

# GOD'S LOVE IN THE QUR'AN

BY GORDON D. NICKEL



Three things are essential when the followers of Jesus think about the relationship of the gospel to Islam. One is a thorough knowledge of the gospel. The second is a fair and accurate understanding of the teaching of Islam. The third is a sympathetic heart for the Muslims whom God has given us the privilege to know.

The New Testament places the unconditional love of God at the centre of the good news about Jesus. Does an examination of the Qur'an reveal a similar teaching? This short article sets out one aspect of this question: the use of two verbs for "love" in relation to Allah.

The two Arabic verbs are *habba* and *wadda*. *Habba* means "to love, like; to wish, want, or like to do something". This verb appears in its active form some 40 times with Allah as subject and with a variety of human objects.

We read that Allah loves (*habba*) the "good-doers" (2:195; 3:134, 148; 5:93),<sup>1</sup> the "just" (5:42; 49:9; 60:8), and the "godfearing" (9:4, 7). Allah does not love the "evildoers" (3:57, 140; 42:40), the "proud and boastful" (4:36; 31:18; 57:23), and the "workers of corruption" (5:64; 28:77). Two striking occurrences of *habba* are

that Allah does not love the "prodigal" (*musrifoon*, 6:141; 7:31), and that Allah "loves those who fight in his way" (61:4). In all there are 22 statements about those whom Allah does not love, and 18 about those whom Allah loves. A noun from this verb, *mahabba*, occurs once in a speech of Allah to Moses: "I loaded on thee love from me" (20:39).

The second verb for love in the Qur'an is *wadda* ("to love, like, be fond of; to want, wish"). Forms of this verb appear in relation to Allah in just three verses. On the Day of Resurrection, Allah will assign love (*wudd*) to "those who believe and do deeds of righteousness" (19:96). The Qur'anic prophet Shuaib (understood by some to be Moses' father-in-law, Jethro) is portrayed as describing his Lord as "loving" (*wadood*) in 11:90; and the same term is used to describe Allah in 85:14. In these two verses *wadood* is associated with forgiveness and mercy. Vivienne Stacey gives the meaning of *wadood* here as "the affection with which the master responds to the loyalty of a faithful servant."<sup>2</sup>

One scholar who studied these two verbs

in the context of the overall theology of the Qur'an was Muhammad Daud Rahbar. As he wrote his PhD dissertation—later published as *God of Justice*—he concluded that in the Qur'an, Allah loves only people who are "perfectly pious."<sup>3</sup> Since it would be presumptuous for any human to claim perfect piety, Rahbar reasoned, the question as to whether Allah actually loves any human is left open. He found an echo of this ambivalence in the fact that human love for Allah is mentioned only rarely in the Qur'an.

***Allah does not love the "prodigal" and Allah loves those who fight in his way.***

Rahbar was led by a series of deep theological reflections to find the demonstration of divine love in human history in "a man who loved, who lived humbly like the poorest, who was perfectly innocent and sinless, who was tortured and humiliated in literally the worst manner, and who declared his continued transparent love for those

*While the Qur'an gives some hints about the love of God, it is much more like a desert than an oasis concerning the subject.*

who had inflicted the worst of injuries on him.”<sup>4</sup>

The Apostle Paul wanted the daily lives of people to be illuminated by the full extent of God's love (Eph 3:18,19). He and other New Testament writers found the objects of divine love to include the powerless, the ungodly, sinful humans, God's enemies, the spiritually dead, and people deserving punishment (Rom 5:6-10; Eph 2:3-5). They identified the supreme demonstration of divine love with an event in history: God's sending His Beloved into the world. At this time God dealt decisively with human sin through Jesus' voluntary act of laying down his life for humanity (John 3:16, 10:11-18, 15:13; Rom 5:8, 8:32; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:1-2; 1 John 3:16, 4:8-10). The good-news message and our motivation for mission are based firmly on that love of God (2 Cor. 5:14).

When considering the Islamic concept of God in a classic study nearly a century ago, Samuel Zwemer noted that the Qur'an contains only a few expressions of human love for Allah (four verses using forms of *habba*, none of which is a command). He couldn't help remarking on the contrast between this and “the abundant and

plain teaching of the Old and New Testament regarding the love which God requires of man and which flows out from God to man!”<sup>5</sup>

But the proof must surely come in the reading. A reading of the verses containing *habba* and *wadda* makes it clear that the love of Allah in the Qur'an is a love reserved for those who obey his commands.<sup>6</sup>

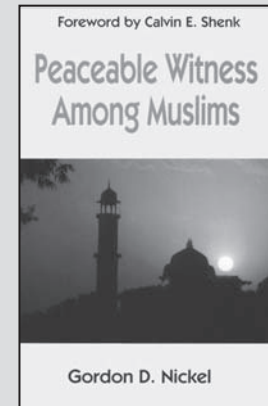
Knowledge of this crucial contrast should encourage the followers of Jesus to confidently and respectfully share the gospel with Muslims. Will that knowledge also prompt us to imitate the God who loves all Muslims unconditionally?

(This entire article with footnotes is available and the 30 Days website).

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“One of the greatest strengths of this book is the author's seriousness about explicitly integrating ... concepts of peace, suffering, servanthood, love of enemy, and criticism of political power.” - Calvin Shenk

## Footnotes: GOD'S LOVE IN THE QUR'AN

1 Translations from the Qur'an are those of Arthur Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford University Press, 1964). Verse numbering follows the standard Cairo system, used for example in Pickthall's translation.

2 Vivienne Stacey, *Submitting to God*, 50.

3 Muhammad Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 180.

4 Muhammad Daud Rahbar, "A Letter to Christian and Muslim Friends," 7. (Daud Rahbar's story is also told in Kenneth Cragg, "Conversion and Convertibility—With Special Reference to Muslims," in *Down to Earth*, John R.W. Stott & Robert Coote, eds., 193-208; and in Frank S. Khair-Ullah, "Evangelism Among Muslims," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, J.D. Douglas, ed., 816-824.)

5 Samuel M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), 101.

6 See also Frederick M. Denney, "The Problem of Salvation in the Qur'an: Key Terms and Concepts," 199, 200.