

The Biblical Witness of the Character of God in Relation to the Qur'an

Larry L. Lichtenwalter
Village Seventh-day Adventist Church
Berrien Springs, Michigan

Introduction

It comes as no surprise that the Bible and the Qur'an create unique worldviews. Sacred writings generate worldviews in keeping with their respective meta-narrative, reasoning, and symbolism.¹ The assertions which each worldview both presuppose and project about God, the world, and human beings profoundly affect one's identity, spiritual experience, and ethics.² Because the biblical and qur'anic worldviews are largely defined by a vision of God, we will explore the biblical witness of the being and

¹ Worldview is manifested in three basic and interrelated ways: through a narrative component, a rational component, and a ritual component. All worldviews tend to manifest themselves in these forms. Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing The Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 63-64; David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 291-330. While both the Qur'an and the Bible express each of the three components as per above, the biblical material is more comprehensive across each spectrum.

² Broadly put, a worldview is the story we tell to answer existential questions: Why is there anything at all? How did we get here and why are we here? What does it mean to be a human being? Why have things gone so badly wrong? Is there any hope of things getting any better? What should I do with my life? Where will it all lead in the end? What about God? Is He there? If so what is He like? What difference does the existence of deity make in the scheme of things? Is there a dark side to reality, to spirituality? Does evil exist, etc.?

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character of God in relation to that of the qur'anic witness of Allah.³ It is hoped that this brief comparison will provide a larger context of understanding in which Adventist Christians can meaningfully engage their Muslim friends for whom God is both a spiritual and morally compelling reality.

There are many similarities and differences between biblical and qur'anic thought about the being and character of God. On the one hand the concept of God in the Qur'an is significantly like the concept of God in the Bible.⁴ Many of the same attributes of God are asserted in both. These include God as omniscience (All Knowing), omnipotence (All Powerful), omni-benevolence (All Good). Both recognize only one God. Both portray God as the self-existent sovereign Creator of heaven and earth. Both exalt God as Merciful. Both proclaim that God will someday judge the world. Both emphasize the oneness of God. Both affirm God has sent prophets and has given sacred scriptures. Both unfold a paradox of divine transcendence and divine immanence. As a result, Muslims and Christians use similar words to describe God. So much so that for some, Allah is merely the personal name for God in Islam, the Yahweh of Moses and the God of Jesus: i.e., there should be no distinction between Allah and the English word "God." Any difference between the biblical God and qur'anic Allah would be solely a matter of language.⁵ At the least the corresponding witness of God should provide a context for understanding, dialogue, and

³ I am under no illusion as to the difficulty for any western person to understand completely what the Qur'an really is in Islam—how it is not a book in the ordinary sense, nor comparable to the Bible, but rather an expression of Divine will. That if we are to compare the Qur'an with anything at all in Christianity we must compare it with Jesus Christ as biblically, Christ is the expression of Divine will. That is what the Qur'an is. In effect, comparisons from the standpoint of Islam will always be open to question and immaterial in many respects. Nevertheless they are both sacred texts with words and meanings. See Norman Geisler, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 97-100; Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind* (New York, NY: Longman, 1976), 14.

⁴ Stephen J. Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 1.

⁵ Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, The Qur'an and Science* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1988), 120, 121; Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 13-14. Not all agree, however, see Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 104. Mohammed was certainly influenced by Christianity and Judaism as he developed Islam.

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bridge building. Surely there is much to affirm between the two regarding how good and how great God is—and worthy of worship, allegiance, and the submission of one's total self.

Despite such God-affirming similarities, the Bible and the Qur'an often construe God (as well as humans and the world as a whole) in noticeably different ways and perspectives that make for significant differences both in theology and practice.⁶ The divergence is profound. As a result, Muslims have a fundamentally different understanding of God compared to Christians. They lay stress on different aspects of God than Christians do. And Muslim faith and experience are remarkably different from Christian faith and experience. The reality is that the use of the word "God" for Muslims does not create the same mental picture nor produce the same response as it does for Christians. These are matters of worldview. This begs the question again, since both the Qur'an and the Bible uphold a high view of God, Are they the same God? The answer is both Yes and No!⁷

Our purpose is to explore this "Yes and No!" in order to understand more clearly both the similarities and differences between the biblical and Qur'anic witness of God. We would understand better how those differences in particular impact both theology and practice. Our questions will revolve largely around the Creator-creature relation from two broad perspectives: divine transcendence and divine immanence.⁸ i.e., in Islam, Allah, the One Supreme God, for the most part remains entirely

⁶ Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 4. Theology influences practice and practice tests theology. While theology may not be the foremost question in Adventist Muslim dialogue it nevertheless influences dialogue on religious practice and spiritual experience.

⁷ We could say the same about Calvinism and Armenianism. Both are Christian and overlap significantly in relation to theological perspectives, and yet their paradigm asserts different visions of God and of reality.

⁸ This pair of concepts "transcendence" and "immanence" refer to the question of God's relationship to the created world, i.e., His nearness and distance. By immanence we mean God's presence and activity within nature, human nature, and history. By transcendence we mean that God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity. God is not simply involved in His creation, He is also superior to it in significant ways. To what degree is God present and active within the world (immanence) as opposed to His being absent and removed from it (transcendence)? These are biblical concepts that must be kept in balance. Where one is emphasized over the other one's view of God shifts accordingly. Spiritual experience and lifestyle is affected by what one believes on these matters. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 301-319.

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transcendent to the world,⁹ while in Christianity, God, who likewise is sovereign and transcendent, is profoundly present (immanence) in both the world and in the life of the believer. The presence absence of anthropomorphisms or metaphoric analogical language appears to be both a fundamental reason for and the result of this difference in focus.

At the heart of our search is the nature of religious experience—the practical implications of one’s vision of God in character, worship, and ethics.¹⁰ Clarity here can help Adventists connect better on the experiential level with their Muslim friends. The Bible and the Qur’an both exalt and hold God in high esteem. Both communicate an experience with God. But what is the nature of their respective experience in relation to their given vision of the nature of God? The Bible and the Qur’an engender a different conception of life, which in turn leads to an entirely different approach to spiritual experience, daily tasks and problems. It is an unavoidable fact that we become what we worship. The question then is, “What have Christians become?” “What have Muslims become?” “What can Seventh-day Adventists bring to the discussion of God that would make a difference in the life of their Muslim friends?” “What is there to learn from Muslims?” “What can Muslims learn from us?”

The ensuing comparison of the biblical witness of God against that of the Qur’an is for the purpose of understanding the core issues in theology and life where Christians might connect in order to build bridges with their Muslim friends. It seeks to understand better how we can be of better help to Muslims as they come to the Bible in keeping with the Qur’an’s witness for them to do so. Christians read the Qur’an largely as a foreign text. They are unacquainted with its style, rhetoric, images, or nuances. Muslim’s likewise read Scripture as a foreign document, and some aspects of its rhetoric and nuances are not only unacceptable, but blasphemous. Furthermore, there is need to relate to inner spiritual matters of the soul longing for harmony with God and to touch the existential angst in both Christian and Muslim religious experience.

This study would assert that there is often a marked difference between the biblical witness of God and contemporary Christian witness of God. Much of the Christian view of God reflects exegetical, theological, and

⁹ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side*, 175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

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cultural interpretation or filtering of the Bible more than it does the Bible itself. Likewise there is often a marked difference between the Qur'anic view of Allah and the Islamic witness of Allah. Much of the Islamic view of Allah reflects Hadith and Tafsir interpretation or cultural filtering of the Qur'an more than it does the Qur'an itself. What the Bible and the Qur'an say about God may not be the same as their respective readers/interpreters may imagine or articulate. It is hoped that the reader is encouraged toward a faithful reading of the respective texts rather than toward dependence on mere perceptions, experience, tradition, or culture in relation to those texts.

Finally, this study would place the comparison of the biblical and Qur'anic witness of the character of God within the larger context of the biblical worldview of the Great Controversy between God and Satan. With this in mind Ellen White writes that those who wait for Christ's soon return are to say to the people of the world, "Behold your God." She adds: "The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them."¹¹ Biblical eschatology places the question of the character of God in the forefront of the great controversy. This is at the heart of Adventist eschatology. Surprisingly, the question of the character of God is at the heart of Islamic eschatology as well. The message of the Qur'an is for the most part eschatological in that it moves readers forward in time toward the Day of Judgment where Jesus will affirm who Allah really is.

The pulse of Seventh-day Adventists' eschatology springs from the Three Angel's Message which is to go to every part of the world: "fear God and give glory to Him . . . worship Him who made . . ." (Rev 14:6, 7; cf. 15:3, 4; 19:1-7). Fear God. Give Him glory. Worship Him alone. In essence, "Behold your God." So would Islam say to the same peoples of our world. But it would do so with an entirely different imagery and language and heart regarding God. And so the question, "What God?" "What vision of God is to be lifted up for the world to behold?" There is to be a revelation of God's character of love—in both impassioned word and empowered life. "God is love," the Bible declares (1 John. 4:16). Those

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1900, 2002), 415. Bold and italics supplied.

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words comprise the opening sentence of *Patriarchs and Prophets*¹² and the final words of *The Great Controversy*.¹³ The revelation of God's character of love is to be at the heart of Seventh-day Adventist personal life, witness and mission in the world.

In this context we ask our question: What is the biblical witness about God? What is the Qur'anic witness about God? What is our Adventist end-time witness of the character of God? What is the Islamic end-time witness of the character of God? Are we saying, "Behold your God" or we saying behold our doctrine? What do we reveal in our own life and character about the person and character of God? What do we need to understand more about God in order for our witness of Him to be more life-changing both for ourselves and for those to whom we bear of God? Can we speak of our God as freely and joyfully as it appears our Muslim friends do? Will we ever be able to build credible bridges unless we do—until we have such an exalted vision of God which enables us to capture a Muslim's imagination in an area in which they are already well versed?¹⁴ These questions are linked to the practical purpose of this study.

¹² "God is love." 1 John 4:16. His nature, His law, is love. It ever has been; it ever will be. 'The high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity,' whose "ways are everlasting," changeth not. With Him 'is no variableness, neither shadow of turning,' Isaiah 57:15; Habakkuk 3:6; James 1:17. Every manifestation of creative power is an expression of infinite love. The sovereignty of God involves fullness of blessing to all created beings" Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890 / 2002), 33.

¹³ "The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love" Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911/2002), 678.

¹⁴ Three questions before we begin by way or orientation: What do we believe? What do Muslim's believe? What is a wise bridge that maintains the biblical witness and truth in genuine dialogue? Sometimes in the process of building bridges we forget what we believe, we lose sight of the strength and purpose of what we believe and what we have to bring to the discussion. We can be influenced too much by Islamic thought that we wonder what we have to offer. What is the distinctive role of our beliefs and why to Muslims need to hear what we have to share? Why do they need to hear what I know? On the other hand, as already wondered—as we engage Muslims with respect to God, are there things we ourselves need to learn? I believe the matter of the person and character of God is foundational to both our dialogue and our witness.

The Nature of God in Scripture

We begin with what we ourselves (as readers of the Bible) understand, or should understand, both intellectually and experientially in relation to the biblical witness of God—who God is in His being and in relation to His creation.

The Bible opens with a clear, concise vision of God: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The simplicity of this opening statement belies the depth of the content. It identifies the Creator. It explains the origin of the world. It ties the work of God in the past to the work of God in the future.¹⁵ The remainder of the Creation account is a praise of God’s goodness and grace in view of His gift of land, which God graciously prepared as a place for human beings to dwell (Gen 1:2-2:3).¹⁶ “God is just there, with no biography or defining features, and God simply starts creating the world through sheer thought and speech.”¹⁷ He is wholly other. He willfully acts. His speech is life-giving. In addition, God speaks words of blessing to the creatures of the sea and sky and to humanity—even to time (Gen 1:22, 28; 2:1-2). The animal world is created, blessed and addressed. Human beings are created, blessed, addressed. Time and history are blessed. There is witness of God moving dynamically into creation in a fully participatory way. The making of our world unfolds as a moral act (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)¹⁸ an act of uprightness, trustworthiness, commitment and decisive faithfulness.¹⁹

The two-chapter narrative affirms that God’s existence is unquestionable. He is personal. He is good. He is transcendent and immanent—distant and near. From this dramatic opening and onward, the creative work of God plays a prominent role in the biblical presentation of God and comprises some of the Bible’s final images of His creative power and covenant faithfulness to His creation (Rev 4:11; 1:8; 21:1-7).

¹⁵John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 82.

¹⁶Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁷John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 1: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 42.

¹⁸Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “Creation and Apocalypse,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 131-134.

¹⁹Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 1: Israel’s Gospel*, 55-57.

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The Genesis Creation narrative nuances the personal (and interpersonal) nature of God with the inclusion of God's personal name Yhwh. In chapter two the God who creates *ex nihilo* is “Yahweh Elohim”—the Lord God (Gen 2:4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 25, 31; Rev 4:11).²⁰ In the biblical narrative, God has a name, which He assigns to Himself and by which He reveals himself. In doing so “God chooses to be described as the definable, the distinctive, the individual.”²¹ The Creator then does not wish to be viewed as an abstract, unknowable being or a nameless force or concept, nor is He merely to be described—even in generic terms, i.e., *Elohim*. The Creation narrative assures us that while the Lord God is a person who lives outside of us and independently of us, He is nevertheless a person who can be personally known, and who personally interacts with His creation.²²

In the context of this self-disclosed name by which the Lord God wants human beings to both know and remember Him, a *divine personality profile* emerges from the ensuing biblical narrative.²³ The name *Yahweh* is a revelation of His nature. *Yahweh* is the holy one, the majestic one, the God who speaks and then acts. The Shema, the most famous confession of faith in the Old Testament presses the reality: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5). This is a confession of divine lordship: that Yahweh, the Lord, is not only the one and only true God, but that He deserves all of our love and allegiance. This worship and love is intensely personal because it responds to God who Himself is intensely personal. Such biblical vision (theology) both demands and invites a practical and experiential response of faith, love, worship, allegiance.

²⁰ Later in the Pentateuch we learn the essence of God's self-disclosure where God reveals His name to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). See discussion John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 21-27; John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2: Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21-43.

²¹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (vol. 1; London: SCM Press, 1961), 206.

²² Lichtenwalter, “Creation and Apocalypse,” 131-136.

²³ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2: Israel's Faith*, 21-22.

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Furthermore, the Lord God asserts, “I AM holy” (Lev 11:44-45). The phrases “I am the LORD” and “I am holy” are used interchangeably.²⁴ Scripture makes it clear that only God is holy (Lev 19:2; 20:7-8, 26; 21:8; cf. 15:4). “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa 6:3). Though God is sovereign, He is described by His holiness, which stands at the very heart of His nature. Revelation 4 asserts these character realities of God (Rev 4:8). God alone is Holy—as such His redeeming acts can be considered righteous and true (Rev 15:3-4). God’s transcendence is expressed by this notion of holiness. It points to God as wholly other, to *Yahweh*’s metaphysical distinctiveness over humanity and all of creation.²⁵ But the Lord’s holiness is ethical as well as metaphysical. His holiness transcends human beings, not only as creatures, but also especially as sinners.²⁶

Nevertheless, the Bible unfolds God’s holiness positively in relation to human beings: “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 1 Pet 1:15, 16). God’s holiness both penetrates human hearts and transforms them. God graciously extends His holiness toward fallen human beings as a way to restore in them His image—to bring holiness into their lives so they can reflect Him in the world (Ezek 20:12; John 17:17; 1 Cor 6:11). Holiness as a chief attribute of God includes God’s *relationality* (His speaking and presence). It also includes His separateness from the world²⁷ (He is transcendent source of all, i.e., Creator). Holiness also relates to God’s power (He is Deliverer), His moral nature (He is and demands righteousness, love, purity), His constancy (He is truthful and faithful), and His covenant relationships.²⁸

²⁴ Allan Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 151.

²⁵ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume 2: Israel’s Faith*, 22, 23. “Holiness is a term for the distinctive, transcendent, heavenly, awesome, exalted nature of deity, for what marks deity over against humanity” (ibid., 24).

²⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 28.

²⁷ Holiness of separation include the—absolute attributes of God—self-existent Creator, spirituality (unity, simplicity, incorporeality, personalty), infiniteness, transcendence, self-sufficiency, constancy.

²⁸ Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, 152, 153.

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Throughout, the biblical witness of God's holiness is wrapped in relational categories.²⁹

Furthermore, God's love reflects His holiness: "Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, *majestic in holiness*, Awesome in praises, working wonders? . . . In Your lovingkindness You have led the people whom You have redeemed" (Ex. 15:11, 13 italics mine); "The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness" (Jer 31:3). The biblical witness points to the relational nature of holiness as comprising divine love. It highlights God's concern for human beings (Rom 5:5; 8:39; 2 Cor 13:14). This expression and evidence of God's love engenders human response of a whole hearted love to God (Deut 6:4-5; 11:1, 13, 22; 30:6; Psa 31:23; Matt 22:37). Because of it, believers will do whatever is necessary to keep themselves within the sphere of God's love (Jude 21).

These themes must linger long in our imagination. They must haunt our every waking moment. The biblical witness unfolds a holy loving God. The John 3:16 of the Hebrew Scriptures asserts: "Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." (Ex. 34:6, 7). God's steadfast love is the basis of all hope and moral life (Psa 33:5, 18, 22; 36:5-7; 94:18; 119:15; 5:7; 13:5; 25:10; 2 Cor 13:14; Rev 3:9). John's Gospel echoes God's heart for our world: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "God is love," the Bible declares (1 John. 4:16). John links God's love to our own love of Him and well as toward one another: "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The New Testament is full of such statements. As the Bible's last witness to human beings, John's Apocalypse assure us of God's enduring love and care (Rev 1:5; 3:9).

²⁹ Ibid., 153.

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The biblical witness thus confronts us with an incredible paradox of divine transcendence and immanence:³⁰ “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isa. 57:15, 16); “O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Psa 139:1-7). Such passages unfold the genuine experience of the “fear of the Lord” where human hearts are haunted on the one hand with realities of God’s transcendence and on the other hand, realities of God’s infinite closeness. One both trembles in self-awareness and keeps still in sweet assurance that is anchored beyond one’s self.

Biblical Anthropomorphisms

The question we asked at this point is whether or not we can truly know the God whom the Bible gives witness to? How do we imagine God? Feel Him near? Experience Him? While the biblical witness can send our thoughts soaring with information and implications about God, in the end are they not but words, or mere statements about God? Do they not speak primarily on the rational or conceptual level of information and theology rather than that of personal spiritual experience and inner life? Do we merely know about God from the Bible or can we truly know God and personally experience Him in our lives? Do we know God at all or just His will? These are important questions. We want to know “How is God?” and “What is God really like beyond the words and doxological affirmations?” We want to know God personally. We want to know Him experientially. But on what level does the biblical witness to God actually reveal God to us?

³⁰ The biblical witness is full of paradoxes and such paradoxes keep in proper balance both God’s revelation to us and our grasp of God as totally other.

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Irrespective of the fact that our inner world of feelings and spiritual experience can never be separated from our world of thoughts and rationality—i.e., thinking feels, thoughts about truth engender feelings, emotions, and engages the self in profoundly practical ways—the human mind, heart, and soul need more than facts and information. It will never be enough to have only the right terms about God or the right list of divine attributes and their meanings. Human beings need illustrations, analogies, stories, and personal practical experiences both to integrate information and to engender understanding and response on the deepest level. It is often literature, music, and the arts, which provide such bridges. Genuine spiritual experience includes the right and left-brain, concept and image, metaphor and proposition, heart and mind.

In keeping with these deeper levels of human knowing the Bible reveals God to us by narrating God's actions, by describing Him in response to events taking place in our world, and by giving us a glimpse into His inner self rather than into his inner life. The entire biblical witness unfolds a narrative self-disclosure of God in which there is information, illustration, and artful application.³¹ The biblical witness provides illustration, analogy, simile, narrative, values, poetry, hymns, wisdom literature, etc. While we can draw many conclusions about God from what we have already reviewed above, other complementary and enlightening dimensions of God unfold in the context of biblical narrative and anthropomorphic language. Story and anthropomorphism (attribution of human characteristics to nonhumans) put a "face" on the divine attributes, which we've already explored. Biblical narrative and anthropomorphic language enable us to more fully know and experience God.

Our discussions of God often reflect more philosophical oriented categories than what the biblical data provide. The biblical witness however spends more time revealing God's personal and moral attributes than it does of His relative and absolute attributes.³² It gives witness of a

³¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 343.

³² Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, 167. The traditional systematic theology approach to understanding God begins with God's existence and absolute attributes and then moves to a discussion of His personal nature. This is a strategic crossroad in one's quest to know God or know about Him: If you begin with attributes rather than character you come at a different view of God. Christians and theologians usually start with absolute attributes of God. The attributes of God are usually

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personal being who can be known, loved, trusted, and obeyed. The Bible both begins and ends with images that would focus readers on God's personal and moral attributes. It puts, so to speak, a face on God—one that can be intuited and responded to personally. A basic principle here is to follow the biblically clear and primarily personal and moral attributes of God in interpreting the less clear relative and absolute attributes.³³ In doing so then the attributes of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence will not to be seen as absolute power exercised per se, but power exercised by a personal self-giving God who relates to creation in love. By following the biblical witness in giving the personal and moral attributes of God priority, the role of personal freedom, both divine and human, is elevated.³⁴

It is in this way that the biblical witness reveals how God has condescended to use human language to describe His own transcendent being. Working with terms from Creation and particularly personal relationships, God reveals what He is like. In other words, God uses words, experiences and images that we are familiar with and that come from our world.³⁵ God communicates transcendence via analogical language (i.e., terms that are like in some way but not all ways).³⁶ In particular the Bible uses metaphoric analogy—where one thing is compared to another. God uses an analogy between Himself and something in the created world that is based on the similarity of being, action or relation.³⁷ For instance, when Scripture calls God a rock—the focus is on how God is unchanging and provides a firm foundation for whatever we do.

It comes as no surprise then that the God of the Bible most often uses human categories to help people understand Himself. These personal metaphors describe God's being, actions, and relationships as similar in many respects to a human's being, and human actions and relationships. We call these *anthropomorphisms* and they provide the greatest degree of

described in the following ways: absolute (asiety, spirituality, infinity, immutability), relative (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence), personal (personhood), and moral (holiness, love, righteousness, purity, truth/truthfulness, grace, goodness).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 194.

³⁵ Ibid., 215.

³⁶ Ibid., 364-378; Frame, *The Doctrine of God*.

³⁷ Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*.

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correspondence between God and the symbolic world from which He draws truths about Himself. The God of the Bible is not afraid to be viewed from such anthropomorphic perspectives. He uses language of personal relations (Father, Husband, Teacher, Physician, Lawmaker, Lord of Hosts, Prophet, Bridegroom, Farmer, Friend, Builder, Potter, Creator, King, Priest, Judge, Redeemer, Shepherd). He uses relational language (fellowship, communication, truth, love, life, authority, grace, purity, care, home, marriage, intimacy, agriculture, faithfulness). God can woo as a lover, grieve as a husband, be concerned like a parent, and enter into covenant to assure faithfulness. These multiple images of God are necessary for a holistic picture of God.³⁸ The varied metaphoric images bring understanding towards both God's transcendence and His immanence. Through them we are enabled to understand both God's *being* and the way God works in relationship to others.

In the biblical witness, God does not hesitate to compare Himself in the way human persons act and relate to others. God is like these metaphoric analogies in some way, but not in every way. In the process the metaphors are reshaped by God's own being and then become the standard for a new understanding of human roles.³⁹ While understanding is engendered, it is not God who becomes like humans, but rather humans who are lifted to become more like God in character and life. God uses multiple metaphors/roles because none is fully adequate in itself.⁴⁰ The multiplicity of biblical images nuance both divine transcendence and immanence. It is in this way that the biblical witness holds together both the transcendence and the immanence of God.

The biblical witness consistently begins with character and relational aspects of God where God is seen at work concretely rather than being abstractly described. As we see God at work images of His person and character emerge. This enables us to connect with God personally and to see Him as personal and engaged in our world. Through its narratives, metaphors, and anthropomorphisms, Scripture gives us the picture that the God who creates by the Word is self-giving, sacrificial love. God the Creator is outpouring and life-giving. He is personal, engaged with His

³⁸ Ibid., 221.

³⁹ Ibid., 216, 217.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 217.

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creation, He is good, and He is moral. God is involved and invested in our world and in our lives.⁴¹

The Bible assures us that human beings can truly know God and not just God's will: "let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD (Jer 9:24); "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3); "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer 31:34). God's self-disclosure intends intimacy with human beings whom He loves and is at work to redeem.

Ultimately God's self-disclosure (and immanence) is most fully expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's final and complete self-revelation: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Heb 1:1, 2); "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (John 1:18); "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

The transcendence/immanence paradox in the forgoing biblical texts are incredible. Christ's incarnation is the ultimate point of connection between God and human. It pushes God's self-revelation beyond anthropomorphisms to lived humanity itself. God provides a human face in the person of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6). The unthinkable becomes reality—the transcendent wholly other God who has existed from eternity is seen by human eyes, heard with human ears, and touched with human hands: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was

⁴¹ See Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 57.

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manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:1-3). Through the biblical witness one can both love the unseen Christ (1 Pet 1:8) and experience genuine fellowship with God (1 John 1:3). There is eschatological promise that the face-to-face communion with God which was both experienced and lost in Eden will be experienced once again in the earth made new (Rev 22:1-5). The incarnate Word provides the fundamental criterion for a true understanding of God’s character and ways in the world (John 1:1-14, 18).⁴²

This summary of the transcendence immanence paradox in relation to the character of God in the biblical witness provides our backdrop for the reading and understanding of the qur’anic witness.

The Nature of God in the Qur’an

The Qur’an’s first Sūra is an organic and vibrant part of the Muslim’s daily prayer experience (repeated 5 times during the day). Titled the “Fātiha” or “opening” it reads: “In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray” (Q. 1:1-7).

Exegetically this first qur’anic witness asserts that Allah is the sole source and sustainer of life. Allah alone is worthy of worship and praise. Allah is Lord of the cosmic drama from the beginning of time at the act of creation to the end of time on the Day of Judgment.⁴³ Allah is Lord of Creation, Lord of History, and Lord of Judgment.⁴⁴ This opening Sūra is foundational in that it sets a tone echoed elsewhere in the Qur’an where it asserts that Allah is one, and unlike any created thing or being (Q. 112:1-4) and where it is asserted that Allah alone exists without the need for anything else. The Qur’an repeatedly asserts that Allah is the creator of

⁴² Ibid., 185.

⁴³ David Waines, *An Introduction to Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 25.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24-30.

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everything that exists and all is dependent on Allah (Q. 2:255; 36:81-82; 54:50).

In keeping with this theme, Allah is elsewhere called the sustainer of the whole universe (Q. 11:6). He did not create the universe or our world and then cease to be involved. He sustains it. He remains connected. This is nuanced in other Sūras where it is implied that nothing exists without being in a relationship with the Allah as Creator (Q. 2:255).⁴⁵ In particular, Sūra 2.255 asserts:“Allah! There is no God save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtaketh Him. Unto Him belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Who is he that intercedeth with Him save by His leave? He knoweth that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what He will. His throne includeth the heavens and the earth, and He is never weary of preserving them. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous.” These grand themes are very much in keeping with the biblical witness regarding God.

It should be noted that this first Sūra celebrates Allah’s mercy in the context of his might and majesty. Allah is the “Lord of Mercy and the Giver of Mercy”—a twice occurring phrase. Thus, Allah is the mighty, majestic, and merciful Creator. The text implies that giving mercy is inherent in Allah’s name or being.⁴⁶ In the Arabic language—the term for mercy or compassion is the plural form of the word *womb*. To feel and share in compassion is to be like a mother who bears, nurtures, and protects her unborn child. It is a picture of divine compassion that gently holds us in being.⁴⁷ This is an incredible personal and intimate image of Allah in relation to the Sūra’s otherwise assertions regarding Allah’s transcendent being. In addition, the phrase “Merciful Lord of Mercy” *Al Fahman al-Rahim* means “By the means of the very essence of God.” The implication is that whatever we do, each breath we take, every word we utter, is done because of and through the essence of the One.⁴⁸ God’s creation of nature and man, and nature for man, is his most primordial

⁴⁵ C. T. R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1, 2.

⁴⁶ See Sūra text notes in *The Qur’an* (trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem: Oxford University Press, 2008); Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 4.

⁴⁷ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side*, 62, 63.

⁴⁸ Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 4.

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mercy.⁴⁹ There is no one-sided transcendence suggested here, but rather equally Allah's being "with" his creation.⁵⁰

This formula—"In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy"—is present at the start of every Sūra (except in "The Opening" as per above). Such repetition extends mercy as a personal and intimate attribute of Allah throughout the Qur'an as a whole. In doing so it sets the theological and worship context for each subsequent Sūra: Allah is Lord of Mercy and Giver of Mercy. Such repetition implies too that mercy is the very essence of Allah.

While the apparent contradictory nature of the Qur'an makes it hard to pin down precisely the exact meaning(s) of Allah's grace and mercy, it is nevertheless present and pervasive. Some titles for Allah connote mercy, but in some respects it is a redefined mercy compared to what one finds in the Bible.⁵¹ Allah is merciful because he did not kill or leave one in peril. This is in contrast to Yahweh who is caring, loving, and an intimately involved Father. At least this is how the Qur'an comes across to a casual reader. Even so, a more compassionate side of mercy can be intuited and nuanced from the Qur'an and surely the by grace hungry hearts of Muslim readers.

The Qur'an's opening Sūra includes also the theologically rich phrase "Lord of the Worlds" (world of mankind, angels, animals, plants, this world, the next world, etc.). The idea of Lord (Arabic root r-b-b) has connotations of caring and nurturing in addition to lordship, and this should be borne in mind wherever the term occurs and is rendered "lord." One translation renders the thought "Lord of the Worlds" as "The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds." The phrase "The Lord of the Worlds" suggests that Allah knows of the existence of and controls all that goes on in the everyday world that is.⁵² "Lord of the Worlds" has to do with time, and destiny in history.⁵³ While some might construe this as fatalistic, i.e., read as oppressive and identifying Allah's will with history where Allah's deeds and Allah's decree influence history without any mediating causation, this need not be the case. The phrase points rather to the simple yet profound

⁴⁹ Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*.

⁵² Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*.

⁵³ Ibid., 6.

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reality of Allah over all. He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. One need not read rigid predestination or matters of free will into the statement.

On the opposite end of the Qur'an one finds the most basic creedal statement of Islamic theology, and which represents the essential understanding of Allah, i.e., Sūra 112 (titled "The Unity"):⁵⁴ "Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him."

This closing Sūra is short and to the point. Its simplicity and brevity defies the depth of meaning. It comprises Mohammed's definition of Allah and is held to be worth a third of the Qur'an and the seven heavens and the seven earths are founded on it.⁵⁵ It points to the absolute unity and sovereignty of Allah. It asserts Allah's existence. Elsewhere the Qur'an appeals to evidences of Allah's existence in the wonders of visible nature in the heavens and on earth, as well as the manifestations of life in plants and animals and especially in the realm of human life. The order of creation and the order of life both point to the existence of Allah. They are signs for those who believe (Q. 45:3-4; cf. 51:20-21; 41:53). They are signs for reason to grasp, for one to know, become convinced of, and believe. This is important to note, as the sensible and intellectual capacities of human beings are appealed to as starting points in one's knowledge of Allah.⁵⁶ But here, like the biblical record, Allah's existence is affirmed as unquestionable. He is wholly other. He is transcendent.

One of Islam's answers to the question of "Who is God" is the celebration of Allah's "most beautiful names." The Qur'anic basis for this is found in Sūra 59:22-24: "He is Allah, than Whom there is no other God, the Knower of the Invisible and the Visible. He is the Beneficent, Merciful. He is Allah, than Whom there is no other God, the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One, Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb. Glorified be Allah from all that they ascribe as partner (unto Him). He is Allah, the Creator, the Shaper out of naught, the

⁵⁴ Reuven Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2008).

⁵⁵ Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 16, 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

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Fashioner. His are the most beautiful names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Him, and He is the Mighty, the Wise.”

One finds little in Islam on the subject of Allah’s essence and character except the sense in which the ninety-nine names for Allah are believed to reflect the character of Allah.⁵⁷ In all the terms and titles of Allah, one does not encounter terms of intimacy.⁵⁸ Allah’s “beautiful names” by and large appear as either active participles or adjectives. They are not read as a proper name in Islam.⁵⁹ Unlike how *Yahweh* in the Hebrew Scriptures is the personal name for God, Allah is not a proper name. In the Islamic religious formulation, God has no personal name.⁶⁰

Besides being Merciful, Allah’s most often-mentioned attributes include Compassionate and Forgiver, i.e., (Q. 40:3; 2:173, 182, 192, 199, 218; 225-26, 235). Allah’s attributes of Compassionate and Forgiver often occur together: “ask forgiveness of Allah. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (Q. 2:199). Those who genuinely repent, God will change their evil deeds to good deeds (Q. 25:70). “He said: I smite with My punishment whom I will, and My mercy embraceth all things, therefore I shall ordain it for those who ward off (evil) and pay the poor-due, and those who believe Our revelations” (Q. 7:156). Existentially the reality of receiving mercy and experiencing forgiveness speak profoundly regarding possibilities of Allah’s immanence and one’s hope of personally experiencing such a divine reality. While the Qur’an may not provide concrete steps toward such an experience, or provide imagery for one to imagine it, it nevertheless nuances its possibility and the hope of experiencing it for one’s self.

Nor is divine love missing from the Qur’anic witness of the Allah’s attributes as some would suppose.⁶¹ Allah is “loving: If ye love Allah, follow me [Mohammad]; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (Q. 3:32); “Allah will bring a people whom He loveth and who love Him (Q. 5:54). For sure, such images are far and few between. More is said about what Allah does not love rather than what

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19. Some more troubling images which the Qur’an has for Allah include names like Bringer of Death, The Avenger, and Dishonor as well as The Distressor which is also used as a name for Shaytan.

⁵⁸ Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider’s Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*, 117.

⁵⁹ Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 3.

⁶⁰ Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, 79.

⁶¹ Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 27.

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he does love. And more revolves around human love for Allah and/or human love towards other things than it does of Allah's love for them or their response of love to Allah's love.

Probably the strongest declaration in the Qur'an regarding Allah's immanence or nearness to the creaturely realm asserts:⁶² "We have indeed created man, and We know what his soul insinuates to him. We are to him closer than the jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). While the full meaning of this passage is yet to be understood, nevertheless on the surface at least, the Sūra affirms how Allah is nearer to each human being than his or her vital life-blood. This is remarkable! One could set this Sūra aside Psalm 139, which highlights *Yahweh's* utter transcendence in the context of the incredible intimacy of His presence and closeness. Any Muslim wrestling with the import of this Sūra would be encouraged with the sense of Allah's overwhelming presence, closeness, and connection. Unfortunately, and unlike Psalm 139, any personal and existential implications of this Sūra are left for the reader to imagine. And yet the implications are there begging to be tapped.

Muslim scholars assert that the Qur'an provides no discussion about Allah and his nature or existence. They posit rather that the Qur'an is only functional, i.e., to inform us that God is Creator, Sustainer, and Guide of the universe and man.⁶³ As a result, there is little Muslim scholarship on the subject of Allah's essence and character. The bottom line of Muslim confession about Allah is that Allah is absolute oneness and sovereignty.⁶⁴ For the most part Allah is outside of time and outside of space. This is true for Shiite tradition in particular where philosophically Allah is beyond space and time.⁶⁵ There is no place where one can say, "Allah is there." Allah is beyond everything that is created. Allah is beyond understanding and the ability to speak accurately about God.⁶⁶ In contrast, the Sufi tradition exhibits a dramatic exception to this emphasis upon utter divine transcendence in Islam in its focus on the possibilities of a more personal

⁶² Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 177.

⁶³ George W. Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 47. In several of its nuances Shiite theology reflects platonic thought.

⁶⁵ Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 16, 20.

⁶⁶ Hewer, *Understanding Islam*, 1, 2.

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relationship with Allah.⁶⁷ Overall, “the belief that God is one, singular, and separate from creation is central to the concept of Allah.”⁶⁸ Not only is Allah one, he is transcendent. Allah is distant from creation and from human beings.

The practical implication of this priority towards divine transcendence is that Muslims believe that in the Qur’an Allah did not reveal himself. Rather, he only revealed his will. As such Allah’s will becomes limited to Islamic law. It is a metaphysical impossibility to be in a personal relationship with Allah. Allah is distant and removed from creation and creatures and relates to them through his will and law.”⁶⁹ As Braswell writes: “The concept of God is deep and complex in Islamic theology and philosophy. Muslims believe that God is one, sovereign, and ruler over all. He has no partners. God’s many names do not describe his essence, only his will and law. God is independent of his creation. He revealed his will and law through the angel Gabriel to his prophet Muhammad as well as to other select prophets.”⁷⁰

Allah is the One Supreme God who remains entirely transcendent to the world. Allah is nowhere immediate and present in creation⁷¹ although the Qur’an hints at the opposite. Again, this does not necessarily mean that Allah is not involved with human beings, but the true nature and attributes of Allah are well beyond human comprehension.⁷²

Qur’anic Anthropomorphisms

This brings us to the question of the paucity of narrative and anthropomorphic language in the Qur’an in relation to the person and character of Allah. Story and narrative plot are less evident in the Qur’an than they are in the Bible. The Qur’an is assembled somewhat randomly with the longest Sūras at the beginning and the shortest ones toward the end. Sras from the Mecca and Medina periods are interspersed. There is

⁶⁷ Note 7. Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side*, 218.

⁶⁸ Braswell, *Islam: It’s Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 48.

⁷¹ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side*, 175.

⁷² Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 3.

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little if any sustained, linear trajectory or sequential story-plot as one finds in the Bible where salvation history moves broadly from Genesis through to Revelation and in which many books along the way (between Genesis and Revelation) reflect narrative content and purpose.⁷³ The Qur'an however, is an eschatological book with linear historical trajectory in that it directs readers toward the Final Judgment where Allah will be vindicated as God. And yet narrative and anthropomorphism in relation to the character of God are negligible.⁷⁴

Where biblical narratives are present in the Qur'an, the Qur'an unfolds a dramatically divergent retelling of the biblical stories and alternative interpretations of biblical figures and ideas.⁷⁵ In the process, the Qur'an largely follows Jewish biblical interpretation's attempts to de-anthropomorphize God.⁷⁶ It appears that the Qur'an's paucity of narrative content and that of anthropomorphisms are related. Surprisingly, Islam is more akin to Judaism in conceptualizing God than it is to Christianity.⁷⁷ This is important to note in Christian/Muslim dialogue regarding the being and character of God. Jewish interpreters were confronted with similar problems as their Muslim counterparts with the biblical depictions of God, which seemed to detract from God's absolute transcendence.⁷⁸ Anthropomorphisms in the Hebrew Scriptures created interpretive problems for both Jewish and Islamic exegetes—as if God is a human being writ large.⁷⁹ As a result, Rabbinic and qur'anic hermeneutics

⁷³ An example is the narrative of Moses in the Qur'an as compared to the Bible, etc. Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

⁷⁴ One could argue (and rightly to some degree) that the Qur'an is written in the form of Arabic poetry and prose. Arabic poetry by nature would be imaginative, full of warm feelings, and engender a personal and emotional response on the part of the reader/reciter. Earlier Sūras are characterized by short sentences, vivid expressions, and poetic force, but later ones become more and more detailed, complicated, and at times, rather prosaic in outlook and language. Such contrasts for Muslims are moot points. See Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 93, 94.

⁷⁵ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁷ Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, 84.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 82, 83.

⁷⁹ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 11.

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and commentary on the being and character of God agree more with each other than they do with that of Christian commentary.

After all, what kind of God molds man out of the dirt like a potter? Or strolls through the Garden of Eden hunting down Adam and Eve and engaging them personally? What kind of God talks to a serpent in a long and complicated interrogation? Or grieves and wonders if it were the right thing to have created humans in the first place? What kind of God eats food? What kind of God can be argued with towards changing his mind (as per Abraham pleading with God not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah)? In the Book of Genesis alone there is material sharing between God and humans, there is fellowship, and conversation, even pleading. Expand such anthropomorphic imagery via narrative across the Old Testament (let alone the New Testament) and you have all kinds of seemingly God-demeaning images. For Islam, “God is seen as separate and independent of creation and has no associations with any human traits.”⁸⁰ Allah has no emotions. Muslim theologians believe that it would be incorrect for God to have real emotions. For them it would be demeaning to His greatness. In contrast, the Bible God unfolds as one who grieves, who rejoices and who loves passionately, but not so in the Qur’an!

The Qur’an reflects the milieu in which it was received, written, and assembled. Lodahl asserts:

Several centuries worth of rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis was collected and collated near the end of the fourth and into the early fifth centuries . . . This material, called *Genesis Rabbah*, provides an authoritative Jewish sourcebook of readings of the Genesis text by and for the Jewish community not only of two millennia ago but even of today. Interestingly, what it demonstrates is that the differences between Genesis and the Qur’an are to some extent accounted for (or at least softened a bit) by the history of Jewish interpretation itself. In other words . . . the Qur’anic versions of biblical narratives often already imbibed the ambience of Jewish readings of the biblical text—readings intended, often, to de-anthropomorphize God . . .⁸¹

⁸⁰ Braswell, *Islam: It’s Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 45.

⁸¹ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur’an Side by Side*, 18.

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In recounting the biblical stories, the Qur'an time and again keeps the story but changes characters (i.e., it is angels, not God who are in view). The biblical stories are edited such that God comes out looking very Godly: transcendent, almighty, omniscient—and often effectively outside the narrative picture.⁸² The Qur'an then essentially cleans up God's image. God's image is much cleaner, crisper, and godlike.⁸³ One Muslim writer notes how the Qur'an rescues humans from regarding God too anthropomorphically.⁸⁴

Naturally, the qur'anic version of any biblical story is assumed to be the correct and even the infallible version of the story. If the Qur'an has details which the Bible does not have, then the Qur'an is assumed to be correcting (or at least complementing) the biblical version of the story—even if it turns out that many of the Qur'an's extra details are found somewhere in the body of Jewish interpretive material that arose after the writing of the biblical text and prior to the time of Muhammad.⁸⁵ The biblical Genesis narrative in particular is full of anthropomorphisms. And yet the Creation account, the fall of human beings, flood and Noah—God grieving, the surprise and sorrow attributed to God in Genesis 6:5-8 are simply not worthy of Allah.⁸⁶ In the Qur'an's record of Noah, not only does God does not grieve, but he commands Noah not to grieve (Q. 11:36-37).

Differences then between the biblical witness and the qur'anic witness regarding God and God's relationship to the world and to one's self⁸⁷ are reflected in a largely non-narrative backdrop with limited anthropomorphic language in the latter. Muslim tradition has avoided the language that man has been made in the image of God, because it could readily lead to the conclusion that God is a physical being and thus possess an image that human beings could represent.⁸⁸ This tradition both reflects the Qur'an and

⁸² Ibid., 24.

⁸³ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁴ “The distorted revelations in the hands of the Jews and Christians contain passages that are repugnant, for good reason, to the modern mind. Hence, mankind will never completely return to those sources and accept them as authoritative. It is the pure revelation, the Qur'an, that can rescue mankind” Jamaal al-Din M. Zarabozo, *How to Approach and Understand the Quran* (Boulder, CO: Al-Basheer, 1999), 258.

⁸⁵ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 90, 91.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 82.

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how it is subsequently interpreted. It inevitably nuances how one views Allah's being and character and subsequently the Islamic worldview.

The Qur'an however, does ascribe certain qualities to Allah that seem to soften somewhat its stance on the absolutely transcendent nature of Allah and possibly encourage perspectives of immanence and even anthropomorphisms. These images contrast with Allah's beautiful names. Allah derides (Q. 9:79). Allah forgets (Q. 9:67). Allah comes stealthily (Q. 7:182). Allah has a face (Q. 2:115, 272), eyes (Q. 11:37; 23:27), and hands (Q. 3:73; 5:64) and is sometimes seated on a throne (Q. 7:54; 10:3). Despite the possibilities that these anthropomorphisms might hint at, most Muslim scholars would assert that any resemblance between the attributes of a thing or person and some attributes of Allah is only apparent and superficial.⁸⁹ The heavenly realm of Allah does not traffic in earthy things (not even the angels ate, let alone God).⁹⁰

It is important to note that qur'anic anthropomorphisms (and traditional Muslim interpretations of them) revolve around physical characteristics of God in relation to humans and their implications rather than personal matters of divine being and character.⁹¹ An example would be the Qur'an's reference to Allah as having a face. Muslims will avoid such implications as verging on blasphemy in that it crosses the barrier between the Creator and the creature. To give Allah a face is to bring him down to the human. In contrast, *face* in the biblical witness is full of existential, personhood, and conscience realities (Gen 3:9, 10; 32:30; 33:10; Ex 3:6; Rev 6:16; 20:11; 22:4). Thus, *face* in the Qur'an is seen in terms of mere external realities and any correspondence with human face is avoided. Qur'anic interpreters assert that the anthropomorphic verses are beyond human understanding⁹² and or verge on blasphemy/idolatry. Again, in contrast, the biblical anthropomorphisms are meant to engender deeper understanding. As mentioned earlier, nowhere does the Qur'an suggest that humanity was made in the "image of God" as per the biblical account (Gen 1:27).⁹³ As a result anthropomorphic language is not considered appropriate with

⁸⁹ Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*.

⁹⁰ As per Muslim exegete IbnKathir and cited in Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 13.

⁹¹ Vicchio, *Biblical Figures in the Islamic Faith*, 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹³ Firestone, *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*, 81.

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reference to Allah. The Biblical witness however asserts that human beings are made in the “image of God” (Gen 1:27) thus opening the way for positive metaphoric analogy and anthropomorphism as a way of understanding God. Again, biblical anthropomorphisms are intended to engender understanding rather than misunderstanding or blasphemy. They bring humans upward to God rather than God downward to human beings. In the Bible, human qualities as per the image of God are in no way associated with inanimate images or idolatry. These are important distinctions, which ultimately determines how one reads both the Bible and the Qur’an and what view of God they will come away with.

In this context it can be stated again that the Qur’an does not really reveal Allah, but rather only Allah’s will for all creation.⁹⁴ “One may have a knowledge about Allah concerning his name and law, but one does not have an experiential and personal knowledge of him.”⁹⁵ Allah’s total transcendence in effect makes him not only impersonal but also un-personal. Allah has no point of reference in either human concept, thought or experience. Allah unwittingly becomes like a word without an idea.

Because anthropomorphic language in the Qur’an is either scant or sidestepped, Allah is often described in Islam more by “what he is not” than what he is.⁹⁶ By limiting the characterization of Allah to primarily that which he is not, Muslim readers and interpreters of the Qur’an have unwittingly nullified Allah’s practical existence for mankind.⁹⁷ Allah is so absolutely singular, so totally separate, that he cannot even be imagined. He has no body, no spirit. He needs nothing, wants nothing, feels nothing, and possesses nothing. Allah is harder to imagine, know, experience.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Waines, *An Introduction to Islam*, 26.

⁹⁵ Braswell, *Islam: It’s Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*.

⁹⁶ “Muslims have a fundamentally different conception of God. To a Muslim, God can only be described by negatives. He is neither this nor that. He is not in any way like man. He is utterly different from man in form and essence; He is completely incomprehensible,” E. W. Bethmann, *Bridge to Islam* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1950), 54.

⁹⁷ Anees Zaka and Diane Coleman, *The Truth About Islam: The Noble Qur’an’s Teachings In Light of the Holy Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 103.

⁹⁸ Bethmann expresses this well: “This radical difference in the conception of the ‘spiritual’ between Christianity and Islam must always be born in mind in order to understand the latter faith, as well as to appreciate the difficulties the Muslim has in

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The Qur'an is revered by Muslims as being God's final Scripture and as such provides the fullest and final revelation of God. While espousing a very high view of God, however, in reality the Qur'an reflects only a partial (or one-sided view) of God:⁹⁹ perhaps not by intent, but by literary content and paucity of metaphoric analogical language and narrative material that would lead the reader beyond the sheer absolute attributes of Allah to that of his being, heart, and character—where a response of love, trust, hope, and assurance would be awakened. For sure the Qur'an's focus on Allah's transcendence could be seen as a much-needed corrective in the view of the polytheism and irreverence of Mohammad's day, not to mention the Jewish-Christian conflict regarding God and much of the milieu's confusing foci, Christology, and distortions of Christian theology. Nevertheless, the Qur'an offers little more than its Rabbinic counterpart with respect to a view of the being and character of God—except what one might glean in addition about Allah from the Qur'an's references to Jesus in relation of Allah and Allah's purposes through Jesus both in the present and in the Final Judgment.

While the Qur'an claims that Jesus was a mere human being, a prophet of God who was superseded by Muhammad, it nevertheless places Jesus in a role unlike that of any other of Allah's servants including Muhammad.¹⁰⁰ Jesus seems to have unique status and is given honorific titles as Messiah, Word of God and Spirit of God (Q. 4:169-71; cf. 3:4-46), Speech of Truth (Q. 19:34-35), a "Sign unto men," and "Mercy from (Allah)" (Q. 19:21).

understanding Christianity. To him there is no kinship whatsoever between God and man; they are different in essence. Whereas the Christian can easily accept God as the leading spiritual force in the universe, a force which acts according to a guiding principle, the Muslim accepts only an omnipotent force—a concept which naturally must lead him to fatalism" (Bethmann, *Bridge To Islam*, 55.)

⁹⁹ One naturally wonders, Does Islam throw a veil over God as per Paul's argument in 2 Cor 3? The answer is both yes and no. We would say "No!" when considering the high view of God, which the Qur'an presents in context of the turbulent, polytheistic, and often theologically confusing times in which it was written. In this context, the Qur'an provided perhaps a much-needed corrective. But we would say "Yes!" in light of salvation history and the final self-disclosure of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In light of the Great Controversy and the biblical witness of the finality of self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, the Qur'an would be a significant step backwards and essentially cast a veil over generations of readers of the Bible.

¹⁰⁰ Isa is mentioned in ninety-three verses of fifteen Sūras, a total of ninety-seven times (although in most cases quite briefly and only as a name in the prophetic list).

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Ultimately, Jesus is the one through whom Allah judges the world and brings the eschatological banquet (Q. 5:109-120). The Qur'an engenders deep respect and even reverence for Jesus where Muslims will invariably pronounce the benediction "Peace be upon him" with every mention of his name. The Qur'an asserts that Jesus is one of Allah's instructive "signs" or "revelations": "We may make of him [Jesus] a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us" (Q. 19:21, 91; cf. 23:50). Furthermore, Jesus is the Messiah, a word from Allah, one of those brought near to Allah, and righteous: "(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous"(Q. 3:45, 46). And surprisingly, Jesus is "a faultless son" given to Mary and mankind (Q. 19:19).

These titles and activities of Jesus have much significance in Christian theology as they relate to the divine character of Christ. Many Christians have tried to read too much into them in their attempts to prove certain biblical doctrines from the text of the Qur'an. However to the Muslim they lack any content of deity and even the Qur'an states that at the eschatological judgment Jesus will affirm that he did nothing to encourage the beliefs and behaviors of Christians that are inconsistent with Muslim teaching. If we want to do justice to the Qur'an we need to let Islamic theology speak for itself in determining the significance of these titles for Jesus.¹⁰¹

Having said this however, it is highly appropriate to wonder how this very human Jesus might be one of God's instructive signs, a mercy from God, the Word of Truth, etc. How might these titles and activities of Jesus relate to our discussion about Allah's character and in particular the question of his immanence? This needs deeper study for sure, but on the surface it implies that Jesus will speak forth Allah's communication as a prophet that will in some sense embody this communication. This is a remarkable possibility, and while it certainly cannot simply be equated with the Johannine notion of Jesus as God's Word become flesh (John 1:14), it does suggest a singular greatness of Jesus' prophetic role and implications

¹⁰¹ Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 61.

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for nuancing Allah's immanence and close connection with human beings.¹⁰² Likewise in Islamic theology the concept Messiah means someone who is prominent in this world and in the next as well as someone who is near God. These are important perspectives for our understanding the transcendence/immanence debate in Islam.

One would wonder too, whether the qur'anic images of word and spirit in relation to Jesus are bridge concepts, which refer to the activity of God in reaching out to bridge the gap between the realms of the transcendent and the mundane? Could Word imply Allah's bridging this gap by communicating with human beings – "speaking to" mankind, imparting a set of meanings by means of human language and interpretation, i.e., anthropomorphism that radically shifts one's view of Allah toward a real lived life. Could the word "spirit" suggest imparting life, vitality, and energy? Could word and spirit denote two inseparable modes of outreaching from Allah toward creation?¹⁰³ If so, it would suggest that perhaps the anthropomorphisms in the Qur'an are not in essence wrong and that their implications should be teased out more fully. Again, one would not need to read matters of deity into either in order for this to be so.

One might further argue, that the Qur'an itself as a book expresses God's immanence. The Qur'an became an earthly book when the "Mother of the Book" was recited to Muhammad and eventually was committed to the writing. The functional equivalent to the Qur'an for Christians is not so much the Bible as it is Jesus Christ. Muslims insist that Allah "has spoken" the full, final, and authoritative Word in the Qur'an, while Scripture asserts that God "has spoke to us by a Son" (Heb 1:2).¹⁰⁴ While as it has been stated above that Allah himself per se may not be revealed in the Qur'an—only his will—nevertheless the Qur'an itself bridges human beings to Allah. One would think so even more when it is related to not as a written text but an internalized reality that is recited.

One naturally wonders at this point, "Is there a difference between the Qur'anic view of God and the interpreters who have come afterwards?" For sure! While some would try to nuance or tease out personal spiritual

¹⁰² Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 140.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 67. Regarding the "preexisting divine Word or Wisdom": 1) for the Jews it is Torah; 2) for Muslims it is "Mother of the Book"; 3) for Christians it is Christ (*ibid.*, 54.)

aspects of God in relation to His being and character, most relegate such discussion to the level of abstract and unknowable. It is hoped that this study will encourage the former letting the Qur'an speak for itself.

Becoming What We Worship

We have explored both the overlap and divergence between the biblical and qur'anic witness with regard to the person and character of God. We have found that the divergence between the two sacred texts largely revolves around the Qur'an's maintaining divine transcendence over that of immanence and protecting God from supposed demeaning (or blasphemous) anthropomorphisms. We ask at this point, What are the practical moral and spiritual implications of this overlap and divergence for Christians and Muslims respectively? What kind of spiritual experience do these divergent views create? Which view of God and reality ultimately satisfies the longing of the human soul? Do both? How do these views of God affect everyday religious life? That Christian and Muslim religious experience is dissimilar is a given. Psalms 115:8 asserts the moral/spiritual principle that we become what we worship.¹⁰⁵ Our view and worship of deity inevitably molds both moral and spiritual life. This contrast in religious experience is linked in part to the divergent biblical and qur'anic witness regarding God's being and nature. We will now briefly explore some of the broad differences in their respective religious experience and spiritual life.

As we observe the practical impact of the biblical and qur'anic views of God in the lives of respective readers, we must keep in mind that there is more often than not a gap between their witness about God and the religious experience of their respective readers. What we see in the Christian world most often does not reflect the biblical witness about God. Cultural influences and the influence of tradition rather than the biblical witness most often determine Christian religious life and experience. The same is true of Islam. What is expressed in the Qur'an about Allah is not always fully or truly reflected in the religious spiritual experience of the

¹⁰⁵ G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 36-70, 241-267; F. B. Meyer, *Gems from the Psalms* (Westchester, IL: Good News Publishers, 1976), 188. See also Michael R. Weed, "Worship and Ethics: Confession, Character, and Conduct," *Christian Studies*, 13, (1993).

average Muslim. Islamic religious experience is markedly cultural and reflects Arabic tradition more than it does the qur'anic witness of Allah, and more noticeably so than in Christianity.

Islamic Devotion and Religious Experience

The liturgical and semi-liturgical influence of the Qur'an is evidenced in Islamic devotion and worship. It does so not so much as a written text that is read, but an internalized reality which worshipers recite¹⁰⁶ for when the Qur'an as a flawless communication from Allah¹⁰⁷ is recited it is truly Allah who speaks.¹⁰⁸ Muslims are encouraged to know the Qur'an by heart (although in practice very few do, most know only bits and pieces and what they do know they usually do so more through their Imam than in personal engagement with its text).

The core of Islamic devotion is the five obligatory daily prayers, whether performed alone or in a congregation. These prayers begin with worshipful qur'anic recitation. First the worshiper recites the Fātiha. Second, he or she is to recite some further portion of the Qur'an. These qur'anic-threaded prayers are offered five times a day as a duty towards Allah and where Allah is directly or indirectly in view in the text read/recited. They serve to strengthen and enliven the belief in Allah and inspire the worshiper to a higher morality. They are said to purify the heart and prevent temptation towards wrong-doing and evil. Preparation for these prayers includes ritual washings with a view toward personal absolution before Allah.¹⁰⁹ Thus cleansing, prayer, and forgiveness are intertwined. Prayer includes standing, kneeling, and prostration. Various portions of the Qur'an are recited throughout. During the five stated prayers individuals

¹⁰⁶ Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, 77. One wonders how one can truly memorize the Qur'an and know what it says and yet allow Islamic theology and Imams interpret its meaning. Experientially, this is similar to Catholic and Protestant tradition, which for the most part blurs the true meaning of the biblical witness.

¹⁰⁷ It is the very speech or recitation of God given to Muhammad.

¹⁰⁸ Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 66. Yet Allah's "speaking" is not as personal as say a Christian might imagine in saying the same about the Bible.

¹⁰⁹ The qur'anic theme of divine transcendence is undergirded by the ritual of washing of hands, face, and feet. This cleansing is done before Salat. The worshiper uses a prayer mat to keep him free from contamination and to provide a sacred place for prostration.

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address Allah directly (but not necessarily personally) without an intercessor or mediator.¹¹⁰

This cycle of prayer—based on the rhythms of the natural world—provides a framework for living and a foundation for those existential moments in life, which lift the worshiper outside the human time/space continuum, and allows him or her to draw close to the Divine Being. But this prayer experience in effect tends to be not so much a personal conversation between a human and God but more rather an external practice saturated with the formal procedures and required customs. It has been asserted that in the end prayer in Islamic piety is an act of obedience more than it is personal petition.¹¹¹ If prayer were not repeated five times daily, believers would soon forget about Allah and his greatness. The heart of the human predicament is one's tendency toward forgetfulness rather than that of a fallen nature.

Informal prayers (Do'a)—extemporaneous petitions, pleas, praises, and statements to God—however, express a more emotional and heartfelt side (and longing) of Islam often associated with Folk Islam.¹¹² Sufism is a more mystical wing of Islam, which attempts to overcome Allah's distance (transcendence) by emphasizing that Allah is closer than one's jugular vein. It talks of love and closeness and the presence of Allah. There is music and dancing which show an intense emotional side of religion and the desire for the nearness of God to the human condition.¹¹³ Folk and Sufi Islam tend to be more personal and spiritual, in light of Allah's perceived immanence and approachability. They highlight a soul hunger endemic in Islam (as well as a very human reality which seeks intimacy and assurance with God).

Outside of the ritual prayer, the recitation of the Qur'an can play a part in a wide variety of semi-liturgical activities (religious and social) as well as everyday life in ways that are not liturgical at all.¹¹⁴ Qur'anic phrases penetrate into everyday language: "If God wills" (in-shā' Allāh, Q. 2:70), "God knows best!" (Allāhua'lām, Q. 3:167), "Praise be to God!" (al-hamadu lillāh, Q. 1:2). Such qur'anic phrases in everyday language reflect how Allah is an every present reality in Muslim life and

¹¹⁰ Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 64.

¹¹¹ Caner, *Unveiling Islam: An Insider's Look at Muslim Life and Beliefs*, 110.

¹¹² Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 65.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹¹⁴ Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, 79.

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consciousness. But the question remains whether this so experientially or culturally?

Prayer however, is only one of the “Five Pillars” of Islamic faith, which gives believers strict, concrete rules and practices to which they can adhere. These pillars are non-negotiable. They are not questioned but believed and practiced. There is the Testimony (Shahada): “There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” There are the Five Daily Prayers (Salat) as per above, Almsgiving or Purification of Wealth (Zakat), Ramadan Fast (Sawm), which honors the arrival of the Qur’an, and Pilgrimage (Jaijj) honoring Abraham. In addition to these five core religious practices, every Muslim is to work purposefully to spread their religion.

The essence of Islam piety as expressed in the above spiritual disciplines is submission. The Arabic root “slm” finds nuance in the words Islam, Muslim, and Salam. Islam means submission to the will of Allah. The person who submits to Allah is called a Muslim. Such submission brings Salam—peace (both personal and communal). The Qur’an asserts that the only correct human response to God is total submission. For Islam, to be human is to be *muslim*—a human in submission to Allah: “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), never will it be accepted of Him” (Q. 3:85); “This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion” (Q. 5:3). The word Islam implies a state of harmony (peace) that exists between God and the whole of creation, and within creation itself, which is the way God created it. It contains as well the idea of submission, because this harmony can come about only when everything submits to the will of God and acts according to the plan of the creator. The mosque as the place of Islamic worship literally means a place of prostration.

In the context of one’s personal submission to Allah, Muslim moral life and ethics includes purity and cleanliness, clothing and adornment, diet, family, marriage and divorce, husband and wife and parent and child, status of women, economic life and the conduct of business and political life. Islam provides an all-embracing view and expression of life. It comprises a worldview complete with cultural expression and support. It is life under the rule and order of Allah as given in the Qur’an and through the prophet

Muhammad's teaching and life.¹¹⁵ It answers fundamental questions of why should one be moral, and how one can be so. For Islam a transcendent Allah knows human beings completely and if Allah knows humans that well, then surely Allah knows what is good for them. Thus the Qur'an expresses the Divine will. Human beings need only follow Allah's will. Understanding or dialogue regarding Allah's will is unnecessary (even irreverent or blasphemous) as submission is all that is needed or required.

Islamic anthropology and Islamic ethics have the same essence—submission of self. Matters of personal will, choice, and freedom blur against the will of Allah who remains transcendent and reveals his will rather than himself.¹¹⁶ Moral agency unwittingly becomes moralistic and any assurance of help beyond one's self wanes. "If Allah is merciful, then I will make it—given there are enough good works on the scale." Love and grace as the spring and power of submission blur against a desire for sufficient works to counterbalance in the eschatological judgment. The question is how much in Islamic moral life is linked to Islam's view of Allah who is transcendent (rather than holy and personal) and how much is it cultural?

In Islam, every human being is born sinless: there is no original sin. Each person is responsible for his or her own acts, and no one bears the burden of others (Q. 6:164). The human condition then is more one of forgetfulness rather than sinfulness. Mercy, grace, and the need for atonement are interpreted from this perspective. One wonders whether there might be a significant difference in Muslim spiritual life regarding these matters if Allah's character (rather than transcendence) were more in view in their reading of the Qur'an?

One wonders too, how much Islamic religious life is based on the character of Allah as found in the Qur'an in relation to the compelling influence of Islamic Arab culture? While the Qur'an casts the larger worldview context for these elements of Islamic religious experience, it appears they reflect Arabic culture and tradition more than they do the Qur'an itself. One's connection with Allah is not as important as staying

¹¹⁵ Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 101-131.

¹¹⁶ In this context it is often asserted that the only way God is personal to Muslims today is via dreams and visions. One could assert that Allah does not care about us enough to talk to us, except through dreams and vision (personally). Experientially such moments are far and few between and fleeting—howbeit compelling and life changing.

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connected to the community and doing what is right within the community and culture. Being connected to the community is to be connected to Allah because this is Allah's community. The success of Islam appears to be the Mosque, the expression of Islamic community more than the Qur'an itself. There appears to be a faithfulness and passion to the religion of Islam more than to Allah. One observes more reaction when Mohammed is criticized than when Allah is. More often Muslims will cry at the mention of Mohammed than they will Allah.

In addition questions of predestination (tacit fatalism) and the assurance of salvation lay heavily in a Muslim's thinking. So too, is a correct understanding of the Qur'an. No one but Allah knows the interpretation of the Qur'an (Q 3:7). The average Muslim does not understand the Quran for his or herself but is dependent on the Imam. One does not get personal guidance from the Qur'an. Only the Imams who read Arabic can really know and interpret it—but even that is open to question. The practical question presses each worshiper: "Why then study the Qur'an if one cannot read it for themselves and understand it unless they are an Imam?" Existential angst and soul hunger is common within Islam and because of it, Islamic sects like Sufism seek to give primacy to the religion of the heart, to the love of God and to values of contemplation and asceticism—even if in the process they directly contradict some of the most fundamental doctrines of orthodox Islam.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, the Qur'an as the expression of Allah's will holds a special place in the life of the believer and Islamic piety tends to be reverent, respectful, dutiful, compliant, morally upright, and worshipful. Because of it Allah dominates Muslim thought and life. Islamic piety provides a familiar context from which Muslims keep spiritual and physical life before Allah focused.

Biblical Devotion and Religious Experience

While there is a marked unity and similarity among Muslims in the essentials and practice of the major doctrines and religious experience as

¹¹⁷ Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 289-291.

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outlined above,¹¹⁸ it is not so with those who read the Bible. The contour of Christian piety and religious experience is not as homogeneous. Nor does it tend to be as reverent, dutiful, compliant, morally upright, and worshipful across the board as one finds in Islam.¹¹⁹ Many aspects of Christian doctrine and religious experience only remotely reflect the Bible and the spiritual/religious experience it portrays. There is no single set of assumptions with respect to the nature and character of God and what that means existentially, experientially, and practically. Some of this stems from disagreement over the nature of the Bible, its origin and authorial integrity, what it contains, what it reveals, how one should approach it (hermeneutics), and the role it plays as an authority in religious and spiritual experience in relation to tradition, culture, personal experience, and science. (Is the Bible an absolute authority, one authority among many, provide only an authoritative witness, or is it ultimate authority through which one finds God who alone is absolute authority?) Religious experience and practice stemming from disparate readings of the Bible and views of God runs the gamut from legalism to mysticism, from high church to unstructured cell-groups. Because this is so, we will not take the time to articulate Christian spiritual experience and religious practice as such, but rather how it should be according to the biblical witness. What does the Bible intend our spiritual experience and religious practice to be?

The Bible reveals that God is love and that God has acted lovingly in Jesus Christ towards man (1 John 4:7-21; John 3:16; Titus 3:4-7).¹²⁰ From these realities everything else springs. We love God because He loves us first, continually, and sacrificially (1 John 4:19; Rev 1:5). Spiritual life and

¹¹⁸ The contour of Islamic piety and religious experience in relation to the Qur'anic witness of Allah is fairly homogeneous despite diverse Islamic political/theological sects and movements (Sunni and Shi'ite, Folk Islam, Sufism, Wahhabis, Druze, Alawite, etc.). There remains a high unity and similarity among Muslims in the essentials and practice in the major doctrines and practices as per above. See Braswell, *Islam: It's Prophet, Peoples, Politics and Power*, 88-99; Geisler, *Answering Islam*, 287-291.

¹¹⁹ As a result Muslims dismiss Christianity as largely irreverent and permissive and are usually surprised when they meet "practicing Christians" whose personal lives reflect genuine spirituality and obedience to God.

¹²⁰ The God who creates by the Word is self-giving, sacrificial love. God the Creator is outpouring and life-giving. He is personal, engaged with His creation, He is good, moral. God is involved and God is invested. See Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and the Qur'an Side by Side*, 57.

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religious practice springs from the haunting reality of God's self-giving love in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Divine love both compels and propels resulting in a new creation complete with altered priorities and transformed life (2 Cor 5:14, 15). The God of Scripture would awaken a response of love not mere submission. One can submit, but not love, nor have experienced being loved. But if one truly loves, there will be heartfelt submission (Eph 5:21-26). Such submission is no mere compliance, obedience, or capitulation. It involves one's very self willingly and totally disposed to God (or another) in service and honor.

Biblically, the experience of grace and peace is the hallmark of one's personal encounter with this God who loves (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3; Rev 1:4-6). Divine grace, peace, and love converge in the human heart bringing oneness with God, communion with Him, hope and joy, moral excellence, and full assurance of redemption despite the vicissitudes of life.

Paul expresses these realities in Romans: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom 5:1-5).

John highlights the profound intimacy one can experience with God: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete" (1 John 1:1-3).

Other passages give witness: that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom 8:1); that there is confidence that God is always for us and never against us (Rom 8:31-34); that nothing can separate us from

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God's love (Rom 8:35-37); that one can have confidence at His appearing (1 John 2:28; cf. Rev 6:15-17; Isa 25:9). The Bible assures us that through His love, grace, and power, God is able to keep us from falling away and will bring us with great joy into His glorious presence without a single fault (Jude 21, 24).

The Bible gives more witness of God as love than it does of God as judge. But where judgment is nuanced those who know God do not fear either Him or the judgment. Rather they welcome God's judgment for they know that in judging, God is at work in their behalf (Psa 7:8; 35:24; 76:8, 9; Dan 7:22; Rev 18:20).¹²¹ The Bible asserts that "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love" (1 John 4:18). Biblical fear includes a loving response to God who is our Holy Redeemer: "what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 10:12).

These images raise important questions. How does it feel like to be loved? What is it like to have love returned or spurned? God desires our love in return and goes out of His way through biblical narrative and anthropomorphic imagery to help us get in touch existentially with such personal and inner realities in relation to Himself (i.e., the books of Song of Songs, Hosea, Ezekiel, story of the Prodigal Son, etc.). Biblical anthropomorphisms help one understand divine mercy and love. They seek to draw one experientially into the circle of divine love. Such an experience engenders joy, hope, and passionate surrender and commitment to God.

The Bible is not abstract thoughts or statements, but thoughts by God on life and lived by Christ (Heb 1:1-3; John 1:1-14; 18). God is not an object that I am to deal with, but a Subject who speaks and addresses me

¹²¹ "In the Bible there is a twofold definition of God's judgment: positive and negative. Both aspects are usually presented and are complementary, but it is necessary to emphasize that the primary meaning is undeniably a judgment in favor of God's faithful people (Deut 32:36; 1 Chron 16:33-35; Dan 7:22; Heb 9:27-28). When God judges, it means first of all that He justifies, delivers, saves, vindicates, and protects. Judgment means justification, salvation, deliverance, and vindication" (Jiri Moskala, "Toward a Biblical Theology of God's Judgment: A Celebration of the Cross in Seven Phases of Divine Universal Judgment (An Overview of a Theocentric-Christocentric Approach)," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 139, 140.).

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personally. God is Personal. Words connect living beings—they are a revelation from one interior to another (1 Cor 2:9-16). What is inside me can get inside you—the word does it. What is in the mind of God can get inside our mind—through words. Language is the bridge in biblical spirituality. The Bible is the text for genuine spirituality. God connects with us personally by means of the language of the Bible: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” (John 5:39); “The words that I speak are spirit,” Jesus asserts (John 6:63). Ultimately the Bible brings us into contact with God Himself who measures our heart and life: “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:12, 13).

Biblical spirituality is a return to “God Said.” For not only is there God, there is God’s Word. On the surface this may sound similar to what Islam asserts in that the Qur’an reveals the will of God and believers are to submit to the will and rule of God. But the Bible goes beyond the will of God to God Himself who expresses His will. When one responds to the Word of God, they respond to God—a person responding to a personal God. They do so in relation to Him. Furthermore the Bible presents God as a calling God, which implies freedom to say “Tomorrow” or “No” or “YES!” (Rev 22:17; Heb 3:15; 4:7).

Two biblical characters model the kind of religious experience the Bible’s vision of God gives witness to—Daniel and Paul. The prophet Daniel is a man whom God highly esteemed and loved (Dan 9:23; 10:11). His life was one of incredibly personal spiritual and moral integrity as well as professional excellence (Dan 6:3-5). His spiritual discipline and religious practice comprised his diet, thought world, prayer life, worship practice, obedience in relation to God’s will, fasting, confession, repentance, and the study of God’s Word (Dan 1:8; 2:17, 18; 6:10; 9:1-21; 10:2, 3). Daniel faithfully served God continually (Dan 6:16, 20). He knew the joy of moral and spiritual innocence and excellence before all around him, before God, in full view of and hope for eternity beyond the grave (Dan 6:22; 12:1-3, 13). Daniel’s experience brings insight into the divine transcendence and immanence paradox, which the Bible ever keeps in tension with respect to those who know and experience God. Upon seeing a vision of God, Daniel

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falls down with fear before the divine One and yet feels the hand and hears the voice of the divine affirming him as favored of heaven and bids him “Fear not!” (Dan 10:4-12).

The apostle Paul likewise exemplifies the biblical divine transcendence/immanence tension and how this paradox impacts the spiritual moral experience of those who encounter God. His “Road to Damascus” experience brings Paul face-to-face with divine transcendence, which totally undoes him, and yet divine immanence is evident in the verbal exchange where the divine and human communicate and from which Paul understands the personal spiritual and missological implications of his encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:1-20; 22:6-16).

This transcendence/immanence experience forever framed Paul’s spiritual life, religious practice, and ministry. On the one hand Paul saw himself as chief of sinners and unworthy of any standing before the eternal, immortal, invisible God (1 Tim 1:12-17; cf. 1 Cor 15:8-10). He would ever characterize himself as being in complete submission to God and to the will of God—“a bond-servant of God” (Titus 1:1; Rom 1:1). His spiritual life and personal integrity would include spiritual disciplines (prayer, fasting, worship), his inner world of conscience and character, and an outwardly disciplined life of obedience to the will of and service to the world around (Acts 24:16; 2 Cor 4:2; 2 Cor 6:3-10; 1 Cor 9:24-27; 1 Cor 15:8-10; cf. Rom 12:1-2; 2 Tim 1:3). On the other hand Paul knew the reality of God’s love, grace, peace, and personal presence—realities of divine immanence which touched him deep within, bringing hope, assurance, courage, comfort, purpose, and moral/spiritual power (1 Cor 15:10; Phil 3:7-14; 1:21; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Rom 15:13; 2 Cor 1:3; 6:7; 1 Thess 2:4; 2 Tim 4:6, 7). Thus Paul sees himself as a slave who is in personal interaction with God whom He both loves and has submitted his life.

In light of these images God’s Word should mean everything to us because that’s where we can see and touch the Infinite, Almighty One who alone can meet every one of our needs. God’s Word is God Himself coming to us with His presence, His mind, His heart, His transforming power, hope, and purpose. It is God Himself strengthening us from inside out, building our core. In His Word God meets human beings, changes human beings and provides for them. God’s Word is where we find God. God does so by keeping ever before us the balance of His transcendence and immanence.

Conclusion

In this study we have seen how the biblical and qur'anic worldviews are largely defined by a vision (and resulting set of assumptions) of God, which in turn profoundly affect each reader's identity, spiritual experience, religious practice, and moral life. Both the message of the Qur'an and the Bible bring something positive to the table with regards to the character of God in relation to the Great Controversy. They generate overlapping yet distinct views of God and thus reality. We have explored the biblical witness of the being and character of God in relation to that of the qur'anic witness of Allah and have found wonderful and foundational truths about God in both. We have found however that the Qur'an exhibits a paucity of narrative and anthropomorphic material with regard to God in comparison to that of the Bible. This revolves largely around the Islam's question of divine transcendence and the desire to maintain the believer's proper relation (distance) to Allah. The Bible too, would raise caution with respect to divine distance. However it presents divine transcendence and immanence as a paradox in balanced tension—which creates a sense of both distance from and intimacy with God on the part of those who encounter Him in relation to His Word.

Each document's presuppositions regarding the presence/absence of anthropomorphic language in relation to divine transcendence/immanence nuances its existential impact on the reader. It appears that the Bible's anthropomorphic language enables the fullest picture of the revelation of God in relation to the human predicament and experience. Biblical anthropomorphisms help one understand divine mercy and love and seek to draw one experientially into the circle of divine love. This is so regardless of questions concerning the nature of Christ, but becomes even more pronounced when Christ as the divine Word become flesh is seen as bringing the final and fullest expression of the person and will of God (Jn 1:14, 18; Heb 1:1-3). Here anthropomorphic language is realized in a person who is seen, heard, touched and with whom and through whom one can fellowship with and love God (1 Jn 1:1-4). In Jesus Christ God provides a face for human beings to see, know, and love (2 Cor 4:6).

Our purpose is that this brief comparison between the biblical and qur'anic witness of the character of God provides a larger context of understanding in which Seventh-day Adventist Christians can meaningfully engage their Muslim friends for whom God is a spiritual and morally

compelling reality. In light of the preceding discussion, I propose the following:

1. Remember that while the Bible and the Qur'an may have similar terms, themes, and imagery with regard to God (and other spiritual realities or truths) they may not mean the same thing. We must interpret each document's material in light of its own text, presuppositions, and the worldview it engenders. Adventist Christians need to be careful not to invest the Qur'an with their own understanding and meaning, but rather ask their Muslim counter-part about possible nuances where the Qur'an provides possibilities. This can help Muslim readers of the Qur'an to make a distinction perhaps between the Qur'an and its Islamic interpreters. It can also help them clarify their understanding of the qur'anic nuances and possibilities and open the way for clearer communication.

2. Keep dialogue with Muslims open by the way you characterize the Qur'an in relation to the Bible. Suggesting that the Bible is more right or more precise than the Qur'an or that the Qur'an may be wrong in some area risks blocking dialogue and tearing down the very bridges one is seeking to build. Affirming biblical principles and truths where they can be rightly found or hinted at in the Qur'an is helpful. Where the Bible provides a fuller or more balanced picture of God, showing how the Qur'an possibly hints at such fuller aspects of God maintains dialogue and invites further study. Suggesting how the Qur'an encourages the reading of the Bible—perhaps with such deeper nuances in mind—can open a Muslim's heart to the reading of the Bible as well.

3. Engage Muslims personally and on a personal level. Remember that while theologically speaking, the God of the Qur'an (or Islam) may not be personal, the people of Islam are personal. This is evident in a Muslim's attachment to the Ummah (community). Muslim wellness is linked with community and sense of belonging (in family and Mosque). As such, Muslims have the same needs, desires, and wants, and struggles and have the same spiritual and existential questions and struggles as Christians do. We must sense this deeper personal need on their part and seek to connect with Muslims on that level. We need to do so personally (mirroring such in our own personal life and spiritual journey). Engaging with them on a

personal level can help focus the existential issues and needs around which the divine transcendence immanence dialogue revolve. It also lends authenticity to our own witness.

4. Let your heart verbally overflow in joy and passion with a cascade of “beautiful names” of our wonderful God—who is holy, righteous, merciful, just, compassionate, Creator, Redeemer, judge, eternal, love, etc.¹²² This will demonstrate our own personal connection with those transcendent realities and with God Himself—both intellectually and experientially. We must understand how our own experience with God and what we say about God is crucial in the Adventist Muslim dialogue. The biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms invite us to experience God for ourselves. They confront us with metaphors and stories, which speak to us on an existential and experiential level. When Adventist Christians experience God’s transcendence as per the biblical witness, it affects how and what they say to their Muslim counterpart about God. We should be able to speak more freely of God than even of Jesus Christ and in the process unfold how the person and work of Jesus reveals more and more about our great God. In the course of time this can open the door toward discussions of the nature of Jesus as well.¹²³ The question must be constantly asked, “How freely and openly do I speak of God and affirm His character?” “How much am I haunted by a vision of His transcendence? We need to experience God’s transcendence. If we do it will affect what we say about God. When we couple that with an experience of God’s immanence, it can bring profound witness and influence as we engage our Muslim friends. Muslims need to see our spiritual experience and religious practice as reverent, dutiful, worshipful, genuine, full of love, and touching every aspect of our life.

¹²² Scripture is full of beautiful names of God and such language and images should haunt our imagination and fill our mouths with words about our wonderful God.

¹²³ Qur’anic references to Jesus as the “Messiah” and a “word from him [Allah]” (Q. 3:4-46). While the Qur’an suggests that Jesus will not simply speak forth divine communication but will in some sense embody this communication cannot be equated with the Bible’s assertion that God’s Word became flesh and is the fullest expression of Himself (Jn 1:1-3, 14, 18), it nevertheless opens up possibilities and opportunity for dialogue.

5. Invite Muslims to engage in deeper thinking on the evidences of divine immanence in the Qur'an. What does Allah mean when he says that he is as close to human beings as the jugular? Would that be frightening or encouraging? How do they process repeated references in the Qur'an to Allah as merciful and the Lord of Mercy? What of Allah's mercy? Do they believe it? How have you experienced such? How can the biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms help? This provides an opportunity to discuss how anthropomorphic language need not be irreverent or blasphemous (as Imams or Muslim theologians might suggest), but rather how such language invites understanding and displays God's desire to communicate on a level where human beings can understand Him and both know Him and love Him. We must be able to share from the Qur'an how God's connecting with human beings is certainly not only possible but also not demeaning to God in any way. This can prove helpful for Muslims as they begin reading the Bible for themselves and perhaps struggle in the unfamiliar or shocking territory of anthropomorphic language.

6. Suggest how narrative and anthropomorphic language can affect both spiritual life and moral orientation. Through these literary vehicles one can see God and be drawn to be like Him in the world. Share how anthropomorphisms give us a glimpse of how God acts and responds. How they give us divine examples and models that can motivate spiritually, morally. We can share how in the biblical witness, God does not hesitate to compare Himself in the way human persons act and relate to others. We can share too how in the process the metaphors in relation to God are reshaped by God's own being and become the standard for a new understanding of human roles.¹²⁴ We can explain that through them God is not dragged down to a human level, but rather human beings are drawn upward to the divine and in the process God's transcendent attributes are actually affirmed. Such images are constitutive bringing spiritual and moral formation. Through them divine character is imprinted upon the human soul. This drawing upward to the divine values and being is in keeping with

¹²⁴ Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God*, 216, 217.

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the many spiritual and moral values which Muslims already display and hold important in the varied human roles of their own life and culture.

7. Share how biblical narratives and anthropomorphisms—which unfold images of God (both transcendence and immanence)—have made a difference in your own life. Share how they invite you into the divine narrative to experience it on an existential level. Relate those stories and their imagery in expressing your own understanding of and connection with God. Again, this brings authenticity and appeal to our witness.

8. Let Muslims see a display of God’s character of self-sacrificing love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness in your own life. Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle recommends the Bible to Muslims because it shows through everyday life and lifestyle that the Bible is not corrupted. In addition, Adventists do not eat pork or drink alcohol. We are not Zionists like many Christians tend to be. When Adventist Christians live as “practicing Christians” in submission to the will of God as revealed in the Bible they surprise Muslims whose own lives are characterized by reverence, submission, worship, spiritual disciplines, etc. or whose own lives have drifted from faithful Islamic piety and life. Adventists who are living their faith challenge Muslim’s convictions regarding the Bible and Jesus Christ, i.e., either challenging them to read the Bible in order to prove it wrong, or because we model Jesus Christ so well, challenging them to read the Bible to find out more about Jesus.

9. Give witness of what it means to know God, personally. Because theologically Islam teaches that Allah himself is unknowable, and Muslims largely seek to worship a God whom they believe is unknowable, Adventist Christians have the privilege of modeling what it means to be called into relationship with a God whom they can know, reverence, and love.

10. Know what it means personally to be redeemed by the grace of God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ in your behalf. While there is an absence in Islam of a theology of man in need of a Savior, Adventist Christians can embody in their own lives and witness that very need and how the God of the Bible meets that angst and need through the death, resurrection, and priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. It can be a positive and

inviting witness—especially where one models true peace, joy, assurance, hope, integrity and excellence in spiritual life and religious practice in relation to God. The witness of a redeemed person leaves an incredible saving influence. This often leads Muslims to compare themselves with how they understand Mohammed and the Qur'an.

11. Pray for Muslims to have a revelation of the character of God—His love, His faithfulness, His kindness, holiness, justice, mercy, grace and peace. Pray that you will have such a revelation in your own life so that you can speak of them with authenticity and power, joy and passion. In the end Muslims must see your life in total submission (“islam”) to the God Whom you have come to see.

At bottom, this study is about helping Muslims see and experience God. It is about helping Muslims get in touch with another side of their God, and helping them gain a fuller more balanced vision of God. Our desire is for them to find true peace, joy, assurance, and hope in the promise of God's personal presence, love, grace, and mercy. As we noted in the beginning of our study, this matter is at the heart of the Great Controversy and its closing message: “Those who wait for the Bridegroom's coming are to say to the people, ‘*Behold your God.*’ The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them.”¹²⁵

What God do we behold? What God are we inviting our Muslim friends (and anyone else for that matter) to behold? What God do they see in our life? How we ourselves understand and experience the biblical witness of the character of God will determine our answer. When we grasp their need for a sense of God's person and presence in their life, we will know what we need to do to support them in their journey toward God.

¹²⁵ White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, 415.

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Larry L. Lichtenwalter is a preacher, pastor, theologian, seminary adjunct professor, and author. He holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics and has been lead pastor of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan since 1985. lichtenwalter@gmail.com