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**Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Holy Quran's Inimitability
in Contemporary Arab Culture**
الشعر الجاهلي وإعجاز القرآن الكريم في الثقافة العربية المعاصرة

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Abstract:

This study delves into the rhetorical inimitability of the Holy Quran and its connection with pre-Islamic poetry, examining their influence on modern Arab thought. It highlights a growing detachment in Arab literature and culture from integrating these two elements, with pre-Islamic poetry often seen as unrelated to the Quran's miraculous nature. The paper emphasizes the consequences of this disconnection in educational frameworks, particularly for the younger generation. This trend has led to an increased focus on aspects of the Quran's miracles beyond eloquence and articulacy, inadvertently eroding the literary sensibility among students, academics, and scholars. The research primarily revolves around the following questions: to what extent has overlooking the link between the Quran and pre-Islamic poetry impacted contemporary Arab intellect? and what adverse effects does it have on the modern Arab mindset?

Keywords: Pre-Islamic Poetry; Quranic Inimitability; Contemporary Arab Thought; Literary Sensibility

الملخص باللغة العربية:

هذه الورقة البحثية تتناول قضية الإعجاز البياني للقرآن الكريم وعلاقته بالشعر الجاهلي، كما تتناول مدى حضور هذه القضية في العقل العربي المعاصر، ذلك أن الأدب العربي والثقافة العربية ابتعدت كثيراً عن ربط العلاقة بينهما، بل اعتبرت الشعر الجاهلي بعيداً عن روح الإعجاز القرآني، وقليل من الباحثين من نبه إلى خطر تغييب ذلك عن مناهج تعليم الناشئة، ومن نتائج ذلك أن صار الحديث عن صور الإعجاز الأخرى وأن القرآن الكريم احتوى على ما يعجز البشر لا من طريق البيان والفصاحة، وقد أدى هذا إلى قتل الذائقة الأدبية في نفوس الناشئة والباحثين والعلماء على حد سواء. إن إشكالية البحث تدور أساساً حول السؤال التالي: إلى أي مدى أدى تغييب ربط العلاقة بين القرآن الكريم والشعر الجاهلي والحديث عن الإعجاز القرآني؟ وما هي الآثار السلبية التي انعكست على العقل العربي المعاصر من جراء ذلك؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الجاهلي؛ الإعجاز؛ العقل العربي؛ المعاصر؛ الذائقة الأدبية

the ocean, and its wonder eclipses that of poetry².

2. The Inimitability of the Quran and Pre-Islamic Poetry:

The study of the Quran's inimitability confronts a significant challenge in engaging with the 'modern mind,' deeply influenced by Western thought. Malik bin Nabi (1984) emphasizes that these Western intellectual influences are not merely confined to the surface of contemporary Muslim youth's intellectual pursuits. They penetrate deeper, subtly impacting their cognitive and emotional processes, and, more profoundly, their spiritual lives³.

Historically, the Arab intellect instinctively understood the Quran's miraculous nature upon hearing it. This reality underscores that the primary dilemma faced by today's Arab individual is a matter of intellect. The contemporary Muslim mind is engaged in an exhaustive search for evidence of this inimitability. Central to this challenge is the modern intellect itself, a divine endowment that evolves through education, culture, and myriad life experiences. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of this modern Islamic mindset is paramount, as it sets the foundation for our approach and methodology in any rigorous academic research⁴.

This modern Muslim intellect has been notably influenced by what Malik bin Nabi referred to as the "radiance of Orientalists." He argues that this influence poses a

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Quran's inimitability poses a deeply intricate challenge, especially in the contemporary context. Regarded as one of the most complex issues confronting the modern intellect, it remains a pivotal topic even for those firmly grounded in the belief of Prophet Muhammad's prophecy, the integrity of divine revelation, and the authenticity of the Quranic text. This issue is not only tightly linked with the discourse on pre-Islamic poetry but also deeply woven into the fabric of our overall culture. It highlights the struggles faced by the Arab world across different scientific epochs, particularly the flawed methodologies employed in teaching language and literature. More broadly, this issue affects the development of the Arab or Muslim individual, especially in their capacity to appreciate aesthetic beauty in both form and ideology.

As Malik bin Nabi (1984) insightfully observed, this challenge extends to shaping the Arab or Muslim identity, fostering individuals who can discern beauty in both visual and intellectual realms¹.

Echoing this sentiment, Al-Baqillani (2013) profoundly articulated and grappled with this issue. He mourned the oversight of his contemporaries and their diverted focus, asserting, "Recognize this as a noble field, vast in significance, yet sparsely pursued and supported. It stands alone, without a tribe for protection or a family to acknowledge its depth. Its complexity surpasses that of magic, its enormity dwarfs

² Al-Baqillani: The Inimitability of the Quran, edited by Al-Sayyid Ahmad Sakr, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, 2013, revised edition, p. 225.

³ Ibid, p 54

⁴ Ibid, p19

¹ Malik Bin Nabi, "The Quranic Phenomenon," (Abdel Sabour Shaheen. Trans), Dar Al-Fikr Al-Mu'asir, Damascus, Syria, 4th edition, 1984, p. 26.

1986)⁶.

Ihsan Abbas' endeavor to reconcile the Western concept of 'the sublime' with the Islamic notion of 'miraculous' reflects a broader inclination among contemporary Arab scholars. This trend involves adapting Western theoretical frameworks to fit Arab cultural contexts, highlighting a key challenge faced by the modern Arab intellect.

The proposal by some Orientalists to develop specific grammatical rules for the Quran, based on its unique use of pronouns, underscores this intersection. Hadi Al-Jatlawi (1998) notes that this perspective suggests the Quran possesses a distinct grammatical structure, necessitating a new Arabic grammar that harmonizes traditional Arabic with the Quranic style. Without such alignment, the Quranic grammar risks being misinterpreted as incorrect by conventional standards⁷.

This Western-influenced approach in Arab academia is also seen in efforts to analyze the Quranic lexicon to understand its structural and thematic framework. Researchers aim to situate the Quran within the context of contemporary Arabic, assessing its alignment and divergences. Al-Jatlawi (1998) critiques this view for potentially undermining the enduring nature of the Quran's inimitability, reducing it to a historical literary piece with a specific linguistic style⁸.

substantial risk to the contemporary intellect's ability to grasp and be reassured by the Quran's miraculous attributes. It has cast doubts on the traditional underpinnings of Quranic inimitability and introduced nuanced, intricate methodologies. These methodologies challenge the conventional means of literary analysis, questioning the very frameworks used to evaluate literary excellence, eloquence, and miraculousness⁵.

Scholars have sought to connect the concept of 'inimitability' in Arabic culture to the Western idea of 'the sublime', as articulated by Longinus. He defined the sublime as that which triggers a profound emotional response, an echo of a grand spirit. Longinus identified five elements of the sublime :

1. The capability to generate grand thoughts.
2. Intense emotional depth.
3. The artful use of metaphor.
4. The choice of lofty language.
5. Elevated and dignified composition.

These components split into two groups: the first two are intimately connected to the poet's psyche, while the latter three are inherent to the literary piece itself. When we evolve the idea of the 'sublime' into 'miraculous', especially in the context of the Quran, the first two elements fade in relevance. The focus then narrows to the last three elements. Unraveling the inimitability within these aspects allows for an in-depth exploration of their collective effect on the reader or listener's psyche (Ihsan Abbas,

⁶ Ihsan Abbas: History of Literary Criticism Among Arabs, Dar Al-Thaqafa, Beirut, Lebanon, 5th edition, 1986, p. 339.

⁷ Al-Hadi Al-Jatlawi: Issues of Language in the Books of Tafsir - Methodology, Interpretation, and Inimitability, Dar Muhammad Al-Jami, Tunis, Tunisia, 1st edition, 1998, p. 431.

⁸ Ibid, p431

⁵ Ibid, p22

especially if the latter lack eloquence. However, grammatical articulateness does not equate to true eloquence. For Arabs, eloquence is intrinsically linked to Arabic, and hence they did not regard non-Arabs as eloquent, regardless of their lexical precision.

The distinction, according to Al-Jurjani, becomes apparent when examining the foundational principles of Arabic speech compared to other languages. The inherent structure and composition of Arabic set it apart, highlighting its superiority and uniqueness. This perspective led Arabs to consider non-Arabic languages as fundamentally different, with true eloquence necessitating Arabic expression¹¹.

Al-Jurjani further clarifies the shared capability of Arabs and non-Arabs in effectively matching words to meanings. The presence of 'al-ayy' (a linguistic fault) is a commonality across languages, not exclusive to non-Arabs. Its antithesis, the natural and effortless articulation of meanings, is equally present in both groups. While Arabs might not label non-Arabs as eloquent, they do acknowledge the spectrum of expression efficiency in non-Arabic languages¹².

Thus, the key distinction between an Arab and a non-Arab speaker, as per Al-Jurjani, lies in the Arab's inherent skill in crafting speech that resonates and captivates audiences—a proficiency considered to be most refined among Arabic speakers. This view aligns with the commentary on Al-Rummani's treatise on the Quran's

The discussion of the Quran's miraculous and inimitable nature leads to an exploration of its relationship with pre-Islamic poetry. The Arab tribes during the Quran's revelation had an innate ability to perceive its inimitability and differentiate between human speech levels⁹. Muhammad Abu Musa (2006) suggests this intrinsic understanding negated the need for them to explicitly address the inimitable aspect of the Quran, as it was inherently evident to them. Consequently, scholarly focus on this dimension in Arab intellectual heritage emerged significantly later, following earlier research on linguistic errors in Arab-Islamic society. Abu Musa (2006) explains that the early deviation of the Arab tongue from natural speech patterns prioritized the establishment of grammatical rules in Arabic sciences by the early 2nd century. In contrast, the development of critical and rhetorical skills, affected by cultural exchanges, only became clearly defined by the 5th century¹⁰.

Abdul-Qahir al-Jurjani (1997) provides a nuanced exploration of linguistic proficiency, distinguishing between Arabic and non-Arabic speakers in terms of eloquence. He contends that language superiority transcends mere expression of ideas or alignment of words with meanings; it encompasses a deeper, often unacknowledged aspect that contemporary researchers struggle to grasp.

Al-Jurjani observes that both Arab and non-Arab speakers can proficiently express meanings. He notes instances where non-Arabs might excel in clarity over Arabs,

¹¹ Abdul Qahir Al-Jurjani: Explanation of Al-Rummani's Treatise on the Inimitability of the Quran, Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, Cairo, Egypt, 1st edition, 1997, p. 70.

¹² Ibid, p38

⁹ Mohammed Abu Musa: The Rhetorical Miracle, An Analytical Study of the Heritage of Scholars, Wahba Library, Cairo, Egypt, Revised Edition, 2006, p. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid, p38

Al-Jahiz's observations on the eloquence of the Bedouins and scholarly Arabs point to a reverence for language that surpassed religious devotion. He noted that the discourse of wise, articulate Bedouins and eloquent rhetoricians possessed a captivating quality unmatched in any other speech¹⁵. His firsthand experiences lend credibility to his assertions, ruling out any bias in his appreciation of Arabic eloquence.

Consequently, a profound understanding of the Quran's eloquence necessitates an appreciation of the linguistic sensibilities of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Omar Salami (1980) asserts that scholars of the Quran must consider the mindset of the Arabian desert's inhabitants, known for their rhetorical intelligence¹⁶. This intelligence was characterized by expressive proficiency, quick-wittedness, and a keen poetic sense, honed by the demanding desert environment. This perspective is essential for grasping the depth and intricacies of the Quranic language.

Omar Salami (1980) articulates a poignant reflection on the contemporary erosion of the refined appreciation and understanding that Arabs historically possessed for their language, particularly at the advent of the Quran's revelation. This decline, he suggests, is attributed to the influence of Western academic paradigms that fail to foster an appreciation for the intrinsic qualities of Arabic. Salami challenges modern scholars and readers, asking if we can truly grasp the original Arab's linguistic genius, immerse ourselves in the Quran's

inimitability, underscoring the unique place of Arabic in the realm of linguistic eloquence.

The corpus of pre-Islamic poetry (Jahiliyyah poetry) stands as a testament to the linguistic pinnacle achieved by the Arabs, evidencing a language refined to perfection and balance. This body of work showcases not just the Arabs' ability to precisely articulate their emotions, but also the versatility of their language, accommodating diverse forms of expression. Malik bin Nabi (1984) underscores this aspect, emphasizing the language's capacity to adapt to the manifold expressions of human communication¹³.

This linguistic proficiency is fundamental to comprehending the Quran's inimitability, a concept that transcends traditional interpretive approaches. As Al-Baqillani (2010) interprets, the Quranic challenge to produce text of comparable eloquence is not just a testament to its divine origin but also affirms the unity of God. This connection is encapsulated in the Quranic verses *"or they may say, 'He forged it,' Say, 'Bring ye then ten suras forged, like unto it, and call (to your aid) whomsoever ye can, other than Allah! - If ye speak the truth! If then they (your false gods) answer not your (call), know ye that this revelation is sent down (replete) with the knowledge of Allah, and that there is no god but He! will ye even then submit (to Islam)?"* (Hud 13-14). These verses link the inability to replicate such eloquence to its divine nature and the principle of monotheism¹⁴.

¹⁵ Al-Jahiz: Eloquence and Exposition, edited by Abd al-Salam Haroun, Maktabat Al-Khanji, Cairo, Egypt, Revised Edition, Undated, p. 145.

¹⁶ Omar Salami: The Aesthetic Inimitability in the Holy Quran, Abdul Karim Bin Abdullah Institution, Tunis, Tunisia, 1980, Revised Edition, p. 10.

¹³ Malik Bin Nabi: The Quranic Phenomenon, p. 33.

¹⁴ Al-Baqillani: The Inimitability of the Quran, edited by Al-Sayyid Ahmad Sakr, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, 2013, revised edition, p. 23.

intrinsic link between language mastery and intellectual capacity, vital for comprehending the Quran's unique eloquence. Al-Rummani, in his treatise, emphasizes the necessity of an inherent appreciation for the nuances of language to truly grasp the Quran's miraculous inimitable nature. Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (1997) expands on this, asserting that such linguistic discernment, a blend of innate sensibility and extensive knowledge, is critical for distinguishing the miraculous from the mundane in language.

Al-Jurjani differentiates between natural linguistic flair and academic learning. The former, a deeper, innate sensitivity to language, enables one to perceive and appreciate its beauty and subtleties, often eliciting profound emotional responses²¹. This intrinsic appreciation, divinely endowed and not universally attainable, elevates the understanding of linguistic elegance beyond mere academic comprehension²².

Malik bin Nabi (1984) points out that an in-depth study of Arabic rhetoric, especially when contrasted with the Quran's style and other languages, reveals Arabic's unique rhetorical prowess. This understanding assists Muslims in engaging with the Quran, positioning it as a universal guide, thereby negating the need for translation. The Quran's unparalleled eloquence and style affirm its status as a divine text, inherently resistant to replication or translation without

revelatory experience, or allow the Quran to transport us back to the era of its revelation with its linguistic purity, thematic vitality, and stylistic sublimity¹⁷.

The relationship between the Arabic language and the inimitability of the Quran has been a focal point for scholars. Ibn Qutaybah (2006) emphasizes that the Quran's superiority becomes apparent through in-depth study, extensive knowledge, and an understanding of the nuances and stylistic finesse unique to Arabic. This linguistic distinction is akin to the Quran's exalted status among religious texts¹⁸.

Al-Baqillani (2013) reinforces this notion, noting that the subtleties and complexities in Arabic expression, especially its remarkable precedence in eloquence, are unmatched in other languages. He references the Quran's self-description as being in clear Arabic, a point reiterated throughout the text, underscoring its divine choice of language, elevating it above others. This linguistic choice is not just a matter of clarity but a deliberate elevation, distinguishing the Quran from texts in other languages¹⁹.

Al-Jahiz asserts the intellectual superiority of the Arabs, attributing it to their discerning linguistic choices: "A man's poetry is a part of his speech, his thought reflects his knowledge, and his selections reveal his intellect"²⁰. This belief underscores the

¹⁷ Ibid, p17-18

¹⁸ Ibn Qutaybah : Exegesis of the Difficult Verses of the Quran, p. 74.

¹⁹ Al-Baqillani: The Inimitability of the Quran, edited by Al-Sayyid Ahmad Sakr, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, 2013, revised edition, p. 80.

²⁰ Al-Jahiz: Eloquence and Exposition, edited by Abd al-Salam Haroun, Maktabat Al-Khanji, Cairo, Egypt, Revised Edition, n.d, p. 77.

²¹ Abdul Qahir Al-Jurjani: Explanation of Al-Rummani's Treatise on the Inimitability of the Quran, Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi, Cairo, Egypt, 1st edition, 1997, p. 75.

²² Ibid, p 75

disconnection from the historical intellectual evolution and a significant detachment from a key component of our heritage—the Quran. Today, scholarly discourse is predominantly shaped by Western thought and modernity, often overshadowing the traditional methodologies and deeper insights that are crucial for authentic Quranic studies²⁴.

Al-Jahiz asserted that a profound appreciation of the Quran necessitates an in-depth understanding of Arabic. Mastery in the language's structure, derivations, context, precision, meanings, and proverbs is crucial. He cautioned that a lack of this knowledge leads to misinterpretation of both the Quran and Hadith. He stated, "Engaging in discourse and various knowledge fields without being deeply knowledgeable results in failure and misguidance"²⁵. In this context, 'deeply knowledgeable' refers to those who possess a comprehensive grasp of Arabic, beyond mere pronunciation, encompassing its methodologies and linguistic subtleties.

Al-Jahiz also emphasized the richness of the Arabic language, highlighting its idiomatic expressions, derivations, and structures, where each word has a specific place and connotation, and different contexts lead to varying interpretations²⁶.

Echoing this sentiment, Ibn Qutaybah stressed the necessity of thorough contemplation, extensive knowledge, and an understanding of the Arabs' stylistic sophistication. Their insights underscore the evolutionary trajectory of intellectual

loss of essence²³.

The Quran explicitly challenged the Arabs to engage with it through a multifaceted reading approach: literary analysis, aesthetic appreciation, and critical evaluation. During its revelation, this challenge was met by the Arab audience who meticulously listened, discerned, and scrutinized the text. Their engagement led them to a profound realization. Confronted with the Quran's unparalleled eloquence and depth, they acknowledged their own linguistic limitations. This self-judgment was not merely an admission of defeat but a recognition of the Quran's extraordinary linguistic prowess, which transcended the heights of their established literary norms.

The Quran, revealed in Arabic, serves as a benchmark for linguistic purity and excellence. To fully grasp and appreciate the Quran, one must reconnect with the untainted linguistic instinct prevalent among pre-Islamic Arabs. This pure instinct, unmarred by complex philosophies or doctrines, harmonizes with the Quran's message, transforming perception into firm belief and actionable faith. Malik bin Nabi (1984) highlights that while these principles are vital across literary texts, their application to the Quran necessitates a distinct and nuanced mindset. The standards established by the early Arabs for this engagement present a substantial challenge in the modern context, where academic studies have progressively diverged from the core essence of the Quran. Contemporary intellectual paradigms, influenced by periods of intellectual and scientific stagnation, are now deeply rooted in modern academic conventions. This shift has led to a

²⁴ Ibid, p19

²⁵ Al-Jahiz: The Book of Animals, edited by Abd al-Salam Haroun, Maktabat Al-Khanji, Cairo, Egypt, 1965, p. 154.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 153-154

²³ Malik Bin Nabi: The Quranic Phenomenon, p. 49.

values. The erosion of this linguistic essence could lead to a significant loss of these integral aspects. Al-Rafi'i observes, "The diminished impact of the Quran on its contemporary adherents is primarily due to their disconnection from the intuitive insights and linguistic understanding inherent to the time of its revelation" ³⁰

Al-Rafi'i frames the Quran's inimitability as an appeal to the fundamental linguistic instinct inherent in all humanity, not limited to the Arabs or their language. This universality of the Quranic challenge underscores its miraculous nature, evident through the instinctual recognition of its uniqueness. He elucidates, "Its miraculous nature challenges the innate linguistic faculties, regardless of their manifestation. This inherent challenge, rooted deeply within, is recognized despite widespread attempts at contestation"³¹. Consequently, the inability of the Arabs to match the Quran's eloquence is tied to their inherent linguistic nature, a fact that remains steadfast amidst divergent views³².

The Arabs, knowledgeable about various cultures and languages, identified their language as instinctual among all languages of that era. Al-Rafi'i notes, "Natural and instinctive phenomena are not subject to mere acceptance or rejection by their community; they are perceived as inevitable truths that must be embraced" ³³

Al-Rafi'i further illustrates the Quran's transformative effect on the Arabs as both a deconstruction and reconstruction of their

thought, transitioning from initial clarity to later complexity. This pattern is mirrored in our cultural legacy; the era around the Quran's revelation was marked by inherent understanding and lucidity, whereas later generations experienced increased intellectual complexity due to life's intricacies and the integration of non-Arabs into Islam, who were less acquainted with Arabic²⁷.

The current scenario mirrors the past, suggesting a cyclical nature of time. Al-Baqillani emphasizes the key to grasping the Quran's inimitability lies in possessing both a refined linguistic sensibility and practical fluency in Arabic. He asserts, "Our explanations and detailed expositions are futile for those devoid of literary insight or oblivious to linguistic subtleties" ²⁸.

To genuinely appreciate the Quran, one must reconnect with the unblemished instinct characteristic of the early Arabs during the Quran's revelation. This innate purity, free from the clutter of unavailing philosophies and complex doctrines, enables a profound resonance and integration of the human spirit with the Quran. Such a deep engagement shifts understanding from mere emotional perception to a conviction rooted in faith, shaping tangible actions²⁹.

During the pre-Islamic era and at the Quran's revelation, Arabic was the indispensable medium for comprehending the Quran's embedded meanings, ethics, and

³⁰ Mustafa Sadiq Al-Rafi'i: History of Arab Literature, Dar Asala, Algeria, 1st edition, 2010, p. 84.

³¹ Ibid, p36

³² Ibid, p37

³³ Ibid, p68

²⁷ Omar Salami: The Artistic Inimitability in the Holy Quran, Abdul Karim Bin Abdullah Institution, Tunis, Tunisia, 1980, Revised Edition, p. 20

²⁸ Al-Baqillani: The Inimitability of the Quran, edited by Al-Sayyid Ahmad Sakr, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, Lebanon, 2013, revised edition, p. 54.

²⁹ Omar Salami: The Artistic Inimitability in the Holy Quran, Abdul Karim Bin Abdullah Institution, Tunis, Tunisia, 1980, Revised Edition, p. 22

this universal instinct, Arabic transcends its linguistic function, embodying the language of innate human understanding and divine revelation.

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ethos, initiated from within their own cultural and historical context. This process, distinct from human endeavors, exemplifies the difference between the achievable and the miraculous, highlighting the divine aspect of the Quran's influence³⁴.

3. CONCLUSION

Quran, embodying the innate linguistic instinct of humanity and not just the Arab populace, underscores that the inherent Arabic instinct aligns with the Quranic ethos. All languages, in comparison, must acknowledge their inherent limitations against this benchmark. The Quran, upon its recitation, exerts a commanding influence on the human psyche, compelling engagement and acknowledgment, whether voluntary or involuntary. This compelling force is not only irresistible but also transformative, clearly delineating its origin from beyond mundane human discourse, aimed at guiding from darkness to enlightenment.

In studying the Quran, it is pivotal to recognize that its inimitability is anchored in its unparalleled eloquence. Attempts to seek its miraculous nature in aspects other than its linguistic prowess are unlikely to yield substantive results. Likewise, efforts to translate its profound meanings inevitably fall short, failing to replicate the depth and transformative impact intrinsic to its original Arabic expression. The Quran's inimitability, therefore, is deeply rooted in its exceptional linguistic and rhetorical sophistication, which is beyond the scope of conventional human expression. Additionally, Arabic's role extends beyond mere communication, distinguishing it from other languages. As the medium of a divine scripture addressing

³⁴ Ibid, p68

9. Ibn Qutaybah. (1973). Ta'wil Mushkil Al-Qur'an [Interpretation of the Difficult Verses of the Quran]. (A. S. Sakr, Ed.). Cairo, Egypt: Dar Al-Turath. (1st ed.).
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