

## 5 Mercy or Clemency

**Summary** 5.1 Mercifulness Towards Parents. – 5.2 Mercifulness Between Spouses. – 5.3 Christians, Muslims, Believers. – 5.4 Those Without Mercy Will Receive None.

Among the Names that the Qur'ān uses to indicate divinity, *al-raḥmān* الرحمن and *al-raḥīm* الرحيم are to the fore, respectively the second and third in the lists after *Allāh*. Both, which are found in the Holy Book only with reference to God, have considerable weight in Islamic liturgy because they are included in the commonest formula of invocation, called *basmala* بِسْمِ اللَّهِ or *tasmīya* تَسْمِيَةٌ, which opens the Qur'ānic suras and every document of religious significance, from distant times down to today.<sup>1</sup> Scholastic debate on the application of these two Names and their theological meaning is endless – God is *al-raḥmān* for believers only and is *al-raḥīm* for all creatures; both operate in this world but only the former in the hereafter; the former belongs to God alone, the latter can extend to others; and so on. What concerns us here though is that the Names *al-raḥmān* and *al-raḥīm* relate to the great divine quality known as *raḥma* رَحْمَةٌ, 'mercy' or 'clemency', cited in the Qur'ān over a hundred times, which represents, even more than love, the designation of the relationship that binds the Creator to the world: it presupposes in particular the inferiority of the recipient, whereas love admits of at least the possibility of an equal relationship.<sup>2</sup> The excellence of this divine attribute is also confirmed by a very significant Qur'ānic statement, contained in the sura *al-An'ām* 'The Cattle' (Qur'ān VI,12 and 54), according to which God has ordained *raḥma* for Himself: it means that His mercy towards creatures overrides His wrath, as God Himself confided to the Prophet in a 'holy

<sup>1</sup> Cf. apropos: Peterson 2003; Anawati 1984, 63-77.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, cf. Rahbar 1960, 158-71.

saying' recalled by the traditionist al-Bukhārī among others.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, as the commentators are unanimous in explaining, He imposed on Himself the obligation of favour and generosity towards penitents.

In English *rahma* is usually rendered 'mercy' or 'clemency', an appropriate enough term with its connotation of disposition. These translations are well established now, but it is important to remember the extent to which they can also be misleading in so far as they have us thinking of forgiveness or of mild punishment and regarding a sin or an offence, or at least of some preexisting wrong. Equally inadequate is 'compassion' because, even if it occupies a higher station than 'sympathy', it still indicates participation in suffering (cf. the Latin *compassio*), an idea incompatible with the Islamic conception of the divinity.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, *rahma*, in the Qur'ān and in later Islamic literature, can also exclude these implications and mean a general and indeterminate tenderness,<sup>5</sup> a completely unconditional kindness, without a specific target and without necessity. As the sura 'The Family of 'Imrān' has it, "He singles out for His mercy whom He will" (Qur'ān III,74), as to say that *rahma* is a divine gift freely given, a free charitable act; and thus recalls consanguinity, the feeling that binds relatives, and especially the mother to the child, with the spontaneous charity that comes with it, since it refers back to the womb (*rahīm* رحم). "I am *al-rahīm* and the mother is *al-rahīm*", goes a well-known 'holy saying' still cited even by contemporary preachers, "and I derived her name from My Own".

This breadth of meaning is highlighted by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in his work on the Names, in the section specifically devoted to *al-rahmān* and *al-rahīm*. The medieval master teaches that *rahma* is simply a divine benevolent intervention in the world, it is the 'Will for Good', and is the opposite of wrath, which is 'Will for Evil'. Nonetheless, al-Ghazālī observes, God's *rahma* can also manifest itself in evil if it brings a good with it. To explain this, he is not afraid to liken the Creator to His creatures, that is, to deploy a human example to make what is not human more comprehensible; so, he compares God to the wise father who, in order to ensure his son's recovery, does not allow himself to be led astray by tenderness, as a mother would be, but forces him to submit to bloodletting. Expressing, therefore, a belief that is also widespread in Western culture – he affirms that evil is not evil if it prevents a greater evil, as is the case, for example, with the amputation of a gangrenous limb.<sup>6</sup>

In the Qur'ān, mercy or clemency is always a quality attributed to God, except in just three verses, where instead it defines a human being of good character and virtuous behaviour. Each of them shows *rahma* in a different light: in the sura 'The Night Journey' it concerns children and their parents (Qur'ān XVII,24), in the sura *al-Rūm* 'The Romans' the relationship between spouses (XXX,21), and in the sura *al-Ḥadīd* 'The Iron' it is a characteristic of Christians (LVII,27). The Qur'ānic attribution of mercy both to God and to man is important; once again, it shows that the believer can be, within the limits decreed by God, a 'God-like' creature.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, kitāb al-tawḥīd*, no. 6879; the saying is also picked up by the great philosopher and mystic Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) in his *Mishkāt al-anwār* or 'Niche of Lights'.

<sup>4</sup> Which is that God is 'passionless'. Equally unsatisfactory is the less frequent 'pity', a term with complex connotations.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. on this Fitzgerald 2015, 62.

<sup>6</sup> For both examples, Al-Ghazālī 1971, 68.

## 5.1 Mercifulness Towards Parents

The sura ‘The Night Journey’ dwells on the charitable behaviour to be shown towards one’s parents: the Qur’ān enjoins the believer to be good to them, to always speak kindly to them without displaying impatience or petty-mindedness; then recommends:

and lower to them the wing of humbleness [*dhull*] out of mercy and say: – My Lord, have mercy upon them, as they raised me up when I was little. (Qur’ān XVII,24)

This verse makes humility (*dhull*) a fruit or a component of mercy; and commentators have tended consequently to insist on humility as a component of human *rahma*, and ended up by rather flattening the two concepts one on the other by mixing their contents. Foremost among those to do so was Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his *Compendious Discourse*.

In line with the majority of his fellow commentators, al-Ṭabarī explains that the good Muslim should not oppose the will or the wishes of his parents. Following the lead of an earlier scholar, Qatāda Ibn Di‘āma (d. c. 117/735), he ascribes to God himself the dutiful rightness of this filial attitude: it is ‘His teaching’, ‘His way of acting’. Al-Ṭabarī recalls how the Prophet, with a suddenly changed voice and gestures, predicted the punishments of hell for those who did not honour their parents despite being lucky enough not to be orphans like himself.<sup>7</sup> And here the author makes an interesting point, which is again an example of the relativity typical of Islamic morality and Islamic law generally, when he adds that the precept on filial docility is not absolute but applies only to parents who are believers. He goes on to explain that this is why some have claimed that the verse in question has been ‘abrogated’ (*mansūkh* منسوخ) by God, i.e. it has forfeited its validity due to a later revelation; indeed, it is said in the sura ‘The Repentance’: “The Prophet and the believers will not ask forgiveness for idolaters, even if they are close relatives” (Qur’ān IX, 113).<sup>8</sup>

A couple of centuries later, in his *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths*, the Mu‘tazilite al-Zamakhsharī also mentions the hypothesis of abrogation (*naskh* نسخ) and the clause about parents’ religious faith, but takes a less harsh line: if your parents are unbelievers, he recommends not so much asking for clemency on their behalf but praying that God guide them to conversion. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, who builds his argument around obedience, al-Zamakhsharī insists on the tenderness aroused by fathers and mothers who today need those who yesterday needed them. He appeals to the Prophetic Tradition and makes filial piety a question of acknowledging a debt that can never be paid. Here are some stories, in the order proposed by the author:

A man said to the Messenger of God: – My parents are so old that I have to take care of them as they took care of me in my childhood. Have I not fulfilled my duty?

– No – he replied – because they did so while waiting for you to live, whereas you do it while waiting for them to die.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for example Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-ādāb*, no. 4634.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur’ān XVII,24.

A man complained to the Messenger of God because his father had money from him. He sent for him and along came an old man leaning on his stick.

He questioned him and he said: – He was weak and I was strong, he needed everything and I needed nothing, and I never begrudged him anything that I possessed; and today, when I am weak and he is strong, when I need everything and he needs nothing, he is stingy towards me with his money.

The Prophet burst into tears and said: – There is no stone, no clod of the earth that would not cry to hear such things. Then, turning to the son, he exclaimed: – You and your money belong to your father, you and your money belong to your father.

There was one who complained to the Prophet about his mother's vicious character.

He asked him: – Was she vicious when she carried you in her womb for nine months?

The man replied: – But she has a vicious character now.

He asked: – And was she so when she suckled you for two years?

The man countered: – But she has a vicious character.

He asked: – Was she so when she watched over you at night, or slaked your thirst by day?

And the man said: – I have already repaid her.

– And how did you do that? – he asked.

– I took her on pilgrimage on my shoulders.

– You would not have repaid her if you carried her running – said the Prophet.<sup>9</sup>

Now let us hear Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the subject, in his *The Keys to the Unknown*. For the famous theologian and philosopher, the Qur'ānic precept on kindness towards parents translates as an instruction to provide for them generously, first and foremost in the sense of feeding. He reaches this conclusion after reflecting on the wing metaphor – “and lower to them the wing of humbleness” – observing that birds lower their wings not only when they humbly renounce the heights of the heavens, but also when they clasp their little ones to themselves to feed them. He then comes to the prayer of mercy for parents, and teaches that the good Muslim will repeat it with the utmost frequency; for while it is true that the sura ‘The Night Journey’ speaks only of a single invocation, and that according to the Holy Book, no iteration is required, this should not mislead the conscientious believer. He reminds his readers that when the Kufan traditionist Sufyān Ibn ‘Uyayna (d. 196/811) was asked how many times it was appropriate to invoke mercy for one's parents – once a day? once a month? once a year? – the ancient scholar replied: five times a day, after each of the five daily prayers.<sup>10</sup>

Taking a rational approach and delving as always beyond the explicit surface meaning of the Book, al-Rāzī emphasises that the divine teaching on filial *pietas* includes the right words to be said and also the right deeds to be done, because the Qur'ān speaks of ‘mercy’ (*rahma*), and this term is inclusive of all right and proper things, in religion and in the affairs of the world. The Qur'ān recommends praying to the Lord to give to parents what they

<sup>9</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

gave to their children, that is, a special kind of goodness (*ihsān*) that signifies growth and material prosperity. Interesting glosses, which, on the one hand, associate divine mercy with human mercy, making the latter an aspect of the former, and on the other hand call into play a parental attitude on God's part, both in the sense that He sustains believers and in the sense that He nurtures affection for them. An attitude that the believer will imitate to the best of his abilities, as did the Prophet before him.

Muḥammad's own paternal role *vis-à-vis* Muslims is noted among others in *The Compendium of the Judgements of the Qur'ān* by al-Qurṭubī, where it is linked to the merciful wing of Muḥammad cited in the sura *al-Shu'arā'* 'The Poets': "And lower your wing to the believers who follow you" (Qur'ān XXVI,215; cf. *al-Ḥijr* 'The Rocky Tract', Qur'ān XV,88). Unlike the pragmatic al-Rāzī, who understands human mercy as a matter of saying and doing, al-Qurṭubī understands it as a feeling, and he reads in the verse in question compassion (*shafaqa* شَفَقَة), the docile and trusting acceding that children necessarily show towards their parents, as if they were good subjects or good servants. He explains that the tenderness (*rifq* رِفْق) of the good believer for his parents, like that which they had for him as a child, is a deeply rooted mercy, hidden deep in the soul, which is by no means fully expressed in external behaviour. He observes that filial piety is an offering that repays a gift that has come well in advance; but – al-Qurṭubī goes on to emphasise, like al-Zamakhsharī before him – reciprocation is always insufficient, which is why the Prophet said that a son could only be said to have compensated a parent if he were to find him enslaved, buy him, and give him his freedom.<sup>11</sup> The author deals with the issue more fully in relation to the sura *Maryam* 'Mary', and the exemplary filial figures of John the Baptist/Yaḥyā (Qur'ān XIX,12) and Jesus/ʿĪsā (XIX,33).

We can look finally at the work of the Shāfiʿī historian and jurist Ibn Kathīr, because he introduces some new considerations. He extends, in fact, the merciful indulgence due to one's parents, which he sees especially as humble behaviour towards them, up to their deaths and beyond. Among the many Prophetic sayings collected in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur'ān*, the following stands out:

A convert from Medina asked the Messenger of God: – After my parents have gone, do I still owe them a debt of mercy? – Yes – he answered – there are four things you must do: pray for them, ask forgiveness for them, fulfil the commitments they made and honour their friends.<sup>12</sup>

Another novel element introduced by Ibn Kathīr, always on the basis of quotations from the Prophetic Tradition, is a pronounced insistence on the figure of the mother. Here are a few examples:

I went to the Prophet and said to him: – I want to go off to war and have come to ask your advice. He asked me: – Is your mother alive? – Yes – I answered. – Then stay with her, paradise is at her feet. – And he said it again a second time, and a third.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-ʿitq*, no. 2787. Al-Qurṭubī 1413/1993, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, *musnad al-makkiyīn*, no. 15726.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. for example al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan*, *kitāb al-jihād*, no. 4195.

The Prophet said: – God commends your fathers to you, God commends your mothers to you, God commends your mothers to you [again], God has entrusted you with your relatives, from the nearest to the most distant.<sup>14</sup>

A man [...] went to see the Prophet and heard him addressing people thus: – The best hand is the one that gives to mother and father, to sister and brother, and to relatives and neighbours, in order of proximity.<sup>15</sup>

The various lines of classical exegesis on mercy are found *verbatim* or concisely summarized in contemporary commentaries, and are generally of limited interest. There is one exception, though: the Egyptian al-Sha'rāwī's *My Considerations on the Noble Qur'ān*, which highlights better than others *rahma* as a good force that flows in both directions between parents and children while at the same time proceeding from God towards both, beyond mere reciprocity, in perpetual triangulation. Commenting on the verse from the sura 'The Night Journey' which we have already looked at – "and lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy" – he writes:

The issue here is first of humility and then of mercy for the parents; but your mercy alone will not be enough, and that is why you must ask for them the utmost mercy that comes from God [...]. For your mercy for them does not suffice for what they have given you, it does not return to them all the good that they have done to you, and furthermore, he who gives first is not equal to he who returns [...]. Therefore, you must pray to God to have mercy on them, so that the Most High may guarantee for you the restitution of that good, that he may be merciful to them in such a way that he may reciprocate their goodness on your behalf.<sup>16</sup>

## 5.2 Mercifulness Between Spouses

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put affection and mercy between you: verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. (Qur'ān XXX,21)

Thus goes the sura 'The Romans'. If in the verse we have been looking at, from the sura 'The Nigh Journey', mercy is a source and ingredient of humility, and is grouped by the commentators with meekness, of mind and conduct, now it is found combined with affection (*mawadda* مودة), and from affection draws its colouring.

Al-Ṭabarī's exegesis in his commentary is meagre, hardly more than a paraphrase, but is worth paying attention to: the love and mercy mentioned in the Qur'ān, as the celebrated scholar explains, are not only between husband and wife, but also between brothers-in-law, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-'ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, *musnad al-shāmiyyīn*, no. 16855, where the mothers instead precede the fathers.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-'ashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, *musnad al-madāniyyīn*, no. 16269. Ibn Kathir 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Sha'rāwī 1991, commentary on Qur'ān XVII,24.

in-laws: God has placed between them affection by which they are bound to each other, and mercy by which they love each other.<sup>17</sup>

Al-Zamakhsharī's commentary in *The Discoverer of Revealed Truths* is fuller. The author remarks first on the extraordinariness of marriage, which is able to create affection and mercy between persons not bound by consanguinity or kinship, who previously did not even know each other, had perhaps never met. And he adds, from the early exegete and preacher al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), that here 'affection' is metonymy for intercourse, while 'mercy' signifies offspring; a seemingly extravagant explanation, which is clarified by thinking of the sura 'Mary', where the angel announces to the Virgin Jesus, a 'mercy' from the Lord (Qur'ān XIX,21), and where 'mercy' for Zechariah comes in the form of his son John (XIX,2). Predictable to the point of triteness is instead the observation that closes his dissertation: "Love and clemency between spouses come from God, mutual aversion comes from Satan".<sup>18</sup>

The idea that love signifies intercourse and mercy signifies children, where the mercy is of course God's and not man's, as in the case of John and Jesus, runs through the medieval commentaries, alongside alternative explanations. Al-Qurṭubī, for example, reads mercy as what keeps a man from harming his wife, while Ibn Kathīr's gloss is unusual, not to say bizarre:

Had the Almighty created the sons of Adam all males and the women of some other species, jinn, shall we say, or animals, this sympathy between men and their wives would not exist; on the contrary they would be most likely irked if their wives were of another species. Therefore, that their wives are of their own species is evidence of the perfection of divine mercy towards mankind.<sup>19</sup>

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, instead, offers a more subtle and psychological commentary:

Affection is a personal need, whereas mercy has to do with the need that others have for us. Let us suppose a man, who loves his son, sees his enemy in destitution and suffering; that man may take from his son and give to his enemy, but he will do so out of mercy, and surely not out of affection.<sup>20</sup>

Among more modern commentators, the Iraqi thinker and polemicist al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) stands out in his *Rūḥ al-ma'ānī* or 'The Spirit of Meanings' for his attention to gender equality: in fact, he explains that God has distributed affection and mercy equally between all, be they husbands or wives, without distinction, just as there is no distinction between God's messengers (cf. Qur'ān II,285).<sup>21</sup>

Chief among contemporaries is al-Sha'rāwī with *My Considerations on the Noble Qur'ān*, because he astutely picks out the sequence of concepts

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ṭabarī 1412/1992, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī 1385/1966, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ālūsī 1415/1994, commentary on Qur'ān XXX,21.



proposed by the Holy Book in this verse: first the stillness – “He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them” – then affection, and finally *rahma*, a sequence that mirrors the natural course of human life, first the vigour that cries out to be tempered, then love in adulthood, and finally, in old age, generous compassion for the physical decline or illness of one’s companion.<sup>22</sup>

### 5.3 Christians, Muslims, Believers

The Qur’ān contains a verse on mercy as a characteristic of Christians:

Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps; and We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow, and gave him the Gospel, and placed meekness and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him. But monasticism they invented – We ordained it not for them – only seeking God’s pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance. (Qur’ān LVII,27)

What engages all commentators here is the difference between meekness (*ra’fa* رَأْفَة) and mercy: some say that meekness is to lighten the burden of others, while mercy is to shoulder the whole burden; and those who say, on the contrary, that meekness is mercy to the highest degree. Recently, Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭaṭṭāwī (d. 1431/2010), rector of al-Azhar University and a theorist of Islam as a religion of the Golden Mean (*wasatīyya* وسطية), distinguishes them by their different scope, as he explains in his commentary entitled *Al-wasīf fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-karīm* or ‘The Mediator in explaining the Noble Qur’ān’:

‘Mercy’ follows ‘meekness’ as the general follows the particular. Meekness is, in fact, a particular form of mercy, one that rejects wrong or harm; mercy is more extensive and general, because it is affection and compassion towards all those who need it.<sup>23</sup>

When reading the verse under analysis, the authors of the great commentaries, classical or contemporary, tend not to devote too much space to the moral characteristics of the followers of Jesus, focusing instead on the most striking element in the passage, the reference to monasticism (*rahbāniyya* رهبانية); nonetheless many have noted that it is precisely the quality of mercy that brings Christians closer to Muslims, themselves defined as merciful in the sura *al-Faṭḥ* ‘The Victory’:

those who are with him are harsh towards unbelievers, merciful one to another. You see them bowing, prostrating, seeking bounty from God and His pleasure. Their mark is on their faces, the trace of prostration. That is their likeness in the Torah, and their likeness in the Gospel: as a seed that puts forth its shoot, and strengthens it, and it grows stout and rises straight upon its stalk [...] God has promised those who believe and do deeds of righteousness forgiveness and a mighty reward. (Qur’ān XLVIII,29)

<sup>22</sup> Al-Sha’rāwī 1991, commentary on Qur’ān XXX,21.

<sup>23</sup> Ṭaṭṭāwī 1997-98, commentary on Qur’ān LVII,27.



Mercy therefore binds together ‘those who believe’ (*mu’minūn* مؤمنون), who might well be called brothers, where, in the words of the Qur’ān itself, mercy involves proximity, affinity, and even an overlapping between believers of different faiths; and at the same time confirms the perpetuity of Islam as faith in the one God.

Another verse important for Islamic morality is to be found in the sura *al-Balad* ‘The City’; here we are not dealing precisely with *raḥma*, but with a closely related word, *marḥama* مرحمة (cf. XC,17), which means mercy also in the sense of kindness or favouring:

And what will explain to you the path that is steep? It is the freeing of a slave; or the giving of food in days of hunger to an orphan near of kin, or to the poor man lying in the dust. And being with those who believe and enjoin one another to show patience, and enjoin one another to show kindness. These are the Companions of the Right Hand. But those who disbelieve Our revelations, their place will be on the left hand, and they will be engulfed in the fire. (XC,12-20)

In the work of the commentators, mercy comes to take on a more decisive character, and again paired with patience sums up the whole faith, a complete devotion to God. By way of example, here is the teaching of al-Rāzī: the author recalls the model of the ‘pious predecessors’, *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, giving his discourse a decidedly Salafi flavour, that is to say he identifies in the very first Muslims the best embodiment of the religion. At the same time, it is worth noting, he does not speak of those who belong to historical Islam, but of man, of human beings in general (cf. *insān* إنسان), and of the whole of creation:

Added here to patience is the mutual recommendation of mercy: it means spurring each other on to have mercy for those who are wronged or poor, or to have clemency for those who do evil, but it also means discouraging them from doing evil, because mercy includes this too. That is to say, man must show others the way of truth and, as far as he can, he must keep them from the way of evil and falsehood. Be aware that to be among those who “enjoin one another to show patience, and enjoin one another to show kindness” is to venture on the ‘steep path’ [Qur’ān XC,12] in the company of that small band of people formed by the Prophet’s greatest Companions, that is, the four caliphs and the others who excelled in their steadfastness in the face of the difficulties imposed by their religion, and also in mercy towards creation as a whole.

In general, to enjoin patience is to exalt God’s order, and to enjoin mercy is to nurture kindness towards His creatures. The whole issue of obedience to God revolves around these two principles.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, commentary on Qur’ān XC,20.

## 5.4 Those Without Mercy Will Receive None

Glossing the verse we have just considered, which is from the sura ‘The City’ and deals with mercy between believers in general (Qur’ān XC,17), commentaries of traditional hue tend to quote some of Muḥammad’s relevant sayings. For example, Ibn Kathīr, in his *Exegesis of the Sublime Qur’ān*, quotes the following: “God shows mercy toward the merciful: have mercy on those on earth so that He who is in heaven may have mercy on you”.<sup>25</sup> “God shows no mercy to those who show no mercy to others”.<sup>26</sup> “He is not of us who shows no mercy to the least among us and does not recognise what is due [*ḥaqq* حَقّ] to the greatest among us”.<sup>27</sup>

These and other expressions of traditional Islamic moral thought are to be found in the *Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī faḍl al-raḥma wa-l-rāḥimīn* or ‘Forty Sayings on Mercy and Those Who Show Mercy’, by Ibn Ṭulūn al-Ṣāliḥī of Damascus (d. 953/1546),<sup>28</sup> known primarily as a historian but evidently well-versed in many fields of religious and secular knowledge. Ibn Ṭulūn’s work consists almost entirely of stories about the Prophet Muḥammad, which succeed one another in no particular order and without any discernible criteria of selection. The result is a text which continuously combines magnificent examples of God’s *raḥma*, which pervades heaven and earth, with modest, everyday scenarios; which alternates the words of the angels with those of ordinary people whose names have not been preserved; and which juxtaposes very short sayings with wide-ranging narratives; an ‘editorial’ strategy clearly aimed at variety, and at constantly amazing the reader. The theme most frequently rehearsed is God’s mercy whose breadth is inconceivable to the human mind, and among the most frequent images is the number ninety-nine, which mirrors the doctrine of the Names:

The Prophet said: – God possesses a hundred mercies. One of them He sent down to the earth and distributed among the jinn, humans, quadrupeds and insects so that through it they would love each other, have mercy on each other, and so that each animal would have affection for its cub. The other ninety-nine God kept back so that He might show mercy to His servants on the Day of Judgment.<sup>29</sup>

The Prophet said that God created a hundred mercies. One He placed among His creatures and ninety-nine, a hundred minus one, He hid close to Himself. Some have said that on the Day of Judgement half of these will go to those belonging to the community of Muḥammad [...]. These form half of all the people of heaven, they are the most merciful of the communities in the world. For this Muḥammad is called ‘the Prophet of mercy’; and it is feared therefore that those who have stripped mercy from their hearts cannot belong to His community.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣīla*, no. 1843; and Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, *musnad al-ʿashara al-mubashsharīn bi-l-janna*, *musnad al-mukthirīn min al-ṣaḥāba*, no. 6315.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. for example al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *kitāb al-tawḥīd*, no. 6852.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *kitāb al-birr wa-l-ṣīla*, no. 1838. Ibn Kathīr 1422/2001, commentary on Qur’ān XC,17.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 28-9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 30.

As suggested in the story just recounted, human mercy, the fruit and blurred mirror of the divine *rahma*, is a condition for salvation in this world and the next. "He who does not have mercy does not receive mercy"<sup>31</sup> from others, including the Other *par excellence*. So much is confirmed in the following dialogue between God and Moses from the same miscellany:

One day Moses, son of 'Imrān, was walking along a road when the Most High and Exalted Ruler of all called out to him: – Moses!

Moses turned to his right and his left but saw no-one.

He called him a second time: – Moses!

Again, Moses turned to his right and his left; again, he saw no-one and began to tremble with fear.

A third time he was called: – Moses, son of 'Imrān! I am God, there is no other god but Me, the Clement, the Merciful.

He replied: – I am here for You, I am here for You. And he fell prostrate to the ground.

God said to him: – Lift up your head, Moses, son of 'Imrān.

Moses lifted up his head.

He said: – Moses, if you wish to abide in the shadow of My Throne on the day when there shall be no shadow but Mine, Moses, be like a merciful father to the orphan, be like an affectionate spouse to the widow; Moses, son of 'Imrān, show mercy and you will be shown mercy, Moses, as you condemn, so shall you be condemned. Moses, announce to the Children of Israel that whosoever meets Me and has disowned Muḥammad, I shall introduce him into the Fire, even if he were Abraham My friend, or Moses My interlocutor [...].

Moses asked: – And who are those of the community of Muḥammad?

He replied: – They are those who lavish praise, who heap praises in the going up and the coming down and in all circumstances, who strengthen their innermost being and purify their limbs, who fast during the day and tremble at night. From them I accept the little they have to give, and I welcome them in paradise as they testify that there is no other god but God.

Moses said: – Let me be the prophet of that community!

He replied: – Their prophet is one of them.

He said: – Make me then one of that prophet's community!

He replied: – You came first, Moses, and he will come later, but I will reunite you in the abode of Glory.<sup>32</sup>

The *Forty Sayings* of Ibn Ṭulūn often deal with human mercy in the context of the family, and not infrequently we find divine love coupled with maternal love:

We were with the Prophet on a raid and passed closed by an encampment.

– Who are you? – they asked.

– We are the Muslims – we replied.

There was a woman stoking the fire in her brazier and she had a child with her; when the flames took in the brazier, she removed the child, came to the Prophet and asked him: – Are you the Messenger of God?

<sup>31</sup> In Arabic: *man lā yarḥamu lā yurḥamu*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 48-9.

- Yes - he replied.
  - For my father and mother's sake - the woman said - is not God the most clement of the merciful?
  - Certainly - the Prophet answered.
  - Is not God more merciful towards His servants than a mother to her child?
  - Certainly - the Prophet said again.
- Then the woman exclaimed: - But a mother would never throw her child into the fire!

The Messenger of God fell to the ground in tears, but then raised his head and said: - From among his servants God will only punish the stubborn and the arrogant against Him, who refuse to say 'There is no other god but God'.<sup>33</sup>

A group of prisoners approached the Prophet and among them was a woman who was breastfeeding. She saw another child of their number, ran, picked it up, put it to her breast and fed it too [...].

- There - the Prophet said - God is even more merciful towards His servants than this woman to her child.<sup>34</sup>

It is only a short step from maternal love to the general manifestation of affection for all children:

The Prophet kissed al-Ḥasan, the son of 'Alī.

Al-Aqrā' Ibn Ḥābis al-Tamīmī, who was sitting nearby, commented: - I have ten sons and I have never kissed any of them.

The Prophet looked at him and said: - Those who have no mercy will receive none.<sup>35</sup>

Given the importance of mercy in morality and in defining Islam itself, the greatest censure belongs those who do not live it but feign it; as the Prophet said, "let the curse of God, of angels and of men fall on the paid mourner and the women who crowd around her".<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 40-1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 22-3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 16-17.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Ṭulūn 1416/1995, 73-5.