

Understanding Islam Series Two: Standing before God

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Part Nine: Angels, Jinn and the Final Judgement

Angels

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 he knew best the havoc that humans would 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 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.

The End of Time

Before the end of the world, there will be a period of time known as the End of Time. Nobody knows how long this will last, but at the start the Rightly-Guided One, *al-Mahdi*, will appear to begin a rule of justice on the earth. For the Shi'a, *al-Mahdi* is identified as the returned Twelfth Imam, who is currently in occultation. Over time, many have falsely claimed to be the *Mahdi* as a way of rallying Muslims to their cause. One example would be the Mahdi of Sudan (d. 1885), who fought the British for independence.

Jesus will also return to the earth at this time to resume his earthly life and with *al-Mahdi* to lead the great battle of good against evil. The forces of evil will be led by the Great Impostor – *al-Dajjal*. Jesus and *al-Mahdi* will lead all true believers in this battle and will be victorious over *al-Dajjal* and the evil he represents. They will then rule the world for a period of time in complete obedience to the will of God, that is, in the state of *islam*. During this time Jesus will be able to do all those things that were not possible during the first part of his earthly life. At the end of this time, Jesus will die and will be buried alongside Muhammad in Madina, where his grave-space awaits him. This will be the signal for the end of the world.

At the end of the world, all humans and other creatures that are then alive will die. Tradition has it that this will be followed by a bleak period of unknown duration. Then will come the sign for the general resurrection. The angel Israfil will sound the trumpet to signal the resurrection. All will rise from their graves and be clothed in 'new bodies' [Q. 56:60-61]. Every single person will stand alone before God as judge and be held to account for their actions [Q. 23:99-101, 35:18]. This will be the final judgement.

The Final Judgement

On that day, no-one will be held responsible for the sins of another, blame cannot be offloaded and merit cannot be transferred to anyone else [Q. 82:19]. There will be no place to hide anything. Everything will be known by God and must be acknowledged. The records kept by the recording angels will be produced and each person will be weighed in the balance of God's justice [Q. 84:7-12]. The tradition is that every good deed will count ten times more than every bad deed. This is a clear indication that God's wrath is overcome and justice is tempered by mercy. This can be seen by two Hadith:

When God decreed the creation, he pledged himself by writing in his book, which is with him: my mercy shall overwhelm my wrath.

Almighty God has said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon me and ask of me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to

me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face me, giving me no partner, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it.

The prophets too will be present at the judgement and will appear before God to testify as witnesses. God, as an act of mercy, will invite the prophets to plead on behalf of their followers. Muhammad will be invited to intercede for Muslims; indeed most Muslims believe that he can intercede for them with God now, before the Day of Judgement. Some believe that many holy people, e.g., the Imams and the Friends of God (*waliullah*), may have a share in intercession, with God's permission. Once the actions of each person are weighed in the balance, they will be sent to heaven or hell. There is no third option.

The Qur'an tells us that heaven and hell are beyond our earthly capacity to understand [Q. 32:17]. Heaven is most often referred to as The Garden, or *al-Jannah*, in which we will be in the presence of God. The Qur'an uses images of heaven that are not only spiritual: joy and peace, gardens with running streams, food without labour, wonderful companions, and "whatever souls desire" [Q. 88:2-16, 36:57]. Some scholars have interpreted these images as figurative rather than literal, basing this on a Hadith that speaks of heaven as a state that no human eye has ever seen or human ear heard, and which has not been imagined by the human heart. Heaven is as difficult for us to imagine as it must be for a caterpillar to imagine the life of a butterfly.

Hell has many descriptions and names in the Qur'an. The most commonly used are terms of fire, e.g., *al-Nar*. The common theme is of unimaginable torment and loss.

The question was asked by some: Is hell eternal? Some scholars have argued on the basis of some verses in the Qur'an that there may be some who are sent there 'only for a time' to be purged from their sins, after which the mercy of God will admit them into heaven [Q. 11:106-108]. However the Qur'an states explicitly that those who die unrepentant of *shirk*, or maintaining that God shares divinity with any being or thing, will never be forgiven [Q. 4:48].