

A CLARIFICATION ON A COMMON MISCONCEPTION: ANGELS DO NOT HAVE FREE WILL¹

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Similar to the phenomenon of folk etymology or pseudo-etymology, human beings cooperatively and successively have a unique knack for renovating and rewiring the history of not just the infrastructure of words but doctrine. For whatever the reason, we invest so much in folk etymology that it mutates and metastasises into its conceptional form, namely etymythology, which we commonly label as urban legends and myths. There is no greater example of this than the rewiring of tawheed into shirk—one god into three gods or one god into man, which is the most mutated form of all urban myths. The purpose of this short paper is not to investigate human vulnerability to the peddling of myths. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to uncover the myth amongst Muslims that angels are bereft of the faculty of free will.

The mythos that angels have no free will is not a new-fangled myth. This particular myth has been around for centuries. Ibn Hazm states in his voluminous work *Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa-Al-Ahwaā Wa al-Nihal*

قال بعض السخفاء: إن الملائكة بمنزلة الهواء والرياح وهذا كذب وقحة وجنون؛ لأن الملائكة بنص القرآن والسنن وإجماع جميع من يقر بالملائكة من أهل الأديان المختلفة عقلاء متعبدون منييون مأمورون، وليس كذلك الهواء والرياح، لكنها لا تعقل ولا هي متكلفة متعبدة بل هي مسخرة مصرفة لا اختيار لها

Some of the dim-witted claim, “Surely the angels are like the air and the winds [i.e., having no free will]”. This is a lie and a statement of impertinence and lunacy because

¹ Compiled by Abu Ameenah AbdurRahman Bennett.

the angels, as dictated by the text of the Qur'an and the Sunan and by the consensus of all those who acknowledge the angels from the different religions, are an intelligent species who are devoted in worship, and subjected to proscriptions and commands. And in no way does the air or the wind have the faculty of intellect; the capacity to take on responsibility or to be devoted in worship of Allah. Rather, they are compelled [forces of nature] devoid of any choice.

It is not just the common masses that peddle in the false currency of this angelic myth. Even some western da'wah organisations have fallen victim to this myth, which suggests, in the west at least, that it is a top-down system of myth distribution. An example of this can be found in an article on a popular online da'wah website: **“Unlike Christianity, Islam maintains that Satan (Lucifer) was from the Jinn and not an angel. Angels do not have a free will to disobey”**. So the logic here is that Satan cannot be an angel because angels do not have any free will for the potential of disobedience. This mode of logic, which is clearly designed as a polemic, implies that the absence of disobedience necessitates the absence of free will. Is this inference invariably true or is it an inference predicated on circular reasoning? Before we deconstruct the assumptive properties that glue together the above chain of logic, let us first investigate what I believe to be the western origins story of this angelic myth.

THE WESTERN ORIGINS STORY OF THE ANGELIC MYTH

Based upon my limited and casual enquiry into the matter, there appears to be two glands that have allowed this myth to secrete. **The formation of the first gland** seems to be a Muslim-fuelled polemic or comparative reaction to the Biblical account of Satan. In Christianity, Satan is depicted as a fallen angel and in swift response to this anti-Islamic view, it seems that many have retorted by arguing that this can't be true because angels have no free will! It is a very effective, albeit conjectural, argument. If angels have no free will, how can the words 'angel' and 'fallen' be juxtapositioned? **The formation of the second gland** appears to be forced productivity of a certain Qur'anic verse. The primary verse which seems to fuel this unfounded belief is the following:

عَلَيْهَا مَلَكٌ غَلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

...over which are [appointed] angels, harsh and severe; they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded.

As a weapon against the Satan-fallen-angel mythos, with one swift motion of the sharp edge of this verse, we sever the head of this Christian myth. However, in our conquest to sever one head, are we severing another head, but this time a head supported by a body of Islamic doctrine? Using this verse to argue for a limited free will, as it relates to the angels, is perhaps acceptable; it's the argument for a complete lack of free will which is not acceptable. It is principally not acceptable because the verse does not necessitate the absence of angelic free will. The angels **having free will** and **never disobeying Allah** are not mutually exclusive concepts. For example, we can logically maintain the mutual idea of the Prophet (ﷺ) never disobeying Allah whilst being endowed with free will. Not only can we intellectually hold aloft these two concepts, we can also textually affirm the existence of an angelic free will. In fact, if we read deeper between the lines of the aforementioned verse, it logically implies that angels have free will or the faculty of choice. We will delineate the details between the lines a bit later. The reason why the angels never disobey Allah is not because they do not have the faculty of free will, but rather because of three cooperative angelic characteristics:

1. The angels have an exceptional propensity to worship Allah.
2. The angels have no *shahwa* (base lusts/desires).
3. The angels have the flawless physical capacity to actualise their exceptional propensity to worship Allah.

These three characteristics are the joint reason for why the angels do not disobey, which lends the impression that they have no free will. However, **possessing the advantages and lacking the disadvantages that obviate inability, and thus disobedience towards Allah** and **having no free will** are not synonymous in meaning. The lowest denominator of free will could simply be **“the ability to choose between different possible courses of action unimpeded”**. Irrespective of whether we associate free will with acts of obedience or disobedience, it has no consequence on the integrity of its basic definition. To illustrate the point further: there is no such concept of Allah being disobedient. Does that in any way, shape or form undermine the incontrovertible fact that Allah has perfect free will? Another example is that in Jennah we will have no recourse to disobey Allah. Does that mean we have no free will? A lack of a thing, especially in the presence of an advantage, does not necessitate an absence of free will.

One thing is for sure, and it is that these three angelic characteristics definitely prove that they have a free will which is different from humans, but it does not necessitate for a moment that the angels have no free will. We have to be very careful when making such assertions because speaking about the attributes of an unseen celestial being without evidential knowledge leads one down a perilous path. Islam, in both matters of creed and worship, prescribes the maxim of *at-Tawaqquf* (i.e., the red light to halt wherever the Islamic text and legal system halts and not to move until you see the textual green to go). The perceived inability to disobey or to do evil does not negate free will holistically; it just means there is no lust-based imperative to disobey. One could argue that having a lust-based imperative to disobey undermines the purest properties of free will and only by overcoming such a basic instinct does one manifest the pinnacle of creature-based free will.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCES FOR THE ANGELS HAVING FREE WILL

There is no definitive evidence in the Book of Allah nor the prophetic sources that sanctions the doctrine of angels having no freewill. If one carefully inspects the sources of Islam, he will find a body of evidence to the contrary. Before we analyse the prophetic evidence, let us return back to the verse quoted earlier:

عَلَيْهَا مَلَكَةٌ غَلَاظٌ شِدَادٌ لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ ﴿٦﴾

...over which are [appointed] angels, harsh and severe; they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded.

We said earlier that not only does this verse not necessitate a negation of free will for the angels, but it can also be used as an evidence for free will for the angels if one understands its implied context. In Shaykh al-Islam's *Majmu' al-Fatāwā*, he states

العاصي هو الممتنع من طاعة الأمر مع قدرته على الامتثال ، فلو لم يفعل ما أمر به لعجزه : لم يكن عاصياً ، فإذا قال : (لَا يَعْصُونَ اللَّهَ مَا أَمَرَهُمْ) : لم يكن في هذا بيان أنهم يفعلون ما يؤمرون ؛ فإن العاجز ليس بعاصي ، ولا فاعل لما أمر به ، وقال : (وَيَفْعَلُونَ مَا يُؤْمَرُونَ) لبيان أنهم قادرون على فعل ما أمروا به ، فهم لا يتركونه ، لا عجزاً ، ولا معصية ، والمأمور إنما يترك ما أمر به لأحد هذين ، إما ألا يكون قادراً ، وإما أن يكون عاصياً لا يريد الطاعة ، فإذا كان مطيعاً يريد طاعة الأمر وهو قادر : وجب وجود فعل ما أمر به ، فكذلك الملائكة المذكورون ، لا يعصون الله ما أمرهم ، ويفعلون ما يؤمرون

The disobedient person is the one who refuses to obey the command whilst being able to comply with the command. For if he failed to carry out the command due to incapability, he would not be [labelled] disobedient. So when Allah states, “they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them,” this is not to announce that they just do whatever they are commanded, since the one who is incapable [of sinfulness] is not disobedient. Rather, His statement “they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them” makes clear that they are proficiently capable of undertaking anything they are instructed to do. Thus, they never leave off anything, neither due to incapability nor disobedience. Any person instructed to do something leaves off doing it for one of these two reasons. Either it is the case he is incapable of doing or he is disobedient, unwilling to obey. For if he were dutiful, willingly ready to obey the one in command whilst being able-bodied, it necessitates the birth of the act he was commanded to do. And this applies to the aforementioned angels—they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them and they do whatever they are commanded.

Ibn Taymiyyah is teaching us here that the angels do not disobey the command of Allah due to the non-possession of free will, but rather because **a)** they have no urge whatsoever to disobey due to a lack of *shahwa* that undermines their resolve to obey and **b)** they have both the physical and natural constitution to undertake anything their Lord commands. Ibn Taymiyyah is also teaching us that when Allah states “**they do not disobey Allah**” that it would be redundant to use the verb ‘disobey’ in conjunction with the angels if they had no freewill at all. What would be the point of negating disobedience from a being devoid of any free will? In the absence of free will, disobedience has zero potential and zero potential renders the phrase “**they do not disobey**” redundant. There is a valid, albeit subtle, distinction between the clauses **they do not disobey** and **they cannot disobey**. In light of this distinction, the words “**they do not disobey**” convey the meaning that they wilfully do not disobey—not due to a lack of free will but due to a lack of any incentive whatsoever to disobey.

In the Sahih of Muslim (2372) on the authority of Abu Hurairah who reported that Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) said,

جاءَ مَلَكُ الْمَوْتِ إِلَى مُوسَى عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ فَقَالَ لَهُ أَجِبْ رَبِّكَ - قَالَ - فَلَطَمَ مُوسَى عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ عَيْنَ مَلِكِ الْمَوْتِ فَقَقَّاهَا - قَالَ - فَرَجَعَ الْمَلِكُ إِلَى اللَّهِ تَعَالَى فَقَالَ إِنَّكَ أَرْسَلْتَنِي إِلَى عَبْدٍ لَكَ لَا يُرِيدُ الْمَوْتَ وَقَدْ فَقَأَ عَيْنِي - قَالَ - فَردَّ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ عَيْنَهُ وَقَالَ ارْجِعْ

إِلَى عَبْدِي فَقُلِ الْحَيَاةُ تُرِيدُ فَإِنْ كُنْتَ تُرِيدُ الْحَيَاةَ فَضَعْ يَدَكَ عَلَى مَثْنِ نَوْرِ فَمَا تَوَارَتْ يَدُكَ مِنْ شَعْرَةٍ فَإِنَّكَ تَعِيشُ بِهَا سَنَةً
قَالَ ثُمَّ قَالَ مَهْ قَالَ ثُمَّ تَمُوتُ. قَالَ فَالآنَ مِنْ قَرِيبٍ رَبِّ أَمْتِنِي مِنَ الْأَرْضِ الْمُقَدَّسَةِ زُمَيْةً بِحَجْرٍ.

The Angel of Death came to Musā and said, ‘Respond to the call of your Lord’ (i.e., for his soul to be taken). So Musā punched the Angel of Death in his eye and knocked it out.² The angel returned to Allah, the Most High, and said, ‘Indeed, you sent me to a servant of Yours who does not want to die and he knocked out my eye’. Allah restored his eye and said to him, ‘Return to my servant and say, “Do you want life? And in case you want life, place your hand on the body of an ox and whatever your hand conceals of hair, you will be granted years of life. He (Musā) said, ‘What, then?’ He said, ‘Then you will die’. He (Musā) said, ‘Then why not now?’ (He then prayed): My Lord, cause me to die close to the sacred land.

In another variation of this hadith reported by Ahmed (2/533), which has been declared sahih by Shaykh al-Albāni in *Mukhtasar al-Uluw* (p.75), the Prophet (ﷺ) said,

قَدْ كَانَ مَلَكُ الْمَوْتِ يَأْتِي النَّاسَ عِيَانًا قَالَ فَأَتَى مُوسَى فَلَطَمَهُ فَفَقَأَ عَيْنَهُ فَأَتَى رَبَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ فَقَالَ يَا رَبِّ عَبْدُكَ مُوسَى فَقَأَ
عَيْنِي وَلَوْلَا كَرَامَتُهُ عَلَيْكَ لَعَنْفْتُ بِهِ

The Angel of Death used to come to the people in the form of a man. [One day], he came to Musā and Musā punched him and knocked out his eye. So he (Angel of Death) returned to his Lord, the Mighty and Majestic, and said, ‘O my Lord, Your servant Musā punched me in my eye! If it were not for his honourable rank with You, I would have dealt with him harshly’.

Both versions of this account contain two evidences for the angels having free will and choice. **The first evidence** is that the Angel of Death was despatched to do a task for His Lord, but as a result of the altercation which took place between the Angel of Death and Musā, the Angel of Death made the independent decision to return to His Lord without fulfilling the task. This is a clear indication of independent decision-making which is a proof for angelic free will. The second evidence is found in the statement: **‘If it were not for his honourable rank with You, I would have dealt with him harshly’**. The Angel of Death spoke hypothetically about something he could have done but chose not to, due to the honourable status of Musā with His Lord. In other

² Removing the doubts about Prophet Musā punching the Angel of Death by Shaykh al-Albāni:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hgHwzdVqgg>

words, he made the decision not to do one thing (i.e., act harshly) due to the presence of a next thing (i.e., Musā's high status with Allah), and that is a decision-making example of exercising free will.

We are all familiar with the hadith of the man who killed ninety-nine people and then made it one hundred by killing the monk who told him that there was no redemption due to the magnitude of his sin. When he was directed to speak to a person of knowledge who advised him to leave the land, which he had soiled with sin, and to go to a people who worship Allah, he died on his path to redemption. The Prophet (ﷺ) went on to state,

فَانْطَلَقَ حَتَّى إِذَا نَصَفَ الطَّرِيقَ أَتَاهُ الْمَوْتُ فَاخْتَصَمَتْ فِيهِ مَلَائِكَةُ الرَّحْمَةِ وَمَلَائِكَةُ الْعَذَابِ فَقَالَتْ مَلَائِكَةُ الرَّحْمَةِ جَاءَ تَائِبًا مُقْبِلًا بِقَلْبِهِ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَقَالَتْ مَلَائِكَةُ الْعَذَابِ إِنَّهُ لَمْ يَعْمَلْ خَيْرًا قَطُّ

So he (the killer of one hundred souls) went away and he had hardly covered half the distance when death came to him, and a dispute between the angels of mercy and the angels of punishment took place with regard to his soul. The angels of mercy said, 'This man has come with a repenting and remorseful heart to Allah'. However, the angels of punishment said, 'He did no good whatsoever'.

This part of the hadith is an evidence for angelic free will simply because of the dispute that took place between the two groups of angels. Both sets of angels presented their respective evidences for why they should lay claim to his soul. If the angels were merely angelic robots who were programmed to undertake ritual tasks, why would both parties be vying with each other on the basis of evidence and reasoning? The ability to draw inferences from data is an evidence for intelligence and thus free will.

Allah states in His Glorious Book,

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 ﴿٣٠﴾

30. And [mention] when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.' They said, 'Will You place upon it one who causes

corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?’

Allah said, ‘Indeed, I know that which you do not know.’

If the angels were devoid of free will, why would they be questioning Allah through the use of analogical induction? The inductive process taking place here through the line of inquiry is: **why would you create another being much like the jinn, who are heavily compromised by their base desires, which inevitably will lead to mass corruption and bloodshed?** The angels are clearly using the jinn to justify their logical process of induction. The ability to deduce or induce requires intellect and intellect is a quality of beings who possess free will to perform independent thinking, decision-making and the will to act.