



Original Research Article

Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi and his Views on 'Ijaz Al-Qur'an (Inimitability of the Qur'an) and Muhkam and Mutashabih (Clear and Ambiguous Verses) in the Qur'an

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.6331054

Submission Date: 23rd Feb 2022 | Published Date: 28th Feb 2022

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Abstract

The science of the Qur'an is a field which serves to understand the Qur'an were developed in the exegetical tradition, starting from the companions of the Prophet (Peace be upon him) to the present day. In this context, Nursi's approach to various Qur'anic sciences such as *asbab al-Nuzul* (reasons for revelation) *Naskh* (abrogation), *Muhkam wa Mutashabih* (clear ambiguous), inimitability of the Qur'an (*Ijaz al-Qur'an*), *Qisas al-Qur'an* (Qur'anic narratives), and *Tanasub* (intertextual hermeneutics), among others. But the paper will only focus on two items from the above mentioned, the two things which are going to be discussed in the paper are *Muhkam wa Mutashabih* (clear ambiguous), inimitability of the Qur'an (*Ijaz al-Qur'an*). All these will be discussed in details in order to ascertain how he deals with these sciences of the Qur'an.

Keywords: Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi, 'Ijaz Al-Qur'an (Inimitability of the Qur'an) and Muhkam and Mutashabih (Clear and Ambiguous Verses).

INTRODUCTION

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi, was born in the small village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis of the eastern Turkey in the year 1877.¹ Nursi was born in a Kurdish family of seven children, headed by his father Mullah popularly called Mirza, who was said to be a Sufi order follower, whose piety was known to many of those who came to know him, to the extent that it was said that he never fed his children with something that was not lawful, and his mother Nuriyah had never breastfed her children unless she was in the state of purity or performed an ablution.² Said Nursi passed his early years with his family in Nurs.³

Nursi spent his childhood with distinctive intelligence, always investigating things and often asked questions in seeking their answers. It was said that he used to visit circles where lessons were taught to adults and listened keenly to all the discussions on various issues, and particularly the discussions made by some of the Scholars of his town whenever they visited his father during the winter, and such discussions will remain for a long period of time in his mind until he ensured that he fully understood them and became familiar with the information discussed.⁴ It is on this note that, he was reported to have said about his childhood that: "indeed I trained my memory during my childhood".⁵

¹ S. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005, p. 3.

² I.Q. Al-Sahihi, *Nazratun Ammah 'an Hayati Badiuzzaman Said Nursi*, Sozler Publication, Cairo, 2000 p. 14

³ S. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey...* Op. Cit, P. 4.

⁴ I. Q. Al-Salihi, *Nazratun Ammah 'An Hayati Badiuzzaman Said Nursi...* Op. Cit., P. 14.

⁵ Ibid, P. 14.

The young Sa'id started his education at the age of nine that was in 1886 and he began with the current existing syllabus by learning the elements of grammar and some books of religion up to the work titled *Izhar* in addition to his memorization of the Qur'an.⁶ Available sources indicate that Sa'id, attend *Madaris* (Schools) directed by both 'Ulama' (those who did not attach to any Sufi order) and the *Sufi Shaykhs*.⁷ Muhammad Jalali was among the 'Ulama' who were said to have taught him under the former group of scholars, but as for the latter, most of whom he studied under were members of the Sufi order. Despite that, Nursi did not join any of the orders, on account he reported to have said that his studies had occupied him.⁸ The first three years of Sa'id in the *madaris* (Schools) taught about the need for the advancement of the existing syllabus, on which he went further to advance himself by reading from other classical works that include *Jam al-Jawami'* of Ibn Subki on the principles of *Fiqh*, Ibn Hajar's *Ithaf al-Mahirrah*, *Sharh al-Mawaqif* of Jurjani and many other works on: *Ilm al-Kalam*.⁹ Here, the researchers will take two topics of the 'Ulam al-Qur'an (Qur'anic Science) such as *Muhkam wa Mutashabih* (clear ambiguous), inimitability of the Qur'an (*Ijaz al-Qur'an*). as an example one after the other and explain the Nursi's views and understanding upon them.

'Ijaz Al-Qur'an (Inimitability of the Qur'an)

It is noteworthy that '*Ijaz al-Qur'an*' is a major field of Qur'anic sciences. The word '*Ijaz*' comes from "*ajaza*", which has many meanings. Those meanings are as follows: to be incapable, to make powerless, to be impossible and to be inimitable. '*Ijaz al-Qur'an*' is defined as the inimitable and unique nature of the Qur'an that leaves the opponents of the Qur'an incapable of meeting the challenge which the revelation poses to them.¹⁰

It is important to note that Nursi's approach to *Tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) relies on the '*Ijaz al-Qur'an*' (inimitability of the Qur'an)¹¹, and he believes that this inimitability lies primarily in its eloquence. He notes that:

It is an established fact that the most distinguishing feature of the revealed Qur'an is the inimitability. Its inimitability primarily lies in the matchless degree of its eloquence. Eloquence is founded upon certain elements of style, including in particular metaphors, allegories, and other figures of speech. One who does not look at the Qur'an through the binoculars of these elements cannot see its merits.¹²

In other words, Nursi highlights that the inimitable nature of the Qur'an lies in its being so extraordinarily eloquent, and this is beyond human power. The most subtle aspect of the Qur'an's inimitability, according to Nursi, is its reliance on the eloquence of its *Nazm* (word-order).¹³

His commentary deals with this feature. Nursi states that:

The Qur'an's inimitable eloquence comes from its words' beauty, order, and composition; its textual beauty and perfection; its stylistic originality and uniqueness; the superiority, excellence, and clarity of its clarifications; its meanings' power and truth; as well as linguistic purity and fluency.¹⁴

Nursi highlights that the Glorious Qur'an challenges its opponents to produce a literary collection similar to itself at nine levels. In his view, these *Tabaqat al-Tahaddi* (levels of challenge) are as follows:

The first level states that "produce the like of the entire Qur'an together with its realities, sciences, predictions, and elevated word-order", the second level notes that, "fabricate something, but with similarly eloquent word-order". The third level points out that, "to produce around ten chapters". The fourth level requires that "just bring one chapter equal to the Qur'an's long chapter". The fifth level underlines that "just bring one chapter even if it is very short". The sixth level says that "get a scholar or professional writer to do it for you". The seventh level of challenge states that "if is too hard for you as well, a number of you cooperate to produce it". The eighth level stresses that "if you cannot do that, seek the help of all people and jinn, and the assistance of all the results of their common knowledge from the time of Adam until the end of the world". The ninth level enjoins that "call your witnesses, and let them help you. Will they be so brave about supporting what you claim disputing the Qur'an?"¹⁵

⁶ S. Vahide, "A chronology of Said Nursi's life" in: I.M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Islam at the crossroads: on the Life and thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, State University of New York, Albany, 2003 P.xvii.

⁷ S. Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi" in: I.M. Abu-Rabi (ed.), P. 4.

⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

⁹ Ibid, P. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, PP. 133-134.

¹¹ A. ACikgenc, "Said Nursi, "In *Diyanet Islam Ansiklopedisi*. Istanbul: Diyanet V., 2008, P. 568.

¹² Ibid, P. 66.

¹³ S. Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, Op. Cit., PP. 197.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 197.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 205-206.

Nursi draws attention to the fact that these levels of challenge demonstrate how the Glorious Qur'an is inimitable.¹⁶

Nursi underlines that there are two opinions regarding the reason why humans are incapable of producing something like the Qur'an. The first opinion is that some scholars believe that it would be possible to meet the challenge of producing a chapter like the Qur'an, but that Allah prevents it by a miracle of the Prophet. This view is known as *sarfa*, which teaches that Allah prevents people from producing even a chapter. However, the mainstream prevailing opinion emphasises that the eloquence of the Qur'an and its virtues are beyond human capacity. This opinion is claimed by 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 471/1078), al-Zamakhshari, and al-Sakkaki (d. 626/1229). They state that composing the Qur'an's elevated word-order is beyond human capacity and power.¹⁷ It is clear that Nursi follows the mainstream approach in this context.

Nursi indicates seven major *Wujuh al-'ijaz* (aspects of this inimitability) in his Qur'anic commentary *Isharat al-'Ijaz*. He states that the seven aspects of its inimitability have been confirmed for thirteen centuries providing proof of these claims.¹⁸ Nursi mentions these comprehensive seven major aspects of inimitability in his commentary as follows:

1. *Nazm* (Eloquence in the composition) of the Qur'an, which is the greatest aspect of the inimitability and beyond human power.
2. *Tanasub* (Harmony among the verses and chapters of the Qur'an)
3. Predicting the future.
4. Its bringing together truths and sciences that is beyond human power.
5. Its freedom from contradictions and defects.
6. The originality of its styles and consonance of the beginnings and ends of its verses and chapters.
7. Its emergence from someone illiterate that could neither read nor writes.¹⁹

It may conclude that Nursi in his Qur'anic commentary acknowledges the seven major aspects of inimitability recognized by mainstream Muslim scholars, particularly focusing on inimitability of the Qur'an's *Nazm* (word-order). In his later work treatise on the Qur'an's Miraculousness, in the words, Nursi underlines forty aspects of the inimitability of the Qur'an and he explains them in detail, giving examples from the Qur'anic text.²⁰ He notes that, out of countless aspects of the Qur'an's inimitability, he has chosen to point out about forty.²¹

The greatest of the aspects of inimitability which Nursi clarifies is inimitability of the Qur'an's *Nazm* (word-order). He states that there is a remarkable eloquence and stylistic purity in the Qur'an's *Nazm* (word-order or composition).²² This aspect is explained in his commentary. Just as a clock's hands complete and are fitted to one another in exact orderliness, so does each word and sentence-the entire Qur'an-complete every other.²³ It is clear that Nursi mainly focused on the theory of *Nazm* (word-order), which is the greatest of the aspects of inimitability.

On the whole, it should be noted that Nursi mainly examined the theory of *Nazm* (word-order) in his commentary. In this context, Muhsin 'Abd al-Hamid (b. 1937) states:

It seems to me that *Ustaz* Nursi studied this theory of the word-order thoroughly and then it became clear to him that the earlier commentators like al-Zamakhshari and al-Razi and Abū al-Su'ūd had not attempted to apply it as a complete system treating all the *sūras*, verses, and words one after the other, in all its details. So he wanted to emulate these great commentators but to compose a commentary in which the theory was applied in detail and comprehensively in respect of the structures and meanings, and the wording and its related sciences intellectual and intuitive, universal and particular. He relied on all these while disclosing the Qur'an's systematic ordering, through which its Miraculousness and inimitability become apparent. He disclosed too and elucidated the subtle qualities of the literary styles and devices of the Qur'an, which when it first appeared opposed some current usages of Arabic, and astounded the Arab orators and silenced their eloquent masters...It was not only to prove the Qur'an's Miraculousness in respect of eloquence and

¹⁶ Ibid, PP. 205-6.

¹⁷ Ibid, P.206, see also S. Nursi, *The Letters*, PP. 205-6.

¹⁸ Ibid, P. 63.

¹⁹ Ibid, P. 197.

²⁰ S. Nusri, *The Words*, Op. Cit, PP. 387-475, 461.

²¹ Ibid, P. 388.

²² Ibid, pp. 391-2.

²³ Ibid, P. 388.

rhetoric that Nursi directed his efforts towards explicating the theory of its word-order; it was to penetrate into the meanings of the verses.²⁴

It is clear that Nursi mainly focused on the theory of *Nazm* (word-order), which is the greatest of the aspects of inimitability. While he followed ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjānī’s approach to the Qur’an’s *Nazm* (composition), he developed what the earlier exegetes and rhetoricians such as al-Zamakhsharī and al-Rāzī did. Nursi applied it as a complete system treating all the chapters, verses, and words one after the other, in all its details. He produced a commentary in which the theory was applied in detail. The following example related to inimitability of the Qur’an’s *Nazm* (word-order) assists us in understanding the theory.

Another aspect of inimitability of the *Usulub al-Qur’an* (Qur’an’s style). The Qur’an has unique, original styles that are novel and persuasive. The styles of the Qur’an still preserve their originality and freshness, and its style do not imitate and cannot be imitated, like its verses, sentences and phrases, and words. Also Nursi mentioned some of the individual letters of the Qur’anic chapters, like (*Alif-Lam-Mim*, *Alif-Lam Ra*) which contains five to six gleams of inimitability. For example, they comprise half of each category of the categories of letters-emphatic, whispered, stressed, and soft, among others.²⁵ The style of the Qur’an is at the top of fluency and harmony.²⁶ It could be said that Nursi’s views on the style of the Qur’an play a major role in his approach to Qur’anic commentary.

A significant feature of the Qur’anic style is repetitions. Nursi discusses this issue in detail. He emphasised that words and speech are reality and fundamental sustenance; they reinforce the mind and feed the spirit. The more they are repeated, the better they appear and the more familiar they become, like sunlight. They are also other words like fruits and embellishments, and they provide pleasure in their variety.²⁷

In Nursi’s view, as a whole the Qur’an offers sustenance and strength for hearts and its repetition provides delight and pleasure. It does not cause boredom. Likewise, in the Qur’an, these are parts that are the spirit of that sustenance and strength. The more they are repeated, the more they shine, spreading lights of truth and reality.²⁸

Among those repetitions are some like *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah) that are fundamental principles, sources of life and external lights. The story of Moses may be given as an example: in each *Maqam* (place), it is repeated due to one of the aspects of the story contains. Repeated expressions are assumed to be repositions because those expressions resemble each other in words.²⁹

In fact, those repeated expressions are not repetitions. Nursi clarifies *Bismillah*, understanding that there are several aspects to *Bismillah*. Some express the seeking of help, while some look to the aim of the particular chapter to follow. Other facets of *Bismillah* show that *Bismillah* is an index to the basic points of the Qur’an.³⁰ Nursi thus draws attention to the fact that repetition in the Qur’an provides delight and pleasure, while it does not cause boredom. Besides, in each *maqam* (place), an expression is repeated for one of its aspects connected with the theme of the chapter.³¹

Another significant aspect of *‘Ijaz al-Qur’an* (inimitability of the Qur’an) in Nursi’s view is the Qur’an’s *Jam’iyyat* (extraordinary comprehensiveness) Nursi indicates five main areas in which the Qur’an shows such comprehensiveness: in wording or expression; in meaning; in knowledge in different subjects dealt with; and in style.³²

With regard to comprehensiveness in wording or expression of the Qur’an, Nursi highlights a prophetic tradition regarding this subject. The Hadith is as follows: “Each verse has outer and inner meanings, limits and a point of comprehension, as well as bought branches and twigs.”³³

In other words, Nursi states that the wording of the Qur’an is such that all of its phrases, words and letters, have many aspects, and give all of those whom the Qur’an addresses intellectual and spiritual nourishment commensurate with

²⁴ M. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, in Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 8–9.

²⁵ Ibid, P. 396.

²⁶ Ibid, P. 416-22.

²⁷ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, Op. Cit, P. 36-7.

²⁸ Ibid, PP. 36-7.

²⁹ Ibid, P. 367.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 36-7.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 36-7.

³² S. Nursi, *The Words*, Op. Cit, pp. 410-23.

³³ Ibid, P. 410.

people's different capacities.³⁴ Furthermore, Nursi underlines that in many places, the Qur'an intentionally leaves the wording open to achieve generality so that it may express numerous meanings. The Qur'an also keeps its verses brief so that everyone can find his share.³⁵

Finally, another important aspect of inimitability in Nursi is *tashri'i I'jaz* (legislative inimitability). This aspect is of particular significance because it is connected with the legal content of the Qur'an. Nursi holds the view that Islamic religion and law are grounded in rational proof, and that they are the sum of the branches of knowledge including the essence of all the fundamental sciences such as the science of refining the spirit, the legal sciences, the science of human relations, social behaviour. Moreover, the *Shari'ah* clarifies where necessary, but it is concise and short where this is not necessary or people's minds are not ready or the times do not allow. That is to say, the *Shari'ah* establishes principles that can be elaborated, deduced and developed via consultation and the exercise of reason. Nursi here emphasises that not all these sciences, or even a third of them, could be found in a single person in civilized places and among intelligent people in the contemporary period. The *Shari'ah* is always beyond human power.³⁶

As has been seen, Nursi considers the inimitable nature of legislation in the Qur'an and believes the universality of the legal content of the Qur'an. Furthermore, he points out that the *Shari'ah* only provides primary principles. Based on these principles, the scholars and the jurists derive and deduce secondary rules through the exercise of reason.

In conclusion, Nursi's approach to Qur'anic exegesis rests heavily on the *Ijaz al-Qur'an* (inimitability of the Qur'an). That is why Nursi indicates seven major aspects of *Wujuh al-Ijaz* (aspects of the inimitability) in his Qur'anic commentary, and he points out about forty aspects of *Ijaz al-Qur'an* (inimitability of the Qur'an) in his latter writings. The reason for Nursi's emphasis on linguistics and eloquences in defining the inimitability of the Qur'an could be traced back to his need to revive respect of people to the wording of the Qur'an and elevates the Qur'anic text to the highest level.

Muhkam and Mutashabih (Clear and Ambiguous Verses)

As for Nursi's place in relation to diverse views on clear and ambiguous verses, it can be stated that the notion of *muhkam* and *mutashābih* is of great importance in his writings, and plays a major role in his hermeneutics. Regarding *muhkam*, Nursi emphasises that Muslims should believe in the literal and explicit truths of the Qur'an that have been expounded by the righteous predecessors since belief in the certain and true realities forming the essentials of the Qur'an and Islam is essential. He goes on to clarify that the Qur'an clearly states that it was revealed in clear Arabic; hence, its meaning is clear and understandable (*muhkam*). The divine speech gives attention to, strengthens, and expounds on these meanings. Denying them means contradicting Allah and the Messenger's comprehension. In his opinion, the explicit meanings forming the basic Qur'anic truths come from the source of Messenger ship and have been transmitted via established reliable means.³⁷

Nursi thinks that *mutashābih* verses constitute a greater part of the Qur'an since the Qur'an speaks to a very wide spectrum, and it was sent to guide humanity in every century. In this context Nursi notes that:

...Underlying the explicit meaning are numerous layers or levels, one of which is the allusive and symbolic meaning, and the allusive meaning is a generality. Every century has particularities. ... That element is intentionally held in view and will perform an important function, and this does not harm the verse of the Qur'an or its clear meaning, but serves its Miraculousness and eloquence.³⁸

The notion of *Mukham* and *Mutashabih* (clear and ambiguous) is one of the primary fields of the Qur'anic sciences. Two of the most important categories of Qur'an itself, and the famous relevant verse run as follows:³⁹

"It is He Who has sent this scripture (Qur'an) down to you (O Muhammad). Some of its verses are definite in meaning-these are the cornerstone of the scripture and others are ambiguous".⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid, P. 410.

³⁵ C. Turner, *The Qur'an revealed: A critical analysis of Sa'id Nursi's Epistles of light* Berlin: Gerlash press, 2013, pp. 210-21.

³⁶ S. Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, Op. Cit, PP. 188-9.

³⁷ S. Nursi, *The Letters*, Op. Cit, P. 382.

³⁸ S. Nursi, *The Rays*, Op. Cit, P. 646;

³⁹ H. Coruh *Badiuzzaman*, Said Nursi, Op. Cit, P. 127.

The first type of verse mentioned above is called *Muhkam* (clear), while the second type is prescribed as *Mutashabih* (ambiguous). Some scholars define *Muhkam* as referring to those verses that can be comprehended without additional interpretation or reflection, while *Mustashabih* are those that require interpretation.⁴¹

The relevant examples from the Qur'an enable us to understand the notion of *Muhkam* and *Mutashabih*. In the Qur'an, those verses dealing with *Halal* and *Haram* (permissible and prohibited), punishments, inheritance, promise and threat among others are considered to be *Muhkam*, while verses regarding the attributes of Allah, the nature of resurrection, judgment, and hereafter among others are regarded as *Mutashabih*.⁴²

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Nursi's definition of *Mutashabih*, Nursi defines *Mutashabih* as follows: the styles of the Qur'an, called *Mutashabih* (ambiguous verses), put the forms before the people's eyes like telescopes or powerful spectacles.⁴⁴ For example regarding the use of *al-Rahman* (Merciful) in reference to Allah, Nursi underlines that the attributes are form *Mustashabihat*, (ambiguous) like Allah having a 'hand'.⁴⁵

Nursi underlines that the Qur'an includes ambiguous verses which are in need of interpretation or require complete submission.⁴⁶ His expression clearly indicates that there are two types of ambiguous verses: one can be interpreted by the eminent scholars, and the other requires absolute submission, like the "detached letters" at the beginning of some *Surahs*.⁴⁷

Finally, Nursi points the wisdom and benefits in the use of ambiguous verse in the Qur'an. While most of them are indicated by other scholars, Nursi has also his own original approaches to the wisdom of ambiguous verses. Nursi's instances of wisdom are as follows:

1. The Qur'an considers the intellectual capacity of the ordinary people in its guidance by using ambiguous verses.
2. The Qur'an expresses what needs to be stated without unnecessary words.
3. The Qur'an addresses all levels of people until the end of time.
4. The notion of *Mutashabih* assists the Qur'an's aim of eloquence and inimitability. It makes scholars understand their powerlessness.
5. The Qur'an takes into account the external senses of human beings because the messes gather their information.
6. The subtle and deep meanings in ambiguous verses encourage scholars to investigate.
7. The notion of *Mutashabih* assists in preserving freshness and youthfulness of the Qur'an.⁴⁸

In Nursi's view, the Qur'an addresses all levels of people in every age, and the statements of the Qur'an are not restricted to a single meaning. The concept of *Mutashabih* is a very distinctive aspect of the universality of the Qur'an.

CONCLUSION

Nursi's approach to *Tafsīr* relies on the '*Ijāz al Qur'an* (inimitability of the Qur'an) and Miraculousness of the Qur'anic text is directly connected with Islamic theology (*kalām*). In any aspect of its inimitability, Nursi directs his efforts towards explicating the fundamentals of faith. Nursi elaborates on the aspects of the Qur'an's inimitability

⁴⁰ Qur'an 3:7.

⁴¹ A. Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction*, Taylor & Francis, e-library, London, 2008, Op. Cit, P. 183.

⁴² V. Denfer, *Ulum al-Qur'an*, Op. Cit, P. 80-1.

⁴³ S. Nursi, *The Letters*, Op. Cit p. 382.

⁴⁴ S. Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, Op. Cit, P. 192.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 22-3 see also S. Nursi. *The Reasonings*, p. 41-142.

⁴⁶ S. Nursi, *The Words*, Op. Cit. P. 369.

⁴⁷ S. Vildirim "Important principles in the *Risale-i Nur* for understanding the Qur'an's Allegorical verses", in a Contemporary Approach to understanding Qur'an: The example of the *Risale-i-Nur*, edit. By the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, Istanbul: Sozler, 2000. P. 241.

⁴⁸ Pp. 244-5.

because he thinks this science to be vital to the Islamic theology. What is more, Nursi holds the fact that Qur'anic narratives are clear proofs of the Prophethood of Muhammad. In addition, Nursi discusses certain difficult verses, clarifies obscure passages and sometimes reconciles those verses. He firmly supports the Islamic tradition in the age of positivism.

Qur'anic verses can address each level of understanding at all times, and this aspect is related to the notion of *Mutashābih* verses. Nursi considers verses connected with Allah's attributes such as Allah having a 'hand' to be ambiguous and clarifies them in his exegetical works. Nursi stresses that *Mutashābih* is a very distinctive aspect of universality of the Qur'an, and it supports the Qur'an's aim of eloquence and inimitability.

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CITE AS

Dr. Muhammad Sani Abdullahi Jos, & Zayyanu Altine. (2022). Badiuzzaman Sa'id Nursi and his Views on 'Ijaz Al-Qur'an (Inimitability of the Qur'an) and Muhkam and Mutashabih (Clear and Ambiguous Verses) in the Qur'an. Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies, 2(1), 28–34. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6331054>