

“Allah, Most Gracious”: Grace in the Qur’an

Charles St-Onge, May 18, 2003

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11)

“On those who believe and work deeds of righteousness will Allah Most Gracious bestow love.” (Surah 19:96)

INTRODUCTION

The Qur’an, the text revealed to Muhammad of Arabia in the early 7th century of the Common Era, is a book of startling simplicity. It contains little explicit doctrine or metaphysical discussion. It contains few original narratives, and what narratives it does contain are simplified retellings of biblical accounts and Arabian legends. Although the first few surahs (chapters) of the Qur’an contain some legal code, the majority of the chapters have only one message: “Verily Man is in loss, except such as have faith, and do righteous deeds, and join together in the mutual teaching of truth, and of patience and constancy.” (Surah 103:2-3) Allah, the creator and preserver of the universe, is telling humanity through his Messenger to either shape up, or face certain and eternal punishment in unquenchable fire and agony.

But what does this Qur’an, revered by millions as the last direct revelation of God to his creation, reveal about God? Who exactly is Allah, and what is he like, this God who is warning us of never-ending hellfire? If the Qur’an claims to be a revelation from the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, then Allah should bear the same characteristics as the God of the Old and New Testaments of the Jewish and Christian faiths. “Graciousness” is a trait commonly associated with יהוה of Israel, whom by “grace” Christians know as the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is the grace of Allah? What role does grace play in the relationship between Allah and his creatures?

This paper will explore how “Allah, Most Gracious” is portrayed in the Qur’an. It will look, first of all, at the use of the word “grace” in the book. How is “grace” used in the Qur’an, and what does its meaning seem to be given that usage? In what ways is Allah gracious? Second, what is the role of man’s will in relation to the requirements of Allah? Is Allah’s grace or favor selective, or does Allah bestow grace on all humanity? Does Allah predestine some to believe in him, and others to fall away? If so, what might that say about Allah’s grace toward mankind? At the end of these sections, some general conclusions will be given regarding the picture the Qur’an paints of Allah, the “Most Gracious” (Surah 19:96).

GRACE: IS ALLAH’S AMAZING?

Grace is a word that Christians, especially Lutheran Christians, use frequently. But what exactly is “grace”? The Oxford dictionary gives several definitions of grace, of which the Christian definition, “the unmerited favor of God”, is only one. Grace can also refer to “elegance of manner”, “an attractive feature”, “courteous good will”, or “delay granted as a favor”¹. When Muhammad in the Qur’an refers to Allah as “most gracious”, what does he mean? When Allah grants grace, what is it exactly that he is granting, and does it always mean the same thing?

Early Meccan Surahs

The earliest surahs of the Qur’an are believed to have been preached by Muhammad between 610 CE (Christian, or Common Era) and 614 CE. Surah 73, likely preached during this period, contains one of the longest verses of the early Qur’an, if that indeed is when the verse was composed and it is not a later addition. Verse 20 admonishes the Muslim to frequent prayer, but not so much that the believer is overwhelmed. The Muslim is to give to charity, do good deeds and in this way “seek...the Grace of Allah: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful”. This grace seems to be a “good will” type of grace. Surah 68, of the same period, also speaks of “grace”, though indirectly. Verse 46 reads that Allah will grant a long respite to those who reject the Message of the Qur’an, for “truly powerful is My Plan.” This is grace of the type of “delay granted as a favor”. The surah then speaks of “the Companion of the Fish”, possibly the Old Testament prophet Jonah. Verse 49 of the surah reads “Had not Grace from His Lord reached him (Jonah), he would indeed have been cast off on the naked shore, in disgrace.” This seems to be “good will” grace, similar to the grace shown in Surah 73. It would also seem to be the closest one gets to the Christian idea of “unmerited favor” in the early surahs. There is, however, not enough mention of grace in the early surahs of the Qur’an to be able to say anything definitive.

Middle Meccan Surahs

From 615 CE to 617 CE, Muhammad began to gather a following in Mecca. The gracious of Allah is mentioned more frequently in these surahs than in the early period. The title of “Most Gracious” begins to be applied to Allah (see Surah 19:58, 20:109, 26:5). There are in middle-Meccan surahs three interesting uses of grace. First, the idea of an intercessor who may be allowed to speak on the people’s behalf before Allah at judgement arises. Allah is said to be “Most Gracious” for allowing this intercession. Second, the grace of Allah comes up in the several-times recounted story of the fall of Iblis, or Satan. Allah is gracious in not permitting Satan to afflict the believers. Last, Allah’s grace is shown in providing signs for his people, so that they may be saved from punishment. Allah’s graciousness is also associated with the actual saving of the righteous from damnation, as well.

Intercession and Grace

The concept of intercession on behalf of the people at the judgement begins to be developed in these middle-Meccan surahs. At first, the Qur’an speaks of Allah allowing certain people to, perhaps, intercede. Surah 78:38 reads: “the Day that the Spirit and the angels will stand forth in ranks, none shall speak *except any who is permitted by (Allah) Most Gracious*, and he will say what is right” (italics mine). Surah 53:26 also reads that Allah might give “leave for whom he pleases” to intercede. Another surah of this period, however, speaks of a certain singular person who will intercede, not persons plural. Interestingly, this reference occurs in Surah 19, which tells the story of Jesus and his mother Mary. Surah 19:87 reads “None shall have the power of intercession, but such a one as has received permission from (Allah) Most Gracious”. Even later on, it is made clear that a specific individual will most certainly intercede at judgement. Surah 43:86 reads “And those whom they invoke besides Allah have no power of intercession – only he who bears witness to the Truth, and they know him.” Christians might see in this verse the idea of Jesus as intercessor. Yusuf Ali, the Muslim scholar, admits that some classical Qur’an

commentaries grant that this interceder may indeed be Jesus, the Prophet of Unity. Ali himself, however, believes that this refers to the prophet Muhammad².

Iblis and Grace

The second interesting use of grace in the middle-Meccan surahs has to do with the role of Iblis, or Satan, in human affairs. This story of the fall of Iblis recounted in Surah 15 will be told again in later surahs, but this is its first mention. Iblis, choosing not to bow down in worship before Adam, is cursed by Allah and banished. Iblis, however, begs for respite until the day of judgement. This Allah grants. However, Iblis has promised to wreck havoc on humanity, as recorded in verses 39 and 40: “Because thou hast put me in the wrong, I will make (wrong) fair-seeming to them on the earth, and I will put them in the wrong – except Thy servants among them, sincere and purified (by thy grace).” Allah, in verse 42, then promises that Iblis will have no authority over his servants, “except such as put themselves in the wrong and follow thee.” How should the grace spoken of by Ali (for it is unclear if these words appear in the Arabic text), be interpreted? It seems to be something that Allah *does*, for it “purifies” the Muslim. Verse 42, however, suggests that people can choose to turn away from Allah and put themselves in the wrong. Is this grace unmerited favor, or Allah’s good will toward certain individuals? The great difficulty of understanding Allah’s grace in surahs such as these will be explored in the next section on predestination vs. free-will.

Other Aspects of Grace

Allah’s grace is spoken of in these middle-Meccan surahs in contexts other than the two significant ones mentioned above. First, Allah is gracious in saving Noah, Abraham and Israel (Jacob). Surah 19:58 reads “These were some of the prophets on whom Allah did bestow His Grace.” Here there is, as we have seen before, the idea of grace being given by Allah’s choice. Allah bestows grace not indiscriminately, but on those whom he chooses. Allah is also “Most Gracious” in revealing the Qur’an to the Arabs through Muhammad (Surah 26:5). However, the Arabs will soon feel his wrath if they choose not to obey. Further one, in Surah 37, we read the story of one in the Gardens of Paradise who wishes to see what has happened to his companion from the mortal life. Permitted to look down into the fires of hell, he sees his companion, and exclaims to Allah, “Had it not been for the Grace of my Lord, I should certainly have been among those brought (there)!” (Surah 37:57). This is truly a fascinating verse. The Qur’an is clearly suggesting here that something of Allah, and not of man, saves man from eternal damnation. Grace, here, is a favor bestowed on man. Clearly the man in the Gardens is grateful for God’s grace in saving him from fire. Yet the same surah, in verses 35-39, seems to say that it is a man’s choice to reject or obey Allah. Allah’s grace remains an enigma.

Later Meccan Surahs

The later Meccan surahs elaborate on some themes of graciousness found in the earlier surahs, as well as providing new insights and difficulties. Surah 21:28 elaborates on the theme of the intercessor first put forward in the early surahs. This surah reads “they offer no intercession except for those who are acceptable”, returning possibly to the idea of multiple intercessors. But who is acceptable? Allah proclaims that “no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear” (Surah 7:42). This dichotomy between our worthiness and Allah’s grace is the primary difficulty in these newer surahs. In order to examine the dichotomy, three points should be

considered. First, there is mention of Allah’s grace being bestowed on famous Old Testament figures, as well as the prophet Muhammad himself. Why is this grace offered, and what are its effects? And second, Allah’s grace toward humanity is mentioned several times. What are the signs of this grace, and what does this grace mean in the context of surrounding verses?

Grace and the Prophets

Grace was bestowed on both King David and King Solomon of Israel, with the result that they in turn praised Allah for the grace of knowledge. In Surah 27:15, we hear the words of David and Solomon, “Praise be to Allah, who has favoured us above many of His servants who believe!” Solomon asks the people to praise Allah for the knowledge he has bestowed on them: “This is indeed Grace manifest” (Surah 27:16). Here is again the suggestion that grace, in the Qur’an, means something undeserved received from Allah. However, it is not clear that this is what is really meant. David and Solomon are “servants who believe”; was their service and belief a prerequisite to their receiving the grace of Allah? If so, the grace was either deserved, in which case it was not grace, or it was undeserved, meaning that even belief and service to Allah does not qualify one for any special treatment. Muhammad also receives grace from Allah. Surah 17:74 reads “And had We not given thee strength thou wouldst nearly have inclined to them a little.” The clear suggestion here is that Muhammad was given grace from Allah to resist the temptation to apostasize. In this case, grace is a “helping hand” from Allah, a “courteous good will” extended to his creature. But for what reason was this grace extended? It would again seem that Muhammad has earned this grace by his first believing the message given to him.

Grace toward Humanity

That Allah shows “grace” to humanity seems clear from a number of these later Meccan surahs. Surah 27:73 reads “But verily thy Lord is full of grace to mankind: yet most of them are ungrateful.” The context of this passage seems to mean the undeserved favor Allah shows toward humanity, including the crops, cattle, favorable weather, and transport routes he provides, as Surah 16 records. This favor is most clearly shown, the Qur’an states, in the fact that Allah has not summarily destroyed us all! Surah 28:82 reads “Had it not been that Allah was gracious to us, He could have caused the earth to swallow us up!” Hardly the point Luther wanted to make in his small catechism explanation of the 1st article of the creed: “God has given me and still sustains my body and soul...he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life...out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy.”³ Allah’s grace is that he has granted us an extreme favor: respite for horrendous punishment

Medina Suras

The surahs of the Meccan period reveal some interesting qualities of Allah’s grace. His grace in the earliest surahs seems to be a good will toward his human partners, the response of a businessman or woman to a faithful partner. The middle-Meccan surahs introduce the idea of an “intercessor” between men and Allah at the day of judgement. They also record the story of Iblis, and how Allah “graciously” forbids Iblis to annoy those who believe in Allah and do righteous deeds. Allah’s grace toward his prophets is recorded, and his grace toward mankind in providing for them and choosing not to destroy them despite their wickedness. In some cases “grace” has been a “respite” from punishment. But it is harder to define what is meant by “grace” in other cases. Perhaps the only way to understand what is meant by “grace” in these

instances is to understand the cause or reason for Allah’s grace. Is this grace in some sense deserved by humanity, in which case it is akin to a “courteous good will” or perhaps an “attractive feature” of Allah? Or is it completely undeserved, as is the grace extended to all humanity by the God of the Scriptures?

In the surahs of the Medina period, the themes introduced in the previous surahs continue to be developed. We see in Surah 2:48, for example, a dramatic turn from previous revelation about the “intercessor” or “intercessors”. It reads “Guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another, nor shall intercession be accepted for her.” An intercessor for humanity will no longer be granted to the people; this avenue of grace has been closed. This change in plans is repeated several times in Surah 2, and again in Surah 3:56.

The Qur’an also continues to develop the idea of Allah’s bestowing “grace” on some individuals. The more passages that are encountered that speak of “grace” toward individuals, the less clear is the meaning of the word. Surah 3:152 reads “Allah is full of grace *to those who believe*” (italics mine). But Surah 2:213 says “Allah by His Grace guided the Believers to the Truth...for Allah guided whom he will to a path that is straight.” Which comes first: grace or belief? To make matters even more confusing, Surah 4:69 reads “All who obey Allah *and the Messenger* are in the company of those on whom is the Grace of Allah.” Now faith in Allah is equated with faith in the Messenger. To be sure, the will of Allah can only be known through the message of the Qur’an, which is delivered exclusively through his Messenger. But now the distinction between Message and Messenger has been blurred. Whether the Muhammad is speaking the Ayat (signs) of Allah or his own will, he must be obeyed to receive “grace”. But the question posed before remains unanswered: is this grace given to those who obey, or do they obey because they have received grace?

PREDESTINATION VS. FREE-WILL

Allah, in the Qur’an, sets before people the path to his “right”, a place of eternal peace and tranquility, and the path to his “left”, a place of eternal torment and suffering. “He whose balance (of good deeds) will be found heavy, will be in a life of good pleasure and satisfaction. But he whose balance (of good deeds) will be found light – will have his home in a bottomless pit...a fire blazing fiercely!” (Surah 101:6-9,11) Allah allows people free choice of which path to choose, and punishes or rewards accordingly. Or does he? Surely a gracious god would not punish people for an outcome he himself has determined. The Qur’an does indeed speak of the free choice of man. But there are also a great many troubling passages that seem to speak of a “double pre-destination”, a predestination to paradise as well as to the blazing fire of hell. Only by addressing the question of how believers come to faith in Allah can the meaning of Qur’anic “grace” be understood.

Is Allah a Lutheran, a Calvinist, or an Armenian? This would seem to be using a Christian paradigm to evaluate a foreign religion, to ask whether Allah is a synergist, predestines humans to faith, or to faith and damnation both. Yet since the Qur’an itself attempts to address this question, it would seem to be a fair one to ask. The key issue here is whether the grace of God is undeserved or deserved. If it is undeserved, there are a great number of passages that suggest

that Allah is a “Calvinist”, in that he predestines some for faith and others for damnation. If it is deserved, then Qur’anic grace is nothing more than a good will toward those who obey Allah. What does the Qur’an itself say about this?

Early Meccan Surahs

The earliest surahs of the Qur’an present humans as creatures with free will. Allah has sent his messenger, Muhammad, as a warner and man must either accept or reject the warning. Surah 92:14-16 reads “I warn you of a fire blazing fiercely; none shall reach it but those most unfortunate one who give lie to Truth and turn their backs.” The only exception to this is found in Surah 74:55-56, which reads “Let any who will, keep (the warning) in remembrance! *But none will keep it...except as Allah wills*: He is the Lord of Righteousness.” (italics mine) What does this verse mean? “Will” is a word traditionally associated with “volition” or “choice”. No one can “will” something that is not in his or her control. If this is also the case here, then the verse would seem to mean that Allah chooses who will keep the warning in remembrance. This would be the first indication that Allah plays a role in who will obey him and who will not. Yusuf Ali’s comment on this verse is interesting. He writes “If man has the will to learn, he will keep the Message always before Him, and Allah’s grace will help him to carry out in his conduct.”⁴ Ali believes that man chooses to obey, and then is helped in that obedience by Allah’s grace. Is this indeed what Qur’anic grace is, a helping hand? The rest of the teaching of the Qur’an on this matter must be considered before a final conclusion can be made.

Middle Meccan Surahs

These surahs record much more revelation concerning the grace of Allah in relation to humanity’s obedience to him. Beginning with surah 76, it can be seen that Allah’s grace plays at least some role in the faith of the Muslim. Surah 76:29-30 reads “This is an admonition: whosoever will, let him take a straight Path to his Lord. But ye will not, except as Allah wills.” Yusuf Ali’s comment on this verse is “man himself is weak; he must seek Allah’s Grace; without it he can do nothing; with it he can do all.”⁵ In the note mentioned previously in the section on the early Meccan surahs, Ali interprets Allah’s grace (small g) as something of a “helping hand”, whereas in this note Grace (capital g) is essential for anything man does, including (presumably) serving Allah. Is the difference in the spelling of grace worth noting? It seems that even Ali has discerned more than one kind of grace in the Qur’an. Is it that small-g grace is that courteous good will of Allah that assists the believer, and capital-g Grace the power of Allah that underlies all human actions?

Surah 36:9 suggests that Allah blinds people so that they cannot see the truth. It reads “We have put a bar in front of them and a bar behind them, and further, We have covered them up, so that they cannot see.” This is why many people do not believe the message of Muhammad. Furthermore, Surah 43:36 reads “If anyone withdraws himself from remembrance of (Allah) Most Gracious, We appoint for him an evil one, to be an intimate companion to him. Such (evil ones) really hinder them from the Path.” Not only does Allah blind the unbeliever, but he also sends an evil companion to ensure that he or she will remain lost. Capital-g Grace, then, is most certainly not extended to those who are “wrongdoers”. How much wrongdoing is permitted before Allah blinds the unbeliever and gives him an evil companion to mislead him? Surah 19:75 reads “If any man go astray, (Allah) Most Gracious extends (the rope) to them. Until,

when they see the warning of Allah (being fulfilled) – either in punishment or in (the approach of) the Hour – they will at length realize who is worst in position.” This would suggest that Allah is *always* holding out hope for the unbeliever. This is, in fact, the verse of the Qur’an that comes closest to speaking of Allah as a god that wishes all to come to him. But how can this verse be reconciled with Surah 36 and 43? Allah is, indeed, most mysterious.

Late Meccan Surahs

The role of the will of Allah in the choices of humanity becomes clearer in some of the verses of later surahs. Surah 7:179, for example, reads “Many are the Jinns and men We have made for Hell.” Surah 21:9 reads “We saved them and those whom We pleased.” Surah 27:4 reads “As to those who do not believe in the Hereafter, We have made their deeds pleasing in their eyes; and so they wander about in distraction.” Surah 7:146 has a powerful message, and reads in part: “Those who behave arrogantly on the earth in defiance of right – them will I turn away from My signs.” Surah 16:93 reads “If Allah so willed, He could make you all one People: but He leaves straying whom he pleases, and He guides whom He pleases.” Nonetheless, as the verse continues, “ye shall certainly be called to account for all your actions.” On the other hand, there are many verses that associate humanity’s faith choice as a free one. Surah 17:7 reads “If ye did well, ye did well for yourselves; if ye did evil, ye did it against yourselves.” Surah 18:28 reads “nor obey any whose heart We have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us.” What does seem clearer from the passages of this period, in the final analysis, is that a tendency toward predestination is beginning to dominate over the free will choice presented in earlier surahs.

Medina Surahs

In the later Medina surahs, predestination is now the dominant understanding of why some humans choose to follow Allah, and others not. Surah 2:105 reads “Allah will choose for His special Mercy whom He will –for Allah is Lord of grace abounding.” Surah 2:142 reads “He guideth whom He will to a Way that is straight.” Surah 2:272 also reads “Allah sets on the right path Whom He pleaseth.” Surah 2:26 is a little confusing, in that one part reads “He causes many to stray, and many He leads into the right path” which is followed by “but He causes not to stray, except those who forsake (the path)”. But in general Surah 2, this important Medina surah, emphasizes the choice and will of Allah in bringing people to faith rather than the free choice of man emphasized in the earliest surahs. The Qur’an starts out with Allah’s grace working with man’s free agency to bring men to salvation. Now, in these later surahs, it seems that the Grace of Allah determines who will receive guidance, and who will not. The courteous grace of good will of the early Qur’an has become the unmerited favor bestowed on those whom Allah chooses.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that the concordance at the end of the Amana Publications Qur’an does not list the occurrences of the word grace. Yet over 40 verses of the Qur’an contain significant references, either to Allah as “Most Gracious”, or to Allah’s grace itself. But the meaning of Allah’s “grace” is elusive. In a few places it is a respite from immediate destruction or punishment. Allah could have, for example, destroyed humanity for their sins but has chosen not to. Allah could also have immediately punished Iblis for his disobedience and rebellion, but did

not. In other places, “grace” is used with reference to general providence of Allah, in providing humanity with crops, cattle, modes of transport, rain, and family. In a similar vein, it is used in reference to Allah’s bestowal of specific talents on individuals, such as wisdom given to Kings David and Solomon of the Old Testament. “Grace” is even applied to the work of Allah in appointing prophets to bring his message of warning to humanity.

But the most interesting uses of “grace” occur in relation to humanity’s decision to believe in Allah and work good deeds, or remain in unbelief. In Christian thought, “grace” is that undeserved favor of God that either helps, or completes, one’s conversion from a state of disbelief to faithfulness. A straightforward understanding of grace does not seem to be present in the Qur’an. Rather, grace seems to change its colors over the course of the revelation of the Message. At first, as in Surah 73:20, grace is something to be sought after. It is the “courteous good will” that is sought after by the Muslim, the one who submits to Allah’s Will. Soon, however, grace takes on more of the characteristics of undeserved merit. Surah 37, describing the companion in heaven who credits his salvation to Allah’s grace, is good example of this “undeserved favor” type of grace. Yusuf Ali may be discriminating between the two types of grace, so that “grace” means Allah’s good will, and “Grace” means the unearned favor and merit of Allah. The idea of Allah’s Grace being the main reason for a person’s belief rather than some synergy of man’s choice and Allah’s grace dominates the later surahs of the Qur’an.

But what does this mean? What insight does this provide into the character of Allah, whom the Qur’an calls “Most Gracious”? First, it is not possible to directly equate the “graciousness” of Allah with the “graciousness” of the God of the Scriptures. Jews and Christians should both be careful not to read their own understanding of grace into the Qur’an. Instead, they should try and discern from the context of the verse and the whole surah what might be meant by the particular usage of “grace” under consideration. Is it a reprieve from certain destruction? Is it the good will of Allah toward a favored servant? Or is it the undeserved favor of Allah in providing for humanity in general, or in saving (or condemning) a particular individual?

Second, no determination can be made of whether the final destiny of a man or women is in his or her hands, or purely at the discretion of the “Most Gracious”. The Qur’an in some places suggests the former, with Allah’s help, and at other times the latter. A Muslim may see in this vagueness a sign of the deep mystery of Allah’s ways. If this is so, then the nature of Allah is every bit as mysterious as the Christian Trinity. Otherwise, one must conclude that the “Book that makes things clear” (Surah 43:2) does not do such a great job. The Qur’an may make clear what it required of believers, but it does not reveal the fundamental relationship between the will of the Sovereign of the Universe and the human will. Allah may indeed be the “Most Gracious”, but what that means remains a mystery.

¹ *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 1998

² *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*. Yusuf Ali (commentator). Amana Publications (1999). Note 2524

³ Luther, Martin. “Small Catechism” in *The Book of Concord*. Theodore Tappert (ed). Fortress Press, 1959, p.345

⁴ *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*. Note 5807

⁵ *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an*. Note 5861