

SURAH 4 (AN-NISA)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 4, known as An-Nisa (The Women), is a foundational Medinan text that serves two primary functions: community organization and theological demarcation. Internally, it provides exhaustive legal frameworks for the nascent Muslim community, specifically addressing the rights of orphans, marriage laws (including polygyny), and complex mathematical formulas for inheritance. It establishes a patriarchal social structure where men are maintainers of women, yet it also mandates the protection of women's property rights. Externally, the text serves as a sharp polemic against the 'People of the Scripture' (Jews and Christians). It accuses Jews of violating covenants and Christians of theological excess regarding Jesus. Crucially, this Surah contains the explicit Islamic denial of the Crucifixion (claiming it was an illusion) and the Trinity (labeling it blasphemous excess). It redefines Jesus as a created messenger, stripping Him of divinity while acknowledging His role as the Messiah and Word of God, but strictly within a unitarian framework. The text emphasizes that salvation is attained through correct belief (Tawhid) combined with righteous actions, specifically obedience to God and His Messenger.

KEY FIGURES

GOD (Allah), The Messenger (Muhammad), Jesus (The Messiah, Son of Mary), Mary, The Hypocrites (Munafiqun), People of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), Satan (The Devil)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. DOCETIC DENIAL OF CRUCIFIXION

Assertion: Jesus was neither killed nor crucified; it only appeared so to the observers. God raised Jesus to Himself directly.

"In fact, they never killed him, they never crucified him - they were made to think that they did... For certain, they never killed him. Instead, GOD raised him to Him [004:157-158]"

Evangelical Comparison: This is the 'Gospel Antithesis' of Islam. While Evangelical Christianity rests entirely on the finished work of Christ on the cross (1 Corinthians 2:2), Surah 4:157 explicitly denies this event occurred. By removing the Cross, the text removes the Atonement, necessitating a different system of salvation based on law-keeping and divine fiat rather than substitutionary sacrifice. This creates an unbridgeable gap between the two faiths regarding history and soteriology.

2. ABSOLUTE UNITARIANISM (TAWHID)

Assertion: God is strictly One; attributing a son or partners (Trinity) to Him is a gross offense and blasphemy.

"You shall not say, 'Trinity.' You shall refrain from this for your own good. GOD is only one god... He is much too glorious to have a son. [004:171]"

Evangelical Comparison: The text frames the Christian understanding of God not as a mystery of one essence in three persons, but as a mathematical impossibility and a moral transgression ('transgress the limits of your religion'). It posits that Jesus would never claim divinity (4:172). This contradicts the Evangelical view of the Godhead (Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14) and the deity of Christ (Colossians 2:9).

3. CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

Assertion: God forgives whom He wills, but idolatry (Shirk) is unforgivable if one dies in it.

"GOD does not forgive idolatry, but He forgives lesser offenses for whomever He wills. [004:048]"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, God is 'faithful and just' to forgive because the penalty has been paid (1 John 1:9). In Surah 4, forgiveness is an act of sovereign will ('whomever He wills') without a mechanism for satisfying divine justice. This leaves the adherent in a state of uncertainty regarding their standing with God, contingent on their avoidance of 'gross sins' (4:31).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: Surah 4 presents a theological chasm that cannot be bridged by shared terminology. While both faiths speak of 'Jesus,' 'Messiah,' and 'Salvation,' the definitions are mutually exclusive. The Quranic Jesus is a messenger who was saved **from** death, whereas the Biblical Jesus is the Savior who saved the world **through** death. The Quranic God is a monad who forgives by fiat; the Biblical God is a Triune being who forgives through propitiation. The text's specific denial of the Trinity (4:171) and Crucifixion (4:157) are not misunderstandings but deliberate theological corrections of Christianity.

Shared Values:

Monotheism (existence of one Creator); Care for orphans and the vulnerable; Prohibition of murder and theft; Reality of Judgment Day and Hell; Virgin Birth of Jesus (implied in 'Son of Mary' and 'Word from Him')

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Christology (The Atonement) – Denies the Crucifixion occurred, rendering the Atonement impossible.
2. [Major] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – Salvation is contingent on belief plus righteous works and obedience to the Messenger.
3. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – Explicitly attacks the Trinity as blasphemy and excess.
4. [Major] Assurance of Salvation – Forgiveness is subject to God's will ('whomever He wills') rather than a guaranteed promise based on Christ's work.

Semantic Warnings:

"Messiah (Al-Masih)"

In Text: A title for Jesus, a messenger of God, created by God's word, servant.

Evangelical: The Anointed One, Son of God, King of Kings, God Incarnate.

Example: *In 4:172, the Messiah is a servant who does not disdain worshiping God; in Hebrews 1:6, the angels worship the Messiah.*

"Word of God"

In Text: A created being (Jesus) brought into existence by God's command 'Be'.

Evangelical: The eternal second person of the Trinity (John 1:1).

Example: *4:171 calls Jesus 'His word' sent to Mary, but strictly denies his divinity.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Admission into 'gardens with flowing streams' (Paradise) and avoidance of the Fire.

How Attained: By believing in God and the Messenger, and doing righteous works (4:124).

Basis of Assurance: There is no absolute assurance; one hopes in God's mercy, but God forgives 'whomever He wills' (4:48).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Explicitly rejects faith alone. 4:124 states 'As for those who lead a righteous life... while believing, they enter Paradise.' This contrasts with Romans 4:5 'to the one who does not work but believes...'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Distribute inheritance according to specific mathematical ratios (4:11-12, 4:176)
2. Fight in the cause of God against oppressors (4:74-76)
3. Obey God and the Messenger (4:59)
4. Do not say 'Trinity' (4:171)
5. Punish adultery with confinement or other means (4:15-16)
6. Perform ablution (or Tayammum) before prayer (4:43)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Monitor the community for hypocrisy
2. Accept the Quran as the final arbiter over previous scriptures
3. Maintain patriarchal authority in the household

Ritual Requirements:

1. Contact Prayers (Salat) at specific times (4:103)
2. Obligatory Charity (Zakat) (4:77)
3. Dry ablution (Tayammum) when water is scarce (4:43)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. Surah 4:157 says Jesus was not crucified, but historians and the Gospels say He was. Why would God allow the world to be deceived for 600 years about such a major event?
2. In 4:48, it says God forgives 'whomever He wills.' How do you know for sure if you are one of the ones He wills to forgive?
3. Surah 4:28 says humans were created weak. If we are weak, how can we perfectly fulfill the laws required for entrance into Paradise?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Weakness of Man – The Quran admits human inability to bear the burden of the law. The Gospel offers the solution: Christ carries the burden we cannot. [Matthew 11:28 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...']
2. The Need for an Arbitrator – Humans need a mediator to settle disputes. We have a dispute with God due to sin. Jesus is the perfect Mediator. [1 Timothy 2:5 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.']
3. Ransom for Killing – The text acknowledges that a price must be paid (a life for a life/freedom) to atone for death. Jesus paid the ultimate ransom to free us from spiritual death. [Mark 10:45 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.']}

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty [Severe] – The believer lives under the weight of 'God forgives whom He wills.' There is no covenantal guarantee of salvation, only the hope that one's submission is sufficient.
2. Performance/Legalism [Moderate] – The text imposes complex laws regarding inheritance, marriage, and ritual purity. The fear of 'transgressing the limits' (4:14) creates a burden of constant self-monitoring.
3. Fear of Shirk [Severe] – The explicit statement that God does not forgive Shirk (4:48) creates a high-stakes anxiety about inadvertently associating partners with God or failing in pure monotheism.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation confirmed by internal consistency.

Verification Method: Rational reflection on the text's lack of contradictions.

Evangelical Contrast: The text appeals to its own internal consistency as proof of divinity (4:82). Evangelicalism appeals to historical resurrection witness (1 Cor 15) and the testimony of the Holy Spirit through the Bible (2 Peter 1:21).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Medinan period (approx. 3-5 AH / 625-627 AD), following the Battle of Uhud.

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad via revelation (Jibril).

Textual Issues: The text addresses specific historical circumstances (orphans of Uhud), suggesting the 'universal' laws were occasioned by local crises.