

Abdul Halim Hasan and his Contributions in Quranic Exegesis in the Malay World

Abdul Qadir Umar Usman Al-Hamidy^{1*}, Muhammad Mustaqim
Mohd Zarif¹

¹Faculty of Quran and Sunnah Studies, Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Bandar Baru
Nilai, 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan.

Email: alhamidy@usim.edu.my

*Corresponding Author

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v7-i8/3253>

Published Date: 08 August 2017

Abstract

The main objectives of this paper are to expound the exegetical methodologies and contributions of Syekh Abdul Halim Hasan (d. 1969) in enriching the corpus of Quranic exegetical works in the Malay World. In particular, it focuses on his two main exegetical works entitled *Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim* which he authored with the assistance of his pupils from 1937 until his demise in 1969, and a work on legal verses of the Quran entitled *Tafsir al-Ahkam*. Due to its nature, appropriate qualitative methods are applied in this study comprising mainly historical, library research and content analysis. The findings highlight some of the salient features of the exegetical methods of the author and its primal role in influencing the style of exegetical composition by succeeding authors. These books also reflect the concern of the local scholars on the needs of the Muslims for credible religious works and references in languages accessible to them, which have also had its impact on the development in the field of Quranic exegesis in the region.

Keywords: Abdul Halim Hasan, Quran, Exegesis, Religious Discourse, Malay World

Introduction

The Quran, as the ultimate source of Islam, has been the subject of studies and analysis by scholars since its revelation to Prophet Muhammad some 1,400 years ago. The need for a proper and correct understanding of the sacred verses has led scholars and exegetes to formulate guidelines for Quranic interpretation which should take into consideration various aspects relating to the traditions of the Prophet, occasions of revelations (*asbab al-nuzul*) and principles of Arabic language, among others. Other than that, the exegetes are free to explore the content of the Quran and relate it with their temporal and societal needs (al-Qattan, 1990).

It is in this regard and understanding that a myriad of exegetical works is produced within the realm of Islam with different approaches, methods and objectives. Although most of the traditional works are written in Arabic, non-Arab Muslims have also attempted to produce their own understanding of the sacred text for their respective community. However, in the case of the Malay World, not many exegetical works are known to have been composed by the locals. Apart from the 17th century exegesis in Malay by Abdul Rauf al-Fansuri and a 19th century exegetical work in Arabic by Muhammad Nawawi of Banten, most of the development of Quranic exegesis in the region happened during the 20th century (Lubis, 2002; Riddell, 2001). Rapid socio-political changes that occurred during this century, from struggles and armed conflicts to independence and nation building have made it an interesting and important phase of history that influenced the religious thinking of the populace.

Here, it is pertinent to note the role and influence of Syeikh Abdul Halim Hasan (d. 1969), an important and influential religious and social figure from North Sumatera, in enriching the corpus of Quranic exegetical works in the Malay World at that time. His two exegetical works entitled *Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim* which he authored with the assistance of his pupils from 1937 until his demise in 1969, and a work on legal verses of the Quran entitled *Tafsir al-Ahkam*, were instrumental in promoting exegetical-based discourse in the region in line with his struggles to develop and modernise the Islamic educational system in facing the challenges of the new age.

However, there are not many studies conducted on this important personage and his contributions in the field of Quranic exegesis. Apart from studies by Abdul Jalil (1999) and IAIN SUMUT (1975) that attempted to reconstruct his biography and record his efforts in the field of education, only Abdul Qadir (2007) and more recently Nadzrah (2014) attempted to analyse certain aspects of his methodologies in Quranic exegesis.

Therefore, the main objectives of this paper are to analyse the salient features of Syeikh Abdul Halim's exegetical methodologies and his contributions to the field of Quranic exegesis as represented by his two works in exegesis; *Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim* and *Tafsir al-Ahkam*. Due to its nature, appropriate qualitative methods are applied in this study comprising mainly historical, library research and content analysis. Aspects relating to his personal life as well as his exegetical methods will be analysed with relevant examples so as to assess its significance and impact on the development of Quranic exegesis and its writing in the region during his time and beyond.

Abdul Halim Hasan: His Life And Works

Abdul Halim bin Hasan was born on the 15th of May 1901 in Binjai, North Sumatera. His father, a pious farmer, was known as Haji Hasan among the villagers. He is related to the clan of Daulay in Manambing, Mandailing; a region located in the borders of the southwest of North Sumatera and West Sumatera (IAIN SUMUT, 1975). When he was seven, he began his formal primary education in Binjai. In school, he was known as a clever, hardworking and active student. He never failed his courses throughout his student life. In addition, he also liked to read, did not smoke, and regularly helped his parents in daily chores. He also observed his prayers dutifully and disliked fooling around mindlessly.

Outside school, he also actively participated in various non-formal religious studies circles (*halaqah*) held by the scholars of Binjai during that time, such as the lessons of al-Faqih Saidi Haris; a renowned Binjai scholar, Hj. Abdullah Umar, Hj. Muhammad Nur Ismail, Syeikh Hj. Muhammad Samah; a Sufi master, Kiyai Hj. Abdul Karim, and Syeikh Hasan Maksum; Grand Imam of the Deli Kingdom. During his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1926, he also participated in the study circle of Syeikh Mukhtar 'Atarid; a scholar teaching in the Grand Mosque (Harahap, 2006).

The religious subjects taught in study circles at that time included Quranic exegesis, hadith, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism, history, and others. In addition, Abdul Halim also studied journalism and politics from Jamaluddin Adinegro in 1930 in Medan, as well as English, which he learned through private lessons from Muhammad Ridwan; a former employee of the Information Unit of the Regency of Langkat in 1930 (KPPA 45, n.d.). Upon completing his primary education, he was appointed as an assistant teacher at al-Jam'iyah al-Khairiyah School in 1920. Then, in 1927, he was named as the principal of the school until 1947. During his tenure, he has imposed many changes that improved the conditions and prestige of the school.

In terms of personality, Abdul Halim is remembered as a modest, compassionate and humble scholar. He could communicate and interact with anyone easily. He was close to his students; wherever they met him, he was willing to discuss and talk with them. He was also easily accessible and strongly disliked formalities. As a teacher, he was generous in giving good grades. For him, the most important thing is the students' earnestness and sincerity in learning, so that they may have a strong grasp of the knowledge that will benefit them in their lives.

In terms of religious ideas, he was open to various opinions and schools of thought. In the field of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), he frequently discussed the opinions of various jurisprudential schools (*mazhab*), along with their arguments and proofs to stimulate critical thinking amongst his students. Similarly, in his works on exegesis, he always reminded the readers to think with a clear mind, and asked them to be humble and moderate (*wasatan*) in everything that they do. He also advised them on the importance of being careful and diligent in the use of resources and that they must always be tactful and honest.

His moderate approach and thinking has earned the trust and recognition of two different religious schools of thought in North Sumatera at that time, namely the Muhammadiyah which emphasizes on rational and reason, and the Wasliyyah which emphasizes on textual tradition. He was among the few who were accepted by these two institutions to teach their students in their respective educational institutions.

Despite his busy schedule, Abdul Halim has dedicated his time to write and compose several religious books. He wrote in various aspects of the religion including Quranic exegesis (*Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim* and *Tafsir al-Ahkam*), jurisprudence (*Hikmah Puasa, Poligami dalam Islam* and *Cara Memandikan Mayat*), history (*Sejarah Fiqh, Tarikh Tamaddun Islam, Sejarah Literatur Islam, Sejarah Kejadian Syara'* and *Tarikh Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari*), ethics (*Bingkisan Adab dan Hikmah*), and general topics (*Wanita dalam Islam* and *Lailatul Qadar*). Most of his books were composed as textbooks for his students, but some are also targeted for the

general public to elaborate some of the issues facing the Muslims at that time. Nowadays, it is quite difficult to get access to his books, and some are reprinted with limited circulations in certain parts of present day Indonesia only.

Exegetical Works And Methods Of Abdul Halim Hasan

Abdul Halim began writing his work *Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim* in early Ramadan 1355AH/July 1937. He was assisted by two of his pupils; Abdul Rahim Haitami (1910-1948) and Zainal Arifin Abbas (1912-1979). Together, they composed a 20-page long commentary of the Quran starting from the first chapter which was then published as an article in the magazine printed by al-Maktabah al-Islamiyyah, Medan, starting from April 1937. They continued writing the commentary of the Quran on monthly basis (of 20-page long) for about a year until April 1938 when the magazine began to be published twice a month, with the same number of pages per publication. The outbreak of the Second World War and Japanese occupation of Indonesia in December 1941 halted the exegetical activity. However, at that time, they have already published 6.5 sections of the al-Quran in 2,140 pages. Nine years later, in 1950, they resumed composing the commentary of the Quran, which was later published by Syarikat Islam, Medan in 1956 (Abdul Halim, A.Rahim, and Zainal, 1957).

At the same time, this work was also published in Malaysia by Maktabah Muhammad Ali bin Muhammad Rawi, Penang, from 1941 to 1947. This edition is written in *Jawi*. In 1969, Pustaka Antara in Kuala Lumpur republished it in Romanised Malay script (Muhammad As'ad, n.d.). In the same year, its main author; Abdul Halim Hasan passed away. Zainal Arifin Abbas continued to write the exegesis until the eighth section of the Quran. His work was later published by Yayasan Persatuan Usaha Sukarela Sumatera Utara in Medan (Saiful, 2003). Throughout the 20th century, this work was regarded as an important religious reference and was distributed in various parts of the Malay World including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. Nonetheless, at present, it is no longer printed and sold in the market, and one can only find it kept in certain libraries only.

In terms of methodology of Quranic exegesis, Abdul Halim commented on the verses according to the guidelines set by the traditional exegetes and scholars as alluded before. He also referred to the works of other exegetes in Arabic, in which he adapted and summarised the meanings of the verses before writing it in Malay. His main reference in understanding the meanings of the verses is a work entitled *al-Mushaf al-Mufassar* by Muhammad Farid Wajdy (d. 1954); a famous Egyptian scholar in the 20th century.

In terms of style of exegesis, he combined the textual (*al-tafsir bi al-ma'thur*) and rational (*al-tafsir bi al-'aql*) approaches and endeavoured to come out with a holistic understanding of the Quranic verses. In doing so, he referred to classical and modern authoritative works in Quranic exegesis including *Tafsir al-Tabari*, *Tafsir al-Baydawi*, *Tafsir al-Kabir* by Fakhr al-Razi, *Tafsir al-Manar* by modernist Rashid Rida and *Tafsir al-Jawahir* by Jawhari al-Tantawi. Priority is given to authentic narrations of a verse based on the textual approach. If there is a verse that has been explained by another verse or an authentic hadith, he would strongly hold onto them. If the explanation or interpretation was only found in an opinion or narration held by a companion or successor (*tabi'in*), he would first check for its authenticity.

For example, in interpreting verse 7 of al-Fatihah, he stated that the phrase "those whom Thou hast bestowed Thy bounties" refers to the prophets, steadfast affirmers of truth,

martyrs and the righteous based on the meaning of another verse in the Quran (verse 69 of al-Nisa'). He further attested that the phrases "those inflicted with Thy wrath" refers to the Jews based on verse 60 of al-Ma'idah while "those gone astray" refers to the Christians based on verses 77 of al-Ma'idah. This interpretation is further strengthened with a hadith narrated and authenticated by Ibn Hibban (1993) which stated that "those who have been inflicted by the wrath of Allah are the Jews, and those who have gone astray are the Christians".

Regarding the unclear or allegorical (*mutashabih*) verses of the Quran, the opinions of the Sunni scholars in interpreting such verses are always preferred. Abdul Halim grouped the words of the Quran into five categories: *nas*, *zahir*, *mushtarak*, *mushkil*, and *mujmal*. The first two are clear in their meaning (*muhkam*), while the last two are unclear. As for *mushtarak*, if every meaning contained in the word is implied, then it is categorized as *muhkam*. However, if only a certain meaning is intended from the word, then it is categorized as *mutashabih*.

Among the *mutashabih* verses discussed by Abdul Halim are verses on the attributes of Allah and alphabetical symbols at the beginning of certain chapters (*al-ahruf al-muqatta'ah*). In discussing these verses, he was careful not to create any controversy by referring to the opinions of various scholars on the matter. For instance, he explained the symbol "*alif-lam-mim*" in al-Baqarah by quoting *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*. Similarly, the same symbol in Al 'Imran was further interpreted according to the opinions of linguists and theologians such as al-Khalil, Sibawayh, al-Razi and others. However, he ended the discussion with a quote from al-Suyuti who said "Allah knows best of its meaning" so as to stress his openness on the matter.

In expounding the issues of jurisprudence and legal rulings, Abdul Halim referred to the books of various schools of jurisprudence as well as works of distinguished scholars in the subject matter. Every issue is discussed from a neutral viewpoint without biasness and fanaticism to the view of a particular school. The opinions of scholars are appended with its respective arguments without any hint of selection or preponderance of any opinion (*tarjih*) on his part. As an example, he discussed the issue of usury when he interpreted the final verses of al-Baqarah. The elaboration for usury is made extensively by citing selected opinions of the early and later scholars. His main references are al-Nawawi's *al-Majmu' Sharh al-Muhazzab* and Ibn Qayyim's *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in*.

In interpreting verses on the universe, he preferred to refer to modern exegetical works by Jauhari al-Tantawi and Rashid Rida. The commentary of these verses is done in a general manner to show the greatness of Allah as well as to prove the truth of the Quran and the prophethood of Muhammad. For instance, in interpreting verse 164 of al-Baqarah, he wholeheartedly adopted al-Tantawi's (1952) sevenfold division of the meaning of the verse as follows: the creation of the heavens and the earth, the alternation between night and day, the ships that sail in the sea carrying essential human needs, the rain that Allah has sent down from the heavens in order to give life, the creation of various species of animals on earth, wind and its change of direction, and the functions of clouds.

At the same time, he paid the utmost attention to the correlation and connection between the verses and chapters in the Quran. For him, the verses in a chapter are similar to an inseparable chain; one will always connect to the other. Thus, he attempted to connect between the verses of al-Baqarah, even if the contents appear to be different. For instance, he tried to connect between the verses that describe the attitudes of men in facing the

guidance of the Quran (verses 2-20); call mankind to worship Allah and describe the signs of His greatness (verses 21-22); miracles of the Quran (verse 23); threats to non-believers and good tidings for believers (verses 24-25), and so on.

In addition, he also elaborated on the relationship between one chapter and another. He began every chapter with an elaborate description on its relationship with the previous chapter. Such is the case for every chapter, except al-Baqarah, where he did not explain its connection with al-Fatihah. This may be because al-Fatihah has a distinct relationship with other chapters, considering its status as *Umm al-Quran* or the “mother” of the Quran. It is also important to mention here that only a few narrations from the Jews and Christians (*al-isra’iliyyat*) are included in his work. He also warned the readers against the danger of clinging to these narrations, as they might contain falsehood and unknown information that could undermine the intended messages of the Quran.

Apart from *Tafsir al-Quran al-Karim*, Abdul Halim has also composed a specialized exegesis on about 250 legal verses of the Quran. This work entitled *Tafsir al-Ahkam* contains 620 pages. It was first published by Kencana Prenada Media Group, Jakarta, based on the initiative of his son, H. Amru Daulay, SH. In this moderately-sized work, he discussed the verses based on the circumstances of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) and elaborated on the opinions of the scholars of the four schools in jurisprudence; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Hanbali, as well as their respective arguments on an issue. Apart from this, his methodologies in Quranic exegesis are similar to his other work as previously discussed. In fact, this work reflects the ability of Abdul Halim as an exceptional scholar and author in elucidating and interpreting the legal verses using simple language style, which makes his book highly acclaimed amongst the scholars and accessible to the laymen.

The Impact And Significance Of Abdul Halim’s Exegetical Works In The Malay World

Abdul Halim’s exegetical works represent an important milestone in the field of Quranic exegesis in the Malay World. This can be particularly seen from his introduction of a new method of exegetical composition by alluding to multiple sources of exegesis in Arabic incorporating both traditional and modern works. The opinions and arguments presented in these works were then critically analysed, summarised and selected to be included in his own compositions alongside his views. On the contrary, the exegetes before him only based their compositions on one particular exegetical work. Abdul Rauf al-Fansuri’s Quranic exegesis for instance, is only based on *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* by al-Mahalli and al-Suyuti, which he translated, summarised and commented on (Riddell, 2001). Similarly, Mahmud Yunus (1998), exegetical method involves a translation of the Quranic verses which he appended with brief explanations only.

Interestingly, subsequent Malay exegetes who produced works after the publication of Abdul Halim’s Quranic exegesis were found to be influenced with his methods of exegetical composition as afore-mentioned. These can be particularly seen from the works of important authors such as Ash-Shiddieqy (1976) in his work *Tafsir al-Nur* (first published in 1956), Hamka (1983) in his famous exegesis entitled *Tafsir al-Azhar* (completed in 1965), Muhammad Milatu (1997) from Singapore in his work *Tafsir al-Quran ‘Abr al-Athir* (completed in 1984), and more recently Syihab (2009) in his *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, among others.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising to find that both exegetical works of Abdul Halim are highly acclaimed and warmly received by researchers and scholars especially in the Malay World due to its pivotal role in advancing a new method of exegesis-based religious discourse alongside his moderate and compromising attitude in tolerating differences of opinions. In this regard, Prof. Dr. Abdullah Syah, Head of the Ulama Council of North Sumatera, stated that “Abdul Halim Hasan and his two pupils’ Quranic exegesis is brilliant; its discussions are comprehensive as it managed to combine between *tafsir bi al-ma’thur* and *tafsir bi al-ra’y*; it also has a social movement tone just as *Tafsir al-Manar* does; it resolves many worldly and religious issues, and it cites well-known Arabic references. This work is even better than Hamka’s *Tafsir al-Azhar* and Hasby Ash-Shiddieqy’s *Tafsir al-Nur*. Regrettably, this work is not complete, as it was only written up to verse 87 of al-A’raf (end of the eighth section)” (Abdul Qadir, 2007).

The same opinion is expressed by Federspiel (1994) in his research on the development of Quranic exegesis in Indonesia. He declared that the exegesis of the Quran, written by Abdul Halim Hasan and his two pupils, is a monumental work that was unrivalled in its time. The authors were able to fill the book with discussions on history, faith, law, and moral. It also presents the religious teachings along with its arguments. In fact, according to Nur Hadi (2005); a scholar in Medan, the exegesis of Abdul Halim is akin to an encyclopaedia on Islam, as it contains detailed explanations on faith, laws, and morals and cites renowned authoritative references in Arabic. Due to its comprehensiveness, Hamka also used it as one of his main references in compiling his own *Tafsir al-Azhar* as mentioned before. Similarly, Shihab; a professor in Quranic exegesis in the Islamic University of Jakarta, followed his methodology in writing his exegetical work entitled *al-Mishbah*.

At the same time, *Tafsir al-Ahkam* also received positive response from its targeted audience. In his remark during the launch of the book, Prof. Dr. H. M. Yasir Nasution has stressed on the importance of making it as a reference for Muslims in understanding the messages of the Quran. Not only it covers important issues in jurisprudence from various perspectives and arguments, it is also easy to read and comprehend its content. The openness and unbiased attitude of the author stimulates thinking and reasoning on the part of the reader to find the truth without being swayed by affiliation to certain schools of thought (Abdul Qadir, 2007).

Conclusion

As a scholar and author, Abdul Halim Hasan has succeeded in transmitting the messages of the Quran to the Muslims in the Malay World through his two exegetical works. His openness and objectivity in presenting the views of the scholars in various religious issues apart from his insistence on the authenticity of religious traditions have elevated the status of his exegetical works which are used as main references in Quranic exegesis for the scholars and public alike. His methods of exegesis stimulate the mind of the reader to accept the truth based on appropriate arguments and reject blind following. Despite many of his books are no longer in print, the idea and methods brought by him can still be felt through the traces of his influence and impact in advancing a new method of exegetical composition on some of the important scholars in the Malay World including Hasby Ash-Shiddieqy, Hamka, Quraish Shihab and others.

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