The Oldest Qur’an Interpretation into Ottoman Turkish Dialect called *Tafsir Sharif al-Asdafa*

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H.E. Ghassan I. Shaker, in his fine collection of Islamic manuscripts, has one of the earliest Ottoman translations of the Qur’an, which was transcribed from a copy made in 1335-36. I am greatly indebted to him for permission to give an account of it here. This remarkable manuscript, entitled *Tafsir Sharif al-Asdafa*, has 314 folios measuring 38.5 x 25.7 cm with 28.5 x 18.2 text area.

**Interpretation or Translation?**

In the introduction to his classic work *the Koran Interpreted*, Arberry makes a clear and important distinction between translation and interpretation. He offers the orthodox claim that the Qur’an is untranslatable. A. Yusuf Ali’s monumental work *The Meaning of The Glorious Qur’an* calls it “English interpretation”; and he has been remarkably resourceful in finding contextual functions for his

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1. For further accounts and illustrations of this tafsir, see *my Golden Pages: Qur’ans and other Manuscripts from the Collection of Ghasan I. Shaker* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. Written on European machine-made laid paper, with laid lines to the centimetre and chain lines at intervals of 3 cm. The paper bears a double watermark of an anchor and a six-pointed star in a circle (see Briquet 6991, dated example Naples 1590).

commentary. Yet he concedes at the end that the Qur’an is its own best commentary—one passage throws light on another.7

The Shaker collection, for example, includes several Iranian manuscripts with translations and commentaries in Persian that were intended to help non-Arabic readers understand the original text. These were written either within the text area (al-main), usually in an interlinear scheme, or in the margin (al-hashiyah), or both. Such translations or commentaries are extremely rare, however, in Ottoman copies of the Qur’an. These two terms (al-main) and (al-hashiyah) are part of the technical terminology used to distinguish between the Arabic text, and the interlinear interpretations8 and marginal commentary.

Tafsir Sharif al-Asdaf is one of the most important and oldest tafsirs of the holy Qur’an. The tafsir or interpretation is from the Arabic into Ottoman Turkish. This mid-14th century tafsir has a wealth of az Türkce (pure Turkish) and qualities of concrete sense impressions, vividness and energy. This astonishing correctness and the quality of its descriptive words are outstanding. Dated mid-March 1362 AD, this fine example is perhaps the earliest known interpretation into Ottoman rather than other forms of Turkish. There are many earlier examples of Qur’an in other forms of Turkish, but this one predates by sixty years the example described by the authority A. Topaloglu as being the earliest known in Ottoman dialects.9 To set this remarkably early date in context, recall that the mainstream of Turkish interpretations of the Qur’an stems from the work of İbn-i Arabı (d. 854/1450) and Muşn el-Izniği (d. 883/1430), themselves using the Arabic writings of Abu Ilyas al-Samarqandi (d. 383/993).10

Satr-Arası

Most of the translations of the Qur’an are interlinear or satr-arası. The Shaker Qur’an is unique in that the tafsir is not interlinear. Instead of the Turkish interpretation being between the lines of the Arabic

9 The interlinear interpretation obviously falls within the main, text area beneath the Arabic; however, it is written in different and clearly singled out script. But it is clear from context that al-main indicates the main text, and al-hashiyah refers equally to the interpretation or translation written in a fine script, buṣna-al-sutor, or interlinear, below the main text.
10 Ahmet Topaloglu, Kitâb-ı Cevâliyesi (İstanbul 1976), vol.I.
11 Ibid. p. 3.

text, this Qur’an has the extremely unusual feature that the Arabic text and its Ottoman interpretation share the same line, with Ottoman following Arabic; the Arabic text is distinguished by red lines above it. To the reader accustomed to the usual interlinear form, the present form is visually surprising, even jarring at first. Indeed, this form lacks the scrupulous deference of the interlinear form, in which the word of God—the Arabic text—and the word of man—the interpretation—are carefully separated. Nevertheless, this form has a usefulness of its own: the interlacing of text and interpretation within rather than between lines gives a fluency and continuity to the passage from one language to the other not present in the conventional interlinear form. This fluency is particularly emphasised when the Qur’an is being read aloud, in Ottoman, to an audience—of students, perhaps—who do not know Arabic. The teacher’s eye is able to jump from one section of the Ottoman interpretation to the next smoothly and without the pause resulting from having to jump between lines. As a result, the teacher is able to make better eye contact with the audience, and achieve a greater continuity and a more intimate effect in his delivery.

A Rosetta Stone?

In post-Ottoman times, being responsible for interpretation of the Qur’an has been no easy task. Ever since the harf inbalı, great effort has been
taken to modernize the Turkish language, mainly through purging it, as much as possible, from the dominance of the Arabic technical terminology and vocabulary, and through the search of roots in əz, or pure, Turkish words. But it seems that with the adaptation of the Latin alphabet to write the Turkish language, the French and English vocabulary have now become an alternative to Arabic—and to some extent, Persian. There is no doubt that a language which does not absorb new words, and abandon others, when it is necessary, is not considered a “living language.”

The Turkish interpretation in this manuscript can be of essential value as a work of reference. Obviously, here, the economy, choice of words and conveying of ideas from one mind to another is an integral task; the interpreter’s job is to make his reader apprehend his meaning readily and, in Qur’anic terms, precisely. Apart from the intelligible and original vocabulary which is abundant in almost every line in this tafsir, the easy manner, the well-chosen and significant terms, give a harmonious and well-pleasing turn to the understanding of the Qur’an in Turkish. As for the further enrichment of modern Turkish vocabulary, this manuscript may also prove to be a key, even a Rosetta stone.

The real function of the Turkish language here more is interpretive in character, it renders the text of the Qur’an into Turkish, as accurately and as truly as possible, so as to give the same meaning, the same sense as the original idea in Arabic. But this translation is also unique in the way in which it is impregnated with the time, and the form of its social life, to which this translation was addressed. Here we have an opportunity to read not only a mere translation but also a host of other related anecdotes from various interpretations of the text in Arabic. One might say that the best tafsir embodies the highest perceptions of its time and somehow explains the concept of the religious message to its generation.

Word Versus Image

Islamic tradition’s disapproval of “representation” has been widely discussed, and its “negative” effects heavily underlined. But, sadly, only one side of the coin so far has been discussed. There have been few cultures in which the influence of the word rather than the image has been as extensive and far-reaching as Islamic culture. Equally, this role of the “word,” in shaping the “conceptual representation” as in writing, rather than the “concrete image,” as in painting and sculpture, is neglected. Understanding the power of the “conceptual representation” is an essential key for understanding interpretation of texts, and is an important, fertile and productive element in art. The process of conceptualization of text in the mind of the reader or listener has all the glories of an undominated vision, and its conjecture has no limits.

In rendering an icon or a religious painting, the painter dictates the perimeters and moulds the form. In the “conceptual representations,” the form is abiding, personal and yet universal in its embodiment. In religious tafsirs or interpretations, including Qur’anic tafsirs, and other verbal descriptions, time never seems to stand still and the concepts narrated are ever evolving and fresh. A good example in this context is the Hilyah—or what I call the “Verbal Image” of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸

The Hilyah can never be considered an “icon” because the cherished fantasies of the believer are never shattered or intruded upon by any “concrete image” prepared by a painter or sculptor, regardless of his or her ability. The wording of the Hilyah is of a classic Arabic attributed to Ali ibn abi Talib, a cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who was himself an undisputed master of the Arabic language and traditionally regarded as the first calligrapher. The words he used have an interplay between sound and meaning which excites the reader’s curiosity. Also the large space rendered by the text in which the character can exist freely allows the reader or listener to engage a very large area of his or her personality. And in its own felicitous way, the “conceptual representation” in the Hilyah can exist freely while at the same time it renders the Prophet in a calm merciful mental vision, and celebrates values which are still our own. The perceptions found in Qur’anic tafsirs, as well as in the text of the Hilyah, and in some other religious texts such as Dala’il al-Khayrat, allow one to imagine centres of reality which are remote from oneself. All this is in harmony with the contemplative attitude found in many Islamic religious studies which perhaps signifies a greater recoil in time and elicits an implicit vision of the past.

Technical Data and Description

Origin: Ottoman Turkey, (late 16th century copy), dated AH 736 (AD 1335–36).
Dimensions: 314 folios, 38.5 x 25.7 cm, 23 lines to the page.
Script: naskh.

Material: Light cream, medium thickness, thoroughly sealed and burnished paper of very fine quality and feel to the hand, laid, with about 9 lines to the centimetre. There is some worming mostly at the spine.

Signed: On folio 313b:

تتم مصحف الشريف تحريراً تذكريه صدمين
كراك في أواخر جمادي الأول من هجرة النبي عليه السلام سنة ست و ثلاث فسمائة كتبه
ضيف العباد الفشير الحميري ابن محمود

Tammāt mashaf al-sharif tahriran Tānnī’ya šinnumak
gerek fi awakhirı Jumadi al-awwal min hījrat al-Nabi
‘alayhi al-salam sanat sit wa fhalath fa-sab’ma’a katabahu
al’āl al-‘ibad al-faqir al-haqqī Gītā bin Mahmūd

Text area: 28.5 x 18.2 cm.
Interlinear spacing: 1.2 cm.
Binding: 18th century red leather, with blind-tooled decoration and flap.
Documentation: Seal (folios 1a, 1b, 2a, and 313b):

وقف محمد أمين النجاة بالصدق والخيرات
والحسنات

And a dated inscription by the owner (folio 1a):

لمما صار صاحب هذا تفسير الشريف الأصلاف
درويش الحاج محمد اغا دزدار قلعة خانم
سنه سبع و سبعين و مائة و ألف

The flyleaf of this important mid-fourteenth century manuscript has the name of its 18th century owner: “Dersiṣ al-hac Mehmed Ağa, Dīzdar-i Kol’ay birda Hanyada,” that is, “Commander of the Fortress of Khanja (Canea),” the capital of Crete (folio 1a). This inscription is written in thuluth in vivid red ink. It is dated AH 1177 (AD 1763). Below the inscription, there is a circular seal bearing the waqf, or endowment, of Mehmed Emin. This fine seal is also surrounded by this saying: “al-najat bi-l-sidq wa-l-khayrat wa-l-hasanat,” meaning: “safety is in truthfulness, charitableness and benefaction.”
Folio 1b opens with the title written in riqa’, and ten lines of text and interpretation of Surat al-fatiha. The page has a simple border in pink, gold rules and side panels with floral illumination in hastari — applied with a brush using only liquid gold. Folio 2a begins with the title, which reads: “hadha tafsir Sharif Asdaf tercüme-i Türki,” or literally: “this is the interpretation of ‘Sharif Asdaf’ translation into Turkish. These two folios, and the text up to page 7, have been re-copied from the — probably damaged — original, and replaced at a later date. The Qur’anic divisions may have also been added at that time. The traces of worming are evident near the bound edge (spine) throughout the manuscript. These two folios also bear the above-mentioned seal of Mehemmed Emin.

A typical example of the text is seen in folios 146b–147a. This shows a surah heading, the verse count and place of revelation. Also we can see the word juz’, or the thirtieths of the text, and a mushir, the last written word outside the text area, which indicates the first forthcoming word on the following folio. Here we can also see a typical addendum and another impression of Emin’s seal. Reading the interpretation of Surat al-’isra’ (S. 17), for example, the unusually rich and fluent Turkish which is used here clearly acts as a vehicle to focus the reader’s concentration and imagination on the mi’raj experience of the Prophet.7 The last surah (folio

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7 That is his night journey from the Holy Ka’ba in Mecca to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, or the Farthest Holy Mosque — the Dome of the Rock — in Jerusalem. This surah is believed to
Tâczâde Risâlesi’ne Göre
Sülüs Hattına Dair Bazı İstilâhat

Irvin Cemil Schick

M. Uğur Derman’a sevgi ve saygılarımı...
Miyân-beste olan üstâdsız olmaz
Rehber olmayınca bu yol bulunmaz
Kal Himmet

Hüsni hatta usul ve bilgi birikiminin bir nesilden sonrakine başka
intikal vâstasi, bu san’atta temel bir yer tutan hoca-talebe (yabrut üstâ-
cıraç) ilişkisidir. Bir talebe, hocasından içazet alan kadar yazida
ketebe koyamamış, istese padişah olsun, bir talebenin hocasına dayanduğu
derin saygı türlü hikâyelerle konu edilmiş, bir talebenin hocasını bırakıp
başka bir hoca kadar yazida geçmekte olduğu dikkat edilmiş, bir hattatın
seçeresi hem kâranc, hem meşruyet kaynağı adedilmiştir. Kısacası, Aşık Paşa’nın
Gâribnâme’de dediği gibi, “okumakla yazmakla olmaz, tâ ustâdan
görnemmiş”‘dir arına göre hareket edilmişdir.”

Nitekim, rivayet olunur ki “Şeyh Hamdullah’u, bu yazıyı nash
elde ettiği sure sonra, o da ‘Gözleri hoca’nın eline ve kalemine,
kulağını diline, görmü gü yazma verdim, elimle kalemde de gereğine
bağladım, bir harf nasıl yazmak ise edilse yazma kadar
yazmakten bırakmadım’ cevabını vermiş’tir.1 Mahmud Bedreddin
Yazar’ın, hocası Hüfiz Ömer Vâsi Efendi’den, onun da kendii hocası
Sâmi Efendi’den naklen anlatığı bu hikaye geçmek değil de bir yaktırma

1 Akıtarım Cem Behar, “Osmancı’da Muşiki Öğretimi ve İntikal Sistemi: Meys,” Defter, 7
(1988), s.168.
2 Mahmud Bedreddin Yazar, Medeniyet Âlemiinde Yazi ve İslâm Medeniyetinde Kalem