

## The Bible as Islamic Scripture

At this point the basic issues of Islam have been examined in the light of the Bible. It is appropriate to change points of view. Rather than beginning with the beliefs and practices of Islam as such, and looking for them in the Bible, it is now time to take the Bible as it stands, and see how it appears from an Islamic viewpoint.

We turn to the examination of a particular Biblical text as a text of Islam. We have already noted that James the brother of Christ is the final Imami figure to appear in the Bible. It is therefore appropriate to look at the epistle attributed to him as we seek a bridge from the faith of the Bible to historical Islam.

### The Epistle of James

The epistle of James is a remarkable one. It contains not only a directly developed discourse on the subjects of its choice, but hints and references to all of the major doctrinal issues and to many matters of practice. Some of these are reminiscent of Islamic values, practices, and beliefs, and they will emerge here as special issues as we go along.

The epistle can be seen as a commentary on the prayer of Abraham as it is known to us in a later text, the first chapter of the holy Qur'an. This first part will examine the epistle from this point of view, showing how the author penetrates the meaning of the prayer with not only theological astuteness, but with an eye continually on the practical side of the life of faith. The epistle of James deals with subjects in order which are reminiscent of the phrases of the first chapter of the Qur'an in the same order of occurrence.

The first chapter of the Qur'an is as follows. It should be remembered that the Qur'an cannot be translated. This is merely an English explanation of the text as rendered by S.V. Mir Ahmad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, 1988, page 4.

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful, all praise is only God's, the Lord of the worlds, the Beneficent, the Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgement, Thee alone worship we and of Thee only we seek help. Guide us O Lord on the Right path, the path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy bounties, not the path of those inflicted with Thy wrath, nor of those gone astray.

## *1: 2 In the Name of God*

The Qur'anic phrase identifies the Deity as Allah, God to whom all creation is submitted.

The first thing James does is to establish his identity. He calls himself merely a servant of God. This corresponds precisely to the well-known name Abd Allah, servant of God. This is of primary importance to James. He wants above all to establish his servanthood under God. This is understandable if the author is James the just, whose right to the throne of Israel may well have been accepted by thousands. As an heir to the throne of Israel he writes to the scattered twelve tribes.

The second point James makes is that he is also the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word *theos* in Greek corresponds in translation generally to the word *Elohim* of the Hebrew Scriptures. This word is the cognate of Allah in Arabic. The word *kyrios* is used to translate the Hebrew YHWH into Greek in the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is also applied to Christ and others in the Greek Scriptures. It seems to have four basic uses in the Greek Scriptures: 1) as a translation of YHWH, 2) Master, as of a slave or disciple, 3) Sir, and 4) Mister. In this case, the second meaning is preferred, the latter being too weak and the former being excluded by application to one who is a man and not God.

The import of James's words in all details establishes the one true God.

## *1:2-11 The Beneficent*

The Qur'anic expression relates to the broad grace of God in creation as a whole.

The word temptation in this section refers to trials, unpleasant events, and suffering in general. It refers to anything that can happen to shake our confidence in God. They are specifically events for which no one can be blamed, and which could not be changed merely by a change in human behavior.

James gives us some counsel on how to relate to such situations. His treatment is firstly to count it joy. This is a conscious exercise of renewing confidence in God. It is natural when disaster falls to question why. Why did God let it happen? The treatment is not to find an answer to such foolish questioning, for such answers in reality merely lay blame on God. The treatment is to lay such questions aside and renew confidence in God. That is, to count it all joy. The second step is the growth of patience. The third step is perfection.

In the face of the temptation to question why God allows this or that, as though disasters were personal messages from God, James gives us some advice on how to pray and what to pray for in such situations. He approaches this problem in verses 5-8. The first point is how to pray: that is, in faith or nothing wavering. We are to pray without doubting God. To question why God allows this or that is in itself doubting, not healthy doubting, but lack of confidence. The second point is what to pray for, which is wisdom. In difficulty we are to pray for wisdom, which is the ability to know the will of God even when we find ourselves in extraordinary circumstances, at times when we might be off guard. To pray for

wealth, as is so popular nowadays, is not appropriate.

James's commentary defines some of the practical aspects of the broad grace of God which could be misunderstood.

### *1:12–27 The Merciful*

The word 'Merciful' refers to the particular grace or mercy of God in a specific case, time and individual.

At this point James enters another area. He even redefines the word temptation altogether. At this point he begins talking about temptation to sin, which is something altogether different. He did not tell us, for example, the source of the temptation he examined up to here. But beginning from verse twelve he talks about the temptation which has its source in lust, as the authorized King James Version of the Bible puts it. The meaning of the word temptation in verses 12–27 is the desire or attraction to do other than the expressed will of God.

James makes two points about temptation of this kind. First of all, those who endure under it, will receive a reward. Secondly, we are not to suggest that God is the source of such temptation. This is not, of course, to imply that God is the source of the former kind of trial either. But James gives a four-step development: 1) lust, which produces 2) enticement, which produces 3) sin, which produces 4) death.

Each of these steps can be examined more closely. The first, lust, is at the level of what each of us is. This can refer to natural, normal drives which have the potential of being directed toward inappropriate objects, or it can refer to abnormal and acquired drives, such as addiction. The second step is enticement, or the moment when a drive becomes conscious and is directed toward a specific goal at a specific moment.

This is the point at which the temptation enters our consciousness. This is the point at which it is too late to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation,' since at that point we are already in temptation. The third step, sin, is the point at which the choice is made to carry out the illicit desire and the act itself takes place. In contrast with what many Christians teach, sin is not a mental disposition or something inborn, such as original sin, but rather the act of transgressing the law. The final step is death, which is primarily the condition in which right knowledge of God is no longer active.

The rest of the section deals with how we can overcome temptation. James's theory could be called salvation by the action of the word of truth. The word of truth is introduced in verses 17–21. The word of truth is described in four points. The first point is that God is the source of all good things. The second is that God does not change. When we realize these two things, then the word of truth can put us into a special covenant relationship with God. This covenant relationship produces the potential for a certain kind of behavior as described in verses 19–21.

Verses 22–25 describe the process of how the word of truth works. This process involves decided

action, not merely intellectual comprehension. The first step is illustrated with the mirror. Just as one can look in the mirror to discover facial blemishes, one can look into the ten commandments to discover blemishes in behavior. This is an actual practice that has to be done decidedly and consciously. Each of the commandments should be read or recited.

After each one, we should think back over our behavior and decide what needed improvement we become aware of in the light of the commandment. The next phase is to make a decision to act accordingly, that is, to continue in the commandment. The important point is the decision. There will often be a temptation not to make the decision to obey, because we know that we have failed to do so in the past. Failure in obedience, however, does not free us from the obligation to decide to obey.

James gives three areas of attention while looking into the mirror of the law. These are found in 1:26–27. The first area of attention is what and how you speak. The second area of attention is how you have related to the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. The third area focuses on the matter of conformity and nonconformity. To practice the mirror of the law should free us from conformity to the mores of the surrounding society. We certainly receive outside influences, but we ought to limit these and let the law influence us as much as possible. So these three areas include speech, action, and attitude or thinking.

James's shift from the temptation inherent in creation to the particular temptation to sin as it appears in the individual parallels the shift in the Qur'anic phrase from general grace to particular mercy.

#### *2: 1–4 All Praise is only God's*

The Qur'anic phrase recognizes that all good things, even those received at the hand of human beings, have their true source in God, to whom is therefore due all thanks and praise in the final analysis.

The desire for credit and inordinate praise is the source of the social system of subservience to the wealthy and disdain for the poor. Although this is true in every time and place, the society in which we now live is almost unique in having only one criterion for respect: money. It has come to the point that faith and spirituality are part and parcel of the materialist culture. We strike directly against this corrupt way when we recognize that all praise is God's.

On the other hand, there is a way of relating to others in terms of moderate, deserved praise, that enhances human relations and feeds the healthy tone of self-esteem. After all, even the things for which we wrongly demand credit and inordinate praise, are things for which the praise is due to God. We are therefore daily dealing in divine actions and are creatures of finer stuff than we imagine.

James's commentary applies the Qur'anic phrase to very practical situations in which humans misunderstand and misappropriate to themselves praise due to God.

#### *2:5–9 The Lord of the Worlds*

The Qur'anic phrase recognizes God's sovereignty over all things by virtue of creatorship.

To give respect to one human being over another on the basis of their wealth is idolatry. Such respect belongs to God. He is the source and true owner of all things. The way to overcome this false perception is the practice of loving one's neighbor as oneself. This does not mean affection. It means to take consideration of every person equally in the struggle for survival.

James's understanding of the Qur'anic principle allows him to point out that status based on wealth is empty, since all things finally belong to God.

### *2: 10–12 The Beneficent*

The Qur'anic phrase of general grace is repeated.

To love one's neighbor as oneself is known as the royal law. Here James mentions another law, the law of liberty. Two examples from the law of liberty are given in verse eleven identifying this law as the ten commandments. The ten commandments, being the unique, direct revelation of God, are the general terms of divine grace. That is why the term 'law of liberty' is so appropriate.

James uses this term to combat the antinomian elements in the early community of the followers of Jesus. It is worth noting that the antinomian trend finally took over what became established Christianity, which is now a non Biblical tradition.

The Bible tradition maintains that liberty is specifically defined by the ten commandments, and that the law is identical with grace. Salvation from sin and condemnation is therefore based entirely on grace which extended to those whose intention is to keep the law and who repent on their failure to do so.

Established Christianity, by contrast, teaches that there is a contrast between freedom or liberty on one hand and the ten commandments on the other. Christians do not see the commandments as liberating, but as binding and onerous. Christianity further maintains that there is a contrast between the ten commandments and grace, and that grace comes after the commandments and abrogates them. Salvation from sin and condemnation according to Christianity is based on confession of acceptance of the vicarious death of Christ in payment for the debt of sin.

The Christian doctrine does not therefore recognize the infinite grace of God in salvation, since it makes a human sacrifice in addition to it necessary. James does not know of any forgiveness of sin on the basis of the crucifixion. That is why, in order to maintain the agreement between the Gospels and James on one hand, and some epistles on the other, it is necessary to understand the application of sacrificial language to the crucifixion as entirely allegorical.

James's analysis of law shows the divine law to be of the character of general grace, just as the Qur'anic phrase would make it out to be.

### *2: 13–26 The Merciful*

The Qur'anic phrase of particular merciful application is repeated.

Grace is within the domain of the basis or justification for salvation. Mercy is within the domain of the individual application of the gift of salvation. James maintains the same condition for forgiveness in verse thirteen that Jesus maintains in Matthew 6:14–15.

That condition is mercy or the willingness to forgive. Only those willing to forgive are forgiven. Neither Jesus nor James maintain that forgiveness is conditional on the death of Christ. James expands on this to show that practical deeds of mercy are the real criteria, not a mere oral acknowledgement of someone's apology for having caused harm.

James's doctrine of salvation can thus be summarized in terms of grace and mercy. From the divine direction, acquittal in the judgement depends on the grace of God extended to all people in the ten commandments, appropriated to each individual through mercy. From the human direction, acquittal in the judgement depends on the human acknowledgement of divine grace, that is, conscious assent to the will of God in the form of obedience and repentance, and the merciful demonstration of the appropriation of grace by works of charity and mercy.

The Christian abhorrence of works as a means of salvation is based on the fallacy that human merit somehow arises from the human resources, the fallacy that human action may have some other source than what determines and conditions. This is precisely the fallacy that James is attacking in the first part of the chapter, where he maintains that all praise belongs to God, who is the Lord of the Universe.

Of course the Christian is right, that human merits, supposing such existed, can have no effect on the divine judgement. But divine merits can and do have such an effect. Recognizing that the praise for any good thing belongs to God is recognizing the divine merit in all things good. We are to choose the works of God, allowing the works of God to be manifest in our lives. Liberty lies not in the power to choose or not to choose the works of God, as many would maintain, but in choosing the works of God. Liberty appears only when the choice has been made. We are otherwise determined and conditioned, possessed of nothing of merit.

From the general law, James turns to its specific application in terms of mercy, thus following a similar pattern to that of the Qur'anic exposition.

### *3:1–8 Master of the Day of judgement*

The Qur'anic expression implies that only God is the judge on the Day of Judgement. The implication of course is that there will be such a return of all creation before the Creator to be held accountable.

The surface information here notes the following points: 1) High position entails greater responsibility; 2) A person in high position cannot fail to offend at least some of those under him all of the time, and all of those under him some of the time; 3) To be able not to offend in one's speech would mean that a person

is perfect; 4) The tongue will condemn us in judgement.

All of these practical bits of advice fit together in terms of the theme that God is the Master of the Day of judgement. This should be kept in mind by the person seeking a position of power and influence. Such power is illusory, first of all, because God alone is Master of the Day of Judgement, and the Day of judgement is not merely a future event, but a mirror casting responsibility back on our daily lives.

The position of power and influence is illusory also because of the character of speech situations. The very essence of authority is offensive to all who come under such authority. So those in positions of power 'in many things... offend all'.

Finally, the position of power is illusory because the tongue undermines it. Anything such a person says to a subordinate, no matter how conciliatory, only serves to condemn the powerful person. This is true in daily confrontations, but it is true of the Day of judgement as well. The tongue confesses the faults of its owner despite the will to bridle it and put forward the matter in the light most favorable to the individual.

James's use of the tongue to comment on the principle of the sovereignty of God is most ingenious, indeed, again showing the mark of inspiration.

James's analysis points out the psychology of trying to usurp judgement which belongs only to God, thus again falling in line with the argument in the first chapter of the Qur'an.

### *3:9-12 Thee Alone Worship We*

The Qur'anic phrase implies the unity of God, to whom alone worship is due.

James notes that it is inconsistent to praise God on one hand, and curse human beings on the other. His argument is based on the unity of the human person.

The prayer expresses the confession of the unity of God in absolute and beautiful terms. James comments on this prayer by showing that it is inconsistent to praise the one true God in His unity and at the same time curse other human beings. The implication is that by dividing humanity we divide divinity as well, thus committing the sin of 'shirk' or association of other beings with God.

### *3:13-18 And of Thee Alone We Seek Help*

The Qur'anic expression affirms the unity of God again by noting that He alone is capable of giving help in the final analysis.

The gist of James's text here is that all wisdom and knowledge coming from God alone, work toward good actions. Failure to recognize this results in contention, competition and bitterness.

James has already shown in chapter one that the right petition is the petition for wisdom. Here he contrasts the petition of selfishness with the petition of wisdom, defining each in more precise terms. The

lesson is that we should examine our petitions in order to ascertain whether or not they are conducive to envy and strife. It is obvious, at least in most neighborhoods, that to petition God for a pink Cadillac is asking for envy and strife. The wisdom from above, the right petition, is beautifully described in verses seventeen and eighteen, with an emphasis on peace.

James's analysis is that prayer addressed to the one true God will petition such things as are in harmony with God's unity.

#### *4:1-6 Guide Us, O Lord, on the Right Path*

The Qur'anic petition for guidance on the right path is more than it seems as such. It follows on the reference to the Day of judgement and thus implies a petition in reference to that event.

James notes that strife arises not only from dependence on others than God, but from lust, which appears as competitive envy and sexual misconduct. He thus gives a practical exposition of the right path.

The direct application of the straight path to the trial on the Day of Judgement obscures the fact that the petition is precisely for divine guidance in our daily decisions now. The two points of difficulty in determining the straight path are conflict and sexual misconduct. We humans have the tendency to fall off the *Sirator* the straight path, either through conflict and separation from other humans, or through too close relations with inappropriate partners. In other words, James chooses not only the most troublesome examples, but the two ends of the continuum.

The source of both problems, according to James, is found in lust. On the one hand, lust for wealth and power causes envy, conflict and war. On the other hand, lust causes adultery. The commandment principle is that sexual relations can take place only within the marriage contract. A man has not the right to relations with the wife of another man, nor does a woman have the right to relations with a man other than one contracted to her in marriage.

James's analysis is again practical, pointing out areas of difficulty in daily life which are particularly relevant to the final judgement.

#### *4:7-10 The Path of Those upon Whom Thou Hast Bestowed Thy Bounties*

The mention of 'bounties' in prayer brings up in most people visions of material abundance and having fun. This general understanding was harshly criticized by Ja'far ibn Muhammad As-Sadiq, the sixth Shiite Imam, in his answer to Abu Hanifa, founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence. He maintained that the bounties of God are three things: 1) the knowledge of the unity of God, 2) the revelation through the prophets, and 3) divine guidance in the flesh through those specifically sent by God.

His illustration for the fact that the bounties are not material things is from human behavior in hospitality.

What would we think of a host, who, after giving food and drink, demanded something in return?

Therefore, the bounties our use of which God inquires about in the judgement are not food and drink, but spiritual gifts. Note the story in S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, New York, 1988, page 1901.

The bounties (grace) are mentioned in verse six, and expanded upon in verses 7–10. James finds the bounties to be God's lifting us up after submission to God, resisting the devil, drawing near to God, cleansing oneself, purifying the heart, affliction, mourning and weeping, and humbling oneself to God. These are in fact stepping stones to grace or the bounties. The state of grace is called being lifted up by God (verse ten). This implies continued dependence on God, being held in His power.

#### *4:11–17 Not the Path of those Inflicted with Thy Wrath*

Two categories of the wrong way are given in the prayer, those who incur wrath and those who go astray. The former is often applied to Judaism and the latter to Christianity. Indeed, Muslims sometimes perceive rabbinical method as a legal means of circumventing the law. It is particularly this mindset that is condemned here. Again, so typical of James, it is placed in the thoroughly practical. James calls speaking evil of one's brother setting oneself up as a judge of the law. In verse twelve, James relegates this to *'shirk'* as well, saying that it amounts to associating oneself with God. James's cure for this ill is to recognize human limitations on one hand, and the human responsibility to obey or submit to God on the other.

#### *5:1–20 Nor of Those Gone Astray*

James here describes the judgement on those who maintain an intellectual faith, but do not carry out the practice of the law, especially in the matters of justice for the poor and deprived.

In contrast with Jews, who do not depart from the law, Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms, departs from the law wholesale, and even prides itself in doing so. This last chapter speaks specifically to the problems that a Muslim observer might perceive in Christianity. Lack of emphasis on the law was already appearing in embryo at the time of James.

The first message is one of condemnation and judgement (verses 1–3). Then there is a list of typical ways of going astray: (verse four) defrauding laborers of salary, (verse five) materialism or wantonness; (verse six) intolerance and persecution of dissenters. This seems almost prophetic of what really happened in three successive phases in the history of Christianity.

The Donation of Constantine is perhaps the most famous example of early Christian fraudulent grasping of power and authority. In time the Church became wealthy and some of its functionaries wanton. This was one of the contributing factors to the Reformation in the West. The fragmentation of Western Christianity, however, did not so much solve the problem of wealth and wantonness as expose the problem of intolerance and persecution.

Verses 7–11 call for patience and reliance on the coming day of Judgement for redress in the face of such excesses.

Verse 12–16 give practices specifically appropriate to the situation of lowered regard for the law. These practices, according to James, will guard and keep the faithful until the Day of Judgement. These are: 1) avoidance of oaths, 2) prayer in affliction, 3) the singing of Biblical Psalms in place of other entertainment, 4) anointing and prayer for the sick, 5) confession of faults to one another.

## A Look at the Message

The message that James is trying to get across has been found by an ordered study of his epistle from beginning to end. It is possible to look at the epistle in another way. In dealing with his subject, James lets slip in many beliefs and practices that he uses as illustrations or to support his arguments. Although these are not the main presentation of James, they reveal the contours of the faith which he professes and assumes. We can note some of these in this second reading of the epistle.

The first principle of belief that appears is the unity of God. James comes down very firmly on the unity of God. This begins in 1:17, where James makes the assertion that God, or 'the Father of lights', as he puts it, does not change. The changelessness of God has very important theological ramifications. There is hardly any expression in the Bible that more clearly supports the idea of God's absoluteness than this. Changelessness is inconsistent with the concept of a god who incarnates, moves in time and space, eats, sleeps, breathes, dies, resurrects, or bears offspring, since all of these activities entail change.

In 2:19 James takes issue with the belief that confession of the unity of God is sufficient for salvation. This is a belief that is current among a certain quarter of Muslims today. James's position is that, although such a confession is the first pillar of belief, still it is not in itself sufficient for salvation. Taking the narrow view of the confession of the unity of God, it is only natural that James would reject this easy, inactive road.

Interestingly enough, the attitude that James condemns here is not the faith-without-works position known in Christianity, something unknown to him, but an attitude in the early church which is much closer to something cropping up today in some Islamic circles, the magnification of the confession of the unity of God to the detriment of the other pillars of practice. One occasionally finds a Muslim who considers that the *Shahadata* or confession of the unity of God and the apostlehood of the prophet suffice without carrying out the points of practice in prayer, fasting, and so on.

The unity of God is reiterated in 4:12, where James says that there is but one lawgiver in reference to God.

The justice of God is an underlying understanding in the epistle. In 1:13 James takes a clear position that God does no evil. James rejects the stand that God can be arbitrary in judgement. In 4:12 James

supports his view by noting God to be a lawgiver, on the basis of which He is able in justice to save and destroy. Finally, he implies in 5:9 that God's judgement based on behavior is not only sure but impartial, therefore just.

The epistle of James is strongly based on the prophetic tradition. The principle is overtly stated in 5:10. 'Take the prophets for an example.' The sequence of prophets upon which he bases his line of thought is as follows: Abraham (2:21–23), Job (5:11), and Elijah (5:17–18).

The idea that the verbal law or revelation must be supplemented by a divine revelation in real flesh and observable actions is only a logical corollary to James's practical emphasis of works that demonstrate faith. The principle is clearly seen in such texts as 2:1, where Jesus is referred to as 'of glory' and 1:17 where God is referred to as the 'father of lights'.

The somewhat obscure wording 'every good gift and every perfect gift' becomes clear in this context, if it refers to the bounty of divine proof. An idea which is historically and theologically close to the messianic promise and the concept of divine guidance in the flesh, is the idea of the perfect man. This appears in 1:4 and 3:2. This belief is often coupled with the veneration of the human face, or person. This extension is found throughout the spirit of the epistle, but especially in 3:9 and 4:11.

Finally the belief in the Day of judgement is strongly implied throughout the epistle and often mentioned outright, as in 5:1–3,9.

Besides beliefs, a number of religious practices are mentioned. Prayer (note 5:13,16) is mentioned and with it presumably ablutions (4:8). The fasting of the Day of Atonement is probably referred to in 4:9, and is reminiscent of how many Muslims celebrate the same date in Muharrem. The giving of alms is central to the epistle, but mentioned especially in 1:27 and 2:15–16.

Some liturgical formulas and religious expressions of speech occur in the epistle. The Islamic 'Depart in peace' (2:16) and 'If the Lord will' (4:15) are complemented by the Jewish prayer formula *'Baruch atta Adonai'* (Blessed art Thou, O Lord) in (3:9). The phrase 'God most gracious, ever merciful' of the Qur'an of course has its roots in the Torah. It is paraphrased here in 5:11.

There seems to be one point above all others that lends a sectarian character to this book, which could otherwise be within the mainstream of Islam or Judaism. That is the prohibition of swearing (5:12). This could be an echo of the teaching of Jesus, already referred to earlier, which was a prohibition of the misuse of swearing.

The final chapter of James mentions a number of religious practices which have been preserved in Christian tradition probably to a great extent because they are mentioned here. Among these are anointing and prayer for the sick by the elders of the church (5:14), and the practice of the confessional (5:16).

It is extremely doubtful that either of these at the time of James appeared in so institutionalized a form as they do today in Christianity.

Their appearance in Islam is probably closer to the spirit of the text. On the other hand, in all likelihood the singing of Psalms was an intensely institutionalized practice in the early church while Christians and even Jews have more or less lost Psalm singing as an institution today. Although the Psalms are sometimes mentioned in connection with the life of Muhammad in Islamic tradition, their liturgical use has practically disappeared.

The Epistle of James would be a good place to start in a dialogue among the three great faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Bible as a whole has a very profound core of consistency. If all would lay aside their traditional innovations and return to the Bible text, we might see the frontiers of conflict among Christianity, Judaism and Islam disappear. The heart core of all the revealed faiths is the one true God.

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