



*Patronage and Women
in the Arab Muslim World*



The patronage system undergirds collective hierarchical cultures, such as those in the Arab world. When ministering to Muslim women in the Arab world, it is important to understand patronage for three reasons: Firstly, we need to understand the cultural system in which we find ourselves, and the implications for living as an honourable patron or client within this system. Secondly, understanding patronage is important for understanding grace and God's relationship with us, which has implications for how we share the gospel with Arab Muslim women. Thirdly, patronage provides an important model for our own discipleship relationships with women believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs).

1. Patronage & Understanding Culture

It is important for us to understand patronage, firstly, so that we understand the cultural system in which we find ourselves, and how to behave honourably within that system.

What is patronage?

Patronage relationships are reciprocal, unequal relationships in which a person of higher status (patron) provides resources (material, political or spiritual) to protect or help a person of lower status (client). The client must then repay the patron by showing them public honour and loyalty, and by providing services to the patron if the opportunity arises.

Richard Saller describes the dynamics at play in a patronage relationship:

First, [patronage] involves the reciprocal exchange of goods and services. Secondly, to distinguish it from a commercial transaction in the marketplace, the relationship must be a personal one of some duration. Thirdly, it must be asymmetrical, in the sense that the two parties are of unequal status and offer different kinds of goods and services in the exchange—a quality which sets patronage off from friendship between equals.¹

Patronage relationships are entered into voluntarily and can be abandoned voluntarily. However, they are usually binding, ideally life-long relationships, sometimes lasting across generations. The relationship “does not remain static but instead changes and can be renegotiated according to the situation. Sometimes the patron may become the client when the need arises.”²

Reciprocity

The principle of reciprocity is the basis for patronage relationships. Initiative requires response. Reciprocity (‘*wajib*’ or ‘duty’) undergirds the whole Arab way of life. A most basic example of reciprocity in an Arab context is the unspoken rule that if someone gives you food, you don’t send the plate or dish back empty, you must reciprocate. Moyra Dale explains that “to be part of a relational network is to participate in the exchange of gifts, and conversely, to give or receive a gift is to enter into a

¹ Richard Saller, *Personal Patronage Under the Early Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1.

² Juliet November, *Honor/Shame Cultures: A Beginner’s Guide to Cross-Cultural Missions* (Self-pub., 2017), 90.

relationship.”³ Recipients of gifts are under a strong obligation to make some return – even if only in gratitude.⁴ The return of the gift represents the desire to maintain social relations: “the counter-gift is rarely the end of the relationship... it is liable to constitute, rather, a form of ‘giving-again,’ adding to the gift-relationship a continuing forward momentum.”⁵

Seneca describes gift-giving as a dance between “the giving, the receiving and the returning of the gift... The beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken.”⁶ The system of gift exchange is never completely balanced: if both parties want the relationship to continue, “someone owes and someone is owed.”⁷ The system is maintained through mutual indebtedness – whether of symbolic, social or economic value. The aim is not independence, but interdependence.

In patron-client relationships, reciprocity involves an exchange of goods or services, with an obligation to reciprocate, but not necessarily in substance or amount. Dale notes that non-material resources can be some of the most important commodities in society: honour, reputation, prestige, respect, status, power, influence, security, safety.⁸ Marilyn Adams notes, “Honour is the currency of the powerless; it is what clients short on material goods can offer to patrons.”⁹ Each party is expected to behave according to their status: the patron (benefactor) should be generous,

³ Moyra Dale, “Patronage and Reciprocity: Finding Balance between Donors and Clients” (Keynote address presented at the The Leprosy Mission Australia’s International Partner’s Day, Eva Burrows College, Ringwood, October 12, 2019).

⁴ John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 18.

⁵ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 18.

⁶ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 46.

⁷ Michael Rynkiewicz, *Soul, Self and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 109.

⁸ Dale, “Patronage and Reciprocity.”

⁹ Marilyn Adams quoted in November, *Honor/Shame Cultures*, 84.

benevolent, respected, providing material goods, protection, influence, employment; while the client (recipient) must be loyal, grateful, and give honour to the patron, sometimes responding with service, gifts and visits.

Paul Hiebert describes the roles of patron and client respectively:

The patron, like a parent, is totally responsible for the welfare of his clients. ... Clients in fact can ask a patron for whatever they think he may grant, but this is not considered begging—no more than Christians think they are begging when they ask God for help. Clients for their part, must be totally loyal to their patron. ... The patron gains power and prestige within the society, and the client gains security.¹⁰

Patronage relationships are often initiated by the client. Chinchin outlines the steps required to establish a patronage relationship as follows:

1. admiration: the client expresses respect and love for the patron;
2. visits: the client makes the first visit, enabling patron and client to build trust and determine one another's needs;
3. token gifts: indicates the client's sincerity, opening the way for the patron to give something greater than has been given to them;
4. request: the client requests some tangible or intangible assistance.¹¹

These steps must be taken slowly, allowing the patron time to determine the potential client's sincerity. However, the process is rarely this simple and clear in real

¹⁰ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 124.

¹¹ Delbert Chinchin, "The Patron-Client System: A Model of Indigenous Discipleship," *EMQ* 31 no. 4 (1995): 447-450.

life.¹² Whichever culture we enter, we must find out what gift-giving entails in that context; how a relationship is initiated, and what is required of each party.

Weaknesses and Dangers of Patronage

The patronage system has been criticised as being corrupt, ‘unprofessional’ and ‘unsustainable’ by Westerners, who operate under the cultural assumption that money and relationships should remain separate.¹³ David deSilva observes:

People in the United States and northern Europe may be culturally conditioned to find the concept of patronage distasteful... When we say ‘it’s not what you know but who you know,’ it is usually because we sense someone has an unfair advantage over us... It violates our conviction that everyone should have equal access to employment opportunities (being evaluated on the basis of pertinent skills rather than personal connection) or to services offered by private businesses or civic agencies.¹⁴

However, the patronage system is not, in itself, immoral or corrupt. Rather, patron-client relationships are an adaptive response to the inherent inequality in hierarchical societies which lack the formal institutions needed to provide resources for all.¹⁵ As such, the patronage system is a normal and necessary feature of shame-based societies. Rejecting or avoiding patronage and instead defaulting to Western cultural practices is simply not viable. Instead, we need to learn how to function within

¹² See Anna Shean’s article in this edition of WWS for some practical examples.

¹³ Jason Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 29–30; Laila Kamel quoted in Moyra Dale, *Islam & Women: Hagar’s Heritage* (Regnum Studies in Mission; Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 104.

¹⁴ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking the New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 95.

¹⁵ November, *Honor/Shame Cultures*, 84.

the system, appropriating positive aspects to foster relationships, intentionally mitigating against these negative aspects while seeking to transform patronage for kingdom purposes.¹⁶

Of course, there is potential for patronage relationships to become unhealthy or abusive. This occurs when reciprocity is unbalanced. If a patron gives when a recipient is unable to respond, the client becomes trapped in debt (even if this was not the patron's intent). When the patron controls the client in this way, this leads to paternalism and unhealthy dependency. Conversely, relationships can become exploitative, when the patron extorts exorbitant favours from the client, without giving in return – as in the case of slave labour.¹⁷

Jim Harries suggests there is a problem with Western missionaries who act as donors whilst being ignorant of the cultural context: “active engagement in gift-giving requires deep cultural knowledge and an identity that a foreigner from a different worldview typically does not have.”¹⁸ The reputation of white missionaries as ‘patrons’ can prevent them from sharing anything except money. Money patronage, Harries argues, “easily kills other forms of patronage.”¹⁹ Harries’ suggested solution is to apply the principles of ‘vulnerable mission:’ as far as possible, to keep our ministry dependent on local resources and local languages.²⁰

¹⁶ Jason Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 114.

¹⁷ Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 449.

¹⁸ Jim Harries, “Sidestepping Patronage with Vulnerable Mission” (paper presented at the Patronage Symposium, Beirut, October 3-5, 2018), HonorShame, <https://honorshame.com/patsym-presentations/. 2>.

¹⁹ Harries, “Sidestepping Patronage,” 3.

²⁰ Harries, “Sidestepping Patronage,” 1.

These dangers of patronage require honest, humble ongoing reflection to be avoided. The key to addressing these potential problems is the basic requirement that both the patron and the client are needy: “the patron needs the client as much as the client needs the patron.”²¹ Proper reciprocity allows both parties to make significant contributions to the relationship.

The Honourable Patron

It is inevitable that Western missionaries must learn to navigate how to behave as honourable and vulnerable patrons within their new culture. Missionaries will naturally be seen as patrons due to their status as foreigners, their wealth, and access to material resources. Chinchén notes that being married and having children “indicates age and maturity.”²² It follows that a single woman missionary may naturally be seen as being in a position of more vulnerability.

When a patron grants a request, it indicates that the relationship is becoming “thicker” (deeper). However, if the patron says no when they have the ability to help, “the relationship dies and the patron’s reputation is tarnished.”²³ As such, we must be discerning about how we respond to requests for help. Georges suggests we consider three issues when considering a patronage relationship:

²¹ Chinchén, “The Patron-Client System,” 450.

²² Chinchén, “The Patron-Client System,” 447.

²³ Chinchén, “The Patron-Client System,” 449.

1. Will we see each other again? (Ongoing relationship is a basic prerequisite for patronage.)
2. Will the relationship allow us to impart non-material resources? (If the client seeks only material benefits, the relationship is distorted.)
3. Will the recipient give something in return? (The relationship must be reciprocal.)²⁴

In Arab cultures, giving flows along relational lines. In deciding who to give to, we should consider the existing relationships we already have. When buying and selling goods or receiving services, it is normal to go to a trusted friend or contact. We may function as patrons to house-helpers, gatekeepers, doormen, drivers, or others whom we employ. In the majority world, employing someone creates patron-client relationships. The employer assumes broad responsibility for their employees. We may only pay them a small wage, but there will be an inherent understanding that we will help them in other ways, for example paying medical bills, offering advice, covering tuition fees, resolving non-work problems.²⁵

Teacher-student relationships can be another form of patron-client relationships. Students may show gestures of respect toward to teacher: carrying the teacher's bag, standing when they enter, agreeing, offering token gifts. Georges warns that "Western teachers who reject the patronage system and refuse to receive respect from client-students undermine the educational process and relationship."²⁶ Rather than leaving students buried in a 'debt of knowledge,' teachers should relate to

²⁴ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 117-119.

²⁵ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 121.

²⁶ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 122.

students as parental, caring patrons, establishing personal relationships of genuine reciprocity which open the way for life mentoring beyond the classroom.²⁷

In the case of beggars coming to your door asking for money or help, we can seek the advice of neighbours, who can advise which locals are in genuine need; and pray for God's guidance, asking Him to bring those who are in genuine need and to keep away those who are not. If you choose to give or help someone, it is important to establish a relationship with them. In order to avoid breaking the friendship by trapping the client in debt, Dale's approach was to 'loan' someone money, with the understanding that they did not need to pay her back, but that when someone else was in need they should be generous to that person.²⁸

If we are unable to provide the thing for which someone is asking, there are several appropriate ways to respond. Firstly, a patron is not obligated to meet the client's request in full: they may ask the client to come back later. Secondly, if unable to grant the request, an honourable patron will not simply say 'no' – they will give a good explanation as to why not. For example, a friend may ask for money, but it would be a valid and acceptable reason to deny the request if you need that money to pay for your house-helper's medical bills. Thirdly, if you cannot provide the request, you may be able to act as a broker, "the trusted intermediary who opens the door to a group or individual to whom the client needs access."²⁹ As deSilva notes, "Sometimes the most important gift a patron could give was access to (and influence with) another patron

²⁷ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 122.

²⁸ Moyra Dale, interview by author (Melbourne, September 2, 2021).

²⁹ Moyra Dale, *Islam & Women: Hagar's Heritage*. Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2021), 105.

who actually had power over the benefit being sought.”³⁰ The broker increases their honour through the indebtedness of the client.

To be an honourable patron means to share the resources God has given you, but it also means giving the other person a chance to bless you. Ripken recounts local believers’ description of a ‘good’ missionary:

*When this missionary’s father died, he came to us and asked for our help... He doesn’t go to other westerners for money. He comes to us... Do you want to know why we love him? He needs us. The rest of you have never needed us.*³¹

This principle of being a ‘needy’ patron can be seen in the apostle Paul’s relationship with the churches he established – they cared for him physically and sent resources. In this way, both discipler and disciple are honoured.³² Other examples of being a needy patron could include asking clients for valuable information, help with language study, advice on cultural issues; or exchanging visits – especially when the client is sick or mourning.³³ Otherwise the patron will be seen as immoral, unfaithful, untrustworthy.³⁴ Hikmat Kashouh emphasises the importance of visiting in Arab cultures:

³⁰ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking the New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 97.

³¹ Nik Ripken, “What’s Wrong with Western Missionaries?” *desiringGod*, September 12, 2006. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/whats-wrong-with-western-missionaries>.

³² Dale, *Islam & Women*, 110.

³³ Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 450.

³⁴ Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 450.

I cannot emphasise enough what pride and pleasure it brings an Arab family to be able to host a guest or guests... you honour them by letting them become the hosts, letting them sit in the high place, while you learn to be a guest... willing to sit uncomfortably, listen attentively and love abundantly.³⁵

The Honourable Client

Just as it is important for us to know how to behave as honourable patrons, we must also be aware of how to behave as honourable clients. As missionaries, we may function as clients to our landlord or landlady, church leaders, our sending organisation. Forgetting a gift, neglecting to return a favour, or insulting one's patron must be avoided at all costs.³⁶ Instead the honourable client will give gifts, treat their patrons as honourable, publicly praise them, and perform favours when possible. Offering appropriate thanks to our patron is crucial. It is important to find out how to appropriately show thanks in the new culture in which we find ourselves.

In a new culture, local people become our patrons who introduce us in the community. Westerners entering conservative Muslim villages can leverage patronage to overcome barriers. Georges gives an example of missionaries who asked community leaders to facilitate public gatherings, then sought opportunities to publicly acknowledge their indispensable role and portray the local leaders as honourable patrons who protect and provide for their people. In making themselves clients in this way, the missionaries fostered goodwill and access to the community.³⁷

³⁵ Hikmat Kashouh, *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times: Disciple-Making in the Arab World* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2018), 12.

³⁶ Dale, *Islam & Women*, 105.

³⁷ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 121.

Similarly, becoming a client can be a strategic way to resolve conflict. Requesting help from a patron to resolve an issue deliberately puts yourself under another person to seek help and save face.³⁸ Elmer notes that:

*If one holds the power to keep another person from being shamed, that person is morally obligated to do something to keep shame from coming to the other... if the person does not act to save another's honour, he is in danger of losing face and being shamed.*³⁹

For the single woman missionary in the Arab world, being an honourable woman carries an extra layer of complexity. A woman is “embedded in the identity and honour of some male (her father, until she marries; her husband after she marries).”⁴⁰ Arab culture does not have a category for adult single women. Compounded with this is the assumption that Western women are sexually immoral or ‘loose:’ “As a single woman, you will be the talk of everyone’s gossip. The worst possible construal will be put on your actions.”⁴¹

As such, it is crucial that as women we behave according to the cultural standards of honour and purity, including modest dress, cautious interactions with men, not drawing attention to ourselves in public – e.g. by walking too fast or laughing loudly in public (according to an Arab proverb, if a woman’s voice is heard laughing outside it is as though she had walked outside naked). Further, single women will need

³⁸ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 122-23.

³⁹ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 80-81.

⁴⁰ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 34.

⁴¹ Karen L. H. Shaw and Perry Shaw, interview by author (Melbourne, August 5, 2021).

to find a patron with links into the community who can vouch for them and introduce them as an honourable woman. This might be an expat team member known by the community, or a local landlord or landlady, whose protection and reputation the single woman can come under.

2. Patronage and the Gospel

Understanding patronage deepens our understanding of the gospel, shedding light on the biblical concepts of sin, grace, faith, salvation, and God as divine patron.

Reciprocity was an integral part of both Jewish and Greco-Roman religion. The ‘gods’ were seen as benefactors, who distributed favours, while human clients responded with prayers and gifts. The ancient concept of ‘salvation’ had less to do with eternal life for the soul, and more to do with earthly benefactions such as health, military liberation, salvation from disease, disaster, or death.⁴² The Greek words for ‘salvation’ (σωτηρία) and ‘saviour’ (σωτήρ) are related to the concept of ‘benefactor’ (εὐεργέτης). The New Testament appropriates such patronage language to explain biblical salvation through the concepts of ‘grace,’ ‘faith’ and ‘repentance.’⁴³

God as Patron

The covenants between the God of the Bible and his people can be understood as patronage relationships. God invites his people into hierarchical relationship: God gives, and his people are expected to respond. Abraham is given blessing, and is called to act by leaving his country, people, and family (Gen 15, 17). Sometimes the obligations

⁴² Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 97.

⁴³ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 98.

are laid out, as in suzerain-vassal covenants, in which God promises blessings for obedience, and curses for disobedience (Exod 19:4-6; Deuteronomy).⁴⁴ Some Old Testament covenants follow the royal grant model: God as patron gives unconditionally – for example his promise to never again destroy the earth by flood (Gen 9:11); David is given the unconditional promise of a throne and an “everlasting kingdom,” but his descendants are expected to obey the covenant obligations (2 Sam 7).⁴⁵ Such unconditional benefaction also occurs in the NT: God makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good, and sends rain on both just and unjust (Mt 5:45).

A key difference in between human patronage relationships and God as patron is who initiates the relationship. In human patronage relationships, the client initiates the relationship when they wish to request some favour from the patron. However, in the Bible, God initiates the relationship. He is the righteous benefactor who blesses and delivers his people and calls them into relationship. As Creator, God is the divine patron who deserves praise and loyalty from his clients: “Every creature is indebted to God because of the sheer act of creating and sustaining that God continually offers.”⁴⁶ But ungrateful human clients have insulted his honour, instead giving their loyalty to idols (false patrons) who demand their loyalty.⁴⁷ This sinful response breaks the relationship between God and humanity.

⁴⁴ November, *Honor/Shame Cultures*, 86.

⁴⁵ Dale, *Islam & Women*, 108.

⁴⁶ Alan B. Howell and Robert Andrew Montgomery, “God as Patron and Proprietor: God the Father and the Gospel of Matthew in an African Folk Islamic Context,” *IJFM* 36 no. 3 (2019): 130.

⁴⁷ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 96-103.

Grace

The biblical word χάρις (grace, favour, kindness) was not primarily a theological term. The term was first used in economic patron-client relationships, grounded in the giving, and receiving of benefits. In the NT world, people relied on patrons to access resources that were not available to them through exchange at the market.⁴⁸ In this social context, χάρις was “a technical term in the reciprocity-oriented world dominated by Hellenic influence as well as by the Semitic sense of social obligation expressed in the term *hesed*.”⁴⁹

χάρις entails three aspects of reciprocal exchanges:

1. the willing attitude of the patron to grant some benefit to another person;
2. the gift or benefit itself (the result of the giver’s beneficent feelings);
3. the recipient’s response of gratitude, thankfulness, and loyalty.⁵⁰

As such, NT ‘grace’ does not simply mean forgiveness of sin, but “God’s benefaction and gifts, which certainly include the gift of legal forgiveness of sin but also much more, including relationship, protection, care, generosity, help, empowerment, loyalty, trust and praise.”⁵¹ Whereas in Jewish and Greco-Roman life, χάρις was granted on the basis of worth or merit, Christ redefines key elements of the

⁴⁸ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 96-99.

⁴⁹ BDAG in Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 99.

⁵⁰ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 99.

⁵¹ Richard Yacoub in Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 100.

reciprocal relationship between God and humans: God gives his sacrificial gift incongruously to unworthy sinners.⁵²

Faith

Related to the concept of χάρις is the idea of πίστις (faith, belief, trust). πίστις refers to someone's trustworthiness and dependability in a relationship. In honour-shame cultures, relational loyalty and commitment to a group leader is highly valued. As clients of our divine patron, our faith is our "embodied allegiance to God as [our] sovereign."⁵³ God as the ultimate patron has given us grace. As honourable beneficiaries we should respond with faithfulness in the form of gratitude, public testimony to what God has done, costly loyalty and behaviour that honours our patron.⁵⁴

God gives gifts to the body of Christ for the sake of the whole body to be built up. As debtors to God, we must give to those he loves. When we give, we are further investing into our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, so that the needs of believers are met, and the glory goes to God.⁵⁵

Christ as Broker

Anselm describes sin in terms of medieval lord-vassal patronage: humans are obliged to honour God by submitting to his will, but we do not give to God the honour he deserves; as such, we incur an honour debt. Divine forgiveness requires the

⁵² Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 100-101.

⁵³ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 101-102.

⁵⁴ Dale, *Islam & Women*, 109.

⁵⁵ Dale, "Patronage and Reciprocity."

repayment of stolen honour. Jesus was never indebted to God, as the sinless God-man who perfectly honoured the Father. He freely gave himself to pay our honour debt, so that we do not experience God's honour-saving wrath.⁵⁶ God as the model patron goes beyond earthly models of patronage, demonstrating his radical generosity by taking initiative to the point of Jesus dying in a demonstration of his character and virtue.⁵⁷ Jesus is the mediator of God's power, and continues in his role as broker in ongoing intercession for us.

Implications for evangelism

Arab Muslims are among the least responsive people in the world to the gospel, and mission approaches among them which have relied heavily on apologetics have generally been ineffective.⁵⁸ We need to develop more effective methods of connecting with Arab Muslims and sharing the gospel with them.

Understanding God as patron and Jesus as broker has important implications for our evangelism among Arab Muslim women. Firstly, understanding God as patron resonates with the Qur'an's descriptions of Allah as patron:

Hold fast to Allah. He is your Maula (Patron, Lord), what an excellent Maula and what an Excellent Helper. Al-Hajj 22:78

And when Allah intends for a people ill, there is no repelling it. And there is not for them besides Him any patron. *Al-Ra'd 13:11*

⁵⁶ Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures*, 106–7.

⁵⁷ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 70.

⁵⁸ Karen L. H. Shaw, "Affective Barriers and Bridges to the Communication of the Gospel with Special Attention to Religious Affectivity among Arab Beirut Sunni Muslim Women" (MA thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008), 232.

Howell and Montgomery argue that in Matthew's gospel, calling God 'Father' is an application of kinship terminology: "God the Father is nothing less than God the Patron."⁵⁹

Using patronage language to describe God allows us to establish stepping-stones to approach God as 'parent' in a way that is potentially more palatable and less offensive to our Muslim friends.⁶⁰

Understanding God has patron and Jesus as broker also resonates with Muslim concepts of group belonging and belonging to one's leader. Collectivist societies are integrated into strong cohesive groups: extended family, tribe, community, nation. A person's identity is bound up in their belonging to a group. Hierarchy orders relationships, shaping the way women negotiate their daily lives:

*An individual's identity is mediated by who they are connected to, requiring a secure network of relationships. Ethics are defined by relationships... Maintaining social order is the moral thing to do.*⁶¹

Group belonging defines one's identity: "to truly know someone you must know with whom they are linked... people find their core sense of identity in the group."⁶² In particular, one's leader is seen as that person's representative, and their path to provision and benefits.⁶³ Colin Edward's article in this webzine describes this

⁵⁹ Howell and Montgomery, "God as Patron," 130.

⁶⁰ Howell and Montgomery, "God as Patron," 133.

⁶¹ Cathy Hine, "Patronage and Reciprocity: Leveraging Aspects of Shame and Honour in Disciplining Women Followers of Jesus from Islam," *Discipleship. When Women Speak* webzine 1, no. 1 (2017): 1-2.

⁶² Callum Johnson, "Patronage and Salvation in South Asia for Islam and MBBs: A Socio-Anthropological Approach," *St Francis Magazine* 3 no. 4 (2008): 1-2.

⁶³ Johnson, "Patronage and Salvation," 2.

relationship with leaders, highlighting the importance of the status of the person to whom you give your allegiance. We can therefore show our Muslim friends that *Isa al Masih* holds the highest honour and position in the hierarchy, is uniquely powerful to save, and is therefore worthy of our allegiance.⁶⁴

The idea of Christ as broker has deep resonance with the Arab concept of *wasta* – or relational mediation. *Wasta* can include an intercessory aspect (asking for a particular benefit) or a mediational aspect (bringing in a respected mediator to resolve relational conflict). Ekkhardt Sonntag explains how the closeness of the mediator’s relationship to you is important: *wasta* from a friend carries stronger obligations than *wasta* from a stranger; whilst *wasta* between family members has the strongest obligations – family members are expected and obligated to provide *wasta*, free from notions of reciprocation.⁶⁵ As God’s Son, Jesus is the best-connected mediator to bridge the divide between us and God (Heb 2:14-17). Because Christ has called us his brothers (Heb 8:6), he freely mediates for us, so that the only reciprocation required from us is to honour Him.⁶⁶

Blessing, curse, and the evil eye

Jesus’ unique role as broker-patron has particular significance for Muslim women, who carry primary responsibility for maintaining harmony in communal relationships (both human and spiritual). Small communal closed-system societies, such as Arab societies, subscribe to the idea of ‘limited good:’

⁶⁴ Johnson, “Patronage and Salvation,” 6-7.

⁶⁵ Ekkhardt Sonntag, “Wasta, Mediation and Patronage in Arab Cultures” (paper presented at the Patronage Symposium, Beirut, October 3-5, 2018), HonorShame, <https://honorshame.com/patsvm-presentations/>.

⁶⁶ Sonntag, “Wasta, Mediation and Patronage.”

All of the desirable things in life... exist in finite quantity and are always in short supply... If 'good' exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others.⁶⁷

In contexts of limited resources and limited access to resources, people seek access to blessing and power through the manipulation or control of forces, both seen and unseen: positive forces which are life-giving, life-enhancing, and promote productivity – such as *baraka* (blessing) which is believed to bring protection, healing, fertility, fruitfulness, success, well-being); and negative forces which are life-diminishing and failure-inducing – such as curses, sorcery and the evil eye.⁶⁸

Women are centrally involved in rites of passage to ensure the safe transition from one stage of life to the next: birth, circumcision, menarche, marriage, death.⁶⁹ As such, women will seek power through rituals, objects (such as the Qur'an, *zamzam* water, the 'blue bead' believed to protect against evil), times (such as *Ramadan*), places or people (shrines, mosques, religious sites) and phrases (such as reciting Qur'anic verses or invoking the name of God).⁷⁰

The evil eye, or "belief in the life-withering force of envy," is referred to in the Qur'an (*Al-Falaq* 113:5) and *hadith*, and is believed to be capable of harming or even killing living beings - whether or not harm was intended by the owner of the eye – for

⁶⁷ George Foster quoted in Moyra Dale, "Who Has Bewitched You? Patronage, Blessing and the Evil Eye," *Folk Islam. When Women Speak* webzine 3 no. 1 (September 2018): 58.

⁶⁸ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 56-57, 62.

⁶⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West, 1954; London: HAU Books, 2016), 66.

⁷⁰ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 57-62.

example, causing sickness, misfortune, defeat in battle or sport, accidents.⁷¹ Women will seek safety from the evil eye by invoking the name of God – for example *Mash’Allah* (“what God wills”), reciting Qur’anic verses, dressing young boys as girls to protect them from envious spirits, or displaying the palm of a hand (the *khamsa*) or objects in the shape of an eye.⁷²

Dale contends that the evil eye in the Bible refers to the destructive impact of envy: עֵיִן עִוְוָה (Deut 15:9, 28:54, 56; Prov 23:6, 28:22), ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρὸς (Mt 6:22-23, 20:15; Mk 7:22, Lk 11:34-35). Envy is not an independent force, but people’s attitudes of “stinginess, meanness and unwillingness to share.”⁷³ The opposite of envy is contentment and generosity. When we minister to people facing limited resources, we are to honour our divine benefactor by reflecting his own self-giving nature: “God’s promise of blessing and provision is to be shown through the open-handed generosity of his people caring for those in need.”⁷⁴

For our Muslim friends, Allah is distant and unapproachable: although he is all-powerful, one can never be sure if he will act in your best interest, which is why women seek to manipulate other forces. However, Satan and demonic powers are bad patrons: the powers of this world will only oppress and destroy people.⁷⁵ Blessing (*baraka*) in the Bible, God’s life-giving power, is never something to be manipulated or used

⁷¹ Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 59-62.

⁷² Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 60.

⁷³ Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 72.

⁷⁴ Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 76-77.

⁷⁵ Howell and Montgomery, “God as Patron,” 132.

independently of God who is the source of blessing.⁷⁶ We can point our Muslim friends to God's abundant generosity and provision:

This world is not characterised by limited good, but by God's blessing shown in lavish, overflowing goodness and provision. The omnipotent God is for us, as our patron; and our covenant relationship with him is binding, confirmed by God's own promise and God's own Son.⁷⁷

The Creator God is the best patron. And yet, God the Father is more than merely God the Patron. He is the God of order, he is always good, acting in covenant faithfulness and loyalty (*hesed*) – He is not capricious or arbitrary in his actions.⁷⁸ Jesus is uniquely positioned to remedy our needs and help us respond well to suffering, as both the most powerful and ultimately self-giving broker who is also child of the King, having total authority and unlimited access to God's power, and is now at God's right hand, interceding on our behalf.⁷⁹ God is present and involved with us. In Christ, we know God intimately as 'Father,' revealed fully in human form, present in his own creation; His Spirit indwells us: "The trinitarian God is cosmic and immanent, all-powerful, and also... personal and present with each one of us."⁸⁰ As such, we can rest secure in his care.

Becoming a follower of Jesus makes us into brokers, and Jesus himself into a patron.⁸¹ As we meet people who may be under-resourced, disempowered and living in

⁷⁶ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 71-72.

⁷⁷ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 75.

⁷⁸ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 69.

⁷⁹ Howell and Montgomery, "God as Patron," 132.

⁸⁰ Dale, "Who has Bewitched You?," 67-68.

⁸¹ Howell and Montgomery, "God as Patron," 132.

fear of the evil eye, “we are to be conduits of God’s power, blessing, to others.”⁸² We can do this by telling stories of how God is both omnipotent and also personal: Jesus raising Lazarus from death (Jn 11:1-43); asking his disciples about their trust in him when he calms the storm (Lk 8:22-25); showing his care for a grieving widow by returning her only son to life (Lk 7:11-16).⁸³ We can also speak words of blessing – of God’s power for protection and healing over those who are vulnerable:

God’s unlimited generosity and power in blessing is the opposite of limited good and restricted access to resources. And this bountiful blessing is mediated by God’s people, as they live lives of sacrificial and extravagant generosity to those in need, and which transmit God’s power and protection to the vulnerable or weak.⁸⁴

3. Patronage and Discipleship

If conversion for BMB women is about transferring allegiance to Jesus, then discipleship can be seen as:

*the journey to maturity in renegotiating identity and belonging, as one who has given allegiance to Jesus the Messiah; and doing this within the obligations and expectations embedded in reframed structures of relational connectivity.*⁸⁵

Among new followers of Jesus from Muslim backgrounds, research consistently shows that a personal relationship with a mentor is more significant for their personal

⁸² Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 72.

⁸³ Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 77.

⁸⁴ Dale, “Who has Bewitched You?,” 78.

⁸⁵ Cathy Hine, “Patronage in Women’s Discipleship” (paper presented at the Patronage Symposium, Beirut, October 3-5, 2018), HonorShame, <https://honorshame.com/patsym-presentations/>).

spiritual growth than the particular teaching content of a discipleship program.⁸⁶

Chinchen explores the patron-client relationship as an indigenous discipleship model, in which the patron (discipler) sees the client (disciple) as a 'spiritual child.' Their goal is to phase out the dependency relationship so that the client leans more on their heavenly Father: "As missionaries enter deep, long-lasting patron-client relationships, they will find cherished Christian values easily flowing from them to their disciples."⁸⁷

The process of discipleship for BMB women must be holistic, helping women to find answers to real life questions and issues, which are often more practical than theological. Common felt needs among BMB women include marriage, childlessness, children, financial struggles, family conflicts, feelings of powerlessness, social pressures, fear, and insecurity.⁸⁸ We need to help these women to know that Jesus will provide for them and protect them. As Hine says:

When we are seen as vessels of God's glory, ambassadors of God's righteousness, brokers of his benefactions to the nations then people encounter and experience God's salvation through us.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Edward Evans, "Discipleship and Training for 'Muslim Background Believers:' Programme Design," in *Ministry of Reconciliation* ed. John Stringer (Groningen, Netherlands: Grassroots Mission Publications, 2009), 160. Sarah Yoon, *Identity Crisis: Standing Between Two Identities of Women Believers from a Muslim Background in Jordan* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 171.

⁸⁷ Chinchen, "The Patron-Client System," 451.

⁸⁸ Hine, "Patronage and Reciprocity," 7–8.

⁸⁹ Hine, "Patronage and Reciprocity," 12.

Identity and belonging

BMB women need a place to belong. Relationships and social networks are shown to be of greater importance in the conversion stories of Muslim women than men.⁹⁰ BMB women need their relationship with Jesus to be made concrete in a community that embodies connective relationships: “community is essential for nurturing belonging.”⁹¹

Hine highlights the importance of patronage relationships in the formation of belonging:

*When we fail to understand the relational economics of the patron-client mode of ordering society, we fail to leverage critical aspects of relational capital in responding to the identified need of women followers of Jesus from Islam for connective relationships and community.*⁹²

With limited access to the public sphere, women need patrons who can provide fellowship and mediate access to their new community of belonging. The patron acts a “a gatekeeper who can give access to what the women do not have... the community of God’s people.”⁹³ Patronage is the relational context in which BMB women have learned to operate. It shapes the ways they engage with others, including their new faith community in which they are seeking to understand their transformed identity and place of belonging.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Kathryn Ann Kraft, *Searching for Heaven in the Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2012), 8–9; Hine, ‘Patronage in Women’s Discipleship.’

⁹¹ Hine, “Patronage and Reciprocity,” 7–8.

⁹² Hine, “Patronage and Reciprocity,” 9.

⁹³ Hine, “Patronage and Reciprocity,” 11.

⁹⁴ Hine, “Patronage and Reciprocity,” 2.

Identity confusion is a primary reason why many BMB women do not continue in their new faith.⁹⁵ Kraft explores the importance of family and community in Arab women's identity and decision-making:

*Family and community are important, if not the most important, factors in developing a woman's belief system and outlook on society... Family is an exceedingly powerful force in most of Arab society, and community is held as one of the highest values in Islam.*⁹⁶

BMB women need the believing community to live out the spiritual reality that we are their new family in Christ. We may act as patrons or brokers for new BMBs, modelling to them what it looks like to be a member of the believing community, and introducing them to networks and relationships which will offer access to resources (material, social, emotional, and informational). This might include making introductions and brokering trust, and practical life dimensions such as providing accommodation if the BMB is thrown out by their family or helping them find a job. In this way, the BMB "will feel that she has another family and can overcome the persecution... [BMBs] need to understand we love them and are not just making them believe in Jesus or teaching them the Bible."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Yoon, *Identity Crisis*, 3-4.

⁹⁶ Kathryn Ann Kraft, "Receptivity & Rejection of Christian Beliefs by Arab Women in Syria" (MA diss., American University of Beirut, 2014), 41-46.

⁹⁷ Yoon, *Identity Crisis*, 172.

Conclusion

We have seen that understanding the dynamics of patronage is crucial if we are to minister effectively among Arab Muslim women, for several reasons. Understanding how to navigate patron-client relationships will be important for living honourably within the cultural system. Understanding patronage deepens our understanding of the gospel and informs how we might explain the gospel in a way that resonates with the worldview of our Muslim friends. And finally, patronage relationships provide a model for discipleship which enables BMBs to navigate their new identity and find belonging in the community of believers.

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