Muḥammad Asad’s *The Message of The Qur’ān* ranks as one of the major works in 20th century exegetical literature, notwithstanding some serious drawbacks in its methodological stances and exegetical inferences. No future serious enterprise in Qur’ānic exegesis in English is possible without taking full cognizance of Asad’s exegetical work.

Asad represents a unique phenomenon. Among the outstanding reverts to Islam in 20th century, he occupies a significant position. He lived for almost the entire twentieth century – born in 1900 and died in 1992 – thus he was contemporaneous to the major intellectual and social movements of the century. He is the one who lived and almost integrated to the societies of the East and the West, thus enabling him the opportunity to have the ‘feel’ of rather the two worlds more accurately. His knowledge of bible and biblical sources and exegesis and his familiarity with Hebrew and Aramaic and later his proficiency in Arabic gave him a clear edge over many others for a comparative study of religious literature in the two most important religious traditions of the world. His studies at Vienna University, where he pursued courses in history of art, philosophy, physics and chemistry gave him necessary knowledge of the Western sciences of the day. His involvement in the club life there, enabled him sharpen his understanding of the thought patterns of the West particularly on psychoanalysis, logical positivism, linguistic analysis and semantics; as Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Ludwig Wittgenstein and other intellectuals used to engage in absorbing discussions in the clubs of the Vienna those days. Although some believe that it was his dissatisfaction with these ideas that led him to Islam (Ismā‘īl Ibrāhīm Nawwāb) yet his own testimony to the power that these ideas wielded on him (“The stimulus of Freud’s ideas was as intoxicating to me as
potent wine”) and the fact that out of the Islamic scholars representing various shades of opinion he selected the modernist ‘Abduh as his exemplar and referent indicate that the most notorious core of Modernism, namely, Logical Positivism, Freudian Psychology and linguistic analysis had left a permanent mark on him and may be taken as the most important explanation for his rather general inability to accept the supernatural statements of the Qur’ān.

Asad’s later migration to the Arabian Peninsula, his learning Arabic language, Islam’s history, Qur’ān, Traditions and other related sciences and his interaction with scholars and people during his almost six years stay there opened a new field of learning to him. From being a simple European Jewish revert to Islam, he emerged as an impressive expositor of Islam, His books; *Islam at the Crossroads, Road to Mecca, Principles of State and Government in Islam, Sahih al-Bukhārī: The Early Years of Islam, The Law of Ours and Other Essays* created a special niche for him among the Muslims intellectuals of the 20th century. His interaction with Allamah Iqbal (d. 1937), involvement in the intellectual efforts for the ideological orientation of Pakistan and later its plenipotentiary at the United Nations brought him to the fore as an important personality. His divorce from the Arab wife after 22 years of companionship, later marriage to an American girl around mid fifties, resignation from the Pakistani foreign services, stay in America, later migration to Africa and back to Europe is marred by major upheavals and ruptures in his individual, family and intellectual life, as had been the case with him while in Europe in the period preceding his embrace of Islam. It is not insignificant to note that in the later period of his life he
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had mellowed down some of his earlier criticism of the Western civilization.

What capped the most significant intellectual outpourings of Asad is his translation and exegesis of the Qur’ān, which though took him seventeen years to complete, was actually the result of his lifelong study of the Qur’ān. Comprised of 5371 notes and four appendices the work is a significant addition to the body of English exegesis of the Qur’ān in twentieth century. Asad’s profound knowledge of Arabic, his possessing the ‘feel’ of the language – acquired by living among the Bedouins of Arabia, which he thinks is indispensable for better understanding of the language of the Qur’ān, puts him in an advantages position, language wise, in comparison to earlier translators and exegetes of the Qur’ān in English language. No less significant is Asad’s access to the major sources of Islam – which are in Arabic language. One of the remarkable features of his tafsir work is the reproduction of views of some major classical commentators like al-Ṭabarī, Ibn-Kathīr, Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī in his exegesis along with those of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rasūlīd Rida and renowned philologists.

One important feature of Asad’s work is his cognizance of the issues of the modern world and Orientalists treatment of issues related to Islam, the Prophet of Islam (S) and the Qur’ān. In his exegesis, Asad has demonstrated not only his sensitivity to the modern world’s issues but also his understanding of them together with the positives and negatives of his response to these issues.

Asad’s exegetical methodology, its applications and inferences show him under an all pervading influence of modernity. Under the influence of Western material outlook, all miracles recorded in
the Qur'ān are rejected by Asad and given new meanings. Most of them are regarded as legends, rendered in the Qur'ān not as facts but as morality lessons since they are well-known to the audience (See Asad, The Message of the Qur'ān, p. 59 for Abraham's miracles, p. 691 for John's miracles (Yaḥyā), p. 498 for Soloman's miracles and p. 438 for the companions of the cave). In the same manner, 'references to Jinn are sometimes meant to recall certain legends embedded in the consciousness of the people to whom the Qur'ān was addressed - the purpose being, in every instance, not the legend as such but the illustration of a moral or spiritual truth.'

A perusal of the Qur'ān through the traditional perspectives leads one to see 'miraculousness in normality and normality in miraculous.' It is the crass rationalism, which leads Asad for such a course of rejecting the miracles of the Qur'ān, denying the occurrences of the events Qur'ān speaks of, like Abraham being thrown in fire, Jesus speaking in the cradle, only because he tries to make use of reason in the realm, which does not correspond to it.

Asad's Tafsīr as such reflects an anti esoteric bias. Not only does he avoid such explanation to the meaning of Qur'ān, which would enlighten the reader about the inner aspects of the Qur'ānic words and phrases. He avoids any references to the mystic exegetes of the Qur'ān; thus his Tafsīr, though being exhaustive in reproducing excerpts of classical exegetes, is conspicuous by the absence of references to mystic exegetes. It may be argued that even in pre modern period there have been some categories of exegesis where mystic exegesis was avoided, yet in the modern period, with its excessive rationalism and this-worldly thrust, avoidance or inclusion of such exegesis is of special significance.
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taking into consideration the strong spiritual ethos of Islam and the Qur‘án.

One almost universal feature of modernists’ adventures in Qur‘ánic exegesis has been their pre-occupation with this worldly concerns, Asad being no exception. This has been done on the so-called pious assumption that classical and pre-modern exegetes have been too other-worldly and there was the need for correcting the alleged imbalance. However, it seems that exegete’s preoccupation with this-worldly concerns is motivated and directed less by the enthusiasm for redressal of alleged imbalance and more by inclination towards the material. The approach both on the quantity and quality of the addressing of the material results practically less than due attention to the other world.

Asad’s inadequate regard or rather disregard for the tradition, as is the case with the other modernists as well, smacks of his inclination to be free of things and entities which make it difficult to ignore the spiritual, as the ethos of the tradition is spiritual. Asad’s infatuation with Imam Hazm (994-1064) and his Zahirism seems to be misplaced. Zahirism as such has been a bonafide legal school in Islam with its over emphasis on the external meanings of Qur‘án and Sunnah. Asad’s rationalism, with frequent divergences from the external meanings of many significant portions of the Qur‘án, are far from being of one piece with Ibn Hazm’s Zahirism. Modernists’ problem lies in its search for legitimacy. Asad occasionally seems to be at pains, to explain that his methodology and inferences are not generally unique but are mostly in agreement with one or the other authority in the classical period. Firstly, it is the correspondence with the mainstream of Tradition that counts as an assurance of the correctness of a new understanding. Secondly, on occasions Asad fails to muster even
one traditional affirmation of his dramatic departures from usual exegesis. Thirdly, he gives no explanation for the clash of his opinion with even authentic Ḥadīths. He is not always successful in substantiating his claim. For example Asad’s position on hijāb (head covering), that the Qur’ān does not enjoin women to cover their heads and his disregard for the authentic traditions in this regard does not find any precedent in any discourse on the subject in the pre-modern period. Asad’s preferences for Zahirims, may sub-consciously be driven by it being a convenient tool to get freedom from the tradition.

Asad as is demonstrated in his exegetical notes lays more emphasis on social aspects of life in tune with the modernistic framework. This has serious implications and associations. It is in tune with the mindset that has been chasing utopias in this world. This amounts to equating Nāsūt (Corporeal World) with the higher realms of existence i.e., ʿĀlami Malakūt (Angelic world). Naturally, the expectation of complete perfection here and now shows a degree of materialism. Secondly, social factors are regarded as the determinants of the development of history and individuals. Such undue engrossment in, and the resultant elevation of social dimension affects Man’s ontological view – the social level gets a higher position than it deserves. Being’s hierarchy is disturbed. The position of God, Angels, Ruh (spirit), is negatively affected and social level is raised to a higher plane Angels etc. than it actually has. As social reality changes and is ephemeral and contingent, so when allowed to dominate the world-view, turns the totality relativistic.

It has become rather fashionable among the modernist exegetes to say and treat the Qur’ān as a book of dynamic guidance. But to understand it to be chiefly so, is wrong. The Qur’ān does provide
guidance at the ever-changing social level also. But its greater concern is to guide regarding Metaphysical truths, which are eternal and immutable. So, it would be more appropriate, in absence of a better alternative expression, to say that Qur’ān is more a book of static guidance. Here it must also be pointed out that the dynamic social guidance of the Qur’ān for ever-changing situations should be obtained in Fiqh studies, or even lower level deliberations i.e. policy and strategy making, and should better not be handled in Exegesis, which should be restricted to the explication of meanings closest to the words of the Qur’ān. Since Exegesis is mainly a means of building-up the world-view, and undue emphasis on lower level, centripetal considerations may lead to descent and chaos of understanding and detract from the Ma’rifah (Gnosis) of the Absolute. Contemporary traits in Tafsīr cannot be taken to be positive in an a priori manner. That would smack of Evolutionism, one of the serious errors of Modernity that considers new developments to be positive. They can be negative as well. They deserve to be examined with greater critical rigour because of the sway of the West/Materialism on contemporary mind. Some traits are deeply negative. As seen above, one such erroneous trait is the attempt at projecting the Qur’ān chiefly as guidance for contingent reality. The proper course should be that in the contingent segment, divine guidance as refracted through Fiqh and further refracted through policy framing should become the norm. Qur’ānic exegesis basically informs our world-view while Fiqh’s purpose is to set our external action right in the light of the divine guidance in the changing situations. Hence it is fiqh which deals directly with the contingent and it does not affect our consciousness and world-view in a manner that Tafsīr does.
Bringing the Qur’anic statements unduly down to the contingent reality shall seriously affect the growth of the inner being of man. The primacy of the vertical dimension of man in Qur’anic discourse is a well-established fact. Dynamism as such is sought not primarily on horizontal plane but on the vertical plane. Qur’an guides more about the Absolute Reality, it engenders man to incline towards the Absolute. However, it is not reflected so much in the modernist exegesis per se.

As mentioned above Evolutionism is a basic component of modernism, Muhammad Asad, like other modernists, is an evolutionist. He believes that man, history and society move from inferior states to perfect states. He thinks that with the increase in the volume of information and historical experience, man is more qualified and in a better position to apprehend the truth. He misses the critical point that the increase in historical experience and the expansion of natural science is increase in the knowledge of ‘things-in-themselves’ and not, in ‘things-as-signs’. Better understanding of the Qur’an can be achieved only when man’s knowledge of things is associated with their correct correspondence to higher realities, and leads to them. Volume at the horizontal level is not significant. Western science’s growth has only increased the volume of man’s information of ‘things-in-themselves’ and not ‘things-as-signs’. Earlier periods, despite the limited volume of his horizontal knowledge, Man was better placed to strike correct correspondence of this knowledge to the higher realities, hence, in a superior position for the apprehension of the truth, which is the primary objective of the Qur’an. Thus it is not justified to claim that historically later men are in better position to understand the Qur’an and Exegesis made on this assumption is bound to be problematic.
Novelty is another component of modernism. Muḥammad Asad, in his exegetical inferences comes up with novelties. Novelty is equated with originality. Westernized readers call Asad’s exegesis “brilliant and original ...” There is an aversion to repeat the explanations already worked out earlier. Undue concern for newness, rather than Truth will naturally lead to errors in exegesis.

Being the immediate product of European modernity, Asad seems to be under the influence of the new philosophy of linguistics. His *tafsir* is praised somewhere for employing the modern linguistic insights in understanding the word of God. He renders the Qur’ān in idiomatic English to go beyond the “outer shell” of the literary matter. Are the western philosophies of linguistics really helpful to understand the Word of God in a better way? Asad appears to be rather inclined to reject the meanings to the words and phrases of the Qur’ān given by the mainstream tradition, which are not in conformity with his modernistic mindset and rationalistic dispositions. Asad brings in Western Psychology to understand the Qur’ān: for instance, the *Isrā* and *Mi‘rāj* [Night Journey and Ascension] of the Prophet Muḥammad (S) and rejects the belief of the mainstream Muslims on this count. Western natural Sciences reduce Reality to the physical/material thus giving rise to errors and anomalies. They are most glaring and serious in case of Psychology because its object of study, namely, human consciousness is fundamentally spiritual. To study and explain a mainly a spiritual entity as only material will naturally engender the most fatal errors. The explication of Qur’ān with the help of this most confounded branch of Western Science in bound to be misleading. Similarly quoting natural sciences too in a way is problematic. The end of science is new discoveries while the end
of the Qur’ān is *Ma‘rifati Rabbānī* (Gnosis of the Lord). *Tafsīr*’s purport must be to help the reader actualize the Qur’ānic purpose. As such exegetes have to exercise caution in applying and using the Western disciplines, whether belonging to natural sciences, psychology or even linguistics.

Muḥammad Asad refers to the Qur’ānic verse (3:7), as “the key-phrase of all its key-phrases.” He has devoted a full fledged Appendix (I), the longest of all the four appendices of his tafsīr work, to the discussion on ‘symbolism and allegory in the Qur’ān.’ He gives us the impression as if it is his discovery, utterly unknown to the tradition. He even accused the believers of lacking the proper grasp of *mutashābihāt* (allegory and symbolism): “without a proper grasp of what is implied by this latter term, much of the Qur’ān is liable to be – and, in fact, has often been – grossly misunderstood both by believers and by such as refuse to believe in its divinely inspired origin.” The fact is that exegetes have all through been taking full cognizance of what is called ‘allegorical’ of parts of the Qur’ān. Among others Imam Ghazali (d. 1111) in his *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* and Shah Waliyullah (1703-1762) in *Al-Fauz al-Kabīr fi ‘Usul al-Tafsīr* have devoted full chapters to this subject. However, they have unlike Asad, not regarded every verse which talks of supernatural as allegorical. They have been insisting that there should be *qarīna* (indication) to consider a verse as allegorical.

Every supernatural event, occurrence, description of the Qur’ān does not necessitate allegorical interpretation. Again allegorical interpretation does not mean negating its existence in the spiritual realm. So an ‘allegory’ is not always metaphorical, it is not a figure of speech behind it. Asad’s use of allegory in understanding the Qur’ān has been too wide. Practically it has amounted to
terming every verse related to a person, event, or phenomenon, allegorical which Asad found inconvenient to explain realistically. Similarly Asad's occasional refusal to accept clear descriptions of Qur'ān as realistic is quite irksome. Asad's calling Luqmān a 'mythical figure', the incident where Soloman differed with his father's decision (21:78-9), as not a reality but a legend, is unreasonable. It hardly behoves a mufasir to discount as a legend what the Qur'ān clearly depicts as an event that has actually occurred.

Asad's impressive rebuttals to the Orientalists' charges against the Qur'ān, found here and there in his exegetical notes is a soothing feature of his exegesis [On al-muqatta'āt (disjointed letters), Slavery etc.]. However, his explanation seem to be defensive, hence a clear representation of apologia, which is far from the responses demanded to the Orientalists' charges.

While there are occasions when Asad seems to be successful in conveying in better way the nuances of the meaning of the Qur'ānic words and phrases, yet at times his renderings are wrong and erroneous. In translating the Qur'ān, he does not confine, as could be the case, his preferential meanings in the notes, but carries them in the main body of translation. Though at times, in his exegetical notes, he presents the literal translations, yet there are occasions when wrong connotations are conveyed. Asad's translating 'ribā' as 'usury' and not 'interest' has serious implications. His translating Zinā as adultery (though Zinā covers both adultery and fornication) at a place where punishment is announced for fornication and his failure to explain the same in the corresponding exegetical note is at least a serious lapse.
Notwithstanding Asad’s advantageous position vis-à-vis earlier translators of the Holy Book, on the count of his command of Arabic language, and his 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 intent underlying the acoustic symbolism of its words and sentences, which he got by living among the Bedouins of Arabia – allegedly the best repositories of the Qur’anic Arabic, he is not always ahead of his predecessors in conveying the best connotations of the Qur’anic meaning in English. His admirer, Murad Hofmann ranks his translation only third in the hierarchy of good translations: “It was the best, next only to ‘Abdullah Yūsuf Ali’s and Marmaduke Pickthall’s translations which are the most remarkable among the contemporary efforts to convey the message of the Qur’ān in English.”

Asad’s translation style does not reflect the terse, compact, even laconic style of the Qur’ān which Marmaduke Pickthall caught so much better in 1930. The difference between the two results from Asad’s attempt to come as close as possible to the nuances of meanings. Though Asad has tried to avoid the archaism, common in Pickthall’s and ‘Abdullah Yūsuf Ali’s translations, he has not got full riddance from them. Using biblical phrases and expressions are certainly not appropriate for Qur’ānic translations. Recent studies, have demonstrated afresh how the usage of biblical phrases and expressions rather distort the true purport of the Qur’ānic verses.

The current status of renderings of the meaning of the Holy Qur’ān into English language – notwithstanding some outstanding achievements and the sincerity and capabilities of some outstanding translators and exegetes – is not satisfactory. Post-11
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September world scenario has added a dimension to the urge for better, rather the best translations of the Word of God. While the major Muslim languages such as Persian, Turkish and Urdu have thoroughly exhausted indigenous linguistic and literary resources to meet the scholarly and emotional demands of the task, the prolific resources of the universal medium of English have not been fully employed in the service of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān is yet to find a dignified and faithful expression in the English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original.

English has become a native Muslim language as of now. It is plausible to think of better renderings of the Holy Scripture by competent Muslims in the days to come. However, certain precautions need to be observed by those who make endeavors in this direction, taking into cognizance the inadequacies and blunders of some of the recent translators and exegetes.

As the revealed Word of God for Muslims, the Qur'ān has, like all other sacred scriptures, a human dimension without which it cannot be fully understood or appreciated. This dimension is first exemplified in Prophet Muhammad (S), the recipient of the divine Word and its transmitter and first interpreter for humanity. The second and equally important aspect of this dimension is the Qur'ān's life in the community and its own life through its power and by its authority. Through their unquestioning acceptance of the Qur'ān, successive generations of the Muslims have provided strong attestation to its authenticity for them. Through their interiorization of the eternal Word of God, “free from limitations of sounds and letters”, they have given it power and vitality through the sciences of tilāwa or qirāʿa (recitation or reading), Kitaba or naskh (writing or copying), and tafsīr (interpretation or exegesis).
Divine-human communication by means of the Qur'ān is expressed in the two terms for divine revelation: tanzil, literally “sending down”, and tafsir, the human unveiling of its meaning. The process of tafsir continues to grow with the life of the community, guiding it through the life’s vicissitudes and consoling it in times of despair and tragedy. Yet it may be said that as God transcends creation while remaining the immanent Lord of its history, so also His Word transcends human history while participating in it. The Qur'ān participates in human history in that it is a book of guidance which must be understood and pondered if it is to serve as the moral and spiritual guide for human conduct. It transcends human history, however, in that its real meaning is known only to God. Transcendence is not simply an expression of power and majesty, but also the safeguarding of the absolute against any confusion with the relative.

So enough care must be taken not to allow contemporary demands of guidance in the contingent, ephemeral and mundane issues of the present dominate the over all exegesis of the Qur'ān.

A distinction needs to be drawn between exegesis of the Qur'ān and commentaries on it. The former are those immediate meanings of the text that are understood from linguistic usages and the explanation given to them in transmitted traditions. All other additions to the core meanings necessarily reflect human knowledge that is available to the commentator.

One absolutely essential dimension of the Qur'ān is its music, sound and rhythm. It becomes necessary to let the Qur'ān be heard, even by those who do not know Arabic – its excellent recitations has had extraordinarily lasting spiritual impact on so many sensitive souls. Modern technological tools like CD-ROMs
and internet sites combining recitation simultaneously with screens of the Arabic text and several translations, has already opened up remarkable pedagogical possibilities which one could not even have imagined a few decades ago. Then why not hope that the Qur'ān will eventually attract the type of inspired poetical translators who have been drawn to other challenging masterpieces of world literature. But it is unlikely that the gifted poetic translator who truly succeeds in capturing some of those deeper musical dimensions of the Qur'ān will also be equally successful in communicating other dimensions of meaning.

Another fundamental area of Qur'ānic understanding still essentially cut off from the English-speaking audience is the vast complex of later Islamic fields of learning – Aṣbāb al-Nuzūl (‘occasion of revelation’), tafsīr, hadīth, tales of Prophets, rhetoric and certain fields of fiqh – which have of course provided one key matrix for learned Islamic interpretation and understanding in the past. What one would like to see developed in the future, at least for teachers of Islamic and religious studies, is a kind of scrupulously layered, hyper-text versions of the Qur'ān in which students would have immediate access to reliable, self-contained translations (including all necessary explanations) of key ancillary works from those disciplines of traditional Islamic learning as they might bear on a particular verse, passage or sūrah of the Qur’ān.

There is a need for ‘Islamicisation’ of the English language. In fact, it is striking to discover how so many fundamental Qur'ānic (or derivative Islamic) expressions – īmān, ṣabr, taqwā, tawḥīd, Walī, Kufr and so on – are very quickly adopted and understood by students in religious studies, after only a cursory introductory acquaintance, precisely because they provide a needed and
effective expression for living, essential spiritual realities which today have no accurate English equivalents. That may facilitate the way for getting rid of biblical phrases and expressions – which has often been a source of misunderstandings.

Many translators of the Qur’ān 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. One may not be pleading for an “American” version (à la Irving) or a pedestrian, “cool”, colloquial style. The language of the Qur’ān 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.

Ultimately, the seeker after truth must try to discover the original and not allow himself to be lost in a maze of translations and interpretations.