

"Divine Grace" in the Bible and in the Qur'an

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The biblical concept of "grace" has many meanings which are hardly understood any longer outside of the Church. The term has been divested of its senses in modern English, and its modern-day usage does not cover the multi-faceted meanings of the biblical term. However, grace is a fundamental biblical concept which distinguishes the Christian faith from all other religions.

Is the Qur'an and Islam familiar with the concept God's "grace" at all? What are the similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur'an? What points of contact can be used to convey the biblical message to Muslims?

1. Grace in the Old Testament

The concept "grace" seems to occur less frequently in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. Statements like John 1:17 ("The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ") and Romans 6:14 ("sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace") seem to confirm the common prejudice that God in the Old Testament is a God of wrath while God in the

New Testament is a God of love.

This impression is false. God is a God of grace throughout the Bible. Salvation history begins in the first book of the Bible where God shows his saving grace towards humankind. Finally, God's saving grace culminates in the coming of God's Son, the Savior Jesus Christ.

The impression that there is less "grace" in the Old Testament is created by English Bible translations: the most important theological term of the Old Testament for "grace" is Hebrew "hesed" which occurs 245 times. "Hesed" has many meanings, one of them being "grace." In the most famous Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, "hesed" is translated systematically by "eleos" which is rendered by "mercy" in the English Bible. The second Hebrew term for "grace", "chen" which occurs only 69 times in the Old Testament was translated by "charis" into Greek and by "grace" into English. However, God has shown his saving grace in the Old Testament starting with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise to the liberation of the children of Israel from the slavery in Egypt, to the sending of his prophets until the coming of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew term "hesed" expresses more than the English word "grace." Depending upon the context it can be translated by "unmerited favor", "lovingkindness", "goodness", "steadfast love", "loyalty", "grace" and "mercy." "Loving-kindness" is perhaps the most comprehensive translation as it includes all the other variants of meaning.

The Old Testament terms for "grace" refer to both God's common grace and his saving grace towards individuals and peoples. This is important to know in order to understand similarities and differences between the biblical and the Qur'anic concept of "grace."

2. Grace in the New Testament

The writers of the New Testament inherited the important key concept of "grace" from the Old Testament. This concept anchors the New Testament message in salvation history.

The many facets of the concept of "grace" are rendered by the word "charis" in the New Testament. "Charis" has even more meanings than "hesed." Depending upon the context it can be translated by "favor", "good will", "lovingkindness", "unmerited favor", "goodness", "mercy", "grace", or "gift."

"Charis" occurs 155 times in the New Testament, mainly in Paul's letters. New Testament "grace" refers in particular to the unmerited

gift of redemption through Jesus Christ. God, the Father is the source of this saving grace which is manifested in the sacrificial death of his Son. Christ the Savior gives the gift of salvation. The richness of God's grace manifests itself in his loving-kindness shown to people, in the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7), the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23), and in spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 1:7).

Both Old Testament "hesed" and New Testament "charis" could be described most comprehensively by "God's *lovingkindness*" This *loving-kindness* is expressed in particular through the unmerited grace of redemption. Thus, in addition to God's common grace, an individual can experience God's saving grace. This distinguishes clearly the biblical (especially the New Testament or Christian) concept of grace from Qur'anic ideas about the "grace" of Allah.

3. Grace in the Qur'an

At first glance there seem to be a number of similarities between Christianity and Islam, but there are fundamental differences in the concept of God and the resulting concept of grace between the two faiths:

Both the Bible and the Qur'an describe God as good. Speaking of Allah's favor, grace and kindness, the Qur'an uses words derived from the Arabic roots RDW, FDL, LTF and

N'M. According to the Qur'an Allah manifests his "grace" in spiritual and material blessings bestowed upon human beings. Allah is the constant giver (surah 3:6; 38:8; 52:28). Allah shows his *common* grace in the creation of man and all other creatures, including the angels (surah 15:29-35; 17:72; 38: 71-85). The Qur'an emphasizes over and over again that Allah is "Merciful", the "sum of all that is good." Each surah - with the exception of surah 9 - begins with the formula "In the name of the Merciful, the Compassionate." Surah 7:156 even says "My mercy comprehends all."

This *common* grace of Allah, his benevolent kindness towards creation shows parallels to the biblical concept of God's *common* grace who "sends rain over the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

A comparison with the Bible shows that the Qur'an speaks of Allah's grace and mercy, even of his "love" (3:31), but these attributes do not describe His essence, nor are they at the center of the Qur'anic message. It is true that Allah is merciful towards whom he wills. However, the center of the Qur'anic message is the declaration that there is only one God who is all-mighty and eternal (arab. tauhid).

The Qur'an emphasizes that Allah "loves" only the righteous ones and that he guides only those who do his will. God is opposed to his enemies, and the ungrateful have

nothing to expect but his wrath and judgment. Allah does not "love" the unjust, the unbelievers, the transgressors and evildoers.

The Bible leaves no doubt that man is saved only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23-24). By Jesus' death this grace of God is already existing, while human beings are still "sinners" and "enemies" of God (Romans 5:6.8.10). Such a prevenient forgiveness would be unthinkable in Islam because, according to the Qur'an, Allah can only forgive if man has made the first step, has become a believer and obeys Allah (especially, if he practices the "Five Pillars" of Islam).

The Bible frequently speaks about assurance of salvation (1 John 5:12), while the Muslim believer can only hope to earn paradise by good works. There is no salvation history and no assurance of salvation in the Qur'an. Islam denies that man needs to be saved from the power of sin because, according to the Qur'anic concept of man, human beings are weak, but good. They only need guidance. According to the Bible man is "evil from childhood" (Genesis 8:21), he needs a regeneration of his heart, i.e. he needs to be born again. That rebirth can only happen through God's initiative, through his saving grace. This is the only way sinners can be redeemed.

However, Allah is not the Father God, who showed his saving grace in the sacrificial death of his Son on

the cross. Allah has not become man, he did not give himself on the cross in order to save the lost. In Islam man is partly responsible for his own salvation. Every human being stands alone before Allah (surah 6:164), he does not need a redeemer. In spite of all his good works, a Muslim has no assurance of salvation. The uncertainty expressed by the statement "so Allah wills" always remains.

Therefore: God's *saving* grace (not his *common* grace) is distinctive of the Christian concept of grace. Nobody can save himself by his own efforts, and everything depends on God's unmerited grace and loving-

kindness shown in Christ's death and his continuing saving grace.

References

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Welche Bedeutung hat die islamische Überlieferung?

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Die islamische Überlieferung (hadith: arab. Überlieferung, Tradition, Bericht) hat nach klassischer muslimischer Auffassung dieselbe Autorität wie der Korantext und ist in vollem Umfang göttlichen Ursprungs. Die umfangreiche Überlieferung erläutert und interpretiert gewissermaßen den Korantext. Es genügt daher nicht, die Vorschriften des Korans zu befolgen: auch die Lebensweise, die "Gewohnheit" Muhammads (arab. die 'sunna Muhammadiya') muß möglichst in allem nachgeahmt werden. Aufschluß darüber, wie Muhammad gelebt und

welche Auffassungen er zu bestimmten Fragen vertrat, gibt die umfangreiche islamische Überlieferung¹.

Schon bald nach Muhammads Tod kamen in der muslimischen Gemeinde viele Erzählungen über Muhammads Verhaltensweisen, Gewohnheiten und seine angeblichen oder tatsächlichen Äußerungen

1 Ergänzend muß hinzugefügt werden, daß für Sunniten außer Muhammad auch das Vorbild der Prophetengefährten und der ersten vier "rechtgeleiteten" Kalifen maßgeblich ist, während für Schiiten außer Muhammad nur der vierte Kalif, 'Ali, und die schiitischen Imame als Vorbilder dienen.