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Households and Patronage: The Social Structuring of Qur'anic Law

The late antique social structures of households and patronage form the backdrop to the Qur'an, but the nature of these social structures and their practical impact on the text have received little scholarly attention. This paper gives a brief overview of households and patronage in the Qur'an and demonstrates how these affect Qur'anic commands. Although some scholars have argued that the Qur'an promotes social egalitarianism or moves toward social equality, this paper disputes that view. Rather, it argues that the Qur'an imposes a salvific frame on existing hierarchical social structures, and that its ethical position cannot be understood properly without some understanding of the social structures it presumes. That is because the care of the vulnerable is a key element in Qur'anic ethics, but care of the vulnerable took place not despite existing social hierarchies but within them. Therefore, the male head of household (the *pater familias*) is frequently addressed about how he should look after vulnerable people in his household, including women, orphans, and slaves. Because of their responsibilities, socially powerful individuals are more often addressed in the Qur'an: patronage of the vulnerable becomes a pious duty in this salvific framework. The terminology of patronage illustrates this shift, as God becomes the ultimate patron (*mawlā*) of the believers. By focusing on the modes of address for different types of command, this paper highlights the way that believers of different social status are recognised as having different social roles, but equal moral responsibility for their actions. Therefore, all are granted equal salvific potential, but some are addressed more frequently than others. When read in light of the late antique social milieu it becomes clear that some commands define an outer limit of behaviour in cases where the powerful are likely to transgress against the weak, whereas other commands set minimum standards of ethical action that may (and, indeed, should) be undertaken by anyone. It could, therefore, be argued that it is not meaningful to speak about Qur'anic law without recognising its graded approach to ethical behaviour.



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