

Programme Three; Belief in Angels.

3.0 Angels- Introduction.

As Muslims, we are required to believe that Allāh has created angels, all with different forms and different tasks. In the Holy Qur’ān, Allāh states:

‘The Messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and so do the believers. Each one believes in Allāh, His angels, and His messengers...’ (2:285).

If a person refuses to believe in the existence of angels, then he is no longer considered a Muslim.

3.1. The key attributes of angels.

From the Qur’ān and Sunna, we are able to identify the key features of angels:

- i. Allāh created the angels from *Nur* (light).¹
- ii. They have been created to be obedient. In other words, they cannot perform any act contrary to the will of Allāh. The Qur’ān states, ‘the angels fear their Lord above them and they do what they are commanded’ (16: 50).
- iii. They do not eat or drink.
- iv. They are not male or female. This refutes the claim of the pagan Arabs who would characterise the angels as being female.
- v. They are hidden from the sights of ordinary Muslims.
- vi. They can change into different forms, as Allāh wishes.
- vii. Only Allāh knows their exact number (Qur’ān, 74: 31).

3.2. Some of their duties.

Allāh Almighty has allocated angels to perform certain duties. The most prominent angels are four: Jibrā’īl, Mikā’īl, Isrā’īl, and Isrāfīl (peace be upon them).

i. Jibrā’īl (peace be upon him).

He is the messenger of revelation for the Prophets; his duty is to deliver the word of Allāh to the prophets and messengers.

Jibrā’īl can take on many forms, but only the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) saw him in his original, created form. Regarding the verse ‘And surely he saw the messenger on the bright horizon’², Ibn Hajar writes that it refers to when the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) saw Jibrā’īl with six-hundred wings on the bright horizon.

ii. Mikā’īl (peace be upon him).

He is the angel of rain; he controls the clouds and moves them to wherever Allāh wants them. He is also in charge of *Rizq* (sustenance).

¹ *Sahih Muslim*. Book of Zuhd and Raqa’iq. Hadith no. 5314.

² Surah Takvir; verses 19-23.

iii. Isrā'īl (peace be upon him).

He is the angel who takes the souls at the time of death. The Qur'ān states:

‘Say (O Messenger!): ‘the angel of death, who is set over you, will [one day] take your souls, then you shall be brought to your Lord’ (32: 11).

iv. Isrāfīl (peace be upon him).

He is the angel who will blow the horn on the Day of Judgement.

Other angels and their duties include:

v. The two writers; *Raqīb* and *Atīd* (also called *Kirāman Kātibīn*).

The Qur'ān states:

‘And indeed over you (are appointed angels) to watch you. *Kirāman Kātibīn*. They know all that you do’ (82: 10-12).

Thus *Raqīb* writes all the good deeds on the right side and *Atīd* writes all the bad things on the left. Of the two, the angel of good deeds (*Raqīb*) has more authority. So if the Muslim intends a wrongful act, *Raqīb* orders the writer of bad things not to write it immediately. He orders him to allow the Muslim time so that he may remember Allāh or seek forgiveness. If he does seek forgiveness or remember Allāh then he saves himself from sin.

vi. *Munkar* and *Nakīr*, who are the two angels that ask the three questions in the grave.

vii. Some angels are entrusted with enforcing Allāh’s wrath and anger over sinful people.

ix. There are angels who formulate the physical features of the baby in the womb of the mother and infuse life into it.

x. Some are entrusted to protect Allāh’s pious servants.

xi. Some are entrusted with guarding Paradise and welcoming its inhabitants. Allāh states in the Qur'ān:

‘And those who were conscious of their Lord will proceed towards Paradise in great numbers, and when they reach it, they shall find its gates wide open and its keepers (the angels) will say to them, ‘peace be upon you! You have done well; enter this Paradise forever’ (39: 73).

xii. Some angels appear on earth during special, religious events. For example, Abū Huraira (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘On every Friday, the angels take their stand at every gate of the mosque to write the names of the people according to the time of their arrival for Friday prayer. And when the Imam sits (on the pulpit for the sermon), they fold up their scrolls and get ready to listen to the sermon.’³

³ *Sahih Muslim*. Book of Jum’a. Hadith no. 1417.

xiii. The *Sayyāhūn*.

In a Hadith recorded by Imam al-Nasā'ī in his *Sunan*, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

'For Allāh are travelling (*Sayyāhūn*) angels on earth, [whose task] is to pass on the Salām of my Umma to me.'⁴

3.3. Who are superior; men or angels.

There is a long-standing argument whether men are superior in the eyes of Allāh or angels. Overall, it seems most of the Ahl Sunna have accepted that men are superior. Here is a summary of the two sides of the argument:

3.3.1. Men are superior.

- Allāh ordered the angels to bow to Adam (peace be upon him). This indicates that the messengers are superior, since the inferior bow to the superior.
- Allāh taught Ādam the names of all things (2: 31). The story indicates that Allāh intended to highlight the superiority of man over angels, since he possessed more knowledge.
- In the Qur'ān, Allāh states:

'Indeed Allāh chose Ādam, Nūh, the family of Ibrāhīm and the family of Imrān over the worlds (*Ālamīn*)' (3:33)

This shows that messengers are better than angels, since the angels are part of the worlds (*Ālamīn*).

3.3.2. Angels are superior.

Those who argue that angels are better do so on the following grounds:

- The Mu'tazila, philosophers and some Ashā'ira have suggested that angels are superior to men because they are pure spirits, free from lust and anger.⁵ In response to this, we say that angels are totally subservient, and could not perform sin even if they wanted to. Allama Sa'd al-Dīn Taftazānī explains:

'Man achieves virtues and perfection in knowledge and practice in spite of such hindrances and impediments such as lust and anger and the recurrence of necessary wants which diverts his attention from acquiring the perfections of life. There is no doubt that religious service and acquiring perfections, when done in spite of preoccupations, are more difficult and display further sincerity; so man is more excellent.'⁶

⁴ *Sunan al-Nasa'i*. Book of Sahv (forgetfulness), Chapter, Salam upon the Prophet. Hadith no. 1265. The same Hadith has also been recorded by Imam Ahmad (Hadith no. 3484) in his *Musnad* and Imam Darmi in his *Sunan* (Hadith no. 2655).

⁵ pp. 177-178. *ibid. Sharh al-Aqa'id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani. Maktaba Khair Kathir, Karachi, Lahore. n.d. on publication.

⁶ *Ibid.*

- Some have argued that angels are better because the prophets actually learned from the angels and benefited from them. Allāh says in the Qur’ān:

‘He (the Prophet) has been taught by the one mighty in power (Jibra’īl)’ (53:5)

And the teacher is better than the student.

In refutation of this, Taftazānī says that in essence it was Allāh teaching the prophets; the angels were merely intermediaries passing on the message of His.

- The third argument is that there are many places in the Qur’ān where the angels are mentioned first before the prophets in a sentence. For example:

‘Each one believes in Allāh, His angels, and His messengers...’ (2:285).

Their being mentioned first is only – according to the argument – because they are better in honour and dignity.

The answer to this is that they are mentioned first because their existence was prior to that of man. Also, believing in them is more of a mystery and so belief in them is emphasised more.

However there can be no doubt that some angels hold a very special rank and perform some important duties of Allāh. With this in mind, Allama Sa’d al-Dīn Taftazānī orders the superiority rankings in the following manner.

- a. The messengers from the men.
- b. The messengers from the angels (such as Jibra’īl).
- c. Ordinary men.
- d. Ordinary angels.⁷

⁷ p. 176. *Sharh al-Aqa’id al-Nasfiyya*. Allama Sa’d al-Din al-Taftazani. Maktaba Khair Kathir, Karachi, Lahore. n.d. on publication.