

# Mistranslations of the Prophets' Names in the Holy Quran: A Critical Evaluation of Two Translations

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## Abstract

This study is devoted to discuss the renditions of the prophets' names in the Holy Quran due to the authority of the religious text where they reappear, the significance of the figures who carry them, the fact that they exist in many languages, and the fact that the Holy Quran addresses all mankind. The data are drawn from two translations of the Holy Quran by Ali (1964), and Al-Hilali and Khan (1993). It examines the renditions of the twenty five prophets' names with reference to translation strategies in this respect, showing that Ali confused the conveyance of six names whereas Al-Hilali and Khan confused the conveyance of four names. Discussion has been raised thereupon to present the correct rendition according to English dictionaries and encyclopedias in addition to versions of the Bible which add a historical perspective to the study.

**Keywords:** Mistranslation, Prophets, Religious, Al-Hilali, Khan.

## 1. Introduction

In Prophets' names comprise a significant part of people's names which in turn constitutes a main subdivision of proper nouns which include in addition to people's names the names of countries, places, months, days, holidays etc. In terms of translation, many translators opt for transliterating proper names thinking that transliteration is a straightforward process depending on an idea deeply rooted in many people's minds that proper nouns are never translated or that the translation of proper names is as Vermees (2003:17) states "a simple automatic process of transference from one language to another." However, in the real world the issue is different viz. most proper nouns are transliterated while others need some kind of translation strategies such as naturalization. Newmark (1988: 214) states that "Normally, people's first names and surnames are transferred, thus preserving their nationality, and assuming that their names have no connotations in the text. There are exceptions: the names of saints and monarchs are sometimes translated." It is obvious that Newmark holds the view that personal proper names are not the same in all texts and consequently require more attention from translators. He differentiates between an ordinary name which is, according to Strawson (1971: 23) "roughly, a word, used referring, of which the use is not dictated by any descriptive meaning the word may have" and another name which refers to a "famous" person. Farahzad (1995) asserts that translators of religious texts must use the most common existing equivalent of a personal name in the target language even if these equivalents do not follow the foregoing translation strategies. In the same regard, Farghal and Shunnaq (1999:59) stress the fact that proper nouns which are natured by the fact of having unique reference are usually transliterated except in some cases; they are translated. Ghazala (2000: 179-183) goes further in this subject by admitting the fact that translating proper names is not a straightforward process. He suggests naturalization as a procedure in dealing with religious names and names of famous scientists, poets, heroes etc. mentioned in history books. He underlines the phrase that "names are NEVER TRANSLATED" as if he ignores the fact that naturalization is a translation strategy (see Farghal & Shunnaq 1999). Rendition, copy, transcription, re-creation, and substitution are some of rather prolonged procedures listed by Fernandes (2006) in translating proper names. Pour (2010) concludes that original names with the source language alphabets should be mentioned in the footnotes to make it clearer for readers in the target language. As can be seen, no matter how arguments extend, religious names will continue to possess the qualities of precession and inspiration as far as they are deeply rooted in the human history and culture. Illyas (1989:89) argues that "translating religious texts requires an additional consideration to be respected besides those associated with literary translation, i.e. sanctity of the text." This means that translators of religious texts should be professional, experienced and extra knowledgeable.

It is still the translator's duty to read, understand and analyze the text (Tytler: 1962). However, the translator does not have to be an exegete of the Holy Quran (HQ) although he is required to adopt an accurate exegetic material to which he refers when he translates. Also, his options should be built on sound decision-making where he takes into consideration lexical, syntactic, and semantic parameters. This being the case, a great deal of information may be lost such as connotations associated with many names especially the names of the prophets who are known for possessing noble qualities such as patience, integrity, honesty etc. to the degree that the name and quality become too integrated to separate. Undoubtedly, the names of the prophets are strongly connected with certain qualities in both languages according to what has been known about the personal qualities of the prophet himself and how he has dealt with the people whom he was sent to. Moreover, the Holy Quran is a guide book which addresses all mankind. This being the case, it is essential to refer to the translation of the prophets' names as they were mentioned in the target language instead of just transliterating them.

## 2. The Data

The present study reviews the renditions of the prophets' names in Quranic translation through two translations of the HQ in an attempt to settle for the appropriate equivalent. The first translation is by Abdullah Yousef Ali (1964) (T1) and the second is by both Mohammad Taki-Udin Al-Hilali & Mohammad Mohsin Khan (1996) (T2). They are not haphazardly selected: each one has qualities which made me opt for it. T1, on the one hand, is a fairly recent translation which is well-known for its elegant style and good choice of equivalents from the target language. On the other hand, T2 is more recent and believed to have made use of the science of translation as a new field that flourished in the 1980's. It uses modern English rather than archaic and has been performed by two professional translators. Discussion will be raised in two cases: when the two renditions of the same noun are dissimilar where the correct rendition will be supported, and when both of them fail to hit the target where a correct translation will be suggested according to linguistic parameters. The aim is to contribute no matter how little it might be, to the advancement of the HQ translation in particular and the translation process in general. It classifies the names of the twenty five prophets mentioned in the HQ along with their frequency in the HQ and T1, T2 renditions in an appendix along with their English counterparts according to Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary. As can be seen in the appendix, T1 correctly translated the nineteen names of:

"آدم وإبراهيم واسحق ويعقوب ونوح وداوود وسليمان وأيوب ويوسف وموسى وهارون وزكريا ويحيى وعيسى واليسع ويونس وهود وصالح ومحمد"

*Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, Lut, Salih, and Muhammad*, respectively but mistranslated six ones of:

"شعيب والياس وإسماعيل وإدريس وهود وذو الكفل"

by transliterating them into: "Shu'aib, Elias, Isma'il, Idris, Hud, and Dhul-Kifl" respectively; On the other hand, T2 correctly translated the twenty-one names of:

"آدم وإدريس وإبراهيم واسماعيل واسحق ويعقوب ونوح وداوود وسليمان وأيوب ويوسف وموسى وهارون وزكريا ويحيى وعيسى واليسع ويونس وهود وصالح ومحمد"

into: "Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Zachariah, John, Jesus, Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, Lut, Salih, and Muhammad" respectively but mistranslated four of them:

"شعيب والياس وهود وذو الكفل"

into: Shu'aib, Elias, Hud, and Dhul-Kifl respectively.

The correct translations in both T1 and T2 are consistent with the English names stated in Webster's and/or versions of the Bible as can be seen in the appendix (p.15) so readers will find no difficulty in referring to these names when they read the translation of the Holy Quran. Therefore, only the names which have been mistranslated by both translations will be subjected to discussion. The verse which includes the prophet's name is photocopied to provide more authenticity to the research as can be see below.

Let us consider the Quranic verse in (1) along with its translations below:

2.1 (العنكبوت: 36) "وإلى مَدْيَنَ أَخَاهُمْ شُعَيْبًا"

T1:

36. To the Madyan (people) (We sent) their brother: **Shu'aib**. (al-*a*nkaboot: 36)

T2:

36. And to (the people of) Midian (Madyan), We sent their brother **Shu'aib**. (al-*a*nkaboot: 36)

*Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia says that:

"This article is about the view of this character in the Hebrew Bible. For the view of him as a Prophet in Islam, see *Shuayb* (prophet)." In the *Old Testament* or the Hebrew: "Bible, **Jethro** (/jeth'row/; Hebrew: Standard *Yitro* Tiberian *Yithro*; "His Excellence/Posterity" ; Arabic شعيب *Sho'ayb*) is Moses' father-in-law, a Kenite shepherd and priest of Midian." In Al-Manar Interpretation:

"هو يتروب بالعبرانية وشعيب بالعربية"

"It is *Yithro* in Hebrew and *Shu'aib* in Arabic." (My translation)(MT)

The Quranic verse makes reference to a prophet whose name is mentioned in the Bible as **Jethro**. Looking at the two translations, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Shu'aib** is erroneously rendered by both T1 and T2 through transliterating the name instead of translating it as **Jethro** viz. naturalizing it. Notably, when the name is transliterated into the target language, readers confuse the referent and the text loses much of its value.

2.2 (الصفات: 123) "وَإِنَّ إِلْيَاسَ لَمِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ"

T1:

123. So also was **Elias** Among those sent (by Us). (Assaaffaat: 123)

T2:

123. And verily, **Elias** was one of the Messengers. (Assaaffaat: 123)

Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary defines Elijah as:

"Elijah: 1. Also, Douay Bible, Elias, a Hebrew prophet of the 9th century B.C. I Kings 17: II Kings."

*Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia states that:

"**Elijah** (Hebrew: *eliyahu*, meaning "My God is Yahweh") or **Elias** Arabic: إلياس, *elyas*) was a prophet and a wonder-worker in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Ahab (9th century BC), according to the Biblical Books of Kings. Derivative references to Elijah appear in the Talmud, Mishnah, the New Testament and the Qur'an."

"In Islam the Qur'an describes Elijah as a great and righteous prophet of God and one who powerfully preached against the worship of Ba'al." In At-Tabari History:

"وأرجح الآراء إن إلياس هو النبي المسمى إيليا في التوراة"

"And the most likely consensus is that Elias is the prophet whose name is Elijah in the Torah" (MT)

If we consider the two translations in the light of the quotations above, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Elias** is almost rendered by both T1 and T2 through transliterating it instead of translating it as **Elijah** which is more common in the target language. Readers of the Holy Quran translation may lose the image related to Elijah when they scan the name Elias in the stories related to Prophet Elijah.

2.3 (مريم: 55) "وَأذْكَرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا"

T1:

55. Also mention in the Book  
(The story of) **Isma'il**:  
He was (strictly) true  
To what he promised,  
And he was an apostle  
(And) a prophet.

(Maryam: 55)

T2:

55. And mention in the Book (Qur'an) Ishmael.  
Verily! He was true to what he promised,  
and he was a Messenger (and) a Prophet.

(Maryam: 55)

Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary defines Ishmael as:

Ishmael: 1. Also, Douay Bible, Ismail, the son of Abraham and Hagar: Both he and Hagar were cast out of Abraham's family by Sarah. Gen.16:11, 12.

*Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia states:

"**Ishmael** (Hebrew: Modern *Yishma'el* Tiberian *Yisma'iil* 259-3 *Yismaaiil*;

Arabic: إسماعيل *Ismaaiil* according to Jews, Christians and Muslims. Ishmael was born of Abraham's marriage to Sarah's handmaiden Hagar (Genesis 16:3). According to the Genesis account, he died at the age of 137 (Genesis 25:17).

Islamic traditions consider Ishmael to be the ancestor of Arab people (Ishmaelites)"

Looking at the two translations, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Ishmael** is correctly rendered by T2 but erroneously by T1 through transliterating the name into **Isma'il** instead of translating it as **Ishmael** viz. naturalizing it. **Ishmael** was known for patience, obedience, and trueness. Undoubtedly, such things attract people to name their children after certain characters they admire, and stimulate authors to employ these names in their literary works as can be seen in *Melville's* novel *Moby-Dick* whose characters *Ahab*, *Ishmael*, *Gabriel* etc. have clear concord between the name and the role of the character through the dramatic employment of these names which are strongly associated with Biblical figures. This being the case, a figure name such as that of prophet Ishmael shouldn't be mistranslated through transliteration.

2.4 (مريم: 56) "وَأذْكَرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِدْرِيسَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا"

T1:

56. Also mention in the Book  
The case of **Idris**:  
He was a man of truth  
(And sincerity), (and) a prophet:

(Maryam: 56)

T2:

56. And mention in the Book (the Qur'an) Idris (Enoch). Verily! He was a man of truth, (and) a Prophet.  
(Maryam: 56)

According to *Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia,

"Enoch (/ˈiɪnək/; Hebrew: Modern Hanokh Tiberian Hanok; Arabic: إدريس /'edriis/) appears in the Book of Genesis and a figure in the Generations of Adam. Enoch is the son of Jared (Gen 5:3-18), the father of Methuselah, and the great-grandfather of Noah."

Given the above translations, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Enoch** is erroneously rendered by T1 through transliterating the name into **Idris** instead of **Enoch** but it is correctly rendered by T2 despite the hesitation which appears through giving two renditions viz. **Idris** and (**Enoch**).

2.5

(الشعراء:124)

"إِذْ قَالَ لَهُمُ أَخُوهُمْ هُوْدٌ أَلَا تَتَّقُونَ"

T1:

124. Behold, their brother **Hud**

Said to them: "Will you not Fear (God)?"

(Ashshu'araa':124)

T2:

124. When their brother **Hud** said to them: "Will you not fear Allah and obey Him?"

(Ashshu'araa':124)

According to *Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia,

"**Eber** ( Tiberian Hebrew 'Eber) is an ancestor of the Israelites, according to the "Table of Nations" in Genesis 10-11 and 1 Chronicles 1. He was a great-grandson of Noah's son Shem and the father of Peleg born when Eber was 34 years old, and of Joktan. He was the son of Shelah a distant ancestor of Abraham. According to the Hebrew Bible, Eber died at the age of 464 (Genesis 11:14-17) when Jacob was 20. Eber is sometimes identified with the prophet Hud of Islamic sources."

Considering the two translations above, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Eber** is erroneously rendered by both T1 and T2 through transliterating the name into **Hud** instead of **Eber**. Notably, when the name is transliterated into the target language, readers confuse the referent and the text loses much of its value.

2.6

(الأنبياء:85)

"وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِدْرِيسَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ كُلٌّ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ"

T1:

85. And remember Isma'il, Idris, and **Zul-kifl**, all (Men) of constancy and patience. (Al-Anbiyaa':85)

T2:

85. And (remember) Ishmael, and Idris (Enoch) and **Dhul-Kifl**, all were from among those who observe patience.

(Al-Anbiyaa':85)

According to *Wikipedia*, the on-line encyclopedia,

"**Ezekiel** (/iˈziːki.əl/; Hebrew: *Y'hez'qel*, meaning 'May God strengthen him' Arabic also Zul-Kifl, ذوالكفل , and *Hazqiyal*, in Arabic meaning 'God will strengthen' (from, *hazaq*, literally 'to fasten upon', figuratively 'strong', and , *el*, literally 'God', and so figuratively 'The Almighty') is the central protagonist of the Book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible.

In Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Baha'i Faith, Ezekiel is acknowledged as a Hebrew prophet."

Considering the two translations above, it can be readily seen that the proper name **Ezekiel** is erroneously rendered by both T1 and T2 through transliterating the name into **Zul-kifl** and **Dhul-Kifl** respectively instead of **Ezekiel**. This name is mentioned two times in the Holy Quran alone without any details which requires more accuracy in dealing with it (see Al-Najjar 2114)

(الأنبياء:85)

"وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِدْرِيسَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ كُلٌّ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ"

(ص:48)

"وَأَذْكُرُ إِسْمَاعِيلَ وَالْيَسَعَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ وَكُلٌّ مِنَ الْأَخْيَارِ"

Having seen that six names of twenty five have been subjected to transliteration although they might have been naturalized, the following points come into view: - Both translations opt for rendering the prophets' names as can be seen in most cases e.g. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Jesus etc. , by translating them into the target language viz. naturalizing them. Obviously, naturalization constitutes a successful strategy in dealing with these names as it results in a kind of relevance and association between the two cultures due to the fact that there is a shared space between them.

- Translating most of the names entails dealing with the rest of them in the same way viz. applying the same strategy to them since they are all proper names and exist in the same source.

- Perhaps some translators fear that the authenticity of some resources may not meet the required conditions of optimal translation, especially when it comes to such highly authoritative text i.e. the Holy Quran. However, translation is an art and its main concern is to be optimal through coinciding form and meaning. In the present study it seems that the issue of choice protrudes to be more vital than meaning as a proper name indicates a unique reference (see Enani 1996).

- History books, manuscripts, inscriptions, historical sites etc. abound in prophets' names and their dramatic and enduring stories. When the name is rendered correctly, all information from different resources integrate to make up a complete thought about the referent; otherwise information will be dispersed.

It can be concluded that the names of the prophets "Shu'aib, Elias, Isma'il, Idris, Hud, and Dhul-Kifl" which have been mistranslated by T1 should have been translated or naturalized into the target language (English) instead of having been transliterated. The same thing can be said about the names "Shu'aib, Elias, Hud, and Dhul-Kifl" which have also been mistranslated by T2. It is clear that T2 has avoided two erroneous renditions because of the constant upgrading of the translating process regarding the time factor of both translations i.e., the period between 1964-1993 the dates of publishing T1 and T2 respectively.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has examined the renditions of the prophets' names in the Holy Quran with an eye to checking the

translator's awareness of transliteration vs. naturalization as a translation strategy in dealing with the prophets' names in translation. Twenty five names repeated five hundred and thirteen times in the Holy Quran have been surveyed. It has been shown that Ali mistranslates six names with a ratio wrong of 24% whereas Al-Hilali & Khan mistranslate just four with a ratio wrong of 16% - an indication which accounts for constant progress in the translation process as there is more than a three-decade period of time between the two translations. Definitely, mistranslating the name of a prophet causes a great loss of the meaning of the whole situation and causes the text to lose much of its value as it mistakes reference.

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Appendix

	T1	T2	English	Times	Arabic
.1	Adam	Adam	Adam	25	آدم
.2	Abraham	Abraham	Abraham	69	إبراهيم
.3	Isaac	Isaac	Isaac	17	إسحاق
.4	Jacob	Jacob	Jacob	16	يعقوب
.5	Noah	Noah	Noah	43	نوح
.6	David	David	David	16	داود
.7	Solomon	Solomon	Solomon	17	سليمان
.8	Job	Job	Job	4	أيوب
.9	Joseph	Joseph	Joseph	27	يوسف
.10	Moses	Moses	Moses	136	موسى
.11	Aaron	Aaron	Aaron	20	هارون
.12	Zakariya	Zachariah	Zakariya	7	زكريا
.13	John	John	John	5	يحيى
.14	Jesus	Jesus	Jesus	25	عيسى
.15	Elias	Elias	Elijah	3	إلياس
.16	Isma'il	Isma'il	Ishmael	12	إسماعيل
.17	Elisha	Elisha	Elisha	2	اليسع
.18	Jonah	Jonah	Jonah	4	يونس
.19	Lot	Lot	Lut	27	لوط
.20	Idris	Idris(Enoch)	Enoch	2	إدريس
.21	Zul-kifl	Dhul-kifl	Ezekiel	2	ذو الكفل
.22	Shu'aib	Shu'aib	Jethro	13	شعيب
.23	Hud	Hud	Eber/Hebrew	7	هود
.24	Salih	Salih	Salih	9	صالح
.25	Mohammed	Mohammad	Mohammad	5	محمد/أحمد
				<b>Total: 513</b>	



### Transliteration of Arabic Words and Names

The following table shows the system which has been followed in transliterating the letters of the Arabic alphabet:

ا	Alif = a (long vowel) = aa	ط	Taa' = t
ب	Baa' = b	ظ	Zaa' = dh
ت	Taa' = t	ع	Ayn = a
ث	Thaa' = th	غ	Ghayn = o
ج	Jiim = j	ف	Faa' = f
ح	Haa' = h	ق	Qaaf = q
خ	Khaa' = kh	ك	Kaaf = k
د	Daal = d	ل	Laam = l
ذ	Dhaal = th	م	Miim = m
ر	Raa' = r	ن	Nuun = n
ز	Zaay = z	هـ	Haa' = h
س	Siin = s	و	Waaw = (w consonant) = uu (long vowel)
ش	Shiin = sh	ي	Yaa' = y (consonant) = ii (long vowel)
ص	Saad = s	ء	Hamzah = '(apostrophe)
ض	Dhad = dh		

Short vowels: َ--- (fathah) = a

ُ---(dammah) = o

◌--- (kasrah) = e