



## Thinking theologically about Islam

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In September 2018, *Evangelicals Now* (EN) featured Ida Glaser and Hannah Kay's book *Thinking Biblically About Islam*.<sup>2</sup> The book shows how the God of the Bible engages with peoples of other religions. But the equally biblical emphasis that God confronts the gods of other religions is largely absent. Provoked by EN's sub-title '*Can you do better?*' I perhaps rashly decided to respond with a book that would simply state the Bible's and the Qur'an's teachings about God, in six basic theological categories:

### God's Word

While Christianity and Islam both depend on traditions, written and otherwise, for their everyday expressions of religion, the Bible, and the Qur'an respectively, are the key to knowing the mind of God: orthodox Christians and Muslims view the books as God 'speaking' in his own infallible words. Yet the books are mutually exclusive in terms of divine authority. The Bible warns against addition to or detracting from its words (Rev. 22:18,19). And, although the Qur'an has multiple accounts of Bible events and characters (Abraham is mentioned 75 times, Moses 176 times, and Jesus 38 times), it regards all previous books of God as having been corrupted (Q5: 13, 51).

The Bible was inspired by God over a period of 1,500 years. Through its 35 to 40 individual human authors, perhaps a dozen literary genres, and in at least three languages, it speaks into myriad eras and cultures. The Qur'an was transmitted in the Arabic language only, to Mohammed alone, in 23 years. In its primary genres of narrative and exhortation, it speaks into a single cultural context.

### God's Character

Their primary words for God, *El*, in the Bible and *Allah*, in the Qur'an have the same Semitic root. Both emphasise sole, supreme sovereignty. In the Bible, the sovereign *El* is also *Yahweh*, the God who makes covenants *with* his people as an expression of his self-giving character. In the Qur'an, Allah takes covenants *from* his prophets as expressions of their submission to his sovereignty.

In both books, God's essential demeanour towards

mankind is revealed in the prayers of those closest to him. In the Bible, David after repenting of adultery and murder, prays to Yahweh: '*Have mercy on me O God, according to your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of your tender mercies, . . .*' (Ps 51:1). Tender mercy best describes Yahweh's demeanour towards mankind.

In the Qur'an, Solomon is described as one near to Allah. After repenting of a lapse into idolatry, he prays for help in ruling his people: '*My Lord! Forgive me and bestow on me sovereignty such as shall not belong to any after me.*' Allah responds: '*And lo! he hath favour with Us, and a happy journey's end*' (Q38:35, 40). Sovereign power, alone, is the root of Allah's demeanour towards mankind.

### God's Purpose

In both the Qur'an and the Bible God envisages a creation in which mankind finds fulfilment in the natural world and in domestic relationships.

In the Bible God's original purpose also includes mankind enjoying the creation in fellowship with his Creator, in a life as deathless as that of God himself (Gen. 1:26-31).

In the Qur'an, however, both death and life are part of God's original created purpose; Allah is '*he who created death and life that he might try which of you is best in deed*' (Q67:2). There is no provision for safe intimacy between mankind and God in the Qur'an. When Moses seeks merely to '*look upon Allah*', he is violently rebuffed and must repent of his folly (Surah 7:143). In the same incident in the Bible, when Moses asks to '*see God's glory*', Yahweh expresses caution yet makes provision for this to occur in a way that would permit a safe, intimate relationship between man and God (Exod. 34:6-7).

### God's Diagnosis

Both the Qur'an and the Bible acknowledge that circumstances changed after the original creation. The chief actors in both cases are God, Adam, and Satan.

In the Qur'an, Allah instructs Satan (at this point called Iblis, the chief angel) to bow to Adam (Surah 2:34). He refuses, and becomes mankind's enemy, sowing dissensions among them (Q35:6; 17:5). God's purposes remain intact, but mankind's duty of following Allah's teachings is challenged.

In the Bible, Satan persuades Adam that God is not serious about his desire for shared enjoyment of his

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<sup>2</sup> Ida Glaser with Hannah Kay, *Thinking Biblically About Islam: Genesis, Transfiguration, Transformation* (Langham Global Library,

creation. The consequences for Adam are tragic, especially given his original privileges: death enters a formerly perfect creation; Adam's guilt before God is established; he loses his essential righteousness; his pure nature becomes warped and, he becomes intrinsically unable to please God. Worse, because God's original purposes for Adam himself were intended for all mankind, these consequences have become God's settled diagnosis of the human predicament ever since.

### God's Remedy

In both the Qur'an and the Bible, the divine responses to the human predicament are commensurate with the nature of the divine diagnosis.

Allah's response to the parochial problem consists in sending messengers, from Adam through to Jesus son of Mary, to warn mankind to remain faithful to him. His response reaches its apex in the ministry of Mohammed, whose role is the same as that of those that preceded him: *Say: 'O men! I am (sent) to you only to give a Clear Warning.'* (Q22:49) and, *'I am sent only to warn plainly in public.'* (Q26:115). Through Mohammed, religious duties are codified for all time, and a mandate (*jihad*) given to share Allah's divine remedy with the whole world, by all available means.

Yahweh's response to his diagnosis of cosmic moral catastrophe is to invest himself wholly in a remedy to address every aspect of the predicament. Firstly, death itself is destroyed as Jesus Christ rises from its grip, never to face death again. In his death, Jesus assumes Adam's guilt to himself, thus satisfying God's justice and reconciling him to Adam and all his faithful progeny. On rising from death and ascending to heaven, Jesus acts as a living surety for Adam before God — his righteousness being counted to his people. Finally, the Spirit of God is sent from heaven to dwell within God's people to progressively untangle their warped natures and enable them to start pleasing God.

In Jesus as covenant redeemer and the Holy Spirit as covenant enabler, the New Testament writers recognised the same tender mercies they knew to be the hallmarks of their Old Testament, covenant-making God. They therefore had no qualms in ascribing deity to the three persons severally, as one undivided God.

### God's Future

Both the Qur'an and the Bible speak of a resurrection after death for believers and unbelievers alike.

In the Qur'an, heaven is called *'Allah's heaven'* (Q89:30); but it is not his presence that makes it heaven. Heaven is pictured as a garden with flowing waters, fruit, cushions, carpets, and virgins —

provided for believers who restrained themselves for God's sake in this world. For them, all that seemed pleasurable but unattainable on earth will be available in heaven (Q56:10-40). For those who chose to indulge in the present life, hell has only the *'tree of Zaqqum'* — offering hope of refreshment but delivering only drinks that will boil in men's stomachs. (Q56:41-56).

In the Bible, heaven is what it is because of God's presence. God's faithful people enter paradise at death and then, at the Day of Judgment they return to earth *'coming down from heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. God will say: Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more'* (Rev 21:2-4). Hell is the conscious, everlasting absence of all this — *'outer darkness'* (Matt. 22:13).

### Conclusion

In his greatest epistle, Romans, it is only after eleven chapters of dense theology that Paul calls for the radical response of *'living sacrifices'*. In the same vein, it is my conviction that it is only as the church learns to think more theologically about Islam that we will find the motivation — and the necessary tools — to properly confront this greatest of challengers to God's glory.

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