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GUARDIANS OF HUMANITY: HOW ANGELS ARE PORTRAYED IN ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

The concept of angels is pivotal and holds a very strong place in Islam. This is because faith in the unseen world that Allah created is an essential element and one of the six articles of faith. A Muslim's faith would be deemed incomplete without a belief in the existence of angels and other articles of faith such as the belief in Allah, his holy book, all his prophets and messengers, in the day of judgement and in fate and destiny. Believing in such transcendental and metaphysical beings has been a vital characteristic of faith, not just in Islam but in various other religions as well. While angels perform crucial roles in Islam and act as the messengers between the human realm and the unseen world, their perception remains of an enigmatic and obscure nature to many. Through readings of previous literature and the Holy Quran, this research paper discusses and analyses the concept of angels in Islam. In doing so, it aims to specify several aspects of angels—creation, characteristics, duties, names—many of which have been subject to confusion.

INTRODUCTION

In Islam, angels, known as malak/ ملك (singular) and malaa'ikah / ملائكة (plural), are part of the unseen world; a part of the world that the human mind cannot comprehend. Angels are faithful servants of Allah, created to constantly worship, obey and praise Him as mentioned in the following Quranic verses: "They glorify Him day and night, never wavering" [Quran 21:20] and "They, (angels) do not disobey Allah in what He commands them, but do what they are commanded" [Quran 66:6].

The word “angels” in literal Arabic means malak (ملك), derived from the word ma’lak (مألك), which means “message” or, more specifically, “to send a message”; thus, describing the angels as messengers. This is supported by the following Quranic verse: “All praise is due to Allah, Originator of the heavens and the earth, who appointed the angels to be messengers” [Quran 35:1]. Burge (2010) avers that Islamic beliefs regarding angels are much more complex than some scholars believe as a large number of angels are singled out and ‘named’, not always with individual names, in a way that varies widely and suggests that angels are incorporated into Islam in different ways. There are four major ways angels are named in Islam: (i) use of the suffix ‘-īl’; (ii) function names using the formula ‘the Angel of X’; (iii) function names formed without malak, which are often derivations from concepts or (sometimes physical) objects; and (iv) other miscellaneous names of varied or complex origins.

According to The Quran:

The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and (so have) the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, (saying), ‘We make no distinctions between any of His messengers.’ And they say, ‘We hear and obey. (We seek) your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the (final) destination [Qur’an 2:285].

It is important to note that believing in God’s angels comes in four parts:

Believing in their existence.

Believing in their stated features.

Believing in all the angels, their names as well as their abilities.

Believing in their duties that are assigned by God.

Creation and Characteristics of Angels

Angels are created from a luminous substance, described as a form of light according to the mother of the faithful and wife of the prophet. “The messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: ‘The angels are created from light, just as the jinn as created from smokeless fire and mankind is created from what you have been told about’” [Muslim]. While the location where angels were created is not mentioned in the Quran, Muslims believe they were created before mankind as the Quran explains that Allah told the angels of His intention to create a vicegerent on earth: “Behold, your Lord has said to the Angels: ‘I will create a vicegerent on Earth.’” [Quran 2:30]. Angels are created with no free will and can only do what Allah orders them to do. They are pure creatures as they are liberated from any need for material goods and desires such as lust.

Angels have no gender; they are neither female nor male. They are described as beautiful creatures by Allah who, when describing Jibreel (Gabriel), peace be upon him, said: “He (the prophet) has been taught by one Mighty in Power, Dhoo Mirrah (free from any defect in body and mind), then he rose and

became stable” [Quran 53:6]. According to Ibn Abbas, “Dhoo Mirrah means he has a beautiful appearance” and Abu Qutadah stated that “He is tall and beautiful.” Angels have wings as mentioned in the Quran: “Praise be to Allah, who created (out of nothing) the heavens and the earth, who made the angels messengers with wings- two, or three, or four (pairs), adds to the Creation as He pleases: for Allah has power over all things” [Quran 35:1]. Angels are also known to be of great size and the greatest of them all is Jibreel, peace be upon him. Abdullah Ibn Mas’ood (may Allah be pleased with him) said “the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) saw Jibreel in his true form. He had six hundred wings, each of which covered the horizon”. The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “I saw Jibreel descending from heaven and his great size filled the space between heaven and earth.” [Muslim].

Angels who carry the Throne of Allah possess substantial capacity and are described as amongst the greatest of angels. Jabir Ibn’ Abdullah (may Allah be pleased with him), quoting the prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), said: “I have been given permission to speak about one of the angels of Allah who carry the Throne. The distance between his ear-lobes and his shoulders is equivalent to a seven-hundred-year journey.” [Abu Dawood]

The angels have different statuses, ranks and categories. The best of them is said to be those who were present in the battle of Badr as stated in the hadeeth narrated by Mu’adh ibn Rifa’ah al Zuraqi who got it from his father who was at the battle. He said: “Jibreel came to the prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and asked, ‘How do you rate the people among you who were present at Badr?’ He said (something similar to), ‘They are the best of the Muslims’. Jibreel then said, ‘So it is with the angels who were present at Badr.’” [Al-Bukhaari].

Angels neither drink nor eat; as indicated in the conversation between the prophet Abraham and the angels who visited him: “They turned quickly to his household, brought out a fatted calf, placed it before them. He said, ‘will you not eat?’ (when they did not eat), he conceived a fear of them. They said, ‘Fear not,’ and they gave him glad tidings of a son endowed with knowledge” [Quran 51:26-28]. It is written in the Quran [21:20] that angels’ sustenance comes from worshipping God and glorifying him and repeating the words *La ilaha illa Allah* (There’s no deity (God) except the one God (Allah)).

Furthermore, angels do not sleep, marry or procreate. They do not die as the same angels that existed when prophet Adam, peace be upon him, was created still exist today and will continue to until the trumpet is blown on the day of judgement.

Their number

Angels are said to be innumerable.; the number is so high that the human mind cannot comprehend its scope. The number of angels is only known to Allah.

The narration of prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, indicates that there is a sacred heavenly house in the seventh heaven called Baitul Ma'mur—the frequented house—situated directly above the Ka'aba. The prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: “Then I was taken to the Much-Frequented House: every-day seventy thousand angels visit it and leave, never returning to it again, another group coming after them” [al-Bukhaari]. Moreover, the messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “Hell will be brought forth that day by means of seventy thousand ropes, each of which will be pulled by seventy thousand angels.” [Muslim].

Their speed

Angels are able to travel very fast and are said to move at any speed from zero to the speed of light. The following verse describes how fast angels travel: “(Allah) Rules the cosmic affair from the heavens to the Earth. Then this affair travels to Him a distance in one day, at a measure of one thousand years of what you can count.” [Quran 32:5]

Their abilities

God gave angels great powers and abilities, including the ability to take on different forms other than their own. This is shown in the following verse where Allah sent Jibreel to Maryam, the mother of Jesus, in the form of a man: “Then We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects” [Quran 19:17]. Angels also went to Ibrahim in human form who did not know they were angels until they told him so. Jibreel visited the prophet in different forms, sometimes appearing in the form of a companion (sahaabah) and sometimes in the form of a Bedouin.

Their duties

Jibreel: Jibreel is the angel of revelation. Jibreel is considered the most important of all angels in Islam. Jibreel's main duty is to communicate the words of Allah to His prophets and the revelation of the Quran to the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Jibreel is mentioned in the Quran: “Say whoever is an enemy to Jibreel – for he brings down the revelation to your heart by Allah's will, a confirmation of what came before and guidance and good tidings for believers” [Quran 2:97]. Jibreel is also mentioned as a trustworthy spirit in the following Quranic verse that highlights a duty which all Muslim scholars agree refers to him: “And truly this is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds, which the trustworthy spirit (Jibreel) has brought down to your heart, in order that you may be of the warners, in clear Arabic language” [Quran 26:192-195]. It is mentioned through prophetic traditions that Jibreel appeared to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) at appointed times and revealed verses of the Quran to him, which he asked the prophet to repeat. The prophet would listen to the verses, repeat and memorize them. It is said that Jibreel would either take the form of a man when appearing to the prophets or share revelation by

voice only. Umar ibn al- Khattab reported that a man once came to a gathering of the prophet and his companions. No one knew who he was. He was extremely white, wearing white clothing and had jet black hair. He sat very close to the prophet and questioned him in detail about Islam. The man said, "O Muhammad, tell me about Islam". The Prophet said, "Islam is to testify there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, to establish prayer, to give charity, to fast the month of Ramadan, and to perform pilgrimage to the House if a way is possible". The man said, "You have spoken truthfully". He said the prophet had answered correctly each time. It was only when he left that the prophet told his companions that that was the angel Jibreel come to teach them about their religion "The Prophet said to me, "O Umar, do you know who he was?" I said, "Allah and his messenger know best." The Prophet said, "Verily, he was Gabriel who came to teach you your religion." [Muslim 8]. Jibreel is described as the angel that communicated with all the prophets and descends with the blessings of Allah during Laylat al-Qadr—the night of divine destiny. Jibreel is also noted as a warrior as he helped prophet Muhammad at the Battle of Badr. It is also said that Jibreel carried out the destruction of the city of prophet Lut, using a wing to bring about an earthquake and the tip of another to turn the city upside down.

Mikail: Mika'il is often described as the "archangel of mercy" and a "friend to humanity". This is because Mika'il is often depicted as a "giver of rain", bringing about God's rizq (providence) and providing nourishment to bodies and souls. He is seen as responsible for rain and thunder and has helpers who execute what he tells them, by the command of Allah, directing the winds and clouds as Allah wills. Mika'il is said to guard places of worship and reward people's good deeds. As the archangel of mercy, he asks Allah to forgive people's misdeeds and, alongside Jibreel, will be present on the day of judgement. Both he and Jibreel are mentioned in the Quran: "Whoever is an enemy to Allah, and His angels and prophets, to Jibreel and Mikail- Lo! Allah is an enemy to those who reject faith." [Quran 2:97-98]

Israfil: Israfil is the angel tasked with blowing the trumpet announcing the coming of Qiyamah (day of judgement). Abu Salamah ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'A'waf said: "I asked Aishah, the Mother of the Believers, about what the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) used to start his prayer with when he got up to pray at night (qiyam al-layl). She said: 'When he got up to pray at night, he would start his prayer (with the words): 'O Allah, Lord of Jibreel, Mikail and Israfil, Creator of heaven and earth, Knower of the unseen and the seen, you are the Judge of the matters in which Your slaves differ; guide me with regard to disputed matters of truth by Your permission, for You guide whomever You will to the straight path.'" [Muslim].

The Angel of Death: The Angel of Death and his helpers are responsible for parting the soul from the body of the dead. "Say: The Angel of Death, put in charge of you, will (duly) take your souls, then shall you be brought back to your Lord" [Quran 32:11].

Malik: Malik is the keeper or leader of the (19) “guards of Hell” who govern Jahannam. This is mentioned in Quranic verses: “They (the people in Hell) will cry: ‘O Malik! Let your Lord put an end to us!’ He will say: ‘Indeed you will remain.’” [Quran 43:77] and “And what will make you know exactly what Hell-fire is? / It spares not (any sinner), nor does it leave (anything unburnt)! / Burning the skins! / Over it is nineteen (angels as guardians and keepers of Hell) / And We have set none but angels as guardians of the Fire, and We have fixed their number only as a trial for the disbelievers - in order that the People of the Scripture may arrive at a certainty and the believers may increase in faith...” [Quran 74:27-31].

Munkar and Nakeer: These are the angels responsible for testing people’s faith in the grave. In Islam, when a person dies, it is believed that his soul passes through a stage called Barzakh, which exists in the grave. The questioning will begin when the funeral and burial is over. Munkar and Nakir will ask the deceased soul the following questions: (i) Who is your Lord? (ii) What is your religion? (iii) What is your faith about Muhammad (peace be upon him)? A righteous believer responds to these questions stating that their Lord is Allah, their religion is Islam, and their prophet is Muhammad. Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said:

The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: ‘When the deceased is buried (or he said: when one of you is buried), there come to him two blue-black angels, one of whom is called Munkar and the other Nakeer. They ask him, ‘What did you use to say about this man?’ and he says what he used to say: ‘He is the slave and Messenger of Allah: I bear witness that there is no God except Allah and that Muhammad is the slave and Messenger of Allah. They say, ‘We knew beforehand that you used to say this.’ Then his grave will be widened for him to a size of seventy cubits by seventy cubits and it will be illuminated for him. Then they tell him, ‘Sleep.’ He says, ‘Go back to my family and tell them.’ They tell him, ‘Sleep like a bridegroom whom no-one will wake up except his most beloved,’ until Allah raises him up. If (the deceased) was a hypocrite, he says, ‘I heard the people saying something, so I said something similar; I do not know.’ They say: ‘We knew beforehand that you used to say this.’ The earth will be told to squeeze him, so he will be crushed until his ribs are interlocked, and he will remain like that until Allah raises him up [al-Tirmidhi].

Harut and Marut: “And when there came to them a messenger from God confirming what they had, a fraction of those who were given the book threw the Book of God behind their backs, as if they do not know.” [Quran 2:101] This is in reference to the misguided people who rejected the Divine Revelation and instead followed the devilish narrations of Satan that contradict the discourse of God in the Quran. This is the theme in the next two verses which say:

And then followed what the evil ones falsely attributed to the Kingdom of Solomon even though Solomon had never disbelieved; it is the evil ones who

disbelieved, teaching people magic. And they followed what had been revealed to the two angels in Babylon – Harut and Marut – although these two (angels) never taught it to anyone without first declaring: “We are merely a means of testing people; so, do not engage in unbelief.” And yet they learned from them what might cause division between a man and his wife. They could not cause harm to anyone except by the leave of Allah, and still they learned what harmed rather than profited them, knowing well that he who bought it will have no share in the World to Come. Evil indeed is what they sold themselves for. Had they but known! Had they believed and been God-fearing Allah’s reward would have been better! Had they but known! [Quran 2:102-103].

The “evil ones” references all evil beings, whether they belong to the human species or Jinn. This verse discusses how the Israelites were overwhelmed by slavery, ignorance and misery when the moral and material decline set in, drained them of all high ambitions and led them to turn to magic, sorcery and witchcraft. They were misled by evil ones, who made them believe that the mighty kingdom and power of Solomon were products of magic and that they would pass on to them the keys to success. Therefore, instead of working hard, they sought facile means like spells and people became so intrigued and involved with these evil practices that they ignored the words of God. Allah sent Harut and Marut to test mankind’s faith and not teach anyone magic until they had revealed to them the nature of their work and given them fair warning, clarifying that this is an evil act. Despite that, some people were insistent on learning and practicing witchcraft and thus fell bait to temptation. Shaykh Saalih Al-Fawzaan avers that Allah (SWT) sent the two angels as a test to distinguish between believers and non-believers.

Mu’aaqibat or angels in succession: These are the guardians whom Allah sends to protect a person until the appointed time of death. Allah said (interpretation of the meaning): “It is the same (to Him) whether any of you conceals his speech or declares it openly, whether he be hiding by night or goes forth freely by day. For him (each person), there are angels in succession, before and behind him. They guard him by the command of Allah” [Quran 13:10-11]. Ibn ‘Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) explained that the angels in succession are appointed by Allah to guard man from the front and from behind until He decrees otherwise. In addition to that, Mujahid said that there is no person who does not have an angel appointed to protect him when he is asleep and when he is awake, from the jinn, men and wild beasts. There is nothing that comes to him that the angels do not fend off, except for that which Allah grants permission to befall him.

Kiraman Katibeen or honourable recorders: These are the angels appointed to every human being to write down their major and minor deeds. They record the good deeds—hasanat—and bad deeds—sayyiāt. They are mentioned in the following verse: “But verily, over you (are appointed angels in charge of mankind) to watch you, Kiraman (Honourable) Katibeen writing down (your deeds). They know all that you do.” [Quran 82:10-12]. While the angel on the

right records hasanat, the angel on the left records sayyiat and it was reported by Abu Umamah that the messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “The angel on the left does not write anything until six hours have passed after a Muslim does a bad deed. If he regrets it and asks Allah for forgiveness, he casts it aside [does not write it down], otherwise he writes down one sayyiah (bad deed)” [al-Tabaraani].

Angels appointed by Allah that accompany children of Adam during their formation in their mother’s womb: This was reported by Ibn Mas’ood (May Allah be pleased with him) who said:

Verily each one of you is brought together in his mother’s womb for forty days in the form of a drop of fluid (nutfah), then it is a clinging object for a similar period. Thereafter, it is a lump looking like it has been chewed for a similar period. The angel is then sent to him and he breathes into him the spirit. He is also commanded to issue four decrees: to record his sustenance, his life span, his deeds, and whether he will be unhappy (by entering Hell) or happy (by entering Paradise). By Allah, other than Whom there is no deity, verily one of you performs the deeds of the people of Paradise until there is but an arm’s length between him and paradise, and that which has been recorded overtakes him, and so he acts with the actions of the people of the Hellfire and thus enters it; and verily one of you performs the actions of the people of the Hellfire, until there is but an arm’s length between him and Hellfire, and that which has been written overtakes him and so he acts with the actions of the people of Paradise and thus he enters it [Bukhari and Muslim].

Keepers of Paradise: “And those who kept their duty to their Lord will be led to Paradise in groups, till, when they reach it, its gates will be opened, and its keepers will say salamun alaikum (peace be upon you!). You have done well, so enter here, to abide eternally therein” [Quran 39:73].

Carriers of the Throne of Allah: Some angels bear the throne of Allah and are mentioned in the Quran: “Those (angels) who carry the Throne and those around it exalts (Allah) with praise of their Lord and believe in Him and ask forgiveness for those who have believed, (saying), ‘Our Lord, you have encompassed all things in mercy and knowledge, so forgive those who have repented and followed Your way and protect them from the punishment of Hellfire.’” [Quran 40:7].

Angels constituting Allah’s Heavenly Army: These are the angels who stand in rows, never get tired nor sit down. Others bow or prostrate, never raising their heads, always worshipping God.

Some angels travel the world seeking out gatherings of dhikr (remembrance of Allah). Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon Him) said the following:

Allah, be He blessed and exalted, has angels who travel the highways seeking out the people of dhikr. When they find people remembering Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, they call out to one another, "Come to what you hunger for!" and they enfold them with their wings, stretching up to the lowest heaven. Their Lord asks them, and He knows better than them, "What are My slaves saying?" They say: "They are glorifying, magnifying, praising and extolling You." He asks, "Have they seen Me?" They say, "No, by Allah, they have not seen You." He asks, "And how would it be if they saw Me?" They say, "They would be even more fervent and devoted in their praise and worship." He asks, "What are they asking me for?" They say, "They ask You for Paradise." He asks, "And have they seen it?" They say, "No, by Allah, O Lord, they have not seen it." He asks, "And how would it be if they saw it?" They say: "They would be even more eager for it and they would beseech You even more earnestly." He asks, "And what do they seek My protection from?" They say, "From the Fire of Hell." He asks, "Have they seen it?" They say, "No, by Allah, they have not seen it." He asks, "And how would it be if they saw it?" They say: "They would be even more afraid and anxious to escape it." Allah says: "You are My witnesses that I have forgiven them." One of the angels says: "So-and-so is not really one of them; he came (to the gathering) for some other reason." Allah says, "They were all in the gathering, and one of them will not be excluded (from forgiveness) [al-Bukhaari].

CONCLUSION

Believing in angels is an important component of the Islamic faith. It helps Muslims understand Islam and Allah better; one learns more about the mala'ika so that they can ponder and reflect on the greatness of the Creator. The study of the nature and importance of angels is essential in order to provide individuals with a better insight of the divine nature of God Almighty and his creations. Muslims feel a sense of awe and humbleness towards Allah because he created these grandiose beings which reflect on his glory. Therefore, having a clear understanding of these heavenly creatures remains a cornerstone that helps guide the individual to his own faith and religion.

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