

SURAH 39

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: The Holy Qur'an | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 39, titled 'The Troops' (Az-Zumar), serves as a rigorous theological treatise on the exclusivity of God's authority. Translated here by Rashad Khalifa, the text presents a sharp dichotomy between the 'Submitters' (Muslims) who devote their religion absolutely to God alone, and the idolaters who seek intermediaries to bring them closer to the Divine. The Surah systematically dismantles the arguments of polytheists and those who claim God has offspring, asserting that God is self-sufficient and transcendent. It employs natural theology—citing the creation of the heavens, livestock, and human embryology—as evidence of God's singular power. A distinct feature of Khalifa's translation is the emphasis on the Quran as the only necessary source of guidance (referencing 'Hadith' negatively in verses 23 and 29), reflecting his 'Quran Alone' theological stance. The text warns that associating partners with God (Shirk) nullifies all righteous deeds, placing a heavy emphasis on individual responsibility where 'no soul bears the sins of another.'

KEY FIGURES

GOD (Allah), The Messenger (Muhammad), The Disbelievers/Idolaters, The Righteous/Submitters, The Angels

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM (TAWHID)

Assertion: God is singular, has no son, and requires exclusive devotion without intermediaries.

"If GOD wanted to have a son, He could have chosen whomever He willed... Be He glorified; He is GOD, the One, the Supreme." (Surah 39:4)

Evangelical Comparison: While Evangelicalism holds to Monotheism, it defines the Godhead as Triune (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). Surah 39:4 explicitly frames the concept of a 'son' as a choice God *could* have made but didn't, rather than an ontological reality of the Godhead. This creates a fundamental impasse with the Nicene Creed and biblical Christology (John 1:1-14), viewing the Trinity as a violation of God's oneness rather than the revelation of His nature.

2. REJECTION OF VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

Assertion: Sin is non-transferable; no being can bear the burden of another.

"No soul bears the sins of any other soul." (Surah 39:7)

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology rests on the 'Great Exchange'—Christ taking humanity's sin and imputing His righteousness to the believer (2 Corinthians 5:21). Surah 39:7 categorically rejects this possibility, establishing a system of strict personal accountability. In this framework, justice requires the sinner to pay for their own sin or receive a fiat of mercy, but justice is not satisfied through a substitute.

3. NULLIFICATION OF WORKS

Assertion: Committing idolatry (Shirk) renders all previous good deeds void.

"if you ever commit idol worship, all your works will be nullified, and you will be with the losers." (Surah 39:65)

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelicalism, justification is a permanent legal standing received by faith (Romans 8:38-39). In this text, salvation is precarious; a theological error (associating partners with God) can retroactively delete a lifetime of righteousness. This introduces a 'conditional security' based on maintaining correct theological alignment and avoiding specific sins.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The theological gap is unbridgeable without redefining terms. Surah 39 defines God's glory by His solitude (having no son), whereas Evangelicalism defines God's glory by His relational nature (Father, Son, Spirit) and self-giving love (the Cross). The text views the Christian concept of mediation as an insult to

God's sovereignty (v. 44), while Evangelicals view mediation as the only hope for sinful humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). Furthermore, the text posits a salvation system based on the 'balance of scales' and the avoidance of disqualifying sins, contrasting sharply with the assurance of Sola Fide.

Shared Values:

Monotheism (existence of one Creator); Rejection of idolatry; Reality of Judgment Day; Moral accountability; Creation ex nihilo

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – Explicit denial of God having a son (v. 4).
2. [Critical] Sola Fide / Sola Gratia – Salvation is contingent on works and can be nullified by sin (v. 65); denial of substitution (v. 7).
3. [Critical] Christology – Jesus is implicitly included in the rejection of 'partners' and 'intercessors' (v. 43-44).
4. [Major] Assurance of Salvation – Assurance is linked to performance; fear of retribution is a primary motivator (v. 13, 16).

Semantic Warnings:

"Believer"

In Text: One who accepts absolute monotheism, rejects the Trinity, and submits to Islamic law.

Evangelical: One who trusts in the finished work of Christ for salvation.

Example: *In Surah 39:10, 'servants who believed' refers to Muslims; in Acts 16:31, 'believe' refers to trust in Jesus as Savior.*

"Word of God"

In Text: The Quran (recited text).

Evangelical: Jesus Christ (The Logos, John 1:1) and the Bible.

Example: *Surah 39:1 refers to the scripture as the revelation; John 1:14 refers to the Word becoming flesh.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escaping Hellfire and entering Paradise (mansions with flowing streams, v. 20).

How Attained: Through total submission (Islam), avoiding Shirk (idolatry), and divine mercy which is responsive to repentance.

Basis of Assurance: There is no absolute assurance until judgment; however, 'good news' is given to those who avoid idols (v. 17).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Surah 39:70 states 'Every soul will be paid for whatever it did.' This is a works-based retribution system, diametrically opposed to Romans 4:5 ('to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Worship God alone (v. 2)
2. Be appreciative (v. 7, 66)
3. Reverence the Lord (v. 10, 16)
4. Follow the best path/teachings (v. 18, 55)
5. Do not despair of God's mercy (v. 53)
6. Submit totally before retribution comes (v. 54)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Reject all intercessors (saints, priests, or prophets acting as mediators)
2. Reject the concept of God having a son

3. Reflect on nature as proof of God
4. Accept the Quran as the only necessary source of religious law (specific to Khalifa's translation of v. 29)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Night meditation/prayer (v. 9)
2. Prostration (v. 9)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 65, it says that idol worship nullifies all your works. How do you define 'idol worship' in your daily life, and how do you find peace knowing one mistake could erase your spiritual history?
2. Verse 4 says God *could* have chosen a son if He wanted. If God is All-Powerful, why is it considered blasphemous to believe He entered creation as Jesus, if He has the power to do so?
3. Verse 53 says not to despair of God's mercy, but verse 54 says to submit *before* retribution comes. How do you know if you have submitted enough to secure that mercy?
4. The text mentions a man with 'disputing partners' versus a man with one master (v. 29). Do you ever feel like you are trying to please multiple 'masters' (society, tradition, self) instead of having peace with God?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Parable of Disputing Partners – This illustrates the peace of serving one Master versus the chaos of serving many. The Gospel invites us to the yoke of Jesus which is easy and light (Matthew 11:30), freeing us from the tyranny of serving the law, sin, and death. [Matthew 6:24 ('No one can serve two masters') and Matthew 11:28-30.]
2. The Spacious Earth – The text encourages migration or movement to worship God freely. This mirrors the spiritual pilgrimage of the believer seeking a 'better country'—a heavenly one. [Hebrews 11:16]
3. Trimesters of Darkness – God's intimate care in the womb demonstrates His personal love for the individual, not just humanity as a herd. This connects to God knitting us together. [Psalm 139:13]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty/Fear of Nullification [Severe] – The believer lives under the threat that 'Shirk' (which can be subtle, like showing off) will instantly delete their entire account of good deeds (v. 65). This creates a 'spiritual bankruptcy' anxiety.
2. Isolation [Moderate] – The text demands cutting off emotional reliance on anyone but God (v. 3, 45). While intended to foster monotheism, it can create a sense of isolation where the believer feels they cannot rely on a Mediator or Intercessor for help when they fail.
3. Performance Pressure [Severe] – The demand to be the 'utmost submitter' (v. 12) and the warning that God records every innermost thought (v. 7) creates intense pressure to perform perfectly without the safety net of Grace.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation (The Book) confirmed by Natural Theology (Signs in creation).

Verification Method: Rational reflection on the natural world (embryology, agriculture, astronomy) and the internal consistency of the Quran.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the historical resurrection of Jesus and the witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:4, 1 Corinthians 2:10-13). This text relies on the self-referential claim of the book's consistency (v. 23) and logical deduction from creation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (approx. 610-622 AD).

Authorship: Revealed to Muhammad (Islamic view); Muhammad (Critical view).

Textual Issues: Rashad Khalifa's translation (1978) contains interpretive biases, specifically translating the Arabic word 'hadith' (speech/narrative) in v. 23 and v. 29 as a proper noun referring to Islamic traditions, in order to support his 'Quran Alone' doctrine. Standard translations render this as 'statement' or 'discourse'.