

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 30 October 1995

From: Research Department

The Guardian's Translation of Quranic Verse 55:5 as found in The Kitáb-i-Íqán

In an email dated 10 October 1995 to The Universal House of Justice, Mr. ... states that he and others have noticed a discrepancy between the translated wording of verse 55:5 in the Qur'án and the Guardian's translation of the same verse as Bahá'u'lláh quotes it in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Mr. ... asks if the wording of this verse in the original Arabic of the Kitáb-i-Íqán is the same as the wording of the original Quranic verse, and if so, whether the Guardian's English translation is a reasonable one. Mr. ...'s query was forwarded to the Research Department and the following is our response.

The Quranic verse 55:5 and the context within which it appears in the Kitáb-i-Íqán is provided below with the verse in question in italics for ease of reference.

That the term "sun" hath been applied to the leaders of religion is due to their lofty position, their fame, and renown. Such are the universally recognized divines of every age, who speak with authority, and whose fame is securely established. If they be in the likeness of the Sun of Truth, they will surely be accounted as the most exalted of all luminaries; otherwise, they are to be recognized as the focal centres of hellish fire. Even as He saith: "*Verily, the sun and the moon are both condemned to the torment of infernal fire.*"¹ You are no doubt familiar with the interpretation of the term "sun" and "moon" mentioned in this verse; no need therefore to refer unto it. And whosoever is of the element of this "sun" and "moon", that is, followeth the example of these leaders in setting his face towards falsehood and in turning away from the truth he undoubtedly cometh out of infernal gloom and returneth thereunto.²

We also provide a generally accepted translation of the same verse published in a standard English translation of the Qur'án.

The sun and the moon
Follow courses (exactly) computed;³

¹ Qur'án 55:5.

² (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), pp. 37–38

³ Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali in "The Holy Qur'án, Text Translation and Commentary" (3rd ed., 1938), page 1472.

In answer to the first part of Mr. ...’s question, in the original version of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, the wording of the verse in question is identical to the wording found in verse 55:5 of the Arabic Qur’án as follows:

Ash-Shamsu va’l-Qamaru bi Ḥusbán

The source of the discrepancy between the Guardian’s English translation and the traditionally accepted understanding of the verse as represented by Abdullah Yusuf ‘Alí’s translation, above, lies in the translation of the word “ḥusbán”. The traditional understanding of the Quranic verse is based on taking the meaning of “ḥusbán” to be “reckoning” or “computation”. Thus, the verse translates as an astronomical fact of the physical world, a physical law of nature concerning the planets. This is clear, for example, in the commentary Abdullah Yusuf Ali provides in association with his translation:

In the great astronomical universe there are exact mathematical laws, which bear witness to God’s Wisdom and also to His favours to His creatures; for we all profit by the heat and light, the seasons, and the numerous changes in the tides and the atmosphere, on which the constitution of our globe and the maintenance of life depend.⁴

However, there is no doubt that “ḥusbán”, taken as an individual item of vocabulary, may also mean both “fire” and “torture” or “punishment”, as is attested by the most authoritative classical Arabic lexica. For instance, in the “*Ṣiḥāḥ*” of Al-Jawharí and the “*Al-Qámúsú’l-Muḥit*” of Al-Fayrúzábádí it is defined as “punishment”; again in the “*Qámús*” it is given as “calamity”, “affliction with which a man is tried”, “evil”, “mischief”; and in the “*Táju’l-‘Arús* of Murtaḍá Az-Zabídí” as “fire”. Furthermore, evidence may be found in the Qur’án itself for the use of the word in these senses. In Súrah XVIII (the Súrah of the Cave), verse 40, there is a general agreement among the commentators that “ḥusbán” does not mean so much “computation” or “reckoning”—indeed this is virtually ruled out by the context—as some form of devastating heavenly visitation, in the shape, for instance, of rain, hail, stones or fire, which is sufficiently destructive to change a cultivated area into “slippery sand”.

Turning now to Mr. ...’s query about whether the Guardian’s translation of the verse is a “reasonable” one, it should be noted that not only the verse in question, but in fact the whole of the Kitáb-i-Íqán might be said to represent a reappraisal of customarily accepted Muslim interpretations of the Qur’án, assigning metaphorical interpretations to images and figures which had traditionally been understood in a principally literal sense. Thus, when Shoghi Effendi translated “ḥusbán” as “torment of infernal fire” he was not violating the sense of the original, but faithfully representing its meaning as affirmed by Bahá’u’lláh. The passage from the Kitáb-i-Íqán quoted above in which the verse occurs makes it quite clear that for the verse to convey an intelligible meaning in the context, it has to be interpreted in the manner illustrated in Shoghi Effendi’s translation; and, linguistically speaking, there is no reason why it should not.

⁴ “The Holy Qur’án: Text, Translation and Commentary”, Note 5174, page 1472.