

SURAH 23

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: Surah 23 (Al-Mu'minun - The Believers) | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa (Translator)

OVERVIEW

Surah 23, titled 'The Believers' (Al-Mu'minun), serves as a comprehensive manifesto of Islamic orthopraxy and orthodoxy. It begins by establishing the criteria for spiritual success, which is inextricably linked to moral performance: reverent prayer (Salat), avoidance of vain talk, payment of charity (Zakat), and strict sexual chastity. The text transitions into a cosmological and biological argument for God's existence, citing embryological development and the provision of rain and livestock as proofs of a singular Creator. The central narrative arc reviews the history of prophecy, citing Noah, Moses, Aaron, and Jesus. A critical theological assertion is made regarding Jesus (v. 50), framing him and his mother merely as a 'sign' rather than divine entities. The text culminates in a vivid eschatological warning: the inevitability of the Resurrection and the Judgment, where salvation is determined by a cosmic weighing of deeds (the Scales). It explicitly attacks the Christian concept of the Incarnation, asserting that God has never begotten a son (v. 91). The Surah concludes with a plea for mercy, establishing that ultimate success belongs only to those who recognize God's absolute oneness and submit to His moral law.

KEY FIGURES

God (Allah), Noah, Moses, Aaron, Jesus (Son of Mary), Mary, Pharaoh

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM (TAWHID) VS. SONSHIP

Assertion: God is singular and has never begotten a son; attributing a child to God is a lie.

"GOD has never begotten a son. Nor was there ever any other god beside Him." (23:91)

Evangelical Comparison: This text presents a polemic against the Trinity, specifically the relationship between the Father and the Son. While Evangelicalism holds that Jesus is the eternal, uncreated Son of God (John 1:1, Hebrews 1:1-3), this text asserts that for God to have a son implies a physical, biological necessity or a division of power ('each god would have declared independence'). It frames the Incarnation not as an act of redemptive love, but as a theological impossibility that insults God's sovereignty.

2. SOTERIOLOGY OF THE SCALES (MAWAZIN)

Assertion: Eternal destiny is determined by the weight of one's good deeds versus bad deeds.

"As for those whose weights are heavy, they will be the winners. Those whose weights are light are the ones who lost their souls..." (23:102-103)

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, the believer's merit is found solely in Christ's finished work; the believer is 'in Christ' and thus possesses Christ's righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Surah 23 posits a forensic system where the individual stands alone, and their own accumulated righteousness (prayers, charity, chastity) must outweigh their sins. There is no concept here of vicarious atonement; the individual saves themselves through the accumulation of 'heavy' deeds.

3. CHRISTOLOGY OF THE SIGN

Assertion: Jesus and Mary are merely a miraculous sign and refugees provided for by God, not divine beings.

"We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign, and we gave them refuge on a mesa..." (23:50)

Evangelical Comparison: The text acknowledges the virgin birth (implied by 'sign') and God's care for them, but strips Jesus of all divine authority. He is grouped with other messengers who are commanded to 'eat from the good provisions' (23:51), emphasizing his human need for sustenance, contrasting with the Biblical Jesus who is the Bread of Life.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental incompatibility lies in the nature of God and the means of salvation. Surah 23:91 is a polemic specifically designed to refute the core Christian confession that Jesus is the Son of God. Furthermore, the soteriology of verses 102-103 (The Scales) creates a system of merit that renders the Cross unnecessary. If a human being can generate enough 'heavy weights' through their own chastity and prayers to merit Paradise, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). The text presents a God who saves through the evaluation of human performance, whereas the Gospel presents a God who saves through the imputation of His own righteousness.

Shared Values:

Monotheism (existence of one Creator); Reality of Judgment Day; Importance of Charity and Prayer; Sexual morality/Chastity; Creation of mankind from dust/clay; Rejection of idolatry

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) & Christology – Explicit denial of God having a son (v91); Jesus is a created sign, not the Creator.
2. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is determined by the weight of one's deeds on a scale (v102-103), not by faith in a substitute.

Semantic Warnings:

"Believers (Al-Mu'minun)"

In Text: Those who perform Salat, Zakat, maintain chastity, and reject the concept of God having a son.

Evangelical: Those who trust in the finished work of Christ alone for salvation (John 3:16).

Example: A Christian reading 'Successful indeed are the believers' might agree, not realizing that by the text's definition (v91), they are considered blasphemers for believing in the Trinity.

"Son of God"

In Text: A biological offspring implying sexual procreation or a rival god (v91).

Evangelical: A relational and ontological term denoting the same essence as the Father, without beginning or creation.

Example: The text argues God cannot have a son because He has no partner/consort; the Bible teaches Jesus is the Son eternally, independent of biological processes.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Inheriting Paradise (v11) and avoiding the Fire (v103-104).

How Attained: By accumulating 'heavy weights' through prayer, charity, chastity, and correct belief (Tawhid).

Basis of Assurance: There is no assurance until the scales are balanced on Judgment Day; one hopes their weights are heavy.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Diametrically opposed. Surah 23:102 says 'Those whose weights are heavy... will be the winners.' Romans 3:28 says 'For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Worship God alone (v23, v32)
2. Perform Contact Prayers (Salat) (v2, v9)
3. Give obligatory charity (Zakat) (v4)
4. Maintain sexual chastity (v5)
5. Keep trusts and promises (v8)
6. Eat from good provisions (v51)
7. Seek refuge in God from devils (v97-98)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Reject the divinity of Christ (implied by v91)

2. Believe in the physical resurrection (v16)
3. Accept the Quran as the final revelation (v68)
4. View life as a test of righteousness (v30)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Regular observance of Salat (Contact Prayers)
2. Payment of Zakat

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 102, it speaks of 'heavy weights' making one a winner. How much weight is enough to be certain you are safe?
2. Verse 91 says God has never begotten a son. If 'Son of God' meant a spiritual relationship rather than a biological one, would that change how you view the term?
3. The text mentions Noah, Moses, and Jesus. Why do you think the text focuses on their struggles with leadership rather than their role in saving people from sin?
4. Verse 118 ends with a plea for mercy. If our salvation depends on our weights (v102), how does God's mercy fit in? Does He tip the scales?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Scales (Mawazin) – The concept of being weighed is terrifying because we all fall short. The Gospel is that Jesus steps onto the scale for us. [Daniel 5:27, Romans 3:23]
2. The Ark – Just as there was only one vessel to save Noah from judgment, Christ is the only vessel to save us from eternal judgment. We must be 'in' Him. [1 Peter 3:20-21]
3. The Protected Repository – God cares for the helpless embryo. How much more does He care for the helpless sinner who cannot save himself? [Psalm 139:13-16]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty/Fear [Severe] – The believer lives under the constant threat of the 'Scales.' There is no 'It is Finished.' Every action, every word, every prayer is a weight added or subtracted, creating a life of spiritual accounting without assurance of the final tally.
2. Performance/Legalism [Moderate] – The requirement for 'reverence' in prayer (v2) and strict chastity (v5) places the burden of perfection on the adherent. Failure in these areas directly impacts one's eternal 'weight,' leading to anxiety over ritual perfection.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Revelation to the Messenger (Muhammad) and Empirical Observation of Creation.

Verification Method: Adherents are asked to observe the natural world (embryology, rain, livestock) as rational proofs of the theological claims (v12-22).

Evangelical Contrast: While the Bible affirms general revelation (Psalm 19, Romans 1), this text uses general revelation to argue ***against*** specific revelation (the Sonship of God). Biblical epistemology relies on the testimony of the Apostles regarding the historical resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15), whereas this text relies on the self-referential authority of the Quranic recitation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Surah (Middle period), approx. 615-619 AD.

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad as the recipient of revelation.

Textual Issues: Khalifa's translation inserts '(Contact Prayers)' for Salat and '(Obligatory Charity)' for Zakat, reflecting his 'Quran Alone' interpretive lens, though the core meaning aligns with mainstream Islamic understanding in this context.