

The Theme of Judgment: A Comparative Study in Isaiah and the Quran

Carol Wright

Christians who witness to Muslims often look for points of commonality between the Bible and the Quran. One significant common element is the theme of judgment. Carol Wright's analysis of this theme, as found in the Quran and the book of Isaiah, highlights bridges of similarity as well as significant differences.



Carol Wright is a registered nurse who currently works in the health care industry. She spent the summer of 1986 as a short-term worker in Indonesia.

The following is a comparative study of the theme of judgment in the book of Isaiah and the Quran. The aspects of judgment to be examined are: Why does judgment occur? What are the characteristics of judgment? What are the results of judgment? What is the role of the intercessor in judgment?

It is the intent of the author to provide a basis by which the Christian can discuss the subject of judgment with a Muslim in a manner which clearly demonstrates the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. The book of Isaiah has been selected as the basic Christian reference because of its many references to judgment of Jewish and Gentile nations as well as its description of the Suffering Servant who brings salvation.

The translation of the Quran used is that of A. Yusuf Ali. (Specific references to verses may vary among English versions of the Quran.) The translation of the Bible used is the New American Standard.

WHY DOES JUDGMENT OCCUR?

It is useful to first define the term "judgment." In the Bible, judgment is not merely an impartial measurement of

Carol Wright
The Theme of Judgment

good and evil, but more of a strong response against sin. It is not impersonal, but intimately related to the bond between God and man. The characteristics of God's nature—such as His mercy, lovingkindness, truth, holiness, and righteousness—are all involved in the process and act of judgment (Douglas 1982:640-641).

The word for judgment in the Quran is *Mash-had*. This implies several things: 1) a Court of Judgment held at a certain time or place where evidence is taken; 2) a time or place where people are brought forth to be judged; and 3) the occasion for the taking of evidence for use in making a decision (Ali 1977:775). The basis for judgment is the reception or rejection of God's teaching and guidance (Ali: 1977:1200).

The reasons for judgment as detailed in Isaiah are quite similar to the reasons for judgment in the Quran. God indicts Israel for revolting against Him, and not knowing or understanding Him (Is. 1:2,3). The focus here is on the relationship between God and man. Likewise in the Quran, true worship of God, with a desire to realize His presence and understand His will, is presented as a characteristic of the righteous, while those who reject the knowledge, teaching, and guidance of God are to be condemned (Ali 1977:1796).

Isaiah rebukes the people of Israel for turning away from God (Is. 1:4). He reveals that the people spoke and acted against God, and rebelled "against His glorious presence" (Is. 3:8). They did not "pay attention to the deeds of the Lord," nor "consider the work of His hands" (Is. 5:12). They spoke irreverently of God, taunted Him to see if He would act (Is. 5:18-19), refused to listen to God's instruction (Is. 30:9), rejected His law, and despised His word (Is. 5:24). Isaiah 65:12 summarizes the reason for God's judgment: "Because I called, but you did not answer; I spoke, but you did not hear. And you did evil in My sight, and chose that in which I did not delight."

The Quran decrees condemnation for those who ignore God's signs and ridicule godly men (Sura 23:105-110; cf. Ali 1977:892). A man is judged for refusing to serve God, and instead serving other things. His lack of appreciation for God's nature and goodness to all creatures will be counted

against him (Ali 1977:930). He is judged for ignoring God, who is the cause and source of all good (Ali: 1977:1601).

Social sins are another basis for judgment in Isaiah. Rulers are condemned for being in alliance with thieves, taking bribes, and not caring for orphans and widows (Is. 1:23). God angrily asks through Isaiah: "What do you mean by crushing my people, and grinding the face of the poor?" (Is. 4:15). Influential citizens were grabbing up land (Is. 5:8), becoming drunkards (Is. 5:11), perverting morality (Is. 5:20), enacting evil statutes, allowing unjust judges to make unfair decisions (Is. 10:1), and defrauding the righteous with meaningless arguments (Is. 29:21).

Social sins are also condemned in the Quran. Those who have wealth and luxury in this life and use it for self-indulgence and shameless crime will be humiliated at the time of judgment (Sura 56:45-46; cf. Ali: 1977:1489). Sura 74:42-47 details the lament of one so judged:

"What led you
into Hell-Fire?"
They will say:
"We were not of those
who prayed;
nor were we of those
who fed the indigent;
but we used to talk
vanities with vain talkers;
and we used to deny
the Day of Judgment,
until there came to us
(the Hour) that is certain" (Ali 1977:1646).

Failure to perform little tasks of neighborly helpfulness, acts of courtesy, and daily kindnesses makes one subject to judgment (Ali 1977:1796). Taking advantage of others and nursing grievances against one's fellow man are described as heavy burdens to a person when he is judged (Ali 1977:811).

Idolatry is another common cause for judgment. Isaiah condemns Israel for worshipping the work of their hands (Is. 2:8), "setting a table for Fortune" (the Aramean god of luck, Gad), and filling "cups with mixed wine for Destiny" (the Aramean god of destiny, Meni; cf. Is. 65:11)). Similarly the

Carol Wright
The Theme of Judgment

Quran says in Sura 37:95-97: "... 'Worship ye that which ye have (yourselves) carved? But God has created you and your handiwork!' They said, 'Build him a furnace, and throw him into the blazing fire!'" (Ali 1977:1203).

Pride and arrogance are additional common reasons for judgment in Isaiah and the Quran. "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight!" (Is. 5:21). The king of Babylon is condemned for attempting to make himself like God (Is. 14:14-15), and the Moabites are judged for their arrogance, pride, fury, and idle boasts (Is. 16:6-7). Tyre is judged for having pride in her beauty (Is. 23:9). The Quran identifies conceit and arrogance as the root cause of most evil (Ali 1977:1653), and notes that this is the reason Iblis (i.e., Satan) fell (Sura 2:34; cf. Ali 1977:25). Selfish arrogance is the root cause of sin and rebellion and prevents man from having a wholesome life (Ali 1977:1195).

In summary, there are many similarities in the reasons that judgment occurs in Isaiah and the Quran. The central concern is true worship of God. Those who fail to render such worship are judged for a multitude of subsequent sins.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF JUDGMENT?

The characteristics of judgment in Isaiah and the Quran are very similar in some respects, different in others. One major difference lies in the time when judgment occurs. In Isaiah, judgment frequently occurs in the present world: nations and peoples are overthrown, natural disasters occur, and rulers are deposed. Isaiah also anticipates a final Day of Judgment. In the Quran, judgment is generally deferred until a future Day, when all men are brought forward and their deeds weighed in the balance. However, the Quran does stipulate some penalty in this life for wrongdoing; this penalty takes the form of a constant corrosive effect on the soul and conscience (Ali 1977:1677).

Fire is a common instrument of judgment in Isaiah and the Quran. God says through Isaiah that He will "smelt away your dross" and "remove all your alloy" (Is. 1:25). In Isaiah 1:31 He says: "Thus they shall both burn together, and there will be none to quench them." In reference to the judgment of

Assyria, God says His breath will consume them like a fire and the peoples will be burned to lime (Is. 33:11-12). In reference to the future Day of Judgment, Isaiah says "the Lord will come in fire" and "execute judgment by fire" (Is. 66:15-16). Quranic references to judgment by fire are somewhat graphic: "The Fire will burn their faces, and they will therein grin, with their lips displaced" (Sura 23:104, as quoted in Ali 1977:892). Hell is described in Sura 37:62-68 as the place of the Tree of Zaqqum. This Tree grows at the bottom of Hell, has fruit stalks like the heads of devils, and supports a boiling mixture that cuts up the intestines when eaten. Those who are condemned to Hell have a compulsion to eat the fruit of the Tree of Zaqqum and also the boiling mixture. These characteristics of Hell are symbolic of a state of spiritual evil: it rises from the lowest parts of human nature, man's best affections are degenerated to envy and hatred, and the hunger for evil grows as the soul remains there and feeds on evil. The appetite for evil results in intense and continual internal aggravation, and the chain of evil is unending (Ali 1977:1199).

Judgment in Isaiah frequently takes the form of a natural disaster or a lack of cooperation by the creation. Such a description may be metaphorical or literal. In Isaiah 3:1 God says He will remove from Jerusalem "the whole supply of water." In the parable of the vineyard He says He will "charge the clouds to rain no rain on it" (Is. 5:6). A characteristic of the judgment on Judah would be a poor yield from their crops (Is. 5:10). Egypt would experience drought and famine as part of its judgment (Is. 19:5-10). In contrast, the Quran makes no reference to judgment in this life occurring through the use of nature. As mentioned above, there is some judgment felt inwardly in this life, but Allah is not noted for his use of nature to punish people while on this earth.

The use of cosmic language is common in the descriptions of the Day of Judgment in Isaiah and the Quran. Isaiah describes the mountains as quaking and corpses lying like refuse in the streets (Is. 5:25). The Branch of Jesse that will come to rule and judge will "strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked" (Is. 11:4). The Day of the Lord will be a day when

Carol Wright
The Theme of Judgment

the land is made desolate, and sinners are exterminated from it (Is. 13:9). In the tribulation period God will "lay the earth waste, devastate it, distort its surface, and scatter its inhabitants" (Is. 24:1). Judah "will be punished with thunder and earthquake and loud noise, with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire" (Is. 29:6). The scene is characterized by mountains drenched with blood and the sky rolling up like a scroll as the host of heaven wears away (Is. 34:3-4). Streams are to be turned into pitch and loose earth into brimstone (Is. 34:8-9).

In the Quran the Day of Judgment is characterized by two figures: 1) the firmament is in horrible commotion, and 2) whatever was thought to be stable and firm will be as a mirage in the desert (Ali 1977:1433). Sura 21:104 describes that Day as one when the heavens will be rolled up like a scroll (Ali 1977:846). To describe the terror of the Day of Judgment, three principal metaphors are employed: the mother will abandon her baby at the breast; the expectant mother will spontaneously abort; and men will be intoxicated with terror (Sura 22:1-2; cf. Ali 1977:850). In Sura 25:25 the Quran says the heavens will be "rent asunder with clouds," and "angels shall be sent down, descending in ranks" (Ali 1977:932). Sura 70:8 describes the sky as being like molten brass (Ali 1977:1606). The stars will become dim, the heavens will be "cleft asunder," and the mountains will be scattered to the winds like dust (Sura 77:8-10, as quoted in Ali 1977:1664). Also, the stars are described as becoming scattered, and the oceans as bursting forth (Sura 82:2-3; cf. Ali 1977:1699).

The reward for those who have suffered righteously and the punishment of those who are wicked are described in both Isaiah and the Quran. Isaiah says that the Branch of Jesse will judge the poor with righteousness and "decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth" (Is. 11:4). All people will be regarded as equal, the class distinctions of this life no longer considered useful (Is. 24:2). The Quran places great emphasis on the point that each man stands alone at the judgment (Sura 23:101; cf. Ali 1977:891), and that every deed is brought to account and weighed in the scales (Sura 21:47; cf. Ali 1977:832). Those who have more good deeds than bad will receive grace for their wrongdoing and be ushered into the

beautiful "Hereafter." Those whose bad deeds outweigh the good will be condemned to Hell. All inequalities of this life are set right and each person is given his precise and just due (Sura 56:1-6; cf. Ali 1977:1421). Men are sorted out into three categories, according to the Quran. The first category is the "Specially Exalted" (or "Foremost in Faith"). They are those nearest to God. The second category is the "Companions of the Right Hand." They are the righteous. The third category is the "Companions of the Left Hand." They are those in agony because their bad deeds outweighed their good deeds (Ali 1977:1484). Those who did not believe God's messenger or message will wish they could be reduced to a state of nothingness, but this is impossible. They will find themselves in a world of absolute reality where there is no place for them (Ali 1977:1677).

As mentioned above, the prominent distinction between judgment in Isaiah and judgment in the Quran concerns the relationship of the present life on earth to the time of judgment. In Isaiah people and nations are often judged in various ways during this present life in response to their wrongful actions. They thus experience the penalty of their sin to some degree and may take opportunity to repent. In fact, the purpose of the chastisement is to bring them to recognition of their sin so they *will* repent. In the Quran, this present life is a probationary period, a time of storing up good and bad deeds. One does not know where he stands for sure until the Day of Judgment. According to the Quran, God is not active in chastening people while they are in this present life. They may experience some consequences of their sin, but it is not an act of God to draw them to repentance. God only gives them the message (the Quran) to read and heed.

A prominent distinction between Isaiah and the Quran is in the relationship of the present life to the time of judgment.

WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF JUDGMENT?

The results of judgment, which occur in this life and the life to come, are graphically described in Isaiah. Physical ailments are part of the punishment of the nation that does not repent but continues in rebellion. Isaiah 1:5-6 says that the head is sick, the heart is faint, and the body is unsound, with bruises, welts and raw wounds that are not treated properly. God's judgment on the daughters of Zion for their pride and

Carol Wright
The Theme of Judgment

haughtiness was scabby scalps, bare foreheads, and a removal of their ornamentation (Is. 3:17-18). The people would be "hard-pressed and famished" because they consulted mediums and spiritists instead of God (Is. 8:21). "Sickliness and incurable pain" would be the consequence of idol worship for Israel and Syria (Is. 17:11). Those who reject the way of the Lord will be hungry and thirsty, have "heavy hearts," and "wail with a broken spirit" (Is. 65:13-14). God says in Isaiah 48:22: "There is no peace for the wicked." They will be separated from God (Is. 59:2). Perhaps Isaiah 66:24 best summarizes the results of judgment for the wicked: "Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind."

In contrast, the Quran does not principally describe the punishment of evildoers in physical terms, but instead uses other metaphors to portray the events that happen after death. The transgressors will taste of the Tree of Zaqqum, which is bitter and pungent and a representation of all that is unpleasant. There will be nothing to refresh them in the midst of the fierce fire, boiling water, and black smoke in which they find themselves (Ali 1977:711). Their faces will be "sad and dismal, in the thought that some back-breaking calamity [is] about to be inflicted on them" (Sura 75: 24-25, as quoted in Ali 1977:1652). They will be blinded on the Day of Judgment because they did not see God's signs when here on earth (Sura 20:124-125). Their life will be "narrowed down," totally missing the good influences and true reality of God and totally centered on self (Sura 20:124, as quoted in Ali 1977:816-817).

Isaiah includes consequences to the society among the results of judgment. Cities would be burned down, strangers would overrun the fields (Is. 1:7), the people would be "devoured by the sword" (Is. 1:20), and others would go into exile (Is. 5:13). Elders and false prophets would be cut off as a result of Israel's sin (Is. 9:14-15). In contrast, the Quranic consequences of judgment are more concerned with the individual than society, although it is certainly a prominent theme in Islam that a society which lives according to its precepts will be a perfect society.

Isaiah goes on to portray the results of judgment for the righteous. There will be no more war, as swords are hammered into plowshares and "spears into pruning hooks" (Is. 2:4). Life will go well for the people as they "eat the fruit of their actions" (Is. 3:10). God will rejoice over His people, and there will no longer be weeping and crying, since the former calamities will not be remembered (Is. 65:17-19). "They shall not labor in vain," and there will be intimate communion with God: "... before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear" (Is. 65:23-24). The creation will be different, as wolf and lamb eat together, lion and ox eat straw, and the serpent no longer kills for food (Is. 65:25). The righteous who were afflicted will "increase their gladness in the Lord, and the needy of mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 29:19).

In the Quran, those judged to be righteous receive a similar reward—nearness to God. The "Foremost in Faith," those who have reached the highest degree of spiritual understanding, will be nearest to God in the Hereafter (Sura 56:10-11; cf. Ali 1977:1485). They will be on thrones of gold and precious stones (Sura 56:15) to demonstrate their spiritual eminence. Their fellowship with one another will be blissful. They will be surrounded by youths who are fresh and perpetually young, and they will be able to eat and drink without experiencing any uncomfortable physical after-effects (Sura 56:17-19; cf. Ali 1977:1485-1486). The second class of righteous people in the Hereafter, the "Companions of the Right Hand," find themselves in a beautiful garden setting:

(They will be) among
lote-trees without thorns,
among tall trees
with flowers (or fruits)
piled one above another...
in shade long-extended,
by water flowing constantly,
and fruit in abundance.
Whose season is not limited
nor (supply) forbidden,
and on Thrones (of Dignity),
raised high.
We have created (their Companions)
of special creation.

Carol Wright The Theme of Judgment

And made them
virgin-pure (and undefiled)...
beloved (by nature),
Equal in age....
(Sura 56:28-37, as quoted in Ali 1977:1487-1488).

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AN INTERCESSOR IN JUDGMENT?

The dictionary defines an intercessor is one who gives "prayer, petition or entreaty in favor of another." To intercede means "to intervene between parties with a view to reconciling differences" (Woolf 1974:601).

In Isaiah, the intercessor is God Himself, in the form of the Suffering Servant, who bears the "iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6). God is described as searching for some man who could intercede for the sinful people of Israel. However, none could be found that was worthy, so He Himself provided that Man (Is. 59:16). The connotation is that God acted out of a motivation of love. God wants to pardon His people, but His Holiness demands a perfectly righteous person to intercede, since He cannot behold sin (Is. 59:2). The intercessor offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice for atonement and the acceptable mediator:

But the LORD was pleased
to crush Him, putting Him to grief;
if He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.
As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
by His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
as He will bear their iniquities.
Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
and He will divide the booty with the strong;
because He poured out Himself to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
and interceded for the transgressors
(Is. 53:10-12).

In contrast, the Quran indicates that there potentially can be more than one intercessor. Intercessors qualify for such a role by God's permission: "None shall have the power of intercession, but such a one as has received permission (or promise) from (God) Most Gracious" (Sura 19:87, as quoted in Ali 1977:785). The sense of intercession in the Quran is one of pleading for mercy and forgiveness from God on behalf of another party. The intercessor is accepted because he conforms to the will of God and has obeyed God's law (Sura 21:28; cf. Ali 1977:827). There is no guarantee that the work of the intercessor will save the other party from condemnation. The intercessor is not able to make any reparation for a person. In fact, the Quran instructs that one must not rely on an intercessor (Sura 6:51; cf. Ali 1977:301):

The Quran makes no guarantee that the work of an intercessor will be effective.

... But proclaim (to them)
this (truth): that every soul
delivers itself to ruin
by its own acts;
it will find for itself
no protector or intercessor
except God; if it offered
every ransom (or
reparation), none
will be accepted; such is
(the end of) those who
deliver themselves to ruin
by their own acts...
(Sura 6:70, as quoted in Ali 1977:307).

It appears from the passages quoted above that the Quran contradicts itself on the role of the intercessor. One passage describes some value in intercession, while the other indicates that intercession will not help the person when he appears in the final court of judgment before God.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this analysis has been to compare and contrast treatments of the theme of judgment in Isaiah and the Quran. It is hoped that knowledge of these similarities and differences will give Christians another avenue of discussion in their dialogue with Muslims.

Carol Wright
The Theme of Judgment

For, as we have seen, the reasons for judgment spelled out in Isaiah and in the Quran are quite similar. From this common ground, Christians can go on to show their Muslim friends how liberating the Biblical distinctives can be. For example, judgment which occurs in this life, as described by Isaiah, is intended to prompt the repentance that leads to salvation, while in the Quran this present life is probationary; it is only at the Day of Judgment that a person finds out where he stands. How wonderful Isaiah's view could be to a Muslim for whom judgment is a terribly unknown and unknowable phenomenon! Likewise, the concept of an intercessor can offer new hope for the Muslim who realizes the significance of Isaiah's guarantee that the work of the intercessor can indeed save from condemnation. What a marvelous thing that God Himself intercedes for His creatures, and what an implicit endorsement for the concept of the Trinity! These are but a few of the possibilities.

The goal of such dialogue is not to win an argument. The goal is to present the similarities and differences and trust the Holy Spirit of God to accomplish His work in the hearts of Muslims. May His Kingdom advance as we increase in our understanding of Him and of those for whom He died.

Author's address: 1774 N. Sierra Bonita Avenue, Pasadena, California 91104, USA.

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