

Essential beliefs:

angels in the Qur'an

Rachel Dryden is a PhD student at Cambridge University. Here she summarises some key points from her studies, on what the Qur'an says about angels.

Angels play important roles in many monotheistic religions and Islam is no exception. Three passages in the Qur'an underline the importance of belief in angels (author's emphasis):

Righteousness does not consist of turning your faces towards the East and the West. But righteous is he who **believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and the Scripture, and the prophets**. Who gives money, though dear, to near relatives, and orphans, and the needy, and the homeless, and the beggars, and for the freeing of slaves; those who perform the prayers, and pay the obligatory charity, and fulfil their promise when they promise, and patiently persevere in the face of persecution, hardship, and in the time of conflict. These are the sincere; these are the pious.

Qur'an 2.177

The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, as did the believers. **They all have believed in God, and His angels, and His scriptures, and His messengers:** "We make no distinction between any of His messengers." And they say, "We hear and we obey. Your forgiveness, our Lord. To you is the destiny."

Qur'an 2.285

O you who believe! Believe in God and His messenger, and the Book He sent down to His messenger, and the Book He sent down before. **Whoever rejects God, His angels, His Books, His messengers, and the Last Day, has strayed far in error.**

Qur'an 4.136

The word for 'angel', *malak* (plural: *malā'ika*) appears 88 times in 37 different *suras* of the Qur'an, but angels are also called a number of different things:

- guests
- messenger(s)
- a strange or foreign people
- hosts of the heavens
- a spirit
- guardians

What do angels look like?

The Qur'an doesn't tell us very much about angels' physical appearance and characteristics, which suggests that those who first heard the Qur'an already knew what an angel was. However, we can learn, or infer, that:

- angels have **wings** (Qur'an 35.1)
- they are **beautiful**, since Joseph's beauty is said to be as great as theirs (Qur'an 12.31)
- they look **strange, different** (Qur'an 15.62; 51.25) or even frightening (Qur'an 11.70; 15.52; 51.27)
- but can **look just like men**, as when a spirit appears to Mary (Qur'an 19.17 see also Qur'an 6.9)
- even though they **don't actually have a physical body** like humans (Qur'an 17.95)
- and therefore **don't need to eat food to survive** (Qur'an 11.69–70; 25.7; 51.27–28)
- they were **created before Adam** but are **not as knowledgeable** as him (e.g. Qur'an 2.31)
- they are **immortal** (Qur'an 7.20)
- but **not divine** and **should not be worshipped** (Qur'an 3.80; 43.19)
- they are **neither female nor God's offspring** (Qur'an 17.40; 37.150; 43.19)

What do angels do?

According to the Qur'an, angels play a number of specific roles:

1 The Heavenly Host: worshipping God and carrying his throne

Angels are also given this responsibility in the Bible. In the Qur'an, this involves surrounding and/or carrying the divine throne (Qur'an 39.75; 40.7; 69.17), accompanying God on his travels (Qur'an 2.210; 89.22), and praising him (Qur'an 2.30; 13.13; 16.49; 39.75; 40.7; 42.5), which they do tirelessly (Qur'an 21.19), both day and night (Qur'an 21.20).

2 God's servants: carrying out his orders

To a certain extent an extension of the role of the Heavenly Host, angels are also specifically described as acting as God's servants or carrying out his orders (Qur'an 16.50; 21.27; 43.19). They must not do anything, such as descending to earth, without his permission (e.g. Qur'an 16.2; 97.4).

3 God's messengers

Perhaps the most important of all the roles played by angels in Late Antiquity (the period between the third and eighth centuries CE), as it allowed them to travel between heaven and earth and form a link between the heavenly and earthly spheres. In the Qur'an, most references to angels as messengers occur in stories that also appear in the Bible: the visitations to Abraham and Lot (Qur'an 11.69–81; 15.51–77; 26.160–161; 51.24–37), and the annunciations to Zechariah and the Virgin Mary (Qur'an 3.38–41–48; 19.16–19).

4 Soldiers/comforters to the Believers

Angels can also act as soldiers on earth, even though it is clear they are sent from heaven. (e.g. Qur'an 36.28; 48.4, 7). Qur'an 3.124–125 and 8.9 describe between one and 5,000 angelic soldiers being sent down to earth. They help strengthen the Believers (Qur'an 8.12) and (will) smite/strike the Unbelievers (Qur'an 8.12).

5 Advocates/intercessors between humanity and God

Angels can also advocate or intercede with God on behalf of humanity, although God does not have to listen to them (e.g. Qur'an 21.28; 42.5; 53.26).

6 Guardian angels recording every person's rights and wrongs

Everyone's good and bad deeds are recorded by angelic guardians, but they are also there to watch over people (Qur'an 82.10–11).

7 Guardians of heaven/hell; angels of death

There are two distinct sides to this role: (a) guardians of hellfire (Qur'an 66.6; 74.30–31), and (b) angels of death, who facilitate the movement of people's souls to heaven (Qur'an 6.61; 16.32; 13.23; 21.103) and hell (Qur'an 4.97; 6.61, 93; 7.37; 8.50; 16.28; 25.22; 32.11; 47.27). Qur'an 32.11 refers to a specific Angel of Death.

8 Eschatological role at the Last Judgment

The Qur'an tells us angels will appear on the last day (Qur'an 2.210; 25.25; 78.38; 89.22). This is a cause for joy for the Believers, who need not fear them (Qur'an 41.30), but not the Unbelievers, for whom their arrival is not good news (Qur'an 25.22). Angels will smite the Unbelievers (Qur'an 8.50), before taking their souls (Qur'an 7.37; 8.50), to the fate that awaits them, the hellfire.

9 Witnesses

Apart from God himself, nobody besides the angels bears witness to his *oneness*, that is, that he is the one and only God (Qur'an 3.18). Angels also witness or testify that the revelation (i.e. the Qur'an), is from God (Qur'an 4.166).

10 Teachers

Islamic tradition tells us that it was the Angel Jibril, or Gabriel, who taught Muhammad the Qur'anic revelations and how to pray, and accompanied him on his ascent to heaven, so it is perhaps surprising that the Qur'an includes only this one reference to angels performing the act of teaching (Qur'an 2.102).

Do angels have names?

There are only four angels in the Qur'an with personal names:

- Jibril/Gabriel (Qur'an 2.97–98; 66.4)
- Mikāil/Michael (Qur'an 2.98)
- Hārūt and Mārūt (Qur'an 2.102)

Jibril/Gabriel and Mikāil/Michael are also the only angels named in the Bible. In the Qur'an, they are never described specifically as angels and are often listed separately from them, e.g.:

Whoever is hostile to Allah, and His angels, and His messengers, and Gabriel, and Michael—Allah is hostile to the faithless.

Qur'an 2.98

If you repent to Allah, then your hearts have listened. But if you band together against him, then Allah is his Ally, as is Gabriel, and the righteous believers. In addition, the angels will assist him.

Qur'an 66.4

Parallels between the biblical story of the annunciation to Mary and Qur'an 19.17–19 means we could see Jibril/Gabriel as being present here, although this is not explicit in the text.

Hārūt and Mārūt only appear in one very brief narrative in one verse, in which they pass on magical knowledge to men but warn them of the danger it represents. In contrast to Jibril/Gabriel and Mīkāil/Michael, they *are* described as angels. Their names are Persian in origin but it is not entirely clear why these names were used.

To get you thinking

- a. Before reading this information, work with a partner and from what you know, believe or have heard, list any ideas you have about what an angel is supposed to be like and what angels are supposed to do. Talk about where the ideas might have come from. After going through the information here, amend and add to your list, noting where your ideas differ from Qur'anic teachings on angels.
- b. Find an image of an angel in Islam (see examples on this page, with more sites listed on www.natre.org.uk/examining-religion-and-belief/). Label it with as much information as possible. Try to devise a symbol or icon for each the features and roles, to help you recall the information (but remember, no images are allowed for God or Muhammad). Annotate another image of an angel with only your symbols/icons. Come back to that copy next week and see if you can fill in the words for each.
- c. Given the Qur'anic teaching about angels, consider what impact this belief may have for Muslims. Suggest at least five ways in which belief in angels might affect the everyday life of a Muslim in Britain.
- d. Talk to some Muslims and find out to what extent belief in angels makes a difference to them.

Extracts from *Quran in Today's English*. Clear and Easy to Read. Translated by Talal Itani. See www.clearquran.com