

Question 16: The Angels and free-will

Question: We know that some angels do nothing but worship Allah (awj). Is this worship of theirs performed of their own freewill? If not, does Allah (awj) have need of such worship?

Brief Answer

No benefit from any creature's worship—whether it has freewill or not—reaches Allah (awj). Rather worship that is offered out of freewill is the cause for the spiritual advancement of the worshipper. However, for creatures that worship Allah (awj) without freewill, such as the angels, their worship is simply an intrinsic part of their existence. Their subservience to Allah (awj) stems from their perception of His greatness, and does not benefit Allah (awj) in the least.

Detailed Answer

Angels are supernatural beings. We can only know of their existence by way of revelation or through individual supernatural experience. Angels are immaterial and can therefore not be described quantitatively or qualitatively. However, they can *appear* in human form. The Qur`an speaks of Mariam's ^۱ encounter with the Noble Spirit when she saw it in human form. It also tells us of the angels who visited Ibrahim (ع) and Lut (ع) in the form of men.² Additionally, it is narrated that Jibra`il would appear before the Prophet Muhammad (ص) in the form of Dahyah al-Kalbi, the Prophet's milk-brother.

We know that angels are limited beings that vary from individual to individual. Some are consigned with the responsibility of meting out punishment in this world, some in Purgatory (*al-Barzakh*), and some in the Hereafter. Some are entrusted with the task of writing the deeds of men, and some write the decrees of Allah (awj).

Some manage the day-to-day affairs of the cosmos, and some are messengers who carry divine revelation. Some inspire the hearts of men and some are protectors and helpers of the believers. Some have higher rank and give orders to others. Some are responsible for sustenance, some for rain, and some take the souls of people when they die. In the same vein, some angels are perpetually in a state of

prostration, some continually bow, and some forever glorify Allah (awj).

Some eternally circumambulate the Ka'bah and pay tribute to the graves of the Friends of Allah (awj). Some seek forgiveness and intercession for the believers. Others curse the disbelievers, pagans, hypocrites and staunch opponents of the Prophet's household. In all cases, each angel is assigned a specific task. He neither has power to perform more than what he has been commanded nor to fall short of his task.

The essence of worship (*'ibadah*) is to display servitude (*'ubudiyyah*) to one's master. One's display of servitude is directly proportional to his perception of Allah's (awj) greatness. Such a display, therefore, is an indication of the spiritual perfection of the creature, not a deficiency in the Creator. It is not necessary that any benefit from a creature's worship reach Allah (awj) in order for Allah (awj) to be able to say that His purpose in creating man and jinn was that they worship him. Rather, the fact that their creation is an awesome display of Allah's (awj) infinite power and endless beneficence is enough.

If a creature has freewill, his worship will result in a purification of his soul and his gradual advancement through the ranks of servitude. Therefore, the benefit of his worship returns to himself not to Allah (awj) in such a way that were he not to worship Allah (awj), he would not harm Allah (awj) in the least. Rather, if he fails to worship Allah (awj), it is himself will be harmed!

Apparently, some of the angels also questioned whether Allah (awj) needs worship done out of freewill. When Allah (awj) informed them that that He would create a regent on earth, they said,

“We already sing your praises. Why would you create someone on earth who will cause corruption and spill blood?” So Allah bestowed on Adam His special knowledge—a knowledge that the angels were incapable of learning. The angels proclaimed, “We possess no knowledge except that which you have taught us.” They thereby conceded their own inferiority to Adam (ع) and fell down in prostration before him.³

It is obvious that the worship that issues from freewill is more valuable than worship to which one is compelled. The former is the actualization of one's potential while the latter is simply a result of one's stagnant and constant present state in which there is no room for future development and from which the slightest slip means a fall to perdition.

Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) describes the angels in the following way: “You have created the angels and placed them in the heavens. They do not feel fatigue nor are they oblivious nor do they sin. Among all Your creatures, they know the most about You, are most fearful of You, are the nearest to You, and the most obedient ... Their intellect does not err. Their bodies do not tire. Neither did they issue from loins nor were they concealed by wombs.

They were not created from filthy semen. You created them in a special way and placed them in the heavens. Through their nearness to You is an honour for them. With Your revelation You entrusted

them. From sickness and tribulations You protected them. From sin You purified them. If You had not empowered them, they would have no power. If You had not made them constant, they would have no constancy. If it were not for Your mercy, they would not obey You. And if it were not for You, they would not exist.

However, despite their station, obedience, nearness to You, and unwavering attention to You and Your commands, if You were to reveal a glimmer of Your reality—a reality that You have kept hidden from them, their actions would seem insignificant, they would be ashamed of themselves, and they would know that they have not worshipped You as You deserve to be worshipped. Glorified are You who are the Creator, the Object of Worship, and the One who tests his servants.”⁴

A reflection of Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib’s (ع) words make three issues clear:

1. The secret behind their worship: The angels’ worship of Allah (awj) is a natural consequence of their experiential knowledge of Allah (awj). However, because their existential capacity is limited, their knowledge of Allah (awj) is also limited.
2. The secret behind the aforementioned objection of the angels when Adam (ع) was created: The root of this objection was their limited knowledge.
3. The secret behind their admission and prostration before Adam (ع): When it became clear to them that they were incapable of understanding the reasons behind Allah’s (awj) actions, they admitted to this shortcoming and prostrated before Adam.

To recap, because the freewill of angels is not like that of man, their worship does nothing to raise their station. However, if they were to abandon their worship, they would fall. Their worship stems from their knowledge of Allah’s (awj) greatness on one hand and their own insignificance on the other. No benefit from their worship reaches Allah (awj). Rather their worship is a manifestation of Allah’s (awj) omnipotence.

1. Surat Maryam (19), Verses 16–19:

وَأذْكَرُ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَرِيَمَ إِذِ انْتَبَذَتْ مِنْ أَهْلِهَا مَكَانًا شَرْقِيًّا. فَاتَّخَذَتْ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ حِجَابًا فَأَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهَا رُوحَنَا فَتَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا. قَالَتْ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ { مِنْكَ إِنْ كُنْتَ تَقِيًّا. قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَنَا رَسُولُ رَبِّكِ لِأَهَبَ لَكِ غُلَامًا زَكِيًّا

2. Surat Hud (11), Verses 69–81:

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ بِالْبُشْرَى قَالُوا سَلَامًا قَالَ سَلَامٌ فَمَا لَبِثَ أَنْ جَاءَ بِعِجْلٍ حَنِيذٍ. فَلَمَّا رَأَى أَيْدِيَهُمْ لَا تَصِلُ إِلَيْهِ نَكِرَهُمْ وَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً قَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَى قَوْمِ لُوطٍ. وَأَمْرُهُ فَائِمَةٌ فَضَحِكْتُمْ فَبَشَّرْنَاهَا بِإِسْحَاقَ وَمِنْ وَرَاءِ إِسْحَاقَ يَعْقُوبَ. قَالَتْ يَا وَيْلَتَا أَلِدُ وَأَنَا عَجُوزٌ وَهَذَا بَعْلِي شَيْخًا إِنَّ هَذَا لَشَيْءٌ عَجِيبٌ. قَالُوا أَتَعْجَبِينَ مِنْ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ رَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ عَلَيْكُمْ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ إِنَّهُ حَمِيدٌ مَجِيدٌ. فَلَمَّا ذَهَبَ عَنْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ الرَّوْعُ وَجَاءَتْهُ الْبُشْرَى يُجَادِلُنَا فِي قَوْمِ لُوطٍ. إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ لَحَلِيمٌ أَوَّاهٌ مُنِيبٌ. يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ أَعْرِضْ عَنْ هَذَا إِنَّهُ قَدْ جَاءَ أَمْرُ رَبِّكَ وَإِنَّهُمْ آتِيهِمْ عَذَابٌ غَيْرُ مَرْدُودٍ. وَلَمَّا جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا لُوطًا سِيءَ بِهِمْ وَضَاقَ بِهِمْ ذَرْعًا وَقَالَ هَذَا يَوْمٌ عَصِيبٌ. وَجَاءَهُ قَوْمُهُ يُهْرَعُونَ إِلَيْهِ وَمِنْ قَبْلُ كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ السَّيِّئَاتِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ هُوَ لَبِئْسَ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ فِي ضَيْفِي أَلَيْسَ مِنْكُمْ رَجُلٌ رَشِيدٌ. قَالُوا لَقَدْ عَلِمْتَمَا لَنَا فِي بَنَاتِكَ مِنْ حَقٍّ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَعْلَمُ مَا تُرِيدُ. قَالَ لَوْ أَنَّ لِي بِكُمْ قُوَّةٌ أَوْ آوِي إِلَى رُكْنٍ شَدِيدٍ. قَالُوا يَا لُوطُ إِنَّا رُسُلُ رَبِّكَ لَنْ يَصْلُوا إِلَيْكَ فَأَسْرِبْ بِأَهْلِكَ بِقِطْعٍ مِنَ اللَّيْلِ وَلَا يَلْتَفِتْ مِنْكُمْ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا أَمْرَاتُكَ إِنَّهُ مُصِيبُهَا مَا أَصَابُهُمْ إِنْ مَوَّعَهُمُ الصُّبْحُ أَلَيْسَ الصُّبْحُ بِقَرِيبٍ {

3. Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verses 30–33:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا

تَعْلَمُونَ. وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ. قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ. قَالَ يَا آدَمُ أَنْبِئْهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ فَلَمَّا أَنْبَأَهُمْ بِأَسْمَائِهِمْ قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ لَكُمْ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَعْلَمُ مَا تُبْدُونَ وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْتُمُونَ

4. Tafsir al-Qummi, vol. 2, pg. 207:

وَ قَالَ أَمِيرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ (ع) فِي خَلْقَةِ الْمَلَائِكَةِ: وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ خَلَقْتُهُمْ وَأَسْكَنْتُهُمْ سَمَوَاتِكَ فَلَيْسَ فِيهِمْ فِتْرَةٌ وَلَا عِنْدَهُمْ غَفْلَةٌ وَلَا فِيهِمْ مَعْصِيَةٌ، هُمْ أَعْلَمُ خَلْقِكَ بِكَ، وَأَخَوْفُ خَلْقِكَ مِنْكَ، وَأَقْرَبُ خَلْقِكَ إِلَيْكَ وَأَعْمَلُهُمْ بِطَاعَتِكَ، لَا يَعْشَاهُمْ نَوْمُ الْعَيُونِ وَلَا سَهْوُ الْعُقُولِ وَلَا فِتْرَةُ الْأَبْدَانِ، لَمْ يَسْكُنُوا الْأَصْلَابَ وَلَمْ تَتَضَمَّهُمُ الْأَرْحَامُ وَلَمْ تَخْلُقْهُمْ مِنْ مَاءٍ مَهِينٍ، أَنْشَأْتَهُمْ إِنْشَاءً فَأَسْكَنْتَهُمْ سَمَاوَاتِكَ وَأَكْرَمْتَهُمْ بِجِوَارِكَ وَابْتَمَنَّتْهُمْ عَلَى وَحْيِكَ وَجَنَّبْتَهُمُ الْآفَاتِ وَوَقَيْتَهُمُ الْبَلِيَّاتِ وَطَهَّرْتَهُمُ مِنَ الذُّنُوبِ وَلَوْلَا قُوَّتُكَ لَمْ يَفُورُوا وَلَوْلَا تَنْبِيئُكَ لَمْ يَنْبُتُوا وَلَوْلَا رَحْمَتُكَ لَمْ يَطِيعُوا وَلَوْلَا أَنْتَ لَمْ يَكُونُوا، أَمَا إِنَّهُمْ عَلَى مَكَاتِبِهِمْ مِنْكَ وَطَوَّعِيَّتِهِمْ إِيَّاكَ وَمَنْزَلَتِهِمْ عِنْدَكَ وَقَلَّةِ غَفْلَتِهِمْ عَنْ أَمْرِكَ لَوْ عَايَنُوا مَا خَفِيَ عَنْهُمْ مِنْكَ لَاحْتَقَرُوا أَعْمَالَهُمْ وَلَازَرُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَلَعَلِمُوا أَنَّهُمْ لَمْ يَعْبُدُوكَ حَقَّ عِبَادَتِكَ سُبْحَانَكَ خَالِقاً وَمَعْبُوداً مَا أَحْسَنَ بِلَاءَكَ عِنْدَ خَلْقِكَ

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