



# In Pursuit of Conviction II: Do You Really Believe in Angels?

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## Author Biography

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## Introduction

The ‘In Pursuit of Conviction’ series aims to instill confidence in the core pillars of the Islamic worldview. This article addresses the second pillar of faith: belief in angels. This belief is often misunderstood as being a superfluous concept that has no real significance in our day-to-day lives. Many believers may see it as just an abstract theoretical belief to be affirmed without appreciating its significance as one of the core pillars of faith, each of which is crucial for human beings to pursue the upward spiritual path in life. Hence, the angelic realm must be relevant and believing in angels must provide us with powerful sources of meaning in our lives. The goal of this paper is to uncover this hidden source of light by articulating the cosmological, spiritual, eschatological, and psychological relevance of angels to humankind. In addition to this, we preface the discussion by establishing the epistemological framework necessary for the study of angels and highlighting some of the fallacies underlying objections to their existence. With a more comprehensive understanding of the theology of angels, we can enhance our lives with the light of this article of faith.

## Answering skeptics - Why do we believe in angels?

Belief in angels is a widespread phenomenon, existing both historically and presently in many cultures and religions. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) said, “All of humanity has generally affirmed the presence of [both] angels and demons except a few rare cases in different nations.”<sup>1</sup> Having said that, he admits that there are skeptics present within a culture that tend to deny their existence, “You would not find an entire culture deny them outright, only particular individuals or groups from amongst them.”<sup>2</sup>

In our times, many scoff at the religious belief in angels and consider it just one of the many superstitious ideas humanity has developed in response to the uncertainty of the future. It is also viewed as an archaic way of explaining natural phenomena prior to the advent of the scientific revolution. Others have claimed that belief in

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Kitāb al-nubuwwāt*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Maktabat Aḍwā’ al-Salaf, 2000), 194-95.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, 195.

angels merely arises from a human desire to seek non-human intelligence and beings.

Nothing has greater fascination for the human mind than manifestations, supposed or real, of something akin to human intelligence in non-human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, according to the skeptics, human beings must have ‘invented’ the concept of angels as a fulfillment of this fascination, as a superstitious way of dealing with existential angst and as a method of explaining what they couldn’t understand in nature. They argue that since human civilization has progressed, we no longer need to hold such primitive beliefs about the world.

Such arguments against believing in angels commit the genetic fallacy, whereby a person attempts to dismiss a belief by ostensibly explaining how the belief arises. The truthfulness of the content of a belief is independent of how particular individuals come to that belief. This is the difference between ontology (reality) and epistemology (ways of knowing reality). For example, a person may believe that it will rain tomorrow due to a superstition that it must rain on the 13th of every month. While we would reject the epistemology as superstitious and irrational, we cannot negate the possibility that it will rain tomorrow purely on those grounds. Similarly, just because some people hold religious beliefs out of fear, emotion, or blind acceptance does not mean that the beliefs themselves can be challenged purely on that basis.

Furthermore, many people claim that, since there is no empirical or logical proof for the existence of angels, they cannot exist. Such arguments are hardly new and Ibn Taymiyyah himself responds to this common trope among skeptics today, “Some who engage in philosophy, attempt to reject their (angels’) existence due to absence of knowledge, but not knowledge of their absence.”<sup>4</sup> As Ibn Taymiyyah demonstrates here, the response to such a claim is to turn it back to the one making the argument. There is no rational or empirical proof to suggest that angels cannot exist. Furthermore, as we will see in this paper, there are good reasons to suggest

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<sup>3</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *The Angels and Us* (USA: Touchstone, 1993), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Kitāb al-nubuwwāt* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazm, 1974), 195.

that scientific explanations of the world are ontologically incomplete without reference to metaphysical forces.

## Angels and epistemology

Before delving into the various roles that angels play in our lives, it is important to discuss the nature of angelic beings from the Islamic perspective. Because of the ubiquity of this concept across cultures and religions, it is very easy for people to falsely equate the Islamic view of angels with that of Christianity, for example. This can become a source of doubt for Muslims as they wrongly assume that Muslims believe in angels as they are visually depicted in Western culture, often as winged humans. The Qur'an makes it a point to repudiate mythological conceptions of the angels:

And they have made the angels, who are servants of the Most Merciful, females. Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be recorded, and they will be questioned. (Qur'an 43:19)

Has your Lord favored you [pagans] with sons and taken angels as His daughters? You are truly making an outrageous claim. (Qur'an 17:40)

Unlike cultural mythologies, Islam provides a rationally coherent theology that can be taken seriously at face value and actually serves to provide a more meaningful and sensible understanding of reality. Islamic theology takes quite a grounded epistemological approach to ideas of the unseen world. The realm of the unseen is wholly unlike the realm of the material world. Nothing in human imagination can approximate it. Any descriptions or claims about the unseen must be derived from revelation. This guards the Islamic worldview from being tarnished by superstitions and irrational ideas regarding the unseen world. Furthermore, the concept of the finality of *nubuwwah* (prophethood) with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ ensures that no figure can emerge later and claim revelation so as to add dubious ideas to Islamic theology.

It is important to also be cautious about those who attempt to rationalize and reduce the concept of angels to simply 'forces of nature' that correlate to scientific constructs from the physical sciences. The reality of the angelic realm and the

nature of its interaction with the world we empirically sense are beyond the purview of the scientific enterprise and cannot be traversed in any certain way through reason beyond conjecture. Science is an epistemological method that is restrained by its focus on purely empirical data. Thus, it cannot comment on metaphysical ideas such as values, morality, beauty, let alone attempt to theorize the nature of angelic beings.

Therefore, the traditional text-based approach to Islamic theology should not be seen as blind literalism and dogmatism. Rather, it is a sensible approach to questions that cannot be addressed by science, due to the fundamental limitations of empirical data. A person may object that since there are no empirical data, and angels cannot be studied by science, we should be able to simply dismiss the concept as unscientific. Here, a distinction needs to be made between something that is unscientific (violates science) and something that is supra-scientific (beyond science). Claiming that the earth is flat would be unscientific, but claiming that multiple unseen dimensions of spacetime form a Calabi–Yau manifold would be supra-scientific, albeit within the realm of mathematical theory. Similarly, the existence of angels in a realm we cannot empirically witness is a supra-scientific concept, not an unscientific one.

## **What about the tooth fairy? Beyond mythology**

At this junction, a person may attempt to equate angels with mythological ideas. Does this mean that we have to accept the possibility of unicorns, the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, Russell's Teapot, or the skeptic's favorite, the Flying Spaghetti Monster? Here, it is important to differentiate empirical and physical entities from metaphysical/spiritual entities.<sup>5</sup> The tooth fairy, unicorns, Santa Claus and other fictitious characters of this genre are physical entities that are claimed to exist or interact with our world. In such a situation, we can use science to evaluate the accuracy of this claim. For instance, a person can put a tooth under their pillow and place a camera to observe whether the tooth is removed by a fairy at night and

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<sup>5</sup> Nazir Khan, "Atheism and Radical Skepticism: Ibn Taymiyyah's Epistemic Critique," *Yaqeen*, July 7, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/nazir-khan/atheism-and-radical-skepticism-ibn-taymiyyahs-epistemic-critique/#when-is-skepticism-reasonable>.



replaced with money. This scientific experiment is sufficient to consider the notion of tooth fairies ‘unscientific,’ since it is claimed that they *physically* remove the tooth and replace it with coins.

As for Russell’s Teapot,<sup>6</sup> the clever skeptic would rebut that it can be so tiny that it is unable to be seen by our observational instruments on earth. The Flying Spaghetti Monster<sup>7</sup> may be claimed to be from another dimension, empirically inaccessible just as we claim about the angels. However, there is a stark difference between imagining an entity or creature based on mundane objects encountered by humans in the physical world (like spaghetti or teapots) and discussing matters that transcend the physicality of this world entirely.

Moreover, we must also differentiate between ideas that are products of an individual’s imagination versus ideas that come from divine revelation. The phenomenon of revelation is a serious issue that requires appropriate academic appraisal, not reflexive skepticism and infantile mockery. To simply attribute all claims of revelation to forgeries before examining the person and product of revelation is intellectually lazy. The topic of revealed knowledge is beyond the scope of this article and will be dealt with in its own right in a future paper, God Willing. Suffice it to say, genuine claims to revelation should be treated differently than ideas known to be the product of individual imagination.

Lastly, we must differentiate between what has actual relevance to our life and what is mere conjecture that has no bearing on our daily affairs. Pontificating about the existence of teapots in outer-space does not have any real consequences for, or bearing on, a person’s life. The existence of angels that record our deeds, for example, on the other hand is a very relevant idea that has ultimate significance in our lives. Their existence implies we are accountable in this life for the choices that we make and that we will see what they’ve recorded in the next life and be judged accordingly.

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<sup>6</sup> Bertrand Russell, “Is There a God?,” 1952, <https://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~russell/cpbr11p69.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas E. Cowan, “Religion on the Internet,” *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath III (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 357-76.

## What are angels from an Islamic perspective?

From the outset we must keep in mind the general methodology Muslim theologians have employed when attempting to understand the unseen world. Among mainstream Muslim scholars there is a general consensus that we cannot anthropomorphize the unseen world based on the descriptions that are given to us in revelation. That is to say, the unseen world contains realities that we have never empirically seen, nor can our imaginations ever fully grasp them. Therefore, we must understand it with adjectives that convey some meaning but cannot entirely capture its unique essence.

Allah tells us about this regarding the descriptions of paradise in the next world,

Every time they are provided with fruit from it, they say, “This is what we have been provided with before,” and it is given to them in likeness. (Qur’an 2:25)

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also informs us that Allah ﷻ said about paradise,

I have prepared for My righteous servants that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has ever imagined.<sup>8</sup>

## Angelic substance

As mentioned, one of the reasons why many people may find it difficult to believe in angels is because of the way various religious and cultural traditions have depicted them. From the Islamic perspective, the reality of angels cannot be understood by imagining their descriptions based on our experience in this world. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told us that the angels are made from an entirely different substance than human beings and the rest of the organisms and animals on earth, “The angels were created from light.”<sup>9</sup>

Life that is derived from light would be a very different reality to organic life that we interact with in this world. Therefore, when we find physical descriptions of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2824.

<sup>9</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2996.



angels in the Qur'an and Sunnah, we should not analogize to organisms we witness in the animal kingdom. Furthermore, just as we see the diversity of life within and between species in this world, we find the same pattern when looking at the description of the angels. There is not one prototypical angel, but rather a variety of angels with a diversity of features based on their roles.

## Angelic wings

The Qur'an describes the diversity within the angelic species' wings,

All praises and gratitude are due to Allah, Creator of the skies and the earth, Maker of angelic messengers having wings, two or three or four. He increases in creation what He wills. Certainly Allah has power over all things. (Qur'an 35:1)

It should be emphasized that when the wings are described, we accept the description as the general idea of a 'wing,' but recognize that an angel's wing is from the unseen, and therefore cannot be compared to the wings of birds or insects. Ibn Ḥajr al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 858 AH), the famous commentator of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* mentions, "The scholars have said regarding the wings of the angels that they are of an angelic nature and cannot be understood except in its meaning."<sup>10</sup> Al-Suhaylī (d. 581 AH), best known for his commentary on Ibn Hishām's Prophetic biography, also mentions this theological principle,

The people of knowledge have said regarding the wings of angels, they are not like what is imagined similar to the wings of birds... the reality of their qualities cannot be discerned rationally nor have they been explained through revelation... and there is no benefit in trying to understand their reality.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of number, the angels are not limited to a maximum of four wings, as we have been told that the Angel Gabriel has 600 wings.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ described 'rubies' and 'pearls' emerging from these wings.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Ḥajr, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 7 (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Malik Fahad, 1991), 589.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Rawḍ al-ānif fī tafsīr al-sīrah al-nabawīyah li-Ibn Hishām*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub 'Ilmiyah, n.d.), 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4856.

<sup>13</sup> *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 4386. Ibn Kathīr grades the *isnād* (chain) as fair in *al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1990), 47.

This further emphasizes the point that the reality of the angels and their physical descriptions are beyond anything we have ever experienced in this world.

## Quantity of angels

The quantity of angels is such that their number cannot be fathomed. Allah mentions, “And no one knows the (number of) soldiers of your Lord except Himself” (Qur’an 74:31).

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said,

Indeed I see what you do not see, and I hear what you do not hear. The heavens squeak, and they have the right to squeak because there is no space within it wider than 4 fingers’ width except that there is an angel prostrating to Allah ﷻ.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the following narration from the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when he ascended to the heavens with Jibrīl shows the sheer quantity of angels in existence,

Jibrīl said to me: This is *Bayt al-Ma‘mūr*, 70,000 angels worship here every day and when they leave they never return.<sup>15</sup>

## Why does all this matter?

The descriptions of the angels that are offered in the Qur’an and Sunnah are not just interesting facts to store in our brains. Rather, they can serve to inspire the heart with awe and wonder when contemplating the majestic nature of these entities. Imagine that the cosmos is filled with these sublime creatures that play an active role in our lives in a number of different capacities. Such a thought can turn the most mundane of activities into a spectacle when viewed through the prism of faith. Consider a young lad walking on a cold winter day on cracked concrete to an unsightly building that contains a small rental unit that functions as a *masjid* classroom. Though his quest for knowledge takes place in seemingly dull if not dreary surroundings in this physical realm, on another plane of reality an entirely

<sup>14</sup> *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2312.

<sup>15</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3207.

different scene is encountered. With our faith in the angels, this walk becomes a grand and monumental parade, with angelic beings lowering their wings and giving this student a hero's welcome. As the Prophet ﷺ said,

He who follows a path in quest of knowledge, Allah will make the path of *jannah* easy to him. The angels lower their wings over the seeker of knowledge, being pleased with what he does.<sup>16</sup>

Learning about the beautiful descriptions of angels serves to increase the impact narrations like the above have on our mind and soul when we strive for goodness in this world.

## What are the roles of the angels?

The remainder of the article will be focused on the relevance of angels to human beings. This will be elucidated through a survey of the various roles angels have been given in relation to our existence. The Qur'an quotes the angels in proclaiming, "There is no one from among us except that they have a particular station" (Qur'an 37:164). Imām al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH)<sup>17</sup> and Imām al-Qurṭubī (d. 671 AH)<sup>18</sup> mention that the stations assigned to the angels are places for them to engage in worship of Allah ﷻ. Part of this worship, as Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685 AH) comments, involves carrying out Allah's commands in the ordering of the world.<sup>19</sup>

It should be emphasized that these angels are not independent demi-gods that act on their own accord. Rather, they are subordinate to the command of Allah ﷻ and do not disobey His orders. Thus, Allah ﷻ has created both the means and the effect in a perfect system of order out of His Wisdom.

When we turn to the Qur'an and Sunnah we find a wide range of tasks that the angels have been assigned. We have broadly categorized these roles as: cosmological, psychological, spiritual, and eschatological.

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<sup>16</sup> *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, no. 3641.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, vol. 19 (Cairo: Dār Hijr, 2001), 651.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, vol. 18 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2007), 114.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl*, vol. 5 (Beirut, Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1998), 20.

The cosmological function of the angels refers to the active role they play in the governance of the physical world, including shaping the development of the embryo, directing the clouds and winds, bringing forth rain and vegetation, and so on. The psychological function refers to the phenomenon of angelic inspiration into the minds of human beings, whispering positive thoughts. The spiritual role refers to the support, aid, and prayers that angels give to humanity. The eschatological role includes the recording of deeds in real time, the interrogation in the grave, the blowing of the trumpet, and serving as gatekeepers and custodians of hellfire and paradise in the next world. Hence, it is clear that the angelic realm plays a significant role in all aspects of our life, from before birth to the afterlife.

## Cosmological function

This function of the angels is perhaps the most contentious that many believers of all traditions find difficulty grappling with. According to the Islamic tradition, angels do play a pivotal role in the governance of the natural world. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 751 AH) states, “every movement in the universe is caused by angels.”<sup>20</sup> The clouds, the mountains, the wind, and the rain are all natural phenomena that depend on angelic activity for their existence. The Qur’an and Sunnah are quite explicit in describing this role of angels in various capacities. Before proceeding, it is important to understand the relationship between scientific understanding and belief in angels.

## Science and angels

How do we reconcile our theological belief regarding the involvement of angels in the natural world with the scientific model of nature that doesn’t seem to require any angels for its explanation? The answer to this question lies in understanding the philosophy of science.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Rawḍat al-muḥibbīn* (Jeddah: Dār ‘Alam al-Fawā’id, 2009), 92.

## Science and reality

The relation between scientific theories and reality is central to the philosophy of science.<sup>21</sup> Do scientific theories provide approximations of ultimate reality? Or do they merely provide us with a *convenient* framework to make reliable predictions in reality? This is a philosophical question rather than a scientific one, and thus cannot be answered through empirical observation or experimentation.

Philosophers advocating for scientific realism maintain that theoretical entities of science (such as gravity and quarks) are real objects.<sup>22</sup> The consequences of this philosophical outlook are that the world becomes ‘populated’ with these entities that come with their own ontological<sup>23</sup> baggage since they are ultimately metaphysical objects.<sup>24</sup> This poses a problem because it would mean that all scientific theories implicitly affirm the existence of a metaphysical layer of reality that determines the direction of nature. In other words, it seems to lend support to theological ideas regarding metaphysical involvement in the natural world.

Said Nursi, the famous 20th-century Turkish thinker, explains the ontological baggage that scientific theories come with.

How can so-called natural laws have any influence upon creation? Being no more than nominal and imaginary principles, they cannot be the origin, nor even the cause, of any kind of existence, nature, identity and external reality if there are no angels to represent, manifest, and administer them.<sup>25</sup>

Philosophers who advocate for scientific instrumentalism wish to dispense with the ontological responsibility that comes with affirming the real existence of theoretical entities.<sup>26</sup> Scientific instrumentalism means to redirect the goal of science away from arriving at objective truth or reality and toward arriving at

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<sup>21</sup> John T. Cacioppo, Gün R. Semin, and Gary G. Berntson, “Realism, Instrumentalism, and Scientific Symbiosis: Psychological Theory as a Search for Truth and the Discovery of Solutions,” *American Psychologist* 59, no. 4 (2004): 214.

<sup>22</sup> James W. Cornman, “Craig’s Theorem, Ramsey-Sentences, and Scientific Instrumentalism,” *Synthese* 25, no. 1 (1972): 82-128.

<sup>23</sup> Ontology refers to the understanding of the nature of being and existence.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Jennings, “Scientific Quasi-Realism,” *Mind* 98, no. 390 (1989): 225-45.

<sup>25</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words: The Reconstruction of Islamic Belief and Thought* (Clifton, USA: The Light, 2013), 532.

<sup>26</sup> Nursi, 532.

convenient models that can make predictions and be used for the purpose of innovation and advancement.<sup>27</sup>

Ernest Nigel, the famous 20th-century analytic philosopher defines scientific theories under an instrumentalist view as,

A rule or a principle for analyzing and symbolically representing certain materials of gross experience, and at the same time an instrument in a technique for inferring observation statements from other such statements.<sup>28</sup>

P. K. Stanford, a philosopher of science, writes in his chapter on Instrumentalism in the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Science*,

Our best scientific theories are not (as the scientific realist would have it) accurate descriptions of how things stand in otherwise inaccessible domains of nature but are instead simply powerful conceptual tools or instruments for engaging practically with the world around us.<sup>29</sup>

If this is the goal of science, then the question of whether the theories are true or false in an objective sense becomes irrelevant. Scientists are then able to remain agnostic regarding the philosophical and theological issue of the nature of reality.

### Angels and nature

The key take-away from this discussion is that, regardless of which view one takes, scientific theories do not replace or negate the involvement of metaphysical entities or determinants in the natural world. Therefore, the Islamic theological understanding of angelic entities being involved in natural processes cannot be considered an irrational belief. Beyond merely not being irrational, it has been argued that the world does not make sense without adopting such ontological commitments.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael R. Gardner, "Realism and Instrumentalism in 19th-Century Atomism," *Philosophy of Science* 46, no. 1 (1979): 1-34.

<sup>28</sup> Gardner, 1-34.

<sup>29</sup> P. Kyle Stanford, "Instrumentalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Science*, ed. Paul Humphreys (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014-2016).



G. K. Chesterton, an English philosopher, in 1903 observed that many of the young generation at the time had returned to a spiritual view of the world, despite major advancements in the sciences. He writes,

What this doctrine is may be right to state as baldly and as briefly as possible; it is the view that the world, closely examined, does point with an extreme suggestiveness to the existence of a spiritual world, of a world of agencies not apparently produced by matter, capable to some extent of controlling and inspiring, capable to some extent of being known.

He then explains that, without having this metaphysical worldview, the natural world stops making sense,

We have not returned to the spiritual theory because of this or that triviality—because of a justification of the Fourth Gospel or a rap on the table. We have returned to it because, by rejection of rationalism, the world becomes suddenly rational.<sup>30</sup>

### **The problem of agencies**

In a fascinating conversation entitled “Angels Without Wings,” Bruno Latour, a French philosopher and anthropologist, explains that our advancement in the scientific understanding of the world has not replaced the need for belief in angels, rather it has made us even more in need of an explanation of why things are the way they are.<sup>31</sup>

If animism is about things having agency, then one thing modernists have done has been to multiply the amount of agencies in the world to an extraordinary degree. But we have silenced it.<sup>32</sup>

Central to the discussion is the problem of ‘agencies’ in nature. An agent is something that moves according to its own pattern or ‘will.’ According to Latour, scientists are surrounded by entities that demonstrate agency,

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<sup>30</sup> G. K. Chesterton, “The Return of the Angels,” *Daily News*, March 14, 1903.

<sup>31</sup> Anselm Franke and Bruno Latour, “Angels Without Wings: A Conversation Between Bruno Latour and Anselm Franke,” in *Animism*, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Franke and Latour.

Atoms have agency, cells have agency, stars have agency, psyches have agency; and then you begin to look at the specificity and the specification of all these agencies, and you realize that you begin to jump from one field to the other.<sup>33</sup>

The idea of agency being present in nature stems from the notion that the natural world seems to behave in an ordered and intelligible way, as if it possesses agency or is controlled by an agent. As long as we produce scientific theories that elegantly describe natural phenomena as an orchestra of interconnected patterns and order, it will beg the unanswered question of how? How do objects in nature seem to interact with a sense of agency if the popular scientific view is that matter is inanimate?

Latour asserts that the belief that the world is made up of inanimate objects is far more difficult to rationalize than the idea that agencies exist in nature,

What has to be explained in my view is the belief in ‘inanimates.’ It is an odd belief, because of course, again, it never worked. So it is this belief in the inanimate that is the big mystery—animism is very easy to explain, but inanimism is very strange. Especially when it’s inanimates speaking by themselves, so they are inanimated but speak, able to close an argument, because they are undisputable. So when you add up all these things that inanimate things do, they are quite full of interesting agencies and animation as well.<sup>34</sup>

Paul Davies, a contemporary cosmologist, recognizes an aspect of this issue in an article entitled ‘Taking Science on Faith’:

Science has its own faith-based belief system. All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way. You couldn’t be a scientist if you thought the universe was a meaningless jumble of odds and ends haphazardly juxtaposed. When physicists probe to a deeper level of subatomic structure, or astronomers extend the reach of their

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<sup>33</sup> Franke and Latour.

<sup>34</sup> Franke and Latour.

instruments, they expect to encounter additional elegant mathematical order. And so far this faith has been justified.<sup>35</sup>

When a person looks to the world, they must have faith that it is intelligible before proceeding to try and understand it. This not only precludes randomness as the origin of the universe but implies the need of a metaphysical explanation for the order and intelligibility of nature.

### **The problem of causality**

The problem of agency extends to the concept of causality. Why do objects cause effects in other objects? The causal relation between two phenomena is often thought to be some sort of rational or empirical axiom or necessity, but this is not the case.<sup>36</sup> There is no rational or empirical principle that dictates how causal relationships should be determined.

Consider the simple example of movement, force, and energy. When billiard balls collide, or when a glass falls to the ground, we can predict what the outcome will be based on measurements of different properties of those objects. Phil Dowe, a contemporary philosopher of science, explains the challenge in understanding the nature of these properties that are measured:

But what sort of thing is the quantity, energy, which is possessed by an object, yet has an identity through time?...In fact, the notion of identity over time suggests that energy is not a property at all, but a thing, a substance, separate from the object, but standing in some relation.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, we are unable to account for the nature of the interaction between these metaphysical properties during a causal event:

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Davies, "Taking Science on Faith," *New York Times*, November 24, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/24/opinion/24davies.html>.

<sup>36</sup> J. Bigelow and R. Pargetter, "Metaphysics of Causation," *Erkenntnis* 33, no. 1 (1990): 89–119.

<sup>37</sup> P. Dowe, "What's Right and What's Wrong with Transference Theories," *Erkenntnis* 42, no. 3 (1995): 363–74.

Once such quantities are ascribed to objects an ‘accounting’ problem arises when bodies interact in that we wish to know what happens to them before, during, and after interaction takes place.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, the concept of causal relation seems to be a metaphysical property that describes how two physical bodies interact in the natural world.

The world contains not only causes and effects, but also causal relations holding between causes and effects.<sup>39</sup>

The metaphysical entities embedded within the notion of causality once again come with ontological baggage that indicates a metaphysical layer of influence to the natural phenomena we observe in the world. The nature of this metaphysical layer of reality is something beyond the grasp of scientific and rational inquiry. Rather, scientific and rational inquiry depend on its existence. Believing in the unseen realm is a crucial idea that enables us to see the world as meaningful. According to Latour, this is why there is ontological space for the belief in angelic entities influencing the natural world:

They have room in ontology, yes; not only those, but lots of other entities that were always there. It’s not that they are new; they are always there, with very, very different types of specifications.<sup>40</sup>

## Angels and reality

Muslims should not feel that the angelic realm described in the Qur’an and the Sunnah go against a rational and intelligent understanding of the world. On the contrary, as has been demonstrated through the course of this article, belief in metaphysical entities is completely justified when we examine the nature of the world carefully. The metaphysical concepts of causality, agency, and theoretical entities demonstrate the need for metaphysical commitments for a reasonable ontology. We should not see scientific advancement as a threat to our theological worldview because it simply is unable to examine the metaphysical realm of reality. In fact, scientific advancement actually testifies to order and intelligibility

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<sup>38</sup> J. L. Aronson, “Untangling Ontology from Epistemology in Causation,” *Erkenntnis* 18, no. 3 (1982): 293–305.

<sup>39</sup> Bigelow and Pargetter, “Metaphysics of Causation,” 89–119.

<sup>40</sup> Latour and Franke, “Angels Without Wings.”

in the world, which serves to support the Islamic picture of reality. With this discussion in mind, we are ready to understand the cosmological functions of the angels from an Islamic perspective. We will explore the main functions that have been described by the Qur'an and Sunnah and clarify any potential doubts that may arise.

### Clouds, thunder, and lightning

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was asked by the Jews in Madinah, “‘O Abū al-Qāsim!<sup>41</sup> Inform us about the thunder, what is it?’ He said, ‘An angel among the angels, who is responsible for the clouds. He has a piece of fire (*makhārīq min nār*) with which he drives the clouds wherever Allah ﷻ Wills.’ They then asked, ‘And what is the sound that we hear?’ He replied, ‘It is [the angel] directing the clouds (*zajruhu bi-al-saḥāb*) until they reach where they have been ordered to go.’ They responded, ‘You have told the truth.’”<sup>42</sup>

Modern science informs us that lightning is formed from a strong polarization of positively charged particles at the top of a cloud and negatively charged particles at the base of that cloud. When the polarization is strong enough to overcome the resistance of air, the negative particles at the bottom of the cloud will follow a path to the opposite charge on the ground. This results in the visual spectacle of lightning.<sup>43</sup> The term *makhārīq min nār* is an interesting phrase that may refer to an unseen phenomenon that correlates with that process in the natural world.

The skeptic may object that this is not an accurate description of lightning formation. It is important to understand that this hadith is describing a metaphysical process that underlies this physical phenomenon. Hence, narrations such as these should not be cause for doubt or confusion as they are not descriptions of empirical phenomena.

<sup>41</sup> This is the *kunya* (teknonym) of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

<sup>42</sup> *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, no. 3117.

<sup>43</sup> “Thunder and Lightning,” UCAR Center for Science Education, <https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/storms/thunder-and-lightning>.

## Rain and vegetation

The Archangel Mikā'il (Michael) has a role that has been specifically associated with rainfall and vegetation. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have asked Jibrīl about Mikā'il's responsibilities and Jibrīl responded, "It is over the vegetation and the rain."<sup>44</sup>

There is also a narration attributed to the Prophet ﷺ that explains the roles of the four main angels, Jibrīl, Mikā'il, Isrāfīl, and the Angel of Death as follows:

As for Jibrīl, he is in charge of war and sending revelation, as for Mikā'il he is in charge of every rain that falls, every leaf that grows, and every leaf that falls...<sup>45</sup>

However, this narration is *mursal* to 'Ikrimah ibn Khālīd ibn al-ʿĀṣ (d. 114 AH), which means it is missing the narrator(s) between the second-generation scholar and the Prophet ﷺ.

The Prophet ﷺ was once asked by some of the Jews in Madinah who his ally was among the angels; he responded with "Jibrīl." They replied, "Jibrīl comes with war and fighting, if only it was Mikā'il who comes with mercy, rain, and vegetation, we would follow you."<sup>46</sup>

There are also narrations going back to scholars from the second generation, such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Sābiṭ (d. 118 AH)<sup>47</sup>, and later scholars such as Ibn Kathīr<sup>48</sup> that also mention Mikā'il's role regarding the rain and vegetation.

<sup>44</sup> *Al-Ṭabarānī*, no. 12061. Ibn Ḥajr al-Haytamī mentioned a slight weakness; Muḥammad ibn Abī Laylā was known to have a bad memory (*Majma' al-zawā'id*, 9:22). Ibn Kathīr mentions it is *gharīb*, meaning it is lacking some corroborating evidence (*al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, 1:41). Al-Suyūṭī declared its *isnād* (chain) fair (*hasan*) (*al-Durr al-manthūr*, 1:483).

<sup>45</sup> Abū al-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-adhama* (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀṣimah, 1408 AH) 3:811, no. 380.

<sup>46</sup> *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad*, no. 2483. Aḥmad Shākir declared the *isnād* as *ṣaḥīḥ* (4:161).

<sup>47</sup> *Muṣannaḥ Ibn Abi Shayba* (Riyadh: Maktaba ar-Rushd, 1409 AH), 7:159.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāyah wa nihāyah*, 1:46.



## Mountains

There is mention of an angel responsible for the movement and formation of mountains. In a longer hadith, Bukharī and Muslim record that the angel of the mountains came to the Prophet ﷺ and said to him, “‘O Muhammad, Allah ﷻ has heard what your people have said to you. I am the angel of the mountains. Your Lord has sent me to you so that you may give me orders. What do you want? If you wish I can crush them between the two mountains.’ The Prophet ﷺ said, ‘Rather I hope that Allah ﷻ will bring forth from their loins people who will worship Allah ﷻ alone, not associating any partner with Him.’”<sup>49</sup> This shows the compassion, forgiveness, and grace of the Prophet ﷺ who never took personal revenge and always saw the best in people.

## Life

It is also mentioned that there are angels that are sent to fashion the embryo in the womb as it develops. The Prophet ﷺ said, “‘When forty-two nights have passed, Allah ﷻ sends an angel to the embryo and he gives it shape, forming its hearing, sight, its skin, flesh, and bones. Then he says: ‘O Lord, male or female?’ Then your Lord decrees whatever He Wills and the angel writes it down.”<sup>50</sup>

Based on current findings, sex differentiation takes place around 6 weeks gestation.<sup>51</sup> This would mean around 42 days, which is remarkably congruent with the timeline mentioned in the narrations. One contention that a person may have is regarding sex *determination* at 42 days. Our current understanding of embryology is that sex is really determined at the moment of conception based on whether the fertilizing sperm carries two X chromosomes or an XY pairing. At around 42 days, we merely start to see the biological manifestation of what was already determined at conception. Firstly, it is important to note that this narration does not say that the decision of Allah ﷻ or His determination occurs at 42 days. From the Islamic

<sup>49</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3231; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1795.

<sup>50</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2645.

<sup>51</sup> Eske Bendsen, Anne Grete Byskov, Steen B. Laursen, Hans-Peter E. Larsen, Claus Y. Andersen, and Lars G. Westergaard, “Number of Germ Cells and Somatic Cells in Human Fetal Testes during the First Weeks after Sex Differentiation,” *Human Reproduction* 18, no. 1 (2003), 13–18.

perspective, this determination occurred even prior to conception. Allah has written everything that will occur before this universe was even created,<sup>52</sup> let alone the fetus in the womb. What this narration tells us is that the angels ask the gender because they do not know what Allah has decided. The decree of Allah mentioned in the narration is referring to the immediate decree at this moment, and does not negate the pre-eternal decree that existed long before. That is to say, Allah has decided everything before everything was created, and when the time comes for something to come into existence, He makes another decree at that moment to bring it into existence. As Allah says, “Every day He is involved in the affair” (Qur’an 55:29).

## Death

There is a lengthy narration that describes the journey of the soul from the moment of death to the grave. Given that this section is dedicated to describing the physical functions of the angels, we will focus on the moment of death that is empirically witnessed by human beings in this world. The Prophet ﷺ said, “When a Muslim is about to go into the afterlife and leave this world, the angel of death comes and sits at his head. Then angels descend from the sky with faces like the sun, bringing a shroud from the shrouds of paradise, and perfume from the perfumes of paradise. They all sit with the angel of death as far as the eye can see. So the angel of death says ‘O tranquil soul, come out to forgiveness from Allah ﷻ and His pleasure.’ So he removes the soul, which seeps out like water seeps out from a waterskin.”<sup>53</sup>

He also describes how death occurs for the evil criminals. “The angel of death says, ‘O filthy soul, come out to anger from Allah ﷻ.’ The soul sinks deep into the body, so when it is pulled out it breaks vessels and nerves just like a stick with branches being pulled from a heap of wool.”<sup>54</sup>

The description of the soul breaking through vessels and nerves does not refer to physical damage to vessels and nerves, but to a spiritual reality that we are

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<sup>52</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2653.

<sup>53</sup> *Musnad Imam Ahmad*, no. 18557. Al-Qurtubi has declared this hadith authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) (*at-Tadhkira*, 119), as well as Ahmad Shakir (*‘Umdah at-tafseer*, 1:22) and Al-Albānī (*Ahkām al-janā’iz*, 198).

<sup>54</sup> *Musnad Imam Ahmad*, no. 18557.

unaware of. Once again, these narrations do not contradict our view of the process of death simply because we do not have access to measure qualitative conscious experiences after the soul has left this world.

## Psychological function

From the Islamic tradition we learn that angels have been given the responsibility of providing positive mental energy through inspiring good thoughts in our minds. This lends support against demonic whispering into our minds.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Satan has a portion over the son of Adam and the angel has a share over him. The devil directs man to commit evil actions and deny the truth and the angel encourages man to do good actions and believe in the truth.”<sup>55</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ said, “When a man enters his house or goes to bed, an angel and a devil hasten to him. The angel says, ‘End it off good!’ and the devil says, ‘End it off with bad!’”<sup>56</sup>

There is a profound benefit to be taken from these narrations when it comes to our mental health. While there are many factors that contribute to our overall mental well-being, cognitions (thoughts) are some of the most relevant to mental health professionals. Cognitive therapy involves challenging and replacing negative thoughts about ourselves and the world. Mindfulness aims to nurture a non-judgmental approach to negative thought patterns, enabling us to de-identify with them, thereby allowing the passive removal of those thoughts from our minds.

From these narrations, we learn about the psychological support available to us by way of the angels to counteract negative thinking. Therefore, from an Islamic perspective, adopting a lifestyle that invites the presence of angels is a crucial aspect of good mental hygiene. Increasing the angelic support around us is about restraining from what repels angels and committing to what attracts them. A

<sup>55</sup> *Jami' at-Tirmidhī*, no. 2988. Al-Albānī graded it authentic.

<sup>56</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, 12:343, no. 5533 (Beirut: Mu'assasat ar-Risaala, 1988); al-Mundhirī declared the *isnād* (chain) as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) (*Targhīb wa tarhīb*, 1:284); Ibn Ḥajr grades it as *hasan* (good) (*al-Amāli al-Ḥalbiyya*, 1:25).

subsequent section will inform us of the attractive forces at our disposal. In the following section, we focus on repellent factors so we can avoid them.

## Home environment

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ gave us advice on how to avoid a home that repels angels, “Angels do not enter a house wherein there is a *soorah* (image) or a dog.”<sup>57</sup>

There has been much commentary regarding what is meant by *soorah* in the classical commentaries as well as in the contemporary period with the advent of photography. It is agreed that images here refer to those depicting human beings and animals, however there is disagreement over what the prohibited forms of the images are. A very small minority of scholars including Makki bin Abi Tālib (d. 427 AH)<sup>58</sup>, An-Nuhās (d. 338 AH)<sup>59</sup> and Ibn al-Faras (d. 597 AH)<sup>60</sup> have said this only applies to images that are constructed for the purposes of worship, such as idols.<sup>61</sup> The default position of the Māliki school of thought is that the image is any human or animal that is constructed in three dimensions, regardless of whether it is for worship or not.<sup>62</sup> The majority position of the Hanafis, Shafis, and Hanbalis is that this applies to both three- and two-dimensional images of humans or animals.<sup>63</sup> Dispensation is given to education, children’s toys, as well as garments. Clothing has been made an exception by some scholars due to a narration that suggests the Prophet ﷺ made an exception for embroidery on garments.<sup>64</sup>

The important benefit to take from this discussion is that homes will be designed and decorated according to the values of their inhabitants. The home represents the state of a person’s heart. Even if one does not intend worship, displaying images or statues of people is usually done to revere those individuals and is a means of

<sup>57</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, no. 3227; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2106.

<sup>58</sup> Makkī bin Abī Talīb was a scholar of *qira’āt* (recitation), a linguist, and a commentator of the Qur’an. Having travelled to Andalus for knowledge, he studied the Maliki school of Islamic law.

<sup>59</sup> Abu Ja’far an-Nuhās was a grammarian and early commentator of the Qur’an. He studied under the famous exegete and linguist, az-Zujāj (d. 311 AH).

<sup>60</sup> Ibn al-Faras al-Andalusi was an Islamic legal scholar that trained under the Maliki school of thought under the famous Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi in Andalus.

<sup>61</sup> Al-Alusi, *Ruh al-ma’āni* (Beirut: Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1993), 22:119.

<sup>62</sup> Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Kharshi, *Hāshiya al-Kharshi* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub Ilmiyya, 1997), 4:395.

<sup>63</sup> Council and Ministry of Islamic Affairs of Kuwait, *al-Mawsu’ah al-fiqhiya*, 12:102.

<sup>64</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, no. 3226.

remembering them. This culture still exists today where people hang images of celebrities, athletes, or images of relatives. This repels the angels as it is an environment that has not been emptied for the remembrance of Allah. Muslims seek to purify their hearts of revering anything other than Allah. Removing images of people that are revered helps one empty one's own heart from aggrandizing anyone other than Allah.

## Physical hygiene

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever eats garlic, onions, or leeks, let him not come near our mosque, for the angels are offended by that which offends the son of Adam.”<sup>65</sup>

This hadith informs us of an important axiom in regards to repelling angels from one's self. Physical hygiene is something that also affects angels in a way we do not understand. Therefore, ensuring that one's body and environment are clean is very important to ensure that we are manifesting a lifestyle that invites the angelic presence. From this we can make an association between physical hygiene and mental hygiene from an Islamic perspective. Taking care of one's home environment, personal hygiene, and purity can have an impact on our minds, since it attracts angels who engage in positive whisperings. Therefore, from an Islamic perspective, good mental hygiene involves good physical hygiene.

The value of *ṭahārah* (physical purity) cannot be overstated in Islam, since it is the very first chapter in every manual of Islamic law. This is a unique characteristic of the religion of Islam. This was particularly apparent at a time when hygiene and purity were seen as unnecessary and superfluous in other parts of the world, such as Europe. The late British anthropologist, Jack Goody wrote extensively on the impact of Islam on Europe and mentions,

But there was also a considerable influence on the domestic scene, especially in terms of hygiene and the use of water, about which the Christians had a lot to learn.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 567.

<sup>66</sup> Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 66.

## Spiritual function

There are a number of spiritual functions that angels fulfill that range from prayers, protection, love, and also testing humanity. We experience the various ways that angels interact with us on a spiritual level in our daily lives.

### Testing

The Qur'an describes two angels called Harūt and Marūt that were sent to the Children of Israel as a test. They taught them the dark art of black magic<sup>67</sup> that was used to sow hatred between spouses, break up families, and cause harm to others.<sup>68</sup>

In the Sunnah, we find a long tradition that states an angel took the form of a beggar, a sick person, and a poor man and went to three different households to see how they would treat their unexpected visitor.<sup>69</sup>

Oftentimes people look at vulnerable populations in society with an eye of judgment. Our belief in the angels should restrain us from casting judgment and focus us on what we can do to help them. We do not know whether Allah has sent them as a test, and whether they may, in fact, be angels.

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<sup>67</sup> There is an exegetical debate in the books of *tafsīr* regarding who Harūt and Marūt were, and what they actually taught. Regarding what they taught, some companions and early scholars such as Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32 AH), Sa'īd ibn Jubayr (d. 95 AH), and al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH) have asserted that it was black magic (*siḥr*), while others, such as Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68 AH), Mujāhid (d. 104 AH), and Qatādah (d. 118 AH), have claimed it was how to cause discord between a husband and wife and not black magic itself. Ibn al-Jawzi, *Zād al-Masīr fī 'Ilm al-Tafsīr*, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 79. Furthermore, there is a debate on whether the two individuals (Harūt and Marūt) who taught the people were two angels or two humans. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an al-ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dar Hījir, 2001), 2:332. One reason for these differences of opinion stems from the theological question of why Allah would “send down” evil knowledge and angels with an evil purpose. Those who maintain that the angels taught this knowledge to the people make several arguments to validate their position. One such argument is that this world is one of tests and trials. They point out that by teaching them black magic and clearly stating it is wrong, a person is being tested to see whether they can curb their desires for the sake of Allah ﷻ. They make an analogy to the test given to the army of Saul referenced later in the same chapter (2:249), where the army is taken to a river and told not to drink from it. For the full discussion, refer to al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*. Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an al-ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dar Hījir, 2001), 2:313–69.

<sup>68</sup> Qur'an 2:102.

<sup>69</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3464.



## Prayers

One of the most profound and empowering ways that angels affect us on a spiritual level are the prayers they offer for us. Understanding that these noble and majestic creatures are a support for the believers helps those going through difficulties in isolation and calamity. Knowing that there are heavenly beings that are praying for one's success helps one deal with loneliness.

The heavens almost break from above them, and the angels exalt their Lord with praise and ask forgiveness for those on earth. Unquestionably, it is Allah who is the Forgiving, the Merciful. (Qur'an 42:5)

Those [angels] who carry the Throne and those around it exalt their Lord with praise and believe in Him and ask forgiveness for those who have believed, “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. Our Lord, and admit them to gardens of perpetual residence which You have promised them and whoever was righteous among their fathers, their spouses, and their offspring. Indeed, it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. And protect them from evil. And he whom You protect from evil on that day has received mercy from You, and that is the great attainment.” (Qur'an 40:7-9)

There are also particular actions that have been linked to the prayers of the angels.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “The angels send prayers on a person so long as he stays in his place of prayer. They say, ‘O Allah, honor him, O Allah, have mercy on him,’ And you are in a state of *salah* as long as you are waiting for *salah*.”<sup>70</sup>

Other examples include being among those in the first row for *salah*<sup>71</sup> and filling in a gap to ensure the line is complete for prayer.<sup>72</sup> One of the most powerful deeds is visiting the sick, which results in 70,000 angels praying for your forgiveness.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 647.

<sup>71</sup> *Sunan Ibn Majah*, no. 816.

<sup>72</sup> *Sunan Ibn Majah*, no. 814.

<sup>73</sup> *Sunan Abu Dawud*, no. 3098.

There is also a narration that describes angels whose daily task is to make a special prayer for or against a person depending on their actions that day,

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Every day two angels come down from the sky and one of them says, ‘O Allah! Give to the one who spends in Your Cause, and the other angel says, ‘O Allah! Destroy the one who withholds.’”<sup>74</sup>

## Protection

There are guardian angels from an Islamic perspective that protect a person from physical and spiritual danger,

For each one are successive (angels) before and behind him who protect him by the decree of Allah. (Qur'an 13:11)

Yes, if you hold on to patience and piety, and the enemy comes rushing at you, your Lord will help you with five thousand angels having marks [of distinction]. (Qur'an 3:125)

As for spiritual danger, we are told that reciting the Verse of the *Kursi* before going to bed results in an angel coming to protect you from demonic forces until morning:

Abu Huraira said, “Allah's Messenger ﷺ put me in charge of the *Zakat* of Ramadan (i.e., *Zakat-ul-Fitr*). Someone came to me and started scooping up some of the foodstuff [of *zakat*] with both hands. I caught him and told him that I would take him to Allah's Messenger ﷺ.” Then Abu Huraira told the whole narration and added “He (i.e., the thief) said, ‘Whenever you go to your bed, recite the Verse of *Al-Kursi* (2:255) for then a guardian from Allah will be guarding you, and Satan will not approach you till dawn.’” On that the Prophet ﷺ said, “He told you the truth, though he is a liar, and he (the thief) himself was Satan.”<sup>75</sup>

Believing in the angels allows us to have courage in the face of danger and hardship. There is great comfort and security in knowing that Allah sends angels to protect you from hardships that have not been written for you.

<sup>74</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 1442.

<sup>75</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3275.

## Support

Angels support believers when they do good by helping them sustain their activity through praying for them, protecting them, or instilling positive thoughts. A narration specifically states what brings about the support of Jibrīl, the greatest of all angels:

The Prophet ﷺ said, “The Holy Spirit (Jibrīl) will continue to aid you as long as you put up a defense on behalf of Allah and His messenger.”<sup>76</sup>

## Love

Not only do the angels pray for us, protect us, and support us, but they also can feel genuine love for the believers. This forges a connection between the angels and the individual, resulting in further support, protection, and prayers. Such a person lives in this world with the angels on his or her side. The Prophet ﷺ said,

When Allah loves a person, He calls Jibrīl and tells him, “Allah loves so-and-so, so love him.” Then Jibrīl loves him and calls out to the inhabitants of the heavens, “Allah loves so-and-so, so love him.” So the inhabitants of the heavens love him, and he will find acceptance on earth.<sup>77</sup>

## Teaching Qur’an in the *masjid*

The Prophet ﷺ said,

No people gather in one of the houses of Allah to recite the Book of Allah and teach it to one another, but tranquility descends upon them, mercy encompasses them, and the angels surround them, and Allah mentions them to those who are with Him.<sup>78</sup>

## Gatherings of *dhikr*

The Prophet ﷺ said,

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<sup>76</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2490.

<sup>77</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3209.

<sup>78</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2699.

Allah has angels who go around the highways and byways, seeking out the people of *dhikr*. If they find some people who are remembering Allah, they call out, “Come to what you are looking for!” And they encompass them with their wings up to the first heaven.<sup>79</sup>

### Saying *Ameen* to prayers of believers

The Prophet ﷺ said,

Do not pray for anything but good for yourselves, for the angels say *ameen* to whatever you say.<sup>80</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ said,

The *duā* of a person for his Muslim brother in his absence will be answered. At his head there is an angel, and every time he prays for him something good, the angel who has been appointed to be with him says, “*Ameen*, and may you have likewise.”<sup>81</sup>

### Conveying *salām* to the Prophet ﷺ

The Prophet ﷺ said,

Allah has angels travelling about the earth to convey to me the *salām* of my *ummah*.<sup>82</sup>

### Praying in a deserted land

The Prophet ﷺ said,

If a man is in a deserted land and the time of *salah* comes, he should make *wudhu*. If he does not find water, then he can perform *tayammum* (dry ablution). If he proclaims the *iqāmah*, then two angels pray with him. If he

<sup>79</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 6408.

<sup>80</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 920.

<sup>81</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2733.

<sup>82</sup> *Sunan Nisa’ee*, no. 1282. Ibn al-Qayyim declared it authentic (*Jalā al-Afhām*, 102 [Dammam: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1431]), as well as al-Albānī in *as-Silsila as-Sahīha*, no. 2853.

proclaims the *adhān*, then an army from Allah is behind him that stretches until one cannot see in the horizon.<sup>83</sup>

As we can see from this short exploration, there are many actions and situations that bring about the angelic presence. One may ask why does the presence of the angels matter? It is important to recognize that when the angels are present, they bring their love, support, protection, positive inspiration, and prayers. This becomes an invaluable source of strength in a person's life that leads them to success in whatever they embark upon. The one who is depressed sees light at the end of the tunnel from the positive whisperings of the angels. The one who is seeking redemption finds comfort in the prayers of the angels as he or she endeavors to do good. The one who is vulnerable finds courage when they know Allah has sent angels to protect them from the misfortunes of life. The one who is lonely finds companionship in the love of the angels, praying with a quantity that extends to the horizon. The one working for the cause of Allah finds creativity, capacity, and competency in the support and aid of the angels. The presence of the angels adds tremendous value and blessings to our lives.

All of this of course is ultimately coming from Allah, and Allah alone. However, Allah, out of His Wisdom, has made the *means* of His Love, Support, Protection and Aid in these noble beings for the believers. Imagine the Mercy of your Lord who has created creatures for the sole purpose of asking Him for your forgiveness. The positive activity of the angels is a crucial source of support we must actively seek for our success in this world and the next.

We have narrations that tell us of stories of the companions receiving such support when engaged in good deeds. For instance, the great poet Hassān ibn Thābit stood up to defend the Prophet ﷺ with his poetry and he was told, “The Holy Spirit (Jibrīl) is with you as long as you are engaged in this poetry”<sup>84</sup> This story tells us that it is possible that angels will be present and inspire us when we are defending the honor of the Prophet ﷺ. While the above narration specifically mentions

<sup>83</sup> At-Tabarani, no. 6120; al-Bayhaqi, no. 1982. Al-Mundhiri declares the chain to be at least fair (*hasan*) if not authentic (*sahih*) (*at-Targheeb wa at-tarheeb*, 1:149). Al-Albāni declares it authentic (*sahih*) (*Sahih at-targheeb*, 249).

<sup>84</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Hibbān*, no. 7269. Al-Arnā'ūṭ declares it authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*).

poetry, another narration is kept general to include any form of defending Islam, “Verily the Holy Spirit (Jibrīl) will continue to aid you as long as you put up any defense on behalf of Allah ﷻ and His Messenger.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore we hope that any form of responding to misconceptions, allegations, and accusations against Islam in our times can bring the support of the angels.

In another story, Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, a companion of The Prophet ﷺ, was reciting Surah al-Baqarah from the Qur’an and his horse became unsettled. When he stopped reciting, the horse would settle. But when he would continue, the horse would become agitated. He looked up to the sky and saw a cloud with what appeared to be lamps within. The Prophet informed him that this was an angel that was listening to his recitation.<sup>86</sup>

## Eschatology

The last function of the angels we will explore regards their role in the afterlife. Understanding this role inspires us to be accountable for our actions in this life and to be motivated to pursue the eternal life of paradise in the next. Faith in the hereafter will be dealt with in future articles in this series, God willing. Here we focus more on the angelic component rather than the actual events of the hereafter.

## Recording of deeds

In this world, there are angels that are tasked with writing down our actions, from the seemingly trivial to the very significant. The book of deeds will be on display in the next life, and many people will be surprised by how much was taken into account:

And the record will be placed and you will see the criminals fearful of that within it, and they will say, “Oh, woe to us! What is this book that leaves nothing small or great except that it has enumerated it?” And they will find what they did present before them. And your Lord does injustice to no one. (Qur’an 18:49)

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<sup>85</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2490.

<sup>86</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. X.



There are also angels that are tasked with recording specific deeds.

The Prophet ﷺ said,

When Friday comes, the angels stand at the door of the mosque and write down who comes chronologically. When the *imām* comes out, they close their records and get to listen to the *dhikr*.<sup>87</sup>

A man said “*Rabbanā wa lakal hamd, hamdan kathīran ṭayyiban mubārakan fīh*” (Our Lord, to You belongs all praise and thanks in abundance, purity, and blessings). When he finished the prayer, the Prophet ﷺ asked “Who was the one who spoke?” The man said, “Me.” He said, “I saw 30-odd angels rushing to see which of them would write it down first.”<sup>88</sup>

### Angels at time of death

There will be angels that will arrive as a delegation when the soul departs from the body into the next world. The attitude and behavior of the angels toward the soul depends on its purity.

Indeed, those who have said “Our Lord is Allah” and then remained on a right course, the angels will descend upon them saying, “Do not fear and do not grieve but receive good tidings of Paradise, which you were promised.” (Qur’an 41:30)

And if you could but see when the angels take the souls of those who disbelieved, striking their faces and their backs and saying, “Taste the punishment of the Burning Fire.” (Qur’an 8:50)

### Interrogation in the grave

There are two angels that will interrogate the person in the grave with three questions. The answer given will be in accordance with how a person truly lived their life. Therefore, these questions are the three most important things in a person’s life.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 3211.

<sup>88</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, no. 799.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

When the deceased—or he said when one of you—is buried, two angels—black and blue—come to him. One of them is called Al-Munkar, and the other An-Nakīr. They say: “What did you used to say about this man?” So he says what he was saying (before death): “He is Allah's slave and His Messenger. I testify that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah and that Muhammad is His slave and His Messenger.” So they say: “We knew that you would say this.” Then his grave is expanded to seventy by seventy cubits, then it is illuminated for him. Then it is said to him: “Sleep.” So he said: “Can I return to my family to inform them?” They say: “Sleep as a newlywed, whom none awakens but the dearest of his family.” Until Allah resurrects him from his resting place. If he was a hypocrite he would say: “I heard people saying something, so I said the same; I do not know.” So they said: “We knew you would say that.” So the earth is told: “Constrict him.” So it constricts around him, squeezing his ribs together. He continues being punished like that until Allah resurrects him from his resting place.<sup>89</sup>

## Blowing of the horn

The moment that will usher in the day of judgment is the blowing of the horn. The closeness of this moment and the attitude of the angel is described in the following narration:

The Prophet ﷺ said, “How could I relax when the bearer of the Horn has put the Horn to his lips and tilted his forehead, and is listening, waiting for the command to blow the Horn?” The companions asked, “What should we say, O Messenger of Allah?” He said, “Say *ḥasbunallahu wa ni'mal wakīl, 'alā Allāhi tawakkalnā* (Allah is sufficient for us and the best disposer of affairs, we rely upon Him, our Lord).”<sup>90</sup>

<sup>89</sup> *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, no. 1071. Ibn Ḥajr al-‘Asqalāni declared it fair (*ḥasan*) (*Hidaya al-Riwayah*, 1:115) as well as al-Albāni.

<sup>90</sup> *Jami' at-Tirmidhi*, no. 2431. At-Tirmidhi declared it *ḥasan* (fair) as did al-Baghawi in *Sharh as-Sunnah* (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1983), 7:470. Al-Albāni graded it authentic in his checking of at-Tirmidhi.

## Paradise and hellfire

Lastly, the eternal abodes of humankind are populated with angels that work to bring about what Allah intends. For the people of Hellfire, the angels are its gatekeepers, and they constantly remind its inhabitants of the reasons for their downfall. For the people of paradise, the angels greet and serve them, congratulating them on the life that they lived.

And those who rejected faith will be driven to Hell in groups until, when they reach it, its gates are opened and its keepers will say, “Did there not come to you messengers from yourselves, reciting to you the verses of your Lord and warning you of the meeting of this Day of yours?” They will say, “Yes, but the word of punishment has come into effect upon the disbelievers.” (Qur’an 39:71)

Gardens of perpetual residence; they will enter them with whoever were righteous among their fathers, their spouses, and their descendants. And the angels will enter upon them from every gate, “Peace be upon you for what you have patiently endured.” And excellent is the final home. (Qur’an 13:23-24)

## Conclusion

This article has explored the various roles that the angels play in the cosmos. Faith in angels provides the believer with immense psychological and spiritual support that enables them to strive for excellence on their journey to Allah in this world. Our belief and understanding of the angels stem from revelation, without which we would not have known of their existence or roles. Their description in revelation is not irrational by any means, nor do they violate any empirical or scientific principles. Angels are beyond science and perception, because their existence is in a dimension inaccessible to us. Since we cannot rationally or empirically challenge the existence of angels, we must return to their epistemological source to evaluate its claims. That is revelation. The next article in the “In pursuit of conviction” series will deal with the topic of faith in revelation, God Willing.