

THE PRESENCE AND INDEFINITENESS  
OF ALLAH'S ATTRIBUTES OF GRACE  
IN THE QUR'AN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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**Introduction**

The basic practice of Islam is summed up in its Five Pillars: the recital of the creed (*shahada*), ritual prayers five times a day (*salat*), almsgiving (*zakat*), fasting in the month of Ramadan (*ssawm*) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*). To many evangelical Christians, such religious devotion can often seem to be evidence of an endless striving after the righteous requirements of Allah. As such, Islam can be easily characterised as a religion devoid of grace. This paper will seek to show that the Qur'an speaks of Allah's attributes of grace. However, the Qur'an also speaks openly of the potential for Allah to withhold the expression of his gracious attributes. This project will seek to show that this presence and indefiniteness with regards to Allah's graciousness lead to a unique conception of Allah as a god of justice. The implication for Muslims is seen in their motivating principle and their understanding of the requirements for salvation. For Christians, this project will show how the presence and indefiniteness of grace in the Qur'an can inform and be a framework for understanding how to show the relevance of the offence of the cross to Muslims.

**The Presence and Indefiniteness of Allah's Attributes  
of Grace in the Qur'an**

Before beginning the analysis of the relevant Qur'anic data, it is important to note the methodology employed in analyzing Allah's attribute of grace in the Qur'an and to acknowledge known issues which have arisen as part of the research.

This project has employed various English translations of the Qur'an, but relies predominantly on an English translation based on Abdullah Yusuf Ali's revised translation (eleventh edition) published by Amana.<sup>1</sup> References from Yusuf Ali's translation are given in the format "*Surah: Ayat*."<sup>2</sup> A comma delineates passages that form a list if the *ayat* is in the same *Surah* otherwise a semi-colon is used. This is distinguished from biblical citations, which contain the name of the book. Furthermore, relevant Arabic words have been transliterated rather than written in Arabic script.

The reliance on an English translation does limit the material available for Qur'anic exegesis. For example, the best resource for exegesis is *al-Tafsir al-kabir* by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (606/1209).<sup>3</sup> However, this and many other *tafsirs* (exegetical commentaries) are currently only available in Arabic. As a result, this work has mainly employed what can be characterised as "reading guides" written by scholars from various backgrounds for its analysis of the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> The primary commentary employed is by Yusuf Ali, due to its availability in his translation. This comment should not diminish the fact that his comments are highly regarded from a Sunni perspective.<sup>5</sup> Two other commentaries have also been employed due to their availability in English and to allow for possible interactions: *The Holy Quran: Abridged Commentary* by the Indian Muslim scholar J.M.S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali and *An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Qur'an* (13 volumes and incomplete) by Ayatulla Sayyid Kamal Faghih Iman and "a group of Muslim scholars."

Allah's gracious attributes are expressed as a subset of His various names. Essentially the Qur'an speaks of Allah's "Beautiful Names" (7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24) without listing them. These "Beautiful Names" play a role in Muslim thought and worship and are a useful way of understanding his attributes.<sup>6</sup> For example, Muslims

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<sup>1</sup>No Author, "Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Qur'an commentary, the deletion of the merits of Imams Hasan and Husayn, and other changes," April 2000, n.p. Available: <http://www.al-islam.org/tahrif/yusufali/index.htm>. Cited 10th November 2008. This article makes us aware that there are three versions of the translations and this site gives some of the later changes that have been made.

<sup>2</sup>Different translations of the Qur'an can vary in the numbering of the verses. If using another translation, just look at the verses preceding or following the reference.

<sup>3</sup>C. Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness: Pardon and Punishment in Islam and Christianity* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 17.

<sup>4</sup>Essentially they provide aids in reading the Qur'an and an awareness of key themes.

<sup>5</sup>No Author, "Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Qur'an commentary," April 2000, n.p.

<sup>6</sup>W.M. Watt, *Companion to the Qur'an: Based on the Arberry Translation*

believe that Allah is Al-Adl (the Just), Al Ali (Mighty and Powerful), Al Alim (all knowing) and Al Bari (the Creator), but also Al-Ghafur (forgiving) and Al-Afuw (Pardoner). Muslims believe that there are 99 names in total, most of which are found in the Qur'an, though they vary by traditions and compilers. This project employed a compilation from Muhammed al-Mandani and Abu Huraira.<sup>7</sup> Based on these names, the attribute of grace is not just one attribute but rather an aggregate compilation derived from twenty-four names, which reflect Allah's moral attributes and are termed the "Glorious Attributes" (*Isma-ul-Jemaliyah*).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, I have analyzed the presence and indefiniteness of grace in the Qur'an by assessing a selection of names associated with Allah's gracious attributes.<sup>9</sup>

Jens Christensen, a Lutheran Bishop who served extensively in Pakistan, notes that some Muslim scholars would dispute the validity of analyzing Allah's names, arguing that they do not reflect the thoughts of Mohammed or the Qur'an.<sup>10</sup> This is further complicated by the fact that there are potentially 552 various names of Allah, according to the Qur'an and Hadiths.<sup>11</sup> The debate over the proper use of Allah's names cannot be solved here. However we are still justified in accepting the names as "indicative of nearly all orthodox and conservative thinking in Islamic theology."<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the Pakistani Muslim scholar Daud Rahbar, warns that the "Significance of the names are found in the context . . . [and] if taken out of context, Allah looks capricious."<sup>13</sup> James Barr makes a similar note of caution when it comes to word studies on biblical concepts for time and eternity. His point was that it can be problematic to treat words for God's attributes as though they communicate the

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(London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1967) 94, 261; A. Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 7th Edition (Maryland: Amana Publications, 2006), 397 note 1154, 766 note 2539.

<sup>7</sup>E.M. Caner and E.F. Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insiders Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 111-117.

<sup>8</sup>S. M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), 48.

<sup>9</sup>The Glorious Names selected are those which are most commonly found.

<sup>10</sup>J. Christensen, *A Practical Approach to Muslims* (no place: North Africa Mission, 1977), 474.

<sup>11</sup>Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, 110. Based on the 1880 Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. See also D. Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 13.

<sup>12</sup>Christensen, *A Practical Approach to Muslims*, 474.

<sup>13</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice* 12.

concept of the various attributes.<sup>14</sup> This means that we are unlikely to ascertain the concept associated with the word by looking at it in isolation from a specific sentence. This becomes particularly pertinent when one observes the indefiniteness and seeming unreliability of the expression of Allah's gracious attributes, where it can be too easy to characterize Allah as capricious. Therefore, this work has sought to understand the concepts a writer wants to communicate, by understanding his intention, emphasis and use of language in the passages cited.

### The Presence of Allah's Attributes of Grace

The Qur'an opens with "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" (1:1). This formula, referred to as the *Basmalah* (or *Bismillah*), is used to denote the boundaries of two Surahs.<sup>15</sup> The Arabic terms used in the *Basmalah* are the adjectives *ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim* respectively.<sup>16</sup> This is paralleled in the Bible, which describes God as merciful and compassionate (רַחוּם and רַחֲמִים in Exodus 34:6-7).<sup>17</sup> There is no great difference between these adjectives, though a distinction of emphasis is sometimes made.<sup>18</sup> For example, a distinction is made between Allah's general and specific mercy. *Rahman* refers to mercy that is unreserved and shown to all, while *Rahim* refers to mercy shown to those who are faithful as a reward or appreciation from Allah.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, a distinction is made in terms of quality. *Ar-Rahman* is the more common term and is used almost exclusively to refer to Allah.<sup>20</sup> It refers to a type of mercy which goes out before the need arises, that serves to protect Allah's

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<sup>14</sup>J. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1968), 55, 110-115, 161.

<sup>15</sup>The 9th Surah is the exception.

<sup>16</sup>L. Gardet, "Basmala" in H.A.R. Gibbs, J.H. Kramers, E. Levi-Provençal, J. Schacht (eds). *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Volume A-B; Brill: Leiden, 1986), 1085. For more information on the Basmalah and its popular uses amongst Muslims.

<sup>17</sup>L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Student Edition)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 333, 1216-1217.

<sup>18</sup>Watt, *Companion to the Qur'an*, 13.

<sup>19</sup>S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, *The Holy Quran: Abridged Commentary* (Karachi: Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust, 1975), 2; Ayatulla Sayyid Kamal Faghieh Imani, et al *An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Qur'an* (13 volumes [incomplete], trans S.A. Sadr-ameli; ed C. Smith; Isfahan: Amir-ul- Mu'mineen Ali Library, 1997), 43-44.

<sup>20</sup>Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 35 note 1; Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 15 note 19.

creatures, preserving them and leading them to a clearer light.<sup>21</sup> As a result, *Rahman* refers to the “. . . Preventative grace, which saves Allah's servants from sin.”<sup>22</sup> It relates Allah's attribute to a mother's care for a child.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, *ar-Rahim* is a more general term that can be attributed to humans as well. It may imply pity, long suffering, patience and forgiveness.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the distinctions, it is not hard to see the presence of grace in the Qur'an. The Qur'an speaks of Allah's mercy and compassion going out to all mankind, especially to those who submit to him.

*Ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim* are just two names which reflect Allah's attributes of grace. A further twenty-two of these names are said to characterize Allah's grace and mercy.<sup>25</sup> *Ar-Rahman* and *ar-Rahim* are often associated with other attributes including Allah's forgiveness, patience, kindness and generosity. Space prevents us from analyzing all these names in detail and not all are found in the Qur'an. A few examples will suffice in further showing the presence of grace in the Qur'an. For example, the name *rahmin* is often used in conjunction with *ghafur*. *Al-ghafur* is the name used to describe Allah as “oft forgiving” or “all forgiving” (2:226; 8:69; 9:99; 12:98; 17:44; 35:5, 28; 42:5; 52:8; 60:7; 66:1). *Ghafur* is related to *ghaffar*, as both are intensive forms of *ghafir* (40:3), which refers to Allah's leniency in being prepared to forgive sin.<sup>26</sup> *Al-ghaffar* (e.g. 39:5; 71:10) describes Allah as one who “forgives again and again” or is “ever forgiving”. This is demonstrated in Allah's willingness to forgive his prophets (20:82; 74:56). With the exception of Jesus, Allah is said to have forgiven the sins of Adam and Eve (7:23), Noah (11:47), Abraham (26:82), Moses (7:151; 28:16), David (38:24-25), Solomon (38:35) and Mohammed (4:106; 40:55; 110:3). As we can see, grace is related to Allah's attribute of forgiveness.

Another name which describes Allah's forgiveness is *Al-afuw*, relating to his role as “Pardoner” or in “Blotting out sins” (58:2). Similarly Allah is also referred to as *Al-tawwab* (e.g. 2:37; 2:54; 9:104; 24:10; 49:12). *Tawwab* is the intensive form of *tawbah* (repentance) and thus carries the translation “oft returning.”<sup>27</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 15 note 19.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 705 note 2321.

<sup>23</sup>Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 25.

<sup>24</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 15 note 19.

<sup>25</sup>Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, 48.

<sup>26</sup>Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 37.

<sup>27</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, 26 note 55.

intensive form may refer to Allah's willingness to forgive disobedience, or it may refer to Allah's initiative in causing repentance.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the uncertainty, to forgive is understood to be a divine prerogative (3:135). The fact that Allah is "oft-returning" indicates that he wants to mercifully turn to believers who have transgressed his laws (4:26-27; 33:73). This is related to *Al-halim*, which speaks of his "patience" or "forbearance" (2:225, 235; 3:155; 5:101; 17:44; 35:21). Allah is patient and forbearing in the sense that he does not hasten his judgment on those who disobey him and is the consequence of his mercy.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover Allah is said to be "full of kindness" (*Ar-ra'uf*, in 2:207; 9:117; 16:7; 59:10), is willing to reward even the smallest service (*al-shakir* in 35:30) and is eager to give generously from his bounty (*Al-wahaah*, in 3:8; 38:9, 35). As a result, the Qur'an speaks of Allah's grace as *Al-fadool*, referring to his grace as a "bounty" (e.g. 2:251) or "reward" (e.g. 4:173; 30:45). This bounty is described as being "boundless" (3:174; 4:130; 8:29) and open to all (2:251; 17:20).<sup>30</sup> This "bounty" or "reward" is mainly associated with material things, but not exclusively as there is no higher bounty than heaven (42:22-23).<sup>31</sup>

This brief survey of Allah's "Glorious names" shows that in the Qur'an grace is predicated of Allah. This grace embodies an aggregate of other attributes such as mercy, compassion, forgiveness, patience, kindness and generosity. This comprehensive view is preferred to regarding grace as a single attribute of Allah. As a result, he is described as the "Lord of grace abounding" (2:105; 3:174; 8:29; 57:21, 29; 62:4). The Qur'an praises Allah's grace by referring to him as the "best of those who show mercy" (7:151; 23:118), which is attested by Moses (12:64), Jacob (12:92), Joseph (21:83) and Job (23:109). In light of Allah's willingness to forgive and be patient, the Qur'an speaks of *rahmah* or *rahamah* (mercy) when a person is in need or in want of Allah's grace (e.g. 2:218; 3:74; 4:96; 30:50; 33:24; 40:9; 42:8) so as to prevent people from despairing (39:53).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, as a result of Allah's willingness to share of his bounty to all and to show mercy to those who need it. The Qur'an commands all to

<sup>28</sup>Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 71-72.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 62. Quoting Fakhr al-Din al-Razi whose commentary is not available in English.

<sup>30</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, 103 note 288, 445 note 1319, 679 note 2200.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 1252 note 4558, 1468 note 5464.

<sup>32</sup>Despairing appears to be a serious sin.

“remember His grace and favour” (*naamah*, for example 5:7,11, 20; 7:69, 74; 14:34; 16:18) and to show gratitude (16:114, 121; 27:019; 46:015) to him for all his “favours.” Yusuf Ali notes that whatever good we do is small; as a result, everyone needs Allah’s grace to “lift us up and blot out our shortcomings.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the Qur’an not only speaks of Allah’s many gracious attributes, but also emphasizes our need for Allah’s grace (73:20).

### **The Indefiniteness of Allah’s Attributes of Grace**

The biblical witness also speaks of God’s grace, mercy, patience and great loving- kindness (e.g. Psalm 111:4; Jonah 4:2).<sup>34</sup> God’s graciousness is clearly and fully expressed in His Son Jesus who is described as: full of grace (John 1:14), has God’s grace upon him (Luke 2:40) and is the One through whom believers receive multiplied grace (John 1:16). As this section will show, in comparison to the biblical revelation of God’s grace, the Qur’anic expression of Allah’s gracious attributes appears more indefinite and vague. Specifically, the Qur’an clearly shows the potential of Allah withholding the expression of his gracious attributes, particularly for non-believers and those who remain unrepentant. This indefiniteness can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, it can be observed by the fact that Allah’s mercy seems discriminatory. At one level, divine compassion is shown to all mankind in the provision of livelihood and comforts of life (7:55; 17:68; 16:5-7; 22:64; 25:50-51; 26:6-8; 27:64; 28:73; 30:45, 49; 42:27) and through the provision of guidance to all mankind through messengers (7:50; 10:58; 16:66; 21:107; 31:1-2; 45:19). Yet Allah’s mercy is often preferentially directed to those who believe (2:61; 9:118-119; 24:10, 14, 20).

Secondly, there are limits placed on Allah’s forgiveness. Forgiveness is only granted when it is sought. For example, David had to ask for forgiveness (38:23-24) and likewise Moses (28:14-15). The context where Allah is *Ghafur* and *Ghaffar* tends to be that Allah is forgiving, not arbitrarily, but under specific conditions. Allah forgives only if unbelievers desist from fighting (2:188), if idolaters repent (9:5), if the person repents (4:110; 6:54; 7:152; 16:120; 20:84; 25:68-70; 27:11), if the person obeys Allah (49:14) and fear Him (57:28). Similarly, when we read the verses relating to *al-Afuw*, Allah forgives.

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<sup>33</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, 1555 note 5777.

<sup>34</sup>Space prevents us for giving a full treatment of the biblical witness. For a comprehensive overview please see J.S.

However, the persistent sinner does not escape judgment (4:148; 5:96; 9:67; 42:29, 32). Likewise, Allah is said to relent (*Al Tawwab*) on those who repent and act wisely--specifically if one asks forgiveness (110:3), if one confesses their sins (9:102-103), or if one turns from injustice (5:42-43). The Qur'an essentially places limits and conditions on Allah's forgiveness.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Allah's character of grace is totally absent for those who do not submit to him, a fact attested by Abu Hurairi in narrating Mohammed who said, "[N]one will enter Paradise but a Muslim soul." (Al-Bukhari 4:190; 52.182.297).<sup>36</sup>

Thirdly, the decision to be merciful and forgive rests ultimately with Allah. However, there are also occasions when the reason as to why Allah would forgive is a mystery (e.g. 3:155).<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the question arises, "In what sense is Allah merciful and compassionate?"<sup>38</sup> One notices that the Qur'an seems to assert that Allah's character of *ghafur* and *rahmin* are only mere possibilities and not certainties:

O ye who believe! Truly the Pagans are unclean; so let them not, after this year of theirs, approach the Sacred Mosque. And if ye fear poverty, soon will Allah enrich you, if He wills, out of His bounty, for Allah is All-knowing, All-wise. (9:28)

Others (there are who) have acknowledged their wrongdoings: they have mixed an act that was good with another that was evil. Perhaps Allah will turn unto them (in Mercy): for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (9:102)

Allah may reward the men of Truth for their Truth, and punish the Hypocrites if that be His Will, or turn to them in Mercy: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:24)

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<sup>35</sup>*Rahim* is often in the same context as *Ghafur* and *Tawwab*. As such the same could be said of Allah's mercy.

<sup>36</sup>M. M. Khan, *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari. Arabic-English*, Volumes 1-9 (Beirut: Dar Al Arabia, no year), IV, 190.

<sup>37</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 168 note 468. Yusuf Ali is not sure why Allah forgives in this particular example.

<sup>38</sup>K. Cragg, *The Dome and the Rock: Jerusalem Studies in Islam* (London: SPCK, 1964), 92-93.



The net result is that Allah's forgiveness and punishment seems arbitrary and fickle, being entirely subject to his will and plan (see 33:17; 48:14).<sup>39</sup>

Lastly, a casual reading of the Qur'an will show how often the descriptions of hell and paradise follow each other, and how reward and punishment are mentioned in the same breath. For example,

Behold! thy Lord did declare that He would send against them, to the Day of Judgment, those who would afflict them with grievous penalty. Thy Lord is quick in retribution, but He is also Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (7:167) Say: 'Who can keep you safe by night and by day from (the Wrath of) (Allah) Most Gracious? (21:42)

In fact, mercy is often juxtaposed to Allah's treatment of the unjust (4:33-34; 5:98; 7:166; 15:49-50; 19:46; 42:5-6; 50:31-33; 76:31). Therefore, these passages are too frequent in the Qur'an to be dismissed as cases of spasmodic incongruity. For the casual reader, the presence of contiguous phrases connoting two opposite disposition tends to lead to the conclusion that Allah is possibly unreliable.<sup>40</sup>

### **Understanding the Presence and Indefiniteness of Allah's Grace**

So how are we to understand this indefiniteness or vagueness with regards to Allah's gracious attributes? Christian commentators on the Qur'an tend to depict Allah as capricious.<sup>41</sup> For example, Canner and Canner, who speak as former Muslim believers, point out that Allah's gracious titles are in fact redefined. They note that Allah may be a "Liberal Giver" (Al-Wahab), but only in the sense of "fierce warrior who decides to be merciful in response to victory."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Dr. Kenneth Cragg, a major figure in Christian-Muslim conversation, in noting the stipulations which seem to show Allah's mercy to be only a mere possibility (e.g. 85:14-16) concludes, "one may not, therefore, say that God is necessarily loving, holy, righteous, clement or relenting, in every and all situations."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1063 note 3698.

<sup>40</sup>The Muslim response to this will be given shortly.

<sup>41</sup>Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims*, 377-378; Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, 117-118.

<sup>42</sup>Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, 118.

<sup>43</sup>K. Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1964), 42.

In contrast, Muslim apologists and scholars note that the Qur'an is not a neutral text but is trying to persuade its readers. Specifically, Daud Rahbar, who treats the Qur'anic text sympathetically and seriously, points out that the literary style and devices the Qur'an employs are suggestive of a highly rhetorical document with an intent and purpose to its style.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the Qur'an speaks of itself as a "clear book" (5:15; 12:1; 26:2; 27:1; 28:2; 44:2) with regards to its message (14:4).<sup>45</sup> Therefore, before subscribing to such casual conclusions, we need to first ask whether the Qur'an intends to depict Allah as unreliable and capricious. In this case, it follows that when one looks at the previous passages that tend to depict Allah as being capricious, it is important to ask the question, "Where is the emphasis? or what is the intention in the text?" The intention is to better understand why the Qur'an speaks of both a presence of grace and an indefiniteness with regards to the expression of Allah's graciousness to better understand the god depicted by the Qur'an.

Firstly, let us tackle the passages that seem to put Allah's graciousness in doubt. In reference to *Al Razi*, Moucarry notes that passages which contain "may" (*asa*) are not meant to induce doubt as to whether Allah will forgive, but are intended to encourage people to seek Allah's forgiveness intently.<sup>46</sup> As such, we should not be too quick to describe Allah's mercy as doubtful.

If this is the case, where then is the emphasis in passages that denote doubt with regards to Allah's graciousness? Consider the following examples:

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<sup>44</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice* 68. Various Muslim scholars suggest that the Qur'an employs a variety of literary devices [see F. Esack, *The Quran: A Users Guide* (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2005), 69-77; M. Mir, "The Qur'an as Literature," 2000, n.p. Available: [http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q\\_Studies/Mirliter.html](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q_Studies/Mirliter.html). Cited 9th November 2008] and even changes in narrative voice for rhetorical purposes [see M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, "Grammatical Shift For The Rhetorical Purposes: Iltifaat And Related Features In The Qur'an," 1992, n.p. Available: <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Grammar/iltifaat.html>. Cited 9th November 2008]. For an analysis of the literary methods employed in the Qur'an see N. Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A contemporary approach to a veiled text* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996).

<sup>45</sup>M. Mir, "Language" in A. Rippin (ed). *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 89. The Qur'anic claim to clarity is in the message. See also Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 251 note 716. He prefers the translation "perspicuous" instead of "clear" to avoid the sense that the Qur'an is just simple and not beautiful.

<sup>46</sup>C. Moucarry, *Faith to Faith: Christianity and Islam in Dialogue* (Leicester: IVP, 2001) 103, 111 note 2.

If Allah do touch thee with hurt, there is none can remove it but He: if He do [sic] design some benefit for thee, there is none can keep back His favour: He causeth it to reach whomsoever of His servants He pleaseth. And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (10:107)

Thy Lord does create and choose as He pleases: no choice have they (in the matter): Glory to Allah! and far is He above the partners they ascribe (to Him)! (28:68).

(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle: by this means does He

[sic] multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things). To Him belong the keys of the heavens and the earth: He enlarges and restricts. The Sustenance to whom He will: for He knows full well all things. (42:11-12)

Be ye foremost (in seeking) Forgiveness from your Lord, and a Garden (of Bliss), the width whereof is as the width of heaven and earth, prepared for those who believe in Allah and His messengers: that is the Grace of Allah, which He bestows on whom he pleases: and Allah is the Lord of Grace abounding. (57:21)

The frequent use of the third personal masculine pronoun “He,” “Him” and “His” seems to be employed for literary emphasis denoting that Allah is able to do and does what he wills. Therefore the Qur’an is keen to show that Allah is not dependent on others for help or advice but is supreme in wisdom, knowledge and power.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, according to Daud Rahbar in his exhaustive study of the relevant verses, the proper way of understanding passages which seem to depict Allah as whimsical is that these passages are probably meant to signify Allah’s sovereignty and power.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 979 note 3397.

<sup>48</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 69-70, 164.

We move now to passages depicting two opposite dispositions of Allah within the same verse. Yusuf Ali asserts that “where the terrible consequences Evil (rejection of God), are mentioned, there is always a stress laid on God's attribute of Grace and Mercy.”<sup>49</sup> This gives the impression that the contiguous phrases connoting two opposite dispositions of God are a definite feature of the rhetorical style of the Qur'an. Furthermore, in reference to Surah 39:53, the Muslim scholar Mir Ahmed Ali notes that Allah is introduced to the world "as a oft-pardoning, most merciful master of the universe who deals with His creation as he pleases and who's justice is tempered with mercy."<sup>50</sup> This suggests that when allusion to Allah's torment and vengeance are made in the same breath as the mention of his love and mercy, it is meant to signify the divine vengeance which sinners are to face and the divine love and mercy which the virtuous will receive. In the opinion of Daud Rahbar, “[S]uch descriptions of God are reminders of rewards and punishment and of God's justice.”<sup>51</sup>

When one looks at these reasons, it is possible to see that the Qur'an deliberately presents an indefiniteness to Allah's gracious attributes to emphasize the sovereignty and power of Allah. When the presence and indefiniteness of grace, along with the seeming absence of grace directed at non-believers and those who are unrepentant are taken together, it is designed to depict Allah as a powerful judge who is unrelenting in his justice. Allah will forgive only those who believe in him and obey his commandments, and he will let men know on Judgment Day what they have done. Therefore, he is “called the punisher with reference to the punishment that awaits a sinner in the hereafter, and the forgiver with reference to the forgiveness that awaits the virtuous.”<sup>52</sup> The importance of Allah's justice makes sense given the fact that justice is regarded as one of the reasons why he created the earth (45:22) and the revelation of the Qur'an is specifically for the purpose of making Allah's justice known to mankind (57:25).

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<sup>49</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 64 note 165.

<sup>50</sup>Mir Ahmed Ali, *The Holy Quran*, 734-735.

<sup>51</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 147.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

## **Implications for Muslims**

### Implications of Responding to Allah

The presence and indefiniteness of Allah's gracious attributes in the Qur'an suggests that justice is the focal point of the Qur'an's depiction of Allah. By implication fear becomes the proper response to Allah and the motive-principle of virtuous conduct in Qur'anic thought. Verses that represent the true spirit of fear-motive include:

And fear the Day when ye shall be brought back to Allah. Then shall every soul be paid what it earned, and none shall be dealt with unjustly. (2:281) O Ye who believe! Put not yourselves forward before Allah and His Messenger; but fear Allah: for Allah is He Who hears and knows all things. (49:1)

In fact, fear of Allah is one of the most common godward sentiments in the Qur'an (e.g. 2:2, 197, 223, 282; 3:102, 175, 200; 4:77, 131; 5:8, 11, 96, 100, 6:69, 72; 7:56, 63; 9:13, 18; 16:51; 22:1; 23:42, 57; 32:16; 33:37; 35:28; 39:10, 23; 49:12; 58:9; 59:7, 18, 21; 60:11; 64:16; 56:1-2, 4-5, 10; 70:27-28; 71:3; 79:40; 87:10; 92:5; 98:8). It is telling that this prevailing fear motive fits "naturally with the idea of the Lord of Justice and Authority."<sup>53</sup> This fear motive explains many of Allah's names. A casual glance at the ninety-nine names of Allah shows that the "Terrible Attributes" occur again and again. For example, Allah is the "High One" in might and power (*Al-Ali*, 2:225-256), "the Judge among His servants" (*Al-Hakem*, 40:48), the one who will take account of people's deeds (*Al-Hasib*, 4:6-7), "the Avenger" (30:47), "the Killer at His Will" (*Al-Mumit* 15:23) and "the one who computes everything" (*Al-Muhsi*, 19:94).<sup>54</sup> These attributes depict his strength, majesty and greatness.<sup>55</sup> These attributes are meant to induce fear and terror of his power and encourage pious Muslims to be obedient to him.<sup>56</sup>

The Bible also speaks of God as being just (e.g. 2 Thessalonians 1:6; Revelation 15:3) and does allow for the use of godly fear as a motivating principle in light of impending judgment (e.g. Isaiah 33:6; Philippians 2:12; Revelation 14:6). However, in contrast to the Qur'an,

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<sup>53</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 179-181.

<sup>54</sup>Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, 111-117.

<sup>55</sup>Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 42.

<sup>56</sup>Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God*, 47.

the God of the Bible is above anything else the Father (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:6; Matthew 5:16; 6:9; 18:10; John 8:41-42; Romans 8:15). Furthermore, His love transcends His justice. For example, Jonah complains that God is too compassionate rather than just in dealing with the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-4). The result is that the Bible allows for a reciprocity of relationship between man and God and makes love the essential motive (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:5; 11:1; Luke 10:27; 1 John 4:7-21).

Now the Qur'an does speak of Allah's loving-kindness (*Al-Wadud*) in two instances:

But ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn unto Him (in repentance): For my Lord is indeed full of mercy and loving-kindness (11:90).

For those who believe and do righteous deeds, will be Gardens; beneath which rivers flow: That is the great Salvation, (the fulfilment of all desires), Truly strong is the Grip (and Power) of thy Lord. It is He Who creates from the beginning, and He can restore (life). And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Full of Loving-Kindness, Lord of the Throne of Glory, doer (without let) of all that He intends (85:12-16).

In having only two verses, it is apparent that the Qur'an has little room for love.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, it would also seem that love is secondary to Allah's forgiveness in both passages.<sup>58</sup> In fact, Daud Rahbar notes that love is too strong a word for *Al-Wadud*.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, in contrast to the Bible, love is not a motivating principle for Muslims.

In conclusion, the Qur'anic depiction of Allah as an unrelenting and awesome judge on the final day directs the reader to respond to Allah in fear and caution. This fear and caution seems to be the basis of faith, which itself is the starting point of virtue and good conduct. Therefore, fear is not the outcome of faith. Rather, fear gives birth to faith and sustains it.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 172.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 172.

<sup>60</sup>Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 185.

### Implications for the Islamic Understanding of Salvation

The depiction of Allah as judge leads to one of the basic tenets of Islam, which is the accountability of human beings before him. This is illustrated by the fact that the Qur'an "places an extraordinary emphasis on the binding relationship between faith and practice or what it describes as righteous deeds."<sup>61</sup> In fact, the bulk of the content of the Qur'anic message contains exhortations dealing with righteous conduct and the consequences of not following or ignoring them and these are framed within the backdrop of the all-pervading presence of Allah.<sup>62</sup> The Qur'an speaks repeatedly about the responsibility of individual human beings to Allah (17:13-14; 99:1-8) because each person's deeds have been recorded in his or her book (69:19-27).

Farid Esack, a critical and progressive Muslim scholar by his own definition, notes that the belief in the accountability of man to God is "second only to that of the existence of God and the belief in the Prophets of God."<sup>63</sup> This is especially clear when we look at the Qur'anic image of what will occur on the Day of Judgment. The predominant image used is that of judgment scales where the actions of people will be weighed according to whether their good deeds outweigh the bad (7:8-9; 23:102-103; 101:6-8). Therefore, Allah will deal with everyone on the Last Day justly, according to what they deserve, whether it is punishment or reward (4:40; 10:44).

This emphasis on human accountability on the Day of Judgment firstly establishes the place of works in gaining a positive verdict on the Last Day.<sup>64</sup> The Bible does not deny the place of works on the Day of Judgment. The Apostle Paul notes that God will judge everyone impartially (Romans 2:6,11): those who do good will attain eternal life (Romans 2:7, 10), while those who do evil will be punished (Romans 2:8-9).<sup>65</sup> In fact, Paul upholds that faithful obedience to God's laws is a theoretical means of attaining justification (Romans 2:13; 7:10). Therefore, Paul validates in principle the place of persistent good works in gaining a positive verdict on the final Day. The

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<sup>61</sup>Esack, *The Quran: A Users Guide*, 146.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 166.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>64</sup>It is too narrow to say that Islam holds to salvation by works. Islam affirms the need for faith and works [see George, T *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad? Understanding the Differences between Christianity and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 110-111; Moucarray, *Faith to Faith*, 102].

<sup>65</sup>D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 135. Following Moo's chiasmic arrangement.

difference with respect to the Qur'an is that Paul goes on to show that while this principle is valid, no man meets the necessary condition for this principle to be a reality (Romans 3:9-20).<sup>66</sup> Therefore, a new way is required (Romans 3:21-22). It is only through Christ's obedient act, which Christians share through our union in Him, that an acquittal on the last Day is made possible (Romans 5:19b).<sup>67</sup>

Secondly, the emphasis on human accountability creates an association between the expressions of Allah's gracious attributes with his reward (e.g. 24:37-38; 30:43-45; 33:47).<sup>68</sup> As such, the expression of Allah's grace seems to be the just and merited favour Allah gives to faithful Muslims based on their righteous deeds recorded in his or her book at the Day of Judgment. This stands in contrast to the Biblical teaching, which understands grace as God's unmerited favour shown to sinners (Romans 5:15, 17, 20-21; 2 Timothy 1:9; 2:1; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 12:15).

The aforementioned biblical witness is affirmed in Reformed Theology, which holds to the understanding that a person needs God's "Special grace" to be saved because of mankind's total inability to live up to God's standard. Special grace is understood to be the benefit of God as Redeemer that effectually imparts salvation (Titus 2:11). This need for God's special grace is borne out of the understanding of "Original Sin" and "Pervasive Depravity" (or "Total Depravity").<sup>69</sup> The Bible teaches that by virtue of their determination to live autonomously rather than under their Creator's lordship, Adam and Eve tragically fell from innocence to sin (Genesis 3:1-7). This act of disobedience brought upon the couple guilt and shame (3:7), estrangement from God (3:8-10), a sinful nature expressed through blaming each other (3:11-13) and physical death (3:19). Adam's sin affected not only himself, but also all those that followed after him (Genesis 5:3; John 3:6; Romans 5:12-19). Essentially the entire human race is afflicted with objective guilt and shame, alienation from God and depraved natures that refuse to know and love their Creator. As a result, this pervasive sinfulness through Adam has seriously maimed human capacity to actualize the good through their works.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>67</sup>"Righteous", here and in most of the Letter to the Romans, does not mean moral uprightness, but rather the acquittal in heavenly judgment (D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 345).

<sup>68</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 1020 note 3561-3562.

<sup>69</sup>A.A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 150-152.

<sup>70</sup>B. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 74.



Therefore, the Bible testifies that the unsaved through their sinful nature are corrupt in every aspect of their being: mind, will, emotion, relationship and actions. Due to their anti-God bias to sin, the unregenerate are apart from grace and are incapable of turning to God, pleasing him and saving themselves (Jeremiah 13:23; Romans 8:3, 8).<sup>71</sup>

The notion that God would show unmerited favour to sinners is repulsive to many Muslims. This point is popularly illustrated by Hasmi's objection to the Christian doctrine of "Faith alone and grace alone":

A person who relies on this belief is like the one who puts his trust in the exercise belt: for a time, such people will feel deluded and content in the promise, but, eventually, reality will bare its ugly head, and all men will be held accountable for their works.<sup>72</sup>

For Muslims the idea that God would show unmerited favour to sinners would be presuming upon Allah's grace, which is the same temptation Satan used against Adam (82:6).<sup>73</sup> But, more importantly, it removes the need for human accountability and therefore undermines the notion that Allah is just.

The Qur'anic depiction of Allah as an awesome judge seems to drive Muslims to ask, "How do I fulfill the requirements of God for me in this day and age?"<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the Qur'an impresses believers to express their faith through action, to show that they are worthy of his grace on the final day. This hopefulness in the ability of mankind to fulfill Allah's stipulations and commands is allowed by the absence of original sin in the Qur'an. The notion of original sin is essentially incongruent with the idea of Allah's justice.<sup>75</sup> The Qur'anic teaching on Adam assumes that he repented and

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<sup>71</sup>Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 75.

<sup>72</sup>J. Hashmi, *Grace, Faith and Works*, 2008, n.p. Available: <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1165/viewall/>. Cited 6th August 2008.

<sup>73</sup>S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, *The Holy Quran*, 1002-1003. Allah name of *Kareem* can be translated as Most Gracious, Most Charitable, Most Noble. It is considered the attribute Satan uses to instigate man to sin. Therefore Man is warned here "... not to be beguiled by such rebellious belief or confidence in God's grace or mercy."

<sup>74</sup>Esack, *The Quran: A Users Guide*, 146.

<sup>75</sup>M. Asad, "The Spirit of Islam" in K. Ahmed (ed). *Islam: Its Meaning and Message* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1976), 53. It would seem unjust to generations of mankind be responsible for the sin of a remote ancestor.

was actually forgiven by Allah (7:23; 20:120-123). As a result, Yusuf Ali notes that Adam “after the Fall repented and was forgiven and the high Destiny of mankind has been the prize open to all his descendants.”<sup>76</sup> It follows that they were “still given a chance in this life on a lower plane, to make good and recover the lost status of innocence and bliss.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the Fall had no devastating effect on the capacity of mankind to turn to and please God.

The implication for Islamic theology is that there is no need for universal redemption of mankind.<sup>78</sup> Instead, Islam teaches that “. . . every Muslim is his own redeemer; he bears all possibilities of spiritual success and failure within his heart.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore a Muslim must strive for his salvation (2:202, 286; 53:36) and Allah’s graciousness must be warranted and earned.

### **Implications for Christian Evangelization of Muslims**

#### **Understanding the Importance of the Cross**

The presence of grace in the Qur’an shows Allah’s attributes of mercy and forgiveness. When combined with the potential that Allah might withhold His gracious attributes, this emphasizes the importance of Allah’s sovereignty and justice. There is an obvious tension between these concepts of mercy and justice. Islamic theology reflects this same tension as it strives to reconcile the demands of Allah’s justice, while also maintaining his sovereign mercy.<sup>80</sup> For example, Moucarry, a Syrian evangelical Christian and expert in Islamic studies, divides the views into four different groups: 1) Allah is just and forgives no sins, 2) Allah is forgiving and will forgive the sins of all Muslims, 3) Allah is just and will only forgive minor sins, or 4) Allah is sovereign and he will decide to punish Muslims, with the eventual result being that all Muslims enter paradise.<sup>81</sup> Space prevents

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<sup>76</sup>Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Qur’an*, 1129 note 4006.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 349 note 1006.

<sup>78</sup>George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* 111

<sup>79</sup>Asad, “The Spirit of Islam” 53. See also George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, 111-112; J. Dudley Woodberry, ed. “Different Diagnoses of the Human Condition” in J. Dudley Woodberry ed. *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989), 149-150. They give a similar observation.

<sup>80</sup>The dilemma is essentially, will Allah be just and punish those who have not satisfactorily carried out His stipulations, or will He be merciful and save those who deserve to be punished.

<sup>81</sup>Moucarry, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 150.

this work from exploring these different views in detail. It suffices for our purposes to note that all views hold that Allah's forgiveness concerns Muslims alone. However, this does not diminish the tension since it is now expressed in how one defines who a Muslim is.<sup>82</sup>

The Qur'anic perspective holds that Allah's sovereignty (e.g. 2:284; 4:48), Allah's justice (e.g. 4:31; 99:6-8) and Allah's mercy (e.g. 39:53) are all motives as to why Allah forgives. Cragg and Christensen are then too narrow in resolving the tension by noting that grace is a characteristic of his will, rather than of his divine attributes.<sup>83</sup> They emphasize Allah's sovereignty as the governing motive for Allah's grace and forgiveness (2:105; 9:28; 57:21-29; 62:4; 85:14-16). It is important to note that Islamic theology has never really found a resolution to the tension between Allah's attribute of grace, justice and sovereignty.<sup>84</sup> It is possible that this might be a deliberate tension on the part of Mohammed, similar with the deliberate indefiniteness of Allah's grace, to prevent mankind from presuming on Allah's generosity and mercy (82:6). Regardless, this does not diminish the fact that Muslims often feel a great sense of despondency and insecurity on their deathbed, resulting from this tension.<sup>85</sup>

The Christian response to this uncertainty might be to impress upon Muslims the love and forgiveness of God in the Bible.<sup>86</sup> Jesus, for example, reveals God's mercy and compassion in the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32). In contrast to the Qur'anic teaching, God loves not only those who love him and there is assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness in that the father in the story forgives his wayward son.<sup>87</sup> The message of God's love can resonate with the felt needs of many Muslims.<sup>88</sup> However, the main problem with this

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 42; Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Islam*, 378-379. Their conclusion may reflect the fact that they have mainly encountered Sunni theologians who tend to emphasize God's sovereignty (see Moucarray, *The Search for Forgiveness*, 317 for a summary of the different positions by theological schools).

<sup>84</sup>Any resolution essentially becomes too narrow just like Cragg and Christensen's position.

<sup>85</sup>Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Islam*, 379.

<sup>86</sup>E.W. Huffard, "Culturally Relevant themes about Christ" in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed. *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989) 163. This is the approach championed by many well-known missionaries such as Zwemer, Cragg and Parshall.

<sup>87</sup>Chapman, *Cross and the Crescent*, 337-338. Contains a more extensive comparison.

<sup>88</sup>Brown, R "Muslims who believe the Bible," *Mission Frontiers* 30 (2008), 20.

approach is that it does not deal with the core tension, which is the need to also maintain and satisfy God's justice.<sup>89</sup>

The attractiveness of the Gospel of Jesus is that it shows how God can be just and gracious at the same time. Specifically, Paul proclaims that in the Gospel "a righteousness from God is revealed" (Romans 1:17). Now the term "righteousness of God" could mean an attribute of God (possessive genitive) or a status given by God (genitive of source) or a righteousness being shown by God (subjective genitive) or "a righteousness which is valid before God" (objective genitive).<sup>90</sup> These options are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can all be found in the literature.<sup>91</sup> However, the significance for this work is that the righteousness of God relates to God's attribute of always doing what is right.<sup>92</sup>

The emphasis on the response of faith and trust is in contrast to the Qur'anic emphasis on the need to fulfil the requirements of God in one's life. The phrase "faith from first to last" or "by faith through and through" (Romans 1:17b) is an emphatic assertion that God's act of righteousness comes by faith alone.<sup>93</sup> Now the natural word order in the Greek could also connect "by faith" (ἐκ πίστεως) as the manner for "living" (ζήσεται). Both options are plausible and the phrase is general enough to warrant both options being in view.<sup>94</sup> As a result, it suggests that faith and trust are not just the means to the salvation of God and but also the way of living.<sup>95</sup>

Paul speaks of the "righteousness from God" in more detail in Romans 3:21. The need for God's act of righteousness by means of faith is because of sin (3:23). God's righteous act is shown in presenting His Son as a propitiatory sacrifice (3:25a).<sup>96</sup> The key idea

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<sup>89</sup>Huffard, "Culturally Relevant themes about Christ," 162-163, would add that for Muslims love is not the essential theme nor do Muslims see love as an expression of God's love. Therefore Huffard questions the extensive use of love as the governing theme in sharing the gospel to Muslims.

<sup>90</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 70-71; A.E. McGrath 'Justification' in G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid (eds). *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 521.

<sup>91</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 72.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 75-76. J. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 64; C.E.D. Cranfield *Romans – A Shorter Commentary*, 23; F.F. Bruce, *Romans (2nd Edition)*. (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 75.

<sup>94</sup>Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 65; Bruce, *Romans, 2nd Edition* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 76.

<sup>95</sup>Stott, 65.

<sup>96</sup>Propitiation signifies the means of averting wrath. For a defense of the ἱλαστήριον

for our purposes is that God did this to “demonstrate his justice” (Romans 3:25-27). The propitiatory sacrifice of Christ on one level enables God to maintain his righteous character in postponing the punishment of sins in the past. But on the other hand, it also preserves God’s righteous character as he justifies those who place their faith in Jesus. Therefore, Paul’s point “is that God can maintain his righteous character (his righteousness’ in 3:21-22) because Jesus as the propitiatory sacrifice provides the full satisfaction of the demands of God’s impartial, invariable justice.”<sup>97</sup> As a result, we see in the gospel the expression of both grace and justice at the same time. It is the cross that allows God to forgive without denying His justice.

For many Muslims the idea that Jesus was given as a substitutionary sacrifice for our atonement can be a serious stumbling block. The Qur’an specifically rejects that Jesus died on the cross and was raised up:

That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah:"- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:- Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise;- (4:157-168).

Orthodox Islam not only denies the historical facts of the crucifixion, but there are also strong objections against the cross. Zwemer, with his extensive experience as a missionary to the Islamic world, notes that Muslims oppose the teaching of the cross for it denies God’s mercy since He allowed Jesus to suffer, and it denies his justice since He allowed those who committed the crime to go unpunished.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the teaching on the crucifixion in the Qur’an and Islamic traditions presents a major stumbling block.

This may cause Christians to look for other ways of making the gospel relevant to Muslims by neglecting the cross. However, one should remember that the cross is often a stumbling block for people (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:23). Moreover, the cross resonates with

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as “propitiation”, see L. Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 163-176.

<sup>97</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 242

<sup>98</sup>S.M. Zwemer, *Islam and the Cross: Selections from the Apostle to Islam*. ed R.S. Greenway (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 48-49.

what many Muslims crave. Christian missions strategist, Rick Brown listed some of biblical themes that appealed to Muslims. It is telling that the main themes which resonate with many Muslims include: God's love and care for his servants, the offer of personal forgiveness and acceptance by God, and the offer of assured and complete salvation from hell and acceptance into God's kingdom.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, I suggest that Muslims long for a deeper experience of God's grace and mercy, which is only possible by the cross. Furthermore, the cross addresses the deficiency in the Qur'anic teaching on the Day of Judgment. The question for many Muslims is whether they will experience Allah's justice or his favour on the Last Day. According to tradition, even Abu Bakr, one of the early giants of the Islamic faith, was fearful of the Day of Judgment.<sup>100</sup> Bakr, like many Muslims after him, longed for assurance that Allah would be gracious and grant forgiveness of sins. Again, only the cross can give full assurance of the forgiveness of sins.

Therefore, the finished atoning work of Christ on the cross speaks powerfully and relevantly to Muslims since it liberates them from the aimless striving after God's requirements in one's life and fear of the final judgment, and it also emphasizes the way of true forgiveness of sins. The message of the cross shows the possibility of God's mercy without denying His justice. Therefore, the fact that the cross is repulsive to Muslims should not move Christians to shy away from the teaching of penal substitutionary atonement.<sup>101</sup> Rather, Christians should look for ways to show its relevance to Muslims. How this can be achieved will be the aim of the remainder of this section.

### The Need to Apply the Christian Doctrine of Special Grace

The first step in evangelizing Muslims is to earn the right to be heard. Muslims have built up misunderstandings and animosity towards Christians due to the Crusades, Western Imperialism and the support of some Christians for the state of Israel.<sup>102</sup> The result is that Muslims are usually suspicious of Christians, hence the need to move from suspicion to trust.

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<sup>99</sup>Brown, "Muslims who believe the Bible", 20.

<sup>100</sup>Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims*, 379. Cites a quote by Abu Bakr from Islamic tradition to his daughter Aisha.

<sup>101</sup>Zwemer, *Islam and the Cross*, 5.

<sup>102</sup>D.J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication, 2nd Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 277.

The indefinite expression of Allah's grace in the Qur'an at one level should indicate to Christians the need to show what true grace looks like. The way forward then entails that Christians properly understand and apply the Doctrine of Special Grace. This doctrine tells Christians that God's grace is an attitude of unconditional favour to the undeserving. Therefore, Spirit-filled believers ought to display a gracious attitude to Muslims around them to build relationships so as to earn the right to be heard.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, since grace is an action exercised towards the unworthy, Christians ought to deal compassionately towards others. Believers should treat Muslims with liberality, generosity and mercy. Jesus himself says:

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. (Luke 6:35).

Too often Christians reflect their fear and hostility to Muslims, rather than the love and compassion of which Jesus speaks. Zwemer, after forty years of ministry to Muslims, says "the nearest way to the Muslim heart is the way of God's love, the way of the Cross."<sup>104</sup> However, the sad reality for the reason as to why so few Muslims have been won for Christ might be "because no one has lived it amongst them."<sup>105</sup> Therefore, Christians need to remember and apply the doctrine of special grace to earn their trust and engage Muslims with the Gospel of Jesus.

#### The Need to Apply the Christian Doctrine of Common Grace

Secondly, the Apostle Paul in speaking of his missionary endeavors said, "I try to find *common ground* with everyone, doing everything I can to save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, NLT). Therefore, in showing the relevance of penal substitutionary atonement to Muslims, one must also look for common ground. The presence of

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<sup>103</sup>Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* 96; Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, 226; Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 278. For some practical principles see B. Dennett, *Sharing the Good News with Muslims: Simple Guidelines for Christians* (Homebush: ANZEA, 1992), 99-101.

<sup>104</sup>Zwemer, *Islam and the Cross*, 56.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

grace in the Qur'an suggests the "common ground" for Christians to engage with Muslims about the Gospel.

The theological basis for looking for "common ground" in preaching the gospel resides in the Reformed doctrine of "Common Grace." Common grace "is the undeserved beneficent of the Creator God expressed by his general care of creation and of all persons everywhere without discrimination."<sup>106</sup> As such, it is God's grace operative in creation as distinguished from God's special grace efficient in salvation. It is understood as evident in God's providential care for creation, his providential restraint of sins and man's conscience.<sup>107</sup> But also, God's common grace facilitates the development of what is true and good in philosophy, the arts and technology (e.g. Exodus 31:2-11; 35:30-35).<sup>108</sup> For example, medical and other technological advancements that improve the lives of both the redeemed and unredeemed are seen as initiated by common grace. Therefore, it recognizes that the gifts we see even in unregenerate human beings are gifts from God. This implies that Christian believers can use the great literary works of non-believers, even though we do not share their faith or commitment.<sup>109</sup> This could include the use of the products and works of other religions in such a way as to glorify God through them. In fact, Calvin notes that to reject or despise the truth when uttered by non-believers is to insult God's Spirit, since in the final analysis all truth comes from the Spirit of God.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Christians are justified in using the Qur'an (and other Muslim works) to find common ground and aspects of the true Gospel through which to engage with Muslims and to bring them to a fuller and more substantial knowledge of God's grace through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>111</sup>

There are potentially many shared concepts between Muslims and Christians to discuss. For example, Muslims believe in One God (25:2), Adam and Eve (2:30-33), Satan and demons (6:100, 128;

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<sup>106</sup>Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 76.

<sup>107</sup>P.E. Hughes, "Grace" in W.A. Elwell (ed). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 479-480.

<sup>108</sup>Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 76.

<sup>109</sup>Hoekema, *Created in the God's Image*. 200.

<sup>110</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion Volume 1 & 2*, ed. J.T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 273-274. See also James 1:17.

<sup>111</sup>C. Chapman, "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims" in J.D. Woodberry ed. *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989), 106. Even with differences between Muslims around the world, there is enough distinctive in the Muslim mind set to warrant finding relevant ways of expressing the gospel.



72:1, 15), heaven (2:25; 3:15; 4:13), hell (2:24; 3:10; 4:14), the second coming of Christ (4:159; 18:94, 98; 21:96) and the Virgin birth (2:87; 3:33; 4:156). Furthermore, Chapman also notes that, "Muhammad must have absorbed something of the spirit and rituals of Jewish worship, as well as many stories from the Old Testament and later rabbinic legends."<sup>112</sup> As a result, the echoes of Judaism and the Old Testament mean that the Qur'an may be used as a stepping-stone into the Gospel.<sup>113</sup>

Schlorff however provides a note of caution. In response to unrestrained experimentations in the field of contextualizing the gospel for Muslims, he cautions against what he refers to as the "hermeneutic of synthesis."<sup>114</sup> Essentially, he is cautious of making the Qur'an a starting point and the interpretation of the Bible dependent on the Qur'an. This is an important word of warning. For example, the Qur'an denies the death of Jesus on the cross and His Sonship (6:95-101; 19:88-98; 112:3) and misunderstands the Trinity (4:171-172). As such, the Qur'an is not necessarily a preparation for Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

Consequently using the Qur'an as a means of engaging Muslims with the Gospel of Jesus requires a certain level of caution.<sup>116</sup> One must be aware of Qur'anic biases. So even if the Qur'an gives us potential stepping stones to the Gospel due to its echoes with the OT, Chapman for example suggests that Mohammed did not simply borrow from Jewish sources, he may have been influenced by the negative response he received from Jews at Medina.<sup>117</sup> Thus the Qur'an may only be described as a deficient commentary on Jewish scripture in speaking against an inadequate Judaism.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, the Bible needs to be taken as the rule of faith and practice and the measure by which all beliefs are measured.<sup>119</sup> Only the Bible completes or corrects erroneous views.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Chapman, *The Cross and Crescent*, 273.

<sup>113</sup>S. Bell, *The Journey from Fear to Faith: Grace for Muslims* (Colorado Springs: Authentic, 2006), 82; F.E. Accad, *Building Bridges: Christianity and Islam* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 23-24.

<sup>114</sup>S. Schlorff, "C-5 Church Revisited," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35 (1999): 395.

<sup>115</sup>Zwemer, *Islam and the Cross*, 27.

<sup>116</sup>Schlorff, "C-5 Church Revisited," 396-397. Schlorff's warnings are not meant to prevent the practice of finding common ground.

<sup>117</sup>Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 274-275.

<sup>118</sup>Bell, *The Journey from Fear to Faith*, 82. This is a more cautious re-wording of Bell's position on the parallelism between Judaism and the Old Testament, with the Qur'an.

<sup>119</sup>P.G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualisation," *International Bulletin of Missionary*

## Showing the Relevance of the Cross

How can we show the relevance of the cross to Muslims who are informed by the Qur'an and Islamic traditions? The purpose of this sub-section is to show how to use an important theme in the Qur'an and to turn the same theme towards the Bible and its teachings on the cross. The example below may not be the exact words used in a conversation with Muslims. Instead, it provides a biblical theological framework for informed discussions with Muslims. Specific studying of the Qur'an reveals the close affinity between the story of prophets and the biblical literature.<sup>121</sup> As a consequence, the concept of prophets provides a stepping-stone into the biblical worldview and the Gospel. Therefore, this example uses the nature of the prophetic office as a means of showing the fundamental diagnosis of the human condition and the need for penal substitutionary atonement. In line with Colin Chapman, the position taken here is that a theology of prophethood is essential in effectively engaging the Muslim mind.<sup>122</sup>

One of the fundamental themes in Islam is that Allah responds to human ignorance by sending prophets and messengers (9:33; 48:28; 61:9). However Allah's prophets are not always well received. They are mocked (15:11), called liars (3:148; 22:42; 23:44; 35:22), falsely accused (21:5), their message denied (11:59) and rejected (14:10; 17:94; 36:15; 64:6). Some prophets are even killed "wrongfully" such as Abel, Zechariah and Yahya (see 2:61, 87, 91; 3:21, 112; 4:155; 5:170). Such rejection renders God's retribution inevitable (7:94; 17:15; 28:59). The theme of rejection and suffering faced by God's prophets is also described in the Holy Scriptures. In the *Tawrat* (Pentateuch), Moses is portrayed as a suffering mediator.<sup>123</sup> He

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*Research* 11 (1987): 110-111. This includes receiving input from evangelical scholars to inform of key theological issues at stake.

<sup>120</sup>B.M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Qur'an and Muslim Exegesis* (London: Continuum, 2002), 14. In contrast to scholars of comparative religion such as Wheeler, I don't subscribe to the view that the interpretation of the Qur'an informs Judaism or Christianity.

<sup>121</sup>U. Rubin, "Prophets and Prophethood" in A. Rippin ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 234.

<sup>122</sup>Chapman, *Cross and Crescent*, 324-330; Chapman, "Rethinking the Gospel for Muslims," 109-110; Bell, *The Journey from Fear to Faith*, 63.

<sup>123</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 1: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975), 294; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975), 276.

suffered because of the sins of the people. In recounting the golden calf incident, Moses lies prostrate before God for forty days and nights (Deuteronomy 9:18, 25). Both the historical and prophetic books show again and again how the acceptance of God's call to be a prophet meant suffering.<sup>124</sup> Prophets often faced the wickedness of people. This includes Micaiah, who was placed in prison with reduced rations (1 Kings 22:27), and Jeremiah, who suffered the abuse and wickedness from the people in Jerusalem (Jeremiah 11:18-23; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20: 7-18).

Furthermore, the prophets in Holy Scripture came to bear the signs of people's wickedness by enduring judgment by way of example.<sup>125</sup> For example, Moses is not allowed to enter the Promised Land due to Yahweh's great wrath being directed upon him (Deuteronomy 1:34; 4:21). The *Tawrat* sets Moses as the stereotypical prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15). As such, the role of representing the penalty for the sins of people cannot be excluded from future prophets. In fact, we see that their lives often came to personify the pain and grief that is deserved for the wicked (e.g. Ezekiel 2:6; 21:2-6; Hosea 1-3).

This habitual rejection of God's prophets and their suffering places a question mark on whether human beings can in fact live out God's righteous requirements.<sup>126</sup> As a consequence, the Holy Scriptures makes us aware that there is something more seriously wrong with human nature than mere "weakness" or "forgetfulness".<sup>127</sup> This problem resides essentially in the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9).

The serious problem of people's hard-heartedness prompted Moses to offer to take the penalty for Israel's sins after the golden calf incident (Exodus 32:30-40). Therefore, the solution to the problem of the human heart comes in the act of an intercessor to take the wrath of God.<sup>128</sup> This expectation gives rise to the prophecy of Isaiah regarding a future prophetic figure.<sup>129</sup> This character has been given a mission

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<sup>124</sup>S.H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2003), 413.

<sup>125</sup>von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2*, 275.

<sup>126</sup>J. Dudley Woodberry, ed. "Different Diagnoses of the Human Condition," 154-155, notes that the Qur'an frequently refers to the problem of human corruption. The fact that most people reject right guidance would suggest a serious problem in human nature.

<sup>127</sup>These are the common terms for sin in the Islamic thought (see George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*, 108).

<sup>128</sup>von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2*, 276.

<sup>129</sup>J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 118-119; B.S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 383.

since birth (Isaiah 49:1), equipped with prophetic speech and instructions (Isaiah 49:2; 50:4a), and possessing special knowledge and guidance (Isaiah 50:4b). This figure will face opposition (49:4a) progressing to open abuse (Isaiah 50:6; 53:3), which leads to death (Isaiah 53:7-12) and ultimate vindication (Isaiah 49:4b). At first glance, he seems to be Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-5). But this figure is more than just a prophetic figure, which opens up the possibility of the servant being a divine figure.<sup>130</sup> His death is described as a substitution for many (Isaiah 53:1-9) and a guilt offering for sins (Isaiah 53:10).<sup>131</sup>

The identity of this person is a mystery until we come to the special person of Jesus. Jesus was born by special means of God (3:45-47) and called to be a prophet of God (4:171; 6:85). According to tradition, He lived a sinless life.<sup>132</sup> Jesus' life is recorded for Muslims in the *Injil* (Gospels). The *Injil* sees Jesus as the greatest prophet.<sup>133</sup> Jesus himself speaks of His life, death and resurrection as the fulfilment of what was written in the Old Testament (Luke 24:25-27). Specifically, the Holy Scriptures speaks of Jesus' death on the cross as God's sacrifice to avert His wrath against mankind in order and to demonstrate His justice (Romans 3:25). Therefore, it is the physical death of Jesus at the cross that allows God to forgive without denying His justice. As a result, one can know peace in this life with God and, by faith alone in Christ, be assured that one has gained access into God's grace (Romans 5:1-2).

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Qur'an deliberately describes the presence and indefiniteness of Allah's gracious attributes to show that Allah is an awesome God of Justice. This helps explain the prevalence of a fear motive in the Qur'an and the importance of human accountability before Allah at the end of time. This serves to establish the importance

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<sup>130</sup>The servant's office is manifestly prophetic (G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2*, 273). However it is not exclusively prophetic [J.A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 384, 388-389.

<sup>131</sup>Notice the interplay between the pronouns "he" and "us" or "our", which give the sense of substitution.

<sup>132</sup>Zwemer, *Islam and the Cross*, 11-14. Zwemer cites Islamic traditions that say Satan did not touch Jesus at birth.

<sup>133</sup>M. Strom, *Symphony of Scripture: Making Sense of the Bible's Many Themes* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2001), 121-122.

of works in regards to a favorable verdict at the final judgment and leads to the understanding that the expression of Allah's grace is the merited favour due to a person as a result of his justice. Islam teaches that each person bears the responsibility of spiritual failure and success. For Christians seeking to engage Muslims, the presence and indefiniteness of Allah's graciousness in the Qur'an highlights the importance of addressing the tension between God's justice and His attribute of grace. The relevance of the Gospel of Jesus for Muslims is that at the cross we see God's forgiveness and favour without denying His justice. Leading Muslims to understand this is difficult in light of its denial by the Qur'an and Islamic traditions. However, an understanding of the presence and indefiniteness of Allah's attributes of grace in the Qur'an offers a framework in showing the relevance of the Gospel. Specifically, the indefiniteness of grace in the Qur'an reminds Christians of the need to show grace to Muslims through our attitude and actions in order to earn their trust. In addition, the presence of grace in the Qur'an encourages us to look for "common ground" through which to present the Gospel of grace meaningfully to Muslims. The exercise of seeking common ground leads us to the importance of the theme of prophethood as a means of showing the biblical witness of the pervading sinfulness of man and the need of an intercessor to die in our place for our sins.

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