



The Divine Wisdom Behind the Pairing of Allah's Names in the Qur'an

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Introduction

“Allah has ninety-nine names. Whoever preserves (*ahsaha* or *hafidhaha*) them will enter Paradise.”¹ Such was the teaching of the Prophet ﷺ. Many of us have heard this hadith, but fewer of us have internalized the true scope of its meaning. To preserve Allah's names is not simply to memorize them—it is to live by them.

“To Allah belong the best names, so call upon Him (*ud'u hu biha*) with them.”² *Du'a* in the Qur'an can refer to supplication specifically and worship more broadly, depending on the context.³ Here, we are being told to call upon Allah with His names—for example, “O Allah, forgive me, You are the Most Forgiving the Most Merciful”—and to worship Him through these names.⁴ The latter entails embodying His qualities and living in light of the knowledge of that name. Worshipping Him through His name the Merciful can mean, for example, showing mercy to people just as we love for Allah to show mercy to us. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The merciful will be shown mercy by the Most Merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth, and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”⁵ It also means turning to Allah when we make a mistake, since we know that no mistake is greater than Allah's mercy. In every case, understanding and connecting to these names is critical.

As al-Razi observes, “Supplicating to Allah with His names is not possible unless one knows the meanings of the names.”⁶ Therefore, Allah's names are not merely meant to be memorized; they are to be understood. Each name has a specific, independent meaning (even if some meanings may overlap) that can help us to know, connect to, and worship God in diverse ways. We are all unique individuals, with varying life circumstances and emotional states, and our needs differ accordingly. Understanding the meanings of Allah's names is therefore crucial for connecting to Him, no matter who we are or what we are going through.

¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7392; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2677.

² Qur'an 7:180.

³ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Badā'i' al-fawā'id* (Dār Kitāb al-'Arabī, n.d.), 3:1–6.

⁴ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Badā'i' al-fawā'id*, 1:164.

⁵ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1924, authentic according to al-Tirmidhī.

⁶ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, <https://tafsir.app/alrazi/7/180>.

However, we may not assume that knowing Allah's names merely entails learning their linguistic definitions. Certainly, definitions form the foundation of our knowledge, but imagine trying to develop a deep relationship with someone on the basis of a one-line description. That short description might spark your curiosity, and form the starting point for that relationship, but you would not stop there. You would want to interact with them. You would want to witness their character in action. You would want to know if you could trust them. Hence al-Ghazali, like many other scholars,⁷ states that, "The science of highest nobility is the experiential knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of Allah Almighty, for all other branches of knowledge are sought for its sake, while it is not sought for anything else."⁸

To truly know Allah, then, we must start by studying, learning, and *experiencing* His names, as recorded in the Qur'an (as well as in sound narrations of the Prophet ﷺ). Every word in the Qur'an is deliberately placed to guide us to Him. The verses contextualize His names and help us understand them in relation to each other, so that we can better understand how they manifest in our own lives. Many names are paired (*muqtarina*)⁹ at the conclusion of verses, and this is no coincidence. Even the sequence in which the names appear contains divine wisdom and an intimate awareness of our psychology, emotional needs, and lived realities, which is why our scholars afforded so much attention to exploring them. Indeed, the pairing of names perfects our understanding of Allah's perfection.¹⁰

Human language and imagination are limited by what we have seen and experienced. The word "king," for example, may conjure up different images for different people: for some, a transgressive tyrant; for others, a benevolent authority. Similarly, the quality of "mercy" might strike one person as a weakness, another as a strength, and still another as implying no accountability for wrongdoers. Subconsciously, we impose human limits on the possibilities of mercy. This is not in its essence wrong, because our understanding of mercy is based on what it looks

⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Badā' i ' al-fawā'id*, 1:161.

⁸ Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā Qabbānī (Dār Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm, 1986), 1:42.

⁹ This refers to names that are paired together but are also independent names, for example: al-'Alīm (All-Knowing) al-Ḥakīm (Most-Wise). Al-'Alīm and al-Ḥakīm are independent names and also appear together in the Qur'an. There are other names that are called *al-asmā' al-muzdawaja* (coupled names), such as al-Qābiḍ al-Bāsiṭ (the Withholder, the Expander), which are considered one name and must not be separated.

¹⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Badā' i ' al-fawā'id*, 1:161.

like (or should look like) at a human level. Allah created our minds this way, and He understands how they work. He knows that we think in terms of our empirical, worldly experiences. The problem occurs when we inadvertently anthropomorphize Allah's attributes, imposing upon them the limits that we experience in our interactions with other human beings.¹¹ The pairing of certain names in the Qur'an helps banish any misestimations of al-Quddus—the Holy, free from anything blameworthy and infinitely beyond human inadequacies.

This paper reflects upon the significance of verse endings (*fawasil al-ayat* or *al-fawasil al-Qur'aniyya*), Allah's names, and the order in which they appear, focusing particularly on His paired names. It is hoped that by pausing to contemplate Allah's names in the Qur'an, we will be able to perceive their full beauty, connect to our Lord, and nourish our hearts and souls. While the overall meaning of Qur'anic verses is clear, we will only access their subtler nuances by taking time to reflect. The order of the verses themselves, the choice of words within them, and how they end, all add meaning and depth, as we will see below. Ultimately, we will find that the real pleasure of knowing Allah's names is simply that: knowing Him and living in the light of this knowledge. When we experience Allah's names, our hearts become so completely filled with love for Him that submission to Him is not only natural, but the most blissful state imaginable.

Rhetorical periods

Al-Zarkashi defines a “rhetorical period (*fasila*)” as “the final word of a verse, like the rhyme in poetry or the paired word in rhymed prose (*saj*).”¹² The conclusions of verses—*al-fawasil* (pl.)—are significant. From a linguistic standpoint, al-Qurtubi states that rhetorical periods are a “beautification of rhythmic speech,” without which “one could not distinguish verse from prose.”¹³ He warns that “failing to pause at [these rhetorical periods] hides that beauty and makes verse

¹¹ For example, Allah says, “There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (42:11). One might think that they “share” hearing and seeing with Allah, but this verse corrects that assumption. Since there is nothing like Him, His Hearing and Seeing are completely unique and perfect, even though the words “hearing” and “seeing” are also applied to imperfect creatures.

¹² Abū ‘Abd Allāh Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Bahādur al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1376/1957), 1:53.

¹³ *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, <https://tafsir.app/qurtubi/106/2>.

sound like prose—ultimately doing a disservice to what is being recited.”¹⁴ Ibn ‘Ashur adds that pausing at the rhetorical periods “serves to make them heard clearly, so that the listeners’ souls are moved by the beauty of that symmetry—just as they are moved by rhyme in poetry and by rhythmic cadence in rhymed prose.”¹⁵

Rhetorical periods not only add eloquence from a linguistic perspective, but bring clarity to the whole verse.¹⁶ For example, in Surah Hud, Allah recounts how the disbelievers scorned Prophet Shu‘ayb:

They asked [sarcastically], “O Shu‘ayb! Does your prayer command you that we should abandon what our forefathers worshipped or give up managing our wealth as we please? Indeed, you are such a tolerant (*halim*), sensible (*rashid*) man!”¹⁷

The verse first mentions how the people of Shu‘ayb worshipped (prayer), and then how they managed their wealth. This sequence of characteristics is mirrored by the sequence with which the verse concludes: *hilm* (maturity) complements worship (as worship becomes obligatory once one reaches puberty), while *rushd* (discernment) complements the proper management of wealth.¹⁸

This is a simple example of the congruence of Qur’anic syntax, as well as the significance of verse endings. The aforementioned meanings cannot be gleaned from a cursory reading, only extracted through deep contemplation of both the content (words) and form (organization) of the verse. Many other verses end in just this way: Allah tells us who He is, connects us to Him, and helps us to understand His words in light of His names.

¹⁴ *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, <https://tafsir.app/qurtubi/106/2>.

¹⁵ Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr* (al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1984), 1:76.

¹⁶ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Rūmānī, “*al-Nukat fī i’jāz al-Qur’ān*,” in *Khatm al-āyāt bi asmā’ al-ḥusnā wa dalālatuha*, ed. ‘Alī ibn Sulaymān al-‘Ubayd (Dār al-‘Aṣima, 1418 AH), 22. This is called “*tamkīn*” in Qur’anic sciences. See Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1419/1999), 196.

¹⁷ Qur’an 11:87.

¹⁸ ‘Alī ibn Sulaymān al-‘Ubayd ed., *Khatm al-āyāt bi asmā’ al-ḥusnā wa dalālatuha* (Dār al-‘Aṣima, 1418 AH), 23, quoting al-Zarkashī. Also in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 196.

Pairing of the names

As mentioned before, Allah pairs many of His names throughout the Qur'an. This rhetorical and literary technique opens up new dimensions in our relationship with Allah by giving us a fuller understanding of Him.

First, when Allah pairs complementary names together, He illuminates the expansive scope of their meanings. A mention of forgiveness naturally invokes the idea of mercy, as the two are related, just as hearing invokes seeing, and so on.¹⁹ Hence, the Qur'an regularly pairs naturally-related names. For instance, the pairing "al-Ghafur al-Rahim" (the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful) recurs 71 times,²⁰ and "al-Sami' al-Basir" (the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing) 45 times.²¹ These pairings deepen our understanding of Allah: He not only forgives but has mercy, He not only hears all but He sees all as well.

Second, Allah anticipates the doubts that might arise in our minds by pairing certain names. For instance, His name al-'Aziz (the Almighty) is frequently coupled with al-Hakim (the Most Wise). Those who possess power are often hasty and reactive, transgressing against the rights of others, but Allah reassures us that His might is always exercised with the highest wisdom. Similarly, those with wisdom may be weak, unable to act upon that wisdom for the benefit of others, but Allah is wise in His might and mighty in His wisdom.²²

His name al-'Aziz is also paired frequently with His name al-Rahim, particularly in Surah al-Shu'ara'.²³ One might think that these two names are contradictory. They are not. As al-Tabari explains, none can escape al-'Aziz once He has decreed their punishment, but nonetheless al-Rahim is merciful toward those who repent for their disbelief and disobedience.²⁴ As for the order of the names, al-Razi states that the Almighty is mentioned here before the Most Merciful to avoid suggesting that

¹⁹ Al-'Ubayd, *Khatm al-āyāt*, 56.

²⁰ Amir Ali al-Haddad, *Iḥṣā' mā iqtarana min al-asmā' al-ḥusnā fī al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, 2nd ed. (n.p., 1436/2015), 15.

²¹ Al-Haddad, *Iḥṣā'*, 78.

²² 'Abd al-Razzāq ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Badr, *Fiḥ al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* (Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1441 AH), 51–52.

²³ Qur'an 26:9: "And your Lord is certainly the Almighty [al-'Azīz], Most Merciful [al-Raḥīm]."

²⁴ *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, <https://tafsir.app/tabari/26/9>.

Allah only shows mercy to those who rebel against Him (a group mentioned in the previous verse) because of His inability to punish them. Allah preempts this misconception by stating that He is al-‘Aziz, whose power none can match, and yet He is still Merciful to His servants. Despite His ability to hasten their punishment for their rejection of Him, He does not withhold His mercy from them. Allah repeats this pairing in Surah al-Shu‘ara’ in different contexts, highlighting His strength when people rebel against Him, but reminding us of His mercy in repeatedly sending reminders to the misguided as well as saving His righteous servants.

Another misconception cleared by the pairing of Allah's names is the total nature of His forgiveness and love. When it comes to human beings, a person may forgive you or show you mercy, and still not like you. Allah, however, tells us: “And He is the Forgiving (al-Ghafur), the Affectionate (al-Wadud).”²⁵

Wudd is an affectionate and tender love;²⁶ it is a love that is expressed without implying need or dependence on creation. Allah thus reassures us that He both forgives us and loves us.²⁷ This placates any fears that Allah may not return to loving someone after their repentance, despite having forgiven them.²⁸ On the contrary, Allah *loves* those who repent (Qur'an 2:222). He invites us to return to Him and then reminds us of His love: “And ask forgiveness of your Lord and then repent to Him. Indeed, my Lord is Merciful (Rahim) and Affectionate (Wadud).”²⁹

The pairing of Rahim and Wadud teaches us that Allah is intensely affectionate towards those who seek nearness to Him through repentance;³⁰ it is not a compassion expressed out of pity or obligation, nor is it devoid of love. Furthermore, unlike divine love, some forms of human love can be destructive. A parent, out of love for their child, can spoil them to such a degree that the child

²⁵ Qur'an 85:14.

²⁶ *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed., 1240.

²⁷ Māhir Muqaddim, *Asmā' Allāh al-husnā: Jalālahā wa laṭā'if iqtirānīhā wa thamarātihā fī daw' al-Kitāb wal-sunna*, 3rd ed. (al-Imām al-Dhahabī, 2014), 57. See also “The Meaning of Allah's Name al-Wadūd: Seeking the Love of Allah,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, July 30, 2024, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-meaning-of-allahs-name-al-wadud-seeking-the-love-of-allah>.

²⁸ *Tafsīr al-Sa'dī*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/85/14>.

²⁹ Qur'an 11:90.

³⁰ Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/11/90>.

never learns to discern between the harmful and hurtful, and never develops a capacity for self-discipline. This is a kind of parental love that, however intense or sincere, ultimately harms the child.

Part of the meaning of *rahma*—mercy—is that its expression brings about benefit and wards off harm.³¹ A parent may take a smartphone away from a child to the dismay of that child, but it is in their best interests. Outwardly, it might not seem “kind” (particularly not for the screaming child!), but every rational person knows that it is done out of care—hence, it is truly, and not only superficially, merciful. Allah tells us He is *Rahimun Wadud* to underline that His mercy and love are expressed in a way that brings us true benefit and spares us from all forms of harm, both physical and metaphysical, in this life and the next.

Another name frequently paired with others is *al-Shakur* (the Appreciative). It is an inherently reassuring name, reminding us that He is constantly appreciative of any good that we do, no matter how small or overlooked by others, and rewards us disproportionately for those deeds. The Prophet ﷺ taught us, “Do not belittle any good deed, even meeting your brother with a cheerful face.”³² Our appreciation for *al-Shakur* is enhanced when this name is paired with others, helping address our subtle insecurities.

Allah tells us in the Qur'an,

It is that of which Allah gives good tidings to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say, [O Muhammad], “I do not ask you for it [i.e., this message] any payment [but] only goodwill through [i.e., due to] kinship.” And whoever commits a good deed We will increase for him good therein. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Appreciative.³³

This verse appears in the context of Allah inviting people to believe and submit, and comparing the fate of the believers to those who stubbornly deny the Truth. We are reminded that the Prophet ﷺ is not asking for anything from us, but rather it is Allah who rewards us for our good. The verse ends with Allah declaring Himself both Forgiving (*Ghafur*) and Appreciative (*Shakur*): He forgives sins, no

³¹ Muqaddim, *Asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 37.

³² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2626.

³³ Qur'an 42:23.

matter how grave—including the worst sin, the sin of *shirk*³⁴—whenever people repent from them, and He repays the humblest of good deeds with a great reward.³⁵

Knowing only that He is al-Shakur may leave some of us wondering whether we are included in this appreciation, since we fall short so often. We may think, “What is the point of doing good when I am so bad?” Indeed, *people* may write us off and discount our good deeds when they become aware of our bad ones. Yet Allah reassures us: When we turn back to Him, He forgives us *and* He accepts and rewards even the smallest of our good deeds. The Prophet ﷺ once told the story of a prostitute who encountered a panting dog by a well: “Thirst had nearly killed [the dog], so she took off her sock, tied it to her veil, and drew up some water. Allah forgave her for that.”³⁶ Her sins did not overshadow Allah's appreciation for her empathy and sincerity; He forgave her and rewarded her.

This reminds us that nothing is lost with Him. In fact, Allah guarantees it. He says: “And whoever volunteers good—then indeed, Allah is Appreciative (Shakir) and Knowing (‘Alim).”³⁷

How many times have we done good that went unnoticed by people? How many times have we harbored good intentions only to be disparaged by those who misconstrued our actions? But Allah knows. He knows our hearts and our actions; He appreciates the good, no matter how small or hidden.³⁸ Indeed, this is why the Prophet ﷺ tells us in numerous hadiths about seemingly insignificant deeds appreciated by al-Shakur. He ﷺ gave the example of man who was walking down the road when he stumbled upon a thorny branch in his path: “He moved it aside; Allah appreciated his deed and forgave him.”³⁹ In another hadith, “I have seen a man enjoying himself in Paradise due to a tree on the road he cut down that used to harm people.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Associating idols with God; see Zohair Abdul-Rahman, “Why is Shirk the Greatest Sin of All?,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, July 25, 2022, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/why-is-shirk-the-greatest-sin-of-all>.

³⁵ *Tafsīr al-Sa‘dī*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/42/23>.

³⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3321; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2245.

³⁷ Qur’an 2:158.

³⁸ Muqaddim, *Asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 189.

³⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2340; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1914.

⁴⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1914.

These were actions that probably no one saw, but they were sincere. These men saw something harming people, and without fanfare, they removed it. They themselves might not have placed much weight on their actions. But Allah is Appreciative and All-Knowing; He knew not only of these men's acts, but of the state of their hearts. So great was Allah's appreciation (and mercy) that for these simple actions, He forgave them and granted them Paradise.

These reflections are but a glimpse into the beauty of the pairings of His names at the end of the Qur'an's verses. Through these pairings, Allah deepens our understanding of who He is, brings clarity to His verses as a whole, and reassures the reader. The more we reflect, the more Allah bestows upon us understanding, if He wills.

Sequence of the pairings

Much as the pairing of names at the end of any given verse conveys special meanings, the sequence in which those names appear is ordered according to divine logic. These orderings show that the Qur'an is to be read with the soul, intellect, and heart in mind. The sequence of a pairing may inform us about how to think of a matter, or it may reflect the order of a matter that was being discussed.

In Surah al-A'raf, Allah says, "And if an evil suggestion comes to you from Satan, then seek refuge in Allah. Indeed, He is All-Hearing and All-Knowing."⁴¹ Al-Razi interprets this sequence as reassuring us that He hears us as we verbally seek refuge, but also reminding us that seeking refuge with the tongue alone is insufficient. The heart must be present,⁴² as Allah both hears what is uttered (al-Sami') and knows the inner workings of our conscience (al-'Alim). A further layer of meaning is suggested by al-Sa'di, who says that Allah hears your seeking refuge in Him and knows your intentions, your weakness, and the strength of your recourse to Him, so He protects you from Satan's temptations and safeguards you from his whispers.⁴³

⁴¹ Qur'an 7:200.

⁴² Al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, <https://tafsir.app/alrazi/7/200>.

⁴³ *Tafsīr al-Sa'di*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/7/200>.

Another frequent pairing is al-‘Alim al-Hakim (the All-Knowing, the Most Wise), demonstrating to us that Allah knows all and is also wise—and indeed, how many people have knowledge, but no wisdom? Yet the order is reversed in other verses (al-Hakim al-‘Alim). It may be that the context in the first case calls for knowledge and then wisdom, while the second calls for wisdom and then knowledge.⁴⁴ For instance, in Surah al-Baqara, the angels asked Allah why He would create human beings who would sow corruption on earth and cause bloodshed. Allah responded by saying, “Indeed, I know that which you do not know.”⁴⁵ After Allah taught Adam the names,⁴⁶ He asked the angels whether they knew those same names. “Exalted are You,” they responded. “We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise.”⁴⁷

Here the order of the pairing emphasizes the angels’ acknowledgment of Allah’s all-encompassing knowledge—precisely what they had implicitly questioned when they asked Allah about His creation of humanity—and their own comparative ignorance. Addressing Allah as al-Hakim further affirms that He does not command nor create except with wisdom and purpose.⁴⁸ This context lets us know that the creation of Adam was intentional, undertaken with divine wisdom, and ultimately good.

In Surah al-Dharyat, Prophet Abraham (as) was informed by the angels that he would have a child, despite his wife’s infertility. Upon hearing this, his wife was shocked and incredulous. The angels responded, “Thus has said your Lord; indeed, He is the Wise, the Knowing.”⁴⁹ The angels mention wisdom first, assuring Prophet Abraham and his wife that Allah is the One who places things in their proper place (i.e., this was not a mistake, and indeed was for a greater purpose). The angels then mention that Allah encompasses everything in knowledge—He knew that Abraham’s wife was barren, just as He was not ignorant of any other detail that

⁴⁴ Al-‘Ubayd, *Khatm al-āyāt*, 55.

⁴⁵ Qur’an 2:30.

⁴⁶ Qur’an 2:31.

⁴⁷ Qur’an 2:32.

⁴⁸ *Tafsīr al-Sa‘dī*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/2/32>.

⁴⁹ Qur’an 51:30.

could seemingly stymie His command—and so they should submit to His decision, and thank Him for this blessing.⁵⁰

These are all subtle nuances that exhibit the depth of the Qur'an for those who reflect.

An exercise in contemplating the pairing of the names

Let us take some verses in the Qur'an that conclude with a pair of Allah's names and ponder over them together. In Surah al-Hujurat, there are three consecutive verses that mention Allah's names at the end.

Allah says,

O you who have attained faith, avoid making too many assumptions—indeed, some assumptions are sinful. And do not spy on one another nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it. So be mindful of Allah; indeed, Allah is **Granting and Accepting of repentance, Bestowing of mercy**.

O mankind, We have created you from a male and a female and made you into races and tribes, that you may know one another; indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah are the most mindful [of Him] among you; indeed, **Allah is All-Knowing, All-Acquainted**.

The nomadic Arabs said, “We have attained faith.” Say, “You have not attained faith; rather say, ‘We have become Muslims,’ for faith has not yet entered into your hearts. But if you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not diminish any of your deeds; indeed, Allah is **Oft-Forgiving, Bestowing of mercy**.”⁵¹

The first step to having a cohesive understanding is to contextualize these verses within the chapter as a whole. Prior to these verses, Allah had already called upon the believers four times (“O you who believe”)—a form of direct address that Ibn ‘Ashur says is meant to alert the listener to the importance of what is about to be said. Allah proceeds to teach the believers how to treat one another

⁵⁰ *Tafsīr al-Sa‘dī*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/51/30>; Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/51/30>.

⁵¹ Qur'an 49:12–14.

and calls them to one brotherhood (Qur'an 49:10). The first verse we are discussing here (Qur'an 49:12) continues with this theme, and calls upon those who believe to warn them against certain behaviors.⁵²

The second step is to ponder the meanings of the verses themselves. The prohibitions mentioned in verse 12 (negative assumptions, spying, backbiting) are subtle. They are thus easier to overlook and harder to avoid.⁵³ Addressing us as “O you who believe” reminds us to live up to who we are: believers. The verse then juxtaposes this aspirational ideal against the reprehensible actions—(negative) assumptions (*dhann*), spying (*tajassus*), and backbiting (*ghiba*)—that are not befitting a believer. Allah says to “avoid making too many assumptions” because “some assumptions are sinful.” Negative assumptions can have at least two consequences. The first, seemingly more benign, is that the assumption, even when one does not act upon it, leads one to unfairly attribute negative qualities to someone who may not have them.⁵⁴ The second, which is more nefarious, is that the negative assumption compels one to verify it through spying, stalking, and the general invasion of another's privacy. This nosiness opens the door to gossip and speculation. If the suspicion in question is verified, it leads to backbiting: mentioning someone in a way he or she dislikes, even when it is truthful.⁵⁵

Allah employs repulsive imagery to convey the ugliness of these actions. He asks, “Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it!” Allah then commands us to have *taqwa* (God-consciousness), the antidote and prophylactic to this type of thinking, and ends with reminding us that He is al-Tawwab al-Rahim (Accepting of repentance, Bestowing of mercy).

⁵² Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/12>.

⁵³ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*.

⁵⁴ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*. Imam Nawawī was of the opinion that it was even haram to entertain bad assumptions about others. He said, “Know that bad assumptions are forbidden the same as words, for just as it is forbidden to speak about another person in an evil manner, it is forbidden to speak to yourself that way and to cultivate bad assumptions.” Al-Nawawī, *Ḥilyat al-abrār wa shi'ar al-akhyār fī talkhīṣ al-da'awāt wal-adhkār al-mustaḥabba fī al-layl wal-nahār* (Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1425/2004), 47, trans. Justin Parrott, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/held-accountable-thoughts/> (translation adapted).

⁵⁵ Abū Hurayra reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “Do you know what backbiting is?” The companions said, “Allah and His Messenger know best.” The Prophet said, “To mention your brother in a way he dislikes.” It was said, “What if it is true about him?” The Prophet said, “If what you say about him is true, it is backbiting. If it is not true, it is slander.” *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2589.

The third step is to reflect upon the relationship between the paired names and the verse as a whole. Why is Allah mentioning these two names in particular, and why here? What am I meant to learn about Allah as it relates to the overall message of this verse? Believers who read this verse may find that they are guilty of falling into these sins. They may want to embark on the path to God-consciousness, but feel ashamed. They may realize the gravity of their sin, and assume that Allah now rejects them. Yet Allah reminds us that He is al-Tawwab al-Rahim. Al-Tawwab is He who repeatedly inspires and accepts the return of those who are far from returning, and al-Rahim is He who, in His eternal mercy and kindness, does not punish those who repent and in fact accepts them in their totality.⁵⁶ Imagine being told this after committing the very acts we are warned against? It becomes a source of hope, and an encouragement to turn back to Allah.

We can now apply this framework to the rest of the verses in this sequence. Again, the following verse reads:

O mankind, We have created you from a male and a female and made you into races and tribes, that you may know one another; indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah are the most mindful [of Him] among you; indeed, **Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aquainted.**

Here we observe a transition from a believer's responsibilities to others to an individual's responsibility to herself.⁵⁷ Allah now addresses humanity as a whole, as the twin vices of self-adulation and tribalism were rampant in the pre-Islamic period.⁵⁸ This verse reminds us that we all have the same origin, and that we all came from one male and one female. We come from different nations and tribes so that we may know, rather than reject, one another. Still, human beings inevitably compete in terms of lineage and nation, and so Allah in this verse reminds people that the most honorable in the sight of God is in fact *not* the one with the most

⁵⁶ Muqaddim, *Asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 148–49.

⁵⁷ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/12>.

⁵⁸ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/13>.

“prestigious” lineage, but rather the most righteous (*atqakum*)—a direct follow-up on the call for *taqwa* in the previous verse.⁵⁹

The verse concludes: “He is al-‘Alim al-Khabir.” In general, al-‘Alim is the All-Knowing, without limits. In this specific context, however, al-‘Alīm is He who knows what is outward, whereas al-Khabir is He who knows what is within; al-‘Alim is He who knows what is open, and al-Khabir is He who knows what is hidden.⁶⁰ Together, these names convey God’s all-encompassing knowledge. Al-‘Alim al-Khabir knows all realities, external and internal. Allah thus reminds people that He knows who is truly God-conscious and who simply exhibits outward nobility, and He will reward each with what they deserve.⁶¹ This verse calls on us to observe the state of our hearts, and to revise the importance we attribute to what we think gives us status and prestige. True honor lies in the *taqwa* of our hearts, to which only al-‘Alim al-Khabir is privy.

After Allah informs us that He is al-‘Alim al-Khabir—and thus knows intimately the state of our hearts—He immediately proceeds to rebuff the nomadic Arabs who had declared, “We believe.” Belief (*iman*) is primarily an internal act that then manifests externally, and includes trust in Allah. The Arabs’ declaration that “we have believed (*amanna*)” implies full belief and everything that entails. The Prophet ﷺ is instructed to tell them to instead say, “We have submitted (*aslamna*),” since true, complete faith had not yet entered their hearts. Allah then guides them to the cure for this weakness of faith: With total obedience to God and His Messenger, their faith will be established,⁶² and their good deeds would not be diminished in the least.⁶³

This third verse concludes by reminding us that Allah is “al-Ghafur al-Rahim” (Oft-Forgiving, Bestowing of mercy). Those with incomplete faith, who may have outwardly declared what they did not in fact believe in their hearts, are reminded that Allah is abundant in His forgiveness, and that all can be overlooked and

⁵⁹ The Prophet ﷺ emphasizes this, stating that “whoever is slow to good deeds will not be hastened by his lineage” (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2699).

⁶⁰ Muqaddim, *Asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 220.

⁶¹ *Tafsīr al-Sa’dī*, <https://tafsir.app/saadi/49/13>.

⁶² Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/14>.

⁶³ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/14>.

forgiven. The reminder that Allah forgives is an invitation to seek forgiveness and mend one's ways. In fact, not only does al-Ghafur forgive what has passed, but al-Rahim also bestows His blessings and mercy upon you.⁶⁴ Al-Rahim may come after al-Ghafur because mercy is the root of forgiveness; i.e., Allah forgives because of His intense mercy and care for people, as mercy is broader than forgiveness.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Understanding the Qur'an requires contemplation. It guides us to what is best,⁶⁶ it is light,⁶⁷ mercy, and healing.⁶⁸ How could it not be when it tells us about Allah? Whoever begins this journey to knowing Allah and reflecting upon His words, and immerses themselves in it, "is in an expedited Paradise [here on earth], before the Paradise of the Hereafter, and in immediate bliss."⁶⁹

Allah concludes many verses in the Qur'an with pairings of His names. He pairs His names deliberately, as they open up a new dimension in understanding Him. Rather than skim over these pairings, we should carefully ponder their meanings. Why is Allah mentioning these particular names, in this particular order, at the end of this particular verse? How can I come closer to Allah through knowing Him in this way? These are just some of the questions we can ask upon encountering a pairing of Allah's names. Remember that every word in the Qur'an has been given its best place, for the express purpose of clarifying reality and guiding us to Allah. When we approach the Qur'an with its divine intentionality in mind, we open ourselves to its richness and ensure that we are always connecting to Him.

⁶⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-ghayb*, <https://tafsir.app/alrazi/49/14>.

⁶⁵ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, <https://tafsir.app/ibn-aashoor/49/14>.

⁶⁶ Qur'an 2:185, 39:28, and others.

⁶⁷ Qur'an 5:15.

⁶⁸ Qur'an 10:57.

⁶⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, in Muqaddim, *Asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā*, 26.