

SURAH 56 (AL-WAQI'A)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 56, titled 'The Inevitable' (Al-Waqi'a), is a seminal eschatological text in the Quran that vividly describes the events of the Day of Judgment. The text opens by asserting the absolute certainty of the resurrection, describing cataclysmic cosmic events where the earth is shaken and mountains crumble. Its central theological contribution is the tripartite stratification of humanity: the 'Elite of the Elite' (the foremost in faith), the 'Companions of the Right' (the righteous), and the 'Companions of the Left' (the damned). The text provides elaborate descriptions of the rewards awaiting the righteous, characterized by sensual luxuries—gardens, flowing wine, perpetual youth, and specially created mates. Conversely, it depicts the visceral physical torments of the damned, including drinking boiling water and eating bitter fruit. The latter half of the Surah shifts to apologetics, using natural theology (human reproduction, agriculture, water, and fire) as evidence of God's sovereignty and ability to resurrect the dead. It concludes by asserting the divine origin and protected status of the Quran, demanding glorification of God.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Lord of the Universe), The Elite (Al-Sabiqun/The Foremost), The Companions of the Right, The Companions of the Left (The Strayers), The Immortal Servants

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TRIPARTITE JUDGMENT

Assertion: Humanity will be divided into three groups: The Elite (closest to God), the Right (saved), and the Left (damned).

"You will be stratified into three kinds... Then there is the elite of the elite." (56:007, 010)"

Evangelical Comparison: Evangelical theology generally posits a binary judgment: one is either in Christ (saved) or outside of Christ (condemned), as seen in John 3:36 and Matthew 25:31-46. This text introduces a tiered soteriology where the 'Elite' enjoy a higher proximity to God than the 'Companions of the Right.' This implies that spiritual status in the afterlife is determined by the degree of one's piety and works, rather than the binary state of justification by faith.

2. RETRIBUTIVE SOTERIOLOGY (SALVATION BY WORKS)

Assertion: Paradise is explicitly a payment or reward for deeds performed.

"Rewards for their works." (56:024)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly states that the luxuries of paradise are 'rewards for their works' (Jaza'an bima kanoo ya'maloon). In strict Evangelical theology, this is the definition of a works-righteousness system. Romans 4:4 states, 'Now to the one who works, his wage is not counted as a gift but as his due.' Ephesians 2:8-9 clarifies that salvation is 'not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' This doctrine places the burden of attaining paradise on human effort rather than Christ's finished work.

3. SENSUAL ESCHATOLOGY

Assertion: The afterlife consists of physical, carnal pleasures including food, wine, and sexual companions.

"Beautiful mates... Like protected pearls... We create for them mates... Never previously touched." (56:022-023, 035-036)"

Evangelical Comparison: The Quranic depiction of heaven focuses heavily on restored and enhanced physical appetites—gluttony without satiety and sexual availability without exhaustion. Jesus explicitly taught in Matthew 22:30 that in the resurrection, people 'neither marry nor are given in marriage.' Evangelical theology emphasizes the presence of God (Revelation 21:3) as the primary joy of heaven, rather than the gratification of carnal desires.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and the nature of the ultimate reward. Surah 56 explicitly ties eternal destiny to human merit ('rewards for their works'), establishing a legalistic framework where God reacts to human effort. Evangelicalism posits that God acts first in grace to save the helpless (Ephesians 2:4-5). Furthermore, the Quranic view of the afterlife is an extension of earthly carnal pleasures, whereas the Biblical view is a transformation of the believer to be like Christ (1 John 3:2), where the presence of the Lamb is the lamp of the city (Revelation 21:23).

Shared Values:

Belief in a Sovereign Creator; Certainty of a Day of Judgment; Existence of Heaven and Hell; Moral accountability for human actions

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is explicitly defined as a 'reward for works' (56:24).
2. [Major] Theology Proper (Nature of God/Heaven) – Heaven is depicted as a place of carnal indulgence rather than spiritual holiness and communion with God.
3. [Critical] Christology – Total absence of a Mediator; the individual stands alone based on their own merit.

Semantic Warnings:

"Peace (Salam)"

In Text: Safety, greeting, and freedom from 'nonsense' or 'sinful utterances' (56:25-26).

Evangelical: Reconciliation with God through the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20); wholeness (Shalom).

Example: In Surah 56, 'Peace' is the greeting of those enjoying luxury. In the Bible, 'Peace' is the status of a sinner justified by Christ (Romans 5:1).

"Mates (Azwaj)"

In Text: Specially created beings (Houris) for sexual/companionship pleasure, 'never previously touched' (56:35-36).

Evangelical: Earthly spouses; in the resurrection, marriage does not exist (Mark 12:25).

Example: The text promises 'beautiful mates' as a reward; the Bible promises deep union with Christ as the Bridegroom.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escape from the Fire and entrance into Gardens of Bliss (Jannah) with physical luxuries.

How Attained: By being among the 'Elite' or 'Right' through works and correct belief.

Basis of Assurance: None guaranteed; depends on the weight of works and God's stratification.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Surah 56:24 ('Rewards for their works') stands in direct opposition to Titus 3:5 ('He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Glorify the name of your Lord, the Great (56:074, 096)
2. Be thankful for natural provision (56:070)
3. Do not disregard the narration (Quran) (56:081)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Acknowledge God's agency in biological and agricultural processes
2. Believe in the physical resurrection
3. Strive to be among the 'Elite' through works

Ritual Requirements:

1. Recitation/Glorification (Tasbih)

2. Ritual purity or sincerity required to 'grasp' the Quran (56:079)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text mentions being 'stratified into three kinds' (v. 7). How can you be certain you are in the 'Elite' and not just the 'Right' or the 'Left'?
2. Verse 24 says paradise is a 'reward for works.' If God demands perfection, how many works are enough to pay for eternal bliss?
3. The text describes the 'inevitable' moment of death (v. 83). When your soul reaches your throat, what assurance do you have that you will be welcomed?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Inevitable (Al-Waqi'a) – Death and judgment are indeed inevitable for all men (Hebrews 9:27). The Gospel provides the only solution to this inevitable appointment. [Hebrews 9:27-28]
2. The Longing for Peace – The text identifies 'Peace' as the ultimate sound of heaven. Jesus offers this peace now, not just in the afterlife. [John 14:27, Romans 5:1]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is under constant pressure to perform enough 'works' to merit the 'Elite' status, with no assurance that their efforts are sufficient.
2. Cognitive Dissonance [Moderate] – The description of heaven appeals to carnal desires that are restricted on earth, creating a tension where holiness is defined by abstaining now to indulge later.
3. Uncertainty of Standing [Severe] – With humanity stratified and judgment based on merit, the adherent faces the 'Inevitable' (death) without the 'Blessed Assurance' of the Gospel.

PISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation confirmed by Natural Theology.

Verification Method: Adherents are asked to observe natural phenomena (semen, crops, rain, fire) and logically deduce a single Creator.

Evangelical Contrast: While the Bible affirms natural revelation (Romans 1:20), it asserts that specific knowledge of salvation comes only through the Word of God and the testimony of the Spirit concerning Christ (1 Corinthians 2:14), not merely through observing nature.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early Islamic history).

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (via Gabriel); Khalifa translation (1978) imposes 'Code 19' numerology interpretation.

Textual Issues: Khalifa's translation of v. 79 ('sincere') differs from the standard 'purified' (mutahharun), which traditionally refers to ritual ablution (wudu). Khalifa shifts this to an internal moral state.