



## An Approach to the Meaning of “Wa Jā’a Rabbuka”, Based on the Theory of the Spirit of Meaning

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### Abstract

The quality of understanding of the *Mutashābihāt* (ambiguous/similar) verses is one of the important issues in the field of the studies of Islamic texts, especially the science of interpretation. The rules proposed for this important skill are different and have different efficiencies. One of the theories expressed in this issue is the theory called the “spirit of meaning.” Based on the descriptive-analytical method and focusing on this theory, this article tries to discuss the interpretation of the *majī’* verses which are known as *Mutashābihāt* of the Qur’an. Findings show that relying on this theory leads us to a clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of these verses. It also shows that *majī’* (coming) does not mean physical and material comings and goings, but it indicates to a comprehensive meaning, that is, the appearance and disappearance, absence and presence. This meaning is consistent with the apparent of other verses as well as the indisputable principles of Muslims’ beliefs in God Almighty. In addition, it does not require a meaning contrary to the external meaning of the verses. The result of this article is applicable for the issues concerning theological and interpretive studies, especially for understanding some *Mutashābihāt* verses such as ‘*Arsh*, ‘*Kursī*, ‘*Qalam* and ‘*Ityān*, as it is used in the field of literary studies of the Qur’an and the originality of non-contradiction of the exterior meaning (*zāhir*).

**Keywords:** *Mutashābihāt Verses; Theory of the Spirit of Meaning, Majī’ Verses; Qur’anic Monotheism; The Corporeality of God*

### Introduction

The study and analysis of *Muhkamāt* (unambiguous) and *Mutashābihāt* (ambiguous/similar) verses has always been one of the most popular topics for Islamic scholars and experts in Qur’anic sciences. Various definitions of *Muhkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt*, rejection and approval of opinions concerning them by the great scholars of this science and commentators, as well as new studies of this issue prove the important role of this science. Whatever be the meaning of *Mutashābihāt*, there is no doubt that an important part of the *Tashābih* (similarity) in the meaning of these verses arises from the existence of certain words in them, which leads to the ambiguity of the meaning of the whole verse. That is, the words such as ‘*Arsh*, ‘*Kursī*, ‘*Lawh*, ‘*Qlam*, ‘*Mizān*, ‘*Sirāt*, ‘*Jināh*, ‘*Nūr*, ‘*Yad*, ‘*Wajh*, ‘*Sāq*, ‘*Sam’*, ‘*Basar*, ‘*Ayn*, etc., the apparent and exterior meaning of which are clear, but such meanings cannot be accepted in the verses they are used.

Notably, the issue of *tashābuh* words is not specific to the Qur'an, but such words exist in other sacred texts, especially in the Torah and the Bible. The words "eyes of God" and "ears of God" have been mentioned many times in the Old Testament. The theme that God's mouth speaks to the prophets is found in both the Torah and the books of the prophets as well.

The verse 22 of Surah al-Fajr is an example of *mutashābihāt*: "وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا": "And thy Lord shall come with angels, rank on rank." Concerning the word (وجاء) has been given various meanings in different interpretations. The interpreters did not reach a consensus on the meaning of this verse. Some of them considered the interpretation of the coming of God incomprehensible to the earthlings (Sayed Qutb) and considered it an allegory of the signs of God's greatness and majesty when He appears as a ruler, because in such a situation nothing other than His soldiers and special servants will appear (Tabrisi). Others argued for the emergence of divine power and domination over affairs without the imagination of spatial displacement (Tha'labī) or the coming of Divine order and destination (Baqawī).

In a preliminary judgment, it should be said that the emergence of this difference is largely the result of the approach of the commentators. Some went through an unstable path by insisting on the apparent and customary meanings. The rigidity of appearances and incarnation led to the formation of groups such as "*Mujassama*" and "*Mushabbaha*", for whom the incarnation of God and the abstract creatures is acceptable. The result of this approach was that the verses of the Qur'an were reduced from the highest to the lowest meanings (Shahrestani, 1985: p. 118). Later, with the slogans of deceiving the exteriors (*Zāhir*) of the Qur'an and refraining from referring to the interior (*Bātin*), as well as with the interpretation of groups such as Wahhabism and Salafism, their bitter crimes still afflict contemporary humanity (Farzaneh and Heidari, 2018: p. 114).

The basic questions to which the present article is written to answer are that: "Is it not possible to understand the meaning of the verse by adopting a new approach or at least applying the neglected rules of interpretation, which is a rational and disciplined interpretation while adapting to other verses of the Qur'an and the original monotheistic teachings?" and "To what extent can the theory of the spirit of meaning, which its designers and promoters believe has a high capacity to solve interpretive problems, help us in this direction?"

## Research Background

Authors have written on the theory of the spirit of meaning and similar/ambiguous verses. Regarding the study of *majī'* verses and the theory of the spirit of meaning, writings have been published, including: "The basics and applications of the theory of the spirit of meaning in the works of Javadi Amoli" (Seyed Ali Asghar Masoudi and Mohammad Ghafouri-Nejad), "The interpretation of ambiguous and unambiguous verses: A critique of the commentary of *Ahsan al-Qisas* and the book of *Qāmūs-e Qur'an*" (Masha'allah Bayat Mokhtari), "A Comparative study of the verses of God's attributes from the point of view of Allameh Tabataba'ī and Rashid Reza" (Ali Ashraf Karami), "*Khabar* attributes from the point of view of Imamiyya and Mu'tazilites with emphasis on the thought of Sayed Mortaza and Qādī Abdul Jabbār" (Mustafa Soltanī), "*Nadarāt wa Ta'qībāt alā mā fī kitāb al-Salafīyah li-Muhammad Saeed Ramadan min al-Hafawāt*" (Saleh ibn Fouzān), "Analogic Language and Metaphor Language of Common Human and Divine Attributes in the Commentary of Mahāsin al-Ta'wīl" (Ebrahim Hossein-Khani and Zahra Qasem-Nejad).

## Review of Various Approaches to The Interpretation of Mutashābih Verses

The variety of translations and interpretations of these verses has made it difficult to understand their true meaning, and the efforts of some scholars have led to the application of incorrect and complex ideas in this regard. Some of these opinions have resulted in the emergence of the idea of the corporeality of God. In examining the Qur'anic similar/ambiguous words, an important question is "how and in what sense are these words formulated and used?" There are generally four theories to answer this question:

### 1) The theory of Zāhiris

In the history of Islamic culture, some scholars have taken these words in the exterior meaning and therefore consider the use of these words in the same conventional and apparent meanings to be true.

### 2) The theory of truth and abstract

The most common theory about similar/ambiguous Qur'anic terms is that these words were first applied to tangible meanings and therefore are true (*haqīqat*) about them, and then were used in intellectual meanings and therefore are abstract (*majāz*) for them.

### 3) Theory of verbal commonality

In addition to the previous two theories, it can also be mentioned of the third theory, which, although it has been proposed only in words related to divine attributes and names in the Holy Qur'an, but it can be generalized to all similar/ambiguous words in the Qur'an. According to this view, the application of words related to attributes and even the word "existence" to God and others is due to verbal commonality, that is, a single word has been established for two different meanings.

### 4) The theory of the spirit of meaning

Another theory about similar/ambiguous words in the Qur'an is that words are basically placed on the spirits of meanings and the characteristics of various instances are not considered in the setting of words on meanings. For example, when the author puts the word 'Arsh in front of a material that we know and call as "throne" in Persian, he did not regard with the characteristics of its various examples, such as what kind it is made of, its shape round or rectangular, and for what purpose it is used. He put only this word for a common meaning used in all its various instances. In this theory, "the spirit of meaning" or "spirits of meanings", which is considered to be the real subject of words, means the same common meaning among various examples. Therefore, a word like 'Arsh may even have an intangible and immaterial instance that can be used in a real way and without the need to use metaphors and abstract words in that instance of truth (Hojjati and Shivapour, 2010: p. 42).

### **The Advent of the Theory of the Spirit of Meaning**

The first form of this theory has been proposed by Ghazali who has described his view mainly in his book *Jawāhir al-Qur'an*. In explaining the theory of the spirit of meaning in this book, he first refers to the issue of balance between the tangible and the rational world and talks about the dream and its relation to the real world, referring to examples of Ibn Sirin's interpretations. According to al-Ghazali, many statements of the Qur'an and Sunnah are like this. For example, the meaning of "Asbu" in the hadith "The heart of the believer is between Absu'ayn (fingers) of the fingers of al-Rahman" is the spirit of the meaning of the finger. Seemingly, words such as pen, hand, right hand, face, etc. also indicate to the spirit of their meaning. For example, the meaning of a pen is what is used for writing, and its meaning does not mention that it is made of straw or wood. So, if there is something in the world with which the science was written on the hearts of people, it could be called a pen in the real sense and not virtually, and even with more priority. After Al-Ghazali, the great scholars accepted this theory, wrote about it and expressed views, such as: Mohiyya al-Din Ibn Arabi, Sheikh Mahmoud Shabestari, Sadr al-Muta'allehin, Feyz Kashani, Hakim Sabzevari, Mirza Javad Maleki Tabrizi, Allameh Mostafavi, Allameh Tabataba'i and Ayatollah Javadi Amoli (Ibid., p. 43).

«فاعلم: أن التَّكْلُفَ والتَّرْسُمَ ممقوت عند ذوي الجِدِّ، فما كلمة طَمَسَ إلا وتحتها رُموز وإشارات إلى معنى خفيّ، يدركها من يدرك الموازنة والمناسبة بين عالم المَلِكِ وعالم الشهادة وبين عالم العَيْبِ والمَلَكُوتِ، إذ ما من شيء في عالم المَلِكِ والشَّهَادَةِ إلا وهو مثال لأمر روحاني من عالم المَلَكُوتِ كأنه هو في روحه ومعناه، وليس هُوَ هُوَ في صورته وقالبه، والمثال الجِسْماني من عالم الشهادة مُنْتَدِجٌ إلى المعنى الروحاني من ذلك العالم، ولذلك كانت الدنيا منزلاً من منازل الطريق إلى الله ضرورياً في حق الانس، إذ كما يستحيل الوصول إلى اللبِّ إلا من طريق القَشْرِ فيستحيل التَّرَقِّي إلى عالم الأرواح إلا بمثال عالم الأجسام، أن القرآن والأخبار تشتمل على كثير من هذا الجنس، فانظر إلى قوله صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ "قَلْبُ الْمُؤْمِنِ بَيْنَ أَصْبُعَيْنِ مِنْ أَصَابِعِ الرَّحْمَنِ" فإن رُوحَ الْأَصْبُعِ الْقَدْرَةُ عَلَى سُرْعَةِ التَّقْلِيْبِ، وإنما قَلْبُ الْمُؤْمِنِ بَيْنَ لَمَّةِ الْمَلِكِ وَبَيْنَ لَمَّةِ الشَّيْطَانِ، هذا يُغْوِيهِ، وهذا يَهْدِيهِ، والله تعالى بهما يُقَلِّبُ قُلُوبَ الْعِبَادِ كَمَا تُقَلِّبُ الْأَشْيَاءَ أَنْتَ بِأَصْبُعَيْكَ، فانظر كيف شارك نسبة المَلَكَيْنِ المُسَخَّرَيْنِ إلى الله تعالى أَصْبُعَيْكَ في رُوحِ أَصْبُعَيْهِ وخالفاً في الصورة.» (Al-Ghazali, 1406 AH, p. 48-50)

### **Majī' Verses in Commentaries**

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, the verse in question is related to Surah al-Fajr: 22, in which Allah Almighty says: “وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا”: “And thy Lord shall come with angels, rank on rank.”

1- *Majma'z al-Bayān*: “Hassan and Jubā'ī say that it means the command of your Lord and His accounts on the servants came. Abi Muslim says that His command came in such a way that it is no longer a matter and a ruling with it, contrary to the state of this world. Some have said also that the glory of his verses came, so He made the coming of the greatness and glory of God to commemorate the coming of His command. And some scholars have said that it means the advent of your Lord came because of the necessity of knowing Him, because the advent of knowledge is something that is the substitute for the appearance and seeing of it, and since the knowledge of God will be necessary and obvious on this day, this knowledge is like the advent and will be a manifestation for His creatures. So it was said that “*wa jā'a rabbuka*”, that is, doubt was removed, as it is removed when something is in doubt. God is exalted and glorified to come and go for taking proofs that are dominant and reasons that are obvious, that God Almighty is not a substance (He was neither compound nor substance nor visible nor place)” (Tabrisī, 1998: p. 741)

2- *Rūh al-Ma'ānī*: “What is in the verse is a metaphor for the severity of taking so that it is not rejected or it is permissible for God Almighty to describe Himself by going in a meaning that befits Him, as He described Himself, the Glory, by coming in the apparent meaning of His Almighty saying: ‘And your Lord has come’ (Ālūsī, 1415 AH, vol. 1: p. 168). ‘And your Lord has come’. Mundhar bin Saeed said: ‘It means, Glory be to Him, appeared to the creation there, and that is not the coming by movement, and likewise is the coming of the calamity and the clamor’. And it was said: ‘The statement is based on deleting the additive for exaggeration, i.e., the command of your Lord and His decree, Glory be to Him, came. Choosing the plural is a representation of the emergence of the verses of His power, the Exalted, and the effects of His power, the Mighty and Sublime, and His power, the Exalted in His power. If He presents Himself, the effects of prestige and politics will appear to His presence that does not appear in the presence of his soldiers, ministers and elites, and you know what the ancestors had said about in similar statement” (Ibid, vol. 15: p. 343).

3- *Al-Tibyān*: “The God’s saying of ‘*wa jā'a rabbuka wal-malak saffan saffā*’ means the command of God or God’s torment came, and it was said that its meaning is coming of the greatness of its signs. So the coming of the great signs came for Him to exalt their affairs. Also Hassan has said that its meaning is that the God’s destination came, as such it is said that ‘the Rome came to us, that is, its *sīrat* came to us” (Tūsī, nd, vol. 10, p. 347).

4- *Al-Mīzān*: “In the God’s saying of ‘*wa jā'a rabbuka wal-malak saffan saffā*,’ the attribution of coming to Him, the Almighty, is an ambiguous statement that will be explained and firmed by His other words of ‘*laytha kamithlih-i shay'*’ (*Shawrā'*: 11). And what is mentioned in the verses of the Resurrection are of that day’s peculiarities, such as cutting off the causes, removing veils, and the appearance of God, the Manifest Truth. So, what has been mentioned in narrations is that the coming of God means the coming of His commands, as God says: ‘*wa al-'amr-u yawma 'izin lil Allah*’ (*Infitār*: 19). This idea is supported by some other verses like “هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ فِي ظُلَلٍ مِنَ الْغَمَامِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ” (Baqarah: 210) and “هَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَوْ يَأْتِيَ أَمْرُ رَبِّكَ” (Nahl: 33). Thus, it seems in the verse under the Surah al-Baqarah the coming of God, which is also mentioned in the verse of Surah al-Nahl, is His command. So it is proved that in the verse under discussion, the adverb has been omitted, and the verse is ‘and the command of your Lord comes’, or attributing to God in the noble verse is permissible rationally” (Tabātabā'ī, nd, vol. 20: p. 284).

5- *The Commentary of Nemooneh*: “After the end of the first stage of the Resurrection, that is, the destruction of the world, the second stage begins. All human beings return to life and appear in the court of the Divine Justice, and ‘then the command of your Lord will come, and the angels will be in line.’ (وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا). They gather around those who are present in that day and are ready to carry out the command of the Truth. This is a depiction of the greatness of that great day and the inability of man to rise above justice. It is an allusion to the arrival of God’s command to take account of the creatures. Or it means the appearance of the signs of God’s greatness. Or the appearance of the Lord

means the appearance of His knowledge on that day so that there is no place for anyone to deny. Everyone sees with his eyes His Unique Essence. Anyway, it is certain that the coming of God in the true sense of the word, which requires being a substance and being transported in a place, does not make sense because He is free from the body and the substantial properties. It has been also explicitly narrated in a hadith from Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (AS). A witness for this interpretation is the verse 33 of Surah al-Nahl, in which God says: ‘Do they not think that the angels will come to them or that the command of your Lord has come to them?’ The interpretation of ‘in lines’ refers to the fact that the angels will enter on that day in different ranks and probably the angels of each sky will be present in one line and will surround the people (Makarem Shirazi, nd, vol. 26: p. 470).

### ***The Interpretation of the Verse with the Theory of the Spirit of Meaning***

Apparently, none of those who believe in the ‘theory of word formation’ for ‘the spirit of meaning’ has offered a strong reason to prove this theory, and so all have been content with denying the views of others. Comparing to other proponents of this theory, Allameh Javadi Amoli has the advantage of considering the approach of thinkers to this theory and introducing its basis as conjecture. He attributes the opinion of Sheikh Tūsī and Allamah Tabrisī in the meaning of the word “*ilqā*” in some Qur’anic verses, that its use is permissible in spiritual things, to other scholars and believes that the opinion of Sheikh Tūsī and Allamah Tabrisī is a conjecture, not an obvious one. Also it can be made to the extent that words are set for the spirits of meanings and not for the bodies of meanings and their examples. Among the commentators, the interpretation of this verse according to the theory of the spirit of meaning belongs to Allama Javadi Amoli. He says: “In some verses *majī*’ and *tyān* are attributed to Allah (Fajr: 22 and Nahl” 26). Many commentators, by sending similar verses to the firm ones, deny material attributes such as coming and so they present some Qur’anic evidences for it.” While referring to the theory of the spirit of meaning, he adds: “*Ityān* and *Majī*’, which in our case mean the movement of a thing between two things and approaching the destination, if we separate the material properties from it, its attribution to God Almighty is correct. For example, it means God appeared means He removed the obstacles and God went means He was absent, because He created the obstacle so that others cannot see Him.” He knows the comprehensive meaning of going as the very advent, absence, hiddenness, presence, and the like. (Masoudi and Ghafouri-Nejad: 2016: 16 and 18)

### ***Critique of a Theory***

Among the opinions and views of the commentators on the *Muhkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* verses, Qarashi’s view seems to be different. Therefore, after presenting this view, the author has criticized it.

The author of the commentary of Ahsan al-Qisas writes in his book: “The holy Qur’an is divided into two parts of *Muhkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt*. *Muhkamāt* are the basis of the Qur’an, to which one can refer and receive individual and social duties, but *Mutashābihāt* are not as such. One must believe in *Mutashābihāt*’s content and leave their true meaning to God. *Mutashābihāt* will remain similar and ambiguous forever. If it means that the *Mutashābihāt* become *Muhkamāt* by referring to other verses or narrations, the division of the verses to two parts of *Muhkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* will no longer make sense. It is necessary to say that Most of the Qur’an is firm and some are also similar and ambiguous whose understanding requires other verses and narrations. It no longer made sense for the *rāsikhūn* to say in the situation of submission that ‘أَمَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا’. But this very submission and the rest of the verse of ‘مِنْمَا آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخْرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ’ prove that such verses will be continuously similar and ambiguous. So such verses will be constantly *Mutashābih* and one must believe in their content and leave the discovery of their truth to God. It has been narrated from Imam Reza (AS): ‘Whoever returns the similarity of the Qur’an to its firmness has been guided to the Right Path.’<sup>1</sup> It seems that Imam (AS) defines the similarity as what can be achieved by returning to the firms, and so it can be used. For example, from the verse Fajr: 23<sup>2</sup>, it may be seemed to someone that God has a body and can be seen in His beauty. But by turning it to the verse An’ām: 103<sup>3</sup>, it is proved that the purpose is to observe the

<sup>1</sup>. من رد متشابه القرآن الى محكمه هدى الى صراط مستقيم.

<sup>2</sup>. وَجُودُهُ يُؤْمِنُ نَاصِرَةً إِلَى رَبِّهَا نَاطِقَةً قِيَامَةً.

<sup>3</sup>. لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ.

blessings of God, otherwise the similar verses quoted in the second paragraph will not be firm by the firm verses. According to the author, verses such as “وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا” and “الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ” are not similar, for their meanings have been clarified. (Qarashī, nd, vol. 2: p. 19-22).

### **The Critique of the Theory**

1. The source of confusion and error of this theory is that it has considered *Muhkam* and *Mutashābih* as two true and intrinsic descriptions, while they are relative and additional matters; A verse may be similar for one person, but for another who is on a higher level and horizon of knowledge and perception, it is a firm verse. In the similarity and non-similarity of a verse, the element of time and place, the position of human sciences and knowledge, and the person facing it are effective. Imam Sadeq (AS) said: “The similarity is similar to the ignorant person about it.” This hadith indicates to two matters: A. There is no verse in the Qur’an that is absolutely similar, but all of them are accessible and understandable. B. Similarity is a skeptical and hierarchical concerning individuals.

2- The new word of this theory is that verses such as Fajr: 22 and Tāhā: 5<sup>4</sup> are not *mutashābih*, because now their meaning sare clear. The question is that “for whom are they clarified?” The Qur’anic collection from the very beginning has been firm for the Prophet (PBUH) and the Imams (AS) as well as for the *rāsikhūn* in knowledge who examine and study the verses. No verse has been similar and ambiguous for the Infallibles (AS), because they were familiar with the divine intentions. If today a person who is not firm in knowledge refers to the Qur’an, all the verses are firm for him? Did not the verses like the two above mentioned cause confusion and mental anxiety and are not similar and ambiguous for him?

3- It is basically not appropriate and reasonable for the Absolute Wise to send down a book, parts of which, even if referred to other sections and firms or with reference to the Infallibles (AS), always remain incomprehensible and unopened.

4- It has been said that “the phrase *و ما يعلم تأويله إلا الله والراسخون في العلم يقولون آمنا به* (Āl-‘Imrān: 7) clearly indicates that only God knows the similar interpretation, for “و” here is *istīnāfiyah* and those who say by returning the similarities to the firms one will find the meanings of similarities, have spoken contrary to the verse,” is a very amazing statement! There has been a long debate among commentators as to whether “wow” in “firms in knowledge” is *istīnāfiyah* or ‘*atf*’; If it is ‘*atf*’, the result is that God and the firms in knowledge, of whom the Prophet (PBUH) and the Imams (AS) are undoubtedly the most superior and knowledgeable, are aware of the similarities and interpretations of the Qur’an. But Fakhr Rāzī gives six reasons for its being *istīnāfiyah* and concludes that the knowledge of the interpretation of the Qur’an belongs only to God. In other words, although the verse “*و ما يعلم تأويله إلا الله والراسخون في العلم*” and “*يقولون*”, as the author says, limits the knowledge of the interpretation of similarities to God, other arguments from verses and hadiths, consider the Imams (AS) firms in knowledge and aware of similarities and interpretations of the Qur’an (Bayat Mokhtari: 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The theory of “the spirit of meaning” was first proposed by Ghazālī, who explained his view mainly in the book *Jawāhir al-Qur’an*. The meaning of “spirit of meaning” or “spirits of meanings”, which is considered to be the true subject of the meanings of words, is a common meaning in different instances. Various meanings are mentioned in Qur’anic exegeses for the verses of *majī*, including: coming of the Lord with the ranks of angels, the expression of divine power and greatness in the Day of Resurrection, coming of divine torment and judgment, the expression of the greatness of divine verses, etc. The study of the meaning of these verses led us to a new meaning, an example of which from the point of view of Allameh Javadi Amoli is that God appeared and removed obstacles from the path, and God went, i.e. He disappeared, for He made obstacles so that others cannot see Him. According to Allameh, the comprehensive concept of going and coming is the same as appearing and hiding, absence and presence, and so on.

<sup>4</sup>. الرحمن على العرش استوى.

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