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Stephen Burge

After a short overview of angels in Islam, this entry begins with a description of the role angels play in the Qur'an, focusing on their appearance in prophetic narratives, in descriptions of heaven and hell, and in debates the Qur'an has with its polytheist interlocutors. While the Qur'an does provide some information about angels, the Hadith literature proves far more expansive, and so this material will be explored in more detail, particularly concerning the role of angels in stories about the prophets, in the biography of Muḥammad (the *Sīra* literature), and in Muslim eschatological thought, as well as how angels are imagined in the Qur'an, the Hadith, and in art. The entry will then examine some of the main theological debates surrounding angels and angelology, as found in the traditional Islamic disciplines of theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafa*), and mysticism (Sufism).

Keywords: Islamic theology, Angels, Cosmology, Heaven, Hell, Eschatology, Islamic philosophy, Mysticism, Kalām, Prophets

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1 Introduction

In Islam, a belief in angels is firmly rooted in the Qur'an, where, in *Sūrat al-Baqara*, it is stated that 'whoso is an enemy of God, His angels and messengers, of Gabriel and Michael, know that God is the enemy of the unbelievers' (Q. 2:98; Khalidi 2008: 13–14). While the Qur'an includes references to angels, this material was greatly expanded upon in the exegetical tradition (*tafsīr*), the Hadith literature, and in the more folkloric material preserved in the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (stories of the prophets). Theoretical and spiritual reflections on angels are also readily found in Muslim theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*falsafa*), and mysticism (Sufism). This entry will explore the conception and theology of angels in these different areas of Muslim thought.

The Qur'an and later Muslim texts envision a world populated with a wide range of supernatural beings, of which angels are a part (see Fahd 1971). The Arabic term for angel, *malak* (pl. *malāʾika*), is related to the Hebrew *malʾākh* (messenger), although there are some important distinguishing features. While the Hebrew *malʾākh* is a generic term for 'messenger' (as is the Greek *αγγελος*), and is used for both human and divine messengers, the Arabic term *malak* is only used for divine messengers. As the Qur'an also refers to messengers (*rusul*, sg. *rasūl*) being taken from among the angels (Q. 22:75), the suggestion is that the word *malak* was not understood merely in terms of 'messenger'. In effect, *malak* is the name of a species of creature, rather than a description of what it is that they do (see Burge 2010b: 51–54).

As Saul M. Olyan noted in his important study of Jewish angelology, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him* (1993), the expansion and growth in angels within Judaism, especially in the naming of angels, can be tied to the interpretation of the Bible; as religious scholars read and engaged with the scriptural text, certain verses and words found therein led to the introduction of angels. The same can also be said of Islam, where a number of verses in the Qur'an that refer to angels are developed through the process of exegesis (see Burge 2012: 32–33; Gallorini 2021: 79–214). However, there does also appear to have been a certain amount of cross-cultural exchange in ideas and imagery regarding angels amongst Jews, Christians, and Muslims in late antiquity and the Middle Ages (see Burge 2012: 179–181), with this sharing of ideas occurring in all directions, with some Muslim beliefs about angels entering the thought of Jews and Christians (cf. Burge 2010c).

Angels are also often used to articulate theological ideas that are not necessarily related to angelology; one of the simplest examples is in the accounts of Muḥammad's ascent to heaven, known as the *miʿrāj*, during which he hears an angel give the call to prayer (*adhān*): Sunnī and Shīʿī sources depict the angel proclaiming the *adhān* according to their own respective versions (see Buckley 2013: 167–171), with each community using

the angels to advance their own claims to religious authenticity. This means that angels and visions of the divine world are used to articulate debates, disputes, and ideas that are deeply rooted in the human world (Vuckovic 2004). Consequently, it is impossible to talk of 'Islamic angelology' as different writers are seeking to make different theological claims; instead, a series of 'Islamic angelologies' is encountered, as is the case in other religious traditions (see Burge 2012: 107–108).

2 Angels in the Qur'an

In general, angels in the Qur'an are largely impersonal, with only Gabriel (Jibrīl; Q. 2:98 and 66:4), Michael (Mīkāʾil or Mīkāl, Q. 2:98), and Hārūt and Mārūt (Q. 2:102) being named specifically. However, the names of angels are greatly expanded upon in the Hadith literature (see Burge 2012: 31–51). Unlike the Bible, which is divided into separate books from different genre-based traditions (historical, mythic, prophetic, wisdom, and so on), the Qur'an is an oral text that, delivered in a sermon-like fashion, draws on a range of genres and styles. It includes narratives of the mythic past, apocalyptic descriptions of the future, legislation concerning ritual, criminal and civil law, parables, and so on. Although angels appear throughout the text, they principally feature within: stories from the mythic past (particularly the creation of Adam, the visit of Abraham's guests, and in narratives surrounding Jesus's birth); descriptions of paradise and hell (particularly the cataclysmic events of the Last Day and the judgment of humanity); and in debates about prophecy and worship that Muḥammad had with those he preached to in Mecca.

2.1 Angels in Qur'anic narratives

The Qur'an sees itself as the continuation of a prophetic tradition stretching back through the ages to the creation of Adam. As such, many of the narratives of the mythic past seen in Genesis are found in the Qur'an and in later Muslim sources. It is, however, important to note that the mantic nature of the Qur'anic text means that the Qur'an's recasting of biblical stories is often piecemeal, with many of the details that it deems superfluous being omitted. Three narratives in the Qur'an featuring angels will be discussed here, although such entities also appear in other stories.

One of the narratives in the Qur'an that generated considerable debate in later Muslim thought is the account of the angelic prostration to Adam (Q. 2:34; 7:11; 15:30; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:71–73). When God created Adam, the angels complained that He was creating something that would be sinful, an accusation for which God chided them. He then commanded them to prostrate themselves before Adam. All the angels did so, except for Iblīs, who remained too proud, arguing that as a creature made of fire he should not have to bow down to Adam, who was created out of mere mud (Q. 7:12; 17:61; 38:76). This story generated much debate in the classical period, with the most controversial view of it being that of the Sufi al-Hallāj (d. 309/922) in his *Ṭawāsīn*, where he argues

that Iblīs was a perfect monotheist because he alone refused to prostrate to anything other than God (see Awn 1983: 33–37). This story is made more complicated by Q. 18:50, however, which states that Iblīs was one of the *jinn*, leading commentators and theologians to ask why Iblīs was in the scene at all and whether he was indeed included in the command to prostrate to Adam. Nevertheless, this narrative has been discussed in great detail in the secondary literature, with a number of different suggestions being put forward for understanding why God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves to something other than Him, an act that would in any other circumstance be considered *shirk* (associationism). According to Gabriel Said Reynolds, Syriac sources from around the time of the Qur'an, such as the *Cave of Treasures*, suggest that during the process of creation, God breathed the divine light into Adam; Reynolds suggests the angels in the Qur'an were prostrating themselves to that light, as it resided within Adam (see Reynolds 2010: 39–54). Leigh N. B. Chipman has emphasized the idea of knowledge as the concept that distinguishes Adam from the angels, since the angels are unable to know the names of things (Q. 2:33), whereas Adam has reason (*ʿaql*), making the prostration an act of respect for Adam's superior abilities (Chipman 2002: 449–453). Roberto Tottoli, however, reads the passage in light of debates around prostration in Meccan society, with the story of Iblīs's haughty refusal to prostrate to Adam being an attack on those in Mecca who refused to prostrate to God (Tottoli 1998: 28–33). The account of the angelic prostration to Adam has generated so much debate because it raises questions about a range of different theological issues, such as the relative status between angels and humans, the nature of angelic substance, and the wisdom behind divine commands, among others.

If in the account of the prostration of the angels to Adam the former are participants in a drama, angels (always acting on God's command) can also bring about necessary changes in the plot of a drama that is happening to humans. This is most clearly seen in the accounts of the births of Isaac (Isḥāq), John (Yaḥyā), and Jesus (ʿĪsā), which, as in equivalent biblical narratives, are each announced by angels. In post-Qur'anic literature (*tafsīr*, *taʾrīkh*, and *qiṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ*) the role of angels in bringing about a change in the plot and circumstances of human events gains more prominence than it does in the Qur'an, with angels appearing in the accounts of Abraham's (Ibrāhīm's) torture in the fire of Nimrod (Namrūd), the plight of Hagar (Hājar) in the desert, and so on (al-Thaʿlabī 2002: 133–134, 139–141). The dramatic appearances of angels to Abraham (Q. 11:69–76; 15:51–60; 51:24–36; see Attallah and Archer 2021: 83), Zechariah (Zakariyyāʾ; Q. 3:35–41; see Archer 2021) and Mary (Maryam; Q. 3:45–51; 19:16–21; see Archer 2021), in each case as a harbinger of the birth of their respective children, follow similar narrative and theological structures to their equivalent biblical annunciation scenes. As in the Bible, the role of the angels is purely to deliver a message and, in consequence, they are often left relatively characterless as figures in and of themselves. This can be seen in the two accounts of the annunciation to Zechariah, where God appears to speak directly to him

in *Sūrat Maryam* (Q. 19:2–15), but where angels are the vehicle for the message in *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* (Q. 3:39), thereby showing that the emphasis is on the divine message, not on the messenger (see Neuwirth 2014: 374–375; cf. Q. 19:64). Angels in the Qur'an can also take on other similar 'messenger' roles in the opposite direction, reporting on the behaviour of humans to God, seen most clearly in the 'watching scribes' (*al-ḥāfiẓān al-kātibān*) who keep note of human behaviour (Q. 6:61; 13:11; 50:17–18; 82:10–12; see Burge 2012: 72–73) and provide the details for an individual's *kitāb* (book [of life]), as produced on the Day of Judgment.

2.2 Angels in images of heaven and hell

As has been seen, angels can be both active participants in Qur'anic narratives and the instruments by which change is brought about, usually by conveying a message to a human protagonist from God. Angels are also described in images of heaven, however, without being part of any narrative drama, where they are invoked for their constant adoration and knowledge of God (e.g. Q. 3:18; 4:172; 13:13; 16:49; 21:19; 39:75; 42:5). The worship and knowledge of the angels can move into the human realm, with the angels being assigned the important role of bearers of revelation (e.g. Q. 16:2 and 8:12, where they bring messages of consolation). The Qur'an sees angels and prophets as the means by which the divine and human worlds interact, angels marking the 'downwards' movement from heaven to earth, and prophets the reverse (cf. Wild 1996).

The angels are described as being ever-present with the faithful, echoing God's praise of them. For example, in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb* the believers are commended to remember that 'It is He who blesses you, along with His angels, in order to lead you out of darkness and into the light' (Q. 33:43). The angels are said to surround believers when they pray (Q. 8:9), bring blessings on the 'Night of Power' (*laylat al-qadr*; Q. 97:4), protect and sustain those who believe in God (Q. 41:30), reinforce the community in battle (Q. 3:124–125; 8:10, 12), and bless and protect the Prophet (Q. 33:56; 66:4). These passages create a sense of unity and support between the believers and the divine world. This closeness between humanity and the angelic world is also seen in the way in which the Qur'an describes the angels' role in death (O'Shaughnessy 1969: 61–76; Burge 2012: 77–80). The Qur'an refers both to an individual 'Angel of Death' (*malak al-mawt*; Q. 32:11) and to angels who are responsible for collecting human souls (Q. 7:37; 16:28, 33; 47:27). What is more common are descriptions of the angels greeting the faithful and faithless, pre-empting their ultimate destination in the afterlife (Q. 13:23; 16:28, 33; 21:103; 25:22; 33:43).

The idea of judgment, of the consignment of the faithless to punishment in hell and of the reward of the faithful in heaven, is one that appears almost constantly throughout the Qur'an as the underpinning of its ethical worldview, with every individual being responsible (*mukallaf*) for their own final destiny (Abdel Haleem 2017: 51–54). The Qur'an is a deeply

apocalyptic text, as seen in the frequent references to the Day of Resurrection (*Yawm al-qiyāma*), when the world will end and the souls of the dead will be resurrected and judged. The Qur'an also describes a series of cataclysmic events at the end of time, when the created order is subverted and destroyed, showing the power and sovereignty of God as the creator and 'terminator' of the world (see Makino 1970: 31–49). The angels are not described as playing a specific role in the events that take place, but the Qur'an sees the appearance of the angels in vast numbers at the end of time as one of the signs of the Day of Resurrection (Q. 22:25; 69:17; 78:38; 89:22). The angels also function as witnesses to human actions and testify as to whether they should be rewarded with entrance into the Garden or confined to the Fire (Q. 4:166; 34:40). Although the angels do appear in descriptions of heaven, particularly with respect to their constant worship of God, there are many more references to angels punishing people in hell (Lange 2016: 74–99). There is a reference to an angel who is the ruler (*mālik*) of hell, who punishes people within it (Q. 43:77); there are angelic creatures called the *zabāniyya* who torture the unrighteous (Q. 96:18); and nineteen 'companions of the Fire' (Q. 74:30–31) who do the same. The angels also interrogate those in hell (Q. 4:97), beat the damned (Q. 6:93; 8:50; 66:6; see also Günther 2019), and curse them (Q. 2:161; 3:87).

2.3 Angels in debates with Qur'anic interlocutors

The Qur'an does not preserve a great deal of direct information about the responses Muḥammad received from the Meccan population, or the arguments that they made in defence of their own forms of belief and practice. However, as Saleh has noted, it is possible to infer the types of criticisms made against Muḥammad's preaching through the Qur'an's responses, as preserved within the text (see Saleh 2018; 2019). Significantly, angels feature relatively prominently within the disputes that Muḥammad appears to have had with the local Meccan community.

The most common rebuke of Muḥammad as the messenger chosen by God appears to have revolved around his being insufficiently important to be the bearer of such a significant revelation, with those who were antagonistic to his message often appearing to have demanded the sending down of an angel. The sending of an angel would, in their eyes, be proof of the divine origin of the message because they considered an angel to be a worthier messenger than Muḥammad (Q. 6:8–9, 158; 11:12; 15:7; 16:33; 17:92; 23:24; 25:21; 41:14; 43:53). The Qur'an rejects such a demand in three main ways: it routinely points to the created world as the principal sign of God's existence and sovereignty (see Tlili 2021: 140–141); the miracles that Muḥammad performs are the night journey (*isrāʾ*) and ascent to heaven (*miʿrāj*), as well as the Qur'an itself (see Williams 2013: 1–2); and the argument is made that prophets are always raised from humans and that to send an angel would not work. For example, in *Sūrat al-Isrāʾ* the Qur'an states, 'Had earth been peopled by angels, walking about, their minds at ease, We would have sent down

upon them from heaven an angel as messenger' (Q. 17:95), making the point that just as humans are sent human messengers, angels would be sent angelic messengers. In a similar vein, the Prophet Noah (Nūḥ) explains to his own people that he is not an angel (Q. 11:31), as does Muḥammad (Q. 6:51). In *Sūrat al-Anʿām*, the Qur'an mocks the Meccans, retorting that 'Had We brought the angels down upon them, or had the dead spoken to them, or had We mustered all things before their eyes, they would still not believe' (Q. 6:111). All of these arguments are put forward as reasons why God has sent Muḥammad with the revelation and not an angel.

There are four places in the Qur'an where there are hints that the Meccan population worshipped angels (Q. 3:80; 17:40; 43:19; 53:26–27). However, the precise form of this angelolatry is not easy to discern as each passage is deeply embedded in polemic. The first passage is found in *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* and relates to Jesus, forming part of a broader attack on Christian *taḥrīf* ('corruption' or 'falsification'), the idea that Jesus gave his community a scripture, but later Christians corrupted its meaning by adding false beliefs, most notably the idea that Jesus is the Son of God. The passage makes it clear that Jesus did not command people to 'Be my worshippers apart from God', and that he did not tell them to 'take angels and prophets as your lords' (Q. 3:79–80). The references to angels in *Sūrat al-Isrāʾ* (Q. 17:40), *Sūrat al-Zukhruf* (Q. 43:60), and *Sūrat al-Najm* (Q. 53:26–27) are rather different and suggest that local Meccan religious practice involved the worship of angels. These polemical passages are related to the worship of the main local deities, the three goddesses al-Lāt, Manāt, and al-ʿUzzā, who are mentioned specifically in the passage in *Sūrat al-Najm* and were known collectively within later Muslim tradition as the *banāt Allāh* (the daughters of God). As Tomaso Tesei notes, the Qur'an portrays 'their cultic practices as a form of imperfect monotheism and the minor divinities whom the *mušrikūn* are accused of worshiping are not idols, but rather angels' (Tesei 2021: 187–188). This suggests that it is the Qur'an that is saying they are worshipping angels, not the Meccans themselves. The Qur'anic argument appears to be rooted in the idea that the worship of idols is as futile as seeking intercession from angels – a point which is also expressed in the so-called 'Satanic verses' (see Burton 1970; also Crone 2010: 158–159). These passages about angel worship in the Qur'an are complex and scholars have interpreted them in different ways. G. R. Hawting takes the position that these passages are related to internal monotheist polemical debates (Hawting 1999: 67–87), while Tesei argues that the passages are evidence of a later redactional hand (Tesei 2021: 195). While the worship of al-Lāt, Manāt, and al-ʿUzzā are archaeologically substantiated (see Robin 2019: 116–121), the claim that the Meccans believed these deities were angels is not evidenced elsewhere, and may simply be a means for the Qur'an to argue that praying to angels or idols is of no avail (see Burge 2012: 11–13).

Crone, however, takes the position that the Meccans did believe that they were worshipping angels, asking whether

> the adherents of female angels operate with female angels alone or see them as part of a larger cast including males? Did they single out three female angels (al-Lāt, Manāt and al-ʿUzzā) for special reverence, or were these three revered by different groups, or is the Messenger picking out those three as particularly offensive because of their pagan names? It is impossible to tell. (Crone 2010: 157)

However, the identification of the *banāt Allāh* with angels can be hard to maintain as angels in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as similar messenger deities in Semitic religions, are almost exclusively genderless or male. Indeed, the only significant angels that are described as being female are part of the male-female pairs of angels seen in Ebionite religion (see Burge 2012: 10–12; Barker 1992: 67; although there are some rare examples of feminine angels and demons in Rabbinic literature, see Ahuvia 2021: 156-158). Crone goes on to argue that the Meccans did not worship the three angel-goddesses without also worshipping God (i.e. Allāh), seeing the goddesses merely as a spiritual avenue though which to reach God (Crone 2010: 161–164). Crone argues that the term ‘daughter of God’ may even be a circumlocution for goddess, as there was no other suitable term available (Crone 2010: 185). In her conclusion, Crone suggests that the references to the worship of angels in the Qur’an are similar in tone to instances of Jewish angelolatry, as attested to in biblical and post-biblical literature, hinting that this may mean the Qur’an is directing its discourse towards ‘Jews and Judaising pagans’ (Crone 2010: 2000). In contrast, in his study of the epigraphic material, Christian Julien Robin concludes that the term ‘daughters of God’ is common in Arabian religious inscriptions, but notes that they are not major deities, which creates something of a discrepancy since the Qur’an and later Muslim tradition suggests that they were full divinities (see Robin 2019: 119–120). All in all, the relationship of these three Arabian goddesses to angels is difficult to assess, given the paucity of information available, but it seems unlikely that the Meccans engaged in angelolatry, with the accusation that they did seeming to form part of a broader polemical position in which the three goddesses have no intercessory power, the worship of them beinf futile.

3 Angels in the Hadith literature

While the angelic world is fairly heavily populated in the Qur’an, it is greatly expanded upon in the extra-Qur’anic literature, including in *tafsīr*, *taʾrīkh*, the Hadith collections, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, and the material relating to the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. This is a broad range of genres, testifying to the prevalence of angels within Muslim thought. It also means that not all appearances of angels in the Hadith literature can be covered

here. The number of hadith about angels is vast and it would be impossible to consider all of them. There is, however, a collection devoted to the topic of angels, *al-Ḥabāʾik fī akhbār al-malāʾik* (The Arrangement of the Traditions about Angels), compiled by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505, see Burge 2012), that brings much of this material into one place, including material from the six 'canonical' collections of Sunnī hadith. Many of the hadith which develop the imagery and role of angels are not found in the canonical collections, although it is important to note that the Qur'anic idea of angels appearing everywhere within the created world is found throughout Muslim thought (Street 1991: 123). The angels are revered as spiritual creatures who do the work of God and worship continually, something that is to be praised and emulated, an idea that is seen in the collections of 'psalms' attributed to the Shīʿī Imām Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 74/713), including a prayer extolling the virtues of the angels (see Zayn al-ʿAbidīn 1988: 23–26).

The increased visibility of angels in the extra-Qur'anic literature is the result of a mixture of exegetical expansions and interactions with other religious communities (see Burge 2012: 177–181). The expansion of angelology through exegesis can be seen in the proliferation of named angels found in the Hadith literature and exegetical works. References to angels that are ambiguous in the Qur'an, such as the 'angel of death' (*malak al-mawt*) or the *mālik* (king) of hell (Q. 43:77), become specific named angels, while events mentioned in brief are assigned to specific angels. For example, the Qur'an refers to the blowing of the trumpet at the end of time (Q. 6:73; 18:99; 20:102; 23:101; 27:87; 36:51; 39:68; 50:20; 69:13), but without making any reference to who is responsible for performing this act; in later hadith included in the exegetical literature this task is given to the angel Isrāfīl (see Burge 2012: 31–51). Al-Ṭabarī writes in his discussion of Qur'anic verse 6:73:

> In our opinion, the correct response concerning this is made clear in the reports (*akhbār*) given on the authority of the Messenger of God; that he said: 'Isrāfīl has put the trumpet to his lips (*iltaqama*), he is leaning his forehead [towards God] waiting for the moment when (*matā*) he is commanded to blow it.' (al-Ṭabarī, present author's translation)

Another example can be seen in al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, in an account of the *miʿrāj*, where the angel Mālik is described in this way: 'the one who is lighting the fire is Mālik, the Guardian of the Fire' (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, janāʾiz*, 194; *badʾ al-khalq* 7, *anbiyāʾ* 24). Here, the generic word found in the Qur'an, *mālik* (ruler), is turned into a proper name, with his role being described as a 'guardian' (*khāzin*) of hell.

While some aspects of later Muslim angelology could have been derived from Jewish and Christian (or even Zoroastrian) stories and imagery, they are often moulded to fit Qur'anic ideas and theology (Burge 2012: 88–108). There is evidence, however, that some ideas about angels may also be related to older pre-Islamic notions, with some hadith (albeit

ones that are not always widely transmitted) bearing parallels to Semitic deities and beliefs (see Al-Azmeh 2019; Burge 2019). For example, al-Suyūṭī includes this hadith:

> Ibn ʿAbbās said: Some Jews approached the Messenger of God, and said, 'Tell us about this Thunder (*al-Raʿd*).' He said: 'It [or *he*] is one of God's angels, responsible for the clouds. In his hand is a whip of fire, with which he drives the clouds. He drives on the clouds when God commands him.' They said: 'What is this sound which we can hear?' He said: 'His voice.' They said, 'You are right.' (Burge 2019: 159; al-Suyūṭī 1988: 75)

This imagery of an angel herding the clouds bears a strong resemblance to depictions of various Near Eastern storm gods, such as Hadad, who was part of the Akkadian pantheon. It is possible that some older Semitic beliefs, ideas, and imagery were maintained in later Muslim sources, albeit adapted to suit Muslim theology.

3.1 Angels in the stories of the prophets

As has already been mentioned, stories about the prophets in the Qur'an are not always complete, often omitting information and being structured in ways that may seem surprising. The genre of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, as well as works of history (*taʾrīkh*), took the lives of the prophets and placed them in chronological order, while filling in any Qur'anic lacunae. Regarding angels, works within the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* genre see a significant increase in the presence of angels, which often have a more prominent role than in the Qur'an. This can be seen very clearly in the accounts of the lives of Adam and Eve (Ḥawwāʾ): while angels are present in the Qur'anic telling of their story, the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* collection of Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035) shows angels appearing far more frequently (al-Thaʿlabī 2002: 41–48, 58–66; see also Kister 1993). The *tafsīr* tradition also sees an increase in the attribution of specific events to angels, with the destruction of various peoples, for example, which in the Qur'an is simply stated as an act of God, being performed and administered by angels (see Burge 2012: 106).

These additions allow for the development of theological ideas, while also imbuing the texts with a sense of the wonder of the supernatural. For example, there are many hadiths that use angels to articulate the Qur'anic idea of the *ajal* – the amount of time allotted to humans for their life. Angels are said to write details about a human's life on their soul at the moment of conception, particularly how long their life will be, whether they will be happy or sad, and what *rizq* (sustenance) they will have (see Burge 2012: 75–78). This engages with theological beliefs about predestination and fatalism. The fixed nature of the *ajal* is also seen in a number of stories about the prophets, particularly Solomon (Sulaymān), where people try to evade death but, without fail, always die at their appointed time (see Burge 2012: 143). Another example of a *qiṣaṣ* text conveying theological ideas

can be seen in the story of the two angels Hārūt and Mārūt, who are only briefly mentioned in the Qur'an (Q. 2:102), but have an extended narrative in several hadith (see al-Thaʿlabī 2002: 86–94; Burge 2012: 154–159) exploring what it means to be human and why humans have such a great propensity towards sin and disobedience (see Crone 2016; Burge Forthcoming).

3.2 Angels in the *Sīra* literature

The accounts of the life of the Prophet often feature angels, with their appearances falling largely into three areas: narratives concerning Muḥammad's birth; Muḥammad's interaction with Gabriel as the angel who delivers the revelation of the Qur'an; and accounts of the Prophet's night journey (*isrāʾ*) and ascension to heaven (*miʿrāj*), during which he is taken on a tour of the latter, and often of hell as well.

The accounts of Muḥammad's birth are broadly similar to the various biblical annunciation narratives. In the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Biography of the Messenger of God) of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 147/765) a voice calls out to Āmina, Muḥammad's mother, giving predictions of what her child will become, as well as an instruction that he should be called Muḥammad (see Ibn Isḥāq 2006: 69). There is also an account of angels coming to Muḥammad as a child, when they opened his chest and purified his heart. As Saleh has noted, these stories seek to imbue Muḥammad's life with a deep sense of the supernatural and numinous, which is in stark contrast to the Qur'an's portrayal of Muḥammad as an ordinary man (see Saleh 2010: 28–31; see also Williams 2013: 21–33). This close interaction between Muḥammad and the angelic world is also seen in the accounts of revelation, where Muḥammad is routinely in touch with the angelic world, and also in the descriptions of his death, where the Angel of Death seeks his permission to take his life, something the angel has never done before and will never do again (Burge 2012: 143–144). The role of angels in providing support and encouragement is also seen in the way in which they are sent to aid Muḥammad and the community at the Battle of Badr, which is mentioned briefly in the Qur'an (Q. 3:124–125 and 8:9–14), but then greatly expanded upon in exegeses, Hadith collections, and historical accounts (see Williams 2013: 109; Gallorini 2021: 42–45).

The events which generate the most significant amount of material concerning angels, however, are the *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj*. These events are alluded to briefly in the Qur'an (see Q. 17:1; 53:13-18), but then expanded upon greatly in the *Sīra* literature (see Ibn Isḥāq 2006: 181–187), as well as in the Hadith compilations and exegeses. The ascension literature is vast and becomes increasingly elaborate over time (see Buckley 2013; Vuckovic 2004), with Muḥammad being shown a number of strange and miraculous sights. The *isrāʾ* and the *miʿrāj* are cast within the context of the Meccans demanding a sign that Muḥammad is a prophet: his tour of the heavenly realm (and the angels that he sees) are used to prove the divine origin of his message. In a similar way, on his return from Jerusalem

(and heaven, if the events are concurrent), Muḥammad is described as opening up the lids of some water containers being kept by a group travelling in a caravan headed to Mecca; the travellers subsequently testify upon their arrival in Mecca that, when they woke up, the lids had indeed been removed. The *isrāʾ* and *miʿrāj* are also used to articulate broader theological ideas. For example, the journey to Jerusalem emphasizes the Qur'anic idea that Muḥammad is part of a long line of prophets stretching all the way back to Adam, which is also seen when Muḥammad is met and honoured by various biblical prophets while in heaven. Muḥammad is also often described as watching the angels perform various rituals, which are then used to give authority and authenticity to Muslim forms of worship, creating a link between heavenly and earthly forms of worship. This is seen particularly strongly with respect to the angelic worship at the *Bayt al-maʿmūr* (the Inhabited House), the heavenly equivalent of the earthly Kaʿba (see Burge 2009: 223–225). Muḥammad's descriptions of angels torturing those in hell are also used to reflect very earthly political realities, with tyrants and those whom communities believe to be heretics or unbelievers being punished in graphic detail, both as retribution and as a comfort to the oppressed (Vuckovic 2004: 97–122; Tottoli 2010).

3.3 Angels in eschatological thought

The Qur'an includes a great deal of eschatological imagery, which is again expanded upon in the classical works of exegeses and in Hadith collections devoted to descriptions of the Last Day and to explanations of the signs (*āyāt*) that will presage it (see Abdel Haleem 2017). The most famous of these are *al-Durra al-fākhira* (The Precious Pearl), attributed to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya's (d. 751/1350) *Kitāb al-Rūḥ* (The Book of the Spirit; see Smith and Haddad 2002: 63–98), although numerous other examples can also be found. The events of the Last Day are ushered in by the angel Isrāfīl, who blows the trumpet that begins a series of cataclysmic events at the end of time (Smith and Haddad 2002: 70–71). The angels assist in the division of humanity into those going to hell and those who are admitted to paradise, while also (as seen in the Qur'an) torturing those in hell and serving those who are in heaven.

Another important eschatological idea that is not found in the Qur'an but became an important element in later Muslim thought is the trial of the grave. After death, humans are visited by the angels Munkar and Nakīr, known as the *fattān al-qabr* (tempters of the grave), who ask them questions about their life and beliefs. If they are Muslim and have behaved well, the individual's grave is made spacious; if they fail the 'test', the grave is made cramped (see Smith and Haddad 2002: 41–49; Kinberg 2023). These events are seen as a prefiguring of the ultimate destination of the dead in the afterlife. Although not mentioned in the Qur'an, the trial in the grave became a part of many Muslim creeds (see Watt 1994: 31, 35, 45, 54, 60, 67, 77, 82, and 88). Some Muslim theologians, however, interpreted the events in the grave allegorically (Netton 2000).

Angels also have a deep impact on an individual's personal eschatology. Hadith give details about which types of prayers and rituals generate the most spiritual blessings (*baraka*), and which are then noted by the angels and entered into an individual's *kitāb*. In some cases, the angels pray and intercede for people who have performed certain rituals. Meritorious actions include saying the *taṣliya* (a prayer of blessing after saying Muḥammad's name; see de la Puente 1999), reciting certain portions of the Qur'an (Asfaruddin 2002), circumambulating the Yemeni corner of the Kaʿba, and so on (Burge 2009: 228–233). Similarly, angels are not simply involved in giving individuals extra sources of spiritual benefit; the behaviour of an individual can also cause the angel that records their good deeds to depart, meaning that they cannot have any good actions recorded in their 'book'. For example, if a person is near a pollutant (such as idols, dogs, urine, etc.), the angel who records that individual's good actions is not present, meaning that individual cannot have any actions that would ordinarily generate merit and blessings credited to their 'book' (see Burge 2010a). Although the angel is not exerting a detrimental effect on the individual, their absence does have an impact on that individual's eschatological reward, especially since the angel that records a human's bad deeds remains.

3.4 Imagining angels

There is relatively little information in the Qur'an concerning the appearance of angels, other than two slightly contradictory comments. The first is that angels have an anthropomorphic form. In the Qur'an, the angel who visits Mary is described as a *basharan sawīyan* ('a well-proportioned human'; Q. 19:17) and Joseph (Yūsuf) is said by the friends of Potiphar's wife to be so beautiful, he must be an angel (Q. 12:31). At the same time, the Qur'an describes angels as having 'two, three, four of wings' (Q. 35:1), to which God can add as He so wishes. Although, the association of angels with wings is known in Christian art and in the depiction of lesser deities in Semitic religions (see Robin 2019: 77–87), the use of wings in this verse appears to be related to the idea of heaven and earth being created and separated, with the wings being the means by which the angels travel from one realm to the other, a point noted by the exegete Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272; see Burge 2010b: 61). These two images were developed into later descriptions of angels as having a 'human' form and a 'true' form, one used on earth, and one used in heaven. In the Hadith literature, there are accounts of Muḥammad asking Gabriel if he can see the latter's true form (see Burge 2012: 100–101), which is so astounding it causes Muḥammad to faint. In contrast, the ordinariness of Gabriel's human form is emphasized by comparing him to Diḥya al-Kalbī (d. c. 50/670), a companion of the Prophet who is reputed to have been a handsome figure (see Burge 2012: 57).

The Hadith literature also describes angels as being 'created out of light'. This forms part of a broader system of differing ontological substances for the varying species populating

creation: humans are made out of clay (*ṭīn*, Q. 7:12; 17:61; 23:12 etc.; *ṣalṣāl*, Q. 15:26, 28, 33; 55:14), *jinn* out of 'fiery wind' (*nār al-samūm*, Q. 15:27) and *mārij min nār* ('shimmering flame', Q. 55:15), devils (*shayāṭīn*) out of fire (*nār*, Q. 7:12 15:33; 17:61; 38:76), and angels out of light (*nūr*; see Burge 2012: 114–115). These differences in physical substance become central in the dispute that Iblīs (also known as al-Shayṭān) has with God. When God commands the angels to prostrate to Adam, Iblīs protests, saying: 'I am better than him; You created me of fire, but him You created of clay' (Q. 38:76; see also Neuwirth 2000: 31–33; Gallorini 2021: 292–294). Each of the four species of creature – angel, human, *jinn*, and devil – have different roles and qualities within the cosmos, which their ontological forms represent.

In the Hadith literature, in collections such as al-Suyūṭī's *al-Ḥabāʾik*, angels are often described as being of great size. Great breadth is conveyed by saying that the angels' wings stretch from the east to the west, while great height is portrayed by saying that the angels span the distance between the seventh earth and the seventh heaven. Great distance is also often described in terms of the time it would take to journey over 70,000 years, or such like (see Burge 2012: 60–63). One of the *Ḥadīth Qudsī* describes a group of angels that go around the Earth seeking those who are praising God. When they find someone, '[the angels] sit with them and surround (*ḥaffa*) each of them with their wings, so that they fill the space between them and the lowest heaven (*ḥattā yamalʾū mā baynahum wa-bayna al-samāʾ al-dunyā*)' (Ibrahim and Johnson-Davies 1980: 75, section 14 [present author's translation]). These hyperbolic measurements are designed to emphasize the utter otherworldliness of the true angelic form, rather than being 'actual' measurements. These great sizes are so great that they are effectively meaningless, save to convey a sense of wonder and majesty.

The anthropomorphic form of angels remains in descriptions of their 'true' forms. For example, Gabriel still has a nose, hair, feet, and so on when in a divine form. These anthropomorphic forms are also highlighted with the addition of clothing and jewellery, particularly the use of precious stones such as rubies, diamonds, and chrysolite (see Burge 2012: 64–66). Such detailing heightens the image of the angel as a part of the divine and not human world, resonating with the Qur'anic view of heaven as a place of luxury (see Rustomji 2009: 51–52, 84–85). Angels are also seen holding specific tools that help them fulfil their roles (see Burge 2012: 66): the angels responsible for punishing people in hell are described holding iron forks with which to beat people; the angel responsible for herding the clouds carries a whip; the angel Isrāfīl is often depicted holding a trumpet with which to usher in the Last Day (Q. 6:73; 18:99; 20:102); and the Angel of Death sits with the world like a bowl between his legs, from which he takes the souls of those who are to die. The anthropomorphic imagery used for angels, both in terms of their

physical appearance (even in their divine form), what they wear, and the objects they carry, show a vision of the divine world that is deeply connected to the human sphere.

Angels can also, however, take zoomorphic forms. The two most common are the giant cockerel angel, known as al-Dīk (lit. 'the cockerel'), and the Bearers of the Throne (*ḥamlat al-ʿarsh*). The angel al-Dīk is often seen during Muḥammad's tours of heaven, being responsible for causing cockerels to call on earth, thereby waking people for the dawn prayers (Tottoli 1999; Burge 2012: 188–189). The Bearers of the Throne are comparable to the biblical *ḥayyōt*, having the face of a bull, a lion, a human, and an eagle, with each of the animal-forms being regarded as the lords (*sayyid*) of the hunting beasts, the grazing beasts, and the birds (see Burge 2012: 145–149). In Shīʿī thought, however, the Bearers of the Throne were often identified with the Prophet and the Imāms (see Tottoli 2019), and therefore did not have zoomorphic forms. This illustrates the way in which angels and their depiction can change to articulate differing theological positions.

Indeed, angels can have particularly unusual forms that are used to articulate specific theological ideas. There is, for example, the angel al-Rūḥ (the Spirit). While in the exegetical literature this angel is closely identified with the spirit that announces the birth of Jesus to Mary, in the accounts of the *miʿrāj*, al-Rūḥ is described as a many-mouthed angel who constantly proclaims the glory of God (see Burge 2012: 149–151); theologically, al-Rūḥ becomes a symbol of the ideal response to God. Another angel who appears within accounts of the *miʿrāj* is made of both fire and ice (see Colby 2019). This fire-ice angel, sometimes named Ḥabīb, is an example of the miraculous power of God to unite seemingly incompatible elements, becoming a symbol of the harmony needed within both the community and believers' own souls (Colby 2019: 265). The last angel with an unusual form is the angel al-Sakīna (related to the Hebrew *shekhina*, the 'dwelling' or 'settling' of the divine presence), who is unusual for taking the purely abstract form of a cloud (see Burge 2012: 159). This entity, however, who is closely identified with the idea of revelation and divine encounter, is not always considered to be an angel (see Lawson 2017: 47–49).

In Islamic art, angels are found most often as miniatures within accounts of the Prophet's *miʿrāj* and within the genre known as *ʿajāʾib al-makhlūqāt* (wonders of creation), of which the most famous example is the work by Zakariyyāʾ b. Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283; see Rührdanz 2019). Images of angels also appear in other works, such as the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* and various historical writings (*taʾrīkh*), with the prostration of the angels to Adam, the binding of Abraham's son, and the appearance of Gabriel to Mary being particularly common subjects. Angels also appear in biographies of Muḥammad, articulating the divine origin of his revelation and his exulted status. The miniatures included in the Ilkhānid *Miʿrājnāma* (dated 685/1286) depict angels in an anthropomorphic form, with wings, dressed in rich robes, and often wearing a crown (Gruber 2010: 24–31). The angel al-Dīk is painted as a large cockerel with no specifically angelic features

(Gruber 2010: 28). Many of the miniatures also depict the angels in positions of prayer, emphasizing the commonality between divine and earthly forms of ritual (Gruber 2010: 28–29). The use of anthropomorphic forms for angels is also seen in the miniatures included in manuscripts of al-Qazwīnī's *ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt*, where the only feature that can easily distinguish the angels from humans is the addition of wings (Rührdanz 2019: 398).

4 Angels in theological and philosophical thought

Angels appear in a number of debates within medieval Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism, although they have not been the subject of a great deal of specific secondary analysis. This section will highlight the main debates about angels found within these disciplines, although it should be noted that there was a high degree of overlap and interaction between them. The theological and doctrinal belief in angels is something that is clearly stated in the Qur'an (e.g. Q. 2:285; 4:136; Abdel Haleem 2008: 24–26) and frequently reasserted in credal statements (*ʿaqīda*, pl. *ʿaqāʾid*), such as those by Abū 'l-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935; Watt 1994: 41), Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933; Watt 1994: 52), and Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142; Watt 1994: 83).

4.1 Angelic or prophetic superiority?

One of the issues often debated within works of *kalām* centred around the spiritual status of angels within the cosmic hierarchy, particularly whether angels or prophets were more worthy of merit (*faḍl*). From the volume of material extant on this issue, it was evidently an important one (Street 1991: 125). A summary of these debates was included by al-Suyūṭī as a theological postscript (*khātima*) to his collection of hadith, *al-Ḥabāʾik* (al-Suyūṭī 1988: 203–276). Although this *khātima* is heavily plagiarized from other sources, particularly the *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn fī uṣūl al-dīn* (The Book of Forty [Investigations] into the Sources of Religion') of the Ashʿarī theologian and exegete, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), al-Suyūṭī outlines three main positions on the issue of the relative superiority of angels and prophets: (1) that 'the prophets (*al-anbiyāʾ*) have more merit [than the angels], which is the position held by the majority of the *ahl al-sunna*'; (2) that 'the angels have more merit [than the prophets] which is the position of the Muʿtazilīs'; and (3) 'a position of neutrality' on the issue (*al-waqf*), which was the choice of the Ashʿarī theologian, al-Kiyāʾ al-Harrāsī (d. 504/1010–11), who argued that only the Prophet Muḥammad is regarded as having more merit than the angels (see al-Suyūṭī 1988: 203). This debate is also found in Shīʿī sources, especially in the thought of al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), where the most common view is that the prophets are superior to the angels (see McDermott 1978: 102) and that the Imāms are superior to the prophets, except for the Prophet Muḥammad, who is superior to all (McDermott 1978: 106). The debates about angelic and human superiority are also an important feature of various Sufi works, particularly those of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240; see Webb 1991; Gallorini 2021: 331–333), as well as among the

Ismāʿīlī philosophical group known as the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (the Brethren of Putiry; see de Callataÿ 2019: 347–349).

These debates surrounding the relative superiority of the angels and prophets were rooted in the interpretation of the Qur'an, particularly verses 4:172 ('Christ will not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the angels closest to God') and 21:20 ('They who are with Him disdain not to worship Him, nor do they grow weary'). Many Muʾtazilī interpreters of the Qur'an, such as Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), regarded angels as being worthy of more merit because of their ceaseless worship and undoubting belief in God (see Ibrahim 1981: 66; Murata 1987: 338–343). The constant adoration and worship of God by the angels is something that humans, even prophets, fall short of. In contrast, Ashʿarī theologians pointed to Qur'anic verses 2:30–31, in which God challenges the angels to know the names of things in the created world, which they cannot do. Adam, on the other hand, is given the ability of rational thought (*ʿaql*) and consequently knows how to name things, which gives him the greater merit (Street 1991: 125–127).

4.2 Angels and bodies

In the Hadith literature, it is clear that angels have physical bodies: their created substance is described; there are descriptions of angels interacting physically with humans (for example, Muḥammad is held in Gabriel's hands in accounts of the first revelation within al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* and rides the celestial, although not necessarily angelic, winged-horse Burāq, which is described in Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* as being 'bigger than a donkey but smaller than a mule' and capable of making huge, supernatural strides); and the angels are also said to have an *ajal* and will die (see Burge 2012: 98–102). However, there was some debate on these questions among theologians and philosophers, with various points of contention emerging between the different schools (Street 1991: 113–119; Ben Mohammed 2019). Within their emanationist cosmologies (see section 4.3), philosophers considered angels to be entirely spiritual beings with no bodies. In contrast, Muʿtazilī theologians maintained that in 'this world everything is material or bound to materiality – even angels and demons are material beings' (Peters 1976: 408). Ashʿarī theologians, on the other hand, took a middle position and believed that angels were composite, having a changing body but an unchanging spirit (Street 1991: 116). While Muʿtazilīs and Ashʿarīs agreed that angels had bodies, they therefore disagreed about the nature of that body, with Muʿtazilīs holding that it was luminous, and Ashʿarīs that it was 'airy'. This distinction becomes important with respect to the descriptions in the Qur'an and Hadith of angels performing acts, such as destroying cities or supporting the Muslim army at the Battle of Badr: for Muʿtazilīs, these must be interpreted symbolically, whereas Ashʿarīs believed that the airy body of an angel could 'condense' and become visible to humans (Street 1991: 116).

4.3 Angels in classical emanationist cosmologies

Islamic philosophy drew heavily on Neoplatonic thought, especially the Plotinian concept of creation through emanation. The idea of emanation (*fayḍ*) became deeply associated with Islamic philosophical thinking, providing a means by which to understand how the One, a divine simplex, could generate a universe of complexity. The early thought of al-Kindī (d. c. 256/870) and Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) saw the introduction into Muslim thought of emanationist cosmologies that, over time, also came to include angels.

Al-Fārābī includes some suggestion of angels within his cosmology. In his *Kitāb al-Siyāsa* (Book of Government), for example, he states that 'secondary [causes] ought to be said to be spiritual existents, angels and the like' (al-Fārābī 2015: 29, section 2). Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna; d. 428/1037), however, was one of the first to formally introduce angels comprehensively into an emanationist cosmology (see Netton 1989: 149–202; Davidson 1992: 74–83). In the metaphysics of his *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ* (The Book of Healing), Ibn Sīnā describes God as the creator of the First Intellect, with the First Intellect generating the Second through the process of emanation (see Netton 1989: 162–165). Muslim philosophers integrated this emanationist system of Intellects with the Ptolemaic cosmological system, which had nine celestial spheres, with earth at the centre. Ibn Sīnā calls each of these spheres a 'heaven'. The nine spheres include the outer sphere (First Heaven), the sphere of fix stars (Second Heaven), the sphere of Saturn (Third Heaven), the sphere of Jupiter (Fourth Heaven), the sphere of Mars (Fifth Heaven), the sphere of the Sun (Sixth Heaven), the sphere of Venus (Seventh Heaven), the sphere of Mercury (Eighth Heaven), and the sphere of the Moon (Ninth Heaven). In these cosmological structures there are vertical and horizontal movements. Regarding the vertical, each of the nine spheres are governed by Ten Intellects, with the First Intellect being generated by the Necessary Being while in turn generating the Second Intellect all the way down to the Tenth Intellect, also called the Active Intellect. Concerning the horizontal movement, from the Second Intellect onwards, each Intellect generates the soul of a heaven, which then generates the body of the heaven. This means that within each level of the hierarchy, from the first celestial sphere to the ninth, there is an intellect (*ʿaql*), a soul (*nafs*), and a body (*jism*). Ibn Sīnā uses angelic 'names' to refer to the intellects and the souls, calling them *malāʾika rūḥāniyya* (spiritual angels) and *malāʾika al-ʿamala* (active angels) respectively (Ibn Sīnā 2005: 358). Ibn Sīnā also refers to the intellects as 'archangels' and the souls as 'angels', conveying the internal hierarchy within each level of emanation. Such a scheme sees a harmonization between the Neoplatonic and Ptolemaic cosmologies of late antiquity with the Qur'anic language of angels. This fusion of philosophical and religious thought is evidenced in other terms that Ibn Sīnā uses for the intellects (see Corbin 1980: 56–68), such as *karūbiyyūn* (cherubs) and *fereshtegān-e karūbiyān* (archangel-cherubs); the personal name *Wajh al-quds* (the Face of the Holy) for the First Intellect (Netton 1989:

164–165); and the various names given for the Tenth Intellect (see Netton 1989: 165, note 3), such as Gabriel, the Holy Spirit (*al-Rūḥ al-quds*), and Servant of the Holy (*ʿAbd al-quds*). The invocation of angels within the cosmological system also enables a link to be made with the Qur'an, which describes the angels as being close to God (cf. Q. 8:12; see Griffel 2010: 165). Similar angelic cosmological models are also found in Ismāʿīlī thought, particularly in the work of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 411/1021; see Netton 1989: 203–255).

The association of angels with cosmological systems reached its zenith in the philosophy of illumination developed by the Persian scholar, Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191; see Netton 1989: 260–268). Suhrawardī's complex emanationist cosmology will not be discussed here, but rather his use of angels and angelic names (see Burge 2008). Within his complex cosmology, Suhrawardī includes a series of 'regent lights' (*al-anwār al-mudabbira*); Netton describes these 'regent lights' as 'a form of guardian angel who directs or moves, but does not cause, the spheres' (Netton 1989: 266). Suhrawardī gives these lights angelic names that are taken from the Zoroastrian/Pahlavi tradition, such as Khurdād, Urbībihisht, and Isfandārmudh. These are all names of Zoroastrian *fravashis* (spirits), which in Zoroastrian theology performed the same task as Suhrawardī gives to the 'regent lights' – that is, they maintained but do not create a sphere (see Netton 1989: 267). By invoking these Zoroastrian names, Suhrawardī was able to convey how he envisaged the role of angels within his broader cosmology. Some scholars have argued that Suhrawardī's use of Zoroastrian names marks an attempt to unify Muslim and Persian traditions (e.g. Razavi 1997: 83). His philosophy, however, is still deeply rooted in the tradition of Islamic philosophy; the appeal of Zoroastrian angelology for Suhrawardī may have resided in the way in which Zoroastrian angels, particularly the Amesha Spentas (the Bountiful Immortals), functioned as archetypes, a notion which he utilizes in his cosmological and theological thought (see Burge 2008: 445–446).

4.4 Angels in theories and models of revelation

In the Qur'an there are two main terms used to describe the process of revelation: *nuzūl* (also *tanzīl* or *inzāl*) and *waḥy*. While both can be translated as 'revelation', the first, *nuzūl*, is related to the idea of 'being sent down', and is used for the revelation of scripture, which is brought to a prophet by an angel, usually Gabriel (see Wild 1996: 146–148; Akbar 2020: 12–27). The term *waḥy*, on the other hand, is used for non-verbal communication, which is often understood to be an act of direct communication between God and a prophet. Toshihiko Izutsu also highlights the fact that *nuzūl* is a form of revelation that must be declared publicly, in which case the prophet is a mediator of the divine message; in the case of *waḥy*, however, the communication is private and need not be communicated to any third party (Izutsu 1964: 179–181). In addition to *nuzūl*, there is also the concept of *ilhām* (inspiration), which is related to (but not the same as) revelation and is usually

used to describe the type of religious experience or inspiration that individuals who are not prophets receive through mystical experience and dreams. The role of angels in the process of revelation was debated by those studying philosophy, theology, and mysticism in the classical period.

Islamic philosophers such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā developed theories around the process of revelation by drawing on Aristotelian ideas of cognition, which Muslim scholars knew through both translations and intermediary works (see Griffel 2010: 163–174). Al-Fārābī's model of cosmology (but also prophecy and psychology) hinged on a two-directional path of procession and return. On the one hand, the successive Intellects marked a progression downwards through the heavenly spheres; on the other, humans have within themselves a desire to elevate themselves and seek their true potential (i.e. entelechy, see Griffel 2010: 165). Al-Fārābī calls the fullest form of intellection that a human can attain the Acquired Intellect (*al-ʿaql al-mustafād*), which marks a level of equality, or near equality, with the Active Intellect (Griffel 2010: 165–166). Someone who has attained this level can then receive revelation (*waḥy*) from God through the Active Intellect, which is transmitted to the imaginative faculty (*quwwa mutakhayyila*), from which prophecy can then emerge (Griffel 2010: 166–167). Although al-Fārābī's model does not specifically include angels, either in his cosmology or in his theories of cognition and revelation, his celestial bodies were often understood as angels, especially by later interpreters. This model is also seen in the thought of the Ismāʿīlī theologian, Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 360/971), particularly in his *Kashf al-maḥjūb* (The Unveiling of the Veiled; see Landolt 2008: 121–122). When al-Fārābī's ideas were adapted by Ibn Sīnā, the latter introduced angels into the language used to describe the process of revelation, thereby harmonizing the philosophical system with Islam (Marmura 1963: 52; Acar 2007: 114). Both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā argued, contrary to Aristotle, that the celestial souls, or angels, have an awareness of events in the future, which means that prophets are able to articulate and predict future events; a process which is also open to other humans, although to a much lesser extent (Griffel 2010: 168, 173; see also Marmura 1963: 51–52).

In the *Risālā fī'l-ʿilm al-ladunī* (The Epistle of Knowledge from On High), a work attributed to al-Ghazālī (although its authorship is debated), knowledge is divided into two types: human knowledge (i.e. standard learning through instruction) and divine knowledge. The author divides divine knowledge into two further categories: *waḥy*, which comes from the Universal Intellect, and *ilhām*, which comes from the Universal Soul. Knowledge derived from *waḥy* is experienced by prophets and is known as *ʿilm nabawī* (prophetic knowledge). It involves the participation of an angel as the Universal Intellect, commonly associated with the angel Gabriel. Knowledge acquired through *ilhām*, on the other hand, is known as *ʿilm ladunī* (knowledge from on high) and does not involve an angel (see Trieger 2012: 65–66).

In mysticism, particularly the thought of Ibn ʿArabī, a clear difference is established between the revelatory experiences of prophets and mystics. Ibn ʿArabī emphasizes the role of an angel (usually Gabriel) in the process of prophetic revelation, while maintaining that formal revelation ended with Muḥammad as the 'Seal of the Prophets' (Q. 33:40). However, mystics can still receive a form of revelation, although one that is lesser in form (Chittick 1989: 403). Among Sufis there is a greater emphasis on inspiration (*ilhām*) and the disclosure of God through visions, which can, but does not have to, include angels. Nevertheless, Ibn ʿArabī also strongly states that any vision or form of revelation granted to the friends of God (i.e. mystics) cannot contravene Islamic law, since the Law has been firmly established (Chittick 1989: 261).

Despite the traditional importance of angels in the process of revelation (particularly the angel Gabriel), a number of modern thinkers have rejected the need for such beings. The modernist thinker Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) argued that the idea of angels being involved in the process of revelation only emerged in the eighth century (see Akbar 2020: 31), with the idea that Gabriel functioned as a kind of revelatory 'postman' being unhelpful, saying that 'this mechanical sort of picture has done a lot of damage to a real understanding of the relationship of the person of the Prophet and the Qur'an' (Rahman 1994: 11). Similarly, the Iranian theologian Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) rejects the need for angels, seeing revelation as a psychological and experiential act, to the extent that 'the Angel Gabriel was part of Muhammad, or appeared in his imaginative faculty, and thus was not an external being vís-à-vís the Prophet' (Akbar 2020: 63). While accepting Ibn ʿArabī's view that the Law has been established, Soroush argues that prophetic experiences can still be experienced by mystics and poets, though to a lesser extent (see Akbar 2020: 70). In contrast, the Egyptian scholar Naṣr Abū Zayd (d. 2010) affirmed the role of angels in the process of revelation, seeing the role of Gabriel as a necessary vehicle for divine communication. This is also tied in with his beliefs about divine language, which in contrast to Rahman and Soroush, is not something that is merely felt within the mind of the Prophet, but is a direct form of communication. Abū Zayd argues that human language is essential if God wished to communicate with the world since, 'If God spoke God-language, human beings would understand nothing' (cited in Akbar 2020: 130).

5 Concluding summary

Angels are ever-present in Muslim thought, appearing in the Qur'an, the Hadith literature, art, philosophy, and theology. Many of the beliefs about angels found in Islam are rooted in the Qur'an, being outworkings of ideas that are mentioned in passing (such as the way angels monitor human actions or the role of angels in the events of the Day of Resurrection) or responses to difficulties that the text of the Qur'an raises (such as in the discussions of angelic or prophetic superiority and the way in which revelation occurs). The body of literature about angels in Muslim sources, both classical and modern, is

extremely rich and has provided Muslims with a means of reflecting upon the nature of the created world and how God interacts with humans. The angels are, above all, spiritual beings that worship God constantly and who bring messages from the divine world to prophets and people.

Attributions

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