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Religious and Scientific Views on Mental Illness

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Abstract

Anxiety, depression, mental disorders, and worries are among the predicaments of human society in the present century. In recent decades, the factors contributing to, preventing, and curing these illnesses have been addressed from different angles.

The resulting achievements are various cognitive, behavioral, psychological, psychodynamic, and biological theories that, of course, led to valuable outcomes. This paper addresses this issue from two perspectives: the psychological perspective and that of the Qur'an and hadith.

Part 1: Psychologists' perspective

Psychologists and psychoanalysts have classified mental illnesses differently. In some sources, mental illnesses are divided into the following ten categories.

1. The disruption of body's biotic balance, due to fatigue, disease, chronic diseases, hypochondria, stress, and childbirth.

2. The organizational positions: The most important factors behind stress in organizations and institutions are the occupational status, social status, career advancement, and social status achieved suddenly.

3. Family crises: Divorce, the loss of one's spouse, child, parents, etc., and economic and livelihood problems.

4. Environmental factors: Sound and air pollution, rules and regulations governing life, work setting and

migration (i.e., changes in cultural environment).

5. Political issues: The thirst for power, which disrupts the politicians' peace of mind, the super-ordinate and subordinate relationship, the psychological warfare and the spreading of rumors, and political and economic crises.

6. The structure of one's personality can be considered a factor behind psychological pressure because one's personality type influences his interactions, actions, and reactions. The Qur'anic interpretation in this regard is as follows:

"Say, everyone acts according to his character." (***17:84***) 1

If one is a pessimist, he considers everything happening against himself. ***"***

They suppose every cry is directed against them," (***63:4***)2

because the pessimist does not have a rational and logical interpretation and conception of the relation among his being, society, and the universe, so he came under psychological pressures and despairs, and is unable to withstand problems: as said in the Qur'an:

"…anxious when an ill befalls him." (***70:20***)3.

While God, the Merciful, said to His servants,

"…do not despair of the mercy of Allah," (***39:53***)4 t

he upbeat believer not only does not despair in hardships and calamities, but also seemingly unpleasant and difficult events make him firm and steadfast,

"…to fortify those who have faith." (***16: 102***)5

7. Doubt and indecision when making important decisions regarding marriage, jobs, education, and so forth. Doubtfulness leading to psychological pressure is the source of many neurological and psychiatric diseases and has its root in feeling inferior and deficient.

8. The moral vacuum: Examples are guilt, remembering life's bitter memories, jealousy, malice, backbiting, and false accusations. To address these concerns, God told the Prophet in the Quran:

"And be patient over what they say and keep away from them in a graceful manner." (***73: 10***)6

9. The spiritual vacuum: Along with the relatively enhanced comfort and developed communications, human civilization has also experienced increased stress and anxiety, and the spiritual vacuum is a main factor in this heightened anxiety. In this vast world, man suffers from aimlessness and the lack of a secured support. The examples of the spiritual vacuum include emptiness, purposelessness,

superstitions and illusions, and the feeling of being alone, abandoned, helpless and unsupported (i.e., weak faith).

10. The religious beliefs: Despite being a means of relieving anxieties, religious beliefs may also bring about psychological pressure because its outcomes include feeling responsible, fearing death and resurrection, and the likes which may cause anxiety and stress.

Part 2: From the perspective of the Qur'an and hadith

As noted above, some factors behind anxiety are cognitive, others are emotional, and yet some others are human. Here, some factors in Qur'anic verses and hadiths by the Ahlul Bayt which are mainly cognitive are elaborated on. If one is aware of them, he will not become anxious, depressed, and worried.

Among the above factors and those referred to below, cognitive factors are more important, because most factors behind the appearance of mental illnesses are cognitive. Having negative attitudes to oneself, others, God, and the future; absolutism, and negative thinking; regarding feelings and the reality as the same, and other irrational beliefs are cognitive.

Likewise, negative feelings, frustration, self-rebuke, and the likes are rooted in cognition. Guilt, loneliness and emptiness also have cognitive aspects. That is why in Islamic sources, changing false beliefs into true ones and rectified thoughts is emphasized. Clearly, the change of a depressed and anxious person's false beliefs leads to modification of his uncomfortable feelings, and appropriate behaviors, and as a result, symptoms of depression are gradually reduced.

To prevent and treat mental disorders, religious leaders have provided necessary training in correct knowledge of – and attitude towards – oneself, God, life, the world and others. As referred to above, cognitive therapies are more effective than psycho-therapy, medications, behavior therapy, shock therapy, and other methods in treating depression, relieving stress, and preventing their recurrence. That is why it has been emphasized in Islamic sources more than other methods.

Investigating the Qur'anic verses, hadiths, and religious sources, one can find the following factors behind anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses to be mostly cognitive. Additional factors that contribute are mentioned below:

1. Disbelief

Although disbelief is considered a mental illness in Islam, it is also regarded as a cause of mental illnesses, since it is an obstacle to an accurate understanding of facts and truths. Through disbelief, the primary means of acquiring knowledge, namely the heart, eyes, and ears stop working:

"Allah has set a seal on their hearts and their hearing, and there is a blindfold on their sight."

(***2:7***)[7]

This means absolute darkness and misguidance. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, God said,

"and one whom Allah has not granted any light has no light." **(24:40)**[8].

This absolute darkness leads to anxiety, stress, and worries.

2. Neglecting the remembrance of God

Those who neglect the remembrance of God and turn away from it will have a very hard life in this world besides the punishment in the hereafter:

But whoever disregards My remembrance, his shall be a wretched life, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall raise him blind. (***20:124***)[9]

All doors are closed to such a person, and this is the "wretched life" because the one who forgets God has nothing left but this world that is considered as his ideal. Naturally, all his efforts are aimed at this ideal, and this kind of life never gives him peace of mind because he is always depressed, anxious, worried, tense, and sad about either losing or not attaining something.

3. Forgetting oneself

As a result of forgetting God, man forgets himself as well:

"They have forgotten Allah, so He has forgotten them." (***9:67***)[10]

Those who forget themselves will forget their values, talents, and capabilities. And the one who engages in anything except his purification will wander in the darkness and will perish.

4. Attachment to material and worldly issues

Strong attachment to the personal belongings and social benefits such as one's wealth, offspring, high status, and relatives, all of which are the ornaments of this world, renders people neglectful of God's remembrance:

"O you who have faith! Do not let your possessions and children distract you from the remembrance of Allah, and whoever does that—it is they who are the losers." (***63:9***)[11]

Not remembering God equals losing one's peace of mind:

Look! The hearts find rest in Allah's remembrance! (***13:28***)[12]

5. Covet and avarice

One of the first motives behind man's inclination to such vices and turning away from the remembrance of God and accumulating wealth is *Hulla'* (هُلْع), that is, covet. Whenever a covetous man is stressed out or loses something, he whines, and when he is benefited, he exercises parsimony and is also unwilling to allow others to benefit:

"Indeed man has been created covetous: anxious when an ill befalls him and grudging when good comes his way," (***70: 19-21***) 13

in other words, feeling insecure, anxious, and worried.

6. Disregard for prayer

As referred to in the second point, remembrance of God brings about peace of mind. On the other hand, prayer is the very remembrance of God, Who said in the Qur'an,

"...and maintain the prayer for My remembrance." (***20: 14***) 14
Also, according to the Qur'an, prayer is superior to any act of worship,

"Indeed the prayer prevents indecencies and wrongs, and the remembrance of Allah is surely greater." (***29:45***) 15

Thus, disregard for prayer has no outcome but anxiety, stress, and tension.

7. High aspirations

When ignorance, arrogance, and high aspirations befall man, he will no longer be able to realize realities and truths, and this leads to disregard for the remembrance of God. How beautifully God said in the Quran about the disbelievers:

"Leave them to eat and enjoy and to be diverted by longings. Soon they will know." (***15:3***) 16

In other words, they will experience the negative outcomes of these high aspirations (since aspirations are not bad in themselves, and high aspirations are blameworthy).

8. Attachment to this world

The man fond of this world is always anxious and worried because this world is associated with loses, and the tensions caused by these losses lead to anxiety. Addressing the people enchanted by this world, Imam Ali said:

"Why when you attain a little of this world, you become delighted, and a great deal of the hereafter you have lost does not sadden you? Also, when you lose a worthless worldly thing, you become so anxious

and worried that your face expressions clearly show your great anxiety, and your little impatience is revealed." 17

In another hadith, Imam Ali said, *"The love for this world is the peak of all seditions and the root of all grief and pains"*18

9. No fear of God

The one who does not fear God and His just punishments through which one's thoughts, actions, and feelings can be controlled; he paves the way for his suffering from *rahbah* (رهبه), that is, fear along with great anxiety. In other words, the one who does not fear God is afraid of – and anxious about – everything. Imam Sadiq said in this regard:

"The one who fears the Great God, He will place fear from him in everybody's heart (*i.e., everybody fears him*)*, and the one who does not fear God, He will place fear from everything in his heart* (*i.e., he will fear everything*)*."*19

Imam Ali also said, *"The outcome of fear* [*from God*] *is security," "Fear* [*from God*] *is security,"* and "[*You should*] *fear* [*God*] *so that you become secure."*20 Thus, fear [from God] brings about peace in both this world and the hereafter, and no fear from God involves horror and anxiety.

10. Not marrying

One of the divine blessings is having a good spouse who brings peace of mind. As God specified this in two verses:

"And of His signs is that He created for you mates from your own selves that you may take comfort in them," **(30:21)**21

and

"It is He who created you from a single soul, and made from it its mate, that he might find comfort with her." (***7:189***)22

This comfort comes from the fact that man and woman complement each other and lead to one another's vitality, prosperity, and growth in a way that one is imperfect without the other. Naturally, there is a great attraction between one person and his complement. Thus, it can be concluded that those who refuse to act on this divine traditional practice may face physical or mental problems.

11. The feeling of destruction (i.e., worry about death)

The love for survival and willingness to have an eternal life are innate human traits. Nobody can ever find in himself a desire for annihilation. Thus, man fights against any factor that he may think leads to his

destruction. If he cannot fight with it, he at least escapes from it. T

his is the reason for his escape from death and his great fear of it because he views death as his destruction and thinks death is opposed to his innate desire, since this desire continuously tells him: 'You must exist', although death tells him: 'You must go to the world of non-existence and destruction'. Here the remembrance of death leads to anxiety and worries. Of course, from the divine perspective, death does not mean destruction; rather it is a rebirth, and a bridge to the Heaven for the righteous.

12. Pessimism

Two factors behind anxiety and stress are suspicion and cynicism. The one suspicious of himself, his family, his relatives, society and its development, environment, and even of God and His inclusive grace, cannot have a peaceful and secure life because cynicism has a negative impact on man's spirit, and the resulting preoccupation and obsession in turn pave the way for apprehension and anxiety. As a result, one becomes less vivacious as his life becomes colorless. Thus, Islam forbids this negativism strongly:

"Avoid much suspicion. Indeed, some suspicions are sins." (***49: 12***)[23]

13. Despair

Despair leads to grief and anxiety, as Imam Ali said: *"The one who becomes completely hopeless will succumb to regret, anxiety, and worries."*[24] The sorrow that originates from despair weakens man's body and soul. He also said, *"Sorrow destroys man's body."*[25]

The hopeless person only sees darkness in the life and is blind to its lights. Like bats, he escapes from the sunlight and is finally afflicted by lethal torment resulting from his own darkness. The philosophical despair is transmitted from such people's actions and writings to their followers, audience, and others. This dangerous virus (i.e., despair), like leprosy, spreads every day and brings along ominous misery, anguish, and pessimism. Therefore, it is strongly forbidden in Islam:

"And do not despair of Allah's mercy. Indeed no one despairs of Allah's mercy except the faithless lot." (***12:87***)[26]

and

"Do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah will forgive all sins." (***39:53***)[27]

14. Ingratitude

The destructive uses of blessings and material and spiritual resources at man's disposal in order to commit sins and injustice are considered ingratitude and leads to the loss of security and peace. In other words, correctly using God's blessings results in their increase, and using them incorrectly leads to one's being deprived of them.

In the Qur'an, this was referred to in a parable in which a tribe enjoyed security and comfort besides other blessings, but God inflicted hunger and insecurity on them due to their ingratitude:

"Allah draws a parable: A town secure and peaceful. Its provision came abundantly from every place. But it was ungrateful toward Allah's blessings. So, Allah made it taste hunger and fear because of what they used to do." (***16:112***)[28]

15. Guilt

Guilt here does not mean the devotional and informed remorse for committing what God has forbidden; rather, it refers to a negative feeling due to sins not committed deliberately. Even though one has committed a sin in a moment of weakness, the person should not allow the guilt to impact his or her soul either transiently or deeply. He or she is to solve the problem through resolving not to commit it again.

When an action is not considered as wrong or sinful according to Islamic or social norms, if guilt takes deep roots in one's mind in such a way that he reproaches or blames himself excessively, and weeps for and sympathizes for himself, such guilt is considered as a psychological disease and have many negative effects.

Perhaps a salient outcome can be self-punishment as atonement for his sin, for example, when one hurts himself or unconsciously washes his hands for no good reason, which are referred to in psychology as a mental disease. Another salient form of pathological inadequacy and guilt is negative self-image.

In other words, the origin of negative attitude to oneself should be found in self-rebuke whether this negative attitude is in the form of self-rebuke and sympathy for oneself or inadequacy, guilt, etc. On the whole, guilt is a factor behind anxiety, depression, and worries, and Islam offers strategies to reach a positive outcome from this feeling and to prevent it from emerging as a mental illness.

16. Emptiness and vacuum

Emptiness or nihilism is a widespread and well-known phenomenon in the modern era. Nihilism refers to meaninglessness of life. If psychotherapy is affected by nihilism, it can only diagnose and indicate the symptoms of the mental illness instead of curing it. This way, psychotherapy not only reflects nihilistic thoughts, but also unintentionally and unknowingly presents a false and caricature-like picture of the human soul and mind to the patient.

The emptiness is revealed as continuous tedium and boredom. According to Schopenhauer, "Man is doomed for ever to a dispute between the polar opposites of distress and anxiety, on the one hand, and sorrow and tedium, on the other." In fact, nowadays man goes to psychiatrists due to boredom and impatience more so than anxiety and distress, and this is increasing every day.

The modern mechanized life aggravates this crisis. The few people who commit suicide should not be considered as the only victims of this emptiness. Rather, issues such as alcoholism and adolescent misdemeanors are the consequences of this unpleasant feeling. The middle age crises at the age of retirement can be also examined from this perspective.

In short, a factor behind anxiety and concern is nihilism. The one who sees no purpose or meaning for his existence is constantly distressed and worried. However, if following the Islamic teachings, one sees man in a position where the whole universe is created for his sake, and views death as a rebirth and a bridge to a perfect state, naturally he will not be a nihilist.

17. Inferiority complex

The feeling of inferiority resulting from real, illusory, or social defects leads to distress, anxiety, or other different emotional reactions. The sense of inferiority is a negative manifestation of fatalism and results from one's conscious or unconscious feeling that he cannot do anything. It has its roots in one's childhood and is manifested during the adulthood.

A famous western psychoanalyst, Adler, believes that human activity is essentially based on the feeling of inferiority which is rooted in one's childhood. In other words, the child feels helpless and weak, and relies on the adults. This feeling accompanies the child through his developmental stages. The very sense of inferiority forms his character in various respects. It also makes him seeks domination in various aspects so that he can be in control of situations and replace inferiority with domination, but when he fails, this changes to the inferiority complex. Then this leads to a number of psychological and neurological disorders, and changes the person into a mean and evil being who is detrimental to social order.

Thus, the feeling of inferiority can pave the way for people's perfection because humankind's measures are based on this feeling. However, in the case of a person's defeat and failure, this feeling changes into the inferiority complex which, in turn, causes many mental disorders.

18. Suspicion and mistrust

Suspicion and mistrust are two dangerous mental illnesses with adverse consequences for the individuals and society. Suspicion also causes masses to fight each other, makes families lose their serenity, and tarnishes pure hearts, filling them with rancor. It can have destructive impacts nationally and internationally and lead to numerous harms and violent acts. Thus, it is considered as a mortal sin in Islam, and God has forbidden Muslims from committing it in the Holy Quran,

"O you who have faith! Avoid much suspicion. Indeed, some suspicions are sins." (***49: 12***). 29

The Prophet also regarded it as murder, because suspicion disrupts social order and causes social disturbance. Imam Ali said: *"Mistrust and suspicion ruin the affairs and cause evils."* 30

In short, people who are suspicious of others do not trust others; even their family members and relatives and are replete with complexes and rancor. Personally, they are also sad, lonely, anxious, and worried. Because they do not trust anybody, they always feel alone, and clearly it is difficult and worrisome to live alone.

19. Envy and rancor

Surely envy and rancor are factors behind anxiety and worries because vengeful and jealous people are constantly suffering as they do not have peace of mind and can eventually destroy their lives. These people not only do not suffer from their pain and adversity, but also become depressed at others' progress and success. Prophet Muhammad said,

"The jealous person has the least comfort and peace of mind"[31]

And:

"The one who sows the seeds of rancor will reap its fruits."[32]

In short, the jealous always wish others' blessings to be taken away. In addition, since in this world not everything happens as the mean and jealous people desire, although their blessings may increase and they may be promoted, they still suffer. That is why jealousy is a factor behind anxiety. Imam Ali said, *"The jealous one is always sad, and the mean one is always rebuked."*[33]

Also, according to Imam Sadiq, *"The jealous one harms himself before harming the one he is envious of."*[34]

20. Other reasons

After careful consideration, one can find many factors behind anxiety and worries, such as distorting facts, committing sins, exaggerating events, hurrying, being superficial, satisfying sexual desires unlawfully, drinking alcohol, gambling, misunderstanding, doubting, associating with anxious people, thinking that others are ungrateful to him, disobeying the rules, backbiting others, Satanic temptations, and the list goes on. Islam proposes many solutions for them; the most important ones are dealt with in the next chapters.

Of course, the remedies suggested for relieving anxiety and worries in this book mainly include their causes, and one should surely visit a psychiatrist. However, Islamic strategies are also greatly effective in relieving anxiety and stress.

1. al-Isra', 84 قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ
2. al-Munafiqin, 4, يَحْسَبُونَ كُلَّ صَيْحَةٍ عَلَيْهِمْ
3. al-Ma'arij, 20, إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا
4. al-Zumar, 53, لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ
5. al-Nahl, 102, لِيُثَبِّتَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُو

6. al-Muzammil, 10, وَاصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَاهْجُرْهُمْ هَجْرًا جَمِيلًا
7. al-Baqarah, 7, خَتَمَ اللَّـهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ ۖ وَعَلَىٰ أَبْصَارِهِمْ غِشَاوَةٌ
8. al-Nur, 40, وَمَن لَّمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّـهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِن نُّورٍ
9. Ta Ha, 124, وَمَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَن ذِكْرِي فَإِنَّ لَهُ مَعِيشَةً ضَنكًا وَنَحْشُرُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَعْمَىٰ
10. Tawbah, 67, نَسُوا اللَّـهَ فَنَسِيَهُمْ
11. Munafiqun, 9, يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُلْهِكُمْ أَمْوَالُكُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ عَن ذِكْرِ اللَّـهِ ۚ وَمَن يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ
12. al-Raad, 28, أَلَا بِذِكْرِ اللَّـهِ تَطْمَئِنُّ الْقُلُوبُ
13. al-Ma'arij, 19-21, إِنَّ الْإِنسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا
14. Ta Ha, 14, وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي
15. Ankabut, 45, إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنكَرِ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّـهِ أَكْبَرُ
16. Hijr, 3, ذَرْهُمْ يَأْكُلُوا وَيَتَمَتَّعُوا وَيُلْهِهِمُ الْأَمَلُ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ
17. مَا بَالُكُم تَفْرَحُونَ بِالْيسيرِ مِنَ الدُّنْيا تُدرِكونَهُ وَلا يحزُنكُم الْكثِيرُ مِنَ الآخِرَةِ تُحْرَمُونَهُ، وَيقْلِقُكُم الْيسِيرُ مِنَ الدُّنْيا يفُتُوكُم حَتَى يتَبَينَ ذَلِك فِي وُجُوهِكُم وَقِلَّةِ صَبْرِكُم عَمَّا زُوِى مِنْهَا عَنْكم
18. حُبُّ الدُّنْيا رَأْسُ الفِتَنِ وَأصْلُ الْمِحَنِ
19. مَنْ خَافَ اللهَ عزَّوجلَّ أخَافَ اللهُ مِنْهُ كلَّ شَيءٍ وَمَنْ لَمْ يخِفِ اللهَ عزَّوجلَّ أخَافَهُ اللهُ مِنْ كلِّ شيءٍ
20. ثَمَرَةُ الْخَوْفِ أَلأمْن، اَلخَوْفُ أَمَانٌ، خِفْ تَأَمَنْ
21. Rum, 21, وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُم مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِّتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا
22. A'raf, 189, هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا
23. إجْتَنِبُوا كثِيراً مِنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ اِثْمٌ
24. وَإِنْ مَلَكهُ الْيأسُ قَتَلَهُ الأسَفُ
25. اَلْحُزْنُ يهْدِمُ ألجَسَدَ
26. Yusuf, 87, وَلَا تَيْأَسُوا مِن رَّوْحِ اللَّـهِ ۖ إِنَّهُ لَا يَيْأَسُ مِن رَّوْحِ اللَّـهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ
27. al-Zumar, 53, لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّـهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّـهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا
28. al-Nahl, 112, وَضَرَبَ اللَّـهُ مَثَلًا قَرْيَةً كَانَتْ آمِنَةً مُّطْمَئِنَّةً يَأْتِيهَا رِزْقُهَا رَغَدًا مِّن كُلِّ مَكَانٍ فَكَفَرَتْ بِأَنْعُمِ اللَّـهِ فَأَذَاقَهَا اللَّـهُ لِبَاسَ الْجُوعِ وَالْخَوْفِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَصْنَعُونَ
29. Hujurat, 12, يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ
30. سوء الظن يفسد الأمور ويبعث على الشرور
31. أَقَلُّ النَّاسِ لَذَّةً، اَلْحَسُود
32. مَنْ زَرَعَ الْعَدَاوَةَ، حَصَدَ مَا بَذَرَ
33. اَلْحَسُودَ مَغْمُومٌ وَاللَّئِيمُ مَذْمُومٌ
34. اَلْحَاسِدُ مُضِرٌ بِنَفْسِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يضُرُّ بِالْمَحسُودِ

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