

SURAH 78 (AN-NABA / THE GREAT NEWS)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 78, titled 'The Great News' (An-Naba), opens with a rhetorical challenge to skeptics who question the reality of the Resurrection. The text employs a teleological argument, pointing to the stability of the earth, the function of mountains, the creation of mates, and the cycles of day and night as proofs of a deliberate Creator. This evidence of order in the physical realm is used to substantiate the claim of an appointed 'Day of Decision.' The text vividly describes eschatological events, including the opening of the sky and the vanishing of mountains. It delineates a strict dichotomy of eternal destiny: Gehenna (Hell) for those who rejected the signs, characterized by boiling fluids and bitter food, and a lush paradise for the righteous, characterized by gardens and companions. The Surah concludes with a stark warning about the inevitability of judgment based on human deeds ('what his hands have sent forth'), ending with the despair of the disbeliever who wishes for non-existence. In the Khalifa translation, specific terms like 'seven universes' reflect the translator's scientific-concordist approach.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Lord, The Most Gracious), The Spirit (Al-Ruh), The Angels, The Transgressors (Disbelievers), The Righteous (Muttaqin)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. WORKS-BASED JUDGMENT

Assertion: Final judgment is determined by the deeds a person has performed and 'sent forth' during their life.

"That is the day when everyone will examine what his hands have sent forth (Surah 78:40)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the terror of the Day of Judgment is mitigated only by the righteous deeds one has accumulated. The text explicitly states that the individual will examine 'what his hands have sent forth,' implying a forensic accounting of personal merit. This stands in sharp contrast to the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone (Sola Fide), where the believer relies solely on the finished work of Christ (Romans 3:28, Ephesians 2:8-9). In the Christian view, 'what the hands have sent forth' is insufficient for salvation (Isaiah 64:6); in this text, it is the deciding factor.

2. STRICT MONOTHEISM (TAWHID) & LIMITED INTERCESSION

Assertion: God is the sole sovereign; even high spiritual beings (The Spirit, angels) cannot speak or intercede without explicit permission.

"The day will come when the Spirit and the angels will stand in a row. None will speak except those permitted by the Most Gracious (Surah 78:38)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text presents a scene where 'The Spirit' (interpreted in Islam as the angel Gabriel) stands in a row with angels, subordinate to God and unable to speak without permission. This contradicts the Evangelical Theology Proper where the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4) and co-equal in the Trinity. Furthermore, the restriction on speech contrasts with the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as the constant, perfect Mediator and Intercessor for the saints (Hebrews 7:25, 1 Timothy 2:5).

3. SENSUAL ESCHATOLOGY

Assertion: The rewards of paradise include physical pleasures such as orchards, drinks, and spouses.

"The righteous have deserved a reward... Magnificent spouses. Delicious drinks. (Surah 78:31-34)"

Evangelical Comparison: The Quranic promise of 'magnificent spouses' (or 'companions') as a reward for righteousness differs from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 22:30, where He states that in the resurrection, people 'neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.' Evangelical eschatology focuses on the presence of God (Revelation 21:3) as the primary reward, rather than the restoration of earthly, sensual pleasures.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of salvation and the nature of the Mediator. Surah 78 presents a courtroom where the defendant (the human) must rely on their own record ('what his hands have sent forth'). There is no concept of Vicarious Atonement; the 'Spirit' is a servant, not a Savior. Evangelicalism posits that the defendant is guilty but acquitted because Christ paid the penalty (Romans 3:23-24). Additionally, the text's cosmology, while monotheistic, explicitly excludes the Trinitarian relationship, reducing the Spirit to a created being standing in line with angels.

Shared Values:

Belief in one Creator God; Belief in a literal Day of Judgment; Belief in the existence of Heaven and Hell; Moral accountability for human actions

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is contingent on the record of deeds ('what his hands have sent forth'), not faith in a Savior.
2. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – The Spirit is depicted as a subordinate being distinct from the Godhead, standing with angels.
3. [Critical] Christology – Christ is absent; the role of Judge is held by Allah alone without a Mediator.
4. [Major] Eschatology – Paradise is defined by carnal satisfaction (spouses, wine) rather than spiritual communion with God.

Semantic Warnings:

"The Spirit (Al-Ruh)"

In Text: A created being, likely the Angel Gabriel, who stands in rows with angels and cannot speak without permission.

Evangelical: The Third Person of the Trinity, fully God, who searches the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).

Example: *In Surah 78:38, the Spirit stands silently in judgment; in Romans 8:26, the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*

"Righteousness"

In Text: Moral conformity and submission to Islamic law, achieved by human effort.

Evangelical: A legal standing granted by God through faith in Christ (Imputed Righteousness, Philippians 3:9).

Example: *The righteous in Surah 78 earn their reward; the righteous in Romans 4 receive it as a gift.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escape from the 'inferno' of Gehenna and entrance into the 'orchards' of success.

How Attained: By not rejecting signs and by sending forth good deeds (v40).

Basis of Assurance: There is no assurance in the text; only the hope that one's record is sufficient. The tone is warning, not assurance.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly links the outcome of the Day of Decision to human effort (v40). This is the antithesis of Ephesians 2:8-9 ('not of works, lest any man should boast').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Take refuge in the Lord (v39)
2. Recognize the signs of God in nature (implied v6-16)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Believe in the Day of Judgment
2. Perform righteous deeds to ensure a good record
3. Fear the retribution of God

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says we will examine what our hands have sent forth (v40). How confident are you that what you have sent forth is enough to satisfy a perfect God?
2. In verse 38, the Spirit stands in a row and cannot speak without permission. Who do you understand the Spirit to be, and how does that compare to the Holy Spirit in the Bible?
3. The disbeliever wishes to be dust (v40) to escape judgment. Does this Surah offer any hope for someone who realizes their bad deeds outweigh their good ones?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Day of Decision – We agree there is a day appointed for judgment. The bridge is: Who can stand on that day? The Quran suggests those with good records. The Gospel suggests only those covered by Christ. [Acts 17:31 (God has fixed a day... by a man whom he has appointed).]
2. The Desire for Non-Existence – This captures the sheer terror of standing before God with only one's own sins. This fear highlights the desperate need for an Advocate. [1 John 2:1 (We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Fear of Insufficiency [Severe] – The believer lives under the constant pressure that their eternal fate rests on the quality and quantity of 'what their hands have sent forth,' with no guarantee it will be accepted.
2. Uncertainty [Moderate] – Since God is 'Lord of the Day of Decision' and can punish whom He wills, the adherent lacks the 'blessed assurance' of salvation found in the Gospel.
3. Isolation in Judgment [Severe] – The text depicts a judgment where intercessors are silent (v38). The individual stands alone, creating a profound sense of vulnerability.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation confirmed by Natural Theology (Observation of Creation).

Verification Method: Adherents are asked to observe the physical world (earth, mountains, rain) as proof of the metaphysical claim (resurrection).

Evangelical Contrast: While the Bible affirms natural revelation (Psalm 19, Romans 1), it posits that specific knowledge of salvation comes only through the special revelation of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1-2), not merely by observing nature.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad; Khalifa translation (1978).

Textual Issues: Khalifa translates 'sab'an shidadan' as 'seven universes' (v12) rather than the traditional 'seven strong [heavens]'. This reflects Khalifa's 'Submission' theology which seeks to harmonize the Quran with modern cosmology.