

Angels and Satan

Angels and Satan: A Christian Perspective

Angels in Christian belief are messengers and agents of God. The Hebrew word *malak* (messenger) is translated by the Greek term *angelos* (messenger), and by the English 'angel.' In Christian belief, however, there are good and evil angels; Satan is considered a fallen angel, who is associated with other evil angels by Jesus (Matthew 25:41). This article will discuss first, good angels in Christianity, then Satan and the evil angels.

Old Testament

Angels appear frequently in the Old Testament as God's messengers or agents. Thus an angel of the Lord appears to Hagar (Genesis 16), telling her that she will conceive a son by Abraham. In Genesis 18, three angels appear as men to Abraham, telling him that in one year he and his wife Sarah will have a son. Angels are the messengers of destruction in Genesis 19, warning Lot and his family to flee from Sodom, which is about to be destroyed by God. An angel of the Lord is said to go before the Israelite army in battle (Exodus 23:20, 23). Again, in 2 Samuel 24, an angel of God is sent to destroy the people in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 24:16). In Job, Satan appears among the "heavenly beings" (probably angels) who consult with God in his heavenly court. Tobias, the son of Tobit, is helped by the angel Raphael in his journey to find a wife. Angels are also frequently mentioned in the Psalms, for example: "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word" (Ps. 103:20). Finally, the archangel Michael is said to be the great prince and protector of Israel (Daniel 12:1).

In the Old Testament, angels frequently appear as men, and are not recognized as angels until they announce themselves as angels—this is true, for example, of the angel who appears to Samson's parents (Judges 13), or of Raphael, in his journey with Tobias (Tobit 5-12). Sometimes, too, an angel appears to the Spirit of God. In short, while angels are frequent in the O.T., their nature and role is not clearly distinguished from that of men or God.

New Testament

Angels play a prominent role in the New Testament also. An angel of God tells Joseph in his dream that the child of Mary is conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20-21). In Luke's infancy narrative, the angel Gabriel appears first to Zechariah, then to Mary, and announces to her that she will conceive a son by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:19-38). Angels appear to the shepherds bringing the good news that a Messiah and Savior has been born in the City of David (Luke 2:9-14).

Jesus himself is reported in the synoptic gospels as speaking of the angels. Here are some examples: "And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son

of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8). “For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10—this is the source of the Christian belief in ‘guardian angels’). Again, before his crucifixion, Jesus says: “Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53). Finally, in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus refers both to the good angels in heaven—“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him...” (Matthew 25:31) as well as to Satan and his evil angels—“You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...” (Matthew 25:41). Angels are also mentioned in other New Testament books, especially the Book of Revelation, where Michael and his angels fight the dragon and his angels (Revelation 12). Accordingly, the archangel Michael has been a special object of devotion in the history of Christianity.

What is the nature of angels? Though some early theologians, (e.g. Augustine) thought that angels might have some kind of material bodies, the contemporary Christian consensus is that angels are spirits. As the Letter to the Hebrews states: “Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14). But angels can appear to human beings, and there are many contemporary accounts of these encounters (see for example Howard Storm, *My Descent into Death*). It is important to understand that angels are creatures, created by God, traditionally before the creation of our universe.

Of course, there is also widespread skepticism concerning the existence of angels since their existence cannot be demonstrated by science or by any empirical testing or method. The hegemony of modern natural science has resulted in general skepticism concerning the supernatural, and angels are traditionally thought to be supernatural beings—that is, they are beyond the laws of nature.

Satan and evil angels

Christian theology explains Satan as a fallen angel. Jesus is reported as saying in Luke: “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightening” (Luke 10:18). The account in Revelations 12, concerning the battle of Michael and his angels with the dragon and his angels, has been taken in Christian tradition as the story of Satan’s fall from heaven. (Angels, therefore, are thought by Christians to be capable of freely choosing for or against God.) Satan points to the existence of a personal force for evil which is older and greater than humanity. But it is important to understand that Satan has no power over human beings unless they allow it, by for example consenting to radical evil, engaging in Satanic rites, etc.

The evil angels which are said by Jesus to accompany Satan are mysterious. Perhaps they are the demons which are frequently mentioned in the New Testament and which are driven out at the command of Jesus. All the accounts of his ministry in the synoptic gospels emphasize exorcisms (casting out of demons) as a principle element of his work

(see for example Mark 1:21-28). Jesus himself speaks of this: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matthew 1:28). Jesus in fact passed on the authority over demons to his disciples—“Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness” (Matthew 10:1). Thus it has been and is the teaching of Christians that demons can be driven out by the power of Jesus Christ. Catholic dioceses normally have a priest who specializes in performing exorcisms, though this is not now commonly done.

Angels and Christian Tradition

Angels have played an important part in Christian art and devotion—especially the archangel Michael. In art, angels are signs of the presence of heaven. They are common in Renaissance and Catholic Baroque art, though much less common in Protestant and contemporary art.

Terence Nichols

Angels and the Devil (A Muslim Perspective)

The Quran refers to angels as the direct servants of God. One of their primary purposes is to relay the message of God unto mankind. Their every action is completed to fulfill the will of God, and they do not possess the capability to deviate from this responsibility. They are, in fact, completely infallible, and must remain so in order to be pure beings which are capable of relaying the righteous message. Thus, if angels had the ability to become fallen, and were therefore able to commit sin, or deviate from their duty to God, the message they relay would also be imperfect.

According to Muslims, the role of angels differs very little from the concept of the holy beings held by most Christian sects. Perhaps the primary distinction between the Islamic and Christian understanding of angels is the scale on which they operate within our daily lives. Muslims believe that every human has, among others, two angels that accompany him from the point of his conception; to the point in which his soul exits his body (death). These two angels are responsible for recording the good and bad deeds that their respective host commits. However, it is not just a simple legislation these angels record, they are responsible for registering how the sins or good deeds a man commits affects his persona, his soul, and to an extent even his physical appearance. It is of course, ultimately the decision of God as to what the outcome of one's actions are to be, however God employs His host of infallible angels to carry out His laws. It is accepted in Islam and Christianity that the Archangel Gabriel is responsible for the delivery of God's messages to His messengers. There are numerous examples of this occurrence in the holy Quran. The dictation of the Quran itself was received by the prophet Muhammad, directly from the angel Gabriel, who was conveying the message directly from God.

The responsibilities of angels exceed relaying divine messages to God's chosen messengers, and recording the actions and nature of mankind. Angels are in fact

responsible for maintaining the perfect equilibrium of nature and all of God's divine laws. They are behind every drop of rain that falls from the clouds, every storm that brews above us, and even the micro ecological miracles of bacteria and germs. It must be noted that the angels are not working autonomously, in fact their every action is willed by God, and they do not even possess the capability to act on free will.

Many believe that the Holy Spirit is an angel. There are two prevailing views in Islam about the Holy Spirit. The first and most common is that it is the Archangel Gabriel. Although this view is the traditional one, there are many who believe that it is a unique creation by Allah that is different and perhaps a higher being than Angels.

Angels have many other roles according to the teachings of Islam. There are guardian angels that protect us from daily mishaps; there are angels who protect us from the whispers of the devils, and there are angels who are charged with causing us to die. However, Muslims believe that angels do not perform evil acts, when they bring us death or calamities since they are only performing tasks that are ordained by God.

The existence of a being that is bent on misguiding the righteous is a theme common to many faiths. Islam holds a somewhat unique perspective on the origin, role, and nature of the devil. Unlike Christians, Muslims do not believe that Satan was a fallen angel; instead he is a creature that God created from fire among a species of creatures referred to in the Quran as Jinn (Quran 7:13). Members of this species possess the capability to commit sin just as their human counterparts. This is an important distinction, as Islam rejects the idea that angels have the capability to sway from their designated path from God. Furthermore, the Quran states that angels are created solely from light, as opposed to clay like humans, or fire like Jinn (Qur'an 7:12-18).

The Islamic perspective on the fall of Satan centers on the creation of Adam. The Quran states that when God created Adam, He commanded all of his angels to submit to His new creation. Present with the angels, and commanded by Allah to prostrate himself to Adam, was *Iblis*. *Iblis* is the name of a Jinni that God allowed to reside among the angels. The story is recounted in Chapter seven of the Quran:

7: 12. And WE indeed created you and then WE gave you shape; and then WE said to the angels, 'Submit to Adam; and they all submitted. But *Iblis* did not; he will not be of those who submit. 7: 13. God said, 'What prevented thee from submitting when I commanded thee?' He said, 'I am better than he. Thou hast created me of fire while him hast thou created of clay.' 7: 14. God said, 'Then go down hence; it is not for thee to be arrogant here. Get out; thou art certainly of those who are abased.' 7: 15. He said, 'Respite me till the day when they will be raised up.' 7: 16. God said, 'Thou art of those who are respited.' 7: 17. He said, 'Now, since Thou hast adjudge me to be erring, I will assuredly lie in wait for them on Thy straight path; 7: 18. 'Then will I surely come upon them from before them and from behind them and from their right and from their left, and Thou wilt not find most of them to be grateful. 7: 19. God said, 'Get out hence, despised and banished. Whosoever of them shall follow thee; I will surely fill Hell with you all. (Quran 7:12-19).

The Quran makes a clear distinction between *Iblis* (the actual name for Lucifer in Arabic) and angels, as *Iblis* boasts of his composition of fire and the Quran states on numerous occasions that angels are created of pure light. This incident when *Iblis* refused to prostrate himself to Adam because Adam was created of clay and *Iblis* of fire is seen by Islam as the root of all feelings of supremacy and hence the cause of all evil.

Out of spite and quest for revenge, *Iblis* swore to misguide mankind and lead them to hell. *Iblis* uses his many followers from among the Jinn and people who may or may not be aware that they serve his cause, to misguide people. The Quran makes it clear that *Iblis* is humanity's number one enemy and that we must guard ourselves against him and his soldiers (Qur'an 6:142). Muslims believe that every human being is well equipped to protect himself against *Iblis* and his army of Jinn and people, and that God gave us the willpower, wisdom, and knowledge we need to do so. Muslims and Christians agree that angels are pure friendly beings that intend well for humankind. They also agree that the devil is humankind's number one enemy. Lucifer is a despised character in both traditions. There is also consensus that without careful attention to our actions, people can be utilized by the forces of evil to do harm to our species and the Earth for which God made us responsible because He gave us dominion over all that's in it. The question remains however, can we find common ground by virtue of our reverence for angels and our shared belief that they are always with us to be human brethren? Can we, based on these shared beliefs, treat each other as either brothers in faith or equals in humanity?

Muhammad H. Muhawesh

Areas of agreement, disagreement, and points for further discussion

Angels figure prominently in both traditional Christianity and traditional Islam. They form a whole universe, as it were, of invisible yet intelligent beings, who are thought of by both traditions as God's messengers and agents. Angels probably play a larger role in Islamic thought than they do in Christianity, partly because modern Christianity has been more influenced by scientific skepticism than has Islam.

The differences in the understanding of angels between Christianity and Islam are striking. Christians have assumed that there are good and evil angels, that Satan is a fallen angel, and that therefore angels are capable of freely choosing for or against God. Muslims, on the other hand, believe there are only good angels, and that Satan and his evil followers are in fact *jinn*. The *jinn* are a class of creatures not found in Christianity: invisible beings (made of fire) who are capable of choosing for or against God, and who therefore need salvation, just as humans do. (The genies of the Arabian Nights and Aladdin tales are actually *jinn*.)

The challenge (for both religions) to the belief in angels comes from scientific naturalism: the widespread belief that nature is all there is, and that nature is what is known by natural science. Since science cannot detect angels, therefore angels do not exist. According to scientific naturalism, angels are the relics of a pre-scientific and animistic age when people knew little about the workings of nature, and peopled all of nature with invisible

spirits, fairies, demons, etc. Now science has explained how nature works, and we can dispense with prescientific superstitions like angels. The challenge for both Christians and Muslims is to explain how there can be intelligent and personal beings who do not have physical bodies. Since it is more and more clear that human consciousness is closely tied to brain states, and therefore seems to depend on the workings of the physical brain, how can there be intelligent beings without physical brains or bodies? This is a point for further discussion.