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Importance of Language Learning and Translation (In the light of Sīrah Literature)

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ABSTRACT

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last Prophet and the book revealed to him, the Qur'an, is the last book for all mankind which initiated the need for a language policy to translate out the message of Allah and His prophet to the outer world. Although the Prophet (peace be upon him) received in his lifetime a number of Arab and non-Arab delegation. The Prophet (peace be upon him) received Arab and non-Arab delegations including Yemenites. To prove the universality of his prophecy and God's book, he sent letters to the rulers of the time which according to Dr Hameedullah were three hundred in number including the governor of Sindh. The Prophetic order to learn languages set the state policy for language learning and in consequence the translation of the sacred messages. It clearly shows the linguistic and translation vision of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The study explores this hidden aspect of sīrah in the light of a plethora of Ḥadīth literature.

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1-Introduction:

The Qur'ān signifies the teaching of languages in the verse of Qur'ān "He taught Adam all the names". The verse proves that the Creator innate the ability of *Bayan* (eloquence) as the $Qur'\bar{a}n$ mentioned in another verse: "He taught him clear speaking"²

Human beings possess the ability of thinking, wishing, expression, and writing down the symbols of words that play an elaborating role in expressing the unfathomable ocean of feelings and thoughts. Hence, due to the diversity of languages, learning languages on one side and language translation on the other side are the means of intercultural transferring of feelings and thoughts into other languages.

The Prophets (AS), being the authentic source of knowledge, conveyed the divine messages for the guidance of humanity to the right path protecting them from evils. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last of this prophetic chain, who received the Last Divine Book, the Qur'ān. The sīrah literature shows that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was well guided about the importance of languages and translation of languages that led him to the vision that learning languages and translating them are the only means of knowledge transfer from one language community to another. The article discusses the Prophetic vision of language learning, its translating and interpreting to the rest of the world languages highlighting the importance of translation in the faithful transfer in his dialogues, speeches and letters. It, further, highlights the linguistic and translational aspect of Sīrah.

2-Research Questions

The research study aims at finding the answer to the following questions:

- Which type of linguistic vision is found in the *Sīrah* Literature?
- What is the translator vision of our Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) found in the *Sīrah* Literature?
- What kind of orders were issued, as a state policy, by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) for the promotion of language learning and translation?

3-Research Methodology

The researcher applied the descriptive method to analyze the *sīrah* literature and find out the relevant material adhering to the questions raised in the research statement. The researcher collected all the ḥadīth traditions related to the issuance of an official order of learning languages to conclude that language learning is a state policy, and the purpose of this policy is to communicate and render the message accurately without any addition or deletion to avoid any mishap due to mistranslation.

4- Multi-Lingual Community of Medina

At the advent of Islam, *Medina* had a multilingual city due to its geographical importance in the peninsula of Arabia. The language communities at the time of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are categorized as under:

- a) Language Speakers:
 - 1- The Hebrews: The Jews were settled in *Medina* for a long time. There are three views about their arrival; 1) They settled at Taima during accompanying the Babylonian King *Baunshair moving* towards *Babylon*. 2) They left Palestine when the Roman attacked it and stayed in *Medina*. 3) They came from Egypt in the company of the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and settled at Medina intending to embrace Muhammad (peace be upon him).³
 - 2- The Christians or Aramites: The roots of Christianity in *Medina* dates back to the time of Jesus (peace be upon him) when one of his messengers graced this city. Later on, a large number of Christian traders from Yemen and Hera settled here permanently.⁴
 - 3- The Persians: The fire worshipers who were settled in *Medina* spoke Persian.⁵
 - 4- Slaves and Traffickers: They were not Arabs⁶. They spoke Persian and Coptic according to Dr *Abdullah Idris.*⁷ Another view by Philip Baker proved the importation of slaves from African countries for swordsmanship to Arab areas...⁸

b) Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) & Scholars/ Speakers of Other Languages:

The biography of Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) narrates various events disclosing his interaction with the speakers of other languages such as Christian scholars of Hebrew, Syriac languages, slaves and traffickers of Ethiopian, Roman and Persian languages, including two official Persian messengers of the King of Persia etc.

The *Sīrah* literature describes face to face meeting of the Prophet (peace be upon him) with Christian Scholars such as; 1) the Monk *Buhaira* of *Busra*, Syria at the age of 12 during his trip to Syria in the company of his uncle *Abu Talib*. 2) The Bishop *Qus bin Sa'ida al Ayadi* of Najran, to whom the prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) listened in the market of *Ukaz* just before his call to the prophet-hood. 3) *Waraqa bin Naufal* at the time of his first revelation who attested his prophecy as the last prophet, 9as narrated by *Imam Bukhari* (*RA*):

"Khadija then accompanied Him to her cousin Waraqa bin Naufal bin Asad bin Abdul Uzza who, during the Pre-Islamic Period became a Christian and used

to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write"¹⁰

The Prophet (peace be upon him) met *Abo Haritha bin Al-Qama* of *Najran*, head of the *Najran delegation* towards *Muhammad (peace be upon him)*. According to Block mentioning the Najranian Treaty with *Muhammad* (peace be upon him)¹¹ that Abu Haritha spoke Arabic and Syriac being the head of the delegation and the native speaker of Arabic language¹². The Prophet (peace be upon him) served two Persian messengers and informed them about the killing of their king by his son Sherawaih. These multilingual interactions showed the linguistic aspect of *Sīrah* which is further promoted by the orders of Prophet (peace be upon him) concerning the learning of languages for intercommunication besides interpreting the foreign delegations and translating the texts received from the neighboring kings

5- Language Learning & Translational Aspect of Sīrah

At the time of Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him), the Arab peninsula was surrounded by various language communities such as the Persians at the Eastward, Romans at the North side and the Coptic in Egypt.¹³ The preferred language of the Jews was Hebrew and of Christians was *Syriac* at that time.

For correspondence with all these language communities, the Prophet (peace be upon him) employed a good-fame man from the Jewish tribe; *Banu Nazir* to be an official translator responding to the lords of tribes and translate their letters to Muhammad (peace be upon him). He received the title of "the writer of the secrets of the prophet" due to this critical responsibility. Once Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) felt his inclination towards Jews. The Prophet Vision (baseerah) led him to the conclusion that this inclination of the translator can distort the meanings of Prophetic words during translation keeping in view the Qur'ānic verses about their polemic tendencies towards him. Due to the critical and impartial role of an interpreter, the Prophet (peace be upon him) decided to discharge him from his official duty to avoid any serious misinterpretation of the sacred messages.¹⁴

The prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him), then, looked for a competent companion to assign him the duty of learning the languages to enable him to provide translation services for the Islamic State of *Medina*. Meanwhile, the Prophet (peace be upon him) saw the ability to learn languages in *Zayd bin Sabit during* his reciting of the Qur'ān in which he successfully applied the phonetic rules of recitation proving his full command over the rules of recitation.

So, the Prophet (peace be upon him) assigned him the task of language learning instead of participating in wars. The recommendations of Zayd's relatives come true. The Prophet (peace be upon him) commanded him to learn Hebrew and *Syriac* at the time when there was no established institution of language learning and no environment of language learning at all. The orders of Prophet *Muhammad*

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(peace be upon him) about language learning are clearly mentioned with the name of Zayd as:

"Zayd, learn the writing of the Jews for me!" Zayd answered: "At your command, O Messenger of Allah,".

Zayd fulfilled the prophetic command of learning languages with full enthusiasm and became competent in the assigned languages to the level of correspondence being an official translator of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to translate the writings of the Jews in Hebrew for him. Another order issued by the Prophet (peace be upon him) for learning *Syriac* language to be an official translator for non-Arabs. After meeting the standards of faithfulness, the Prophet (peace be upon him) assigned him the serious task of recording the Qur'ān.¹⁵

The encouragement for learning foreign languages with the order of the state's sovereign power is a noticeable point in $S\bar{\imath}rah$ literature. According to the recorded literature, Zayd learnt Hebrew, Syriac, Ethiopian, Greek, Persian, and Aramaic. ¹⁶

5.1. Commands to Zayd for Learning Languages in Ḥadīth Literature:

Ḥadīth literature narrates that on the request of the mother of Zayd; An-Nawwar, the relatives conveyed the wish of Zayd to the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) saying:

"O Prophet of *Allah*, this child of ours knows by heart 17 chapters from the Book and recites them accurately as they were revealed to you. Besides, he is well versed in the matters of reading and writing. He wishes to be close to you. Listen to him if you will."

Prophet *Muhammad* (*peace be upon him*) listened the recitation of *Zayd* observing the learning talent and selected him for learning the writings of Jews to communicate with them from Muhamad (peace be upon him).¹⁷

Stepping towards becoming an official scribe of the Prophet (peace be upon him) he occupied the position of the most important scribes, as later, he was considered the only person in the case of compilation of the Qur'ān in a volume, and in one dialect.¹⁸ Zayd helped the Prophet (peace be upon him) in official letters as state invitations to the rulers and in other correspondences.¹⁹

One important text, as quoted by *Ibni Katheer* and *Ibni al-Aseer*, ²⁰ narrates that Prophet (*peace be upon him*) ordered *Zayd bin Sabit* to learn *Syriac* or Hebrew in the 4th year of *Hijra* due to insecurity about the writings of the Jews.

Zayd ibn Sabit narrated that "the Prophet (peace be upon him) ordered me to learn the writing of Jews saying: "I do not feel secure from Jews about my writings", Zayd said: "within fifteen days I got mastered in it, and when the Prophet (peace be upon him) had to write to the Jews, I wrote to them, and when they wrote to the Prophet, I read their letters for him".²¹

The historical command for the promotion of learning languages is quoted by various books of *Ḥadīth*. Some of them are as under:

- 1- "the Prophet (peace be upon him) to *Zayd*: learn the book (writing) of Jews, I do not feel secure on Jews about my writings. So, I learnt in less than a month".²²
- ²⁻ Imam Tirmizi quoted Zayd sayings about learning Syriac.²³
- 3- Zayd narration of the Messenger (peace be upon him): "I receive letters from people which I do not want anyone to read them, so can you learn Hebrew or said Syriac? I said yes. So, I learnt it in 17 nights".²⁴
- 4- "Zayd was confirmed about the order of the Prophet (peace be upon him) to learn Syriac".25
- 5- "Zayd studied the writings of the Jews at the schools of Maskat in 15 nights to know the level of their alteration and change".²⁶
- 6- A narration stated that Zayd wrote in Arabic and Hebrew.²⁷ Or Syriac.²⁸
- 7- *Ibn al Aseer al-Jazri* says: "the Prophet received letters in Syriac so, he ordered *Zayd* to learn it, and he learnt it.²⁹
- 8- Dhahabi said that "the Prophet (peace be upon him) came to Madina while Zayd was an intelligent teenager of eleven years old from a good family, so, the Prophet (peace be upon him) ordered him to learn the writing of Jews (خط) and he learnt it very well".30
- 9- Dr. Jaber Qumaha translated (کتاب یهود) as the language of Jews, reading and writing. He further elaborated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) guessed the vicious desire of Jews of exploitation as they used to write in their language despite speaking Arabic language even doing poetry in it. By learning their language Zayd bin Sabit played the role of a translator.³¹
- 10- Abu Umer said, "Zayd had been writing plenty of letters." Another narration says that "Zayd and Abdullah bin Arqam used to write to the kings. Yaqoobi narrates that "Zayd was among those who wrote the revelation, letters and contracts". Masoodi said that "Zayd bin Sabit al-Ansari used to write to the kings and answered from the prophet in his presence". 33
- 11- Hassn Bahrawi quoted Al-Khuzai al-Tilmisani (d. 789 AH) in the book "Babel Tower; Translation Poetics from History to Theory" that Zayd bin Sabit used to write to the kings and answered for prophet in his presence. He was the official interpreter of Prophet in Persian, Roman, Coptic, and Habashi languages. According to him, "the translation movement in this period adopted a diplomatic turn for the purpose of preaching Islam by making relation with people of other languages living in Medina". It adopted a strategic turn while learning the languages of other communities specially the Jews for disclosing their bad intentions.³⁴

12- Sadiq Hussain mentioned quoting from Tilmisani and Khuzaai, "Zayed learnt Syriac, Persian, and Coptic from their speakers living in Madina". 35

The <code>Ḥadīth</code> literature elaborated that Prophetic awareness about the importance of language learning, its critical role in the faithful translation and interpretation of the sacred messages to the speakers of other languages.

6-Prophet (peace be upon him) Translated Letters Translated in Courts:

Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) invited the kings and the chiefs of the surrounding states. He wisely selected the messengers for this important, critical, and dangerous duty. The very first correspondence in this connection, was the letter sent to Negus by the hand of *Jafar bin Abu Talib* in the fifth year of the prophet-hood. Jafar played the role of the official translator in translating the sacred letter that comprised the good habits of *Muhammad* (*peace be upon him*), the ignorance of Arabs, their bad habits, and replied the questions of the King about Jesus. Historically, it was the first letter translated in the court of Negus. According to Dr. *Mehmood Ahmad Ghazi*, quoting Dr. *Hameedullah*, the Prophet (peace be upon him) used some words of *Habashi* language in this letter.³⁶

6.1. Translation of Prophet's letters to the Kings:

The inviting letters to Islam are as under:

- 1- The first invitation to Islam was sent to Negus, which was the second letter sent to the same king at the end of 6thAH through Amar bin Umayat al-Zamri.³⁷ Umer bin Umaya was the translator who translated the letter of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur'ānic verses in the court of the king of Ethiopia.
- 2- The second letter was sent to *Jurij ibn Mathew*; the Cyrus of Alexandria (*Maqoqas*) through *Hatib bin Abi Baltaa*. He respected Hatib bin Abi Baltaa and called his translator to write in Arabic the answer to the Prophet.³⁸
- 3- The third letter was sent to *Kisra*, the king of Persia, through *Abdullah bin Huzafa al-Sahami*. When the letter was recited, he got furious and torn the letter.³⁹
- 4- The fourth letter was sent to Hercules when he was in Ilya at Palestine.⁴⁰

These letters were in Arabic which were translated for the kings in their languages, so, for Hercules in Roman language, for *Kesra*, in Persian language, for the Cyrus, in Coptic and for Negus, in *Habashi* language. This was an oral translation and sight translation of the sacred texts in the courts.

7- The Role of Translation in the Court of Heraclius

A very good example from <code>Ḥadīth</code> literature that elaborates the affective role of Translation is the talk between <code>Abu Sufyan</code> and Hercules about the <code>Sīrah</code> of Prophet <code>Muhammad</code> (peace be upon him). Hercules asked <code>Abu Sufyan</code> about the family of Prophet <code>Muhammad</code> (peace be upon him), his dignity, honesty, and followers. <code>Imam</code>

Bukhari narrated the event that *Abu Sufyan bin Harb* was called by Hercules when he received Dihya *bin Khalifa*, the messenger of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in Ilya (Jerusalem-Palestine) in 6th AH.⁴¹ Hercules then called for his interpreter when the Arab delegation came to the court and "asked him to interpret the conversation for him."

This event is the turning point in the history of Rome where translation played a great positive role. Due to the faithful rendering of *Abu Sufyan* statements about the Prophet, Hercules changed his mind and inclined towards Islam and his concepts got changed about Prophet *Muhammad* (*peace be upon him*), his prophesy and his importance confessing him a true Messenger of Allah. On the other hand, *Abu Sufyan* observed that the king of *Bani al-Asfar* (Byzantine) confessed the prophecy of Muhammad (peace be upon him) forecasting his victory in the near future.⁴³

From the narration of *Imam Bukhari*, we conclude that the faithful translation of the conversation changed the mind of the king while in case of mistranslation of a single linguistic unit it might influence the king negatively bringing drastic emotional changes in the minds of the kings and his people due to not conveying the true sense of the speech. On the other hand, *Abu Sufyan* feeling this ideological and emotional change assured the overall victory of Islam and the Prophet *Muhammad* (*peace be upon him*). It is, universally, accepted that the communicative role of translation cannot be ignored in the history of Islam being the only source of conveying the sacred message to the whole mankind.

8- Discussion:

The last of Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) was sent with the last book of guidance for humanity. His wise speeches, historical talks, visionary commands, and applicable deeds all are blessed and beyond criticism. Every order, he issued, contains the ocean of meaning as he himself says: "I have been given words which are concise but comprehensive in meaning" (Muslim: the book of prayers: https://sunnah.com/search/?q). The orders issued in favor of language learning, its visionary purpose, its far reaching affects, and the sciences bringing forth as a result of language learning specifically translation and interpretation are the areas that must be dealt in a broad aspect of the Sīrah. This aspect of Sīrah needs more elaborative and deep discourse research and studies. The number of letters sent to the kings and translated for them is of great importance in the history of sacred texts. All the translated versions of the original Arabic letters in various languages need to be searched out in the old libraries for the purpose of research for textual translatory analysis. Another vast area is the serious job of translating these letters and speeches to more than 7000 languages of the world in very fluent and faithful way. This is, no doubt, a challenging project. The Sīrah Chairs at various university must take the initiative in this regard with the help of Translation, Language and Linguistic

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Departments of both faculties of Arabic and Faculties of Languages. This is a lifetime project for the *Sīrah* scholars and students.

9- Conclusion

The various narration regarding the order of Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) to *Zayed bin Sabit* to learn foreign languages for correspondence, accurate writing, and faithful translation of letters to the neighbouring kings, rulers and chiefs of tribes. The discussion can be summarized in the following points:

- 1. The command of learning languages is a divine command issued by the Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) which is a gateway to language education. It declared the learning of languages, language sciences, and translation a very important profession and a source of worship. It is the first official divine order in the history of Islam.
- 2. The selection of Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) shows that rendering the meaning of an important message is a serious activity that requires competent, eligible, and trusted persons. It is a guideline for educators to select suitable persons for Islamic education, teaching, and translating and interpreting.
- 3. Learning languages for war strategies, defensive measurement, and obtaining secret information about the plans of vicious and wicked personalities is an intelligent strategy adopted by the Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) in his time. It is golden point in planning language policies for the rulers of Islamic states, statesmen and policy makers.
- 4. Prophet (peace be upon him) ordered to learn foreign languages for the purpose of faithful translation, interpretation, and communication. It initiated the importance of language teachers, translators, and interpreters in Islamic States regarding the process of Islamic preaching.
- 5. Prophet *Muhammad* (peace be upon him) was aware of the Importance of faithful translation and interpretation for the accurate transmission of Divine message.
- 6. Learning foreign language from the native speakers creates respect for them which surely is a strong mean and a positive step toward interfaith harmony.
- 7. The words of Prophet *Mohammad* (*peace be upon him*), "I do not feel secure about my writings" denote the need of learning languages and translation at the same time. He observed that the change of a single letter or unsuitable selection of words can change the meaning of the

whole text. He was aware about the grievance in case the wrong meaning is rendered intentionally.

- 8. He set up a rule to learn the languages of those from whom you feel insecure. A very serious example is mentioned by Sadiq Hussain saying that unfamiliarity with Israelite language and terminology was the main reason of Egyptian destruction and defeat in the war with Israel.
- 9. Importance of suitable selection of titles according to the status of the addressee as the holy Prophet (peace be upon him) kept in mind the psychological effect of words.

10-Recommendations

After having this fruitful discussion, it is recommended that the literature scattered in the books of *AḤadīth* about language learning, linguistic sciences and translation /interpretation should be textually analysed to explore the semantic ingredients of the sacred words of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Such research will explore new horizons of the *Sīrah* and will open new dimensions in the field of Languages sciences.



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⁶ Ibid. p 33

¹ Al Our'ān 2: 31

² Al Qur'ān 78:4

³ Hussein Sadiq, *Ta'amulat I'jaziyat lilinnabi fi Majal al-amn al-siyasi*. al-hai'at al-almisriya al-'ama lilkitab Cairo, 2010, p 30

⁴ Ibid. p 32.

⁵ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. P 34

⁸ Bakar, Philip. Stephen A. Wurn(editors), Atlas of Languages of International Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the America. V. II.I Page.642, (de Gruyter.1996)

⁹ Block, C. John, The Quran in Christine- Muslim Dialogue, Historical and Modern Interpretation, P. 25, (Routledge 2014).

¹⁰ Khan, M.Mohsin. Translation of *Shahi Bukhari*, P. 8, Vol. 1, Hadith No.3, 1 edition., in chapter Revelation*Hadith* No.3.(http://ahadith.co.uk/chapter.php?cid=1 accessed on 19-04-2020)

¹¹ Block, C. Jonn, The Quran in Christine- Muslim Dialogue, Historical and Modern Interpretation, P. 53, (Routledge 2014).

¹² Ibid. p 47

- ¹³ Bakar, Philip. Stephen A. Wurn (editors), Atlas of Languages of International Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the America. V. II.I Page.642, (de Gruyter. 1996)
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- ²¹-Tirmizi 5:67-68;Mushkil ul-Athar 2:421; Baihaqi, al-sunan al-kubra. 6:211;Balazari, Futooh ul-Buldan p.583;Taratib ul-Idariya 1:203-204; quoting from Bukhari and Tahawi.
- ²²-Tabaqat ibn Sa'ad 2:115; Muntakhab Kanzul Ummal on the footnote of Musnid Ahmed 5:185; Hayat al-sahaba 3:216 quoting from Abi Ya'al and Ibn 'Asakir.
- 23-Tirmizi 5:68
- ²⁴-Tabaqat ibn Sa'ad 2:115; Kanzul Ummal 16:9 quoting from Ibn 'Asakirand Ibn Abi Dawood in al-Masahaf and Tazkirt ul-Hufaz 1:31; Tahzib Tarikh Dimashq 5:426 quoting from Ahmed and Abi Ya'ala, Muntakhib Kanzul Umaal on the footnote of Musnid Ahmed 5:185; Hayat al-Sahaba 3:216; Taratib al-Idariya 1:120,204;
- ²⁵-Kanz ul-Ummal 16:9 quoting from *Ibn 'Asakir* and *Ibn Abi Dawood; Tahzib Tarikh Dimashq* 5:446-447 quoting from *Ahmed* and *Abi Ya'ala; Musnid Ahmed* 5:182; al-Isaba 1:561; Mushkil al-Athar 2:421; Mustadik Hakim 3:422; Baihaqi Sunan al-Kubra 6:211; Muntakhib Kanz ul-Umaal on the footnote of Musnid Ahmed 5:185; Hayat al-Sahaba 3:350; Isti'aab on the footnote of Isaba 1:552; Taratib ul-Idariya 1:203-204 and from those who quoted from *Ibn Abi Dawood* in al-Masahif and Al-Ahkam al-Sughra by Abi Bakar ibn Shaiba.
- ²⁶-Kanuz ul-Ummal 16:8-9 quoting from *Ibn 'Asakir; Ibn Kathir Al-Sirat al-Nabawiya* 3:176; *Taratib ul-Idariya* 1:204 quoting from *Ibn 'Asakir*.
- ²⁷-Tahzib Tarikh Dimashq 5:449; Mustadrik Hakim 3:421; Talkhis of Dahabi on the footnote p.422; Bilazari Futooh ul-Buldan p 583; Mufasal fi Tarikh ul-'Arab qabl al-Islam 8:160.
- ²⁸-Mufasal fi Tarikh ul-'Arab qabl al-Islam 8:160
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