

## Locating Islamic Concept of Mercy (*al-Rahmah*) *vis-à-vis* the Doctrine of Salvation (Soteriology): A Qualitative Review

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**Abstract:** *This study delves into the theological exploration of mercy, known as al-Rahmah within the framework of the doctrine of salvation, or soteriology, in Islamic theology. The concept of mercy occupies a central position in Islamic teachings, and its implications concerning salvation providing a significant discourse. The research involves study of classical Islamic theological texts, including Qur'anic verses, Hadith literature, and the viewpoints of prominent theologians across different Islamic era. By analyzing these sources, the study shown some keys points to understand how mercy functions in the salvation of believers according*

*to Islamic theology. This research explored the multifaceted aspects of mercy, including its role in divine justice, forgiveness, and the overall salvation narrative in Islam. How individuals attain salvation through divine mercy, considering factors such as faith, repentance, obedience and divine guidance. Additionally, it examines the practical implications of this theological framework on the lives of Muslims and their understanding of the divine relationship. In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper comprehension of the intricate interplay between mercy and salvation in Islamic theology. By locating mercy within the broader doctrine of salvation, the study aims to shed light on the theological underpinnings that shape the Islamic understanding of divine compassion and its impact on the ultimate salvation of believers.*

**Keywords:** *Al-Raḥmah, Soteriology, Islamic theology, Tawḥīd, Ethics and Practices*

## **Introduction**

To investigate and analyze the relationship between *al-Raḥmah* and soteriology within the Islamic framework, an overview regarding both terms and relevant aspects may provide conceptual clarity. The intersection of Islamic theology and the broader discourse on salvation, particularly within the framework of soteriology, unveils the concepts and beliefs. One of the pivotal elements in Islam that traverses this theological terrain is the concept of mercy, known as "*al-Raḥmah*" in Arabic. This qualitative review aims to explore the Islamic understanding of mercy and its correlation with the doctrine of salvation.

In the Islamic tradition, *al-Raḥmah* is a multifaceted concept that encapsulates divine compassion, benevolence, and forgiveness. It is considered one of the fundamental attributes of Allah Almighty, emphasizing His boundless mercy towards all creation.

The study of soteriology, the discourse on salvation, has often been a focal point in theological discussions, especially in Christianity. However, within the Islamic context, salvation is approached differently, and *al-*

*Raḥmah* plays a central role. The Islamic perspective on salvation is intricately woven into the concept of divine mercy, portraying a pathway towards redemption through sincere repentance, submission to the will of Allah Almighty, and adherence to righteous deeds.

By exploring how mercy operates within the broader framework of soteriology, this review seeks to unveil the profound connections between divine compassion and the ultimate deliverance of the human soul. Through a qualitative lens, this review aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of the Islamic concept of mercy in its dynamic interplay with the broader doctrine of salvation.

This qualitative review will delve into classical Islamic texts, scholarly commentaries, and contemporary perspectives to illuminate the Islamic understanding of *al-Raḥmah*. It includes the theological debates and variations within Islamic thought concerning the mechanics of salvation and the centrality of mercy in multiple matters. Islamic soteriology encompasses a comprehensive understanding of salvation, emphasizing divine mercy as a fundamental component.

### Fundamental Terms and Concepts

According to Al-Jurjānī (d.816AH) mercy (*raḥmah*) is the willpower to convey what is worthy and good.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the word mercy (*raḥmah*) Imām Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 1108/1109) says that '*raḥmah*' is closely related to benevolence (*al-Iḥsān*), explaining *raḥm* in relation to womb and relationship (*qarābah*). Everything what Allah Almighty has created is under the umbrella of Mercy. In the light of Ḥadīth about blood relationship he inferred that we have two meanings of mercy. One is '*al-Iḥsān*', a dimension of mercy from the Allah Almighty and the other face of mercy is '*riqqah*' which is inbuilt quality of human nature where action motivated by compassion and leniency are the types of mercy from man towards man (and the other humanity).<sup>2</sup>

This definition tells us about the relation of Allah with human and human being towards each other.

In Lisān al-‘Arab that the word *rahmah* means delicacy, subtlety, and kindness (*Riqqah wal ta’ṭṭuf*), forgiveness (*maghifrah*), sustenance and provision (*rizq*), succor (*ghayth*), benevolence and philanthropy (*ḥsān*), heart leniency (*riqat ul-qalb*), and compassion. All these aspects are the expression of mercy.<sup>3</sup> In this discussion, Ibn Manẓūr (d.1311) indicated various aspects and phases of the word (*rahmah*) quoting the number of references from the Qur’ān.

The doctrine of salvation<sup>4</sup> or soteriology is a significant belief in the various religions concerning preservation from harm and different types of loss. It is a well-known creed about the ultimate destiny of man within the theological domain and limitations from the Islamic perspective. Since the notions ‘salvation’ and judgement had long flourished in the earlier human’s history. The term ‘salvation’ encircles the discussion regarding this world to that of Hereafter specifically and final pardon. Multiple dimensions of this doctrine can be understood from the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*, focusing on the prescribed parameters (examining the role of mercy) and ways of action in this world.

From the Islamic viewpoint, we would like to explore the soteriological matters exploring the role of Divine Mercy in the different contexts. There are several limitations of salvation for the Muslim who received the prophetic message and for them who received not i.e., “unreached”.

Naṣr writes:

*“the term ‘salvation’ sometimes may be rendered into Arabic word ‘falāḥ’ generally and usually understood in Christianity. It is an idea that appears in the call to prayer (adhān), where the caller recites, after the takbīr (Allahu Akbar) and the shahādah, ‘come to ṣalāh (prayer) and come to falāḥ (prosperity or salvation).”<sup>5</sup>*

In Islam, the true dogmatic perception and performance of pious deeds lead us to salvation.

### The Key Role of ‘*Tawḥīd*’ vis-à-vis Mercy to Salvation

The most important creed in this regard is ‘*Tawḥīd*’ that there is no God except One, Who is Oft-Forgiving and the Most Merciful. At the heart of the discourse surrounding mercy and salvation in Islam lies the foundational concept of *Tawḥīd*, an Arabic term representing the oneness and unity of Allah. *Tawḥīd* serves as the cornerstone of Islamic theology, weaving through the fabric of beliefs and practices, and playing a key role in shaping the understanding of mercy and salvation within the Islamic framework.

Tamara Sonn remarked that Qur’ān offered ‘*Tawḥīd Oriented Society*’, where mercy is the paramount topic among the other themes. The Qur’ān warns of penalty for wrongdoers and violators, instead of that Divine Mercy is a more focused theme (in this regard).<sup>6</sup> There is no such a concept of original sin in Islam as well as God of Islam does not demand human’s blood to sacrifice in order to bestow His Forgiveness and Mercy for humanity.

Fakhry indicated earlier historical development of Islamic thought and stated regarding salvation:

*“Even the prerequisites of salvation tended to diminish progressively in the early theological squabbles. Eventually the profession of the unity of God (Tawḥīd) became the only condition of salvation, or at any rate of the cessation of punishment in hell.”<sup>7</sup>*

There are many things involved concerning the creed of salvation in Islam. We should observe how mercy works in each matter, either apparently or not.

Dr. Bilal Philips discussed the Islamic concept of salvation and said:

*“There is a direct link between faith, righteous deeds and Divine Grace. Allah’s wisdom and justice work along with His*

*Grace and Mercy. This (Divine) system does not disturb man's free will.*<sup>8</sup>

Belief in 'Oneness of God' and to act upon Prophetic guidance (*Sīrah*) have a central position in Islamic philosophy regarding salvation.

Mohammad Hassan Khalil says that scholars of theology usually state mercy is from Al-Merciful, the Omnipresent Lord. While mercy is from Ever-Merciful is mutually linked with to the Prophetic teaching and guidance. In the same discussion, he expressed about forgiveness and salvation, (notably the salvation of non-Muslim). Oneness of Allah (*Tawḥīd*) has the main concern in Islamic philosophy towards soteriological matter, (dealings, procedure and results).<sup>9</sup>

Hence, it is reiterated that to follow the guidance of the Prophet of Islam (*ṣallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) is the main factor to acquire salvation. It demands to act upon his footsteps in all affairs and concerns practically. The interconnectedness of *Tawḥīd*, mercy, and salvation is evident in Islamic teachings. Belief in the oneness of Allah cultivates a profound sense of gratitude for His mercy, as every act of compassion is seen as an expression of His singular and boundless attributes. Simultaneously, *Tawḥīd* provides a clear roadmap for the believer seeking salvation, an unwavering devotion to the One God; Allah Almighty, adherence to His guidance, and reliance on His mercy.

### **Islamic Theological Viewpoint**

We may comprehend the concept of salvation as noted by Izmirli and what is mentioned by Sabine Schmidtke in the book, '*The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*'. She says that mercy and wisdom have been considered dominant qualities concerning the God of Islam; Allah Almighty. Pain and torture for wrongdoers in Hell is to purify them so that they acquire the status to enter into paradise and to get Divine Mercy eventually.<sup>10</sup> It shows

that God of Islam is always well-wisher to put humanity into peace and salvation. Any hindrance from human sides to disturb the balance may cause to function Divine Justice in order to save the merciful milieu. Moreover, Naşr says that, “Although the effect of Divine Mercy on individual salvation remains imponderable. It is a source of hope.”<sup>11</sup>

From the Islamic concept of salvation, he remarked:

*“No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve is a description of one’s life after death, the equivalent of what might be called salvation. It describes the reward of those who follow God’s Guidance.”*<sup>12</sup>

As far as the question of ultimate salvation is concerned, one may observe from the philosophical view of Mulla Şadra. It is a notable concept that displays that felicity (happiness) and salvation are mutually linked with Divine Mercy.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Islam demands balance in each and every deal, Morgan (b. 1947) also admits that it is required to believe that Allah exists and only good actions and performance is not enough for salvation unless belief in Allah Almighty.<sup>14</sup> So, dogmatic purity along with actions and good deeds are necessary for salvation.

Hakan analysed how Nursi elaborating the concept of Divine Mercy. He mentioned that Qur’ānic explanations regarding the “bodily resurrection proves eternal happiness. Many Qur’ānic verses have opened up windows looking to the resurrection, presenting its reality with all its contents and dimensions. For example, the Qur’ān directs attention to humanity’s first creation in order to prove the bodily resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, the idea of creation and rebirth in Islamic philosophy is jointly connected with mercy. Şadra’s hermeneutics also shows the ultimate return of all things is towards God. He is a source of beauty and goodness and all things come from Him the One God. Hell is must be limited and finite.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding Şadra’s insight, Dr. Mohammed Rustom writes:

*“Since all things issue from God...they can also be said to issue from mercy and be nothing but modes of God’s mercy. Likewise, since all modes of being must return to their Source of being, so too must all modes of mercy return to their Source of mercy. Hence, the end for all creatures is mercy.”<sup>17</sup>*

This philosophy revolves around the concept of mercy. Moreover, al-Ghazzālī says that “compassion and punishment may be reconciled. The mother of a sick child may disallow him from being cupped. His treatment apparently is an act of affliction but it leads him to good health. Similarly, God is the Most Merciful. He states, the amputation of a corroded hand appears to be an evil act, but, in reality, it extremely beneficial for the well-being of the body. Otherwise, the whole body would become ruined.”<sup>18</sup>

We may visit ‘Ghazālīan Soteriological Vision’ in another book, where he argues that:

*“Most Byzantine Christians and Turks ‘whose lands lie far beyond the lands of Islam,’ and who have not been exposed to the message of Islam will be covered by God’s mercy.”<sup>19</sup>*

The universal worldview of Islamic eschatology can be scanned from the statement of Al-Ghazālī concerning humanity other than Islam. Hassan Khalil commenting about Al-Ghazālī projecting another view in the words;

*“In the final analysis, however, al-Ghazzālī maintains that Islam is, in principle, the only path to salvation, and that God’s mercy will nevertheless be granted to multitudes of non-Muslims not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message.”<sup>20</sup>*

While in the Nursian worldview, “...Salvation is only to be found through truthfulness and honesty...the strongest chain with which to be bound to salvation is honesty.”<sup>21</sup>



The exploration of salvation in Islamic thought, as articulated by scholars like Sabine Schmidtke, Seyyed Hossein Naṣr, Mulla Ṣadra, and Al-Ghazālī, reveals a profound interplay of mercy, justice, and divine wisdom. The concept of salvation is intricately tied to the merciful attributes of Allah, as demonstrated through purification in the afterlife. Naṣr's insight emphasizes the hopeful nature of Divine Mercy in individual salvation. Mulla Ṣadra's philosophy underscores the link between felicity and Divine Mercy, emphasizing the necessity of both belief and righteous deeds. Nursi's detailed exposition connects the Qur'anic concept of bodily resurrection with eternal happiness, grounded in divine mercy. Al-Ghazālī's reconciliation of compassion and punishment reflects an understanding of divine justice. However, the tension between exclusivity and inclusivity in salvation remains, as highlighted by Hassan Khalil's commentary on Al-Ghazālī. Nursi's emphasis on salvation through truthfulness and honesty adds an ethical dimension to the discourse, showcasing the integral role of virtuous actions alongside belief. In essence, the diverse perspectives converge on the central theme that mercy, justice, and ethical conduct are integral elements in the Islamic understanding of salvation.

### Study of *Nuṣūṣ* regarding Subject Matter

The phrase *Nuṣūṣ* regarding subject matter typically refers to the study of textual sources, often within the context of a particular subject or field. The term *Nuṣūṣ* itself is Arabic and translates to texts or scriptures. Therefore, a study of *Nuṣūṣ* regarding subject matter involves a focused knowledge from specific textual references of Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. Let us observe another verse of the Qur'ān in this regard:

“هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْسِبُونَ”<sup>22</sup>

*“Are you being recompensed except for what you used to earn?”*

Al-Rāzī interpreting the three dimensions of verse as introduced by him, one out of them is as under:

Almighty Allah mentioned punishment and torment with reason. If someone appeals asking: “O, Lord of Glory, you are the Self-Sufficient, so how is it appropriate for your mercy to threaten and intimidate?” He replies, firstly, I don’t treat so, but one reached (up to that situation) at the end of his own false actions. It indicates; however, Divine Mercy is dominant and Divine Punishment is a recessive one.<sup>23</sup> The Qur’ān also conveys us the concept of collective repentance (24:13) to get salvation.

Islamic soteriological domain also includes the worldly damage and loss. Imagine that Divine Mercy shelters human beings unless they deprive themselves due to bad actions. Syednā Anas bin Malik (*Raḍī Allahu ‘Anhu*) narrated that Allah’s Messenger (*ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) said:

”مَا مِنَ النَّاسِ مُسْلِمٌ لَهُ ثَلَاثَةٌ مِنَ الْوَالِدِ لَمْ يَبْلُغُوا الْحِنْتَ إِلَّا أَدْخَلَهُ اللَّهُ الْجَنَّةَ بِفَضْلِ رَحْمَتِهِ إِيَّاهُمْ.“

*“Any Muslim whose three children died before the age of puberty will be granted Paradise by Allah because of His Mercy to them.”<sup>24</sup>*

Moreover, Prophet of Islam (*ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) said:

”لَنْ يُدْخَلَ أَحَدًا عَمَلُهُ الْجَنَّةَ قَالُوا: وَلَا أَنْتَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: لَا، وَلَا أَنَا، إِلَّا أَنْ يَتَّعَمِدَنِي اللَّهُ بِفَضْلٍ وَرَحْمَةٍ، فَسَدِّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا، وَلَا يَتَمَنَّيَنَّ أَحَدُكُمْ الْمَوْتَ: إِمَّا مُحْسِنًا فَلَعَلَّهُ أَنْ يَزِدَادَ خَيْرًا، وَإِمَّا مُسِيئًا فَلَعَلَّهُ أَنْ يَسْتَعْتَبَ“

*“The good deeds of any person will not make him to enter Paradise. They (the Prophet’s Companions) said, “Not even you, O Allah’s Messenger?” He said, “Not even I, unless Allah bestows His Favour and Mercy on me.” So be moderate in your religious deeds and do the deeds that are within your ability; and none of you should wish for death, for if he is a good doer, he may increase his good deeds, and if he is an evildoer, he may repent to Allah.”<sup>25</sup>*

This Saying of Prophet (*ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) leads us to a well-balanced way of life increasing good deeds and leaving what is opposite. In another Ḥadīth Abū Hurairah (*Raḍī Allahu ‘Anhu*) narrated that Allah’s Messenger (*ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) said:

”لَنْ يُنَجِّيَ أَحَدًا مِنْكُمْ عَمَلُهُ قَالُوا: وَلَا أَنْتَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: وَلَا أَنَا، إِلَّا أَنْ يَتَّعَمَّدَنِي اللَّهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ، سَدَّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا، وَاغْدُوا وَرُوحُوا، وَشَيْءٌ مِنَ الدُّلْجَةِ، وَالْقَصْدَ الْقَصْدَ تَبَلَّغُوا.“

*“The deeds of anyone of you will not save you [from the (Hell) Fire].” They said, “Even you (will not be saved by your deeds), O Allah’s Messenger?” He said, “No, even I (will not be saved) unless and until Allah protects or covers me with His Grace and His Mercy. Therefore, do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately, and worship Allah in the forenoon and in the afternoon and during a part of the night, and Al-Qaṣd (always adopt a middle, moderate, regular course) whereby you will reach your AI-Qaṣd (target i.e., Paradise).”<sup>26</sup>*

Moderate way of life is the need of every age. Both Sayings incorporate the manners which are responsible to acquire salvation.

Another context can be understood from Tim Winter. He writes:

*“In conclusion, the tenor of Islamic eschatology stresses the inexorable triumph of good over evil. God has created the universe and human nature as signs of His goodness; and the final Hour will reflect both His wrath at their subversion and His final vindication of beauty and mercy.”<sup>27</sup>*

Furthermore, for the people of hell believing in Oneness of God (*Tawḥīd*), they will be taken out from the torment of hell due to Divine Mercy. Prophet of Islam (*ṣallā llāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*) said:

“..إِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ أَرَادَ مِنْ أَهْلِ النَّارِ، أَمَرَ اللَّهُ الْمَلَائِكَةَ أَنْ يُخْرِجُوا مَنْ كَانَ يَعْبُدُ اللَّهَ، فَيُخْرِجُوهُمْ وَيَعْرِفُونَهُمْ بِآثَارِ السُّجُودِ،...”

*“... When Allah intends mercy on whomever He likes amongst the people of Hell, He will order the angels to take out of Hell those who worshipped none but Him Alone. The angels will take them out by recognizing them from the traces of prostration ...”<sup>28</sup>*

In this part of a Ḥadīth, “*those who worshipped none but Him alone*” and “*by recognizing them from the traces of prostration*” are required to be focused on the question of salvation from the Islamic perspectives.

How various factors of salvation and felicity in this world and in the Hereafter are mutually linked with *al-Rahmah*.

This why Fazalur Rahman concerning Mu‘tazilite theologians writes: “Instead of accepting God’s infinite mercy as real and as seriously modifying their quid pro quo theory of retribution, they did grave violence to religion in trying to get around it and explain it away.”<sup>29</sup>

Iqbāl commented on the ultimate fate of man from Qur’ānic verse (19:93-95) and explained philosophically, “this is a very important point and must be properly understood with a view to secure a clear insight into the Islamic theory of salvation. It is with irreplaceable singleness of his individuality that the finite ego will approach the infinite ego to see for himself the consequences of his past action and to judge the possibilities of his future. Whatever may be the final fate of man it does not mean the loss of individuality. The Qur’ān does not contemplate complete liberation from the finitude as the highest state of human bliss.”<sup>30</sup> So, salvation is a step to purify oneself by performing sincere and appreciable deeds during the journey towards Allah Almighty.

Therefore, creed and action play a vital role in soteriological matters along with the bestowal of Divine Mercy. Humanity by birth is not sinful

from an Islamic perspective, everyone is born in sinless nature. Salvation has different grades and limitations due to human good actions in this world and the bestowal of Divine Mercy. Similarly, we have to know the pre-conditions for acquiring Divine Mercy in the light of the Qur'ānic worldview. Thus, the concept of salvation in Islam is a universal one. It embodies mercy, compassion, good deeds and the fair application of justice. Hence, mercy is the cornerstone of Islamic theology concerning soteriological matters and ultimate salvation. Recently, there are standpoints of exclusivists and pluralistic approaches concerning the question of salvation. However, toward universalism, the concept of Divine Mercy is one of the most significant factors in the Islamic mystic philosophy and theological discussions.

### Conclusion

This qualitative review has undertaken a brief exploration of the Islamic concept of mercy, *al-Raḥmah*, within the context of the doctrine of salvation, or soteriology. The Islamic understanding of *al-Raḥmah* emerges as a cornerstone in the discourse on salvation, offering a unique perspective that distinguishes it from other religious traditions. Unlike some soteriological frameworks that emphasize a relationship between the gravity of sin and redemption, Islam places a profound emphasis on the encompassing mercy of Allah. This mercy, manifested through compassion, forgiveness, and benevolence, provides a path to salvation.

One key finding is the integral role that repentance and submission play in the process of salvation within the Islamic framework. Oneness of Allah Almighty (*Tawḥīd*), good deeds and ethical practices in the light of Prophetic guidance is essential requirements for ultimate salvation. The concept of *al-Raḥmah* encourages believers to turn towards Allah Almighty with sincerity, acknowledging their shortcomings and seeking Divine forgiveness. This process aligns with the broader soteriological goal of spiritual transformation and redemption.

The Islamic concept of salvation is not merely a predetermined outcome but involves an active engagement with Divine Mercy through righteous deeds and ethical conduct. Al-Raḥmah, therefore, becomes a guiding principle that shapes the believer's journey towards spiritual fulfillment and eventual salvation. By locating this concept within the broader doctrinal landscape of salvation, we may know Islamic approach towards the ultimate destiny of the human soul. This exploration contributes to the ongoing dialogue on religious diversity and underscores the richness of Islamic theology in shaping the understanding of salvation through the lens of Divine Mercy keeping in view the question of justices and punishment securing merciful milieu and mercy-oriented society (ROS) in this world.

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth 1381, 2: 266.

<sup>25</sup> Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth no. 5673. trans Dr. Muḥammad Muhsin Khan. (Saudi Arabia: Maktabah Dār al-Salām 1997), 7: 323.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth 6463, 8: 257.

Similarly, one may find dozen of Prophetic Saying. Importance of good is always there in Islamic philosophy of salvation. For example, it is stated Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Ḥadīth 2818, "bear this in mind that the deed loved most by Allah is one which is done constantly even though it is small."

<https://sunnah.com/muslim/52/75>

<sup>27</sup> Tim Winter, *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 322.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth 806, I: 447.



<sup>29</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 93-95.

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