

# The Intermediate Worlds of Angels

## Islamic Representations of Celestial Beings in Transcultural Contexts

Edited by Sara Kuehn  
Stefan Leder  
Hans-Peter Pökel





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# “As the Angels Stretch Out Their Hands” (Qurʾān 6:93)

## The Work of Heavenly Agents According to Muslim Eschatology

*Sebastian Günther (Göttingen)*

In the Qurʾān it is stated that “the truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets” (Q 2:177), and an enemy of God is he who disbelieves in “God, His Angels, and His messengers, Gabriel and Michael” (Q 2:98). Based on this kind of Qurʾānic decree, the beliefs in both angels and the Last Day have come to constitute integral components of the six articles of Muslim faith.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, numerous statements in works by classical Muslim scholars highlight the vital role played by heavenly agents and divine messengers – Arabic: *malāʾika*, sing.: *malak*, usually translated as “angels” – in Islamic religious thought and practice.<sup>2</sup> These transcendental beings are important not only when a person passes away but also during the events prophesied for the apocalyptic cessation of this world and the creation of the eternal kingdom of the heavens and the earth in a world to come (Q 2:107; 48:14). Thus, their activities are primarily concerned with two main aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> For Qurʾānic evidence concerning these articles of faith, see also Q 2:285, “They all believe in God, His angels, His scriptures, and His messengers”; and Q 6:59, “He has the keys to the unseen: no one knows them but Him. He knows all that is in the land and sea. No leaf falls without His knowledge, nor is there a single grain in the darkness of the earth, or anything, fresh or withered, that is not written in a clear Record.” Thus, the six articles of Muslim faith constitute the belief in (1) God, (2) His angels, (3) His scriptures, (4) His messengers, (5) the Last Day, and (6) His supremacy, i.e., the belief that predestination, both good and evil, comes from God, who alone foreknows and foreordains all that comes to pass in the world and in the lives of individuals. On the establishment of the Muslim creed in the early sources, see Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, vol. 1, Berlin et al.: de Gruyter 1991, 207-221.

Passages quoted from the Qurʾān in this article are given in M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s translation; in some cases, individual Qurʾānic terms are my own renderings. All other translations from the Arabic are my own, unless indicated otherwise, although I often consulted existing relevant English and German translations. On this note, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Maher Jarrar, American University of Beirut, for his invaluable advice and help concerning a number of thematic and translation aspects of this study.

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew *malʾāk* (*malākī*) and the Greek *aggelos* (*angelos*) also mean “[divine] messenger,” “angel”; cf. also Gisela Webb, “Angel,” in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 2001, 84-92, 84; and Glen Carpenter, *Connections: A Guide to Types and Symbols in the Bible*, Maitland: Xulon Press 2004, 295. For an exhaustive recent study on angels in Islam, see Stephen Burge’s correspondingly titled 2012 monograph, *Angels in Islam: Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s al-Ḥabāʾik fi akhbār al-malāʾik*, London et al.: Routledge 2012.

eschatology: the end of an individual person's life and the end of the world as we know it, including the resurrection of the dead, the divine judgement, life in the hereafter, paradise, and hell.

In addition to the Qur'ān, the earliest Muslim views about the roles of angels in Islamic eschatology are included in the extensive body of Islamic prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*). However, these notions were also popular themes in accounts related by early Muslim storytellers (*quṣṣās*) and in sermons delivered by preachers (*wu'āz*, *khutabā*). Yet it appears that the *ḥadīth* scholars, storytellers, and preachers were inspired in this regard not only by the Qur'ān but also by the fertile pool of eschatological concepts nurtured by ancient Near Eastern cultures and religions.

The first efforts to collect, classify, and trace the authenticity of Muslim beliefs about the tasks of angels at the end of an individual's life and on doomsday were undertaken by Muslim compilers of prophetic traditions during the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, by the time of the Yemeni Qur'ān exegete and *ḥadīth* scholar 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 211/827), the Iraqi traditionist and historian Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 235/849), and the Transoxanian *ḥadīth* scholar Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), numerous traditions containing such information had become integral components of the authoritative Sunni *ḥadīth* collections. The respective traditions were included in these compilations, often in chapters entitled *Kitāb al-janā'iz* ("The Book of Funerals") or with a very similar name.

Another early scholar, the littérateur and ascetic Ibn Abi l-Dunyā (d. 281/894), reportedly devoted no fewer than fifteen treatises to the subjects of death, life in the grave, and life in the hereafter. In his *Kitāb al-marwt* ("The Book of Death") and *Kitāb al-qubūr* ("The Book of the Grave") in particular, Ibn Abi l-Dunyā's description of the eschatological events is, in its methodological approach, close to that presented by *ḥadīth* scholars.<sup>3</sup> Thus, his traditionalist, piecemeal exposition of the 'last things' is in stark contrast to al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī's (d. 243/857) powerful and imaginative vision of humankind's path to a world to come.

Several early Muslim scholars with a variety of theological and juridical backgrounds devoted chapters or entire works to eschatological issues. However, it was not until the renowned jurist and theologian Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066)

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Abū l-Dunyā's *Kitāb al-marwt* is an instructive examination of death, the various modes of dying, and the role of the Angel of Death in this process, but also of interactions between the dead and the living. The *Kitāb al-qubūr*, in turn, provides anecdotes relating to the hereafter, especially the "sepulchral period between dying and the Day of Resurrection," with two aspects in the foreground: "the interaction between the dead and the living" and "the correlation between one's record in life and the circumstances he will later experience in his grave," as Leah Kinberg notes in her introduction to the Arabic edition of these two texts. Cf. Ibn Abi l-Dunyā, *Kitāb al-marwt wa-l-qubūr* (Al-Karmil Publications Series 2), Leah Kinberg, ed., Haifa: Jāmi'at Ḥaifā, Qism al-Lugha al-'Arabiyya wa-Ādābiḥā 1983, I-V. See also the review of this publication by Khaled Nashef, in *Die Welt des Orients* 16 (1985), 191-198.

addressed the topic in his *al-Ba‘th wa-l-nushūr* (“Resurrection and Resurgence”)<sup>4</sup> that the eschatological genre appears to have become fully established in Arabic-Islamic writing. In the aftermath of al-Bayhaqī’s work, eschatological writing began to be recognised as a distinct textual category, known as *‘ulūm al-ākhirah* (“branches of knowledge concerning the hereafter”).<sup>5</sup> While it is not the primary purpose of the present study to provide a survey of the genre of medieval Muslim writing on eschatology, two further works must also be mentioned here at least briefly: *al-Tadbkirah fi ahwāl al-marwāt wa-umūr al-ākhirah* (“The Reminder about Death and the Matters of the Hereafter”), perhaps the most inclusive and celebrated compilation on Islamic eschatology, written by the Andalusian Qur’ān-commentator, scholar of prophetic tradition, and jurist Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273); and the *al-Nihāyah fi l-fitan wa-l-malāḥim* (“The Conclusive Word Concerning the Civil Wars [of the End-Times] and Apocalyptic Battles”) by the renowned religious scholar and jurist Abū l-Fidā’ Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373).<sup>6</sup>

With these preliminaries in hand, the following pages will go on to explore certain key activities and functions of heavenly agents as they are described in the eschatological manuals written by three celebrated Muslim scholars from the classical period of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *al-Ba‘th wa-l-nushūr*, Amīr Aḥmad Haydar, ed., Beirut: Markaz al-Khadamāt wa-l-Abḥāth al-Thaqāfiyya 1986.

<sup>5</sup> This genre consists of four sub-categories: (1) the *al-fitan wa-l-malāḥim* (“the civil wars [of the end-times] and apocalyptic battles,” or “dissensions and fierce battles”) literature, a kind of Islamic apocrypha combining historical commentaries with eschatological stories; (2) writings that focus on *al-qiyāmah* (“the resurrection” of the dead), the revivication of the body, the gathering for divine judgement, and divine judgement on the Day of Judgement; (3) works that deal exclusively with *al-jannah wa-l-nār* (“the garden and the fire”), offering specific descriptions of the various domains of paradise and hell; and (4) *al-adab al-ukhrāwī*, the belletristic “literature on the hereafter,” with fiction-like, often quite entertaining, presentations of the last things and life in the hereafter. Cf. Sebastian Günther, “«God Disdains Not to Strike a Simile» (Q 2:26). The Poetics of Islamic Eschatology: Narrative, Personification, and Colors in Muslim Discourse,” in: *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol 1, *Foundations and the Formation of a Tradition. Reflections on the Hereafter in the Quran and Islamic Religious Thought*, Sebastian Günther, Todd Lawson, eds., Leiden: Brill 2016, 181-217, here 194-195. Furthermore, see also Waleed Ahmed, “The Characteristics of Paradise (*Ṣifat al-Janna*): A Genre of Eschatological Literature in Medieval Islam,” in: *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 2, *Continuity and Change. The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World Thought*, Sebastian Günther, Todd Lawson, eds., Leiden: Brill 2016, 817-848.

<sup>6</sup> Abū l-Fidā’ ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr al-Qurashī, *Kitāb al-nihāyah fi l-fitan wa-l-malāḥim*, M. ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, ed., Cairo: Dār al-Taqwā 2002.

<sup>7</sup> For the use of “classical” as a term in the cultural and intellectual history of Islam, in reference to both the time between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and the special, high quality of the respective texts (or other cultural testimonies), see Tarif Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, xi; Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*, Berlin: Insel Verlag 2011, 4; and Sebastian Günther, “Introduction,” in: *Ideas, Images, and Methods of Portrayal: Insights into Classical Arabic Literature and Islam*, Sebastian Günther, ed., Leiden: Brill 2005, xxviii-xx.

- *al-Tawābhum* (“Imagining,” “Envisioning,” also translated as “*The Visualisation [of the Last Things]*”) by Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Muḥāsibī, an immensely influential theologian, mystic, and prolific writer of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century;
- *al-Durrab al-fākhirab fi kashf ‘ulūm al-ākhirab* (“*The Precious Pearl Revealing the Knowledge of the Hereafter*”), commonly ascribed to the authoritative philosophical theologian and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī from the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century;
- *Kitāb al-rūḥ* (“*The Book of the Soul [and its Journey after Death]*”), by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, a prolific theologian of the Ḥanabali school of jurisprudence from the 8<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

We will concentrate on these writings because, first, they thematically focus on – and follow in their textual structure – three core issues relating to ‘the final things’, which Muslim tradition concisely refers to as *al-marwat wa-l-qubūr wa-l-qiyāmah* (“death, graves, and resurrection”). According to this basic tripartite structure, and in terms of the tasks attributed to angels, these treatises deal with:

- i. The biological death of a human individual, including the dragging of the soul out of the body by angels, the Angels of Death, the accompanying of the soul by angels on its initial journey to the heavens, and the angels’ returning of the soul to its body for the funeral (these topics are studied in sections 2 and 3 of the present chapter).
- ii. “Life” in the grave, covering the timespan between burial and resurrection, including the interrogation by the angels in the grave as well as initial perspectives on the reward and punishment of body and soul (examined here in section 4).
- iii. The duties of angels at the resurrection and judgement (discussed in section 5).

The second reason for giving preference in this study to the aforementioned classical Arabic books is their particularly creative approach and imaginative presentation of eschatological ideas, the intensity and vividness of their depiction of angels, and the authoritative character and broad popularity they still retain among Muslims today. In these respects, the books considered here stand out,

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<sup>8</sup> For a survey of the eschatological literature in Islam, see Sebastian Günther, Todd Lawson, eds., *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 1. *Foundations and the Formation of a Tradition: Reflections on the Hereafter in the Quran and Islamic Religious Thought*, vol. 2. *Continuity and Change: The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World*, Brill: Leiden 2016, and here in particular the editors’ Introduction, 1-28; an instructive classification of the Muslim apocalyptic is given by Fred Donner, “A Typology of Eschatological Concepts,” in: *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 2. *Continuity and Change. The Plurality of Eschatological Representations in the Islamicate World Thought*, Sebastian Günther, Todd Lawson, eds., Leiden: Brill 2016, 757-772.

even when considered in the context of the rich pool of Arabic works on Islamic eschatology.<sup>9</sup>

Given the common thematic focus (and overlap) of these books, our exploration will follow the sequence of ‘the final things’ – death, grave, resurrection, and judgement – rather than a chronological order based on the dates of our authors. We will, therefore, hear the voices of the respective writers concurrently when drawing, it is hoped, a representative picture of the roles played by heavenly agents in Muslim eschatology. This inclusive approach is not diminished by the fact that a certain emphasis is placed on al-Ghazālī’s work, since this emphasis mirrors the relative popularity of this particular text.

### *1 Our sources on the tasks of angels: three classical Muslim thinkers*

#### *1.1 Al-Muḥāsibī*

Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Hārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (170-243/781-857) is said to have been an early advocate of the doctrine of later Muslim orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> Al-Muḥāsibī was born in Basra but grew up and lived most of his life in Baghdad, where he ultimately died. Along with asceticism and the commitment to the inner and the outer duties toward God, al-Muḥāsibī proposed the combination of reason (*‘aql*) and knowledge (*‘ilm*) as the most suitable tool for considering matters of faith. In so doing, he went beyond what mystics at that time considered to be important for a religious life: an ascetic lifestyle, mystical inspiration (*ilbām*), mystical instruction (*ta‘līm*), and ecstatic exaltation (*wajd*, also *jadbb*).<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that al-Muḥāsibī viewed didactic conversation as the most efficient method of communication and instruction, a perspective that is clearly reflected in several of his writings.

Despite this interest in conversation with others, a vital element in al-Muḥāsibī’s world of thought was, as Josef van Ess has noted, constant self-examination – *muḥāsaba* – in anticipation of the Final Judgement. Unsurprisingly, issues concerning ‘the last things’ and the Final Judgement were thus major themes in his writing, as can be seen in his main work, *al-Ri‘āyah li-ḥuqūq Allāh* (“*The Ob-*

<sup>9</sup> In the light of these thematic foci (death, grave, resurrection, and judgement), we shall leave aside in this study any consideration of activities in which angels engage at the beginning of doomsday when the earth and the universe collapse, as well as the duties that angels fulfill in the eternal abodes of paradise and hell.

<sup>10</sup> Josef van Ess, “al-Muḥāsibī,” in: *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica 1992, 400-401. See also the more recent elaboration, Josef van Ess, *Kleine Schriften*, Hinrich Biesterfeldt, ed., vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 2018, 153-159.

<sup>11</sup> Josef van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt des Hārith al-Muḥāsibī, anhand von Übersetzungen aus seinen Schriften dargestellt und erläutert*, Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalisches Seminars 1961, 78. See also Göran Oğén, “Religious Ecstasy in Classical Sufism,” in: *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 11 (1982), 226-240.

servance of that which is Owed to God”),<sup>12</sup> and his similarly important *al-Taṭawabhum* (“The Visualisation [of the Last Things]”). Al-Muḥāsibī argues in these books that human death and the final judgement are inseparably connected. Moreover, the fear of the final judgement can be excited, and thus mobilised in pursuit of one’s own spiritual development, only through three things: one’s own imagination, the words of the Qurʾān, and the prophetic tradition. Envisioning the last things – from the moment of death to the joys of paradise and the vision of the Divine (*visio beatifica*) – thus plays a crucial role in al-Muḥāsibī’s works.<sup>13</sup>

*Al-Taṭawabhum*<sup>14</sup> in particular is a uniquely imaginative portrayal of different eschatological events, with specific references to the roles played by the angels in each of these scenarios. In this book, al-Muḥāsibī begins most paragraphs with the words “imagine yourself” (*taṭawabham nafsaka*). He thus not only addresses his reader directly, but vividly evokes in the reader’s mind, in the here and now, the dramatic scenes believed to happen when a person passes away and the experience that he or she may encounter after death.<sup>15</sup> Stylistically, al-Muḥāsibī harks back in

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Smith, ed., London: Luzac 1940.

<sup>13</sup> Van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 14. Remarkably, al-Muḥāsibī deals with death, its unpredictability, and its consequences in a way that van Ess (following Helmut Ritter) called a ‘maieutic conversation’; cf. van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 130, 136-8.

<sup>14</sup> Van Ess aptly uses for the verbal noun *taṭawabhum* the German expression “Vergegenwärtigung” (“Re-presentation”); cf. his *Gedankenwelt*, 137, where he also draws attention to the complexity of this Arabic term. The *nafs* (“soul”), as well as the entities that manifest the soul or operate as its layers (such as *ʿaql*, “intellect,” *qalb*, “heart,” and *rūḥ*, “spirit”), cover a wide array of meanings and psychological dimensions. These range from a primary emanation from the divine essence (Q 16:2, the spirit as a creation like the angels but above them in rank), a life-giving agency of God or “breath of life” (Q 15:29, 21:91), to the “carnal soul” (Q 12:73, 75:2, 89:27) and “the self” in the Qurʾān, the prophetic tradition, and works of Muslim scholars, especially those on mysticism. Cf. Régis Blachère, “Note sur le substantif *ʿnafs* dans le Coran,” in: *Semitica* 1 (1948), 69-77, here 70-71; van Ess, *Gedankenwelt*, 31-36 (on *nafs* and *qalb*); and Imranali Panjwani, “Soul,” in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam*, vol. 2, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014, 267-273.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the *Taṭawabhum* appears to have been written specifically for male Muslims. This observation is due not only to the use of the male form of the second person singular (which, according to the rules of Arabic grammar, would not *per se* exclude female addressees). Rather, it is based on the many specific male issues mentioned in the text. For example, the reader is called upon to imagine how, in Paradise, the wives, children, servants, and stewards of the blessed man, who is granted entrance into paradise, will be informed of his arrival, and how the entire family will rejoice about his coming. Moreover, the wives of the blessed are portrayed as very eager to meet their husband, and as feeling very happy and pleased at the prospect. The wives, this text continues, will even lose control of themselves due to their great happiness in anticipation of seeing their husband, as they want to see him immediately and look at him who is the delight of their eyes. Still, the wives will have to wait for this moment and remain under guard in their pavilions, since God prescribed it so in the Qurʾān (Q 55-72). The text later mentions in great detail the tender bodies, sweet smells, gentle touches, and similar extraordinary pleasures that the blessed men will experience when meeting the *huris*, or virgins of paradise, promised to Muslim believers. Cf. Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥārīṭ ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī, “Kitāb al-tawabhum,” in: Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā, ed., in: Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥārīṭ ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī, *Adab al-nufūs*, ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1411/1991,

this treatise to the technique of the early Muslim *quṣṣās* when admonishing his audience that “salvation can only be attained through pious fear, the observation of canonical obligations and *wara’*: abstaining from that which God forbids, acting in all things only for God and taking the Prophet as a model.”<sup>16</sup> *The Visualisation* thus exquisitely illustrates how, as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, the combination of powerful literary images with a style that engaged the reader served to instruct Muslim believers in ‘the last things’, in which angels play, according to al-Muḥāsibī, a central role.

## 1.2 *Al-Ghazālī*

Next we shall look at *al-Durrab al-fākīrab fī kashf ‘ulūm al-ākīrab* (*The Precious Pearl Revealing the Knowledge of the Hereafter*), another exceptionally rich source of eschatological ideas. This text has commonly been ascribed to the authoritative philosophical theologian and mystic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111). Al-Ghazālī was born in Ṭūs near the city of Mashhad in Iran, but pursued much of his education and higher studies in Nishapur and Baghdad. He served for several years as the head professor at the newly-founded Nizāmiyya College, the most famous institution of higher learning not just in Baghdad but in the entire Muslim world in the eleventh century CE. However, several of his major works were written far from the bustle of the great city, while travelling on a 3-year-long journey that was begun under the pretext of making a pilgrimage and during the course of which he led a rather secluded life.

In terms of the history of ideas, al-Ghazālī is generally noted for accepting Greek logic as a neutral instrument of learning, and for recommending it to theologians. In his mystical writings in particular, he successfully recast basic Aristotelian ethical values in an Islamic mode, representing them as Sufi values. At the same time, he insisted that the path to mystical gnosis must begin with traditional Islamic belief.

Al-Ghazālī’s *The Precious Pearl* is exclusively devoted to the topics of death and the hereafter.<sup>17</sup> He apparently drafted this remarkable work after finishing his multi-volume *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (“*The Revitalisation of the Studies of Religion*”). In fact, *The Precious Pearl* appears to be an extract from the fortieth and last book of the latter work, which he seems to have modified to better provide for the spiri-

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148-206, here 182-184; Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Hārīt ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī, *At-Tawābūm* (sic). (*Visualization*), *Mankind’s Journey to the Hereafter*, Muhammad Dāgher, transl., Cairo: Dar al-Salām 1430/2009, 127-133.

<sup>16</sup> Roger Arnaldez, “al-Muḥāsibī,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (EP), new ed., vol. 7, Leiden: Brill 1993, 466b.

<sup>17</sup> For the main topics of *The Precious Pearl*, see my “«God Disdains Not to Strike a Simile» (Q 2:26).” This article also addresses the question of whether *The Precious Pearl* was originally written by al-Ghazālī or not. On this issue, see also Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016, 108.

tual and dogmatic edification of a wider Muslim readership. Within the general eschatological framework of the book, the specific eschatological activities of angels play a remarkable, manifest role.

### 1.3 *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah*

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (691-751/1292-1350) was born in Damascus as the son of a scholar and teacher. Following in his father's footsteps, he soon became renowned in his own right. Several of his students later distinguished themselves as leading scholars of the Mamlūk era. Today, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's legacy has become a matter of some controversy, since aspects of it have been claimed by fundamentalist reformers of the Salafi and Wahhabi movements.<sup>18</sup>

Ibn Qayyim's *Book of the Soul* is a later, but no less popular, medieval magisterial treatise about death and what the body and the soul will experience in the next world. The book is of a composite nature, perhaps based on several earlier essays by the same author. Nonetheless, the *Kitāb al-rūḥ* is probably his most widely circulated and, thus, "successful" book.<sup>19</sup> In it, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah offers a first critical synopsis of views that had become 'mainstream' among orthodox Muslims concerning Islamic eschatology. However, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah goes beyond simply compiling various pieces of information and scholarly opinions on topics related to eschatology. Rather, using the proof of reason (*dalil al-ʿaql*) and unprejudiced intuition (*fiṭrah*), he scrutinises each piece of material individually in the light of the doctrines specified in the Qurʾān, in the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth* and *sunnah*, religious practice), and by the consensus of Sunni scholarship.<sup>20</sup> *The Book of the Soul* thus appears to constitute a fully-fledged treatment of Muslim eschatology as it stood in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century, summing up and systematising much of what had been said on the topic by previous Muslim scholars.

## 2 *Angels at the point of human death*

The Qurʾān says little about the actual circumstances of a human being's death. Nevertheless, it is indicated in Islam's Holy Scripture that death is a distressing

<sup>18</sup> Asʿad AbuKhalil (sic), "The Incoherence of Islamic Fundamentalism: Arab Islamic Thought at the End of the 20th Century," in: *The Middle East Journal* 48/4 (1994), 677-694.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Tzvi Langerman, "Ibn Qayyim's *Kitāb al-Rūḥ*: Some Literary Aspects," in: *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, Birgit Krawietz, Georges Tamer, eds., Berlin: de Gruyter 2013, 125-145, here 125, 133. This article also addresses the authenticity of the book, which has been debated among certain Muslim scholars recently on dogmatic grounds; see Langerman, "Ibn Qayyim's *Kitāb al-Rūḥ*," 135-137.

<sup>20</sup> Ulrich Rebstock, "Grabesleben: Eine islamische Konstruktion zwischen Himmel und Hölle," in: *Islamstudien ohne Ende: Festschrift für Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag*, Rainer Brunner et al., eds., Würzburg: Ergon 2013, 371-382, here 373.

process that every person will experience alone and helpless. At the point of death, “the angels stretch out their hands” to the souls of the dying (Q 6:93-94) while the soul of the dying person “comes up to his throat” (Q 56:83). Interestingly, the idea of an angel wresting the soul from the dying individual’s body is also evident in the name of sura 79, “The Forceful Charges,” the main theme of which is the inevitability of resurrection, its aftermath, and its timing. Similarly, the Qur’ān states that “the Angel of Death (*malak al-marwī*) put in charge of you will reclaim you, and then you will be brought back to your Lord” (Q 32:11).

### 2.1 *Cosmological dimensions of death*

Al-Ghazālī begins his discussion of death and the afterlife by setting these issues within a wider cosmological context. In reference to individual human death, he notes first the Qur’ānic concept of *kullu nafsin dhā’iqatu l-marwī* (“every soul is certain to taste death,” Q 21:35). This idea of the soul “tasting death” is, he says, “attested” in the Qur’ān “in three places,”<sup>21</sup> and he concludes from this that “God desired three deaths for the world.” Drawing again on the same premise, al-Ghazālī states that the Qur’ānic attestations signify three categories of death and, thus, the corresponding tripartite structure of the universe:

- (a) The death of those in the perceptible “earthly world” (*al-‘ālam al-dunyāwī*), populated by humans, animals, and plants.
- (b) The death of those in an unseen celestial world, the “dominion of divine power” (*al-‘ālam al-malakūti*), inhabited by the angels, spirits, and *jinn*.
- (c) The death of those in a “world of might and magnificence,” of pure, angelic intelligences (*al-‘ālam al-jabarūti*), inhabited by the highest otherworldly beings who are nearest to God, including the mysterious cherubim,<sup>22</sup> “the bearers of the Throne and companions of the pavilion of God the Majestic,” as well as other spiritual beings who maintain the divine order in this celestial sphere.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> These three places are Q 3:185, 21:35, 29:57; but see also 44:56.

<sup>22</sup> In the Bible, God placed the *living* cherubim “at the garden Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). In another Biblical passage, they are described as golden statues placed on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, “stretching out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:18-22; see also Exodus 25:1, 1 Kings 6:32). Cf. also Carpenter, *Connections*, 304. Translation according to the New King James Version (NKJV, 1982, online).

<sup>23</sup> al-Ghazālī’s tripartite cosmological division is based on the sophisticated cosmological endeavours of certain of his predecessors, including in particular Ibn Sinā (427/1037). These ideas reached their zenith in classical Muslim thought with Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 637/1240). See, for example, Kojiro Nakamura, “Imām Ghazālī’s Cosmology Reconsidered with Special Reference to the Concept of ‘Jabarūt,’” in: *Studia Islamica* 80 (1994), 29-46; and Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam*, New York: Suny Press 2005, 1-3, 114. A cosmological vision of this kind seems to recall certain of Plato’s ideas (c. 427-347 BCE). Plato proposed that there are two realms of reality: the (ever changing) physical or material

Al-Ghāzali writes that all three realms will be destroyed on doomsday (*yawm al-dīn*) and will vanish without exception. With them will go all their inhabitants, including the angels, who will die and be annihilated before God revives them and establishes his eternal “kingdom of the heavens and the earth.”<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 Angels drag the soul out of the body

Elaborating on the idea of death in the three realms, al-Ghazālī reviews the notion that life is a combination of soul and body and that death occurs when the soul is separated from the body. Prior to this discussion, he states (with implicit reference to Q 6:93-94) that four angels descend to the dying person in the attempt to extract his soul from his body. These angels, for whom a name is not given, pull the soul simultaneously from the hands and the feet of the dying. The four human extremities may explain why these angels are four, although the number four also generally symbolises universality in religious contexts.<sup>25</sup>

In the moments immediately preceding biological death, some aspects of the “dominion of the angels,” the *malakūti* world, may be unveiled to the dying person, and he may actually see the angels.<sup>26</sup> In al-Ghazālī’s description, the arrival of the four angels precedes the Angel [of Death], who stabs the dying person with a spear rubbed in a fiery poison (*summan min nār*), thus causing biological death. The activities of these four angels are described in *The Precious Pearl* as follows:

فإذا دنت منيته وهي الموتة الدنيوية فحينئذ ينزل عليه أربعة من الملائكة، ملكٌ يجذب النفس من قدمه اليمنى، وملكٌ يجذبها من قدمه اليسرى، وملكٌ يجذبها من يده اليمنى، وملكٌ يجذبها من يده

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world of becoming and the (constant, unchanging) world of being, the world of forms or ideas. He also proposed a division of the soul into three parts: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational (Robin Barrow, *Plato and Education*, London: Routledge 1976, 46). As the history of mystical thought in Islam suggests, views of this kind played an important role for Muslim illuminationist philosophers such as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 586/1191) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640), to name only two.

<sup>24</sup> Q 7:185 (*malakūt al-samawāt wa-l-ard*), Q 3:189; 5:17, 9:116, 24:42, 57:5 (*mulk al-samawāt wa-l-ard*). For the various names of doomsday in the Qur’ān, see Sebastian Günther, “Day, times of,” in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 2001, 499-504, here 500.

<sup>25</sup> Carpenter, *Connections*, 272-274, 304.

<sup>26</sup> Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah al-fākhiraḥ fi kashf ‘ulūm al-ākhirah,” in: *Ad-Dourra al-fākhira: La perle précieuse de Ghazālī: Traité d’eschatologie musulmane, avec une tradition française par Lucien Gautier*, Lucien Gautier, ed., Geneva: Georg 1878, repr. Leipzig: Harrassowitz 1925, 2; see also Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *The Precious Pearl: al-Durra al-fākhira: A translation from the Arabic with notes of the al-Durra al-fākhira fi kashf ‘ulūm al-ākhirah of Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī*, J.I. Smith, transl., Missoula, MT: Scholars Press 1979 [new ed.: *Knowledge of the hereafter: Durrah al-Fākhiraḥ*, Selangor: Islamic Book Trust n. d.], 21.

اليسرى، وربّما كُشِفَ للميت عن الأمر الملكوتي، قبل أن يُغرغر، فعاين أولئك الأملاك على حقيقة علمه، لا على قدر ما يتخيّرون إليه من عالمهم.<sup>27</sup>

When [the human’s] destiny approaches, that is, his earthly death, four angels descend upon him. One pulls out the soul from his right foot, another from the left foot, the third from his right hand, and the fourth from his left hand. Perhaps, the matter of the lower spiritual (*malakūti*) world [inhabited by angels, spirits, and *jinn*] may be unveiled for him even before he exhales his last breath. Then, he sees those angels according to [the degree of] his cognitive power, not the way in which they actually appear in their own world.

Still, the conditions of the dying and the duties of the angels placed in charge of them by God vary, as al-Ghazālī explicates:

تختلف أحوال الموتى، فمنهم من يطعنه الملك حينئذ بجرية مسمومة قد سُقِيَتْ سُمًّا من نار، فتنتز النفس، وتفيض خارجةً، فيأخذها في يده، وهي ترعد أشبه شيء بالزئبق على قدر النحلة شخصاً إنسانياً، ثم يناولها الزبانية.  
ومن الموتى من تجذب نفسه زويداً زويداً حتى تنحصر في الحنجرة، وليس يبقى في الحنجرة إلا شُعبة يسيرة متصلة بالقلب، فحينئذ يطعنها بتلك الحربة الموصوفة.<sup>28</sup>

[At this point,] the conditions of the dead differ. Some of them will be stabbed by the Angel [of Death] with a poisoned spear that was rubbed in a fiery poison, so that the soul flees and overflows toward the outside [of the body]. Then the Angel takes it in his hand while it shudders, very much resembling quicksilver. The soul is only the size of a bee, but with human characteristics. At that point, the guardians of hell (*zabāniyāl*) seize it.

There are [others] from among the dead whose soul will be dragged out slowly and gradually until it is confined in the windpipe. There remains but a small portion in the windpipe, connected to the heart. At this point, the Angel [of Death] stabs it with the aforementioned spear.

One could argue that al-Ghazālī evokes here the traditional (“orthodox”) belief in the corporeal nature of resurrection and the hereafter.<sup>29</sup> On such a reading, he would re-emphasise his refutation (*ibtāl*) of the errors he found in the metaphysical sciences (*al-ilābiyyāt*) of the philosophers, whom he charged with disbelief (*ya-jību takfirubum*) regarding three points. Two of these points relate to concepts concerning the hereafter:<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 4; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 7; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 23. Cf. a similar passage in al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 154-155.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Frank Griffel’s review of T. J. Gianotti’s “Al-Ghazālī’s Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the *Ḥyā’*,” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124/1 (2004), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, Ḥamid Ṣaliba/Kāmil ‘Ayyād, ed., Beirut: Dār al-Andalus 1967/[1397], 83; see also al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error. Five Key Texts In-*

- a) The philosophers' "denial of bodily resurrection and the return of spirits to bodies" on the Day of Judgement (the philosophers reason that it is the spirit, not the body, that will be rewarded or punished (see the chapter *Fi ibtāl inkārihim li-ba'ṭh al-ajzād wa-radd al-arwāḥ*).<sup>31</sup>
- b) The philosophers' "denial of the world's eternity (see the chapter *Fi ibtāl qawlihim bi-qidam al-ālam*) as well as their statement on "the post-eternity of the world, time, and motion" (see the chapter *Fi ibtāl qawlihim fi abadiyyat al-ālam wa-l-zamān wa-l-ḥarakah*).<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the orthodox belief is that the world was created and that it will cease on the Day of Judgement.

Moments prior to death, when the soul has risen to the upper part of the body before leaving it completely, temptations are presented to it, and the devil, Iblis, may send his servants to tempt some people. He may place his servants over the respective person and put the person in their charge. The servants of hell might then show the dead person an image of beloved relatives who had predeceased them to attempt to persuade the dead person to give up his Islamic belief and die instead as a Jew or Christian. It is noteworthy in this context that Iblis is thought of as an angel in some Muslim traditions, while others consider him to be one of the *jinn*.

However, if God wants to "acknowledge and guide his servant," God instead sends the Angel of Mercy (*malak al-raḥmah*), Gabriel, to drive away his enemies from amongst the devils (*shayāṭūn*) so that this person dies as a Muslim. The dying person is relieved and smiles before passing away.<sup>33</sup> Up to the point of biological death, a small part of the soul remains connected to the heart. The heart, as the seat of life, will be pierced with the aforementioned poisoned spear so that the soul completely separates from it. The soul will then leave the body, marking the point at which the person has definitively passed away.

#### *The believer's soul*

In the case of the good soul (lit.: fortunate or felicitous soul, *nafs sa'idah*),<sup>34</sup> the Angel (of Death) will seize it. However, two angels "with beautiful faces, wearing lovely clothes and sweet-smelling fragrances," will be in charge of the soul. The good soul is the size of a bee and has human characteristics. One of the two angels pulls the soul out slowly and gradually, so that it slips out of the body easily

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*cluding His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, R[ichard] J. McCarthy, transl. and annot., Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 1980, 66-67.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Marmura, *Al-Ghazālī's: The Incoherence of the Philosophers [= Tahfut al-falāsifa]: A Parallel English-Arabic Text, Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Michael E. Marmura*, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 2000, 208-209 (20<sup>th</sup> Discussion).

<sup>32</sup> Marmura, *Incoherence*, 12-13, 47-48 (First and Second Discussion).

<sup>33</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 9; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 11.

and smoothly “like the jetting of water from a water-skin” – a description from al-Ghazālī, which our third author, Ibn Qayyim, repeats in a similar fashion with reference to a prophetic tradition.<sup>35</sup> Al-Ghazālī’s text runs:

فإذا قبض الملك النفس السعيدة تناولها ملكان حسنا الوجوه عليهما أثواب حسنة، ولهما رائحة طيبة فيلقانها في حرير من حرير الجنة، وهي على قدر النحلة شخص إنساني، ما فقد من عقله ولا من علمه المكتسب له في دار الدنيا شيئاً.<sup>36</sup>

When the Angel [of Death] seizes the good soul, two angels with beautiful faces, wearing lovely clothes and with sweet-smelling fragrance, will [take it and] wrap it in silk taken from the silk of the Paradise. The soul will be the size of a bee, with human characteristics, and will have lost nothing of its intelligence and the knowledge that it acquired in the realm of this world.

### *The disbeliever’s soul*

The soul of the profligate (*fājir*)<sup>37</sup> also bears human characteristics, but is the size of a locust. Ugly, black-garbed guardians of hell, called the *zabāniyah*, squeeze it out of the body. The Angel of Death stabs the wicked with the poisoned sword. The profligate soul tries to flee but the Angel of Death, ‘Izrā’īl, seizes it.

وأما الفاجر فتؤخذ نفسه عنفاً، فإذا وجهه كاكل الحنظل والملك يقول: "اخرجي أيتها النفس الخبيثة من الجسد الخبيث"، فإذا له صراخ أعظم ما يكون كصراخ الحمير، فإذا قبضها عزرائيل تناولها زبانية قباح الوجوه سود الثياب مُنتني الرائحة، بأيديهم مُسوح من شعر، فليقونها فيه، فتستحيل شخصاً إنسانياً على قدر الجرادة، فإنّ الكافر أعظم جُرمًا من المؤمن، أعني: الجسم في الآخرة.<sup>38</sup>

As for the profligate, his soul is taken forcefully. Suddenly, his face is like the face of someone who has eaten colocynths. The angel says: “Come out, O you wicked soul, from this spiteful body!” Then he shrieks louder than the braying of donkeys. ‘Izrā’īl [the Angel of Death] then seizes it and delivers it to the guardians of hell, who have repulsive faces, black clothes and a rotten smell, who carry in their hands haircloth. They will wrap it therewith; then he will turn into a person as big as a locust. Indeed, the disbeliever (*kāfir*) will have a bigger body than the believer. I mean [by this] the body in the hereafter.

<sup>35</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abi Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Kitāb ar-Rūḥ*, Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muḥammad ‘Alī Ṣabīḥ 1966, 47; idem., *The Soul’s Journey After Death, An Abridgement of Ibn Al-Qayyim’s Kitāb ar-Rub*, Layla Mabrouk, transl., London: Dar al-Taqwa 1990, 16.

<sup>36</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 11; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 17. See also Q 38:28: *fujjār*, “those who spread corruption” (Abdel Haleem’s translation).

<sup>38</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 17.

### 2.3 *The Angel of Death*

Al-Muḥāsibī, writing in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, does not refer to the angels mentioned in the Qurʾān as those who stretch out their hands to the soul of the dying. Nor does he indicate their duties in any other way. In this regard, his description contrasts with the elaborate portrayal that al-Ghazālī provides. Al-Muḥāsibī does, however, refer to the Qurʾānic Angel of Death when directly addressing his audience with a powerful depiction of the task this specific angel will carry out. He asks his readers to imagine themselves at the very moment when the Angel of Death visits “you”:

فتوهم نفسك وقد صرعت للموت صرعة لا تقوم منها إلا إلى الحشر إلى ربك، فتوهم نفسك في نزح الموت وركبه وغصصه وسكراته وغمه وقلقه، وقد بدأ الملك يجذب روحك من قدمك، فوجدت ألم جذبته من أسفل قدميك، ثم تدارك الجذب واستحسنت النزح، وجذبت الروح من جميع بدنك، فنشطت من أسفلك متصاعدة إلى أعلاك، حتى إذا بلغ منك الكرب منتهاه، وعمت آلام الموت جميع جسمك، وقلبك وجلّ محزون مرتقب منتظر للبشرى من الله عز وجلّ بالغضب أو الرضا، وقد علمت أنه لا محيص لك دون أن تسمع إحدى البشريين من الملك الموكل بقبض روحك. فبينما أنت في كربك وغمومك وألم الموت بسكراته وشدة حزنك لارتقابك إحدى البشريين من ربك، إذ نظرت إلى صفحة وجه ملك الموت بأحسن الصورة أو بأقبحها، ونظرت إليه ماداً يده إلى فيك ليخرج روحك من بدنك، فذلت نفسك لَمَا عاينت ذلك وعاينت وجه ملك الموت، وتعلق قلبك بماذا يفجأك من البشرى منه، إذ سمعت صوته بنغمته: “أبشر، يا ولي الله، برضا الله وثوابه”، أو “أبشر، يا عدو الله، بغضبه وعقابه”، فتستيقن حينئذ بنجاتك وفوزك، ويستقر الأمر في قلبك، فتطمئن إلى الله نفسك، أو تستيقن بعطبك وهلاكك.<sup>39</sup>

Imagine yourself (*tawabham nafsaka*) when death throws you down with a blow, from which you wake up only for resurrection [in front of] your Lord. Then, imagine yourself in the throes of death, its struggles, sorrows, agonies, and anxieties when the Angel [of Death] starts dragging your soul out [of your body] from your feet, while you feel the pangs of his (the Angel of Death’s) twitch. Thereupon, the convulsions become continuous and the extraction hastier and more rapid. Forthwith, the soul is removed from your entire body. It briskly ascends to your highest point. When agony reaches its [upper] limit and the sufferings of death have overcome all your body, your heart is fearful and distressed in anticipation and in uncertainty of the tidings from God – blessed and exalted be He – [which will express] either anger or contentment [with you]. You will have realised that you have no choice but to hear one of the two tidings from the angel commissioned to seize your soul.

While you are in this state of trepidation and sorrow, when the pangs of death with its agonies [will overcome you] and [while you are in] austere grief due to your anticipation

<sup>39</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawabhum,” ed. Beirut 1411/1991, 153-154; ed. Paris 1978, § 6-9. See also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 13-15.

for one of the two tidings from your Lord, [good or bad,] you will gaze at the face of the Angel of Death, which will either [appear] in the most beautiful form or in the most horrible. You will see him stretching his hand out to your mouth in order to pull out your soul from your body. Then, your soul will submit because of what you recognised, and because you saw the face of the Angel of Death. Your heart will become attached to the tiding, with which he overwhelms you. It is then that you hear his voice with the announcement either saying: “Rejoice, o beloved of God, in God’s contentment and His requital,” or “O enemy of God, prepare to receive the dreadful tidings of God’s anger and punishment.” It is then that you will be sure about your redemption and great achievement. The matter will firmly settle in your heart. You will find repose in God; or else, you will be sure of your perdition and doom.

The Angel of Death is not given a name in the Qur’ān (Q 32:11) and al-Muḥāsibi refers to him also only by his duty. Islamic tradition, however, gives the Angel of Death the name ‘Izrā’il and usually describes him as a creature moving around the earth with the speed of light, seizing the souls of those whose appointed time has come.<sup>40</sup>

Based on a prophetic tradition, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah adds to this a word of comfort, assuring the believers that:

إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ إِذَا كَانَ فِي إِقْبَالٍ مِنَ الْأَخْرَجَةِ وَأَنْقَطَعَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا نَزَلَتْ إِلَيْهِ مَلَائِكَةٌ كَانَتْ وُجُوهُهُمُ الشَّمْسُ  
فَيَجْلِسُونَ مِنْهُ مَدَّ الْبَصَرِ. ثُمَّ يَجِيءُ مَلِكُ الْمَوْتِ حَتَّى يَجْلِسَ عِنْدَ رَأْسِهِ فَيَقُولُ: أَيُّهَا النَّفْسُ، الطَّيِّبَةُ  
أَخْرِجِي إِلَى مَغْفَرَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانٍ.

<sup>40</sup> A later source, the popular *Daqā’iq al-akbbār fi dhikr al-jannah wa-l-nār* (“*The Meticulous Accounts about Paradise and Hell-fire*,” often attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī (5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century), is rather detailed in its description of the Angel of Death. Here it is stated that, “The Angel of Death has seventy thousand feet, four thousand wings, and his whole body is full of eyes and tongues. In fact, there is not one of God’s creatures from whom there is not a tongue, a face, an eye, or a hand that is part of his body. Only when a creature dies, does its eye, its hand, leave the body of this Angel. It is said also that the Angel of Death has four faces, watching in all four cardinal directions (with a Biblical parallel in the four Biblical living creatures, who resemble a man, although ‘each one had four faces, and each one had four wings’ (Ezekiel 1:4-7). In Islam, the Angel of Death is also said to be so gargantuan that he stands with one foot on the Bridge that spans Hell, and the other on the Throne of Paradise. The Angel of Death has knowledge of each person’s death. But this knowledge of his is a secret. It is given to him by God only when the time of a person’s death is near.” Cf. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī, *Daqā’iq al-akbbār fi dhikr al-jannah wa-l-nār*, Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā Muḥammad 1352 [1933], 6-8 (chapter 5). See ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī, *The Islamic Book of the Dead: A Collection of Hadiths on the Fire and the Garden*, ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, transl., San Francisco: Diwan Press 1977 [English transl. of al-Qāḍī’s *Daqā’iq al-akbbār*], 32-35. Christian Lange, however, has convincingly shown that the *Daqā’iq al-akbbār* does not constitute a fixed text. Rather, it appears to be part of a “corpus that splits up into three major clusters, a Western, Eastern, and Middle Eastern one [...] Finally, in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire, where the title regularly appears as *Subtle Traditions [Daqā’iq al-akbbār]*, the work came to be connected with the name of an otherwise unknown ‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. Aḥmad”; see his *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, 108-112. Based on Lange’s arguments, the ascription of this work to ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī can now be laid to rest.

قال: فتخرج تسيل كما تسيل القطرة من في السماء، فيأخذها، فإذا أخذها لم يدعوها في يده طرفة عين حتى يأخذوها فيجعلوها في ذلك الكفن وذلك الحنوط ويخرج منها كأطيب نضحة مسك وجدت على وجه الأرض.<sup>41</sup>

When he is about to be accepted into the hereafter as he is departing from this world, angels will descend to the believer (*ʿabd*), [from the heavens] with faces as bright as the sun. They will sit around him [in throngs stretching] as far as the eye can see. Then the Angel of Death will come and sit at his head. He will say, “Good soul, come out to forgiveness and pleasure from God!”

*It is said:* So, his soul will emerge flowing like a drop of water flows from a water-skin. Then the Angel [of Death] will take hold of it. When he will grasp it, the other angels will not leave it in his hand even for the twinkling of an eye. They will take it and place it in a shroud, while the most pleasant scent of musk found on earth’s face will exude from that corpse.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah also tells his readers that the angels will come to the soul (*rūḥ*) of the dying believer and will speak with it, while the people present at the deathbed will not notice this. They will not smell the sweet fragrance nor hear the words of the conversation.<sup>42</sup>

### 3 Angels guard the soul on its first ascent to heaven

#### *The believer’s soul*

After the person has passed away but before burial takes place, the souls of both the believer and the disbeliever will experience – in different ways – a first heavenly journey. The good soul, it is said, will be wrapped in sublime silk by angels. The soul will then be lifted up to heaven by two beautiful angels (according to al-Ghazālī) or by the Angel of Death (according to al-Muḥāsibī and Ibn Qayyim).

At the first heaven, as at every other of the seven, the voice of a heavenly agent, whose name is not given, will ask al-Amin, “The Trustworthy,” and the good soul for their names.<sup>43</sup> Muslim tradition normally identifies *al-Rūḥ al-amin* (Q 26:193) with the archangel Gabriel. Gabriel is also the spirit who, together “with the angels,” descends and ascends to God (Q 16:2, 70:4, 97:4).<sup>44</sup> Al-Ghazālī, however,

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Smith in her translation of al-Ghazālī’s *al-Durrab* gives the name “Gabriel” in parenthesis after al-Amin. This information, however, is not supported by al-Ghazālī’s text, as our further discussion will demonstrate.

<sup>44</sup> Gisela Webb, “Gabriel,” in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 2, Leiden et al.: Brill 2002, 278. In Q 16:102, the term *rūḥ al-quḍus* (“the holy spirit,” see also Q 2:87, 2:253, and 5:110) is understood by some Muslim commentators to refer to Gabriel, the traditional angelic bearer of God’s message. Cf. Sidney Griffith, “Holy Spirit,” in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 2, Leiden et al.: Brill 2002, 442-444.

has it that al-Amin, as he knocks at the heavenly gate and is asked by the voice for his name, replies: “I am Ṣaṣṣā’il.”<sup>45</sup> According to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, upon the good soul’s arrival in the lower heaven, it is **Gabriel** who welcomes the soul in the presence of seventy thousand angels. Each of these angels will delight the soul with glad tidings that it had not heard before.<sup>46</sup>

Once the soul has entered the first heaven, it is al-Amin, or Gabriel, who then accompanies the good soul as it journeys onwards, “from one heaven to the next until it comes into the presence of God.”<sup>47</sup> Every angel in every heaven that the soul passes through smells the good soul’s exceptional sweet fragrance

<sup>45</sup> Al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 11-12. Ṣaṣṣā’il is usually believed in Muslim tradition to be the angel in charge of the fourth heaven. Information ascribed to the early Qur’ān-commentator Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/688) and the Christian convert to Islam and transmitter of Biblical material, Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 55/728) reads as follows:

عن ابن عباس رضي الله عنه أنه قال: ملائكة السماء الدنيا على صورة البقر وكل الله تعالى بهم ملكاً اسمه اسماعيل، وملائكة السماء الثانية على صورة العقاب والملك الموكل بهم اسمه ميخائيل، وملائكة السماء الثالثة على صورة النسر والملك الموكل بهم اسمه صاعديائيل، وملائكة السماء الرابعة على صورة الخيل والملك المول بهم اسمه صلصائيل، وملائكة السماء الخامسة على صورة الحور العين والملك الموكل بهم اسمه كلكائيل، وملائكة السماء السادسة على صورة الولدان والملك الموكل بهم اسمه سمحائيل وملائكة السماء السابعة على صورة بني آدم والملك الموكل بهم اسمه روبائيل. قال وهب [بن منبه]: وفوق الساعات السبع حجب فيها ملائكة لا يعرف بعضهم بعضاً لكثرة عددهم يستحون الله تعالى بلغات مختلفة كالرعد الصاعق، والله الموفق.

On the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, may God be pleased with him, it is said: “The angels of the lower heaven are in the shape of a cow (*baqar*) while God entrusted them to an angel whose name is Ismā’il. The angels of the second heaven are in the shape of an eagle (*‘uqāb*), while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Mikhā’il. The angels of the third heaven are in the shape of a vulture (*nīsr*), while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Ṣā’diyā’il. The angels of the fourth heaven are in the shape of horses (*khayl*), while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Ṣaṣṣā’il. The angels of the fifth heaven are in the shape of a Ḥūrī [virgin of paradise, with big black eyes], while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Kalkā’il. The angels of the sixth heaven are in the shape of children, while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Samkhā’il. The angels of the seventh heaven are in the shape of the decedents of Adam, while the name of the angel entrusted with them is Rūfā’il.” Wahb [ibn Munabbih] said: Above the seventh heaven, there are veils, in which there are angels who do not know each other due to their large number. They praise God in different tongues, which sound like numbing thunders; God is the Bestower of Success.” Cf. Qazwini, *‘Ajā’ib al-makblūqāt* = [Zakariyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwini], *El-Cazwini’s Kosmograhie*. vol. 1. *Die Wunder der Schöpfung*, Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, ed., Wiesbaden: M. Sändig 1967 [Repr. Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung 1848-49], 59-60. See furthermore Qazwini, *Die Wunder* = Al-Qazwini, *Die Wunder des Himmels und der Erde*, Alma Giese, transl., Lenningen: Erdmann 2004, 71-72, and Sachiko Murata, “Angels,” in: *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, Seyyid Hossein Nasr, ed., London: Routledge 1987, 324-344, here 326-328, with an annotated list of these angels’ names, based on al-Qazwini’s *‘Ajā’ib*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 100.

<sup>47</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 11-12; al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 26. See similarly Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 46.

(*yastanshiqūna riḥabā*) and prays for blessings on the soul.<sup>48</sup> On this heavenly voyage, the soul's trustee, al-Amin, guides the good soul through oceans of fire, light, darkness, ice, and hail, until it reaches the Throne of Mercy. Some souls, despite having come so far, will be ordered back without an encounter with God, as only "those who know him" may actually reach Him at this point.<sup>49</sup>

The souls of the most pious and of the martyrs will remain at this supreme location until Judgement Day. All other souls will be taken back to earth by angels in order to be reunited with their bodies in their graves.<sup>50</sup> When the soul returns to earth, it can even see its body being washed. During this time, the angels carry on a conversation with the soul, although the living are unable to hear it. Angels also pray for the soul of the believer in the heavens just as people pray over his body on the earth.<sup>51</sup> This is the fate of all righteous and pious souls, whether they have lived as Muslims, Jews, or Christians on earth, provided, it is affirmed, that they "followed their faith" (*man kāna minhum 'alā sharī'atibi*) in both its beliefs and its ritual practices. The polytheists, however, will not experience this.<sup>52</sup>

### *The disbeliever's soul*

The profligate soul will also be taken to heaven. Like the good soul, it is accompanied by an angel whom al-Ghazālī calls al-Amin. When al-Amin is asked by the voice at the entrance to the first heaven for his name, he responds: "I am **Daqyā'il**." Daqyā'il is said to be the angel "responsible for myrmidons of punishment."<sup>53</sup> Yet, the heavenly journey of the wicked soul ends abruptly. When an unnamed agent behind the first heavenly gate is informed that the soul of a disbeliever wishes to enter, entry is denied. Al-Ghazālī writes:

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 50.

<sup>49</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 17; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 11-12, 18-20; al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 26-27, 30-31; Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 92.

<sup>51</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 50, 65; see also Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul's Journey*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 18 and 43, see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 30 and 47.

<sup>53</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 17-18; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 17-18. Daqyā'il is probably the Arabic equivalent of Dalkiel, one of seven angels of Hell, and ruler of Sheol, the place of darkness in the Hebrew Bible. Dalkiel operates in the seventh compartment of the Jewish underworld, "punishing ten nations." Cf. Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels, Including the Fallen Angels*, New York: The Free Press 1967, 94. Apparently quoting al-Ghazālī's *al-Durrah*, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī mentions Daqyā'il in his *al-Tadbkirah fi aḥwāl al-marwāt wa-umūr al-ākhirah*, al-Sādiq ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm, ed., vol. 1, Riyadh: Dār al-Mihāj 1425/[2004], 244:

وفي الصحيح: "أن ضرس الكافر في النار مثل أحد"، فيعرج به حتى ينتهي إلى سماء الدنيا، فيقرع الأمين الباب، فيقال: من أنت؟ فيقول: أنا دقيائيل لأت اسم الملك الموكل على زبانية العذاب دقيائيل، فيقال: من معك؟ فيقول: فلان ابن فلان بأفح أسائه وأبغضها إليه في دار الدنيا، فيقال لا أهلاً ولا سهلاً....

قال: فَيُعْرَجُ بِهِ حَتَّى يَنْتَهِيَ إِلَى سَاءِ الدُّنْيَا، فَيَقْرَعُ الْأَمِينُ الْبَابَ، فَيُقَالُ: "مَنْ أَنْتَ؟" فَيَقُولُ: "أَنَا دَقْيَائِيلُ" لِأَنَّ اسْمَ الْمَلِكِ الْمَوْكَلِ عَلَى زَبَانِيَةِ الْعَذَابِ دَقْيَائِيلُ، فَيُقَالُ: "مَنْ مَعَكَ؟"، فَيَقُولُ: "فُلَانُ ابْنُ فُلَانٍ" بِأَقْبَحِ أَسْمَائِهِ وَأَبْغَضِهَا إِلَيْهِ فِي دَارِ الدُّنْيَا، فَيُقَالُ: لَا أَهْلًا وَلَا سَهْلًا، وَلَا يُفْتَحُ لَهُ أَبْوَابُ السَّمَاءِ، وَلَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ.<sup>54</sup>

It will be said: The soul [of the disbeliever, *kāfir*] will be taken up until it reaches the lower heaven. The Trustee [of the soul], al-Amin, will knock at the door.

Then he will be asked: "Who are you?" So, he replies: "I am Daqyā'il," as the name of the angel responsible for the myrmidons (*zabāniyah*)<sup>55</sup> of punishment is Daqyā'il. Then he will be asked: "Who is with you?," to which he replies: "So-and-so, the son of so-and-so," using the ugliest and most loathsome of the names that he used to detest in the earthly realm.

Then it responds [to the soul of the wicked]: "You are not welcome!" '... and the gates of heaven are not open to him, and he will not enter the garden' (in reference to Q 7:40).

When al-Amin hears this response, he will "fling the soul from his hand." It will fall from heaven and be "flung to a distant place by the wind" (Q 22:31). Once the wicked soul reaches earth, the guardians of hell take charge of it and take it to *Sijjīn* (Q 83:7,8), explained here (just as in most recent Islamic scholarship) as "a huge stone to which souls of the profligate (*arwāḥ al-fujjār*) are brought."<sup>56</sup> Eventually, however, all souls will be reunited with their bodies in their graves and will stay there until the Day of Resurrection.

#### 4 Angels interrogate in the grave

While little is said in the Qur'ān about the situation in which the soul finds itself between death and resurrection, eschatological works are rich in details in this respect. In this literature, it is suggested that the soul attaches itself to "the breast [of the deceased] from the outside" (*bi-ṣadr min khārij al-ṣadr*) and that body and soul

<sup>54</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 17-18; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 17-18.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. the Qur'ānic passages about the nineteen angels in charge of the scorching Fire, punishing the disbelievers under the supervision of their leader, the angel Mālik (Q 74:30-1). Some Muslim exegetes identify these guardian angels with the Qur'ānic *zabāniyah*, the "guards of hell" (Q 96:18) and "Over it (the Fire) stand angels, stern and strong; angels who never disobey God's commands to them, but do as they are ordered" (Q 66:6). See furthermore Rosalind W. Gwynne, "Hell and Hellfire," in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 2, Leiden et al.: Brill 2002, 414-420, here 417. See also Christian Lange, "Revisiting Hell's Angels in the Quran," in: *Locating Hell in Islamic Tradition*, idem, ed., Leiden and Boston: Brill 2015, 74-99, esp. 75-84 and 88-91.

<sup>56</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 18; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 30. For the different meanings and the complex etymology of the expression *sijjīn*, see Michael Carter, "Foreign Vocabulary," in: *Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, Andrew Rippin, Jawid Mojaddedi, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009, 120-139, here 137-138 ("a place of eternal imprisonment," rather than a "register").



The Angels Munkar and Nakir in the famous cosmography *‘Ajā’ib al-makblūqāt wa-gharā’ib al-marājūdāt* (“The Wonders of Creation and the Unique Phenomena of Existence”) by Zakariyā’ ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwini (d. 682 AH/1283 CE). Ms. Walters 659, fol. 51B. Date: 1121 AH/ 1717 CE (Ottoman Empire). Reproduced from Wikipedia with the permission of the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.

will await the day of resurrection together in the grave.<sup>57</sup> However, this time in the grave is not a lifeless, uneventful period. Rather, it is a state and time in which body and soul experience a number of events, including visits from angels, interrogations about the deceased’s life on earth, as well as previews of life in the hereafter, whether in paradise or hell. Interestingly, this concept of a “life in the grave” recalls an ancient Egyptian idea according to which the soul *ka* (that is, the more intellectual and spiritual aspects of a person, in contrast to the soul *ba*, representing the personality) takes up its abode in the tomb, contemplating and viewing pictures and other representations of the deceased’s life on earth.<sup>58</sup>

In Islam, two angels, **Munkar and Nakir**, well known in the tradition as *fattānā al-qabr* (“the two Interrogators in the Grave,”<sup>59</sup> visit the dead. “Reprehensible” and “Reproachful” (or “The Denied” and “The Denier”), as their names can be translated, enter the grave and interrogate the deceased “with severity and reproach him

<sup>57</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 21; see al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 32.

<sup>58</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani in the British Museum. The Egyptian Text with Interlinear Transliteration and Translation, A Running Translation, Introduction, Etc.*, New York: Dover 1967 (abridged republication of the work originally published in 1895), lxiv; Geddes MacGregor, *Images of Afterlife: Beliefs from Antiquity to Modern Times*, New York: Paragon House 1992, 59.

<sup>59</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 23.

with roughness.”<sup>60</sup> They make the dead sit up in the grave, which will widen for this purpose, and ask the deceased person questions concerning their faith, such as: “Who is your Lord? What is your religion? Who is your Prophet? And what is your prayer direction?”<sup>61</sup>

Al-Muhāsibī mentions the two angels of the grave, but follows the Qur’ānic usage (“the angels take them in death and beat their faces and their backs, because they practiced things that incurred God’s wrath,” Q 47:27-28; see also 8:50) in not providing names for them. He also states, however, that the two angels will strike the grave with their legs on both sides and that they will cause the deceased, while in the grave, to look at what they can expect in the hereafter, whether paradise or hell.<sup>62</sup>

Al-Ghazālī elaborates on this idea by stating that God determines for the deceased the right responses to the questions put forward by the two angels. In fact, to the believer (*mu’min*) who has worked for the good in his life but has no share in knowledge (*laysa ma’abu ḥazz min al-’ilm*), God will send his good deeds in personified form. These deeds will appear to him in the best image, wearing pleasant perfume and clothing, and will instruct him how to respond to the questions that Munkar and Nakir will ask, so that the deceased need not worry. Munkar and Nakir will expand the top of the pious person’s tomb and make it a great dome. They will open for him on his right side a gate through which to view paradise and smell its fresh breezes. The disbeliever’s soul, in contrast, will be tormented by gazing upon hell and its punishments through a gate on the left side of the grave.<sup>63</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah specifies that the angels will visit the dead shortly after those attending the funeral have left and the earth has been leveled over the corpse. They will not be prevented from entering the grave by the soil, as angels can move around in dense substances as easily as birds do in the air. He writes:

فإذا وُضِعَ في لَحْدِهِ وَسُؤِّيَ عَلَيْهِ التُّرَابُ لَمْ يَحْبِجِ التُّرَابُ الْمَلَائِكَةَ عَنِ الْوَصُولِ إِلَيْهِ، بَلْ لَوْ نُقِّرَ لَهُ  
حَجْرٌ فَأُودِعَ فِيهِ وَخْتَمَ عَلَيْهِ بِالرِّصَاصِ لَمْ يَمْنَعِ وَصُولَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ إِلَيْهِ، فَإِنَّ هَذِهِ الْأَجْسَامَ الْكَثِيفَةَ لَا تَمْنَعُ  
خَرَقَ الْأَرْوَاحِ لَهَا، بَلِ الْحَجْرُ لَا يَمْنَعُهَا ذَلِكَ بَلْ قَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ سَبْحَانَهُ الْحِجَارَةَ وَالتُّرَابَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ  
بِمَنْزِلَةِ الْهَوَاءِ لِلطَّيْرِ.<sup>64</sup>

When the corpse has been placed in the grave, and the soil is levelled over him, the soil does not prevent the angels from reaching him. Even if a stone had been hollowed out for him so that he was placed/put into it and the opening sealed over with lead, it

<sup>60</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 23. See also Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> al-Muhāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 154, 155; see also al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 23-24; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 34; and Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 47 (almost verbatim).

<sup>62</sup> al-Muhāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 155; see also al-Muhāsibī, *The Visualization*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 25; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 65 ; see also Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul’s Journey*, 6.

would not stop the angels from reaching him. Indeed, these dense substances cannot hinder the passage of souls. Nor are the *jinn* hindered by them. God – glory be to Him – made stone and soil for angels equal to what air is for birds.

The image and function of Munkar and Nakir carries certain echoes of the Zoroastrian concept of the angels *Srōsh* (“Obedience”) and *Ātar* (“Fire”). These angels are believed to appear on the first night after a person has passed away. They welcome the pious soul and guide it over the Bridge of Judgement, which separates the world of the living from that of the dead.<sup>65</sup>

Another angel, named **Rūmān**, a figure not found in the Qurʾān and perhaps introduced to the Islamic tradition at a rather later time, is mentioned only by al-Ghazālī. Rūmān visits the grave even before Munkar and Nakir do. He roams the graves in the graveyard and demands from the deceased that he write down his deeds, using his shroud as paper, his saliva as ink, and his finger as pen. The deceased must then seal his record and hang it around his neck, in line with the words of Qurʾān 17:13, which states: “We have fastened the fate of every man on his neck.” Al-Ghazālī says in this regard:

فإذا أُدخل الميت قبره ... ثم يناديه ملك اسمه رومان، وقد رُوي عن ابن مسعود رضي الله عنه أنه قال: قلت يا رسول الله، ما أول ما يلقي الميت إذا أُدخل قبره؟ قال: يا ابن مسعود، لقد سألتني عن شيء ما سألتني عنه أحد إلا أنت. فأول ما يناديه ملك اسمه رومان يجوس خلال المقابر، فيقول: يا عبد الله، أكتب عملك!، فيقول: ليس معي دواة ولا قرطاس، فيقول: هيات كفنك قرطاسك، ومدادك ريقك، وقلمك إصبعك. فيقطع له من كفنه قطعة. ثم يجعل العبد يكتب، وإن كان غير كاتب في الدنيا. فيذكر حينئذ حسناته وسنناته كيوم واحد، ثم يطوى الملك تلك الرقعة ويعلقها في عنقه. ثم قرأ رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: ﴿وكل إنسان أزمانه طائرته في عنقه﴾، أي عمله.<sup>66</sup>

Once the deceased is laid in his grave and the earth is poured over him, .... Thereupon an angel named Rūmān calls to him. It is related from Ibn Masʿūd – may God be pleased with him – that he said: I asked: “O Messenger of God, what is the first thing that the deceased encounters when he is laid in his grave?” He replied, “O Ibn Masʿūd, you ask me about something that no one has ever asked about, except for you.”

<sup>65</sup> Jal Dastur Cursetji Pavry, *The Zoroastrian Doctrine of a Future Life: From Death to the Individual Judgement*, New York: Columbia University Press 1929, 14-16, 23, 85; William W. Malandra (transl. and ed.), *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1983, 135-140. The idea that ancient Iran is the region of initial importance for the concept of angels in the ancient Near East is supported by Annemarie Schimmel, who stated, “Iran kann als Heimat der Engelvorstellung im engeren Sinn angesehen werden”; cf. her article “Geister, Dämonen, Engel,” in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (= RGG3), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 2, Leiden: Brill 1958, 1298-1301, here 1300.

<sup>66</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 22; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 32-33.

[*The Prophet said:*] “The first one to call him is an angel called Rūmān, who roams about the graves, saying: ‘O servant of God, write down your deeds’. So, he answers: ‘I do not have ink or parchment with me’. ‘But oh!’, [Rūmān responds], ‘your shroud is your parchment, your saliva your ink and your finger your pen’. So, he cuts for him a piece of his shroud and makes the servant write, even if he was unable to write during his lifetime. Then he mentions his good and bad deeds as if [they all happened] in one day. Then the angel folds up that shroud and hangs it around his neck.”

At that point, the Messenger of God – peace and blessings be upon him – recited, ‘We have bound each human’s destiny to his neck (Q 17:13)’, referring to his deeds.

The portrayal continues as follows:

فإذا فرغَ من ذلك، دخل عليه فتانا القبر وهما ملكان أسودان يخْرِقان الأرض بأنيابهما، لهما شعور مسدولة، يجزانها على الأرض، كلاهما كالرعد القاصف وأعينهما كالبرق الخاطف ونفسهما كالريح العاصف بيد كل واحد منها مقمع من حديد لو اجتمع عليه الثقلان ما رفعاه، لو ضُربَ به أعظم جبل ضربةً لصار دكاً.

فإذا رأتهما النفس ارتعدت وولّت هاربةً، فتدخل في منخر الميت فيحيا الميت من الصدر ويكون كهيئته عند الغرغرة ولا يقدر على جراك غير آتة يسمع وينظر.

قال: فيسألانه بعنفٍ وبهراة بجفاء، وقد صار التراب له كالماء حينما تحرك انفسح فيه، ووجد فرجة فيقولان له: من ربك؟ وما دينك؟ ومن نبيك؟ وما قبلتك؟

فمن وفقه الله تعالى وثبته بالقول الثابت فيقول: ومن وكلكما عليّ؟ ومن أرسلكما إليّ؟ وهذا لا يقوله إلا العلماء الأختار

فيقول أحدهما للآخر: صدق فقد كُفي شرنا، ثم يضربان عليه القبر مثل القبة العظيمة ويفتحان له باباً إلى الجنة من تلقاء يمينه، ثم يفرشان له من حريرها ورِيحانها ويدخل عليه من نسيها ورؤحها ويأتيه عمله في صورة أحب الأشخاص إليه يُؤنسه ويُحْدِثه ويملاً قبره نوراً ولا يزال في فرح وسرور ما بقيت الدنيا حتى تقوم الساعة، ويسأل: متى تقوم الساعة؟ فليس شيء أحب إليه من قيامها.<sup>67</sup>

[*The Prophet said:*] When he (Rūmān) finishes this matter, the two denunciators will enter his grave. They are two black angels whose canine teeth penetrate the earth, with long hair hanging down and dragging over the ground, with voices like cracking thunder, with eyes like flashing lightning, and with breath like forceful wind. Each one of them carries a pair of iron tongs (*miqma'*) so heavy that the inhabitants of heaven and earth together would not be able to lift them; if the greatest mountain was hit with them, it would be crushed.

Once the soul sees these two angels, it shudders, runs away, and enters the nostrils of the deceased. Then the deceased will come back to life, from his chest [upwards], and be

<sup>67</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 23-24; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 33-24. A similar passage is found in al-Qazwini, ‘*Ajā’ib*’, 60-61; al-Qazwini, *Die Wunder*, 74.

back in the same condition that he was in when exhaling his last breath. He will only hear and see, but be unable to move.

*The Prophet said:* “They will ask him with severity and shout at him boorishly. By then, the soil will become like water, so that, in whatever direction the deceased moves, it will widen for him. Should he then find relief, they will ask him: ‘Who is your God?’, ‘What is your religion?’, ‘Who is your prophet?’, and ‘What is your prayer direction?’

Whoever is granted success by God, Exalted be He, and this consolidated through an affirmative saying [in the Qur’ān], he will say: ‘Who has put you in charge over me?’ and ‘Who sent you to me?’ [However, this kind of statement] will be uttered only by select knowers.

One of the angels will tell the other: ‘He said the truth; and he is protected from our evil’. Then they will cover the grave over him in the form of a mighty dome and open a gate for him toward paradise from his right side. The two angels will furnish the gate for him with the silk and the sweet basil of paradise. He will smell its fragrance and freshness. His deeds will come to him in the image of the person most liked by him on earth. This person will be friendly to him, speak with him, and fill his grave with light. He will continue in happiness and delight as long as this earthly world lasts, until the Hour of Judgement. He will then ask: ‘When will the Hour take place?’, and nothing will be dearer to him than that.

Further research will be needed to explore how this idea of the grave-visiting angel Rūmān, otherwise unattested in the early Muslim sources, was introduced to Islamic eschatological thought. One wonders, for example, whether the Islamic perception of this figure might have been inspired by a Rabbinic idea, according to which the Angel of Death,

Places himself upon the grave of a person after burial and strikes him upon the hand, asking him his name.... For three successive days the Angel of Death, with a chain made half of iron and half of fire, smites off all the members from the body, while his host of messengers replace them in order that the dead may receive more strokes. All parts of the body, especially the eyes, ears, lips, and tongue, receive thus their punishment for the sins they have committed.<sup>68</sup>

Another possible parallel can be found in the Iranian concept of Vizarsh, a demon who struggles with the soul of the person during the first three nights after he has passed away.<sup>69</sup>

Al-Ghazālī’s account of death (as the cessation of all the biological functions of life) and of life in the tomb (as the intermediate state of the deceased) culminates in the final and lengthiest part of his book: a dramatic portrayal of resurrection

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Kaufmann Kohler, “Hibbut ha-Keber,” in: *Jewish Encyclopaedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 6, New York et al.: Funk & Wagnall 1906, 385.

<sup>69</sup> Vizarsh (or *vizarsha*, “drag-off”), with his devilish crew, tries to ensnare the soul of the righteous, casting a noose around its neck to drag it off to hell; but he fails in his attempt and the snare falls off. Cf. Pavry, *The Zoroastrian Doctrine*, 12. This information is found in *Bundabishn* (Pahlavi: “Original Creation”), a Zoroastrian scripture dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, it is based on ancient material from a lost part of the original *Avesta* and even preserves some pre-Zoroastrian elements.

and divine judgement. Ibn Qayyim, by contrast, contemplates the question of whether a human may save himself from punishment, with explicit reference to the *barzakh* or isthmus (that is, the state or space between this world and the next). He answers this question in the affirmative by mentioning a dream of the Prophet, maintaining in this context that, when the Angel of Death is about to take a person’s soul, the dying person’s good and pious deeds arrive at the scene in personified form and intercede to ease the time in the grave for the deceased. These deeds and ethical behaviours may even suffice to drive away the Angel of Death, the devils, and the angels of punishment.<sup>70</sup> Also, if a believer “supplicates for his dead brother, an angel takes this supplication to him in his grave.”<sup>71</sup>

### 5 *The tasks of the angels at the resurrection of the dead*

Resurrection and divine judgement will be signaled by the blast (*naḥkba*) of the divine Trumpet. With the awakening of the dead, a “Caller” – the angel Isrāfil (Raphael; or Gabriel according to some Muslim exegetes in accordance with the Christian tradition) – “will call from a nearby place,” exhorting the dead to come out from their graves so that Divine Judgement may begin (Q 50:41). According to Muslim tradition, this place of the Caller is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup>

Resurrection follows immediately from the single blast of Isrāfil’s Trumpet, according to most Qur’ānic passages. Only Q 39:68 specifies that the Trumpet “will be sounded once again” and that it is then that the dead “will be on their feet, looking on.” According to al-Ghazālī, a “second death” will occur between the two blasts of the trumpet, this time not of the body and the outer senses (like on earth) but of the “inner senses” instead. Reinforcing the idea that all the human senses are put to death during the state of the “second death,” so that nothing is left in the lifeless bodies, al-Ghazālī surmises that an angel would not stay in such an alien corpse even if he was forced into it.<sup>73</sup> This idea of a second death once again seems to resonate with an ancient Egyptian conception, in this case the famous belief that the heart of the deceased person will be weighed in judgement against an ostrich feather on the divine balance. The good heart will be so light that its owner will be admitted to the realm of bliss, while the heavy hearts of those who fall

<sup>70</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 82 (and 33); see also Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul’s Journey*, 26-27.

<sup>71</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 90; see also Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul’s Journey*, 33.

<sup>72</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 33.

<sup>73</sup> Based on respective Qur’ānic references, the various majoritarian (Sunni) theological approaches share a belief in the resurrection of the body. The spirit that proceeds from God (*nafs* or *rūḥ*, depending on the term’s definition) rejoins the resurrected body and both become immortal. According to these views, the soul would not be immortal without a resurrected body. Cf. furthermore Michael Sells, “Spirit,” in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 5, Leiden: Brill 2006, 114-117, here 116; Arent J. Wensinck, *Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development*, Cambridge: Frank Cass 1932 (repr. Abingdon: Routledge 2008), 129-30, 195, 268.

short in goodness will fail the test. In fact, the soul represented by this heavy heart will either be eaten by a ravenous monster lying in wait for this occasion (thus, the soul experiences something equivalent to a second death of the human it represents), or it will be punished in a fiery furnace.<sup>74</sup>

The critical role played by angels in the setting and conduct of resurrection is highlighted by our author. He points out that:

فإذا ساقبتهم الملائكة زُمراً أفواجاً يُحشَرُ كلُّ واحد على حاله تحت كلِّ واحد منهم ما قَدَّرَ له، وجموعاً في صعيد واحد، الأولون والآخرون، أمر الجليل جلّ جلاله ملائكة السماء الدنيا أن يتولّوهم، فيأخذ كلُّ واحد منهم إنساناً وشخصاً من المبعوثين، إنساً وجمناً ووحشاً وطيّراً. ويحوّلونهم إلى الأرض الثانية، وهي أرض بيضاء من فضّة نورية، وصارت الملائكة من وراء العالمين حلقةً واحدةً، فإذا هم أكثر من أهل الأرض بعشر مرّات، ثم إنّ الله سبحانه وتعالى يأمر ملائكة السماء الثانية فيصدقون بالكلِّ حلقة واحدة، فإذا هم مثلهم عشرين مرّة.<sup>75</sup>

When the angels hand over the dead in groups and bands, while each individual is raised in his own state, mounted on that which has been ordained for him, they are gathered on a single highland, the first [to die mixed in] with the last. The Glorious One orders the angels of the near heaven to take care of them. Everyone takes one from amongst the resurrected humans, *jinn*, animals, and birds.

They transport them to the second earth, which is an earth white with silvery light (see Q 14:48).<sup>76</sup> The angels stand in ranks behind the creatures in one great circle; and they number more than ten times the people of the earth. Then, God, praised and exalted be He, will command the angels of the second heaven to form a single circle around them all. Then, they would number twenty times more than the others.

The angels of the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh heavens will then descend, each time outnumbering the previous group of angels by thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, and seventy times respectively. Each group of angels will form their own great circle around the circle of angels that had arrived before them. At this point, all of creation blends and mixes together, one part on top of another, “until one foot is raised above a thousand other feet by the density of the throng.”<sup>77</sup> However, angels will comfort the believers in that terrible moment by repeating to them the Qurʾānic promise that on that day the God-fearing will not have to fear or be sad,

<sup>74</sup> Budge, *The Book*, cxviii, cxxx; 16; MacGregor, *Images*, 58-60, 101.

<sup>75</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 54.

<sup>76</sup> Q 14:48: “One Day – when the earth is turned into another earth, the heavens into another heaven, and people all appear before God, the One, the Overpowering – you [Prophet] will see the guilty on that Day, bound together in fetters, in garments of pitch, faces covered in fire. [All will be judged] so that God may reward each soul as it deserves: God is swift in His reckoning.”

<sup>77</sup> al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 54-55.

in indirect reference to the verses, ‘On that day, ... my servants there is no fear for you today, nor shall you grieve’ (Q 43:67-68).<sup>78</sup>

On the Day of Reckoning, eight angels “will bear the throne of your Lord above them” (Q 69:17). Also on that Day, as during all existence, the *malā’ikah muqarrabūn*, “the angels who are close to Him” (Q 4:172), “glorify Him tirelessly” (as do all “those that are with Him” in the heavens and the earth [Q 21:19-20]).

An angel, called in the Qur’ānic text “the summoner from whom there is no escape” (Q 20:10), will summon the resurrected to the place of Judgement. Guardian angels, called in the Qur’ān “watchers, noble recorders who know what you do” (Q 82:11-12), register deeds and actions executed in this world so that the people will be judged accordingly in the next. One of the “receptors set to record” sits at a person’s right shoulder (recording the good deeds), another one on his left (recording the bad deeds) (Q 50:17). Based on this Qur’ānic evidence, some modern scholars seem to understand the Qur’ānic adjectives of the *kirām kātībūn* (“honourable scribes”) – *raqīb* (“watcher”) of good deeds and *‘atīd* (“ever-present” recorder) of bad actions – as personal names, although no support for this view has so far been found among the classical Qur’ān-commentators, nor elsewhere in the classical Arabic sources.<sup>79</sup> During judgement, these angels are charged with bringing along the pages of a person’s heavenly record, in which all their good and evil deeds are recorded. The angels will place the respective pages on the pan of the divine balance so that the fate of the person will be decided and it will be learned whether they will be sent to paradise or to hell.<sup>80</sup>

Based on Qur’ānic evidence, it is generally believed that the **angels and the prophets** will bear witness on behalf of individuals and entire communities, respectively (Q 2:143; 16:89). More specifically, al-Ghazālī indicates that God permits the scholars (*‘ulamā*) at some point during judgement to intercede for their virtuous neighbors and brethren. This is the time at which the scholars will “order an angel to call out among the people” to individually announce a scholar’s intercession for those who had helped him on earth to ease his harsh living conditions.<sup>81</sup> However, on the Day of Resurrection, as al-Muḥāsibī specifies, the angels will cover themselves with their wings despite their huge bodies. They will humble themselves and submit to their Lord.<sup>82</sup> Gabriel, as al-Muḥāsibī also notes, will be called by God on Judgement Day to “fetch hellfire”:

<sup>78</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 64; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 53-54.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Umar Sulaymān al-Ashqar, *‘Ālam al-malā’ika al-abrār*, Kuwait: Maktabat al-Falāḥ 1403/1983, 18, which refers to “some scholars” (*ba’d al-‘ulamā*), without providing a reference for this statement. A search on the Internet, however, reveals that there are (non-academic) websites claiming that the expressions *raqīb* and *‘atīd* are names of angels.

<sup>80</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 96-97; al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 80.

<sup>81</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 88; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 75.

<sup>82</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 158; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 31.

ثم نادى [الله]: يا جبريل، ائتني بالنار، فتوهما وقد أتى جبريل فقال لها: يا حتم، أجيبي ... فتوهما حين اضطربت وفارت ونارت. ونظرت إلى الخلائق من بُعد مكانها .... وجذبت خزائنها متوثبة على الخلائق غضباً لغضب ربه على من خالف أمره وعصاه.<sup>83</sup>

Then, God demands: “Gabriel, bring me Hell-fire!” Imagine it, when Gabriel will come and say to it: “Oh Hell, comply!” ... So, imagine both of them when Hell will start to quiver, to gush copiously, and to flame up; and it will look at the creatures from afar; ... it will drag its keepers, jumping up onto the creatures, in fury against those who disobeyed His orders and sinned.

After God passes judgement on all the disobedient and wrongdoers, they are pushed by unnamed divine agents into the vaults of hell. Only the believers, the Muslims, the doers of the good work, the knowers of the Truth, the affirmers of Revelation, the martyrs, the righteous, and the messengers remain at the place of resurrection, al-Ghazālī writes.<sup>84</sup> This is also the time at which a giant unnamed angel is revealed to them to the left of the Throne. He pretends to be the Lord, but the people will remain steadfast and not give up their belief in God. Then, another, even more gigantic, angel appears on the right side of the Throne, pretending to be the Lord. But, again, the people will adhere to their belief in God until the Lord himself appears to them and allows them to pass over the Bridge (or pathway) that spans hell (*ṣirāt al-jahīm*), set up for the faithful to reach paradise.<sup>85</sup>

The idea is evoked that, on that Day of Reckoning (*yawm al-ḥisāb*, Q 38:16, 26, 53; 40:27), God will command that heavenly agents adorn paradise and bring it near to the resurrected who await judgement. God will likewise order “a group of divine guardians” to bring hell near, a hell “which walks on four legs and is bound by seventy thousand reins,” as al-Ghazālī tells his readers.<sup>86</sup>

It must be stressed that several heavenly agents and actions mentioned in the Qurʾān are entirely absent from the manuals of al-Muḥāsibī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qayyim. These include, for example, **Riḍwān** (“Good-pleasure,” Q 13:23-24), the angelic Keeper of the Gates to Paradise who welcomes the pious at the gardens of perpetual bliss. Likewise, **Mālik** (Q 43:77), the “Possessor” or Keeper of Hell, who is traditionally believed to be an angel,<sup>87</sup> is not mentioned by any of the three au-

<sup>83</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 161; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 43-44.

<sup>84</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 81; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 70.

<sup>85</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 81; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 71.

<sup>86</sup> al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 67; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 61. In spite of its reins, hell will break free and storm, “clattering and thundering and moaning,” towards the crowd of people at the place of judgement. Everybody will fall on their knees, even the messengers. The Prophet Muḥammad alone will, by the command of God, seize hell by its halter and command it to retreat.

al-Ghazālī, “al-Durrah,” 67-68; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 61-62.

<sup>87</sup> Mālik is the one telling the wicked who appeal to him that they must remain in Hell because “they abhorred the truth when the truth was brought to them,” and who thus be-

thors. While al-Muḥāsibī briefly mentions the “keepers” (*kbuzzān*) of Hell-fire,<sup>88</sup> the three authors otherwise appear to make no explicit reference to the “harsh, terrible angels” (Q 66:6), nineteen in number, who guard Hell-fire, God having made their number “a test for the disbelievers” (Q 74:30-31). Nor do they refer to the Qur’ānic idea that the angels shall enter Paradise “from every gate” (Q 13:23-24).<sup>89</sup> However, since the manuals under review here expressly deal with eschatological issues relating to death in this world, the grave, and resurrection in the hereafter, we should not be surprised to find that topics that are related to the abodes of final confinement in the hereafter fall outside the thematic scope of these accounts.

### 6 *Additional characteristics of angels*

Al-Muḥāsibī also provides a few physical descriptions of (nameless) angels. Angels are said, for example, to move fast and to have “large bodies and loud voices” (*bi-kabīr ajsāmihim wa-bawḥl aṣwātihim*).<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, they have hands with palms that feel harsh when they put them on the person’s upper arms while taking him or her to the place of divine judgement.<sup>91</sup> Angels move quickly, setting off “at a fast pace” with the person on the way to judgement.<sup>92</sup>

In terms of their duties, angels cause horror and terror in the people waiting for Judgement.<sup>93</sup> They drag people to the place of judgement and loudly announce God’s ruling before all creation. In the case of a believer, they will declare: “This is so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, he will be blessed today and will never be wretched again.” In the case of a disbeliever (*kāfir*) or hypocrite (*munāfiq*), they will proclaim: “This is so-and-so, the son of so-and-so, today he will be wretched and will never feel happy again.”<sup>94</sup> What is more, angels will humiliate the disbeliever and sinner because he pretended in this world to be a good person, when he was not.<sup>95</sup> To the houses of the believer and blessed in paradise, they will bring gifts

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came known in Islamic tradition as the “Keepers of Hellfire,” assisted by 19 mysterious Guards of Hell, the *zabāniyah*. Cf. Q 43:77 and 96:18.

<sup>88</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 161. See also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 44.

<sup>89</sup> With the salutation: “Peace be with you, because you have remained steadfast. What an excellent reward is this [final] home of yours!” (Q 13:24).

<sup>90</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 157; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 29.

<sup>91</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 166; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 63.

<sup>92</sup> For upper arms, the Arabic text has *ḍabīʿuka*, which looks like a misspelling of *ḍabʿaika*, “your two upper arms.” Cf. al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 166; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 63.

<sup>93</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 165; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 60-61.

<sup>94</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 165, 170, 172; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 60, 77, 86-87.

<sup>95</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, “al-Tawahhum,” 172; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 89.

and presents.<sup>96</sup> The angels also humble themselves and submit to their Lord in front of Him.<sup>97</sup>

Al-Ghazali states that the angels may appear to humans in ways that are different from their appearance in their own angelic world; they will appear to them in ways that accord with the extent of the respective human's degree of understanding.<sup>98</sup> The appearance of angels seems to resemble that of humans, as they are described on several occasions as having hands.<sup>99</sup> Specific mention is made of two of the angels being black,<sup>100</sup> namely Munkar and Nakir, which prompts the question of whether this implies that all other angels are white. Angels are also said to have prostrated themselves before Adam when he still lived in Paradise, before he disobeyed his Lord and was expelled from the Garden.<sup>101</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah adds to this the notion that there are angels who live in the heavens "in throngs" (coll.: *mala'*).<sup>102</sup> They are "creatures like the *jinn*," who may live with humans on the earth; and they fought with the believers [at Badr] and "struck down the disbelievers with whips" (*taḍribu al-kuffār bi-l-siyāt*) and shouted at them (*taṣīḥu bihim*). However, the Muslims did not see or hear them.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, when a servant of God supplicates for his dead brother, an angel will take the supplication to the dead in the grave, and the angel will say, "You, owner of this strange grave! Here is a gift from a brother who feels compassion for you!"<sup>104</sup> Angels were created prior to the *jinn* and humans.<sup>105</sup> They need no physical bodies to carry out their duties,<sup>106</sup> and they roam all the physical and celestial worlds as they bring glad tidings not only to the dying and the dead in the grave, but also to those in the hereafter.<sup>107</sup>

## 7 Concluding remarks

Authoritative Muslim writers on eschatology such as al-Muḥāsibī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah make it quite clear that angels are integral parts of, and active participants in, Islam's end-time scenarios. In fact, their vivid and highly imaginative descriptions of the angels' activities are central topics in their writings. While the three authors examined in the present study make it unequivocally clear

<sup>96</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, "al-Tawahhum," 189; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 151.

<sup>97</sup> al-Muḥāsibī, "al-Tawahhum," 158; see also al-Muḥāsibī, *Visualization*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 4; al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 21.

<sup>99</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 7; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 23.

<sup>100</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 23; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 33.

<sup>101</sup> al-Ghazālī, "al-Durrah," 37; see also al-Ghazālī, *The Pearl*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 41; Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul's Journey*, 7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 71; see also Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul's Journey*, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 90; Ibn Qayyim, *The Soul's Journey*, 33.

<sup>105</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 148.

<sup>106</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 148.

<sup>107</sup> Ibn Qayyim, *Kitāb al-rūḥ*, 93.

that they draw for their respective views primarily upon the corresponding Qur’ānic passages, they (like others working in the Muslim eschatological tradition) also creatively use related ideas drawn from the rich pool of Near Eastern eschatological traditions.<sup>108</sup> Through resourceful adoption of relevant extra-Qur’ānic perspectives, a number of ancient Near and Middle Eastern eschatological visions have come to be incorporated into an Islamic framework and have, thus, been Islamicised. This general insight is also true more specifically when looking at the images of heavenly agents carrying out the work of their eschatological functions.

Second, the Arabic eschatological texts surveyed here clearly reemphasise the Islamic idea that the primary function of angels is to serve God as messengers and agents and, thus, to carry out His will. As in Judaism and in Christianity, angels in Islam are mediators between the known physical world of humankind and the unknown, celestial world of the divine. Moreover, the angels are privileged to move freely between these two realms.

Angels have a wide range of purposes and duties within this framework, as al-Muḥāsibī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah emphasise in their works by providing detailed and intensely vivid descriptions of these tasks. This can be seen, for example, in the case of al-Amin, an angel who accompanies the soul on its initial trip to heaven before it is returned to its body for burial. Al-Amin is identified as the angel Ṣaṣā’il, who is said to escort the soul of the believer, and the angel Daqyā’il, who is designated as the escort of the soul of the disbeliever.

Depicting the acceptance of the soul into heaven, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah names Gabriel, “the Angel of Mercy,” as the angel entrusted with the soul’s journey through the seven heavens up to the Throne of God, before the soul is taken back to its body in the grave. Gabriel, well-known in the Muslim tradition as the messenger sent by God to communicate the Qur’ānic revelation to Muḥammad, is portrayed in these eschatological writings as the soul’s constant companion, guide, and cognitive intermediary on its journey through heaven. Indeed, the eschatological functions and images associated with Gabriel also bring to mind the vital role he is assigned in the story of Muḥammad’s *miʿrāj*, or ascension to heaven, as depicted in Islamic historical and biographical literature.<sup>109</sup> Yet one may also, in this context, think of a more general religious concept, according to which Gabriel often acts together with Michael, the angel who is said to provide nourishment for body and soul in this world, and who is also given the role of transcendental Rewarder of good deeds. Thus, in the Muslim religious and eschatological traditions, Gabriel and Michael play a prominent role as they offer dogmatic instruction to

<sup>108</sup> See for the more general picture my articles “«Gepriesen sei der, der seinen Diener bei Nacht reisen ließ» (Koran 17:1): Paradiesvorstellungen und Himmelsreisen im Islam – Grundfesten des Glaubens und literarische Topoi“, in: *Jenseitsreisen: ERANOS 2009 und 2010*, Erik Hornung, Andreas Schweizer, eds., Basel: Schwabe 2011, 15-56 and “«God Disdains Not to Strike a Simile» (Q 2:26).”

<sup>109</sup> See also Webb, “Angel,” 91.

believers about the configuration and significance of the world beyond death and beyond human sensory perception.

Furthermore, as in the Bible, angels in the Qurʾān and the Muslim eschatological literature act almost exclusively within the framework established by God's omnipotence. They have no free will, something that is as true when they serve as God's agents of interrogation and punishment as it is when they act benevolently. ʿIzrāʾīl, the Angel of Death, mentioned in the Bible on more than one occasion,<sup>110</sup> is portrayed in the Muslim literature as a frightening being of immense power. Through his divinely mandated duty of seizing souls at the point of death, he symbolises in Islam the universal religious idea that no one can escape his or her mortal fate.<sup>111</sup> This idea finds its expression in, for example, the Muslim notion of the Angel of Death's visitation at the deathbed, accompanied by other angelic beings and visionary guides, or by ugly demons. Likewise, Munkar and Nakir, the Angels of Punishment, interrogate the deceased in the tomb with questions about the state and seriousness of his faith and punish them for their failings. However, this 'trial in the grave' does not replace Divine Judgement or render it superfluous. Instead, it presents a preliminary solution to a human mind that might wonder at the perplexing ideas of death, resurrection, judgement, and eternal life, and at the temporal gap between the individual human death and collective divine judgement.<sup>112</sup> It is not, therefore, surprising that Muslim ideas of this kind reverberate and further develop eschatological thoughts known from other monotheistic religions, including those concerning the function and image of the Angel of Death in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic texts. Indeed, the Muslim idea of the examination and punishment of the dead in their tombs has striking parallels in certain Christian and Jewish sources (Hebr.: *ḥibbūt ha-keber*, lit. "the beating of the grave").<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, as the Dutch Orientalist Arent Jan Wensinck (1882-1993) observed, certain of these Jewish ideas seem to belong to the "post-Islamic period," as he calls it, thus indicating an Islamic influence on Judaism, rather than vice-versa.<sup>114</sup> Still, the narrative complexity and richness of detail evident in the respective Muslim descriptions of the eschatological roles of angels, coupled with

<sup>110</sup> For example, Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16; Isaiah 37:36.

<sup>111</sup> Christopher M. Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold: Afterlife Beliefs and Experiences in World Religions*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1992, 2010<sup>2</sup>, 86.

<sup>112</sup> For two angels of death in the Hebrew Bible, see also van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 4, 533.

<sup>113</sup> One of seven modes of judgement or of punishment that humans undergo after death, as described already by Rabbi Eliezer (c. 40-120 CE), a leading Rabbinic figure of his day. Cf. Kaufmann Kohler, "Ḥibbūt ha-Keber," 385.

<sup>114</sup> For Christian parallels, see Moreman, *Beyond the Threshold*, 44. For similar issues in Judaism, see Johann Ch. G. Bodenschatz, *Kirchliche Verfassung der heutigen Juden*, vol. 2, Erlangen: Selbstverlag 1748, 95-96; Arent J. Wensinck, Arthur S. Tritton, "Adhāb al-Ḳabr," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (*El<sup>2</sup>*), vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 1979, 186-187.

the emotional intensity that these portrayals yield, must be seen as strikingly distinctive features of Muslim eschatological writing.

Third, the eschatological texts we have examined here provide their readers with impressively detailed instruction about the activities and functions of angels and other transcendental beings in space and time. Indeed, these various angelic engagements, when taken together, help to depict an intriguing eschatological scenario, which may be summarised as follows:

*At the point of death:*

- Four angels descend to the dying person to extract his soul from the body. They “stretch out their hands” to the soul of the dying (Q 6:93-94), dragging out the believer’s soul slowly and gradually but removing the disbeliever’s soul with pressure and force.
- The Angel of Death reclaims all the souls, stabbing the heart of the dying with a spear rubbed in fiery poison so that the soul must leave the body.
- Two beautiful, sweet-smelling angels will be in command of the good soul. The Angel of Death will take the bad soul in his hand and ugly, rotten-smelling guardians of hell will grab it.
- Gabriel, the Angel of Mercy, appears to the dying person who is a believer, driving away the devils who tempt him at the point of death to give up his Muslim faith.

*The soul’s initial journey to heaven:*

- Angels will lift all the souls to the first heaven. They wrap the good soul in sublime silk, but pack the profligate soul in haircloth.
- An angel called al-Amin, “The Trustee” of the soul, will accompany the souls, both the good and the profligate, to the first heaven. The angel entrusted with the soul on this trip is *Ṣaṣa‘il* (in the case of the good soul) and *Daqyā’il* (in the case of the profligate soul).
- Gabriel will guide the good soul through all the heavens. Entry into heaven will be denied to the profligate soul and it will be sent back to earth where the guardians of hell will take charge of it. They will take it to *Sijjīn* (Q 83:7,8), a place dreadful like hell. Both the good and the bad souls will be taken back to their bodies.

*In the grave:*

- An angel named *Rūmān* visits the grave, roaming the graves in the graveyard, forcing the deceased to write down his deeds, and hanging this record around his neck.
- *Munkar* and *Nakīr*, the two Angels of Punishment will arrive, hitting the grave with their legs on both sides. They will make the dead sit up, interrogate him in the grave with questions about his faith, and cause him to see what to expect in the hereafter, whether paradise or hell.

*At resurrection and judgement:*

- The angels (except for the bearers of the Throne) will be annihilated like all other creatures before God revives them and establishes his eternal “Kingdom of the heavens and the earth.”
- A Caller – the angel Isrāfil (Raphael) or Gabriel – will exhort the dead to come out from their graves.
- The angels of the lower heaven will take care of the resurrected humans, *jinn*, and animals.
- Every angel will take responsibility for one resurrected creature and transport him or it to a new, silvery-shining earth.
- The angel will hand over the dead in groups to the place of judgement.
- The angels will form vast circles, massing in ranks behind the creatures in anticipation of judgement.
- An angel, “the summoner from whom there is no escape” (Q 20:10), will call the resurrected to the place of judgement.
- Angels will bring along to the place of judgement the heavenly record of the person’s good and evil deeds, prepared by angelic “watchers, noble recorders who know what you do” (Q 82:11-12) who have recorded the person’s lifetime, one recorder sitting at his right shoulder (recording the good deeds), and another at his left (recording the bad deeds).
- Angels will place the respective pages on the pan of the divine balance so that God can decide the fate of the person: paradise or hell.
- The angels will bear witness, along with the prophets, on behalf of individuals and entire communities; eight angels “will bear the throne of your Lord above them” (Q 69:17) and all the angels will eternally glorify God.

Fourth, as may have become clear from this list, these Muslim eschatological views emphasise the rationally defined tasks and functions of the angels, as opposed to questions regarding their appearance, nature, or substance. In this regard, the respective eschatological ideas in Islam seem to differ somewhat from those known to us from Judaism and Christianity. However, there are also a number of clear parallels among the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian eschatological views, as well as those of Ancient Egypt and the Zoroastrian faith. These parallels arise, in part at least, from the fact that several of the Arabic names of angels appear to be borrowed from Aramaic and Hebrew.<sup>115</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that in adopting the Biblical names of certain angels into the Islamic milieu, Muslim tradition also

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<sup>115</sup> This is to be noted also for the name of the Angel of Death, ‘Izrā’īl, deriving from Hebrew ‘Asri’īl; cf. Arent J. Wensinck, “‘Izrā’īl,” in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition (E<sup>2</sup>), vol. 4, Leiden: Brill 1993, 292; and Burge, *Angels*, 36-37.

embraced some of their “Biblical” characteristics.<sup>116</sup> However, while the Hebrew names of angels in the Bible have a theophoric element, such as the suffix “ēl,” that serves to underscore God’s power and authority – Gavri’el (meaning “God is my Strength”) or Mikhā’el (“Who is like God?”) – such elements are rendered meaningless to an Arabic-speaking audience. As a result, in the Islamic context these angels seem to achieve some degree of independence from God “as a named being,” as has been noted by Stephen Burge,<sup>117</sup> even though their primary purpose is to pass on His orders and act on His instructions.

Another important point remains to be made. In Islam, the angels’ significance and purpose resides much less in an evocation of God’s might and power through their theophoric names. Nevertheless, the frequently used function-formula of an angel’s name (‘the angel of so-and-so’ or the Angel of Death, for example) shifts the focus of the believer away from the angel itself and directs it toward God. The angels surround God, continuously serve, praise, and worship Him, and thus offer “a symbolic depiction that progressively gives him more royal traits”<sup>118</sup> and that emphasises His sovereign majesty in a way that is perceptible to the Muslim believer. Seen from this perspective, the images and symbols that the angels convey and represent in this cosmic framework appear like otherworldly reflections of human existence.

Last, but by no means least, in classical Muslim eschatology, angels have not only a revealing and ushering function but also a catalysing role. It is, above all, this animating and driving force of the angels in these medieval Arabic texts that brings to light a number of ethical teachings that serve as injunctions of faith for the ‘living of this life’, rather than providing mere descriptions of the ‘resurrected in a future life in the hereafter’. Among these messages, there is one that is always central to these edifying dogmatic narratives: believers are urged to re-think their ways in this life in anticipation of the serious consequences that their conduct will have for them in the next.

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<sup>116</sup> For more references concerning the respective development in the history of ideas, see Hasan El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions of the Arab world: A Guide to Motive Classification*, vol. 2, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press 1959, 36.

<sup>117</sup> Burge, *Angels*, 34-38, esp. 35.

<sup>118</sup> Pierre Grelot, *The Language of Symbolism: Biblical Theology, Semantics, and Exegesis*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers 2006, 72, 74; and Burge, *Angels*, 34-38.

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