The Love of God in the Qur'an and in the Bible

Introduction

The New Testament places the unconditional love of God at the heart of the Good News about Jesus. Does the Qur'an reveal a similar teaching? This article sets out the use of two verbs for 'love' (in relation to God) that are used in the Qur'an.

Many detailed studies have been made on this topic – see the bibliography at the end. Two word roots (consonants) are used for divine love in the Qur'an – HBB and WDD. Both are used in contexts where the recipients of God's love have first repented or done what is good.

The Qur'anic use of each "Hubb"

The meaning of 'ahabba' (a causative verbal form from the same route as the noun) is broader than 'to love'. It also includes 'to like' and 'to approve'. It is an 'inclination' or a 'preference'. It is used to assert that God loves (likes, approves) those who:

- **Do good** (Sura 2:195) *"And do good; for God loves those who do good."* [see also 3:134, 148 and 5:93]
- **Repent** (Sura 2:222) *"For God loves the contrite and loves those who keep clean."*
- **Rely on Him** (Sura 3:159) *"For God loves the trusting."*
- **Are just** (Sura 5:42) *"But if you judge, judge between them justly for God loves the just."* [see also 49:9 and 60:8]
- **Are conscientious** (Sura 9:4,7) *"…for God loves the conscientious."*
- **Fight in His way** (Sura 61:4) *"God loves those who fight for the sake of God in a battle line."*

So the love of God for believers is God's intention of benevolence. And the love of people for God is a person's intention to obey his/her Lord. One Muslim writer – Razi in Tafsir al Kabir – says, **"A man can only love that which is lawful and therefore he cannot love God or any of his attributes."**

The Qur'an also states those God **does not love** (or like or approve of) – those who are:

- **Excessive** (Sura 5:87) *"Believers do not prohibit the wholesome things God has made legitimate for you, but do not go to excess. For God does not love the excessive."* [see also 7:31]
- **Ungrateful** (Sura 30:45) *"For God does not love the ungrateful."*
- **Wrongdoers** (Sura 3:140) *"And God does not love the wrongdoers."* [see also 3:57]
- **Oppressors** (Sura 42:40) *"For God does not love oppressors."*
- **Scoffers and unbelievers** (Sura 4:46) *"But God has cursed them for their scoffing, for they do not believe."*
- **Arrogant and vain** (Sura 4:36) *"For God does not love any who are arrogant and vain."* Also Sura 31:18 *"For God loves no pompous braggart."* [see also 57:23]
- **Violent** (Sura 5:64) *"And God does not love the violent."*
- **Corrupt** (Sura 28:77) *"And do not seek corruption on earth, for God does not love the corrupt."*
- **Wasteful** (Sura 6:141) *"And do not be wasteful for God does not like the wasteful."*

There are ~ 18 statements about those whom God loves and ~ 22 statements about those God does not love. The reciprocal nature of God's love can be clearly seen in Sura 3:31-32, *"Say, 'if you love God then follow me* (i.e. Muhammad)*. God will love you and forgive you*

your sins, for God is most forgiving, most merciful'. Say, 'Obey God and the messenger'. Then if they turn back, God does not love scoffers."

A noun from this verb, 'mahabba', occurs only once in the Qur'an in relation to God (Sura 20:39) *"… but I cast love from Me over you* (Moses - when he was about to be rescued by Pharaoh's daughter from the basket floating on the Nile) *so you might be brought up under my eye."*

The Qur'anic use of "wudd"

The words from the second Arabic root – WDD – express the same prerequisites for receiving God's love. The verb form in the Qur'an is 'wadda' – meaning to love, to like, to be fond of, to wish and to want. The verb occurs three times in the Qur'an.

- Sura 19:96: *"As for those who believed and acted with integrity, the Benevolent One will give them love."*

  One of the 99 names of God is Al-Wadud "The Loving", yet the contexts of the two occurrences in the Qur'an also indicate the same sequence.

- Sura 11:90 *"Ask your Lord for forgiveness and turn thereunto in repentance; for my Lord is most merciful, most loving."*

- Sura 85:12-14 *"The power of your Lord is truly tremendous; for that is who begins and renews and is most forgiving and loving."*

In these last two versus 'wadud' is associated with forgiveness and mercy. Vivienne Stacey gives the meaning of 'wadud' here as, "The affection with which the master responds to the loyalty of a faithful servant."

So the Qur'anic concept of man's love for God and God's love for His creatures (people) is consistent with man's position as an entirely dependent slave and with God's self-sufficiency.

D. B. Macdonald states that, **"Love in man is not the same as love in Allah. In man, love is the inclination of the soul towards something that suits it, is lacking in it and from the gaining of which it expects profit and pleasure. This is impossible in Allah, the Perfect, the Unchangeable, who can contemplate nothing but Himself and His own acts."**

So 'Al-Wadud' signifies God's approval of His righteous servants.

There are other places in the Qur'an where the word is used. God places 'love' between those who are hostile to each other (Sura 60:7) and between a man and his wife (Sura 30:20).

It is noteworthy that in the Qur'an this root – WDD – is never used for man's love of God. The orthodox opinion is that man can't love God Himself. God, in His mystery, remains always inaccessible and man can only love what is lawful – God's service, rewards and favour.

Muhammad Daud Rahbar did a detailed study on the Qur'anic material for his PhD thesis. This was later published as **God of Justice**. He concluded that, in the Qur'an, God only loves people who are "perfectly pious". And since it would be presumptuous for any human to claim perfect piety, he reasoned that the question as to whether God actually loves any human is left open.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament uses a number of words for love. Like the Qur'an, it mentions God's love for those who love Him and do His will and His punishment for those who don't (Ex. 20:5-6 and Deut. 7:9-10). Yet it speaks in more personal terms of God's love. His relationship to His people is made analogous to that of a mother and her child (Is. 49:15). There is a similar idea of God's mercy being greater than that of a mother for her child in a Hadith (Al-Bukhari, Sahih 78:18 and 87:35). In the Old Testament God's love is analogous to a father's love (Ps. 103:13). And although the Qur'an denies that God has offspring (e.g. Sura 112), Muslims have used the example of a father to describe God's actions.

Another analogy used in the Old Testament is that of a husband (Is. 54:5). In this analogy it is a relationship in which God accepts the suffering brought on by unfaithfulness – see Hosea chapters 1-3.

So the emphasis on the love of God is not found in orthodox Muslim theology that puts far more emphasis on His remoteness and His sovereignty. The Old Testament, in contrast to the Qur'an, has God taking the initiative in loving and choosing a people – Israel – although they were not more worthy of love than any other people (Deut. 7:6-8 and 10:15-16).

The New Testament

The major word used to express God's love in the New Testament is 'agape' – a word also used to describe the nature of God (1 John. 4:8). 'Agape' is not conditional, but extends even to those who have not yet turned to God. This unconditional love finds its fullest practical demonstration in the Lord Jesus (who fully revealed the Father) giving His life for all people. Paul says, in Rom. 5:8, ***"But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."*** And in 1 John 4:10 we read, ***"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"***.

The believer also loves God, but the sequence is significant for it reverses the Qur'anic sequence by saying, ***"We love because He first loved us"***. (1 John 4:19) It is interesting that some Sufis – like Al-Hallaj – said that the essence of God is love. But for this and for similar statements, he was executed in Baghdad in 922 AD.

Paul wanted the daily lives of people to be radiated by the full extent of God's love., ***"… that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and <u>to know this love</u> that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God"***. (Eph. 3:17-19)

Paul and other New Testament writers found that the people God loves include the powerless, the ungodly, the sinful, those who were enemies of God, people who deserve punishment and the spiritually dead (Rom. 5:6-10; Eph. 2:3-5). They stated that the supreme demonstration of God's love was in an event that occurred in history – God sending His Beloved Son into the world (Jn. 3:16). God dealt decisively with our sin (the sin of all human beings – past present and future) through the voluntary act of the Lord Jesus laying down His life as a sacrifice for sin for all humanity. (Jn. 10:11-18; 15:13; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 Jn. 3:16; 4:8-10) This is our "Good News" and our motivation to tell friends. All of it is based firmly on that love of God. (2 Cor. 5:14)

Some Conclusions

The Qur'anic roots of WDD – approval – and HBB – preference – can cause confusion if we take them to be the exact equivalent of "love". For example, if we use a word derived from HBB – like 'mahabbat' – to refer to God's love for sinners, as we often do when talking with friends, it seems to these friends that we are stating that God 'likes' or 'prefers' sinners! In our desire to be understood by our friends, we have borrowed Qur'anic terms, but we must remember that such terms have a much different significance to our friends. No term borrowed from the Qur'an can, by itself, be an adequate vehicle for the expression of Biblical truth. We must be prepared to explain the sense in which we use all such words. We must not assume that the term alone will convey the truth.

It is sometimes stated that in both Christianity and in Islam man has no right to God's favour. This is often affirmed, but the similarity is only apparent. Muslims see man as an unworthy slave, but paradoxically apply some degree of 'worthiness' in that, as we have seen, sin excludes sinners from the love of God and that love is really only 'approval' or 'preference'.

God the Father's gracious love for all people is inseparably related to His righteous purposes as He seeks to restore His fellowship with us. This truth is only found in the Bible. In the Old Testament God's righteous and redemptive love for His sinful and rebellious people is central

to God's covenant with man going back to both covenants – given to Noah and to Abraham. In the New Testament the full meaning of this love is shown to us in the self-committal and self-giving of God in His Eternal Son – The Lord Jesus. This is the Good News of Eternal Life that is given to all people in the Lord Jesus alone: ***"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.***" (2 Cor. 5:19) By faith, we may lay claim to the benefits of that Divine Sacrifice. Sadly, for our friends there is no place for such faith or for the love which God the Father has revealed in His righteous sacrificially-redemptive act of grace.

The Qur'an doesn't give the believer any assurance of the forgiveness of all his sins this side of the grave and after that it will be too late. Any prospect of forgiveness at the end of life is a reward of obedience to the laws of God – the Sharia. So our friends can only die in the hope of God's mercy (Sura 17:57). But then the motive of such service is purely selfish, seeking one's own welfare in the future.

It can only be when a believer **begins** with the total knowledge of God's forgiveness and the fact that God really loves us that we can then serve God out of genuine heartfelt love.

The story of Dr. Muhammad Daud Rahbar

Dr Rahbar was an influential scholar, poet and translator from a Muslim background. He wrote:

"In the face of a frontal attack launched on the intellectual level, the best of (workers) to Islam pursue a mode of approach that was seldom neglected by their predecessors, but that was never quite trusted to bear full fruit – the method of intimate personal fellowship, of loving service, of sympathetic testimony and of united prayer. Believing that the essence of conversion is direct experience of the saving power of Christ, they seek to lead the Muslim to that experience by helping him to sense his deepest needs, by appealing to what he has already known of God in his inner life and by sharing with him what Christ has done for them. In counting upon Christ himself – and not theories about Him – to exert the drawing power, they are aided by the fact that the character of Christ ***does*** *attract the Muslim and is doing so more and more. The most hopeful note to many in the Islamic World today is the irresistible attraction of the person of Jesus Christ! To make the Muslim feel that attraction through deepening friendship, through guided study of the New Testament, through leisurely conversations and through prayer together that confesses God's Spirit alone can convert; this is the primary aim on which all else depends."*

It was loving friendship that won Dr. Muhammad Daud Rahbar to faith. As he reflected on now being "in Christ" by faith, he found that the longings of his Muslim origins had a radical fulfilment in the Lord Jesus. But he found it wasn't necessary to repudiate that heritage. He saw in his conversion three aspects:

- The conversion of the mind
- The conversion of the 'soul' (the emotional part of us)
- The conversion of the will

In Dr. Rahbar's case, in the conversion of the mind, it was what he called the "worshipability of God" that was vastly increased as he came to know Jesus. He said that, even as a child, he was sensitive to the mystery and dignity of suffering. His father, a learned and renowned Muslim scholar, became a widower in middle life. He worked hard at being a "double parent" bringing together a close and loving family. Muhammad Daud grew up realising the self-giving affection of his father as he neglected his beloved books and studies – suffering countered with tenderness.

Later Dr. Rahbar was to encounter the bigotry of religious obscurantism and the unfeeling exercise of dogmatic authority, crushing the spirit and the wistfulness of inquiry into truth. As a result, he began to wonder at the relevance of belief in God. What does divine greatness mean in the realm of compassion and suffering? He had seen some "greatness" in his father. But "God is greater" and the human could not outdo the divine!

At the same time he became increasingly aware of divine justice – a great theme in the Qur'an. He wrote the following:

"It was the fact of the incarnation that made me fall in love with Christianity. To a Muslim the very idea of God becoming man is blasphemous, but it was this "blasphemy" that saved me from unbelief. To me it became the most natural thing. Stories are told of Shah Abbas (an 18th century ruler in Persia) and how, in order to get to know his poorer subjects, he used to dress up as a poor man – a dervish – and thus go among them. This gracious act he was able to do precisely because he was a king. And by such action nothing was taken away from the glory of his kingship. If we admire such action in a human being, why should we not admire it in God?"

Dr. Rahbar also came to see his discipleship in terms of his past heritage. He loved languages – Arabic, Persian and Urdu. He delighted in calligraphy, both as an art form and as a way of venerating the Word of God. He produced beautiful calligraphy of Bible verses. He found the geometrical and floral designs of Arabesque exquisitely beautiful compared to much of 20th century western art! He believed that Islam had no monopoly of grace, of angle, curve and line. So he loved to write poetry in all three languages. He loved the arts, the symbols of his old worldview. He sort of "baptised" them into his new life in Jesus. [It is interesting that Jesus and His Crucifixion – even the crown of thorns – has come into contemporary Arab poetry and art in the context of the Palestinian tragedy.]

A Bibliography

Muhammad Daud Rahbar, **God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur'an** (E.J. Brill, Leiden 1960).

Muhammad Daud Rahbar, **A letter to Christian and Muslim Friends.**

R.A. Nicholson, **Studies in Islamic Mysticism** (University Press Cambridge).

E.J. Hastings, **Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.**

Samuel M. Zwemer, **The Muslim Doctrine of God.**

Useful Materials

- **The Love of God in the Qur'an and the Bible** by John Gilchrist [This is a 30-page booklet that can be given to Muslims and needs to be studied by workers.]
- **The Cross and the Prodigal** by Kenneth Bailey [This is a commentary and a drama. It has been used in many contexts as a culturally appropriate, non-threatening portrayal of the love of God.]
- **I dared to Call Him Father** by Bilquis Sheikh [This is a very readable story of a person who came to faith in the Lord Jesus through experiencing God's love.]
- There are several videos/DVDs built around the parable of the two sons (Prodigal Son)
    - ✧ **The Return** – in Arabic
    - ✧ **Lost and Found** in Arabic and Sylheti

In Dari there is an illustrated novel – **My Two Sons**