



Research Article

Rahim and the Question of Arham: A Qur'an-Centric Linguistic Analysis of Divine Self-Description of Mercy in the Holy Qur'an

Noba*

Foreign Languages Department, College of Arts, Taif University, Saudi Arabia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2025

Received in revised form 2 January 2026

Accepted 3 February 2026

Available online 2 March 2026

ABSTRACT

In exploring the nuances of divine self-description within the Holy Qur'an, this original research delves into the linguistic deployment of the root R-Ḥ-M (رحم), focusing on how mercy is articulated as an inherent attribute of Allah. Drawing from a Qur'an-centric perspective, the study argues that forms like al-Raḥīm (الرحيم) represent absolute, non-relational mercy, while elative constructions such as Arḥam (أرحم) introduce comparative elements that may not fully align with the text's emphasis on unbounded divine compassion. Anchored in principles of Tawḥīd and Raḥmah, the analysis employs root tracing, morphological dissection, and semantic mapping across the Qur'anic corpus to reveal patterns in divine naming. Findings indicate that al-Raḥīm appears in fixed, nominal structures over 100 times, often paired with al-Raḥmān, whereas Arḥam is confined to relational contexts in fewer than 10 instances, never as a standalone name. This distinction underscores potential tensions between scriptural precision and devotional expansions, contributing to discussions on theological linguistics and the authority of Qur'anic self-reference in Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: Raḥīm, Arḥam, Qur'anic linguistics, Tawḥīd, Raḥmah, divine attributes, Qur'an-centric theology

1. Introduction

The concept of divine mercy stands as a cornerstone in Islamic theology, woven intricately into the fabric of the Qur'an's message. From the opening invocation of "Bismillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm" to numerous verses extolling Allah's compassion, mercy is portrayed not merely as an action but as an essential aspect of the divine essence. Yet, amid this emphasis, a subtle linguistic question arises: How does the Qur'an itself frame mercy in its self-descriptions of Allah? Specifically, does the text favor absolute, intrinsic expressions like al-Raḥīm, or does it incorporate comparative forms such as Arḥam in establishing divine names?

This inquiry gains relevance when considering popular devotional phrases like "Allāhu Arḥam ar-Raḥīmīn," which echo Qur'anic language but elevate a comparative elative to near-nominal status. While such expressions enrich spiritual practice, a Qur'an-centric lens prompts us to examine whether they mirror the text's precise mode of revelation. As scholars like Izutsu (2002) have noted, Qur'anic terms derive depth from their internal relational networks, making morphological

choices far from arbitrary. The fa'īl pattern in al-Raḥīm suggests an enduring quality, whereas the af'al form in Arḥam implies "more merciful," potentially introducing relational dynamics that contrast with the Qur'an's portrayal of mercy as all-encompassing (Q. 7:156).

In this study, I address these dynamics through three core questions: (1) How is the R-Ḥ-M root linguistically applied to divine descriptions? (2) What grammatical and semantic divides exist between al-Raḥīm and Arḥam? (3) How does post-Qur'anic devotion align with or diverge from these patterns? By prioritizing the Qur'an's own discourse, this research not only clarifies linguistic nuances but also invites reflection on how tradition interacts with scripture.

1.1 Significance of the Study

Delving into divine mercy's linguistic framing holds multifaceted value. Linguistically, it enriches Qur'anic lexical research by isolating the R-Ḥ-M root for detailed scrutiny, extending works like Abdel Haleem (2011) that emphasize the text's rhetorical coherence. Theologically, it refines understandings of Asmā' al-Husnā, where debates on name

criteria—textual vs. traditional—persist (Burrell & Daher, 1992). A Qur'an-focused approach highlights mercy as absolute, informing devotional authenticity per Q. 7:180.

Methodologically, this work advances content analysis techniques in Islamic studies (Sinai, 2017), blending qualitative semantics with quantitative mapping. Practically, it aids in bridging scripture and praxis, echoing Crone (2004) on historical evolutions. Ultimately, by distinguishing inherent from comparative mercy, it fosters a nuanced appreciation of divine compassion in contemporary theology.

1.2 Brief Review of the Literature

Literature on divine attributes spans classical exegeses to modern semantics. Al-Ghazālī (1992) integrated mercy names into ethical frameworks, while al-Rāzī (1981) probed their metaphysical layers. Contemporary semantic studies, such as Izutsu (2002), reveal mercy's relational ties to justice and forgiveness. Ritual-focused works (Sells, 1999) discuss phrases like *Arḥam* but overlook morphology. Grammar texts (Versteegh, 1997) clarify patterns, yet integrated analyses are scarce. This study bridges these gaps.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly conversation surrounding divine attributes in the Qur'an is rich and multifaceted, spanning classical theological reflections, modern semantic analyses, and linguistic examinations. This review synthesizes key strands relevant to the R-Ḥ-M root and the distinction between intrinsic forms like *al-Raḥīm* and comparative elatives like *Arḥam*.

2.1 Research on *Asmā' al-Husnā*

The Qur'an itself lays the foundation for discussions of the Most Beautiful Names, urging believers to invoke Allah by them (Q. 7:180; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24), yet it provides no exhaustive list. The canonical enumeration of ninety-nine names emerges primarily from hadith traditions, with variations across narrations in collections like *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (al-Bukhārī, 2002; Muslim, 2006). Classical theologians sought to harmonize these with Qur'anic evidence. Al-Ghazālī's influential *Al-Maqṣad al-Asnā* (1992) interprets each name not only as a descriptor of divine essence but as a model for ethical and spiritual cultivation, blending explicit Qur'anic usages with prophetic insights. Similarly, al-Rāzī (1981) delves into metaphysical dimensions, often subordinating strict lexical analysis to broader doctrinal coherence.

Modern scholarship shifts toward textual origins and semantic precision. Burrell and Daher (1992) characterize the ninety-nine-name tradition as a devotional codification rather than a direct Qur'anic mandate, while Gardet (1965) traces the historical integration of Qur'anic attributes, hadith-derived names, and rational constructs. A persistent debate concerns criteria for a "divine name": Must it appear nominally and directly attributed to Allah in the Qur'an, or can it arise through inference or tradition? Rahman (1980) advocates prioritizing Qur'anic usage for normative status, whereas others accommodate broader frameworks (Campo, 2009).

Within this discourse, *al-Raḥīm* emerges explicitly as a divine attribute (e.g., Q. 1:3; 2:163; 59:22), frequently paired with *al-Raḥmān* to underscore encompassing mercy. *Arḥam*, however, appears only in comparative constructions (e.g., "*Arḥam* ar-

Rāḥīmīn" in Q. 12:64), lacking definite nominal status. This morphological gap—intensive *fa'īl* versus elative *af'al*—remains underexplored in isolation, offering fertile ground for Qur'an-centric inquiry.

2.2 Historical Development of Mercy Invocations

Phrases invoking divine mercy trace back to the Qur'an's earliest layers, with the *basmalāh* ("*Bismillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*") appearing at the head of nearly every *surah* and in key contexts (Q. 27:30). *Arḥam* surfaces in relational settings, such as Joseph's father's plea (Q. 12:64), emphasizing superiority over human mercy. Liturgical centrality solidified through prophetic practice, incorporating mercy affirmations into prayer, supplication, and *dhikr* (al-Bukhārī, 2002). Sufi traditions amplified repetitive invocation for spiritual intimacy (Schimmel, 1994), while sociopolitical uses framed mercy as a counter to injustice during expansions (Madelung, 1997).

Despite this evolution, grammatical structure persists: *Arḥam* retains elative morphology, implying comparison (Versteegh, 1997). Historical developments illustrate how descriptive phrases can gain quasi-nominal weight through ritual repetition, yet scholarly analysis must separate devotional authority from Qur'anic naming conventions (Hallaq, 2009). Contemporary discussions often emphasize cultural resonance over linguistics (Sells, 1999), leaving room for deeper morphological-theological integration.

2.3 Research on Qur'anic Linguistics

Modern approaches underscore the Qur'an's semantic fields and rhetorical strategies. Izutsu (2002) pioneered relational analysis, showing how terms like mercy interconnect within the monotheistic worldview. Rahman (1980) insists on holistic interpretation from internal coherence, avoiding later overlays. Neuwirth (2010) and Sinai (2017) highlight rhetorical functions: divine self-descriptions often serve polemical or didactic ends, contrasting Allah's mercy with human limitations.

Arabic grammar provides crucial tools: the *fa'īl* pattern (e.g., *Raḥīm*) denotes inherent, permanent qualities, while *af'al* (e.g., *Arḥam*) typically expresses comparison or superlativeness (Versteegh, 1997). Elatives may function rhetorically to affirm transcendence, but remain semantically marked. Recent studies on Qur'anic self-referentiality stress lexical precision (Abdel Haleem, 2004). While scholarship abounds on divine names and semantics, a focused synthesis of R-Ḥ-M morphology with theological implications in a Qur'an-centric frame is underdeveloped. This study bridges that by combining linguistic mapping with principled reflection.

3. Theoretical Framework: Qur'anic Principles

This framework centers *Tawḥīd*, *Raḥmah*, and self-referential authority. *Tawḥīd* demands absolute terms (Q. 112); *Raḥmah* affirms encompassing mercy (Q. 7:156); the Qur'an's authority prioritizes its patterns (Q. 15:9).

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, Qur'an-centric content analysis approach, prioritizing the text's internal linguistic and theological evidence over external traditions. The methodology follows established protocols for corpus-based Qur'anic studies (Krippendorff, 2018), emphasizing systematic root tracing, morphological classification, and contextual semantic mapping.

4.1 Corpus and Data Sources

The primary corpus is the standard Uthmani Qur'anic text (114 surahs, 6236 verses). Data were cross-verified using reliable digital resources, including the Quranic Arabic Corpus (corpus.quran.com) for lemma tagging, frequency counts, and concordance, ensuring accuracy in form identification and verse retrieval.

4.2 Analytical Procedures

1. **Root Tracing:** Identified all 339 occurrences of the R-Ḥ-M root across nine derived forms (e.g., nominals, verbs, nouns).
2. **Morphological Examination:** Classified patterns using classical Arabic grammar: fa'īl (intensive/permanent, e.g., al-Raḥīm) vs. af'al (elative/comparative, e.g., Arḥam). Noted definite article usage, pairing (e.g., with al-Raḥmān), and syntactic roles.
3. **Semantic and Contextual Mapping:** Analyzed each instance in its verse context per Izutsu's (2002) relational semantics. Categorized as: divine self-description, human mercy, comparative negation, or exhortation. Quantitative elements (frequencies, distributions) complement qualitative insights.
4. **Theological Alignment:** Evaluated patterns against Tawḥīd, Raḥmah, and self-referential principles.
5. **Rigour and Limitations:** Reliability ensured through multiple source verification and transparent citation. Scope limited to Qur'anic text; hadith or tafsir excluded to maintain Qur'an-centric focus.

This mixed qualitative-quantitative design yields transparent, reproducible findings on mercy's linguistic articulation.

5. Results: Linguistic Analysis of the R-Ḥ-M Root

The root R-Ḥ-M appears 339 times, manifesting mercy/compassion in diverse forms. Key patterns emerge in divine contexts.

5.1 Frequency and Distribution

Table 1: Key R-Ḥ-M Forms in the Qur'an (based on Quranic Arabic Corpus data)

Form	Frequency	Primary Usage	Divine Contexts (%)
al-Raḥīm (الرحيم)	116	Nominal attribute (definite)	~95%
Arḥam (أرحم)	4	Elative/comparative	100% (relational)
Raḥmah (رحمة)	114	Noun (mercy as concept/action)	Varied
Raḥmān (رحمن)	57	Intensive nominal (often paired)	High
Verbs (raḥima etc.)	28	Action of showing mercy	Mixed
Others (e.g., rāḥimīn)	6	Active participle	Exhortative

al-Raḥīm dominates divine attributions, appearing in formulaic structures like "Innahu huwa... al-Raḥīm" or basmalah pairings.

5.2 Morphological Patterns

- **al-Raḥīm:** fa'īl form conveys inherent, enduring quality. Always definite with al-, functioning as predicate in self-descriptive clauses (e.g., Q. 59:22: "Huwa... ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm").
- **Arḥam:** af'al elative implies "more merciful," presupposing comparison. Limited to 4 occurrences (e.g., Q. 12:64: "Allāhu Arḥam ar-Rāḥimīn"; Q. 21:83), never definite or standalone nominal.

5.3 Semantic Contexts and Examples

al-Raḥīm clusters in affirmations of divine essence, often paired with forgiveness or might (e.g., Q. 2:173; 26:9). Arḥam appears in human-divine contrasts, rhetorically elevating Allah's mercy (e.g., Joseph's story). No verse uses "al-Arḥam" as a fixed name.

These results indicate deliberate linguistic choice: intrinsic forms for absolute mercy, comparative for emphatic negation of limits.

6. Divine Self-Description Patterns

The Qur'an's mode of divine self-description is neither random nor merely stylistic; it forms a deliberate rhetorical and theological architecture that reveals Allah's identity through recurring linguistic patterns. These patterns—formulaic structures, definite nominal attributions, thematic pairings, and contextual rhetoric—prioritize absolute, inherent qualities over relational or comparative ones. In the case of mercy (root R-Ḥ-M), this manifests as a clear preference for intensive forms like al-Raḥīm (الرحيم) and ar-Raḥmān (الرحمن), which function as stable divine attributes, while elative forms like Arḥam (أرحم) serve primarily rhetorical or emphatic purposes in specific contexts.

6.1 Formulaic Structures in Divine Self-Description

A hallmark of Qur'anic divine naming is the use of formulaic clauses that affirm Allah's attributes with emphatic clarity. Common structures include:

- **Huwa... constructions:** Phrases like "Huwa... ar-Raḥīm" (He is... the Most Merciful) or "Innahu huwa... ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm" (Indeed, He is... the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) recur to underscore divine identity. For instance, Q. 59:22 declares: "Huwa Allāhu alladhī lā ilāha illā huwa 'ālimu l-ghaybi wa-sh-shahādati huwa ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm" (He is Allah; there is no deity except Him, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful). Here, the pronoun huwa reinforces singularity and absoluteness, while the definite attributes (with al-) present mercy as an intrinsic, unchanging quality.
- **Predicate affirmations:** Verses often employ nominal predicates directly linking Allah to mercy without intermediaries, e.g., "wa-Allāhu... ar-Raḥīm" (and Allah is... Most Merciful) in contexts like Q. 4:106 or Q. 24:5. These avoid comparative syntax, emphasizing mercy as part of Allah's essence rather than a relative superiority.

Such formulas appear consistently across Meccan and Medinan surahs, serving both didactic (teaching monotheism) and polemical (contrasting divine mercy with human failings) functions.

6.2 The Role of the Definite Article and Nominal Stability

The definite article (al-) plays a pivotal role in establishing nominal stability for divine attributes. al-Raḥīm occurs 116 times in the Qur'an (primarily as a definite nominal form), almost always in divine contexts, and is frequently paired with ar-Raḥmān (57 occurrences total for ar-Raḥmān). This pairing—seen in the basmalah (Q. 1:1, repeated at the start of nearly every surah) and verses like Q. 2:163 ("Your god is but one God; there is no deity [worthy of worship] except Him, ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm")—creates a rhythmic, emphatic affirmation of mercy's encompassing nature.

In contrast, Arḥam (appearing only 4 times) never takes the definite article as "al-Arḥam" nor functions as a standalone nominal attribute. Its occurrences are invariably elative and relational: e.g., Q. 12:64 ("fa-Allāhu Arḥam ar-Rāḥimīn" – "But Allah is the Most Merciful of the merciful"), where it presupposes comparison to human mercy (in Joseph's story). This absence of definite, nominal usage for Arḥam signals a deliberate boundary: mercy is presented as inherent and absolute, not graded or superlative in a fixed naming sense.

6.3 Pairing, Thematic Clustering, and Rhetorical Emphasis

Divine attributes rarely stand alone; they cluster thematically to balance mercy with other qualities:

- Mercy often pairs with forgiveness (Ghaḥūr Raḥīm, e.g., Q. 2:173, 39:53), might ('Azīz Raḥīm, e.g., Q. 26:9), or knowledge ('Alīm Raḥīm, e.g., Q. 4:25). These pairings highlight mercy's integration into Allah's holistic essence—compassion tempered by justice and wisdom.
- Rhetorically, elatives like Arḥam serve emphatic negation: they elevate divine mercy above human limitations (e.g., Q. 21:83 in Ayyub's supplication: "annī massaniya aḍ-ḍurru wa anta Arḥam ar-Rāḥimīn" – "Harm has touched me, and You are the Most Merciful of the merciful"). Here, the form functions superlatively in prayer, but remains syntactically comparative, not a fixed name.

This clustering and rhetorical use suggest intentional design: intrinsic forms (fa'īl pattern) convey permanence and absoluteness, while elatives (af'al) provide dynamic emphasis without establishing new nominal titles.

6.4 Frequency and Distribution Insights

Corpus analysis reveals stark patterns:

- al-Raḥīm dominates divine self-description (~95% of its occurrences), appearing in basmalah, supplications, and affirmations.
- Arḥam is rare and context-specific (only 4 instances: Q. 7:151, 12:64, 12:92, 21:83), always in comparative phrases negating human mercy's sufficiency.

These frequencies underscore a preference for stable, non-relational mercy descriptions, aligning with the Qur'an's broader avoidance of comparative elatives in core divine naming (similar to patterns in other roots, e.g., Kabīr vs. Akbar).

6.5 Theological and Rhetorical Implications

These patterns are theologically coherent: Tawḥīd demands descriptions free of implied comparison, preserving incomparability (Tanzīh). Raḥmah as all-encompassing (Q. 7:156: "My mercy encompasses all things") favors inherent forms that avoid any suggestion of hierarchy. Rhetorically, the Qur'an uses elatives for emphasis in human-divine contrasts or supplicatory contexts, but reserves nominal stability for attributes revealed as fixed.

In sum, divine self-description in the Qur'an systematically favors nominal, intrinsic expressions for mercy—al-Raḥīm as an established attribute—while employing elatives like Arḥam rhetorically. This linguistic architecture not only reinforces theological absoluteness but also invites believers to approach devotion with fidelity to the text's precise modes of revelation.

7. Discussion

The findings reveal a clear Qur'anic preference for absolute, non-relational mercy via al-Raḥīm, contrasting with the relational elative Arḥam. This distinction is not incidental but aligns with core principles: Tawḥīd demands descriptions free of implied comparison, lest they suggest gradation in divine essence; Raḥmah as encompassing (Q. 7:156) favors inherent forms that avoid hierarchical nuance.

Devotionally, phrases like "Allāhu Arḥam ar-Rāḥimīn" powerfully affirm transcendence, negating human mercy's bounds. Yet linguistically, Arḥam's elative nature presupposes contrast, potentially subtly conflicting with mercy's absoluteness. Ritual repetition may intensify rhetorical effect, transforming comparative expressions into experiential affirmations of boundless compassion—much as historical practice elevated Allāhu Akbar beyond strict morphology.

Theologically, prioritizing Qur'anic patterns (per Q. 7:180) encourages affirming attributes as revealed: al-Raḥīm as established name, Arḥam as emphatic tool. This nuance enriches rather than restricts devotion, highlighting scripture's precision amid tradition's dynamism. Limitations include exclusion of hadith; future comparative studies could explore intertextual layers. Overall, the analysis underscores how linguistic fidelity deepens appreciation of divine mercy's profundity.

8. Conclusion

This Qur'an-centric exploration of the R-Ḥ-M root demonstrates that divine mercy is articulated predominantly through intrinsic, absolute forms like al-Raḥīm, embedded in stable nominal patterns across the text. Comparative elatives such as Arḥam, though rhetorically potent, remain secondary and relational, never elevated to independent divine nomenclature.

Grounded in Tawḥīd and Raḥmah, these patterns reflect deliberate theological precision: mercy as inherent essence, not graded superiority. While devotional practices enrich spiritual life by amplifying Qur'anic expressions, fidelity to the text's linguistic choices safeguards authenticity and avoids unintended relational implications.

Ultimately, this study affirms the Qur'an's self-referential authority as the primary guide for understanding divine attributes. By distinguishing inherent from comparative mercy,

it invites scholars and believers alike to engage scripture with renewed linguistic and theological sensitivity—fostering a deeper, more coherent appreciation of Allah's boundless compassion.

References

- Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. (2011). **Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and style**. I.B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755625468>
- al-Bukhārī, M. I. (2002). **Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī** (M. M. Khan, Trans.). Darussalam. (Original work published 870 CE)
- al-Ghazālī, A. Ḥ. (1992). **The ninety-nine beautiful names of God** (D. B. Burrell & N. Daher, Trans.). Islamic Texts Society. (Original work published 1100 CE)
- al-Rāzī, F. al-D. (1981). **Mafātīḥ al-ghayb** (Vol. 1-32). Dār al-Fikr. (Original work published 1209 CE)
- Burrell, D. B., & Daher, N. (1992). **The ninety-nine beautiful names of God**. Islamic Texts Society.
- Crone, P. (2004). **Medieval Islamic political thought**. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748618712.001.0001>
- Gardet, L. (1965). Allah. In **Encyclopaedia of Islam** (2nd ed., Vol. 1, pp. 406-417). Brill.
- Izutsu, T. (2002). **Ethico-religious concepts in the Qur'an**. McGill-Queen's University Press. (Original work published 1966)
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). **Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology** (4th ed.). Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506395661>
- Madelung, W. (1997). **The succession to Muhammad: A study of the early Caliphate**. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511622397>
- Schimmel, A. (1994). **Deciphering the signs of God: A phenomenological approach to Islam**. State University of New York Press.
- Sells, M. A. (1999). **Approaching the Qur'an: The early revelations**. White Cloud Press.
- Sinai, N. (2017). **The Qur'an: A historical-critical introduction**. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748695775.001.0001>
- Versteegh, K. (1997). **The Arabic language**. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748606948.001.0001>
- Watt, W. M. (1973). **The formative period of Islamic thought**. Edinburgh University Press.