

## Jesus, My *Wāṣṭa*? *Applying a Middle Eastern Cultural Concept to the New Testament*

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Using cultural anthropology to read New Testament texts has proven highly fruitful and even inspiring. Biblical scholars have revisited concepts such as patronage, kinship, and honour in the first century, and used them as a hermeneutical lens for reading these texts.<sup>1</sup> In modern Arab societies, some of these concepts are still readily present in everyday life, which makes reading the New Testament in a Middle Eastern environment particularly exciting.

The Arabic word *wāṣṭa* captures aspects of these Biblical concepts of patronage, brokerage, mediation, and kinship. *Wāṣṭa* has been called the 'the hidden force in Middle Eastern society'.<sup>2</sup> I learned the word quickly when moving to Jordan in 2008. Deriving from the root *w-s-ṭ* (middle), *wāṣṭa* denotes a middleman as well as the process of mediating any practical favour or brokering peace in a conflict. Finding a job, applying for university, getting paperwork done at a public office, and many other tasks often involve *wāṣṭa*; a friend or relative who has relevant connections uses his or her influence to speed up or even make possible a task that might otherwise take a long time to accomplish.

Although *wāṣṭa* as such cannot be traced back to New Testament times, it relates to concepts that can, such as patronage, brokerage, and kinship.<sup>3</sup> It might constitute an inspiring reading environment for New Testament texts and, being a modern Middle Eastern concept, be accessible to Arab Muslims and useful for Muslim-Christian dialogue.

*Wāṣṭa*: Between Family or Friends? Scholars note a significant difference between *wāṣṭa* in the *family* context and *wāṣṭa* between *friends*. Between family, *wāṣṭa* is a matter of course. No reciprocation is expected. A story is told of a high-ranking official in the Jordanian customs department who had to employ three typists. His nephew was the personnel manager, and, having

worked with an international consultant, was bent on modernising human resource practices. He invited applicants for an assessment of their typing proficiency. Presenting his uncle with the names of the three fastest typists, the uncle dismissed him: 'You want me to appoint on the basis of gimmicks', he asked incredulously, 'while I have to find jobs for all these family members who graduate in ever-increasing numbers each year?' He went on to appoint three typists on the basis of *wāṣṭa*.<sup>4</sup>

Between friends, however, *wāṣṭa* favours are a matter of give-and-take. Subconsciously, long lists are kept. Having a problem with my bank in Amman, Jordan, I went to the branch numerous times to speed up an overdue transaction. Over the course of several weeks, I progressed from calm and accommodating to nearly shouting at the clerks. Finally one of the bank's clerks called a friend, chatted with him casually for a while, and explained to him my case, after which he promptly facilitated the transaction. Later I wondered why she had not made that phone call when I first visited the bank. The economy of *wāṣṭa* explains it: using her friend (not family) as *wāṣṭa* to solve my problem, she drew 'wāṣṭa credit' and was now in his debt—an investment that had not seemed worthwhile when I was still calm and accommodating.

If the New Testament's metaphors for Jesus' relationship to humanity stopped at 'friend', by the rules of *wāṣṭa*, every good thing coming through him would call for reciprocation, as in the case of the bank clerk and her friend. As son and brother, however, Jesus appears to be more like the uncle at customs, who single-mindedly goes about supplying his relatives with jobs not because they are the most qualified but because they desperately need the income the jobs provide.

Reading with the lens of *wāṣṭa* opens up new possibilities for how we read

the New Testament. Consider Jesus' command that the disciples shall pass on the favours of the kingdom 'freely' (δωρεάν) as they have 'freely' received (Matthew 10:8). 'Freely' is the 'family rate' for mediation of favours: only a son could command that. This saying of Jesus is found only in Matthew, who generally in his Gospel puts a special emphasis on Jesus being the Son of God (compare e.g. Matthew 16:13-20 with Mark's and Luke's accounts). The emphasis on free favours may flow from his particular sensitivity to the sonship of Jesus, a connection that is easily overlooked without relevant cultural knowledge. One gets a similar impression when reading Ephesians 1:5-6. Here the notion that God 'freely bestowed' (ἐχαριστόσεν) grace, a wording that suggests a high degree of favour, is directly preceded by notions of adoption and sonship.

Despite its rootedness in noble tribal mediation, *wāṣṭa* today increasingly has overtones of corruption and inefficiency. It might therefore look like an unsuitable metaphor for the mediating office of Jesus. But while *wāṣṭa* as a way of selecting typists might not make a customs department more efficient, the *wāṣṭa* dynamics as such might still be instructive when thinking about Jesus as mediator of that which God gives by grace, poignantly separate from all notions of efficiency. And it may, perhaps, provide a new way of thinking about and discussing the sonship of Jesus in the context of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

### References

1. David Arthur deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (IVP Academic, 2000). See also Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
2. Robert Cunningham and Yasin Sarayrah. *Wasta: the hidden force in Middle Eastern society* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993).
3. For the relevance of these three to the notions of God as Father and Jesus as Son, see Bruce J. Malina, *The social world of Jesus and the Gospels* (London: Routledge, 1996), ch 6.
4. Cunningham and Sarayrah, 54.