



## WASTA(MEDIATOR) IN JORDAN AND ITS APPLICATION TO EVANGELISM AMONG MUSLIMS

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# WASTA(MEDIATOR) IN JORDAN AND ITS APPLICATION TO EVANGELISM AMONG MUSLIMS

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## I . INTRODUCTION

Jordan is a country in transition from a traditional to a modern, industrialized society. The modernization that this country is trying to achieve against a traditional background, undoubtedly creates an interesting setting for the study of conflict in its organizations as well as other managerial practices.<sup>1</sup>

With modernization, the role of *wasta* is enlarged and is very important in its society. In its general meaning, *wasta* refers to using one's influence to get things done, including government transactions such as the smooth processing of paperwork and getting hired for a job. Some *wasta* acts are legal and moral within most cultural contexts. They resemble professional service, such as that of an attorney, accountant, or real estate broker in the West. In the Arab culture, *wasta* has a great range of works. Along with the civil works, *wasta* is still needed to solve problems and make reconciliation by intervening between tribes or counterparts. For Arabs, especially Jordan, it has both social and cultural meanings.

In this article, I will talk about the diverse features of *wasta* in Jordan society, and its possible implication on evangelism among Muslims as a contact point.

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1 Markus Loewe et al, *The Impact of Favouritism on the Business Climate: A Study on Wasta in Jordan* (Bonn: Dt. Inst. für Entwicklungspolitik, 2007), 110.

## II . WASTA IN MODERN MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES

### 1. The Social Meaning of *Wasta*

The word ‘*wasta*’ is a form of an Arabic word for ‘middle.’ In English, it would be translated ‘intercessor,’ ‘mediation,’ and ‘arbitrator.’<sup>2</sup> Although the degree of *wasta* use varies between Arab countries, *wasta* permeates many aspects of life in the Arab world.

*Wasta*, as mediation valued for resolving conflict and as intercession or advocacy to obtain a benefit or to speed one’s paperwork gets a mixed reception.<sup>3</sup> It has a vital role in all Arab countries.

At the same time, it becomes recognized as a form of corruption that involves the use of one’s connections in places of power to accomplish things outside of the normal procedures. Around 1990, when Jordanian society was undergoing a more complicated modernization, some researches were started on *wasta* in the Middle East in the areas of business, administration and transparency and corruption. In the spring of 2005, King Abdullah II started an initiative to curb corruption, in which he mentioned *wasta* as a form of corruption.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, the Jordanian

2 English-Arabic dictionary, <https://en.bab.la/dictionary/english-arabic/mediator>. (accessed, 1 Jan 2018).

3 Robert B. Cunningham and Yasin K. Sarayrah, *Wasta: The hidden force in Middle Eastern Society* (London: Praeger, 1993), 1.

4 Loewe, *The Impact of Favouritism on the Business Climate: A Study on Wasta in Jordan*, 99.

government drafted an anticorruption law, which is still in progress on various levels.

Nevertheless, the role of *wasta* is connecting people to the society (giving jobs or completing the paper process quickly), especially, in Jordan. *Wasta* is a kind of product in transitional society and forming civil society. *A Study on wasta in Jordan* is a survey which found that *wasta* is used in many different kinds of social interactions among Arabs. First, *wasta* is very helpful in interactions with the state. The survey showed that “64% of the public sector employees confessed that their clients can speed up procedures in their department if they know one of the employees.”<sup>5</sup> Secondly, *wasta* also plays a very important role in the recruitment of civil servants. Finally, *wasta* is valuable for gaining admission to a university, for getting good marks on university exams, for gaining access to financial support from the government, and for avoiding penalties or fines.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Cultural Meaning of *Wasta*: Corruption or Cultural Favoritism

If someone comes from Western Egalitarian society, she/ he views *wasta* as a favoritism and a corrupt system. Consistent with their egalitarianism, she/he dislikes favoritism. However, we need to draw attention to the cultural meaning of *wasta* from Arab people. At least three factors distinguish *wasta* from the

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5 Ibid., 62.

6 Ibid.

Western variant. The first outstanding difference is family-based versus individualistic decision making. Middle Eastern society is family-based, with decision making dominated by the male patriarch. A family's status is based on tribal loyalty, a function of the mutual support between the tribal leaders and the rank. In contrast, Western individualism asserts that people identify primarily with self, and the needs of the individual are satisfied before those of the group. Looking after, taking care of oneself, and being self-sufficient guarantees the well-being of the group.

The second factor distinguishing a developed from developing nation is the size and the strength of the economy.<sup>7</sup> In a Western country where the economy is strong and the labor market is large, one need not call on others to intervene to get a job.

The third factor differentiates the universalist versus the particularist. For Westerners, wherever possible, they should try to apply the same rules to everyone in like situations.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Arabs indulge family, friends, and their preferred groups, and they let the rest of the world take care of itself. Particularism represents how one behaves in a given situation depending on the circumstance.

In the Middle Eastern society, favoritism (or nepotism) can be distinguished from other forms of corruption such as bribery, in that it is based on long-term social relations and mutual trust rather than on an immediate exchange of material favors, as in

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7 Ibid., 18.

8 Craig Storti, *Figuring Foreigners Out* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 1999), 38.

the case of bribery, where a certain amount of money or a gift is given for a specific favor. In contrast, favoritism creates a more implicit, indirect and unspecified obligation. Although reciprocity is also very important for favoritism, the person doing a favor to another person does not know when and how the latter will reciprocate. In many circumstances, the recipient of a favor must not even reciprocate to the donor himself. Rather, especially in the context of family networks, he is expected to reciprocate by showing solidarity to any other relative in need. This is a form of ‘generalized reciprocity.’ Many people believe, for example, that loyalty to friends and tribesmen manifests itself in the provision of preferential treatment. To refuse a favor is perceived in such circumstances as a violation of the rules of society.<sup>9</sup>

### III. WASTA IN ARAB TRADITIONS

#### 1. Tribalism and Hierarchical Structure Based on Kinship System

Although many contemporary scholars doubt primordialist theories of group identity<sup>10</sup>, Jordanians still have group personality and show traditionalism which highly values cultural continuity.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Loewe, *The Impact of Favouritism on the Business Climate: A Study on Wasta in Jordan*, 92.

10 Ted C. Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), 90.

11 *Ibid.*, 101.

Jordan is basically a tribal society. Tribalism is a pre-Islamic tradition. In pre-Islamic times, the tribe was the highest unit of social and political organization, and the tribal leaders constituted the most important social, political, and judicial authority in many Arab territories. In fact, in the *Qur'an* there is no exact mention of *wasta*, but it mentions the needs of two witnesses when people judge or make an agreement (Surah 2:282). The role of a mediator does not much weigh on religious influence; rather on cultural continuity in Arab societies.

Tribal organization transformed in many ways after the 1980s and later, however, it still has significant meaning in Jordan society. Its tribal structure can be described in terms which are supported by the segmentary principle, including 'Ashira (tribe), *Firqah* or *Fakhd* (several lineages), *Hamula* (a larger section of lineage) and *Ahil* (the nuclear family).<sup>12</sup> Due to the segmentary of lineage based on consanguinity and affinal relationships, a strong tribal characteristic is solidarity between 'ashira members. Lewellen articulates that "within traditional societies, family, kinship, and community are the primary relations and whereas in modern societies, individuals are involved in a multitude of often impersonal relations based on jobs, clubs, sports teams and government agencies."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the problem with tribalism is that it strengthens solidarity among relatives but not

12 Mohammad Al-Ouda, *Tribal identity and State Power*(Germany:Shaker Verlag, 2005), 19.

13 Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21st Century*, 101.



with others. Hong emphasizes the role of leadership (*Shake*) as a mediator in Jordan society.

Jordan social system evolved to preserve the social structure of the tribe. It allowed for the leadership to distribute the tribe's wealth as they deemed in their wisdom and experience would preserve peace and harmony...In a harsh environment where the key to survival is to band together as a group, it is paramount that resources and advantages remain as close to the center of the tribe as possible.<sup>14</sup>

In Jordanian's tradition of tribalism, *wasta* (a mediator) associates with cherished values such as solidarity and loyalty. The sense of mutual dependence among members of the tribe and collective responsibility are central dynamic factors of tribal solidarity reinforcing the cohesion within the tribal structure. Therefore, many Jordanians explain the use of *wasta* in cultural terms, and they associate it with cherished values and norms such as solidarity, allegiance, and mutual responsibility. They regard it as a part of their heritage; "*Wasta* is in our heads, it is in our culture."<sup>15</sup> Hence, many Jordanians do not give up using *wasta*, because they deem it part of their culture. Likewise, they do not blame others for benefiting from *wasta*.

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14 Jung-Mi Hong, "Religious Elites and Tribalism in Jordan," *Korean Middle Eastern research association* vol.27, no.1(2006): 160.

15 *Ibid.*, 91.

## 2. Mediator in Conflicts

One of important role of *wasta* is a mediator among conflicts. Cunningham and Sarayrah contend that “*wasta* evolved from conflict resolution as a means of survival to intercession to maintain one’s place of honor in contemporary Jordan.”<sup>16</sup> They also identified two types of *wasta*; intermediary and intercessory.<sup>17</sup> Intermediary *wasta* is utilized to facilitate the resolution of intergroup or interpersonal conflicts. Although the tribal sheik role as mediator between tribes in conflict is declining now that government has become more assertive in preventing interfamily violence, the *wasta* role as intercessory has expanded.<sup>18</sup>

In the deserts of Arabia during one of the Bedouin raids between shepherding tribes that used to take place, a man was killed. Then a blood feud began between two tribes. A life from the other tribe must be taken; “A life for a life.” The sheik or leader of murderous tribe tried to go to reconcile with other tribe and road off in the direction of the other tribe. From a great distance away before this sheikh could even open his mouth, he was recognized by the offended tribe and shot dead.<sup>19</sup>

This is a very famous story to explain why they need the third

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16 Cunningham and Sarayrah, *Wasta: The hidden force in Middle Eastern Society*, 11.

17 Ibid., 8.

18 Ibid., 9.

19 S. M. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam* (USA: The Caxton press, 1900), 265.

party to make a peace between tribes. The sheikh or someone from the third tribe needs to be without guilt between the two tribes; therefore, only he is in the position to make peace. Therefore, the qualifications of *wasta* is considered wise, to have all the answers and solutions to the problems, and is a very powerful and important person.<sup>20</sup>

In order to be successful a mediator must be trusted by people.<sup>21</sup> The *mediator* should be a man of high moral repute.<sup>22</sup> If he mediates intertribal conflicts, the qualifications of the *sheikh* or leader should be respected by both tribes and the local area. He must be famous, fair, highly regarded by people and not have any blame from both tribes.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, anyone cannot be the mediator if he just comes from the third party.

### 3. *Wasta* in The Bible

The *wasta* in terms of nepotism or negative favoritism was of no advantage in the Bible. The Bible clearly teaches that favoritism is forbidden. Leviticus 19:15 teaches, “Do not pervert justice; do not show particularity to the poor or favoritism to the great,

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20 George E. Irani, “Islamic Mediation Techniques for Middle East Conflicts,” in *Intercultural Communication: A Global Reader*, ed. Fred E. Jandt (California: Sage Publications Inc., 2004), 364.

21 Joseph Ginat, *Blood Disputes among Bedouin and rural Arabs in Israel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1987), 31.

22 Sarang Kim, “Reconciliation among the Bedouin,” in *Ministry of Reconciliation* (Groningen: Grassroots Mission Publications, 2009), 38.

23 Ibid.

but judge your neighbor fairly.” God himself does not show favoritism. Deuteronomy 10:17 teaches, “Lord your God shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.” Romans 2:11 says, “For God does not show favoritism.” James teaches that Christians should not show favoritism: “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism (2:1).” The context of James 2:1–9 concerns the treatment of rich and poor in the church. James points out that treating someone differently based on his financial status or how he is dressed is wrong.

However, in a sense of mediation, the *wasta* takes place in the Bible. People use mediators to argue a case or to negotiate terms of peace with a hostile party, as Moses did with Pharaoh on behalf of Israel (Exodus 6:28–12:32) and Joab did with David on behalf of Absalom (2 Sam 14:1–14). Esther acted as a mediator, saving her people from Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews (Esther 7:3–8:6). Jesus Christ is the outstanding model mediator. Paul declares that God’s desire to save all people is expressed in the “one mediator.” 1 Timothy 2:5–6 teaches, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.” The most sustained theological treatment of the concept of the mediator comes from the letter to the Hebrews. The author of Hebrews describes that Christ is the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrew 8:6, 9:15, 12:24). He is the only person in history who takes the place as our mediator with God. Considering the aspect of intermediary, was-

ta which facilitates the resolution of intergroup or interpersonal conflict, Jesus Christ is a perfect model of *wasta* and can be used as a redemptive analogy in the Middle Eastern context.

#### IV. WASTA IN MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Like Richardson used a concept of *tarop* child in the Sawi tribe as a bridge (peace child) between God and them, I suggest here that a concept of a mediator can be used a metaphor to explain the gospel to Arabs. According to Richardson, ‘redemptive analogies, God key’s to man’s culture, are the New testament–approved approach to cross cultural evangelism.’<sup>24</sup> He adds that

The key God gave us to the heart of the Sawi people was principle of redemptive analogy– application to the local custom of spiritual truth. The principle we discerned was God had already provided for the evangelization of these people by means of redemptive analogies in their own culture.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Hiebert points out that the missionary should be careful to use the cultural concept in its biblical understanding, because ‘Christ is much more than a Peace Child

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24 Don Richardson, *Peace Child: an Unforgettable Story of Primitive Jungle Treachery in the 20th Century* (Glendale, Cal: Regal books, 1976), 244–5.

25 *Ibid.*, 9.

Sacrifice.’<sup>26</sup> In that sense, we should notice that Jesus is much more than a mediator in the Arabs’ concept, because he sacrificed his life to make people reconcile to God.

Our sin is not solved by any other thing. It should be paid by our blood and eternal death (Romans 6:23). In the New Testament, 1Timothy 2:5, Galatians 3:19–29 are all closely linked to Jesus’ description of mediation. “Jesus lived a complete life on earth without a single sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).”<sup>27</sup> They know that *wasta* is necessary to make reconciliation and know that it is impossible to make an agreement without it. Therefore, *wasta* is a vital and familiar concept to reach out to the Jordanians. That can bring us to emphasize Jesus as the great *Sheikh* and *wasta* between God and us.

## V. CONCLUSION

A concept of *wasta* is necessary for Jordanians individual and social lives. Using *wasta* is a kind of phenomenon in the transit process of modernization or civilization. In a negative sense, it is closely related to corruption, but according to Arab traditional culture, it is understood as affirmative favoritism even though some features are considered negatively. In case of Jordan, its

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26 Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*(Michigan: Baker Books,1999), 223.

27 Kim, “Reconciliation among the Bedouin,” 39.

society is strongly based on tribal system and a *wasta* in a tribe works as a mediator or helper to solve all kinds of life issues for his people.

When we approach Arabs in our mission, the concept of Jesus as the *wasta* would be the bridge between God and them. We have Jesus Christ as our model to mediate between God and the world. At the same time, Christians or missionaries also can be mediators, *wasta* to present the gospel to them by showing God's love through actions.

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■ ABSTRACT

## *Wasta* (Mediator) in Jordan and Its Application to Evangelism Among Muslims

Sam Kim

*Wasta* has an important role in modernizing and socializing Jordan since long ago. Although it has a negative association, to use one's power or networks to get things done for individual or tribal benefits, it also has positive functions, such as helping in the matters of people in need. In particular, the role of *wasta* as a mediator among tribal conflicts or individuals are vital. Socially and culturally, *wasta* is an essential part of Jordan society and can potentially work as a contact point for evangelism among Muslims. Using the example that Jesus is a mediator between God and the fallen people and that through Jesus' redemptive work people can be saved, Muslims can understand the function of mediator and the high standard of qualification to be one, such as a *wasta*.

**Keywords:** Jordan, *Wasta*, Conflicts, Mediator.

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