**ANGELS**

Angels are very active in the Qur’an, and are described in a variety of

ways. They may have two, three, or four pairs of wings (35:1); they

do not need to eat (25:7, 25:20); and they are said to be very beautiful.

Sometimes they fi ght on the side of the righteous (3:124). They

note our actions (50:18) and take the souls of the dead and guard over

**hell** (32:11, 43:77). These angelic guards are understood to be nineteen

in number (74:30). On the **day of judgment** God’s throne will

be carried by the angels (69:17). The Ark of the Covenant, holding

the *sakinah* (inspired peace), will also be borne by the angels (2:248).

There is a High Council of angels (37:8, 38:69), who repel eavesdropping

demons with bolts of fi re. Some angels are described

by name, such as the “two angels at Babylon,” Harut and Marut,

who teach people white magic (2:102). There are also Gabriel and

Michael (2:98). The former is associated with the bringing down of

**revelation** (26:193 calls him “the faithful spirit”), and in the **hadith**

accounts he accompanies Muhammad on his heavenly ascension or

*mi*‘*raj*. The Qur’an calls ‘Izra’il the angel of death and names Israfi l as

the angel whose trumpet blast will mark the day of judgment (69:13).

It is an interesting question why an angel was not sent down to

ANGELS

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accompany the Prophet Muhammad in his task. In 6:8–9 we are told

that such an angel would have made it too easy for the audience to accept

the message. The only miracle in the Qur’an is taken to be the miracle

of the Qur’an itself, its unique and perfect style and composition.

Belief in angels, mentioned alongside that in God, the Last Judgment,

the Book and the messengers is incumbent upon Muslims

(2:177). God is the enemy of those who oppose his angels (2:98).

The angels are intermediaries between the divine and the lower

world. They announce the news of Yahya ( John the Baptist) to Zakariyya

and Jesus to Mary. Angels may also serve as messengers (sing.

*rasul*). However, most messengers mentioned in the Qur’an are

human. Passages describe the coming down of the angels and the

spirit (*ruh*) during the Night of Power (*laylat al-****qadr***), and the descent

of the angels, together with the spirit of God’s command, to help

humanity (16:2, 97:4).

In the story of Adam’s creation, which is mentioned in seven distinct

places in the Qur’an, angels fi gure prominently. In 2:30–34

God announces, “I will create a vicegerent on earth,” to which the

angels reply, “Will You place there someone who will make mischief

and shed blood? While we celebrate Your praises?” The narrative

continues with God teaching Adam “the names of all things,” and

then challenging the angels to recite these names. Their inability to

comply betrays their simple nature: “We have no knowledge beyond

that which You have taught Us.” Adam then tells the angels their

own names, and they are commanded to prostrate themselves to him,

but one of them called Iblis (**Satan**) refuses, saying, “I am better than

he is. You created me from fi re and him from clay” (7:12). Iblis is cast

out of heaven, and will contend with humanity until the Last Day.

He is an angel (7:11), but made from fi re, like the ***jinn*** (55:15). In the

hadith literature, angels are said to be made from light.

The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 428/1037) identifi

ed the various spheres of the world as angels, and this sort of language

became popular with various thinkers. Al-Suhrawardi (549–587/

1154–1191) developed a cosmology of light in which angels play a signifi

cant role. Ibn ‘Arabi (560–638/1164–1240) distinguished between

the angels of the incorporeal world, and contrasted them with those of

the physical. The four archangels Gabriel, Michael, ‘Izra’il, and Israfi

l are used to represent the four divine attributes of life, knowledge,

will, and power.

(Islam the Key Concepts, ed. Oliver Leeman and Kecia Ali, Routledge, 2007)