

A Probe into the Concept of Friendship in the Qur'ān

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The topic of human relationships—be they positive and sympathetic, or negative and hostile—receives a great amount of attention in the Qur'ān. Human beings need to be aware of both their friends and their enemies in order to learn how to engage with both groups, how to make additional friends and defend themselves from harm caused by enemies, and, if possible, turn these enemies into friends. There are several concepts used in the Qur'ān to refer to the general notion of friendship—a relationship that is positive, constructive, and sympathetic. Starting with an analysis of the concept of spouse (*zawj*) and then focusing on five other concepts (*ṣāhib*, *khalīl*, *akh*, *ṣadīq*, and *walī*) used in the Qur'ān to refer to friendship, I will try to explore their distinctive features as well as their similarities.

Different Types of Positive Human Relationships

Studying the qur'ānic verses about different types of relationships that human beings may have with one another, we see that there are at least five concepts that the Qur'ān uses in order to refer to positive, constructive, sympathetic, and supportive relationships. Some of these relationships may also be found among non-humans, but most of them are exclusive to human beings.

Spouse

The spousal relationship is one of the sympathetic, supportive, constructive, and positive relationships that human beings may have with one another, though it is found among non-humans as well. In several places, the Qur'ān refers to the fact that God has made everything in pairs. There is a discussion among qur'ānic exegetes about whether “everything” includes every created being, or whether

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it refers only to human beings, animals, and other living creatures. Some commentators, who believe that all creation is created in pairs, explain their viewpoint by referring to the duality that exists inside each atom.² What matters most here is that when it comes to human beings, the Qur'ān does not regard this relationship as merely biological. In plants, for example, this pairing may be only for biological reasons, while in animals it may also be, at least to some extent, to provide for security and comfort. However, when it comes to human beings the spiritual dimension precedes. According to the Qur'ān, God has created for us spouses from our very own nature so that we may be able to achieve serenity and tranquillity:

And of His signs is that He created for you spouses from your own selves that you may take comfort in them, and He ordained affection and mercy between you. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect. (Q 30:21)

Or in another verse, we read, “It is He who created you from a single soul, and made from it its spouses, that he might find comfort with her” (Q 7:189).

Therefore, this tranquillity is the result of a union that is partly established by God's creative act and partly by His legislation. Thus, in God's creation and also in His legislation, this union has been significantly taken into account, and all the necessary arrangements have been made so that it can be strong. According to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (s), marriage is the most sacred construction that human beings can build (Majlisī 1403AH, 100:222), and its destruction by divorce is the permissible act that is most disliked in the sight of God (Kulaynī 1407AH, 5:328).

The Qur'ān also extends the significance of marriage to Paradise in the story of Adam and Eve:

We said, “O Adam, dwell with your spouse in Paradise, and eat thereof freely whencesoever you wish; but do not approach this tree, lest you should be among the wrongdoers.” (Q 2:35)

[Then He said to Adam,] “O Adam, dwell with your spouse in paradise, and eat thereof whence you wish; but do not approach this tree, lest you should be among the wrongdoers.” (Q 7:19)

When God wanted to warn Adam about the deceptions of Satan, He told him that Satan is their enemy who strives to expel them from Paradise and cause them to suffer and have a miserable life:

2. See, e.g., Makarim Shirazi (1374 Sh, 18:377-8; 22:376).

We said, "O Adam! This is indeed an enemy of yours and your spouse's. So do not let him expel you from paradise, or you will be miserable." (Q 20:117)

Although Adam was addressed (*Yā Ādam*), the message was that Satan is your and your wife's enemy (*la-ka wa li-zawjik*); you must not let Satan to cause both of you to be expelled (*lā yukhrijanna-kumā*) from Paradise, or you [Adam] will be miserable (*tashqā*). I think these shifts between singular and dual pronouns show the great unity that exists between a husband and wife. In any case, Adam and Eve entered Paradise together and were warned not to do anything that would lead to their expulsion from it.³ Unfortunately they both made a grave mistake and were consequently dismissed from Paradise.

The situation mentioned above was about a temporary Paradise for Adam and Eve. However, in several places the Qur'ān also refers to the existence of this type of relationship in the eternal heaven and enumerates having pure spouses as one of the greatest blessings for the people of heaven. Pious ladies would have pure husbands and pious men would have pure wives. The Qur'ān says,

[A]nd give good news to those who have faith and do righteous deeds, that for them shall be gardens with streams running in them: whenever they are provided with its fruit for nourishment, they will say, "This is what we were provided before," and they were given something resembling it. In it there will be pure spouses for them, and they will remain in it [forever]. (Q 2:25)

Say, "Shall I inform you of something better than that? For those who are God-wary, there will be gardens near their Lord, with streams running in them, to remain in them [forever], and chaste spouses, and God's pleasure." And God sees best the servants. (Q 3:15)⁴

Interestingly, the Qur'ān informs us that the angels who bear the Divine Throne, and those around it, pray for the believers. One of the things they continuously ask for is that God let them enter Paradise together with their spouses:

Those who bear the Throne, and those around it, celebrate the praise of their Lord and have faith in Him, and they plead for forgiveness for the faithful: "Our Lord! You comprehend all things in mercy and knowledge. So forgive those who repent and follow Your way and save them from the punishment of hell. Our Lord! Admit them into the Gardens of Eden, which You have promised them, along with

3. There is not even the slightest mention of the possibility of one of them remaining in Paradise and the other going outside. Both go to Paradise and both leave it together.

4. See also Q 4:57-13:23.

whoever is righteous among their forebears, their spouses and their descendants. Indeed You are the All-mighty, the All-wise.” (Q 40:7-8)

Thus, there seems to be no doubt about marriage being a very intimate type of positive relationship or, one may say, a very strong kind of friendship.

Friend

There are some types of relationships that seem to be exclusive to human beings and apparently do not exist among animals. These types of relationships, which indeed demonstrate our humanity, take form when we voluntarily decide to build a close relationship with someone, who does not speak our language, who does not have the same ethnic background that we have, who may not even share our faith. We can even choose to be friends with someone who has harmed us, something that is also exclusive to human beings. God has given us the ability to look beyond all these differences and decide to get close to one another. In the Qur’ān, we find that there is no limit or restriction regarding this type of relationship as far as God is concerned. For example, the Qur’ān says,

God does not forbid you in regard to those who did not make war against you on account of religion and did not expel you from your homes, that you deal with them with kindness and justice. Indeed God loves the just. God forbids you only in regard to those who made war against you on account of religion and expelled you from your homes and supported [others] in your expulsion, that you make friends with them, and whoever makes friends with them —it is they who are the wrongdoers. (Q 60:8-9)

God does not require us to refrain from befriending even those pagans who do not share our faith in God and Islam on the condition that they have not sent us into exile and have not waged war against us. We can be good friends with them, be kind and just with them, and provide them with what they need. Indeed, according to the Qur’ān, justice is something that has to be observed all the time, even with respect to our enemies. The Qur’ān says,

O you who have faith! Be maintainers, as witnesses for the sake of God, of justice, and ill feeling for a people should never lead you to be unfair. Be fair; that is nearer to God-wariness, and be wary of God. God is indeed well aware of what you do. (Q 5:8)

So we have two main principles here: first, to be just to everyone, including those who are hostile to us; second, to befriend and treat kindly everyone who does not expel or kill us, including those who believe in other faiths or are faithless.

Can friendship survive death? According to the Qur'ān, true friendship can survive death and continue to exist in the hereafter. In other words, true friendship is not a worldly matter, such as money, property, position, or reputation to come to an end with the end of this world. Of course, this does not refer to all types of friendship. If friendship is based on piety, good will, and love for God, it can continue forever. However, those types of friendship that are based on worldly considerations or self-interest, in which the parties involved merely use each other as means to achieve worldly gains, are doomed to perish. The Qur'ān says,

O you who have faith! Spend out of what We have provided you before there comes a day on which there will be no bargaining, neither friendship, nor intercession. And the faithless—they are the wrongdoers. (Q 2:254)

Tell My servants who have faith to maintain the prayer and to spend out of what We have provided them with, secretly and openly, before there comes a day on which there will be neither any bargaining nor friendship. (Q 14:31)

Indeed, the Qur'ān informs us that such friends will wish they had never become friends:

A day when the wrongdoer will bite his hands, saying, "I wish I had followed the Apostle's way! Woe to me! I wish I had not taken so and so as friend! Certainly He led me astray from the Reminder after it had come to me, and Satan is a deserter of man." (Q 25:27-29)

The Qur'ān also tells us that such types of friendship would turn into enmity:

On that day, friends will be one another's enemies, except for the God-wary. [They will be told,] "O My servants! Today you will have no fear, nor will you grieve." (Q 43:67-68)

This verse confirms that pious people will continue to remain friends. This is so because their friendship was genuine, they really wanted the best for the other party, and, of course, because their friendship was based on love for God and for goodness. This type of friendship will continue up to the Day of Judgement and indeed afterwards in Paradise where it will be perfected. The Qur'ān says,

We will remove whatever rancour there is in their breasts, and streams will run for them. They will say, "All praise belongs to God, who guided us to this. We would have never been guided had not God guided us. Our Lord's apostles had certainly brought the truth." And the call would be made to them: "This is paradise, which you have been given to inherit because of what you used to do!" (Q 7:43)

We will remove whatever rancour there is in their breasts; [intimate, like] brothers, [they will be reclining] on couches, facing one another. (Q 15:47)

Different Terms Used for Friendship in the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān uses various terms to refer to friendship:

Ṣāhib (plural form: *aṣḥāb*). This term is used in different senses, but it essentially refers to something that accompanies something else, whether it be a human being or an animal,⁵ a place or a time.⁶ Therefore, *ṣāhib* is more general than friendship and mainly denotes acquaintance and being together for a considerable period of time. This is why even Prophet Muhammad (s) is introduced to the pagans who had rejected Islam as their *ṣāhib* or companion since they had lived with him in Makkah and knew him very well. In what follows, we will refer to some of the cases in which this term is used in the Qur'ān to refer to this kind of relationship:

Say, “Shall we invoke besides God that which can neither benefit us nor harm us, and turn back on our heels after God has guided us, like someone seduced by the devils and bewildered on the earth, who has **companions** that invite him to guidance, [saying,] ‘Come to us!’?” Say, “Indeed it is the guidance of God which is [true] guidance and we have been commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.” (Q 6:71)

Have they not reflected that there is no madness in their **companion**, [and that] he is just a manifest warner? (Q 7:184)

If you do not help him, then God has already helped him when the faithless expelled him, as one of two [refugees], when the two of them were in the cave, he said to his **companion**, “Do not grieve; God is indeed with us.” (Q 9:40)

O my prison **mates**! Are different masters better, or God, the One, the All-paramount? (Q 12:39)

The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the punishment of that day at the price of his children, his **spouse** and his brother, his kin which had sheltered him and all those who are upon the earth, if that might deliver him. (Q 70:11-14)

[T]he day when a man will evade his brother, his mother and his father, his **spouse** and his sons— that day each of them will have a task to keep him preoccupied. (Q 80:34-37)

5. “So submit patiently to the judgement of your Lord, and do not be like the Man [*ṣāhib*] of the Fish who called out as he choked with grief” (Q 68:48).

6. See Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (1983, 475).

“*Khalīl*” (plural form: *akhillā*).⁷ This term means “intimate friend” and the root “*khullah*” means affection with ultimate purity and friendship that has penetrated the heart deeply (Ṭurayhī 1375 Sh, 5:364). About this type of friendship, the Qur'ān says that on the Day of Judgment there will be people who will regret becoming intimate friends, *khalīl*, with impious people who made them forget God and His message, rather than having befriended righteous people (Q 25:27-28). However, when they realise that they had adopted their real enemies as friends and their real friends as enemies, it will be too late for them to change their situation.

It is interesting that even God chooses some people as His *khalīl*. One can be a *khalīl* of God, but not a brother of God. With respect to Prophet Abraham, the Qur'ān says,

Who is better in his faith than the person who submits himself to God and follows the path of Abraham? And God chose Abraham as his friend. (Q 4:125)

God chose Abraham as his friend, which is a great honor for Abraham and also a great honour for all of us because we are all followers of Abraham. There are many *ḥadīths* explaining why God chose Abraham as his friend. For example, Imam Ṣādiq (a) is quoted as saying, “God chose him as His friend because Abraham never rejected anyone’s request and he himself never asked anyone other than God” (Baḥrānī 1995, 2:177).

“*Ṣadīq*” (plural form: *aṣḍiqā*). This word is derived from the root *ṣidq*, which means truth, *ṣadīq* is used to refer to a friend who is honest and sincere (Ibn Manẓūr 1993, 10:194). The Qur'ān uses this term in the following verses, and in both cases it is used in the singular form: “Now we have no intercessors, nor do we have any sympathetic **friend**. Had there been another turn for us, we would be among the faithful” (Q 26:100-102).⁸

“*Akh*” (plural form: *ikhwah*). Although this word literally means brother, it also can mean friend, as attested by the usage of this word in the Qur'ān. Indeed, this is an extension of the literal meaning—i.e., biological brother—to include an associate who shares the same tribe, nation, faith, or worldview.⁹ The Qur'ān says, “And to [the people of] ‘ād, Hud, their **brother**. He said, ‘O my people, worship God! You

7. See Q 4:125; 17:73; 25:28; 43:67.

8. See also Q 26:101.

9. See, e.g., Ṭurayhī (1375 Sh, 1:2); Ibn Manẓūr (1993, 14:1); Rāghib al-Iṣḥāhānī (1983, 6).

have no other god besides Him. Will you not then be wary [of Him]?” (Q 7:65)

In this and similar verses,¹⁰ “brother” refers to a person who is from the same nation and is very well known to, and who cares for certain people. In some verses, “brother” is used to refer to fellow faithful people whose relationships with each other will continue until they enter Paradise together and indeed will be perfected there. For example, the Qur’ān says,

Yet if they repent and maintain the prayer and give the zakat, then they are your **brethren** in faith. We elaborate the signs for a people who have knowledge. (Q 9:11)

Indeed the God-wary will be amid gardens and springs. “Enter it in peace and safety!” We will remove whatever rancour there is in their breasts; [intimate like] **brothers**, [they will be reclining] on couches, facing one another. Therein neither weariness shall touch them, nor will they [ever] be expelled from it. (Q 15:45-48)

And [also for] those who came in after them, who say, “Our Lord, forgive us and our **brethren** who were our forerunners in the faith, and do not put any rancour in our hearts toward the faithful. Our Lord, You are indeed most kind and merciful.” (Q 59:10)¹¹

Interestingly, the Qur’ān refers to this brotherhood as a great gift from God for the believers. The Qur’ān says,

Hold fast, all together, to God’s cord, and do not be divided [into sects]. And remember God’s blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became **brothers** with His blessing. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it. Thus does God clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided. (Q 3:103)

God brought together the hearts of people who used to fight and kill each other and made them brothers; thus, the people of Makkah, the people of Medina and then all believers were made brothers of one another. Here, brothers is used in contrast to “*a ʿūdā*” (enemies).

“*Akh*” is also used to refer to the association of bad people with one another. The Qur’ān says,

Indeed the wasteful are **brothers** of satans, and Satan is ungrateful to his Lord. (Q 17:27)

10. See also Q 7:73; 7:85; 11:50, 61-84; 27:45; 29:36; 46:21.

11. See also Q 33:5; 49:10-12.

Have you not regarded the hypocrites who say to their **brethren**, the faithless . . . (Q 59:11)¹²

Reflecting on these verses about brotherhood, we understand that, when used for non-biological brothers, it refers either to the members of the same nation whose lives are somehow interconnected, such as prophets and their entire nations that included both believers and unbelievers, or to people who share the same worldview, be it God-centered or not. Thus, it seems that it is not used simply for two people who become each other's friends; rather, it is used for members of the same nation, party, or camp.

"Ḥamīm." This term is sometimes used as an adjective and is normally translated as sympathetic or intimate. There are two places in the Qur'ān where such usage can be found:

And no one led us astray except the guilty. Now we have no intercessors, nor do we have any **sympathetic** (or **intimate**) friend. (Q 26:99-101)

Good and evil [conduct] are not equal. Repel [evil] with what is best. [If you do so,] behold, he between whom and you was enmity, will be as though he were a **sympathetic** (or **intimate**) friend. (Q 41:34)

Ḥamīm is also sometimes used by itself as a noun and is often translated simply as friend or as a friend who is intimate, loyal, or caring. In the following verses, such usage can be found:

Warn them of the Imminent Day when hearts will be at the throats, choking with suppressed agony, [and] the wrongdoers will have no **friend**, nor any intercessor who might be heard. (Q 40:18)

[S]o he has no **friend** here today, nor any food except pus, which no one shall eat except the iniquitous. (Q 69:35-37)

[A]nd no **friend** will inquire about [the welfare of his] **friend**, [though they will be placed within each other's sight]. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the punishment of that day at the price of his children, his spouse and his brother, his kin which had sheltered him and all those who are upon the earth, if that might deliver him. (Q 70:10-14)

However, studying Arabic lexicons leads one to the conclusion that the literal meaning of *ḥamīm* is a close relative or kin for whom one really cares and about whom one is concerned.¹³ When it is used as an

12. See also Q 3:156; 7:202.

13. See, e.g., Turayhī (1375 Sh, 6:50); Ibn Manẓūr (1993, 13:153); Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (1983, 254)

adjective, again it is said to mean the same. For example, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī interprets *ḥamīm* in both cases as “*al-qarīb al-mushfīq*,” which means a caring or sympathetic kin.¹⁴

“*Walī*” (plural form: *awliyā*).¹⁵ *Walī* is one of the most profound concepts in Islam, especially in Shīʿa Islam. In its basic sense, *walī* is a mutual relationship between two or more people who know each other and work for the same cause, who belong to the same party or camp and follow the same leadership. Of course, their rank in that party or camp may be different. One may be the leader and the other a follower, or both may be under the leadership of a third person. When it comes to pious people who are *walī* for each other, they not only know each other and work together for the same causes and under the same leadership but also they love each other and this love between them continues even in the hereafter. This is in contrast to the evil *walīs* who will become enemies and try to disassociate themselves from each other, because their relationship is not based on piety and so there is no genuine love present. It is possible that in this world they think they love each other, but indeed their hearts are divided,¹⁶ and in the hereafter this will become obvious, so much so that, according to the Qurʾān, on the Day of Judgement evil leaders will wish to disassociate themselves from their followers. Disheartened by this, their followers will wish that they could have a chance to return to this world and distance themselves from such leaders:

When those who were followed will disown the followers, and they will sight the punishment while all their means of recourse will be cut off, and when the followers will say, ‘Had there been another turn for us, we would disown them as they disown us [now]!’ Thus shall God show them their deeds as regrets for themselves, and they shall not leave the Fire. (Q 2:166-167)

This shows that their relationship is a very shallow one.

However, the relationship of “*wilāya*” that exists between believers will indeed manifest itself in a stronger form in the hereafter, where they will love and support each other forever. One of the requirements of such a relationship is listening to those who enjoin good or prohibit evil. No matter whether someone is, for example, an older or a younger person, a senior or a junior scholar, rich or poor, they have to

14. Ibid.

15. See, e.g., Q 2:107, 120, 257; 3:68; 6:51.

16. The Qurʾān says, “They will not fight against you in a body except in fortified townships or from behind walls. Their might is great among themselves. You suppose them to be a body, but their hearts are disunited” (59:14).

listen to their brothers and sisters in faith who are their *awliyā'* when they advise them correctly. The Qur'ān says,

But the faithful, men and women, are *walī* of one another: they bid what is right and forbid what is wrong and maintain the prayer, give the *zakāt*, and obey God and His Apostle. It is they to whom God will soon grant His mercy. Indeed God is All-mighty, All-wise. (Q 9:71)

This means that even a great scholar has to listen to a young seminarian who gives good counsel. The scholar should not say, "It is none of your business" or "I am more learned than you," and the student has a right to be obeyed. Of course, this is a mutual relationship; today someone may ask me to correct myself, and tomorrow it may happen that I correct the person who corrected me. Therefore, when there is *wilāyah* between two people, there must be mutual knowledge, mutual love, and mutual obedience. Thus, it is not merely the kind of official relationship that usually exists within companies or political parties, where the members are not expected to love each other but only to fulfil their duties. However, in the relationship of *wilāyah* one has to love everyone involved in that type of relationship, and it is this love that then leads us to obedience. We obey because we love the one who instructs us and love the values that are at stake.

Conclusion

Reflection on the above verses of the Qur'ān leads to the conclusion that human beings can have positive and sympathetic relationships with each other in different ways and at different levels. Most of these relationships can be shared with those who are pious, who are believers in God, or who have good will from among different religions, especially the followers of Abraham. Further reflection on the above and similar verses also shows that there are two types of people who are totally different from a friend (*khalīl*, *ṣadīq*, *akh*, *ṣāhib*, or *walī*): those who are just different from us and the ones that are in sharp contrast to us, and it is only the latter group that could be regarded as enemy. Therefore, the one who is not our *khalīl*, for instance, is not necessarily our enemy. However, with regard to all five categories of friendship, if someone is really in conflict with us and works against us, such a person is called "*aduww*" (enemy; the plural form is *a'dā*).

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