

Scriptural Reasoning: Understanding Mercy in the Qur'an

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

“In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful.” (Qur'an, 1:1)

Mercy is an overarching theme in the Islamic tradition and prominently mentioned in the Qur'an and the narrations of Prophet Muhammad. There are many words used in both the Qur'an and Hadith that refer to mercy such as *rahma*, *raheem*, *rauf*, *hanan*, *kareem*. There are numerous parables, passages, recommendations and perhaps even legal edicts that motivate believers towards forgiveness, mercy and compassion. There is an entire chapter in the Qur'an call 'Ar Rahman' (The Most Merciful).¹ Mercy appears about 348 times in the Quran. Compassion appears 23 times in the Quran. The body of work that emanated from lessons of mercy in the Islamic tradition are countless, in fact mercy is relevant to and can be discussed through various Islamic sciences such as *tafsir* (exegesis), *hadith* (narrations of prophet Muhammad),² *kalam* (theology), *falsafa* (philosophy) and even *fiqh* (jurisprudence). In this paper I will focus on how mercy is discussed and related to in the Islamic holy scripture the Qur'an with a particular deconstruction of the verse 'in the name of God the All Merciful, the Ever Merciful' (Qur'an 1:1), also known as the *basmala*, a verse that the Qur'an begins with and according the juristic scholar Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767-820) although it was a single verse it was revealed 114 times.³ It is also a phrase that has come to be known as the *sha'ir* of Islam of one of its key symbols or markers, as it is used daily not only in the formal *salat* (five daily prayers) and at the start of *du'a* (supplications) but used repetitively in daily life and mundane activities. The *basmala* acts as a bridge that binds the sacred to the mundane and draws no distinction between them. I have considered some of the classical commentaries and considered contemporary reinterpretations or elucidations, including Ibn Arabi, Al-Ghazali and others.

Islamic worldview embedded in Mercy

Islam's invitation for humanity to embrace and embody mercy is connected with the *kalam* reference to mercy as a key name and an essential attribute of God's nature. The centrality of God in the monotheism of Islam is undoubtedly instructive in prescribing the key ontological and teleological outlook of the tradition as well as its philosophical and ethical outlook on life and existence. Thus, connecting mercy to essential attribute of Divine is emphasizing its great significance. This belief of an omnipotent and transcendent God but also a very Merciful and personal God permeates across the tradition's worldview and outlook and impacts upon not only legal maxims that encourage and enjoin mercy but more importantly in social and personal ethics as a virtue that needs to be exercised by individuals based on the perfect emulation of mercy by the one 'sent as a mercy to all worlds' - Prophet Muhammad.⁴

According to the Islamic worldview God's act of creating humanity was an act of mercy and compassion. Compassion represents the love between parents and children as well as that between children and parents. However, universal love can best be seen through all elements of the universe working together with each other for the benefit of all life.⁵

Thus, it is a phenomenon that the entire creation and existence rests upon – mercy. Just as gravity is one of the essential laws of nature, mercy is another essential law emanating from the Divine Name and essential attribute. Since it is such a significant attribute and human beings are made in the image of the Most Merciful, thus they are charged with the duty of being merciful towards the rest of creation as the stewards and custodians of creation. The best exemplars of these are the prophets in the Qur'an who have gone through the most difficult and bitter trials in life and yet their mercy and compassion has afforded them large following.

The *basmallah*

This central role of the *basmallah* as an invocation to the particular attribute of God's mercy was reiterated by Pope Francis who states:

Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are 'Compassionate and Merciful.' This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open.⁶

The *basmala* role to mercy is further signified by its appearance in the Qur'an – as the first verse before the first chapter of the Qur'an Surah Fatiha. It is also used as starting verse written at the start of each chapter of the Qur'an, all 113 chapters except for 1 begin with the bismillah. Chapter 9 Surah 'Repentance, al-Tawbah' does not begin with the phrase but contains the phrase in the chapter when the Qur'an is relaying the story of Suleyman and Queen Sheba. Suleyman's letter to Queen of Sheba begins with this phrase as mentioned in the Qur'an. This is also a hint that the phrase perhaps existed in previous scriptures, some suggesting it is the Greatest Name of God. The recent archaeological excavations in Southern Arabia have found pre-Islamic inscriptions similar to the *basmala* suggesting the monotheistic *hanifs* that may have prevailed among the region even prior to Islam as evidenced by the archaeological inscription of shaman and ra.⁷

The significant due to the inclusion of double mercy in the phrase. It includes the notion *rahman* and *rahim* in it. These two attributes of mercy are reiterated in opening chapter Al Fatiha, the next verses echo the same theme: "Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful". Thus, the Qur'an emphasizes on mercy right from the initial verses of its first chapter. The repetition conveys a simple yet profound message that mercy is a 'core truth of Islam, repeated over and over'.

The first chapter of the Quran is only seven verses long, but the commentary on it extends to volumes. "God, the Compassionate, the Merciful:" the divine essence (Allah, God), the unity of all divine attributes (Compassionate), and the unity of divine acts (Merciful). "The Compassionate" is a divine name that no other can bear, since "it connotes the Loving-Mercy by which God brings forth existence." "The Merciful" indicates "the blessing of nourishment by which God sustains each particular being." Compassion is like the sun; mercy is the ray of sunshine warming and vivifying every given thing on earth. The first (Compassion) brings the world into being, the second (Mercy) "is that by which God shows Mercy to those whom He will, as in 33.43, 'And He is Merciful unto the believers,'" enabling them to endure as they were created to be.

And that Mercy is, in turn, the wellspring of other Divine Names: the Kind, the Clement, the Beautiful.⁸

***Rahman* (Title of God's Merciful Attribute) and *Rahim* (Title of God's Compassionate Attribute)**

Rahman is both an adjective and noun in Arabic. Literally it means 'the most merciful' as it is particularly attributed to God in Islam, it is used as a Name of God. When we say *Rahman*, we mean God. This is abundantly exemplified in the Qur'an. "The all merciful established himself on the throne" (Taha 20;5) *Ar Rahman alal arsh estawa* "The All Merciful has taught the Quran created man, and taught him speech. It is an attribute particular to God, it is another proper name of Allah and not proper to translate.

Rahim is also an adjective and noun too. It is also a Divine Attribute but it is **not** particular to God. Both are derived from the root word *rahma*, meaning mercy and compassion. *Rahman* is denoting an All-encompassing mercy and compassion over the universe, while *Rahim* denoted his compassion over every creature. *Rahman* is more general manifestation of mercy and *rahim* is more particular. The first case is called *Wahiddyyah* while the latter is *ahadiyyah*, thus it denoted the Oneness (*Ahad*) and unity (*Wahid*) of God.

Despite the universal mercy in creation, there is individual accountability due to manifestation of *Rahim* - free will given to individuals. Humans can rise to highest of the high or lowest of the low. If *Rahman* not manifested - we would not come into existence, if *Rahim* did not manifest (had not existed) we would not have had free will or understood subtleties of Divine Creation. *Rahman* unfolded the universe before us and *Rahim* gave us the will to read the book. 'The true comprehension is to understand our incapacity of comprehension'.

"Oh the Known One we could not have know You as You truly are"

Both terms intensification not mercy loving mercy also title of Sarah 55 *Ar Rahaman* more encompassing , emphatic and embracing according to Ibn Kathir, Qurtubi, Tabari.

Prophet said any significant work that is not started with the "Bismal l Rahman Rahmee' if fruitless. The 4 fundamental truths of Quran *taw hid*, *nubuwwa*, *hashr*, *adl* are indeed summarised there in . It is a key for everything in life, it is indeed a luminous line extending from Divine Presence to our hearts. Those truly understand can ascend to human perfection (Prophet Muhammad). *Basmala* contains the seeds of all truths of creation (summary of *Fatiha* which is summary of the Quran). Transcendent Essence of Divine Mercy - God is exempt from human qualities. His mercy and compassion are different than ours just s His seeing and hearing are, .with this moderate interpretation we do not need to deny the real meaning of the Divine atrinbtue by assuming them to be figurative . Our will power is a manifestation of God special mercy and generosity upon us.

The basmala is the ‘seed’ of Sura Fatiha (The Opening Chapter of the Quran) which is in turn is the seed of the entire Quran. The phrase (BismillahiRahmaniRaheem) in the name of God the All Merciful and the All Compassionate called the ‘Basmalah’ is one of the symbols of Islam. Muslims begin every deed with it. The particle *Bi* means both in and with so that everything dependent on the laws of the All Merciful does whatever it does in and with His Name. E.g. small seed germinated under the earth and to grow into tree depending on the laws of All Merciful. It is a rope of light extending from the supreme throne of God to the hearts of people, whoever holds fast to it in awareness of its meaning and is enlightened by it can rise to the highest point of human existence.

In relation to calling out to God with His greatest name - Allah is translated as the proper name of the Divine Being who creates and administers His creatures individually and as a whole. It is the Creator is Eternal is his name.

Rahman

The expression “the All Merciful” translates the Arabic *ar Rahman*. Essential attribute of God the precise rendering of which into another language is impossible. Ar Rahman can be used interchangeably with the name of God, for it is applied to none other than God. It means the One with infinite mercy

- Rahman is for this world ,
- temporary , immediate, extreme
- Universal (all encompassing)
- zamakhsari words that are extreme / immediate they are acting out like waves of ocean
- Rahman name of God known in the Hebrew Scriptures/ known to Judaic people
- Sarah 17:110 enjoins the Prophet to call upon God or call upon the Compassionate Rahman
- Rahman is like light of the sun that illuminates the whole Skye
- Very existence is nothing but Nafas al Rahman (breath of Divine Compassion)
- Universal mercy

Raheem

- Rahim is for the next world (companion)
 - o dormant, constant
- - zamakhsari that are not acted out are like the calm ocean
 - o Particular / individual
 - o Rahim was made manifest through the messiah Jesus son of Mary ra
- Used to describe the Prophet Muhammad pbuh in Sarah 9:128
- Al Rahim is like the particular ray of sunlight the ttouches a creature.
- Essential mercy
- He shows mercy to whom he will 33:43
- God is thus said to be Compassionate (Rahman) towards all of creation but Merciful toward the believers (Tabari)
- Mercy encompasses all time and all space 7:156

HUMANS AS REFLECTION OF MERCIFUL ESSENCE

‘God has created humankind as the reflection of His All-Merciful essence.’

If there is a shining mirror which reflects the Divine Essence, along with the All-Beautiful Names of God and His Divine Attributes, it is humankind.

Said Nursi states in his famous works the Words:

On the face of the universe, the face of the earth, and the face of man are three Stamps of dominicality one within the other and each showing samples of the others. That is to say, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is the sacred title of three Stamps of Divine Oneness, which form a luminous line on the page of the world, and a strong cord, and shining filament. That is, through being revealed from above, the tip of *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* rests on man, the fruit of the universe and miniature copy of the world. It binds the lower world to the Divine Throne. It is a way for man to ascend to the Divine Throne. In order not to overwhelm minds by Divine Unity, which is apparent in the boundless multiplicity of creatures, the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition constantly points out the manifestation of Divine Oneness within Divine Unity. (Wahdaniya and ahadiya Unity and oneness)

Oh man! Come to your senses! Is it at all possible that the All-Glorious One, Who causes all the varieties of creatures to turn towards you and stretch out their hands to assist you, and causes them to say: “Here we are!” in the face of your needs, is it possible that He does not know you, is not acquainted with you, does not see you? Since He does know you, He informs you that He knows you through His Mercy. So, you know Him too, and with respect let Him know that you know Him, and understand with

Like on the face of the earth there is such a Seal of Mercy and Stamp of Divine Oneness, so also on the face of man's nature is a Stamp of Divine Mercy which is not inferior to the Stamp of Compassion and vast Stamp of Mercy on the face of the universe. Simply, man possesses a comprehensiveness like being a point of focus of a thousand and one Divine Names. Just as the most precious jewel in the treasury of Mercy and its doorkeeper is the Prophet Muhammad (Upon whom be blessings and peace), so too is its first key *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*. And its most easy key the prayer for the Prophet.

Prophet Muhammad as embodiment of mercy

“We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds.” (Qur'an, 21:107)

We learn later on, in 21.107, that the Prophet Mohammed is sent by God as an act of mercy: “And We sent thee not, save as a mercy unto the worlds.” The commentary here explains the subtlety of the Arabic: “The grammar of the verse allows it to be understood to mean either that the sending of the Prophet Mohammed was a merciful act by God or that the Prophet is himself a mercy that God sent. It can signify that the

Prophet is a possessor of mercy, is merciful, or is himself a mercy.” This is, the comment continues, a manifestation of the mercy to which the Law tends, and a mercy for all, the whole “world,” and not just believing Muslims. Even those who do not believe in the Prophet experience his mercy, which wards off doom even from those who reject him; he will intercede for all, on the Day of Judgment.

Never Lose Hope in Gods Mercy

The state of today’s condition can sometimes drive us to depression and hopelessness, or even our own mistakes and human errors of judgement and the dis-compassionate attitude that unfortunately prevails in our commercial, business and social and political realm. The Qur’an reminds us to never lose hope in Gods mercy. This is another reminder of Gods mercy and gives humanity hope despite the bleak state that ourselves and societies may be going through.

The verse of Mercy. *Arja Aya* ‘The verse of the greatest hope: Say oh my worshippers who have transgressed against himself never lose hope in the mercy of Allah’. (Surah Zummar 53) the believers are reassured in another verse “Tell my servants I am the forgiving One, The Merciful”.

Do not lose hope in my Mercy I will forgive all your sins I’m most forgiving most merciful. Satan will make your delay - turn back to your Rab quickly before. Do not lose hope in mercy of God. Repent sincerely to Allah. And repent to Allah all of you believers so that you will be successful Recommendation : Hadith Third of the night is there anyone seeking forgiveness and my mercy.

He also says “My Mercy encompasses all things.” (Qur’an 7:156) and “God ordained mercy onto Himself.” (Qur’an, 6:12)

Conclusion

Mercy is thus an essential Divine attribute emphasised in the verse *'In the name of God the Most Gracious the Most Merciful'*.⁹ Mercy is necessary to Gods essential nature that is why it was revealed 114 times in the Qur’an. Belief, life, creation, prophets and revelation are all manifestation of His Mercy and are embodiments of mercy themselves. Believers are encouraged to embody this Divine attribute within themselves and towards all of creation. The Prophet Muhammad encouraged mercy ‘Be merciful to those on the earth and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you’. Mercy as another name of Allah; Mercy as an attribute of God (feminine and masculine version in the Quran) and Mercy as key Prophetic essential attribute prophet was sent as the “mercy to all the worlds”, Quran begins with Bismillah I Rahman I raheem to emphasis the essence of our Lord is Mercy – the essence of our Prophet sas is mercy and essence of Islam is mercy and that Muslims. Mercy is to counterbalance the chaotic nature of our world today, and focus on a real light that enables us to see and find this attribute of our Lord/ Divine and also to live and manifest this attribute as the Prophets and saints have done in all our traditions.

¹ Qur'an, Chapter Ar-Rahman, (55:1). In this paper I have used Ali Unal's English translation of the Qur'an see Ali Unal, *The Glorious Qur'an: Annotated*, Light Inc: New Jersey, 2004.

² In line with Islamic tradition, every time the name Prophet Muhammad appears in this paper, peace be upon him is intended with every mention, but it has been omitted to not obstruct the reader from the main argument of the paper.

³ Hanafi school of law it is the first verse of Surah Fatiha. Quoted in Said Nursi '*The Words*', (Trans. Ali Unal) Light Inc: Istanbul, 2004.

⁴ The importance of mercy in the not only the Divine character but also the Prophetic character is reiterated in the Quran and the historical records of his life Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad as well as his traditions sayings called the hadith.

⁵ Fethullah Gulen, *Universal Mercy and Education*, Accessed 07.05.19 via <https://fgulen.com/en/home/1359-fgulen-com-english/gulens-works/recent-articles/24929-universal-mercy-and-education>

⁶ Francis X. Clooney, S.J. 'Discovering God's Mercy in the Quran' *America the Jesuit Review*, December 11, 2015. Accessed 09.05.19 <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/studying-quran-catholic-ii>.

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⁸ Ibid., in note 6.

⁹ Qu'ran 1:1.

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