

Angels in Islam

In Islam, angels (Arabic: ملاك *malāk*; plural: ملائكة *mala'ikah*) are celestial beings, created from a luminous origin by God to perform certain tasks he has given them. The angels from the angelic realm are subordinates in a hierarchy headed by one of the archangels in the highest heavens.^[1] Belief in angels is one of the six Articles of Faith in Islam.^[2]

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An angel according to Islamic arts from a Persian miniature from the 16th century

Concepts of angels

Islam acknowledges the concept of angels both as anthropomorphic and abstract.^[3] It does not mean Islamic scholars depict them as either personified creatures or abstract forces: Some scholars distinguished between the angels, charged with carrying the laws of nature dwelling on earth as being abstract, and the angels in heaven prostrating before God and spiritual creatures of the supreme world, such as the archangels, as personified.^[4]

As personified creatures

Angels are another kind of creature created by God, known to mankind, commonly dwelling in the heavenly spheres. Although the Quran does not mention the time when angels were created,



Angel Blowing a Woodwind', ink and opaque watercolor painting from Iran, c. 1500, Honolulu Academy of Arts

they are generally considered as the first creation of God. They are created from a luminous substance with no bodily desires, never get tired, do not eat or drink and have no anger.^[1] Al-Kindi and Ibn Sina both define angels as simple substances endowed with life, reason, and immortality. In contrast to humans, who are substances endowed with life and reason but are mortal, who is, in turn, distinguished by unreasonable but also mortal animals.^[5]

The Angels were born out of light and the Jann was born out of the mixture of fire and Adam was born as he has been defined (in the Qur'an) for you (i. e. he is fashioned out of clay or soil) ^{[6][7]}

Commonly, angels were created from light according to the Islamic faith, based on the quoted hadith above. However, a dispute arises whether there are angels created from other substances or not. According to Tabari, besides the angels of light, there can be angels created from any other substances.^[8] Angels created from other elements, especially those who carry the Throne of God,^[9] are thought to be composed of elements such as water or fire. According to the Isra and Mi'raj-narrations, Muhammad met an angel composed of fire and ice and both pass into one another without cooling down the fire, nor melting the ice, demonstrating God's power over the usual laws of nature. According to Ibn Abbas, Iblis was an angel created from fire, differing from the other angels.

Later Islamic scholars evaluated, in the view of the prevailing Jewish opinion at the time, that God revealed angels were created from fire, whether angels were created from fire or not and how they are distinguished from those created from light is disputed.^[3] Al-Suyuti stated angels are either from fire or light.^[10] Maqdisi divided the angels into two groups: The angels of mercy created from light in contrast to the angels of Punishment from the fire.^[11] Qazwini and Ibishi assert that all supernatural creatures, due to their invisibility, are composed of a subtle matter that is equivalent to fire but which differs in intensity and are distinguished by the part of fire they originated from. Accordingly, the angels are created from the light of a fire, the jinn from the tongue of fire and the demons from its smoke.^{[12][13]} Furthermore, scholars such as Tabari stated that light and fire do not appeal to different elements, but to a luminous origin of angels which should not be taken literally.^[14]

As abstract concepts

Angels as abstract concepts belong to Al-Ghaib (the unseen). Angels here are used as expressions of natural laws.^[15] They carry the Divine command into execution. References to specific angels, like Jabra'il or Azrail, are respective leaders, with a multitude of subordinative angels, who perform for a specific function.^[16]

Qazwini portrays the earthly angels as indwelling forces of nature, who keep the world in order and never deviate from their duty. Qazwini believed that the existence of these angels could be proven by reason and the things these angels affect.^[17]

Islamic philosophy stressed that humans own angelic and demonic qualities and that the human soul is seen as a *potential angel* or *potential demon*.^[18] Depending on whether the sensual soul or the rational soul develop, the human soul becomes an angel or a demon.^[19] Angels may also give inspirations opposite to the evil suggestions, called *waswās*, from Satan.^[20]

The modern astrophysicist Nidhal Guessoum has pointed to modern Islamic scholars such as Muhammad Asad and Ghulam Ahmed Parwez in his book "Islam's Quantum Question" who have suggested a metaphorical reinterpretation of the concept of angels.^[21]

Angels' impeccability

A question in Islamic theology deals with the impeccability of the angels. The majority of Islamic scholars prefer the opinion that angels are sinless. Advocates of angels' infallibility commonly cite certain verses from the Quran, which support their claim such as 16:49 (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2002.02.0006%3AAsura%3D16%3Averse%3D49>): "To Allah prostrates whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth, including animals and angels, and they are not arrogant". However, these verses cannot prove the impeccability for all angels at any time and in any situation.^[14] The motif of erring angels is also known to Islam.^[22] This is supported by verses describing angels with personal traits and being tested.^[23] Al-Baydawi argued, angels are only impeccable until they fall.^[24] Others speak of Islamic angels as continuously obedient and also refer to Ijma (scholarly consensus).^[25] One of the first scholars who asserted the doctrine of impeccable angels, was Hasan of Basra. He not only advocated the impeccability of angels by quoting certain Quranic verses, but also reinterpreted verses, which speak against the impeccability of angels.^[26]

With the discussion whether angels are able to err or not, a dispute arises concerning whether humans, prophets or angels are the superior. Hasa of Basra also advocated that angels are better than both humans and prophets because of their purity, a position that was opposed by Sunnis and Shias.^[27] On the other hand, the prostration of angels before Adam is often seen as evidence for humans' supremacy over angels. Because it is harder for humans to worship God since they are hassled with bodily temptations, in contrast to angels, the angels rank lower than humans. Other scholars argue that the messengers of archangels rank higher than the messengers of humans, but the messengers of humans rank higher than ordinary angels and the ordinary humans again lower than the ordinary angels.^[14] The Mu'tazilites and some Asharites held the superiority of angels, because they are free from any material deficits including anger and lust.^[14] Another thought holds that an undeveloped human soul ranks lower than angels, but an Al-Insān al-Kāmil higher than angels, and therefore the angels were commanded to prostrate themselves before Adam, who represented the perfect human.^[28] According to some Sufi views, angels rank lower than humans, because as already flawless and desireless beings, they are not capable of loving God like humans do.^[29] When humans die, they return to the heavenly spheres with all deeds, experiences, and thoughts accomplished in the earthly plane.^{[30][31]}

If fallible angels are assumed, as long they carrying out the laws of nature, they are considered infallible. However, as personified angels, they may indeed sin. Their obedience and worship consist of their awareness of God, rather than lack of free will.^[32] They are endowed with human reason neither are they subject to temptation but beings who may err; also explaining the implications of a well-known hadith concerning an argument that took place between the angels of Mercy and the angels of Punishment.^[33] Ibn Arabi stated that some angels may err in opposing Adam as a vice-regent and fixing on their way of worshipping God to the exclusion of other creatures.^{[34][35]}

Individual angels

Islam has no standard hierarchical organization that parallels the division into different "choirs" or spheres hypothesized and drafted by early medieval Christian theologians, but does distinguish between archangels and angels. Angels are not equal in status and consequently, they are delegated different tasks to perform. (Note that the affiliation of some of the following creatures is disputed and denoted by an asterisk. These creatures may be regarded as *jinn*, saints or kings, instead of angels. However, these are often related to angels and are consequently listed here).

Archangels

- Jibra'il/Jibril/Jabril (Judeo-Christian: Gabriel),^[36] the angel of revelation. Jibra'il is the archangel responsible for revealing the Quran to Muhammad, verse by verse. Jibra'il is the angel who communicates with (all of) the prophets and also descends with the blessings of God during the night of Laylat al-Qadr ("The Night of Divine Destiny (Fate)"). Jibra'il is also acknowledged as a magnificent warrior in Islamic tradition, who led an army of angels into the Battle of Badr and fought against Iblis as he tempted Jesus (Isa).^[37]
- Mikail, also spelled Mikāl or Mīkā'īl (Judeo-Christian: Michael),^[38] the archangel of mercy, is often depicted as providing nourishment for bodies and souls while also being responsible for bringing rain and thunder to Earth.^[39] Some scholars pointed out that Mikail is in charge of angels who carry the laws of nature.^[40] According to legend, he was so shocked at the sight of hell when it was created that he never laughed again.
- Israfil or Israafiyl (Judeo-Christian: Raphael), is the archangel of music^[41] often depicted with a trumpet, he will blow in the end time. Therefore, Israfil is responsible for signaling the coming of Qiyamah (Judgment Day) by blowing a horn.
- 'Azrail/Azraaiyl/Azrael (Judeo-Christian: Azrael), is the archangel of death (also known as Malak al-maut). He and his subordinative angels are responsible for parting the soul from the body of the dead and will carry the believers to heaven (Illiyyin) and the unbelievers to hell (Sijjin).^{[42][43]}

Other angels and angel groups

- The angels of the Seven Heavens.
- Hafaza, (The guardian angel):
 - Kiraman Katibin (Honourable Recorders),^[44] two of whom are charged to every human being; one writes down good deeds and another one writes down evil deeds. They are both described as 'Raqeebun 'Ateed' in the Qur'an.
 - Mu'aqqibat (The Protectors)^[45] who keep people from death until its decreed time and who bring down blessings.
- Jundullah, those who helped Muhammad in the battlefield.
- Those who draw out the souls of the blessed.^[46]
- Those angels who distribute provisions, rain, and other blessings by God's Command.^[47]
- Those angels who drive the clouds.^[48]
- Hamalat al-'Arsh, those who carry the 'Arsh (Throne of God),^[49] comparable to the Christian Seraph.
- Those that give the spirit to the foetus in the womb and are charged with four commands: to write down his provision, his life-span, his actions, and whether he will be wretched or happy.^[50]
- The angel of the Mountains.^[51]
- Artiya'il, the angel who removes grief and depression from the children of Adam.^[3]
- Munkar and Nakir, who question the dead in their graves.^[45]
- Nāzi'āt and Nāshitāt, helpers of Azrail who take the souls of the deceased.
- Darda'il (The Journeymen), who travel the earth searching out assemblies where people remember God's

name.^[52]

- The angels charged with each existent thing, maintaining order and warding off corruption. Their number is known only to God.^[53]
- Habib, an angel Muhammad met during his night journey composed of ice and fire.
- Ridwan, the keeper of Paradise.
- Maalik, chief of the angels who govern Jahannam (Hell).
- Nineteen angels of hell, who are commonly identified with Zabaniah, torment sinful people in hell.
- Harut and Marut, (*) often depicted as Fallen angels who taught the humans in Babylon magic.^[54]
- Khidr (*), sometimes regarded as an angel which took human form and thus able to reveal hidden knowledge exceeding those of the prophets to guide and help people or prophets.^[55]

Vision of angels

Traditionally, angels are described as corporeal beings, able to appear in human form. Unlike the *jinn* and demons, angels always take on beautiful forms,^[56] except the angels of death, if they approach sinners.^[57] Besides their human form, the angels also have a celestial form in the heavens and according to some Sufi-traditions, it is possible to see an angel during dreams in Malakut.^[58] Angels interceding with other creatures than human, may take on a different shape, like the Bearers of the Throne each take the form of a specific animal.^[59] Some philosophical approaches, made by scholars like Ibn Sina,^[60] refused that angels have bodies. The idea, that angels may take on human form is rooted in the principle writings of Islam. According to Qur'an Jibra'il appeared in a human-like form to announce to Mary the future birth of Jesus. Muhammad accordingly saw Jibra'il in both human and his original angelic shape.^{[61][20][56]} Some folklore traditions maintain that it is still possible to meet Khidr in human shape. If a Sufi can not find Shaikh as a teacher, he would may teach the Sufi.^{[62][63]}

Relation to jinn

Closely connected to the angels are another category of invisible creatures called *jinn*. While the exact correlation between angels, jinn and demons remains vague, the jinn are generally a category of beings apart from the angels. The jinn differ from the angels in regard of their position; while the angels dwell in heaven, the jinn lie on earth along with humans or in an intermediary realm.^[58] Further the jinn have, unlike the angels, desires, have an extended measure of free decisions, thus able to choose between *good* and *evil*. Based on this fact, many scholars argued, that Iblis was not actually an angel, but one of the jinn. However, those scholars who assume Iblis is a fallen angel, consider the jinn be more free, with Iblis having only a limited possibily of choice. The jinn on the other hand are free to roam on earth, can even raise families and build up societies, however are mortal^[64] thus sharing many characteristics with humans. Additionally, the final abode of demons, Iblis and the angels, is predestined, while the extended measure of free-will of the jinn, makes it possible to enter hell or heaven depending on how they lived their lives.

Otherwise, *jinn* are thought of as a sub-category of angels, who guarded the heavens, and distinguished from the other angels, by their creation out of fire and their ability to disobey and procreate their kind.^[65]

Even more blurred is the dinstinction between angels, jinn and demons by the fact, the term *jinn* can also encompass any creature concealed from human eye.^{[66][67]}

See also

- List of theological angels
- List of theological demons
- Sariel

Notes

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