

The Nature of Angels

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We previously stated that in Islamic cosmology, portions of the world of creation pertain to supernatural creatures. Here we shall take a glance at Islam's perspective on immaterial .entities

Angels .1

One of the definite tenets of Islamic cosmology is the existence of entities called angels [malak]. Many Qur'anic verses and Hadith speak of angels and their qualities, attributes, and actions. Here, we shall succinctly indicate some of Islam's teachings regarding these divine :creations

a. The Nature of Angels

The Holy Qur'an does not clearly speak of the nature and essence of angels. It is evident that angels have a different nature than humans and other intelligent creations, such as jinn.¹ However, the reality of their essence is a controversial issue. Some Muslim scholars believe they are immaterial and incorporeal entities. Others believe that they have subtle bodies, which are different from non-subtle bodies, that have three dimensions, weight, and mass and can be perceived by normal senses. Nevertheless, all agree that angels cannot be perceived by the outward senses of humans.²

b. The Immaculacy and Worship of Angels

The essence of angels is completely intellectual and has no taint of carnality or hedonistic desires. Thus, they continuously worship and glorify their Lord and never defy or rebel against God. The Qur'an describes angels thus: "Rather, [angels] are noble servants. They do not overtake Him in speech, and they perform as He commands."³ In addition, of the angels that guard hell it states: "They disobey not Allah in what He commands and perform what they are commanded."⁴

c. Divine Mission [risālat al-ilāhī]

Angels have been appointed by God with divine missions: "Allah appoints of the angels, messengers ..."⁵

With regard to the role of angels in world administration [tadbīr al-'ālam], we can state that their mission encompasses two functions. That is, their genetic mission [risālat al-takwīnī],

which is administration of world affairs and performing divine commands, and their legislative mission [risālat al-tashrīf], which is intermediacy in divine revelation unto prophets

d. The Occupations of Angels

The Noble Qur'an has enumerated many deeds for angels.⁶ Transmitting divine revelation to the prophets,⁷ administration of world affairs and mediation in imparting divine blessings upon God's creatures,⁸ repentance and intercession on behalf of the faithful,⁹ aiding the faithful¹⁰, damning unbelievers,¹¹ recording people's deeds,¹² and taking souls at the time of death¹³ are several divine commissions that angels undertake. Angels are also present in the world of Barzakh¹⁴ and the afterlife; some reside in heaven,¹⁵ and others are the keepers of Gehenna/Hell [jahannam] and its inhabitants.¹⁶

In addition, Angels continuously worship, revere, and praise God. They never stop and never do anything else. According to the Qur'an: "And those who are with Him never wax too proud to serve Him and never grow weary. They glorify Him night and day without remit."¹⁷

e. The Hierarchy and Order of Angels:

According to the previous discussions, angels are divided into various echelons based on their various commissions. The fact whether various orders of angels are typically and essentially different or not is obscure to us. This much can be derived from the Qur'an and traditions that angels do possess various ranks and echelons and some are subordinate to others. The Qur'an declares that each angel possesses a determined station and rank: "And there are none of us (angels) save who has a determined rank."¹⁸

Moreover, various Qur'anic verses reveal that the Angel of Revelation (i.e. Gabriel) has various aides that are subordinate to him.¹⁹ The Angel of Death (i.e. Azrael) also has agents among the angels.²⁰ Various traditions indicate that Gabriel [jibrā'īl], Michael [mīkā'īl], Israfil [isrāfīl], and Azrael [izrā'īl] possess uniquely lofty ranks

f. Incarnation of Angels

Even though angels are intangible, they can be incarnated in human form. The Qur'an verifies this fact by relating various historic occurrences. For example, various visits by angels to Abraham ('a) and Lot ('a) and the embodiment of a divine angel as a human to bestow Jesus ('a) upon Mary ('a) were some occurrences of the incarnation of angels in human form

Notes:

:1. - In differentiation between humans and angels, Imam 'Alī ('a) has stated

لَمْ يَسْكُنُوا الْأَصْلَابَ وَ لَمْ يَغْتَنِمُوا الْأَرْحَامَ وَ لَمْ يُخْلَقُوا مِنْ مَاءٍ مَعِينٍ

Angels do not reside in loins [of fathers] and are not born of wombs [of mothers] and have not“
been created from ignoble water.”

2. - Muslim philosophers regard angels as incorporeal entities, some of whom possess absolute intellectual incorporeality while others enjoy transitive incorporeality and therefore can hold various material qualities such as shape.

3. - Sūrah Anbiyā' 21:26-27.

4. - Sūrah Ta rīm 66:6.

5. - Sūrah ajj 22:75. Additionally, see: Sūrah Fā ir 35:1.

6. - It must be noted that some of these affairs are specifically stated in Qur'anic verses while others are inferred from various signs and indications in the Qur'an.

7. - Sūrah Na l 16:2, 16:102; and Sūrah 'Abas 80:16.

8. - Sūrah Nāzi'āt 79:5; and Sūrah Ma'ārij 70:4.

9. - Sūrah Ghāfir 40:7; Sūrah Anbiyā' 21:28.

10. - Sūrah Āli 'Imrān 3:124-125.

11. - Sūrah Baqarah 2:141; and Sūrah Āli 'Imrān 3:87.

12. - Sūrah Yūnus 10:21; Sūrah Zukhruf 43:80; and Sūrah Infi ār 82:11.

13. - Sūrah An'ām 6:61; Sūrah Nisā' 4:97.

14. - Sūrah Na l 16:28, 16:32. Barzakh literally means the barrier between two things. It is an intermediate state between death and resurrection. The Hebrew equivalent to Barzakh is Sheol.

In Catholic doctrine a close equivalent is purgatory. [trans.]

15. - Sūrah Zumar 39:73; and Sūrah Anbiyā' 21:103.

16. - Sūrah Muddaththir 74:31.

17. - Sūrah Anbiyā' 21:19-20.

18. - Sūrah āffāt 37:164.

19. - Sūrah Takwīr 81:21.

.20. - Sūrah Sajdah 32:11; and Sūrah An'ām 6:61