

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 20

Volume 20 • Number 2 • April 1996

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

Evertt Huffard suggests that a 'Christology of honour' is as scriptural as any (western) emphasis on the 'love of God' being declared in [p. 167](#) Christ¹⁰ Of course such love is shown, but is it not significant that the synoptic gospels make little reference to it and Luke doesn't even mention *agapê* (God's special love for man) in his recounting of the missionary sermons of Acts? A concern for God's glory, honour, blamelessness and unmerited generosity seems rather to be documented—themes which make profound sense in the kind of cultural settings we are considering in this book.

In the difficult situation cited above (admittedly from a West African, Muslim context), the authoritative vision from heaven convinced the human father that he should no longer oppose his son's conversion to Christ. The vision-word from God was strong enough to nullify the traditional theological reservations which Muslims have about the crucifixion. Such present-tense experiences of God's holiness are perhaps the best attestation to the possibility that in the original crucifixion event itself, a holy God was also strongly in charge.¹¹

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The Servant Songs of Isaiah in Dialogue with Muslims

Bruce J. Nicholls

The author gave this paper at a seminar on Islam at the Gujranwala Theological Seminary, Pakistan.

The Editor

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to offer the thesis that to understand the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ from an Islamic perspective we need to start our discussion from the unity and greatness of God and with the prophet as the servant of the Lord who brings forth justice to the nations and shows compassion and mercy to the weak and to the transgressors of God's commands. We need to focus on honour and shame rather than initially on love and guilt. The thesis is that the approach of the prophet in [Isaiah 40–66](#) and especially in the so-called 'servant songs' is one with which the sincere and searching

¹⁰ Evertt Huffard, 'Culturally Relevant Themes about Christ' in J. Dudley Woodberry, *op cit.*, p. 172.

¹¹ It is not my intention to minimize the difficulties of getting around traditional Muslim objections to the crucifixion. It is, however, to suggest that a shift away from intellectual argument towards a concern for the Muslim to be 'shamed' into allowing God to be God is valid. After all, Paul knew that it was 'word' and 'power' together that convinced many of his hearers ([I Thess. 1:5](#)) of the truth of his message. According to Luke, the story of Acts is really that of how Jesus *continued* from heaven, via his apostles on earth, to act and to teach—both aspects of proclamation going together ([Acts 1:1](#)).

Muslim can identify. I will argue that the servant songs are an effective starting point for this dialogue, and that they open the way to understanding Jesus Christ as the suffering servant of the Lord, the Messiah whom God has honoured and exalted as king and Lord. The uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ in terms of the trinity, the incarnation, the cross and resurrection which are stumbling blocks to both the Jew and the Muslim can be accepted as divine mysteries but only after we have first met the servant of the Lord in the context of our own human predicament and responded by faith. The theological dictum of Augustine and Anselm ‘credo ut intelligum’—I believe that I may understand—is as appropriate for the Christian-Muslim dialogue as it was for the Christian-Graeco-Roman philosopher dialogue. For the articulation of this thesis I am grateful to the articles in the recent publication, *Muslim and Christian on the Emmaus Road* edited by J. Dudley Woodbeery (MARC, Monrovia, 1989) and especially for the chapters P. 169 by Evertt Huffard, Colin Chapman and Dudley Woodbeery. Pages quoted are from this compendium.

THE GOD OF HONOUR AND SHAME

In our Asian context whether Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, the general practice of Christian evangelists, pastors and missionaries is to interpret the gospel to their hearers and readers from the perspective of the love of God manifest in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and to appeal for a response in repentance, faith and love. This pattern is clearly seen in Raymond Lull, the first missionary to Muslims, who as a mystic and poet identified love as the distinct element of Christianity (p. 162). The modern missionary movement to Muslims beginning with Gairdner and Zwemer has continued to emphasize the same priority. However with Huffard, we ask the question, ‘For whom is love the key, the speaker or the hearer?’

No evangelist would deny the centrality of the theme of love in the gospels especially as the one that dominates the thought of the Gospel according to John and the three epistles that bear his name. In sections of Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul makes the same point. However, we need to ask if there are other themes and approaches to the gospel that are equally valid and may in some cultural circumstances be more appropriate. From the Isaiah passage we will argue that justice for the nations is an equally valid interpretation of the gospel motif. It is not without significance that in the synoptic gospels neither *agape* nor *agapao* are given any prominence. Love in the synoptics is almost wholly limited to the Lord’s interpretation of the Ten Commandments as to love God, to love your neighbour, and to love your enemy. In the Sermon on the Mount the noun *agape* is mentioned only twice. The emphasis is more on the power of God, his justice and his mercy to the weak and to those oppressed by sickness and disease and by demonic forces.

The story of the cross is in terms of honour and shame rather than love and guilt. Having said this we want to affirm the comprehensiveness of the gospel and that each theme is essential to the whole. This is beautifully illustrated in the parable of the two lost sons, one that strikes a response in many Muslim hearts.

While love is found in the Quran, it is a minor theme and limited to those whom Allah wills to love. There is no concept of God’s universal love for all of mankind. Allah is merciful to those whom he accepts. He reveals his will through the prophets but not his divine attributes. God in himself is unknowable. The Muslim cannot say, ‘God is love’, for in a mathematical monotheism the being of God cannot be love, for love involves interpersonal relationships. Only in a trinitarian understanding of God is it possible to say, ‘God is love’, and to understand his covenant relationships with his people as one of unconditional love.

The gap between the traditional evangelical and the Muslim world-views and value systems is wider than is often realized. Evertt Huffard [p. 170](#) points out that, 'Evangelical theology is heavily influenced by a Western individualistic worldview that amplifies the values of freedom, equality and personal love. On the other hand, Islamic theology has its symbiotic relationship with a community deeply rooted in the group-orientated pre-Islamic Arab culture that champions the value of honour, authority and loyalty. The stress in evangelical circles on a "personal Saviour" disturbs the Muslim as an attempt to bring God down to the human level' (p. 166). Thus in a western cultural context relationships are horizontal; all are equal. It is common today for children to call their parents by their personal names. Social relationships are maintained by love and shared interests. Where love no longer exists, separation and divorce are common.

Huffard contrasts this with the Arab Muslim who 'lives within a group-orientated context where vertical relationships have priority. The group/vertical structure is maintained by loyalty to the family and respect for authority. Fathers want to be respected and honoured by their sons; people are treated on the basis of their status and age. The cultural theme most valued is honour and the greatest fear is shame' (p. 166).

This difference is dramatically symbolized in the two approaches to marriage. In western culture marriage is based on a personal and free choice where love is the criteria for marriage. In Arab and Eastern society generally, marriage is an honourable arrangement between families that mutually respect each other. Marriage begins in honour and grows in love. In Muslim society love is not the only consideration in the selection of a mate; Huffard adds, 'Thus a man may not marry the woman he loves but he learns to love the woman he marries' (p. 166). Relationships are vertical; honour, authority and loyalty and only then love. Thus in the Muslim social consciousness, it is appropriate to begin our discussion on the uniqueness and finality of Christ with the concept of honour without shame and end with concepts of love and obedience and not the reverse as is often our evangelical practice.

Our first goal therefore is to show that God is one, that he reigns supreme in the universe and that in exercising his authority over all people he demands absolute loyalty. The Mosaic Ten Commandments ([Ex. 20](#)) work these principles out in detail and find a ready response in the Muslim heart. It is only in the New Testament that Jesus takes up the theme of Deuteronomy, 'Hear O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts' ([6:4-6](#)). It should be noticed that this interpretation of the justice of God in the Ten Commandments which is reemphasized by Jesus, directed to those who are already within the covenant, whether the first covenant or the new covenant, represents the experience of the insiders. To those who are outside the covenant, the emphasis is primarily on justice and mercy. As is to be expected, the Muslim interprets Jesus the blessed prophet of the Quran in terms of honour and shame. The cross is a [p. 171](#) shame which brings dishonour to Allah. It is therefore both impossible and unnecessary. The problem here is that the Muslim is unable to give content to his monotheistic understanding of the honour of God and he has an inadequate understanding of the cause of shame. The Christian understanding of the trinity is not a tri-theism nor is any analogy or illustration of it adequate; rather God has not only revealed himself in three different ways (this is the modalism of Christian heresy and of Hinduism) but in his being he exists in three different personal ways. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism is in the one name of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But little is to be gained in arguing this point with the Muslim. It can be accepted only when it is first experienced.

Similarly the relationship of shame and guilt can be understood only from inside the covenant relationship and experienced by the believer. As Christians we maintain that God's honour is upheld when God acts in ways consistent with his character as revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. God reveals not only his will (as Allah does) but also his essential character (which Allah does not). He is the God who acts justly and with compassion and mercy. Our triune God is holy. He is love. Therefore the acts of the servant of the Lord, whether understood as the remnant of God's faithful people or the messianic prophet who is still to come, must maintain the honour of the Lord God. The prophet suffers dishonour, shame and even death in order to maintain the honour of God. God may maintain his honour by delivering his prophets from shame, for example, Noah, Lot, Moses (as the Quran gives testimony) or he may permit or will his prophets to be wrongly killed, for example, Abel, Zecharias (as the Quran also gives testimony). We would argue that only in suffering and even death can the honour of God be maintained.

In interpreting the Servant of the Lord as finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the cross becomes the supreme event in which the honour of God as just and holy is maintained and God as love and merciful is proclaimed. It is only in the evangelical emphasis on Christ's death as an atonement for sin that God's justice is propitiated and his honour maintained. The problem for the Muslim is that the Quran gives an inadequate understanding of the human predicament. To reduce Adam's sin to ignorance or human error does not do justice to the question of why the prophets of Allah wrongfully suffered, nor does it do justice to the enormity of human suffering in the present context of the Middle East and the recent Gulf war. Some thoughtful contemporary writers admit this. The questionings of the Egyptian Muhammed Kamal Hussain are well known on this point. Dudley Woodbeery's diagnosis of the human condition (pp. 149-160) is particularly informative and relevant. Thus we would argue that we can understand honour and shame only when we understand both the greatness of God's character and the depths of human degradation and sin. Only then can we understand the necessity of the cross. To the Jew and the Muslim the cross is a [p. 172](#) stumbling block, to the Greek it is foolishness but to those of us who are being saved it is the wisdom and power of God. We glory in the cross ([1 Cor. 1:18-2:5](#)). Samuel Zwemer rightly entitled his biblical study 'The Glory of the Cross'. The servant songs of Isaiah are a marvellous introduction to this theme as the frequent references to them in the New Testament show.

RATIONAL ABSTRACTION OR FELT NEEDS

Before turning to the Servant Songs themselves we may note a second issue in the difference in the perspective between our evangelical evangelists and traditional orthodox Muslims. Drawing heavily on Paul's letter to the Romans it is common for evangelicals to develop a systematic theological approach to the gospel in which the law is taught, people are made aware of their sin and guilt and only then is grace proclaimed. Colin Chapman draws our attention to the Bible selection publication entitled 'The Message of the Tawrat, the Zabur and the Injil' which was prepared for Muslim readers and published first by the Bible Society in Beirut. In it the first four studies of the ten are entitled as follows: 1. God is one and has created man to serve and love him, 2. God gave man his laws, 3. God warns man of the consequence of his failure to keep his laws, 4. God is merciful and loving and wants to forgive. The remaining six studies show how Jesus is God's answer to the people's needs. Section 8, for example, is 'God demonstrates his love for sinful men through the death of Jesus'. Like many others, I was impressed with this selection and was in part instrumental for it being republished by the Bible Society in Bangalore. But with Chapman we might rightly ask whether this is 'the only model of the

Gospel? ... is this model of the Gospel appropriate for Muslims?' (p. 139). The use of the four spiritual laws abstracted from all cultural contexts and widely used in Asia is another example of the same methodology. My point is that this approach is appropriate for the speaker and the insider to the Christian faith, but not necessarily for the outsider who comes to the gospel with a different, in this case an Islamic perspective.

An alternative approach is to begin with the Muslim's felt needs which are similar to those of all peoples and where the Muslim, like all of us, is most vulnerable. Folk Islam and Sufiism are more sensitive to the daily human predicament of people than is Islamic orthodoxy. I have watched Hindus and Muslims praying at the same shrine of a holy saint, sharing the same felt needs and making the same request to 'God'. Martin Goldsmith, a one-time missionary to Muslims in South-East Asia, made effective use of parables in his preaching in the market place. His adaptation of the parable of the Pharisee and the sinner ([Lk. 18:9-14](#)) is a good example of how parabolic preaching to those with an eastern mindset is quickly understood and readily acceptable. I have twice published this story in the [p. 173](#) *Evangelical Review of Theology*, once in 1983 and again in July 1991 (Vol 15, No. 2 p. 272-277). The parable effectively answers our Lord's question, 'Which man went to his home justified before God?'. The justice of God, forgiveness and restoration are themes that go to the heart of the Muslim's felt needs. Colin Chapman calls Kenneth E. Bailey's interpretation of the prodigal son in the context of its literary form and the peasant culture of the Middle East, 'New Testament scholarship at its very best' (p. 142). Bailey's approach is not to counter the rationalism of Islam with an evangelical rationalism but with the excitement of discovering the unexpected in the story in which the honour of the father is vindicated and the love of the father is unexpectedly demonstrated. Chapman questions the reprinting of Pfander's great work *The Balance of Truth*, first published in India in 1835 (p. 118). For many today it sounds uncomfortably culture bound. Chapman likens his rationalistic approach to the 'football player who not only decides where the game is to be played, but also moves the goal post to suit himself' (p. 118). In India I was part of the Bible Society team supported by WASAI who met a number of times to discern the felt needs of Muslims today and to select Scriptures that speak to these needs. These booklets have been found useful. It was Martin Luther who rightly said, 'If you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues that deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the Gospel at all.'

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SERVANT SONGS IN PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL TODAY

[Isaiah 40-66](#) is set in the period towards the end of the Babylonian captivity (about 540 BC) when the return from exile was imminent. The new ruler Cyrus, was about to permit the Jews to return to Jerusalem and to Judea.

Interwoven in this section of the book of Isaiah are four servant songs that have the common theme of the servant of the Lord. There is uncertainty over the length of each song and no agreement as to whether they had a separate existence or were part of Isaiah from the beginning. I prefer to see them as distinguishable but an inseparable part of the original corpus of [40-66](#). Taking this broader view we identify the songs as [42:1-9](#), [49:1-7](#), [50:2-9](#), [52:13-53:12](#). The theme of the one sovereign God who acts through his servant is by no means limited to the songs as will be indicated in this discussion. We may summarize their significance as follows:

1. The Servant whom God the Lord has chosen and filled with his spirit is portrayed as 'the man for others' whose progressive suffering rises to a crescendo in chapter [53](#).
2. God's honour as the Creator King and Redeemer is vindicated through the suffering of his servant whom God raises and lifts up and exalts above all others.
3. The identity of the servant oscillates between Israel the faithful remnant, the prophet and even [p. 174](#) the pagan Cyrus and the coming anointed one, the Messiah whom the New Testament writers identify as the Lord Jesus Christ. Fulfilment in the present age and the age to come form a single perspective in the plan of God. It may be compared to an observer standing on a Himalayan hill station and viewing first the immediate valley and foothills and then the distant Himalayan peaks whose distance is foreshortened by the merging of the hills and valleys in between.
4. The perspectives of the servant songs find an initial commonality with the perspective of an Islamic worldview; in the theme of righteous suffering a bridge of understanding to communicate the passion and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes possible.
5. The songs are climaxed by the Glory of the Servant of the Lord who will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted ([52:13](#)); he will be given a portion with the great and divide the spoils with the strong ([53:12](#)). This vision can be fulfilled only in one, the Lord Jesus Christ risen from the dead and ascended into heaven.

SIGNIFICANT THEMES IN THE SERVANT SONGS

Space forbids more than a summary of the themes of [Isaiah 40–66](#) with special reference to the servant songs that are significant for our discussion.

1. There is no God but God. The Lord says, 'To whom will you compare God?' ([40:18, 25](#)). 'Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth' ([40:28](#)). 'I am the Lord; this is my name! I will not give my honour to another or my praise to idols' ([42:8](#)). In the spirit of the first two commandments of the Decalogue, the prophet warns against idolatry and ridicules the maker of idols who bows down and worships what he has made and cooks his food on the remaining wood that bums in the fire ([44:6–23](#)). 'The Lord says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord God Almighty; I am the first and the last; apart from me there is no God' ([44:6](#)). The Bible shares with the Quran its abhorrence of idolatry and the sin of *shirk*.
2. God the Creator is great. The Lord says, 'He who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to his people, and life to those who walk on it. I the Lord have called you in righteousness' ([42:5](#)). The Lord calls his servant to lift up his eyes and look to the heavens and asks 'Who created all these? He who created the stars calls them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing' ([40:26](#)). In the second song the Lord pronounces woe to those who quarrel with their maker and asks, 'Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?"'
3. God is righteous in all his acts. The first song begins, 'Here is my [p. 175](#) servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my spirit on him and he will bring forth justice to the nation' ([42:1](#)). 'He will open the eyes of the blind, free the captives from prison and release from the dungeons those who live in darkness' ([42:7](#)). Bringing forth justice on earth is the central motif of these songs. The honour of God is upheld for he always acts in accord with his character. He cannot overlook evil or act capriciously. He acts justly because he is just. Jesus

Christ, too, was just in all his work, in his rebuke of religious hypocrisy and in his obedience to death on the cross.

4. God acts with compassion and mercy. The first song emphasizes that the Lord protects the weak and has mercy on the broken hearted. 'A bruised reed will he not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out' ([42:3](#)). He gives food to the poor and water to the thirsty. He makes rivers flow out of the barren heights ([41:17-20](#)). He cares for his people as a shepherd does for the sheep. 'He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart' ([40:11](#)). He says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please' ([44:28](#)). Thus the Lord says, 'Do not fear; I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God, I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand' ([41:10](#)). The Lord's compassion is directed to all, even the enemies of his people, and especially to the poor and oppressed. Jesus Christ was 'a man for others'. His life and death show him to be the true and final servant of the Lord.
5. God judges and redeems. God pours out his anger on Israel who are blind and deaf ([42:18-25](#)). Yet he is Israel's only Saviour. 'ear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine' ([43:1](#)). In the first song, the Lord declares his covenant relationship with Israel and calls them to be a witness to the nations. He says, 'I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and light for the Gentiles' ([42:6](#)). He redeems his people in times of trouble. 'When you pass through the waters I will be with you ... When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned ... for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel your Saviour' ([43:2f](#)). He promises to restore their land and to give them back their inheritance ([49:8](#)), a theme that has been central to the Palestinian conflict between the sons of Jacob and the sons of Ishmael and is at the heart of the present-day Middle East conflict. The Lord who blots out the people's transgressions and remembers their sins no more ([43:25](#)) is the Christ of the Epistle to the Hebrews.
6. God speaks through his Word. God's word is more than a knowledge of God's will; it is his selfrevelation. It is the eternal Word. This is emphasized in the second song ([49:1-6](#)). The Servant says, 'He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his p. 176 hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver' ([49:2](#)). In the third song he says, 'The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, he wakens my ear to listen like one being taught' ([50:4](#)). The knowledge of God is direct, for the servant of the Lord not only speaks the word, but also lives out the word. This eternal word is God and is incarnate in the Logos becoming flesh ([Jn. 1:1, 14](#)).
7. The servant of the Lord is the mediator of a new covenant. 'He who vindicates me is near', says the servant ([50:8](#)). As a mediator the servant is blameless but he is also vulnerable. He suffers, but through his mediation he maintains the honour of God. He is stricken and smitten of God. The Lord says, 'He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed' ([53:5](#)). Little needs to be added to the significance of the fourth song ([52:13-53:12](#)). The New Testament writers point to the remarkable fulfilment of this song in the passion and cross of Christ. He is the mediator of the new covenant. In the cross, Christ in a voluntary act accepted the shame of this humiliating death. The honour of God's righteousness was justified and his name praised. God can blot out the sins of the transgressor only because Christ died for our sins. A just God could do no other.

8. The servant of the Lord brings glory to God. The fourth song begins, 'See my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted' ([52:13](#)). The song ends, 'Therefore I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils among the strong because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors' ([53:12](#)). In the resurrection God has given him the name that is above every name and at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' ([Philp. 2:10f](#)). The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead silences all objections to the incarnation and the cross. Christ is alive and he reigns forever. The final chapters of Isaiah ([54-66](#)) are a crescendo of praise to the triumph of God's servant king whose coming kingdom on earth is one of judgement and hope.

CONCLUSION

[Isaiah 40-66](#) is the moving announcement and enactment of God's establishing his kingly reign over the affairs of mankind through his suffering servant, who is none other than the King himself. This is Good News indeed. God redeems at great price his covenanted people, he restores the land, rebuilds Jerusalem and brings forth justice among the nations. In the fulness of time the Lord promises, 'Behold I create new [P. 177](#) heavens and a new earth' ([65:17](#)), to which Peter adds, 'the home of righteousness' ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). God will answer before his people call and 'The wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox' ([65:24f](#)). In the person of Jesus Christ the kingdom came ([Mk. 1:14f](#)), the church as the sign of the kingdom is being built ([Mt. 16:18](#)), the powers and authorities of darkness were exposed and defeated by the cross ([Col. 2:15](#)) and on the Final Day all will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory ([Mt. 24:30](#)).

Only when the believer confesses his sins, puts his trust in Christ as Saviour and Lord and is born from above by the Spirit of God, will the windows of heaven open and he be filled with the love of God. As a new believer he discovers that God is just and God is love and 'we love him because he first loved us' ([1 Jn. 4:19](#)).

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Theological Principles for Evangelizing Muslims

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