

Background article: Beliefs, Angels

Angels and Jinn

One of the articles of faith for Muslims is to believe in the angels. They are mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an and, like everything else, they were created by God [Q. 35:1], therefore they had a beginning and eventually they will come to an end. But angels do not reproduce, so once angels are created by God they live until the final conclusion of the existence of all created things. We do not know how many angels there are in total, but there are Hadith that state that they are more than any other kind of creature. We are told that there are vast numbers in heaven, where they are constantly engaged in the worship of God.

Angels are spirit beings 'created of light.' They do not eat or drink. They don't have free will, which means that they are always completely obedient to God and therefore *muslim*, and so this makes them ideally suited to carrying out the tasks set for them by God [Q. 19:64; 66:6]. They act as God's agents to keep the creation operating as God wills. One of their most important tasks is to act as messengers from God's world to the created world. Because they do not have the capacity to disobey God, they are able to deliver God's messages in a complete and unadulterated form.

The most widely known angel is Jibril (the Arabic form of the name Gabriel), who carries messages from God to the prophets. It was Jibril who appeared to Muhammad on Mount Hira when the Qur'an was first revealed. Angels can take on different forms, appearing and disappearing. Jibril came to Muhammad on many occasions and was associated with the form of a handsome young man, who appeared unannounced bearing no signs of a journey. Like all angels, Jibril has no free will, therefore is incapable of distorting the message of the Qur'an as it was sent down from the realm of God [Q. 2:97]. This is one of the important elements in the Islamic belief that the Qur'an is the word of God, preserved without change from the realm of God to the earth, where it continues to be protected by God from all error. Jibril is sometimes called in the Qur'an, the Trustworthy Spirit [Q. 26:193] and Muslim philosophers have referred to Jibril's role as the Agent of Revelation.

There are other angels who are identified in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, e.g., Mika'il, who guards places of worship [Q. 2:98]; Israfil, who will sound the trumpet on the Day of Resurrection [Q. 39:68; 69:13]; Izra'il, the bringer of death [Q. 32:11]; Ridzwan, the guardian of heaven; Malik, the guardian of hell [Q. 43:77]; and Munkar and Nakir, who interrogate the souls in the grave [see Q. 79:1-2].

Jinn

In Islamic understanding, angels by their very nature cannot disobey God; therefore there is no possibility of a "fallen angel." There is, however, a third order of sentient life called the *jinn*. As angels are created from light and humans from clay, *jinn* are

created from fire. They live in a parallel universe and we cannot usually see them, although some people claim to be able to. The *jinn* have some freewill; therefore they can be obedient servants of God, or disobedient and thus rebellious agents of temptation. Like us, the *jinn* will be judged by God.

Before human beings or *jinn* were first sent to the earth, God held a “conference of the souls” of the angels and all the humans and *jinn* that would ever exist [Q. 2:30-34]. God asked all human beings, “Am I not your Lord?” and they answered “Yes indeed!” Thus no-one can claim to be in ignorance on the Day of Judgement [Q. 7:172-173]. God gave knowledge of the things of the earth to Adam. Then God said that humans were to be sent to the earth as God’s regents or representatives. All the angels were commanded to bow down and acknowledge the superior status and knowledge of Adam. They all obeyed at once. But one of the *jinn*, called Iblis, was in the company of the angels and he chose to rebel [Q. 38:71-85; 18: 50]. His piety gave way to arrogance and he pitted his judgement against that of God and said that, as the *jinn* were created from fire, they were superior to humans, and that he knew the havoc that humans could create on the earth. In this way, Iblis became the Great Tempter, the *Shaytan* or Satan, who was given leave by God not to die until the end of the world [Q. 15:30-43]. With his party of rebellious *jinn*, who decided to follow him, Iblis seeks to tempt human beings to rebel against the will of God [Q. 7:11-18]. God told him that he would have no power over those who are full of *taqwa*, God-consciousness, but those who neglect the guidance of God are prone to rebellion and sin [Q. 20:115].

Some *jinn* are good and we can think of those who might lend assistance to poets or composers. Others are bad and can tempt people to disobedience. They are the source of the literary figure of the genie. They are constantly surrounding human beings and play an important part in popular Islam. They can be dangerous for innocent people to deal with, or to take as spirit guides, as they can lead people into evil ways and destruction. They can possess people and some Muslims specialise in driving them out through exorcism. In traditional societies, many bad things are blamed on the *jinn*; they explain what appears to be beyond explanation. Not surprisingly, some people have been quick to describe people that they do not like or who oppose them as “being possessed by a bad *jinn*.” This is sometimes used to explain childlessness, neurosis, mental illness, strong characters, epilepsy and so on.

Life in the grave

Islam believes that all human beings who follow God’s guidance by treading the path, the Shari’a, that has been laid out for them, are capable of living an ethical life. This life is not all there is. It is only a testing ground and preparation for the life hereafter. Every human being who becomes truly the servant of God in all things can rely upon the mercy of God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:286]. This life is a test that prepares us for death, which is inevitable [Q. 28:88, 3:185]. Death is the point of transition to the afterlife or *akhira*.

Every human being has two angels (*Kiraman* and *Katibin*) assigned to them to record their good and bad deeds throughout their lives [Q. 82:10-12]. It is a mercy from God that good deeds are written as soon as the intention is formulated, whilst bad deeds are not written until after the act has been performed, thus leaving room for failure to carry out a bad intention without penalty. These records will be brought out on the Day of Judgement. When we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do to affect our records of good or bad deeds – except for three things that we can leave behind us. Upright children full of *taqwa* can be an on-going credit to us after we die. If we do something for education, as a teacher or through writing a book, the knowledge goes on spreading long after we are dead. Finally, we can establish a charitable trust (*waqf*) to go on doing good for later generations.

As soon as human beings are buried and the mourners have filled in the grave and left, the angels of the interrogation, Munkar and Nakir, appear. They ask the dead person: Who is your Lord? What religion did you follow? and Who was your prophet? This is followed by a foretaste of the joys of heaven or the torments of hell. If heaven, the grave expands, becomes light and airy and is filled with the sweet scents of heaven. If hell, the grave contracts, becomes dark and cold and is filled with the stench of hell.

Life in the grave, or *barzakh*, is understood in Islam as a timeless state in another dimension, in which one awaits the resurrection [Q. 23:100]. Some Muslims believe that they can perform pious acts in the name of the person who has died and thus assist them during their time in *barzakh*. The state of *barzakh* is difficult fully to understand. After death one enters into another realm that lies beyond our powers to describe. On the one hand, it is real and is to be feared or awaited, but on the other hand, Muslims know that if one digs up a dead body some time later, the process of decay will have taken place.

Our human language and knowledge break down beyond death. One way of glimpsing this is to recall the *mi'raj* or night journey and ascent to heaven of Muhammad. Muhammad was taken from Makka to Jerusalem and from there ascended to heaven where he had an audience with God. All this took place in a single instant. Yet the tradition tells us that on the way to Jerusalem, Muhammad passed the grave of Moses and saw Moses there in prayer. When he arrived in Jerusalem, Muhammad was greeted by all the earlier prophets, including Moses, and he led them in prayer. After his initial audience with God, Muhammad met Moses in heaven and held conversation with him. That is three meetings with Moses in three quite different contexts all in a single instant. In this way we can see that something that happens after death can be both 'real' and beyond our earthly comprehension.