

Exegeting Sūra al-Fātiḥa for the Masses: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Haji Muḥammad Saʿīd bin ʿUmar

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Abstract

Purpose: This article considers exegetical perspectives on the best known Sūra of the Qurʾān from two exegetes who lived in diverse contexts in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Caliphate. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi is arguably the most influential theologian to emerge from Ottoman Turkey in its long history. Haji Muḥammad Saʿīd bin ʿUmar, by contrast, enjoys a local reputation as a scholar in the Malay-Indonesian region but is unknown outside of that area.

Methodology: This research is based on a comparative analysis of the exegesis of both scholars on Sūra al-Fātiḥa, exploring the techniques they used to reach ordinary Muslims with their exegesis, not just highly educated Muslims.

Findings: Said Nursi and Muḥammad Saʿīd bin ʿUmar came from quite different backgrounds and contexts. Moreover, their exegetical styles were fundamentally different, with the former's being more thematic and the latter's being more literalist. Nevertheless, each succeeded in producing exegesis that reached the masses, thereby meeting their overall goals of reinforcing the commitment to faith and dynamic spirit of Muslims in their respective contexts.

Originality: This research is original in various ways. First, comparative studies of Said Nursi and Malay-language exegetes are few in number. Second, the identification of similarities in the results of studies on exegesis despite the use of different methods requires greater scholarly attention. This article should stimulate interest in further studies on the matter⁽¹⁾.

Keywords: Tafsīr; Said Nursi; Sūrah al-Fātiḥa; Malay-Indonesian; Risale-i Nur

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تفسير سورة الفاتحة للجماهير:

بديع الزمان سعيد النورسي والحاج محمد سعيد بن عمر

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ملخص البحث

أهداف البحث: تتناول هذه المقالة وجهات النظر التفسيرية حول أشهر سورة في القرآن من مفسرين عاشوا في سياقات متنوعة في أواخر القرن التاسع عشر وأوائل القرن العشرين، ويمكن القول إن بديع الزمان سعيد النورسي هو اللاهوتي الأكثر تأثيراً الذي خرج من تركيا العثمانية خلال تاريخها الطويل، وعلى النقيض من ذلك، يتمتع الحاج محمد سعيد بن عمر بسمعة محلية باعتباره باحثاً في المنطقة الماليزية الإندونيسية ولكنه غير معروف خارجها. منهج الدراسة: تستند الدراسة إلى تحليل مقارنة لتفسير هذين العالمين في سورة الفاتحة، واستكشاف الأساليب التي استخدمها للوصول إلى المسلمين العاديين بتفسيرهم، وليس فقط المتعلمين تعليماً عالياً.

النتائج: جاء بديع الزمان سعيد النورسي والحاج محمد سعيد بن عمر من خلفيات وسياقات مختلفة تماماً. علاوة على ذلك، كانت أساليبهم التفسيرية مختلفة اختلافاً جوهرياً، حيث كان الأول أكثر عقلانية والأخير أكثر حرفياً. ومع ذلك، نجح كل منهما في إنتاج تفاسير وصلت إلى الجماهير، وبالتالي نجحاً في تحقيق أهدافهما العامة المتمثلة في تعزيز الالتزام الديني والروح الديناميكية للمسلمين في سياقاتهم الخاصة.

أصالة البحث: هذا البحث أصيل من نواح مختلفة: أولاً- الدراسات المقارنة لسعيد النورسي مع مفسري اللغة الملاوية قليلة العدد. ثانياً- يتطلب تحديد أوجه التشابه في النتائج على الرغم من الاختلافات في الأساليب في مجال التفسير مزيداً من الاهتمام الأكاديمي، ويجب أن تحفز هذه المقالة الاهتمام بمزيد من هذه الدراسات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تفسير، سعيد النورسي، سورة الفاتحة، الملايو الإندونيسية، رسائل النور.

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Introduction

Of the Qur'an's 114 chapters, Sūra al-Fātiḥa is the best known among the world's Muslim masses. It forms part of the five daily ritual prayers and its text in Arabic is recited by the Muslim faithful from Morocco to Indonesia and from New Zealand to Finland. Sūra al-Fātiḥa, like every other Sūra, benefits from interpretation through the formal process of tafsīr, or exegesis, by commentators (mufasssīrūn). Such interpretation provides a guide to the faithful to correct understanding.

Countless commentators down the ages have offered commentary on Sūra al-Fātiḥa. A worthy project would be to conduct a comprehensive comparative study of how commentators have engaged in exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa from the earliest period of Islam to the early 21st century.

This article makes a contribution to such a study by selecting two commentators who both made their mark in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though coming from diverse locations and cultures, each sought to interpret Sūra al-Fātiḥa in a way that made it accessible to the countless millions of the faithful who recite its verses on a daily basis.

Our two chosen commentators are Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Haji Muḥammad Sa'īd bin 'Umar, both exegetical pioneers in their respective contexts. In crucial ways the differences between them outweighed the similarities: Nursi, a Kurd from Ottoman Turkey, achieved international fame for his work, while Muḥammad Sa'īd's influence was very much localised to his native Malaya; Nursi was a reformist while Muḥammad Sa'īd was a traditionalist. Nevertheless, each was concerned to reach the masses with their message, and each dominated the field of tafsīr within their respective contexts and periods.

In this paper we will undertake a comparative study of the two scholars, initially considering context, educational formation, and influences. We will then address our primary research question: how did each of the two scholars go about reaching the Muslim masses with their respective exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa? In answering that question, we will gain certain insights into the broader study of commentary writing upon Sūra al-Fātiḥa across the Muslim world from the 7th century until today.

Birth and Context of Said Nursi and Muḥammad Sa'īd bin 'Umar

They were both born into contexts that carried the stamp of imperialism, though in different ways. The Ottoman state into which Said Nursi was born was an agent of imperial expansion, having created one of the most dynamic empires that the Mediterranean region had seen in its long history. But it was an empire in an advanced state of decline.

By contrast, Haji Muḥammad Sa'īd bin 'Umar, a Malay, was born in the state of Kedah on the Malay Peninsula, where gradual encroachments by the British Empire were increasing. His fellow Malays were not the agents of imperialism but were rather its recipients.

Both men were products of the mid-19th century, born into humble village surroundings. Uncertainty surrounds the birth year of Said Nursi: he was born in 1876 according to Mardin⁽¹⁾ and Yavuz⁽²⁾;

(1) Mardin, Serif. *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989, 23.

(2) Yavuz, M. Hakan. *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 152.

Çoruh⁽¹⁾ and Tanis⁽²⁾ record his birth year as 1878; yet others suggest 1873⁽³⁾ and 1877⁽⁴⁾. What is agreed is that he was born in the village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis in eastern Anatolia. Muḥammad Sa'īd predated him by a generation, being born in the village of Kampung Kuar in Kedah, Malaya. There is similarly debate surrounding his birth year: Yusuf & Hamzah and Zulkarnain record it as 1854⁽⁵⁾ while Abdullah points to sometime between 1854-1857.⁽⁶⁾

Both Nursi and Muḥammad Sa'īd were born into multicultural and multi-faith contexts. Mardin cites Cuinet (1891) in reporting the 1889 population of Bitlis province in Anatolia:

254,000 Muslims, 130,000 + Armenians, 6,000 + Syrian Jacobites, 2,600 Chaldean Catholics, 3,862 Yezidi ... 210 Greek Orthodox and 372 Copts ... This plural ethnic composition was one of the important structural features of the clashes which became endemic in the last half of the nineteenth century.⁽⁷⁾

So as a child, Nursi came to understand diversity and also must have encountered inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension in his immediate surroundings.

Similarly, as Muḥammad Sa'īd grew up, Malaya was rapidly changing in terms of demographics, ethnicity and religious pluralism. The British colonial authorities imported large numbers of workers from India and China to Malaya to work on rubber plantations and tin mines in the 19th and early 20th centuries, triggering significant and rapid social change. This caused friction and conflict among the various ethnic groups. In Muḥammad Sa'īd's birthstate of Kedah, the once flourishing Malay population had declined significantly after the Siamese invasion of 1821.⁽⁸⁾ Although Chinese and Indian immigration was slower there than in certain other locations in Malaya, Muḥammad Sa'īd must have been aware of growing tensions and friction in the broader context of Malaya as he was growing up in the 1850s-1870s. The British Governor of the Straits Settlements in 1880 reportedly stated that "The fact is, Malays think no more of killing a Chinese than a tiger does."⁽⁹⁾

Childhood and Early Educational Formation

According to some accounts, both of Nursi's parents were of Sayyid lineage.⁽¹⁰⁾ Mardin clarifies that Nursi's father was "an impoverished village molla", possessor of a small land holding and having a

(1) Çoruh, Hakan. *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 22.

(2) Tanis, Haci. *The Sufi Influence in Said Nursi's Life and Thought*. Philadelphia: PhD Dissertation, Temple University, 2016, 61.

(3) *Dokumentari Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3J8kGHRxZ00>. Produced by MalaysiaNur. n.d.

(4) Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said. *The Damascus Sermon*. Edited by Sükran Vahide. Istanbul: Sözlere Nesriyat ve Sanayi A.S., 2nd edn., 1996, 7; iikv. "Who Was Said Nursi?" The Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture. n.d. <https://www.iikv.org/s/who-was-said-nursi> (accessed October 21, 2020).

(5) Yusuf, Zulkifli Haji Mohd, and Hamzah Bt Muhammad. "Biographi Haji Muhammad Said dan Sejarah Penulisan Tafsir Nur al-Ehsan." *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies* 3 (May 1426/2005), 67; Zulkarnain, Iskandar. "Disertasi Ilmiah 9 - Kitab Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan." 2007. <http://disertasi.blogspot.com.au/2007/07/disertasi-ilmiah-9-kitab-tafsir-nur-al.html> (accessed April 22, 2014).

(6) Abdullah, Mustafa. *Khazanah tafsir di Nusantara*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2011, 34-39.

(7) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 45.

(8) Khoo, Kay Kim. "Malaysia: Immigration and the Growth of a Plural Society." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 71, no. 1 (1998): 12.

(9) Robequain, C. *Malaya, Indonesia, Borneo, and the Philippines*. London: Longmans, 1958, 120.

(10) Hermansen, Marcia. "Said Nursi and Maulana Ilyas: Examples of Pietistic Spirituality among Twentieth-Century Islamic Movements." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, no. 1 (January 2008), 74.

large family of seven children to support.⁽¹⁾ Nursi's initial educational (theological) formation appears to have been provided by his oldest brother, Molla Abdullah, which he supplemented by attending Sufi gatherings and studying at local *medreses*, including that of Molla Mehmed Emin Efendi in nearby Tag village.⁽²⁾ He reportedly struggled with the authoritarian approach of *medrese* teachers in these early years.⁽³⁾

In his middle teen years Said Nursi moved on to study with several scholars in different schools. He spent time sitting at the feet of Nakşbendi scholar Seyyid Nur Muhammed Efendi in Hizan, also in Bitlis province, and spent three months studying with Shaikh Muhammad Jalali in the Bayezit *medrese*. Such were his gifts that at the tender age of around 13-14 he graduated with a diploma from this study program.⁽⁴⁾ The following year (1889) he moved on to continue studies with another teacher, Molla Fethullah, in Siirt in south-eastern Turkey.⁽⁵⁾

After having gained his initial theological insights from his family, Nursi had thus travelled around various locations in eastern Turkey in pursuit of education and wisdom. Such was also the case for the Malay, Muḥammad Sa'īd . His father, Haji 'Umar Khaṭīb bin Amīn al-Dīn bin 'Abd al-Karīm, was renowned as a local preacher and scholar of Islam, hence earning the honorific of Khaṭīb.⁽⁶⁾ Muḥammad Sa'īd therefore undertook his initial studies of Islam with his father in their native state of Kedah. His path to wisdom then took him further afield; in interview, family members reported that he undertook further education in neighbouring Patani,⁽⁷⁾ a Malay region rich with well-established and reputable pondok⁽⁸⁾ and having produced a number of famous scholars in previous periods. Wan Mohd. Shaghir Abdullah reports that Muḥammad Sa'īd studied at the Pondok Bendang Daya,⁽⁹⁾ initially receiving instruction from the founder of the school, Sheikh Haji Wan Muṣṭafā al-Faṭānī.⁽¹⁰⁾ He then studied more intensively with that scholar's son who inherited the leadership of the school, the Meccan trained Sheikh Wan 'Abd al-Qādir Bin Wan Muṣṭafā al-Faṭānī (c. 1818-1895), who devoted a significant part of his adult life teaching Sufism in Malaya after returning from Mecca.⁽¹¹⁾

Turning Points: From Education to Activism

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi

In his late teens Said Nursi moved to the ancient city of Van in eastern Turkey. He worked in the office of the Van governor as a "religious attaché"⁽¹²⁾, also undertaking further studies in the modern scienc-

(1) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 65.

(2) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 66.

(3) Hermansen, "Said Nursi and Maulana Ilyas", 74.

(4) Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 22

(5) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 71.

(6) Yusuf and Hamzah, "Biographi Haji Muhammad Said", 67.

(7) Yusuf and Hamzah, "Biographi Haji Muhammad Said", 67.

(8) A *pondok* is a private Malay Islamic school, literally meaning "hut".

(9) Abdullah, Wan Mohd. Shaghir. "Muhammad Sa'īd Umar Kedah - Pengarang Tafsir Nur al-Ihsan." Ulama Nusantara. 12 November 2006. <http://ulama-nusantara.blogspot.com/2006/11/muhammad-sa-umar-kedah-pengarang-tafsir.html> (accessed October 7, 2020).

(10) Also known as "Tok Bendang Daya Pertama".

(11) Also known as "Tok Bendang Kedua". Anon. "'Abd al-Qadir b. Haji Mustafa b. Muhammad Faqih al-Fatani, Shaykh (1818-95)." Center for Patani Studies: Resources for the Study of Patani's History, Culture, and Society. n.d. <https://patani-studies.com/muslim-scholars/abd-al-qadir-b-haji-mustafa-b-muhammad-faqih-al-fatani-shaykh-1818-95/> (accessed October 21, 2020).

(12) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 78

es: math, physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology and geology, as well as history and philosophy.⁽¹⁾ In all he spent over a decade in Van, with this period significant for the formation of his thinking and sense of calling, as well as the building of his reputation. He was greatly concerned with the moribund state of traditional education in the *medreses* and reached the conclusion that a revival of Islam in the face of creeping secularisation depended on a significant overhaul of Islamic educational programs to accommodate the knowledge available in the secular areas of learning.

He formulated the idea of founding an Islamic educational institution in Van, to be called *Medre-setü'z-Zehra* (the Madrasah of Renewal),⁽²⁾ which would present a curriculum built around both Islamic and scientific subjects so that its graduates would be strong in the faith and equipped to engage with the challenges of the modern world rather than be backward looking, ill-prepared for the realities facing the *ummah* in the early 20th century. Determined to bring this proposal before the highest authorities, he journeyed to Istanbul in November 1907 to seek the endorsement for his plan from the Sultan himself, Abdül Hamid II (r. 1876-1909), a conservative man wary of reform. His hopes were dashed when rather than his petition being warmly embraced by the Sultan, he was sent to Toptaşı Mental Hospital and then to a prison for much of 1908.⁽³⁾ Nursi's petition was published following the Young Turks revolt of July 1908.⁽⁴⁾

This was a significant moment for Said Nursi. The reforms he considered essential might not be achievable through the established channels of authority. He was no revolutionary, seeking to violently overthrow the existing order. Rather he was committed to a Shari'a-based constitutionalism⁽⁵⁾ that would revive the spiritual state of the Ottoman Empire, reversing the inexorable decline that seemed to have beset it. His calling was to revive and revitalise Islam.

In one of the most significant events in this first phase of his life, in early 1911 Said Nursi delivered a sermon in Arabic in the old Umayyad mosque in Damascus that came to be known as his Damascus Sermon. It was the result of an invitation by the local religious authorities, a mark of his recognition as a significant scholar and thinker, having by this stage earned the honorific *Bediüzzaman* (*Badī' al-Zamān*, Wonder of the Age). In this sermon, he set out what he saw as the problems that had beset the Muslim world and his vision for overcoming these challenges. Speaking in medical metaphors, he diagnosed six ills that faced Muslims: (a) despair and hopelessness; (b) the absence of truthfulness in social and political life; (c) enmity; (d) ignorance of the luminous bonds binding believers together; (e) contagious despotism; (f) pervasive self-interest.⁽⁶⁾

Having "diagnosed" the challenges facing the Muslim world, Said Nursi devoted the rest of the sermon

(1) Markham, Ian S., and Suendam Birinci Pirim. *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011.

(2) Redhouse, J.W. *A Turkish and English Lexicon*. Constantinople: A.H. Boyajian, 1890, 1020. The term *zehra* refers to a certain kind of flowering plant. Nursi's intention in using this term seems to have been to point to the multiplying effect of a combined curriculum of Islamic and scientific subjects producing "blossoms", or metaphorical renewal. Hence I provide a metaphorical translation of the name of the institution, the "Madrasah of Renewal", rather than the more clumsy and literalist "Madrasah of the Flowering Plant".

(3) For a fascinating discussion of the reasons for Nursi's internment, cf. Armağan, Mustafa. "Abdülhamid, Said Nursi'yle hiç karşılaştı mı? (Has Abdülhamid even met Said Nursi?)." 14 Eylül 2010. <http://www.mustafaarmagan.com.tr/genel/abdulhamid-said-nursiyle-hic-karsilasti-mi/> (accessed November 25, 2020).

(4) Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 79.

(5) Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 22.

(6) Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 26-27.

to a set of words which encapsulated his proposed remedies to lead Islam back to world dominance. In time, this sermon was to enter the diverse body of writing that came to constitute his monumental Qur'an commentary, *Risale-i Nur*.

Said Nursi had thus mapped out a plan for achieving his goal. So far in his short life – he was still only in his mid-thirties – he had undertaken studies, formal and informal, in wide-ranging contexts and locations, he had been acclaimed as a scholar and thinker of unique gifts, a “wonder of his age”, and he had commenced that prolific writing output that was to ultimately constitute his legacy for future generations of Muslims.

Muhammad Sa'īd bin 'Umar

The time spent studying in the Malay state of Patani was crucial in preparing the next stage for Muhammad Sa'īd. If indeed he had studied with Sheikh Wan 'Abd al-Qādir Bin Wan Muṣṭafā al-Faṭānī as some reports suggest, that scholar's earlier experience in Mecca may well have provided connections which led Muhammad Sa'īd to travel to the city of the Messenger's birth. In any case, there was a well-developed community of Patani scholars in Mecca and their networks back in Malaya could have equally provided the trigger for Muhammad Sa'īd to travel to Arabia.

Unfortunately the details of Muhammad Sa'īd's life are sketchy compared with the abundant material on the life of Said Nursi. It seems plausible to propose that Muhammad Sa'īd spent the period studying in Patani in his late teens/early twenties. We could therefore propose a date of around 1880 for his arrival in Mecca, around the time that Said Nursi was a small child. The precise length of Muhammad Sa'īd's stay in Arabia is not recorded. However, it may well have been for up to a decade, as he procured a parcel of land near the Meccan Great Mosque, where a hostel was constructed for use by Malay pilgrims taking part in the annual *ḥājj*. The land was reportedly ultimately requisitioned by the Saudi authorities, for which Muhammad Sa'īd was well reimbursed.⁽¹⁾

His years in Mecca must have been put to good use in terms of study, as he returned to Malaya well equipped for the teaching and religious leadership that came his way. While in Mecca, no doubt he encountered, and perhaps sat at the feet of, some of the greatest scholars from different parts of the Malay Peninsula who were resident in Mecca, as well as Arab scholars of Islam. Unfortunately, a list of his scholarly mentors during his time in Mecca is not available. His period in Mecca must have coincided with the prominent presence of Shaykh Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (1816-1886), Shāfi'ī Mufti in Mecca, Shaykh al-Islām of the Ḥijāz and vehement critic of Wahhabism. Muhammad Sa'īd's contemporary Shaykh Aḥmad al-Faṭānī (1856-1908) grew up in Mecca and returned there after many years studying at Al-Azhar around the same time that Muhammad Sa'īd was in Mecca. His years in Mecca cannot have failed to be inspiring, enriching, and equipping for what lay ahead of him.

So when Muhammad Sa'īd returned to Malaya, probably around 1890, he was well prepared in terms of educational formation to take up the roles that inevitably came his way. This would place him in his mid-thirties, around the same age as Said Nursi at the time of his life-changing Damascus sermon.

Different callings: Approaches to Sūra al-Fātiḥa

Both our two chosen scholars had a clear sense of calling as they approached middle age, arising from the solid educational formation that they had received and the gifted scholars with whom they had

(1) Yusuf and Hamzah “Biographi Haji Muhammad Said”, 68.

interacted. However, by this stage of their lives, Said Nursi had already achieved a significant profile throughout the Ottoman Empire, while Muḥammad Sa'īd had yet to make his greatest mark in his native Malaya.

Said Nursi's commentary on the Qur'an, *Risale-i Nur*, is a monumental 6000+ page work which, in the words of Colin Turner, "is not one building, but a whole complex of edifices, constructed at various points along the author's career."⁽¹⁾ The commentary is in effect Nursi's collected works, written over a lifetime of scholarship, reflection, imprisonment, suffering, and widespread admiration by many for Nursi's unique gifts. After Nursi's Damascus Sermon of 1911, his life took a series of dramatic turns, with many detailed studies done of his biography during the remaining 49 years of his life. Our attention in this paper falls on one part of his early work, *İşârât-ül İ'caz* (Signs of Miraculousness), written in the pre-Republican period during the first two years of World War One.⁽²⁾

By contrast, Muḥammad Sa'īd's commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*, came at the end of the author's long life. After his study period in Mecca, he returned to Malaya and established *pondok* schools, becoming a much sought-after teacher, preacher and legal scholar. He served as Qāḍī in the region of Jitra in Kedah, following the Shāfi'ī school, and also being a member of the ṭarīqa Naqsh-bandiyya.⁽³⁾ He was a less prolific author than Said Nursi; apart from his Qur'an commentary, his other written output consisted primarily of *Fatāwa al-Qāḍī fī Ahkām al-Nikāh*, known popularly as *Fatwa Kedah*, the fruit of his role as Qāḍī. His commentary, *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*, was written between January 1925 and 1 October 1927,⁽⁴⁾ being completed barely five years before his death in 1932.

In order to achieve the impact that both sought, it was important for them to find a way to connect with the Muslim masses. Nursi's goal of reviving and revitalising the *Ummah* was not simply a matter of addressing the scholarly elite but rather preaching his messages in ways that connected with the ordinary believers. Similarly, Muḥammad Sa'īd's goal in writing his commentary was not to engage in obscurantism. Indeed, he states clearly in his Foreword to volume one of *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*:

... a number of noble brothers [fellow believers] requested that I compose a Qur'an [commentary] for them in the Malay dialect of Kedah so that they could easily understand [God's] instructions and His commands and without swaying their hearts from obedience and faith.⁽⁵⁾

In order to evaluate their method of accessing the masses of the Muslim faithful, we will consider their individual exegetical engagement with the Qur'anic sūra most known by members of the *um-mah*: Sūra al-Fātiḥa. How did they each go about the task of the commentator, to give expression to the rich meanings of the seven verses of Sūra al-Fātiḥa in ways which would connect, not simply with the great and the famous, but with the little people, the ordinary Muslims, who were seeking guidance from the Qur'an for their daily lives?

(1) Turner, Colin. "The Six-Sided Vision of Said Nursi: Towards a Spiritual Architecture of the Risale-i Nur." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, no. 1 (January 2008), 56.

(2) Anon. "When were Risale-i Nur treatises written?" *The Pen*. 2014. <http://www.thepenmagazine.net/when-were-risale-i-nur-treatises-written/> (accessed November 26, 2020).

(3) 'Umar, Muḥammad Sa'īd bin. *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*. Maktabah wa Matbuah al-Hadi wa Auladuhu, 3rd edn., 1391/1971, vol. 4, 311.

(4) Yusuf and Hamzah, "Biographi Haji Muhammad Said", 77.

(5) "... maka sungguh telah pinta pada hamba oleh setengah Ikhwan yang mulia-mulia bahawa hamba surat bagi mereka itu dengan bahasa Melayu Kedah akan Qur'an supaya dapat faham mereka itu akan suruhanNya dan tegahNya dengan mudah dan tiada bergoyang-goyang hati mereka itu pada taat dan iman." 'Umar, *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*, vol. 1, 2.

In his exegetical writings across the vast landscape of *Risale-i Nur*, Said Nursi did not adopt the method of phrase-by-phrase exegesis that was the classical model going back to Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī and beyond. Rather Nursi's approach was generally thematic, providing expansive commentary drawing on diverse Qur'anic verses according to particular themes or topics that were in focus. However, his exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa in *İşârât-ül İ'caz* is an exception; he provides verse-by-verse, and at times phrase-by-phrase, commentary, progressing from the beginning to the end of the Sūra. Muḥammad Sa'īd takes a similar approach in *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*. We will do the same, undertaking a comparative examination of both scholars on each verse, focusing especially on how they made the message of the verses accessible to ordinary believers.

Several comparative features are worth noting at the outset. First is the great difference in size of the two commentaries on Sūra al-Fātiḥa. While Nursi's commentary in *İşârât-ül İ'caz* comprises around 5200 words in Turkish, that of Muḥammad Sa'īd only needs 600 words in the Malay original of *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* to achieve the goals which the author set for himself. This in itself is potentially significant for accessing the masses, who are typically less inclined to read vast theological tomes and more favourable to succinct expositions providing clear guidance. So Nursi needed to offset the lengthy discussion with mechanisms that ensured reader accessibility.

Another observable difference in exegetical style is the extent to which each commentator draws on other references from the Qur'an or Ḥadīth in support of their discussion. The commentary in *İşârât-ül İ'caz* on Sūra al-Fātiḥa draws on eleven other Qur'an verses on thirteen occasions across the seven verses of Sūra al-Fātiḥa (Q55:1-4; 51:57; 12:4; 20:50; 11:112; 2:269; 6:90; 4:69). Additionally, one Ḥadīth reference is cited but not sourced by Said Nursi. By contrast, Muḥammad Sa'īd does not make reference to any other verses from the Qur'an, nor Ḥadīth references, in support of his commentary on this Sūra in *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*. He makes a solitary reference to the writing of the medieval Ḥanafi exegete Abū al-Barakāt 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd al-Nasafī (d. 1310) in the Postscript to his Sūra al-Fātiḥa commentary. This difference works in favour of Said Nursi in accessing the Muslim masses, as Qur'an-on-Qur'an exegesis supported by Ḥadīth references carries more immediate visible authority than reference to a medieval theologian about whom ordinary believers may know little.

Another difference in style relates to pedagogical approach. Both scholars were also teachers. Nursi employs a dynamic strategy of building his commentary around twelve questions (*Sual*), to which twelve response (*Cevap*) are given, constituting the heart of his commentary on Sūra al-Fātiḥa. This shows that Nursi is not only interested in internal reflection or preoccupation with the syntactic form of source texts, but rather has considered outward-looking pedagogy to achieve the most effective teaching outcome possible.⁽¹⁾ His materials for *İşârât-ül İ'caz* and his other pre-Republican writings emerged from his teaching in the *medreses*. It is not clear whether these questions represent actual enquiries posed to Nursi by his students over the years or whether they were artificially created for this text. Given Nursi's extensive experience both as student and teacher by 1913/14 when *İşârât-ül İ'caz* was being composed, the former explanation seems plausible.

Unlike Nursi, Muḥammad Sa'īd adopts a classical approach of placing primary focus not on read-

(1) Şükran Vahide's English translation of *İşârât-ül İ'caz* does not render all in the Q/A format of the Turkish original. Moreover, the English translation is sometimes selective in other ways, as discussed later.

er-response but rather on the form of his source texts. He employs a word-for-word translation technique, reflecting “form, sentence structure, [and] grammar of the source language.”⁽¹⁾ More will be said about the sources of *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* below.

Preface to the commentary on Sūra al-Fātiḥa

Nursi provides a Preface to his commentary on Sūra al-Fātiḥa in which two of the twelve questions (*Sual*) are posed, with the answers used to shape his teaching. He immediately draws his audience's attention to the big questions raised by the Qur'an as a whole, rather than immediately engaging in micro-exegesis. He declares that “one aspect of [the Qur'an's] miraculousness is manifested in its word-order. Indeed, the embroidery of its word-order is its most brilliant form of miraculousness.”⁽²⁾ He has immediately shown his brilliance in the use of metaphorical language (embroidery/*nakışlar*) that the Muslim masses could understand.

He then immediately identifies the fundamental aims and essential elements of the Qur'an as divine unity (*al-tawḥīd*), prophethood (*al-nubūwwa*), the resurrection of the dead (*al-ḥaṣhr*), and justice (*al-ʿadāla*), reassuring his readers that these elements provide a divine balance by being “manifested in every sura; indeed, they are hinted at in every phrase or alluded to in every word.”⁽³⁾

Nursi the teacher has thus first painted on a very broad canvas for the benefit of his readers before turning his attention to matters of detail.

Muḥammad Sa'īd does not provide a Preface to his exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa, rather turning his immediate attention to the individual verses.

Verse 1

(*bi-ism allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*)⁽⁴⁾

Nursi's commentary on this verse is built around four of his 12 questions. The first is “Show me these four aims [of the Qur'an] in ‘*Bismillāh* – In the Name of Allah’ and ‘*al-ḥamdulillāh* – all praise be to Allah.”⁽⁵⁾ This serves to provide cohesion across his commentary by referring back to the statement of the Qur'an's aims in Nursi's Preface.

His use of metaphor relating to daily events and perceptions appears again in explaining *Bismillāh*, which he compares to the sun “which illumines itself as well as others and is self-sufficient.”⁽⁶⁾ He relates the divine name to the seven key attributes of God: Knowledge, Will, Power, Sight, Hearing, Speech, Life, thus achieving thematic cohesion and addressing God's features which relate to the

(1) Faizan, Bahrum, and Haziya Hussin. “Kaedah Terjemahan Nas al-Quran dalam Tafsir Nur Al-Ihsan (The Method of Translation of al-Quran in Tafsir Nur Al-Ihsan).” *Islāmiyyāt* 36, no. 1 (2014), 37.

(2) Çünkü, i'câzın mühim bir vechi, nazmından tecelli eder ve en parlak i'câz Kur'ân'ın nazmındaki nakışlardan ibarettir.

(3) Kur'ân'ın sûrelerinde, âyetlerinde, kelâmlarında, hattâ kelimelerinde bile sarahaten veya işareten veya remzen bulunmaktadır.

(4) This verse is discussed at length by Nursi in another part of *Risale-i Nur*. He considers “six of the thousands of mysteries contained in *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*” in *The Flashes (the Fourteenth Flash, Second Station)*. Cf. Vahide's translation into English at <http://www.erisale.com/?locale=en&bookId=203&pageNo=142#content.en.203.134>. *The Flashes* were written by Nursi between 1932-1936 so come from a later period and context of Nursi's life [Anon. “When were *Risale-i Nur* treatises written?” *The Pen*. 2014. <http://www.thepenmagazine.net/when-were-risale-i-nur-treatises-written/> (accessed November 26, 2020). Space does not allow us to engage in detail here with that section of *Risale-i Nur* and it will form the focus of further research at a later date.

(5) S - 1 بِسْمِ اللَّهِ ve 2 الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ gibi âyetlerde makasid-i erbaaya işaretler var mıdır?

(6) Yani, güneş başkalarını gösterdiği gibi, kendini de gösterir, başka bir güneşe ihtiyaç bırakmaz.

human experience of living.

Nursi points his audience to the deeper meanings of words such as “the Most Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*)”, which he explains as an allusion to the order of the universe, and therefore to justice and beneficence, as well as “the Most Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*)” as a signpost pointing to the resurrection of the dead. Again through his eloquence he is addressing issues that are questions and matters of concern to ordinary Muslims.

He reminds his readers of the importance to defer before the Almighty given limited human understanding. Speaking of the allegorical verses (*mutashābihāt*), he writes: “it is divine condescension to human intellects; making something familiar to the mind and inducing it to understand, like one speaks to a child in terms he is accustomed to and familiar with.”⁽¹⁾ This again shows his wish to reach the masses. Ismail Albayrak observes: “...for Nursi, the *mutashabihat* function like a binocular, [bringing distant] meanings closer to us, so *mutashabih* makes the Qur’anic messages always contemporary on the one hand, and accessible for everyone on the other.”⁽²⁾

As for Muḥammad Sa‘īd, the *bismillāh* is only provided in Arabic at the outset of *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* and not rendered into Malay because it is discussed in part in verse 3 as well as in his Postscript to the Sūra.

Verse 2

(*al-ḥamdulillāh rabb al-‘ālamīn*)

Said Nursi poses another question at this point, quite possibly asked by one of his students, to orientate his exegesis of the verse: “This sentence is the beginning of the Quran ... the beginning is based on what?”⁽³⁾ His discussion of *al-ḥamd* shows his gifts of linking specific instruction with general wisdom in pointing out that “to mention praise is to conceive of the Qur’an’s ultimate purpose”. His treatment of this verse includes some grammatical discussion, but it is topped off with metaphorical symbolism: “(*al-‘ālamīn*) The *yā* and *nūn* that is, the two final letters denote either a grammatical ending as in the numbers twenty (*ishrīn*) and thirty (*thalāthīn*), or the sound plural. For the components of the worlds are worlds, or the world is not limited to the solar system.”⁽⁴⁾ While ordinary believers may not be familiar with issues of grammar, the connection with the created world grounds his commentary in terms that are widely understood.

In his treatment of this verse, Muḥammad Sa‘īd also makes use of metaphor:

(*All praise be to God, the Lord*) who created (*all the world*) including humans and jinn and angels and all creatures of the land and the sky and elsewhere. And the names of each of these elements is a sign of the Lord who created it, just as cow dung is a sign of the existence of a cow. So God is the name for the Lord who is truly worshipped.⁽⁵⁾

(1) Vahide provides a free translation of the following: Müteşabihatta, mânâ-yı mecazînin, mânâ-yı hakikînin lâfzıyla, üslûbuyla gösterilmesindeki hikmet, insanların melûf ve malûmları olmayan mânâları ve hakikatleri zihinlerine yakınlıştırıp kabul ettirmekten ibarettir.

(2) Albayrak, Ismail. Personal communication. 29 October 2020.

(3) Bu cümlemin Kur’ân’ın başlangıcı ... başlangıç yapılması neye binaendir?

(4) Bu kelimenin sonundaki *ین* yalnız *i’rab* alâmetidir, *كَلَامِيْنَ، عَشْرِيْنَ* gibi. Veya cem’ alâmetidir; çünkü, âlemin ihtiva ettiği cüzlerin herbirisi bir âlemdir. Veyahut, yalnız manzume-i şemsiyeye münhasırdeğildir. Cenâb-ı Hakkın, şu gayr-ı mütenahi fezada çok âlemleri vardır.

(5) (Segala puji-puji itu bagi Allah Tuhan) yang menjadikan (sekalian alam) daripada manusia dan jin dan malaikat dan

The exegetical reference to the cow dung was probably based on the medieval commentary by Abu al-Fiḍā ‘Imād Al-Dīn Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), whose commentary on Q2:21 includes the statement: “The camel’s dung testifies to the existence of the camel, and the track testifies to the fact that someone was walking. A sky that holds the giant stars, a land that has fairways and a sea that has waves, does not all of this testify that the Most Kind, Most Knowledgeable exists”.⁽¹⁾ Muḥammad Sa‘īd has assisted his audience by contextualising his exegesis to the Malay world context, changing the referent from camel to cow. This description may well have been a window into his own work as a rice farmer, which he undertook alongside his role as a religious scholar.⁽²⁾

Verse 3

(*al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*)

Said Nursi only provides a brief comment on verse 3, having already commented on this phrase in his discussion of the first verse.

The comment by Muḥammad Sa‘īd in *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* is quite telescopic, only offering a brief expansion on each of *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm* as follows:

(*The Lord who is Most Beneficent*) in this world and (*the Most Merciful*) towards His believing servants in the Hereafter.⁽³⁾

In terms of educating the ordinary faithful, Muḥammad Sa‘īd’s comment briefly reminds them of the division between the here-and-now and the Hereafter, alluding to the need to remain faithful in order to win the fruits of Paradise. In this he follows the traditional exegetical pattern on this verse.

Verse 4

(*Mālik Yawm al-Dīn*)

Said Nursi poses a question that could very plausibly have been asked by a student: “God is always the owner of everything, so why is the Day of Judgment specified?”⁽⁴⁾ In answering, Said Nursi shows his commitment to holistic exegesis by cross-referencing to enable his readers to see Sūra al-Fātiḥa in its entirety, rather than merely engaging in verse-level exegesis. He states that this verse points to “the result of what precedes it, for mercy (*raḥma*) is one of the proofs of resurrection and eternal felicity. For mercy can only be mercy, and bounty can only be bounty when the Resurrection arrives and eternal felicity comes about.”⁽⁵⁾ So his readers are able to see *al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm Mālik Yawm al-Dīn* as a unit rather than as two separate elements.

Nursi provides further reassurance by reminding his audience of the overriding sovereignty of God:

segala binatang darat dan laut dan langit bumi dan lain-lainnya. Maka tiap-tiap satu itu nama alam itu arti alamat atas Tuhan yang menjadikannya, seperti tahi lembu alamat atas ada lembu. Maka Allah itu nama bagi Tuhan yang disembah dengan sebenarnya.

(1) Ibn Kathīr, Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar, and Ṣafī al-Raḥmān Mubārakfūrī. *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr (abridged)*. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000, 123

(2) Yusuf and Hamzah, “Biographi Haji Muhammad Said”, 77.

(3) (Tuhan yang amat murah) di dalam dunia ini lagi (yang amat mengasihani) bagi hambanya yang mukminin di dalam akhirat.

(4) Cenâb-ı Hakkin herşeye mâlik olduğu bir hakikat iken, burada haşir ve ceza gününün tahsisi neye binaendir?

(5) ... rahmeti ifade eden mâkablîne neticedir. Zira, kıyametle saadet-i ebediyenin geleceğine en büyük delil, rahmettir. Evet, rahmetin rahmet olması ve nimetin nimet olması, ancak ve ancak haşir ve saadet-i ebediyeye bağlıdır.

“For by relating causes to effects, Allah has deposited an order in the universe through His will, and obliged man through his nature, illusions, and imagination, to comply with the order and be bound to it.”⁽¹⁾

Muḥammad Saʿīd’s exegetical contribution on this verse is again modest, but it too stresses the over-all sovereignty of God.

(*The Lord who rules the day of recompense*) namely the Day of Resurrection because none rule it apart from God alone. As for this world, it appears to be ruled by Kings but in truth none rule the world and the here after apart from God alone.⁽²⁾

Verse 5

(*Iyyāka naʿbudu wa iyyāka nastaʿīn*)

In exegeting this verse, Said Nursi does not use the question/answer format. He again makes reference to a couple of grammatical points, concerning a “detached accusative pronoun” (*iyyāka*) and a pronominal suffix (-*ka*). But lest grammatical terminology pose an opaque obstacle to his readers, Nursi again uses it as a vehicle for symbolism to imply the divine attributes of perfection.

Furthermore, Nursi uses cohesive devices to remind his readers how this verse fits in the greater Sūra context. He links *naʿbudu* (v5) with *al-ḥamd* (v2), saying the former is the expression of the latter, resulting from *mālik al-yawm al-dīn* (v4).

Nursi also uses the language of the verse to conjure up images from everyday life. Metaphor is a key device for doing so: “The positioning of ‘do we seek help’ and ‘do we worship’: you should understand that the relationship between them resembles the relationship of wages with service. For worship is Allah’s right over His bondsman. Worship is a form of service, and the help is His bountiful bestowal or reward.”⁽³⁾

On this verse, Muḥammad Saʿīd engages in more extended exegesis but shapes it to assist his audience grasp the essential elements of practice of the faith. He provides a concise statement of the five pillars of Islam (except for the *shahāda*). Then, cognisant of the influence of Sufi teaching in his context, he makes explicit references to Sufi notions and themes. He mentions various forms of *dhikr* and points to layered meanings of Qur’anic terms, expressed in a context of prayer and supplication. He concludes by suggesting that if the believer properly practices *dhikr* of the tongue, he/she can attain internal cleanliness “such as that which was sent down to the saints.”

(*To You we give worship*) through prayer and fasting and almsgiving and pilgrimage and so forth. (*And to You we turn for assistance*) in acknowledging your Oneness and faith and reverence and hope and sincere worship of you, and in increasing *dhikr* of the tongue and heart and opening the inner eye and cleansing through it and pointing and devoting it to You alone because the origin of the heart is very pure. So protect it from vain and lying words. And if evil deeds become a black spot that is not pleasing [to You], namely good thoughts that can be exemplary are not evident, but the eyes of the heart are blind, then there is no deed that can cleanse anew other than *dhikr* to Allah of the tongue and

(1) Evet, Cenâb-ı Hak, müsebbebatı esbaba bağlamakla, intizamı temin eden bir nizamı kâinatta vaz etmiş. Ve herşeyi, o nizama müraat etmeye ve o nizamla kalmaya tevcih etmiştir.

(2) (Tuhan yang memiliki hari balasan) yaitu hari kiamat kerana tiada memiliki padanya melainkan Allah semata-mata. Dan adapun pada dunia maka pada zahir ada memiliki raja-raja maka pada hakikat-Nya tiada yang memiliki dunia dan akhirat melainkan Allah semata-mata.

(3) Bu iki fiili birbiriyle bağlayan münasebet, ücretle hizmet arasındaki münasebettir. Zira ibadet, abdin Allah’a karşı bir hizmetidir. İlane de, o hizmete karşı bir ücret gibidir.

the heart, or the heart alone, until internal cleanliness like nature is achieved such as that which was sent down to the saints.⁽¹⁾

Verse 6

(*Ihḍinā al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*)

Like Muḥammad Sa‘īd’s comment on verse 5, here Nursi refers to “several levels of meaning”, pointing to elements of Sufi influence in his own educational formation. So the verb *Ihḍinā* (Guide us) is taken to mean “make us firm in guidance if we are a society; increase us in guidance if we are a community; make us successful in guidance if we are a tribe; give us guidance if we are a group.”⁽²⁾

In explaining the key phrase of *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* for his audience, Nursi engages again in multi-faceted systematised exegesis, portraying the Straight Path as justice, which is constituted by the blending of wisdom (*ḥikma*), chastity (*‘iffa*), and courage (*shajā’a*). Such notions entail a certain intellectual complexity, so Nursi, ever the teacher, seeks to clarify by emphasising the importance of “the mean or middle way” (*vasat*) between the three powers of humankind: (a) the power of animal appetites to attract benefits; (b) the power of savage passion to repulse harmful and destructive things; (c) the power of angelic intellect to distinguish between benefit and harm.

Again a sense of reassurance for his readers comes through in Nursi’s exegesis. Lest his audience feel overwhelmed, given that God has placed “no innate limitation on these powers, as He did on those of other living beings”, Nursi reassures his readers that the *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* prevents them losing direction: “[God] did however limit them through the Shari‘a, for it prohibits excess (*ifrāt*) and deficiency (*tafrīt*) and enjoins the middle way (*wasat*).”⁽³⁾

On verse 6, Muḥammad Sa‘īd engages in far less sophisticated exegesis of the term *al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*. He states unambiguously that the straight path is the “path of the religion of Islam”,⁽⁴⁾ in order to achieve textual coherence and a sense of contrast with the following verse that discusses Jews and Christians. The approaches of the two commentators achieve a similar result in terms of reader understanding but follow quite different routes; that of Nursi involves extensive and somewhat philosophical reflection and discussion, whereas that of Muḥammad Sa‘īd is staccato and steers clear of any semblance of philosophical reflection.

Verse 7

(*Ṣirāṭ alladhīna an‘amta ‘alayhim ghayri’l-maghḍūbi ‘alayhim wa lā ḍāllīn*)

(1) (Akan Dikau kami sembah pada ibadat kami) daripada sembahyang dan puasa dan zakat dan haji dan lainnya. (Dan akan Dikau kami minta tolong) atas Tauhid kami dan iman dan takwa dan harap dan ikhlas ibadat bagi Engkau, dan pada membanyak zikir lidah dan hati dan perbuka mata hati dan bersih akan dia dan berhadapannya dan rendongnya kepada Engkau semata-mata kerana asal hati itu sangat bersih. Maka menutup akan dia oleh debu percakapan yang sia-sia dan dusta dan jika kerja maksiat jadi titik hitam sampai tiada tampak suka yakni tiada datang pikiran kebajikan yang di-ibarat dengan, dan tetapi buta mata hati itu maka tiada suatu amalan yang boleh bersihan balik melainkan zikir Allah dengan lidah dan hati, atau hati sahaja, sampai jadi bersih tertangkap rupa alam dalamnya seperti yang jatuh pada setengah awliya.

(2) Vahide’s translation is a free rendering of: Sanki اِهْدِنَا dört masdardan müştakdır. Meselâ, bir mü’min hidayeti isterse, اِهْدِنَا sebat ve devam mânâsını ifade eder. Zengin olan isterse, ziyade mânâsını, fakir olan isterse i’tâ mânâsını, zayıf olan isterse ianeve tevfiik mânâsını ifade eder.

(3) Lâkin, insandaki bu kuvvetlere, seriatça bir had ve bir nihayet tayin edilmişse de, fitraten tayin edilmemiş olduğundan, bu kuvvetlerin herbirisi, tefrit, vasat, ifratnamıyla üç mertebeye ayrılırlar.

(4) ([Tu]njuki oleh-Mu akan kami jalan yang betul) atau tambah akan kami atau kekal akan kami jalan yang betul agama Islam.

On verse 7, Nursi again emphasises cohesion across the sūra and across the Qur'an: "The way of those whom You have blessed (*Şirāṭ alladhīna an'amta 'alayhim*) has a relationship with 'All praise be to God' because bounty (*al-ni'ma*) is the corollary of 'praise.'" And he goes on to link that particular phrase to every single verse of Sūra al-Fātiḥa.⁽¹⁾ So as the faithful pray the Sūra in their daily prayers, they are thereby helped to see the Sūra as a unit, mirroring the divine unity (*al-tawḥīd*) which he had defined in his Preface as one of the fundamental messages of the Qur'an.

Furthermore, Nursi provides a succinct clarification for his readers of "those who are blessed" by using Qur'an-on-Qur'an exegesis, citing Q4:59, which stipulates that the blessed include "the prophets, the veracious, the witnesses, and the righteous".

As for Muḥammad Sa'īd's interpretation of *Şirāṭ alladhīna an'amta 'alayhim*, he takes a similar approach though he does not specify Q4:59 as his point of reference. After concurring that the blessed include "prophets, the upright, the martyrs and the righteous", the Malay exegesis goes on to spell out in very accessible terms who is included in each of the four categories:

The prophets include all those who became a prophet; the upright refers to all those who show external and internal integrity before God and mankind; the martyrs refer to all Muslims who die in war with the infidels thereby upholding the faith of Islam; and the righteous refers to all those who do not cease to be devout before God and do no evil. So we beg that all those groups be shown the path.⁽²⁾

With regard to the phrase *ghayri'l-maghḍūbi 'alayhim*, Nursi poses a key question, given that the phrase makes mention of groups that earn the displeasure of God: "God Almighty is Absolute. What wisdom is there in the creation of so many wicked and ugly things in the world?"⁽³⁾ This is a question that may well have been asked in a teaching setting by one of his students.

Nursi's response is reassuring to the common people: "Know that perfection, good, and beauty are essentially what are intended in the universe, and are in the majority. Relatively, defects, evil, and ugliness are in the minority, and are insignificant, secondary, and trivial."⁽⁴⁾ But then Nursi explains further, according to the relatively free translation of Vahide: "Their Creator created them interspersed among good and perfection not for their own sakes, but as preliminaries and units of measurement for the appearance, or existence, of the relative truths of good and perfection."⁽⁵⁾

So far, the explanation of who is intended by the phrase *ghayri'l-maghḍūbi 'alayhim* is generalised. However, the translator Vahide chooses not to mention a much more specific comment by Nursi which links a particular people group with this phrase: *Yahudilerin temerrüdü gibi* (It's like the default of the Jews.)

(1) Evet, الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ صِرَاطِ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ ile mâkablindeki herbir kelime arasında bir münasebet vardır. Meselâ,

(2) Maka anbia orang yang jadi nabi; dan *şidīqīn* segala orang yang benar zahir dan batin pada Allāh dan manusia; maka syuhada itu segala muslimin yang mati perang kafir kerana meninggi agama Islam; dan *şāliḥīn* itu segala mereka tiada tinggal taat kepada Allah dan tiada kerja maksiatnya. Maka jalan orang-orang itulah kita minta ditunjuki kepadanya.

(3) Cenâb-ı Hak Ganiyy-i Mutlak'tır. Âlemde bu kadar dalâletlerin ve pek çirkin fena şeylerin yaratılışında ne hikmet vardır?

(4) Kâinatta maksud-u bizzat ve küllî ve şümullü olarak yaratılan, ancak kemaller, hayırlar, hüsünlerdir. Şerler, kubuhlar, noksanlar ise hüsünlerin, hayırların, kemallerin arasında görülmeyecek kadar dağınık ve cüz'iyet kabilinden tebeî olarak yaratılmışlardır ki, hayırların, hüsünlerin, kemallerin mertebelerini.

(5) Kâinatta maksud-u bizzat ve küllî ve şümullü olarak yaratılan, ancak kemaller, hayırlar, hüsünlerdir. Şerler, kubuhlar, noksanlar ise hüsünlerin, hayırların, kemallerin arasında görülmeyecek kadar dağınık ve cüz'iyet kabilinden tebeî olarak yaratılmışlardır ki, hayırların, hüsünlerin, kemallerin mertebelerini, nevilerini, kısımlarını göstermeye vesile olsunlar ve hakaik-i nisbiyenin vücuduna veya zuhuruna bir mukaddeme ve bir vahid-i kıyasî olsunlar.

In *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*, Muḥammad Sa‘īd is much more candid in exegeting *ghayri’l-maghḍūbi ‘alayhim*. He offers a single word explanation of the phrase: *(Not the path of all those with whom [You] are angry) the Jews.*⁽¹⁾

As for the final phrase of Sūra al-Fātiḥa, *wa lā ḍāllīn*, Nursi provides a concise statement for his readers: “This refers to those who have strayed from the path because delusion and passion have overridden the intellect and conscience, and they have fallen into hypocrisy through false belief.”⁽²⁾ However, again Vahide has not translated the specific people group whom Nursi links with this phrase: *bâtıl bir itikada tâbi olarak nifaka düşen bir kısım Nasârâdır* (Those who fall into allegiance to false belief is a group of the Nazarenes/Christians).

Again Muḥammad Sa‘īd is clear in identifying the group he sees as representing the phrase *wa lā ḍāllīn*. Nevertheless, he does allow for alternative interpretations, which points once again to the experienced teacher giving his audience various options.

(And not the path of all those who are astray) the Christians; namely not the paths of either the Jews or the Christians.

Some scholars explain this as not the path of the infidels and the hypocrites.⁽³⁾

With an eye on teaching method, Nursi concludes his exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa with a summary of the two states, that of the disbeliever and that of the believer. This helps the ordinary faithful grasp the choices before them:

For [the disbeliever’s] state is one of compounded anxiety, terror, impotence, trembling, fearfulness, orphanhood, and despair. If he considers his power, he will see himself to be impotent and weak. If he tries to quieten his needs, he will realize that they cannot be quietened ... Now consider the state of this person ... on the Straight Path ... his conscience and spirit are illuminated with the light of belief: ... when he enters this world, opens his eyes, and beholds the assaults of all the things around him, he discerns a support on which to lean in the face of these onslaughts, and this is recognition of the Creator, so he will find rest.⁽⁴⁾

Postscript

While Nursi had provided an extended Preface, Muḥammad Sa‘īd offers a fascinating Postscript. In it he offers his readers an insight into the role of Sūra al-Fātiḥa as encapsulating the entire Qur’an:

... the meaning of the Qur’an is collected in the *fātiḥa* as if the *fātiḥa* is an abridged scroll and the Qur’an is its explanation, because the words of the Lord are collected in *(al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb al-‘ālamīn [v.2] al-raḥmān al-raḥīm [v.3])* and the Hereafter in *(mālik yawm al-dīn [v.4])*, and all religious matters regarding faith, duty and obedience are summarised in *(iyyāka na‘budu wa iyyāka nasta‘īn [v.5])*, and matters of Law in *(ṣirāt [al-]mustaqīm [v.6])*, and the stories of the prophets and all righteous people in *(al-ladhīna an‘amta ‘alayhim [v.7])*, and stories of the infidels in *(ghayr al-maghḍūb ‘alayhim walā al-ḍāllīn).*⁽⁵⁾

(1) (Lain daripada jalan segala orang yang dimurka atas mereka itu) Yahudi.

(2) Üçüncü fırka ise, vehim ve hevâ-yı nefsin akıl ve vicdanlarına galebesiyle, bâtil bir itikada tâbi olarak nifaka düşen bir kısım Nasârâdır. Dalâlet, nefisleri tenfir ve ruhları inciten bir elem olduğundan, Kur’ân-ı Kerim, o fırkayı aynı o sıfatla zikretmiştir.

(3) (Dan lain jalan segala orang yang ḍallālah sesat) Nasrani yakni lain daripada jalan Yahudi dan Nasrani. Kata setengah ulama lain daripada jalan segala kafir dan munafik.

(4) Evet, o biçare, havf ve heybetten, acz ve ra’şetten, vahşet ve gönül darlığından, yetimlikle meyasuyetten mürekkep bir vaziyet içinde olup, kudretine bakar; kudreti âciz ve nâkis. Hâcetlerine bakar; def edilecek bir durumda değildir. ... Fakat o şahsın, sırat-ı müstakime girmekle kalbi ve ruhu nur-u imanla ışıklanırsa, o zulmetli evvelki vaziyeti nurânî bir hâlete inkılâp eder. Şöyle ki: O şahıs, hücum eden belâları, musibetleri gördüğü zaman, Cenâb-ı Hakka istinadede, müsterih olur.

(5) ... dan makna Qur’an terhimpun dalam fātiḥa seolah-olah fātiḥa naskah mukhtaşar dan Qur’an tafsilnya, kerana terhimpun bicara Tuhan itu pada (al-ḥamdu li-llāhi rabb al-‘ālamīn al-raḥmān al-raḥīm), dan negeri akhirat pada (mālik yawm al-dīn), dan terhimpun segala ibarat daripada itikad dan hukum suruh dan teguh pada (iyyāka na‘budu wa iyyāka nas-

Again this Postscript has clear pedagogical intent. The author is stressing the overall coherence of the message of the Sūra, which somewhat compensates for his focus on verse-level exegesis previously.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has not been to present every aspect of the exegesis of Sūra al-Fātiḥa by our two chosen commentators, but rather to provide some insights into how they attempted to reach the Muslim masses in their engagements with the Qur'an's best-known sūra. Although Said Nursi was a major figure on the world stage of Qur'anic exegesis and Muḥammad Sa'īd was a local scholar, they shared the desire to reach the little people, not only the great and the famous.

Said Nursi's question/answer technique (Preface, verses 1, 2, 4, 7) is a key indicator of his desire to express his exegesis in ways that reach the masses. Muḥammad Sa'īd's more orthodox approach of concise phrase-by-phrase exegesis was far less creative but nevertheless it connected with the Malay Muslim masses. He attempted to contextualise his commentary to a readership of Malay farmers (verse 2) where Sufi practice had a significant following (verse 5). This accounts for the popularity of *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān* in Malaya throughout the 20th century.⁽¹⁾

The way that both commentators provided their readers with tools to identify cross-referencing among the verses of Sūra al-Fātiḥa again spoke of their concern for effective teaching. Both Said Nursi and Muḥammad Sa'īd enabled their readers to see Sūra al-Fātiḥa as a unit, which would greatly enhance the performance of the daily prayers.

A key difference relates to the question of sources for their exegesis. Nursi offers exegesis without generally identifying sources. He doesn't feel the need to cite the generations of exegetes who preceded him. By contrast, Muḥammad Sa'īd was much more the classical exegete. Although he only cites al-Nasafī as a source in exegeting Sūra al-Fātiḥa, elsewhere he acknowledges his dependence on multiple earlier exegetes, especially *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, *Tafsīr Bayḍāwī*, and *Tafsīr Jamāl*.⁽²⁾

The question of sources points to the relative gifts of the two scholars. Nursi was undoubtedly a genius, providing his readers with insights into Sūra al-Fātiḥa that were fresh and original and which they could not find elsewhere. Muḥammad Sa'īd was, by contrast, a relay runner, taking perspectives from his exegetical predecessors and passing them on to future generations. This very difference points to the need for both: the essential complementarity that comes from the great innovators and the transmitters throughout the history of the *ummah*.

ta'īn), dan shariat sekalian pada (ṣirāṭ [al-]mustaqīm), dan cerita anbia dan segala orang saleh pada (al-ladhīna an'amta 'alayhim), dan cerita segala kuffar pada (ghayr al-maghḍūb 'alayhim wa lā al-dāllīn).

(1) Nevertheless, there is some criticism of the work for lack of citation of sources and for unreliable exegetical comment on occasions. Cf. Yusuff, Mohd Sholeh Sheh, and Yusuf Haji-Othman. "Information Management from the Interpretation of Al-Quran: Study on Tafsir Nur Al-Ihsan." *Rahat-ul-Quloob* 3, no. 2 (July-December 2019), 2.

(2) 'Umar, Muḥammad Sa'īd bin. *Tafsīr Nūr al-Iḥsān*. Maktabah wa Matbuah al-Hadi wa Auladuhu, 3rd edn., 1391/1971, vol. 1, 2.

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