not saved from the fire, but was never thrown into it. It is true that the Qur’ān does not explicitly state that Ibrāhīm was in the fire. But to say that the phrase “God saved him from the fire” (29:24) “point rather to the fact of his not having been thrown into it” seems to place limits on Allah’s ways and power of intervention.

Probably confronted by the Pseudo-rationalists’ similar, rather outrageous treatment to the obvious miracle, Mawlana Mawdūdī, in his commentary on the relevant Qur’ānic verse, takes them to task in a befitting way. Being fully convinced of his arguments on the subject, his views are reproduced below:

Both the words of the verse and context indicates that Abraham’s opponents did indeed carry out their threat. They prepared a pit of fire and threw Abraham into it, but God commanded the fire to cool, thus preventing Abraham from suffering any harm.

This is doubtlessly a miracle narrated by the Qur’ān. Nonetheless, these are still those people who are apologetic about such miracles, and who resort to far-fetched interpretations so as to explain them away. They would appear to believe that it is impossible for God to do anything, which runs counter to the routine working of the cosmic system. One may well, if such is their will, ask why they even bother to believe in God in the first place. It is also possible that many of those who resort to such far-
fetched explanations do so because the ‘rationalists’ of our time deny all miracles. If this is the case, one is quite justified in asking why they feel it incumbent upon themselves to convince everybody of their views. One would be better advised to leave well alone those who are not prepared to believe in the Qurʾān as it is. It is no use trying to mould the Qurʾān according to the whims of such people when the Qurʾān resists such attempts at virtually every step. How can such an effort be considered a healthy and justified means of propagating the Qurʾān? (For further elaboration see al-‘Ankabūt 29, n. 39).  

(h) Allegories and Symbolism

Muḥammad Asad has devoted a full-fledged Appendix (One) to ‘On Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān’, this demonstrates the earnestness and primacy Asad gives to it for proper understanding of the Qurʾān. Asad considers verse 7 of Sūrah al ‘Imrān ‘a key-phrase of all key-phrases’: the statement to the effect that the Qurʾān “contains messages that are clear in and by themselves (āyāt muḥkamāt) as well as others that are allegorical (mutashābīhāt).” It is this verse which represents, in an absolute sense, a key to the understanding of the Qurʾānic message and makes the whole of it accessible to “people who think” (li-qawmīn Yatafakkarūn).  

Qurʾānic scholars of all times have given special attention to the above cited verse and highlighted its significance. Among others Imām Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Shāh Waliyullah (d. 1762) too have specially shed light on the subject. In this background, Asad’s comments about the significance of the term and the Ummah’s attitude to the Qurʾān seems to be misplaced. Asad’s following statement gives the impression as if he is the first scholar of the
Qur'ān who has discovered the significance of the verse (key-phrase of the key-phrases as Asad calls it) and opened the way for right understanding of the Qur'ān. Asad *inter alia* writes:

...Without a proper grasp of what is implied by this later term, much of the Qur'ān is liable to be – and *in fact has often been* – *grossly misunderstood both by believers* *(Emphasis added)* and by such as refuse to believe in its divinely-inspired origin... Asad’s discussion and his application of the allegory and symbolism to almost every such event, occurrence and phenomenon which, seems to him not conforming with rationalistic dispositions is marked departure from the traditional understanding and usage of the verse. Traditional scholars declared anything allegorical or symbolic in the Qur'ān as allegorical only if they found ‘*qarīna’* (indicator) for it. It is not that anything which they found supernatural, they would call it allegorical as has been the case with Asad. Again allegorical interpretation does not necessarily mean negating the reality of the entity discussed in the āyat in the spiritual realm and reducing it to either a metaphor or a material phenomenon. To believe in *al-Ghayb*, does not mean only that there are areas to the truth which are beyond our perceptions and imaginations as rationalist try to impress. But it necessarily includes our firm faith in the substantial reality of the spiritual realm, which the rationalists seem to be uncomfortable with. Imām Ghazālī, *inter alia* says on the benefit of employing allegories in the Qur'ān.

...All this happened because their intellect was confined to the study of shapes of things and their imaginative forms; their consideration was not extended to the spirit and realities of things, and they did not understand the *parallelism between the visible world and the invisible*. Since they did not understand that, and
since the outward aspect of the questions seemed to them contradictory, they themselves strayed from the right path and led others astray. Neither did they understand any thing from the spiritual world through immediate experience (dhawaq) such as the understanding of the special people (Khawāṣṣ), nor did they believe in the unseen, as is the belief of the layman. Thus their intelligence destroyed them. Ignorance is nearer to solution than defective prudence and imperfect intelligence.\(^{73}\)

About those who do not go beyond their senses and imagination, Ghazâli says:

...Know that the majority of the people are not aware of the most of the work of God, especially the noblest of these works. Rather their understanding is confined to the world of sense and imagination, which form the last of the results of the invisible world and are like the rind most distant from the pith. One who has not gone beyond this stage has, as it were, seen nothing of the pomegranate except its rind, or of man's wonders except his outward shape.\(^{74}\)

Thus for Imam Ghazali, it is not supra-sensory statements of the Qur'ān that need to be interpreted as figurative or allegorical representation of sensory phenomena, but on the contrary 'allegory' for him are statements about the corporeal world which represent a spiritual supra-sensory reality. This is on the whole representative of mainstream Islamic tradition. Thus Asad, and his like, stand the traditional notion of allegory on its head by considering problematic supra-sensory reality and feeling compelled to give its materialistic interpretation.
(i) Abrogation (*Nasakh*)

Asad, in line with the modernist trend, has understood the word 'Nasakh' in the meaning of abrogation only, and held that there is no verse in the Qur’ān which has been abrogated and dismisses the "Theory of Abrogation" as a fanciful assertion, "which calls to mind the image of a human author correcting, on second thought, the proofs of the manuscript, deleting one passage and replacing it with another -- there does not exist a single reliable Tradition to the effect that the Prophet ever declared a verse of the Qur’an to have been abrogated."\(^75\)

Asad, understands that the Qur’ānic purport in verse 106 of *Sūrah* Baqarah relates to the suppression of the Biblical dispensation by that of the Qur’ān.\(^76\) Verse 106 of *sūrah* two as rendered by Asad is:

\begin{quote}
Any message which We annul or consign to oblivion. We replace with a better or a similar one. Dost thou not know that God has the power to will anything?
\end{quote}

The meaning of "Nasakh" as understood generally in the classical period is that of *Takhsees* (particularizing, contextualising), not abrogation as such. With a small number of those who use ‘Nasakh’ in the sense of abrogation, the majority does not approve of this understanding.

In his efforts to resolve the issue, Shah Waliyullah brought down the number of verses considered *mansūkh* from twenty one to five. Allamah Anwar Shah Kashmiri, an outstanding scholar of 29th century in his book Faḍlul Barī ruled out that there is any verse in the Qur’ān which is abrogated. Abū Muslim Isfahānī, not a Muʿatázīlī (who mainly propound the theory that there is no verse
in the Qur’ān which is abrogated) too advocates that no verse of
the Qur’ān stands abrogated. Noted Qur’ānic scholar Hameedud Din Farahi, too understands that the said verse relates to the
abrogation of the earlier divine message (as carried by earlier Prophets) and not to any part of the Qur’ān itself. Shah Waliyullah
has devoted a full fledged chapter as to the meaning and significance of Nasakh in his ‘Al-Fauz al-Kabīr fī ‘Usūl al-Tafsīr.’
About the classical understanding of Naskh he inter alia says:

...The meaning of abrogation, according to them, is the removal of
some of the qualities of one verse by some other verse whether the
removal will be due to the fact that the time for acting upon the
abrogated verse has come to an end or the reason may be diversion
of the speech from the unexpected meaning to the expected one, or
because of the mention of some restriction which was only accidental or the reason may be the particularization of the general
or the cause be the explanation of what differentiates the textual (mansūs) and the one which is plainly analogical, or it may be due
to the eradication of the pagan customs or the abrogation of the
preceding law (Shariat).\(^77\)

(j) Hijāb (Head Covering)

Asad’s novel interpretation of the verses 24:31, has had a very divisive impact on the Muslims who have had been under tremendous pressure by the all swaying Western civilization to do away with the head covering. Asad’s assertion has been that the Qur’ān does not specifically ask Muslim women to cover the head. Though he admitted that in the Prophet’s time Muslim women wore head covering, but says that it was in tune with their civilizational modes. Asad does mention that a women’s public
exposure traditionally is restricted to her face, hands and feet, but he fails to indicate that this is based on *aḥādīth*.\(^7\)

Reports from authentic *aḥādīth* speak of dress changes adopted by Muslim women with the reception of the revelations related to the dress code for women. Also indicative is the Prophet’s involvement and direction as to the import of the verses related to *ḥijāb*.

Asad’s approach is total neglect of not only the Muslim tradition but also of the authentic *Ahādīth* in this connection. (For a fuller discussion on the issue see the relevant portion of the chapter on comparative study of Asad’s methodology, in this work).

(k) Rebuttal of Orientalism albeit apologia

There are numerous occasions when we find very elaborate notes of Asad where he deals with the objections of Orientalists’ regarding Islam’s and Qur’ānic stances on various issues. For example on *Harūf al-Muqqata‘āt* (Abbreviated letters), on slavery, on Islamic penal laws etc. etc., but his explanations smack of a defensive and apologetic approach (For details see relevant portions in chapters dealing with ‘description of Asad’s *tafsīr*’ and ‘comparative studies’ in this work). One would have accepted that Asad goes beyond explaining the validity and worth of Islamic and Qur’ānic stances on the various issues and brings to the fore the defects and inadequacies of the Western thought patterns in this regard. Here Asad seems to be wanting!

(l) Science

Asad seems to be over impressed by the developments of science and technology in the West. Among the great contributions of
Islam to the humankind he considers that it is the culture fostered by the Qur'ān which penetrated in countless ways and by-ways into the mind of medieval Europe and gave rise to the revival of the Western culture which we call the Renaissance, and thus became in the course of time largely responsible for the birth of what is described as the "age of science": the age in which we are living.\textsuperscript{79}

The fact remains that Muslim intellectual and scientific tradition was instrumental in rescuing the West from the dark ages. But this is only a partial truth. The other part of the reality is that the Renaissance had a strong anti-religious sentiment. Though the immediate cause of their hatred toward the religion was the church and its functions. Yet the development of modern Westerns science continues to harbour an anti-Religious sentiment which is not confined to Christianity only but heavily infringes upon the premises held by the Qur'ān and Islam.

One of the malpractices of the church in the pre renaissance period had been that the cosmological references of the scripture had been interpreted and those interpretations had been given a status equal to that of the scriptures themselves. With the passage of time when many of the interpretation of the scriptures regarding cosmology were challenged, it was deemed to represent heresy.

It is high time that the dangers inherent in this approach are well understood.

\textbf{(m) Predominance of this-worldly concerns}

Asad's exegetical notes, his tone and tenor and his overall approach leaves one with the feeling, with enough justifications, that his main concerns are this worldly. While it is true that
Qur’ān’s and Islam’s message seeks ḥasana of this world and that of the other world, yet Qur’ān unequivocally demonstrates the superior status of the other world and hence justification for the predominance of other-worldly concerns. While Qur’ān did not ask for renunciation of Khayîr (Good) of this world, and sad Rehbaniyat was not decreed by God, yet it has strongly condemned those whose obsession with this world exceeds the concerns for the Akhirah (the other world). This approach of Asad, as is the case with the modernist trend as such, makes them to take a reductionist strategy of subsuming higher concerns of the Qur’ān to the immediate, ephemeral, contingent – social issues and problems. This trend seriously disturbs and affects the eternity of the Qur’ān – which though guides humans in all time and places – yet is above every time and place. Its primary objective is to build man’s world-view on its Tawheedic basis and provides man with the absolute values and also the framework of his thought and action. More so, provides him an insight into the vast realm of reality which is beyond human perception and prepares him to move towards the higher positions in the other world through a life programme which engenders a ḥasanah (good) life in this world on the individual and collective plane in all its dimensions, spiritual being the highest and the topmost of all.
Endnotes

1 Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾân*, “Foreword”, p. v.


3 Ibid., pp. 25-26.


6 The Qurʾân, 56:7-14 (Translation from Yūsuf Alī’s Qurʾān translation).


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


12 In a footnote on this point, Asad says: It is to be noted that under the impact of modern economic circumstances, which have radically changed the time honoured way of life of the bedouin and brought them, by means of school education and the radio, into direct contact with the Levantine culture of the cities, the purity of their language is rapidly disappearing and may soon cease to be a living guide to students of the Arabic tongue. (fn. 3, ‘Foreword”, pp. iv, v)

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Asad, 'Foreword', p. vii.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid, p. v.
25 Ibid.
26 Asad, 'Foreword' p. viii.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., pp. 244-5.


32 See, Asad, *op. cit*, p. 4.

33 Muḥammad Asad: Doyen of Islamic Scholars’, *op. cit*.

34 See Kidwai, Appendix-2, in this work.


36 *Asad, The Message of the Qur’ān*, 4, p. 66.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 3, p. 66.

40 Asad, 61:6, N. 6, p. 861; There are other similar notes in Asad’s exegesis, another instance is Asad’s research on the word of “al-masīḥ”, he proves its origin to be Aramaic mēšīḥaā. See 33, in the Sūrah 3, verse 45, p. 73.

41 Asad, 19:2, N. 2, p. 457.

42 Ibid., 29:14, N. 12, p. 608.

44 See, Hofman’s views on Asad in the relevant chapter (Opinions) of this work.

45 Asad, *op. cit.*, 10:2, N. 2, p. 287.

46 Ibid., 10:40, N. 64, p. 297.


52 Asad, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-9.

53 Martin Lings, *The Eleventh Hour* (Lahore, Pakistan; Suhail Academy) fn 2, p.2.


56 Ibid., p.4.

57 Asad, *op. cit.*, 72:1, N. 1, p. 899.

59 For arguments and a comparative look at the two versions and inference contrary to that of Asad on this issue, see Mawdūdī’s notes on verse one of Sūrah Banī Isrā’īl (17:1) in Zafar Ishaq Ansari (ed), op. cit, Vol. V, pp. 5-8.

60 Asad, op. cit, p. 452.


62 Asad, op. cit, p. 628.

63 See Zafar Ishaq, op. cit, pp. 125-127.

64 Asad, op. cit, p. 73.

65 Asad, op. cit, 19:30, nn. 23 and 24.


67 Asad, op. cit, p. 135.

68 See Asad, op. cit, 21:69, N. 64, p. 495.

69 Murad Hofmann, op. cit, p. 245.

70 Zafar Ishaq Ansari, op. cit, Vol. V, p. 278.

71 Asad, op. cit, Appendix I, p. 989.

72 Ibid.

73 Muḥammad Abul Quasem, op. cit, p. 63.

74 Ibid., p. 25.

75 Asad, op. cit, 2:106, n. 87, pp. 22-23.

76 Ibid.

77 G.N. Albani, op. cit, p. 30.

78 See Asad, op. cit, nn 37 and 38.

79 Asad, “foreword”, op. cit, p. i.