



## The Belief in Angels in the Islamic Faith According to Said Nursî's Study in *Risale-i Nur*

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Abstract:

Said Nursî (1877–1960) is considered one of the most influential Turkish Muslim theologians of the twentieth century. In the collection of his works called *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light), among many other theological topics, he discusses angels as a problem of Islamic theology concerning the unseen world. Nursî states that the existence of angels is a certain fact that cannot be disputed or doubted by believers. It is one of the central principles of faith, without which Islamic faith would not be complete. Therefore, believing in angels is a part of the faith (*īmān*) and one of requirements for being considered a believer in God. Their existence is as certain and definite as the existence of human beings.

This paper will catalogue and analyze Nursî's writings on this topic. I will consider Nursî's views about the concept of angels and examine his interpretations about these unseen creatures by studying their relation to human beings, their duties to God, their kinds, their essence of creation, and their significance for humans. I will argue that, for Nursî, angels function as examples for certain aspects of human religious behavior. Furthermore, I will argue that angels function as connectors between the endless universe, which shows the magnitude of divine power, and the earth, inhabited by humans. This analysis of a prominent Muslim scholar's perspective on angels will introduce an Islamic view to complement the concept of angels contained in the other two Abrahamic traditions.

**Key Words:** Qur'ān, Angels, Universe, Adam, Paradise, Iblīs, Jibrīl, 'Azrāil, Isrāfīl, Mīkāil, Kirāmen Kātībīn, Munkar, Nakir, Heaven, Faith, Ḥadīth, Prophet Muhammad.

Said Nursî (1877–1960) is considered as one of the most influential Turkish Muslim theologians of the twentieth century. In the collection of his works called *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light),<sup>1</sup> among many theological topics, he discusses angels as a problem for Islamic theology regarding the unseen world. Many religions consider angels to be invisible and lovely creatures that accompany and protect people. Although organized and revealed religions regard them with esteem, materialistic ideologies, on the other hand, reject their existence.

This paper will catalogue and analyze Nursî's writings on this topic. I will consider Nursî's views about the concept of angels and examine his interpretations about these unseen creatures by studying their relation to men, their duties toward God, their kinds, their essence of creation, and their significance for humans. I will argue that, for Nursî, angels function as examples for certain aspects of human religious behavior. Furthermore, I will argue that angels function as connectors between the endless universe, which shows the magnitude of divine power, and the earth, inhabited by humans. This analysis of a prominent Muslim scholar's perspective on angels will introduce an Islamic view to complement the concept of angels contained in the other two Abrahamic traditions.

### 1.1 The Belief in Angels: One of the Principles of Faith

In his writings, Nursî cites many Qur'ānic verses regarding the existence of angels and takes these verses as the main argument for their existence. Two verses are considered central to his teaching:

Therein come down the angels and the Spirit by Allah's permission, on every errand. (97:4)

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<sup>1</sup> There are various editions of this book. This article uses Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Kaynaklı-İndeksli-Lügatlı: Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı*. Volume 1-2. İstanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2001 & 2006).



O ye who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a Fire whose fuel is Men and Stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the Commands they receive from Allah, but do (precisely) what they are commanded. (66:6)<sup>2</sup>

Based on these verses, Nursî states that the existence of angels is a certain fact that cannot be disputed or doubted by believers. It is one of the central principles of faith, without which the Islamic faith would not be complete. Therefore, the belief in angels is a part of the faith (*īmān*)<sup>3</sup> and one of requirements for being considered a believer in God.<sup>4</sup> Their existence is as certain and definite as the existence of human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Nursî emphasizes that principles of faith must first be accepted and acknowledged, and it is from that perspective and belief that we can try to understand the wisdom of these principles. Belief requires blind acceptance, which can then inspire human curiosity to investigate these principles. This reflects a general opinion among Muslim theologians that creedal issues must first be believed, and then they can become a matter of further examination.

In his writings, Nursî often argues that since humans live on the earth, they must admit that there should be creatures in the sky – the angels.<sup>6</sup> Our world (earth) is filled with inhabitants, although it is not as beautiful as the boundless sky.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, such a marvelous and infinite sky should also have occupants.

On the essence of angels, Nursî says they are pure and perfect creatures<sup>8</sup> who live everywhere around us<sup>9</sup> and are created from the light.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, they cannot oppose or object to God's orders; they obey them completely.<sup>11</sup> Like humans, angels have their own community (*ümme*) and civilization.<sup>12</sup> Yet, although they are superior creatures to humans, humans have a higher status than angels before God<sup>13</sup> because God gave the keys of paradise to humans and not to angels.<sup>14</sup> But it is up to those pure creatures to keep the order of the worldly laws in harmony by ensuring that everything works according to divine command.<sup>15</sup>

Those who believe in the existence of angels desire to be in their company. Nursî argues that this is possible through reading the Qur'ān because the Qur'ān brings angels closer to people. The Qur'ān, as a divine revelation, teaches humans about angels,<sup>16</sup> and through reading and reciting it, humans not only learn about angels but draw closer to them. Therefore, believers are encouraged to read the Qur'ān so they can be in company with these pure creatures.

Nursî highlights the fact that the belief in the existence of angels is found in Judaism and Christianity as well. The angels' presence in the scriptures of all three Abrahamic faiths is, according

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<sup>2</sup> There are many translations of the Qur'ān in English Language. In this article, I will use the translation of Yusuf Ali.

<sup>3</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 225.

<sup>4</sup> Dokuzuncu Şuā, 947.

<sup>5</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 225.

<sup>6</sup> Onuncu Risale, 1351.

<sup>7</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 226.

<sup>8</sup> Otuzuncu Lem'a, 813.

<sup>9</sup> Yirmi Altıncı Lem'a, 705.

<sup>10</sup> Birinci Makale: 2010.

<sup>11</sup> On Birinci Şuā, 982.

<sup>12</sup> Lemeāt, 334.

<sup>13</sup> Otuzuncu Lem'a, 825.

<sup>14</sup> Şemme, 1347.

<sup>15</sup> İşārātü'l-icāz, 1209.

<sup>16</sup> Yirmi Üçüncü Mektup, 479.



to Nursî, another confirmation of their existence. Nursî also asserts that the belief in the existence of angels is not limited to the Abrahamic traditions; it has been present in many other traditions and civilizations in history. He argues that such a large consensus in humankind over an extended period of time could not be a matter of error.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he wonders why materialist thinkers – Muslim and non-Muslim – deny the existence of angels but still believe in the existence of many other things that the senses cannot detect. He firmly confronts their ideas, saying that not only revealed religions but also other religions that are not revelation-based – such as indigenous and other non-monotheistic traditions – believe in the existence of angels. Materialists have no argument for their claims denying the existence of angels; therefore, he concludes, their assertions are baseless and unfounded.<sup>18</sup>

Nursî's objections to materialists who deny the existence of angels and the existence of one God is that belief in angels is not limited to monotheistic religions. It is a belief in polytheistic traditions as well. Whether people believe in one or more gods, the belief in angels was an inseparable part of their belief systems. Hence, the belief in angels is as old as the belief in God.

Nursî asserts that humans have a long history of believing in the existence of things they cannot see. For example, he refers to the reality of the New World (America). Although many people did not see it, they believed in its existence because of the reports of others.<sup>19</sup> For humans, however, the New World, being earthly rather than ethereal, was arguably easier to acknowledge than angels. People who traveled to and lived in the New World spoke and wrote of their experiences; yet the world of angels has no such correspondents. Maps and pictures of the New World gave further evidence for the existence of this unseen place; not so for the world angels inhabit.

## **1.2 The Universe and the Relationship Between the Heavens and the Earth**

Nursî cites this Qur'anic verse where God says:

Allah is He Who created seven Firmaments and of the earth a similar number. Through the midst of them (all) descends His Command: that ye may know that Allah has power over all things, and that Allah comprehends, all things in (His) Knowledge. (65:12)

In this verse, Nursî states that the earth (world) and the skies (universe, heavens) are like two different worlds. In fact, however, they are two parts of one world and are under the same authority. Both the earth and heavens are closely connected, and this connection is established through angels, who can journey with divine consent in both.<sup>20</sup> Elements such as rain, light, and heat come from the sky, and the earth would not exist or survive without those things. Divine revelations to humankind also came from the skies. These contacts and relations between two are implemented by the angels, who are comfortable in and have access to both, which are governed by one God. This world-sky connection is so systematic and frequent that even raindrops falling from the sky serve angels in their journey to the earth.<sup>21</sup>

According to Nursî, such a splendid and magnificent universe full of wonders cannot possibly be without inhabitants; these, he contends, are the angels.<sup>22</sup> The limitless and marvelous heavens would

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<sup>17</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 982.

<sup>18</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 226-27.

<sup>19</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 231; Dokuzuncu Şuâ, 947.

<sup>20</sup> Dokuzuncu Şuâ, 947.

<sup>21</sup> On Beşinci Söz, 69; Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 225.

<sup>22</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 971; Otuz Birinci Söz, 258-59.



not be complete without angels,<sup>23</sup> who are beautiful and luminous (*nūranī*) creatures of heavens.<sup>24</sup> Hence, by their presence in the heavens, they make it even more beautiful, shiny, and splendid. Despite humans' inability to witness and observe this splendour in detail,<sup>25</sup> it is certain that the skies are filled by these creatures<sup>26</sup> whose purpose is only to serve God. Maybe people cannot comprehend the reason for their existence, but it is within their capacity to believe that God does not create anything without a purpose and a plan.<sup>27</sup>

Nursî says that in this beautiful and marvelous sky, its unseen creatures sometimes clash. Heavens occasionally witness confrontations between angels and devils, which also have access to skies and the world. These clashes occur because angels guard and protect divine orders against "spy devils" who want to ascend into the heights of heavens and learn divine secrets. Some curious devils desire to hear and learn God's instructions to angels, but the angels prevent them from going to "restricted areas" in the heavens. Angels fight against the devils and either destroy them or force them to retreat without any secret information.<sup>28</sup> The angels are protectors of God's secrets and guardians of the heavenly precepts.<sup>29</sup> As God is in constant dialogue with angels by giving them new instructions,<sup>30</sup> angels have opportunities to see some secrets and mysteries about this world and the hereafter.<sup>31</sup>

### **1.3 The Creation of Adam and Dialogue with Angels**

One of the most interesting aspects about angels is their role in the creation of the first human, Adam. The creation of Adam is an important narration not only in the Qur'ān but also in the Bible. According to Abrahamic traditions, Adam is the first human. And the story of the first human is often discussed by religious scholars from monotheistic faiths. Nursî begins this discussion by examining the Qur'ānic verses about creation and asserts that the story of creation offers many lessons for the children of Adam. Nursî asserts, like many other Muslim scholars, that people should not just read the Qur'ān as a historical document that narrates stories of the past; they should learn from these stories. He remarks that in the narrative of the creation of Adam, God had a direct dialogue with angels.<sup>32</sup> He then cites the Qur'ānic verse where God informs angels that He is creating Adam, the first human being:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?- whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not." (2:30)

Nursî states that this verse demonstrates crucial information that God honored humans to the highest degree by appointing them as His vicegerent on earth. This displays that humans are higher in rank than all other creatures, including angels, even though angels serve and obey God perfectly. Being appointed as God's vicegerent on earth means that humans are in charge and responsible for leading on earth. Thus, humans should show appreciation and gratitude to God for this prominent position.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> İkinci Şuā, 863.

<sup>24</sup> Otuzuncu Lem'a, 815.

<sup>25</sup> Yedinci Şuā, 931; İkinci Şuā, 863.

<sup>26</sup> On İkinci Lem'a, 615.

<sup>27</sup> Onuncu Söz, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Yirmi Sekizinci Lem'a, 745; On Altıncı Söz, 72.

<sup>29</sup> İşārātü'l-İcāz, 1210.

<sup>30</sup> Yirminci Lem'a, 665.

<sup>31</sup> On Birinci Şuā, 961;

<sup>32</sup> Yirminci Söz, 98.

<sup>33</sup> İşārātü'l-İcāz, 1266.



God expects humans' appreciation for this honored and privileged status among all other creatures.

Nursî notes that angels did not hide their surprise and wonder upon learning that people, who would spread evil over the face of the world, could be in the charge of the earth.<sup>34</sup> According to Nursî, when God told the angels He was "creating men on the earth," He was informing them as well as testing their reaction to this extraordinary news. Nursî sees this verse as educational as well as a "sign" to humans about the necessity and importance of dialogue with others. Before creating Adam, God discusses His plans with the angels, even though it is not necessary for Him to consult or inform them about anything.<sup>35</sup> This is a clear message to humans that, before they decide to do something, they also need to consult other people instead of acting solely on their personal judgment.

The angels' response, "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?" indicates that they were surprised and also confused as to why there was a need for creating another type of creature when they were obeying God perfectly and performing their duties splendidly. Nursî reads God's answer, "I know what ye know not," as a message to angels and to humans – that His knowledge is limitless, immeasurable, and not to be compared to others'.<sup>36</sup>

Nursî concludes that people might not understand the wisdom and reason of God's actions, but they should trust that God knows what He is doing. Although the angels did not understand at first, their lack of understanding did not prevent God from creating humans and putting them in charge of the earth. It shows that the absence of knowing something does not mean that the thing does not exist. Nursî argues that this is a message to those who do not believe in God's existence: their disbelief does not disprove God's existence.<sup>37</sup>

Since the story of creation is a central concern for religious scholars, Nursî discusses it at length, emphasizing the role of angels. According to him, when God informed the angels about the creation of Adam, He also gave them some indication concerning the future relationships between angels and men. God let angels know that He was going to create Adam and that angels would have frequent contacts with humans.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, God was also testing the angels' responses about their future "neighbors"<sup>39</sup> to see if they would like or despise this competition. Nursî notes that, just as angels are subject to this divine test, it also can be done to humans. Therefore, people must be constantly alert for divine tests in which God tests their faith.

Nursî also pays attention to different forms of divine speech in God's conversation with angels. For example, when God informed the angels about Adam, He used one form of speech, and when He created Adam, He used another. To be more specific, when God said to angels that He was going to create Adam, He said, "I will create" (*innī jā'ilun*), using the singular first-person form: "I." This form shows that God does not need any assistance when it comes to the act of creation. His power is limitless, and He does not need a mediator to make whatever He desires. However, when he told the angels about the creation of Adam, God used the plural instead. At that time, God said to the angels, "When We said" (*wa idh qulnā*), instead of "When I said." To better understand the reason for these different forms of speaking, Nursî turns to another verse in which God uses the first- person plural as well.<sup>40</sup>

We have sent down to thee the Book in truth, that thou mightest judge between men, as guided by Allah. So be not (used) as an advocate by those who betray their trust. (4:105)

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 1266.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1264-66.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1264-66.

<sup>37</sup> *İşārātü'l-icâz*, 1264-66.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1266

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1267

<sup>40</sup> *İşārātü'l-icâz*, 1266-70.



By using the “We” form, God informs humans, but also angels, that in conveying news there might be someone else—a messenger—between Him and other creatures. This means that revelation is not given directly from God to creatures, but through an intermediary. For the revelation of the Qur’ān, this intermediary is the angel and the prophet.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, this form of speech indicates that angels act as a bridge between humans and God. This is a message for people to believe in angels, but it also can help them to appreciate and not be envious of the nature of angels.

Discussing the creation of Adam, Nursî continues his analysis, saying that a major theological problem arises when the angels question God about the creation of Adam. The angels asked God, “Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?” Nursî is curious to know how the angels knew that people would cause trouble in the world before Adam existed. Where could the angels have obtained the information that Adam can commit evil? According to Nursî, there are three possibilities:

1. God inspired the angels somehow regarding future events;

2. Angels learned this information from the “Preserved Tablet” (*lawh al-mahfūdh*), which is a place where the knowledge of future events is stored, and the angels had access to it and could therefore see the humans’ future deeds;

3. Angels knew that humankind was going to cause trouble because humans have free will, which allows them to act erroneously. The angels realized that free will could result not only in Adam’s obedience but also in his disobedience.<sup>42</sup>

Although angels knew of Adam’s evil side in one way or another, the angels’ knowledge was not sufficient to understand God’s wisdom regarding Adam’s creation. God did not provide them adequate knowledge to understand how this “evildoer” could be the vicegerent of the world. Therefore, God would prove to angels that despite Adam’s ability to do wrong, he is superior to the angels.<sup>43</sup>

God would test the angels, and they would fail.<sup>44</sup> Thus, they would understand their mistake and realize that their knowledge is limited and imperfect. God would test angels first and then Adam. The test concerned the knowledge of the names. God asks the angels first and then Adam, right after Adam was created. God describes this event in the Qur’ān:

And He taught Adam the nature of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: “Tell me the nature of these if ye are right.” They said: “Glory to Thee, of knowledge We have none, save what Thou Hast taught us: In truth it is Thou Who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom.” He said: “O Adam! Tell them their natures.” When he had told them, Allah said: “Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?” (2:31-33)

Adam’s knowledge is extraordinary. Despite his limited experience in the world, he possesses knowledge that angels do not have. This demonstrates his superiority to the angels. Therefore, it is clear that Adam is more worthy than the angels and deserves to be the vicegerent of God on the earth. This was the proof the angels needed to admit that Adam was superior to them.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the angels showed their respect and esteem for Adam, accepted his superiority, and prostrated themselves before him as God requested.<sup>46</sup>

Nursî also considers the dangers that Satan poses for humans as those occurred in the creation account. He explains that when the angels asked why God wanted to create Adam, it was not only

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1266.

<sup>42</sup> *İşārātü’l-İcāz*, 1266-67.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 1266-67.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1268-69.

<sup>45</sup> *İşārātü’l-İcāz*, 1270-71.

<sup>46</sup> Yirmi Dördüncü Mektup, 490.



because they were surprised but also because they were manipulated by the arrogance of Iblīs (the chief Satan). It was Iblīs who questioned God about the creation of Adam and showed great disappointment about this creation. He refused God's command to prostrate himself before Adam. Iblīs' disobedience confused the angels; nevertheless, they understood their mistake and admitted their inability to know anything more than what God gave to them. With humility and piety, the angels quickly repented for questioning God's action, and God accepted their repentance.<sup>47</sup> Nursî concludes from the story that everyone can make mistakes, but it is important to understand our errors and genuinely repent for our behavior. This is an example for human conduct since it can teach humans that, although it is okay to make choices and question God, the wisest path is to accept God's will, through faith.

From God's statement, "And He taught Adam the nature of all things," Nursî argues that, although people know all "these things" (names), the angels also have some knowledge of "these things" or possibly the majority of "these things." He notes the importance of the word *kullehā* (all of it [things]), which, he argues, shows that angels already had some knowledge but not as much as Adam had. Although the knowledge of angels have is less than humans have, their knowledge is still great.<sup>48</sup>

Nursî sees this as a pedagogical example. The divine methodology used to convince the angels is a model of how to prove our own claims about events in our lives. God does tell the angels that He is creating Adam, but He does not need to give them any proof or convince them of Adam's superiority. Instead, He tests both of them and convinces the angels in that way. These educational patterns<sup>49</sup> teach us that people should provide proof in their arguments with others rather than making claims without any evidence. Even in cases when people are not required to provide evidence to support their actions, showing evidence would make their actions acceptable and understandable in the eyes of others.

In the confusion of the angels, Nursî sees an example of the menace that comes from Satan. He warns humankind to be alert to the danger of Satan who was able to cause confusion even among the angels, and they are the ones who obey God strictly and without question. God ordered the angels and Iblīs to prostrate themselves before Adam, but Iblīs was proud and arrogant and refused. Since he did not listen to the divine ultimatum, it follows that he will not hesitate to lead humans into disobeying God; therefore, people should be constantly aware and cautious.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding the problem as to why Iblīs did not obey God's command, Nursî says Satan exercised his free will and made his choice, whereas angels do not have that ability. Therefore, they obeyed God. Since people also possess free will, they may be in danger of following Satan's lead, choosing disobedience instead of obedience to God. Moreover, because humans were given the position of the vicegerent of God and were equipped with greater knowledge than both angels and Satan, they may be tempted to pride, which could lead them to make the same mistake as Iblīs.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, humans' free will should always be kept in mind, and people must be careful not to make choices that could anger God.

In the verse, "And He taught Adam the nature of all things," Nursî finds a divine trust given to humankind by God. God taught people the nature of all things; therefore, they are confirmed as the best creatures in the universe. However, people must exert themselves to prove they are worthy of God's trust. This trust requires constant divine obedience, and the path to perfect submission is always open. God encourages people to unceasingly strive to reach the highest level of piety, thus becoming

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<sup>47</sup> İṣārātü'l-İcāz, 1270-71.

<sup>48</sup> İṣārātü'l-İcāz, 1264-71.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1269.

<sup>50</sup> Yirminci Söz, 97-98.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 97-98.



worthy of their mission as vicegerents of God in the world.<sup>52</sup>

While on the path to reaching perfection, people should be aware of a constant hidden threat. Satan manipulated Adam in paradise; Adam listened to him and ruined the divine order. Therefore, Nursî asserts, God reminds humans that although they are God's vicegerent in the world, they can still be weak and misled like their father, Adam.<sup>53</sup> Humans need to constantly evaluate their actions to make sure they are acting in harmony with God's will. Humility helps combat arrogance and egotism.

Nursî explains one difference between angels and humans. According to him, the angels' situations do not change and are always fixed; they can be neither better nor worse. They cannot even switch their duties because their task is that for which they were created.<sup>54</sup> Nursî then explains that people have free will; they can choose to do good or evil. Therefore, people's situations are variable, unlike the angels'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, humans should cherish this freedom but also repent of their sins and seek to be closer to God. Free will enables humans to sin, whereas angels cannot sin but only obey God's commands.<sup>56</sup>

#### **1.4 Types of Angels' Duties**

Nursî explains the different types of angels<sup>57</sup> in terms of the various duties that they perform. He also asserts that these angels do not act alone but have their leaders who guide them in their tasks.<sup>58</sup> According to him, the most important angel is Mikāil (Michael), who is in charge of sustaining people.<sup>59</sup> He is also responsible for watching over all other proceedings in the universe.<sup>60</sup> The other chief angels are Jibrīl (Gabriel) and 'Azrāil (Azriel), and they have assistants to help them perform their momentous duties.<sup>61</sup> For example, 'Azrāil, the angel who takes people's lives does not perform this duty alone but has other angels who assist him in this duty. Nursî supports this view using the Qur'ānic verse where God uses the plural for the angels who take people's lives:

By the (angels) who tear out (the souls of the wicked) with violence; By those who gently draw out (the souls of the blessed). (79: 1-2)<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the possibility that God's use of the plural indicates the existence of multiple angels who take people's lives, Nursî says it is possible that there could also be one angel with thousands of heads. Therefore, they can be on duty in many places at the same time. Either of these possibilities can explain why many people can die at the same time in different places: 'Azrāil is not alone and has helpers, or, with thousands of heads, he can be at many places at the same time.<sup>63</sup>

All other angels are divided according to their duties into groups such as *Malak al-Biḥār* (Angels of Seas), *Malak al-Jibāl* (Angels of Heights), and *Malak al-Amtār* (Angels of Rain).<sup>64</sup> They have

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>53</sup> Yirminci Söz, 106.

<sup>54</sup> On İkinci Mektup, 365.

<sup>55</sup> On Üçüncü Lem'a, 619.

<sup>56</sup> Yirmi Dokuzuncu Söz, 228.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>61</sup> Birinci Makale, 2002; İşarätü'l-İcâz, 1265.

<sup>62</sup> Yirmi Sekizinci Mektup, 515.

<sup>63</sup> Yirmis Sekizinci Mektup, 515.

<sup>64</sup> Birinci Makale, 2002; İşarätü'l-İcâz, 1265.



distinctive duties and responsibilities, and they perform perfectly what is ordered of them. Everything in the humans' environment is also a place where angels exist and act. Another important angel is Isrāfil, who will blow the trumpet before the Day of the Judgment as a sign of the annihilation of the entire universe. All people who have lived in the world since its beginning will start gathering to be questioned about their deeds in the world.<sup>65</sup> Once he is called by God, Isrāfil will come immediately, together with his assistants, prepared to do his duty. He will not question why God is destroying the universe. God describes this in the Qur'ān:

And among His Signs is this that heaven and earth stand by His Command: then when He calls you, by a single call, from the earth, behold, ye (straightway) come forth. (30:25)

Nursî states that this verse indicates that people should always remember that everything comes to an end – not only personal life, but the earth itself and the universe. People should be prepared for this final end and accept it without any hesitation, as readily as Isrāfil does. Therefore, they need to be prepared with their good deeds and to learn the full obedience demonstrated by Isrāfil, whose obedience to the divine command should be an example for humans.<sup>66</sup>

Nursî argues that angels can move very quickly from one place to another because they have wings and can fly. This is how they check on whether everything is in order. This is based on the Qur'ānic verse in which God says:

Praise be to Allah, Who created (out of nothing) the heavens and the earth, Who made the angels, messengers with wings,- two, or three, or four (pairs): He adds to Creation as He pleases: for Allah has power over all things. (35:1)<sup>67</sup>

Interpreting this verse to support his claim that angels have wings, Nursî also highlights, based on the verse above, the fact that angels live in groups instead of living alone. This is not only a point of information about angels, according to Nursî; it tells the Muslim community that, just as angels live in groups and are organized, they also should live in communities and not live separately and alone. By living in groups, people can help each other in correcting their actions through observing and directing one another.

Nursî claims that angels convey a divine message to alert people when they do wrong. Hence, when God wants to warn people to be cognizant of their actions, it is angels who alert people so they become thus aware and correct their actions. For example, thunder and lightning in the sky are produced by angels and should be understood as a warning to recall the divine power. This warning should cause people to be frightened and to assess their behavior to ensure they are acting in accord with the laws of God.<sup>68</sup>

### **1.5 Angels: Friends and Guardians of Prophets**

Nursî addresses the question of the visibility of angels by humans. He says that God sometimes sent His angel Jibrīl – who was in charge of bringing the revelations to the Prophet Muhammad – in the form of a human being. At times, Jibrīl would come to the Prophet in the form of Dihye, one of the Prophet's companions.<sup>69</sup> At those times, the Prophet Muhammad and those companions present during such visits were able to see Jibrīl<sup>70</sup> in Dihye's image.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> On Birinci Şuā, 958.

<sup>66</sup> On Birinci Şuā, 959.

<sup>67</sup> Yirmi Beşinci Söz, 194-95.

<sup>68</sup> İşārātü'l-icāz, 1211.

<sup>69</sup> On Beşinci Mektup, 372; On Dokuzuncu Mektup, 427.

<sup>70</sup> Yedinci Şuā, 905.

<sup>71</sup> On Dokuzuncu Mektup, 426-27.



Related to this, there were particular cases when some other people saw an angel. For example, Hamza, Muhammad's uncle, asked the Prophet Muhammad if he could see Jibrīl. At Muhammad's request, God fulfilled Hamza's wish, and he saw Jibrīl in the Ka'ba. From this story, Nursī concludes that seeing angels has consequences: Hamza loses consciousness and falls down. This shows that angels are different creatures: usually, people cannot see them as they really are, even though they can see us.<sup>72</sup>

Nursī also talks about the special relationship between angels and God's prophets. He asserts that angels not only brought revelations to the prophets but also gave them moral and psychological support, such as assuring them that they were not alone in their challenging mission. Angels showed the prophets that they were under the continuous protection of God's guardians, who will support them in their hardships during their prophetic assignments.

Angels informed and alerted the prophets about any plot or danger that may be planned against them. Nursī sees this protective role of angels as necessary for humans as well. He states that people who defended and supported the prophets are also included in the same honorable line as the angels and are honored by God,<sup>73</sup> who says in the Qur'an:

If ye two turn in repentance to Him, your hearts are indeed so inclined; But if ye back up each other against him, truly Allah is his Protector, and Gabriel, and (every) righteous one among those who believe,- and furthermore, the angels - will back (him) up. (66:4).

Speaking about the prophets and angels, Nursī pays particular attention to the Prophet Muhammad. He argues that the Prophet Muhammad is more exalted than all the angels, and his soul is much cleaner and brighter than the light from which the angels are created.<sup>74</sup> As an example of this high ranking, Nursī asserts that Muhammad was privileged by being allowed to ascend to heaven, where he was able to visit the angels, see their civilization,<sup>75</sup> and converse with them. He was allowed to do this to the exclusion of all other creatures.

The angels did not even leave the Prophet Muhammad to fend for himself on the battlefield. They were with him, giving him courage and guarding him from dangers. In the first battle between Muhammad's followers and his enemies at Badr, God sent five thousand angels to help Muhammad's army. As a result of this divine assistance, Muhammad was victorious, despite having fewer soldiers than his opponents. These angels who participated in the battle are called *Aṣḥāb al-Badr* (those who participated in the Battle of Badr), and they have a much higher rank than the angels who did not participate. This parallels the Islamic tradition that views people who participated in this battle as being more praiseworthy than those who did not.<sup>76</sup>

Nursī reports a *Ḥadīth* from the collection of Bukhārī that relates that, in another battle, the Battle of Uhūd, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, Sa'd Abī Waqqās, claimed that he saw two guardians around the Prophet Muhammad wearing white clothes. Later, they learned that these two guardians were the angels Jibrīl and Mikāil. These angels are considered to be the leaders of all the angels, and God sent them to the Prophet to give him the message not to be worried about his opponents.<sup>77</sup>

Discussing the importance of the prophecy of Muhammad and the angels, Nursī says that the Prophet Muhammad's message was not limited to people but was broader: it included the angels as

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>73</sup> On Beşinci Söz, 70-71.

<sup>74</sup> Otuz Birinci Söz, 256.

<sup>75</sup> Otuz Birinci Söz, 259; Lemeāt, 321; Yirmi Beşinci Söz, 194; Hakikat Çekirdekleri, 571.

<sup>76</sup> On Dokuzuncu Mektup, 427; Onuncu Risale, 1351.

<sup>77</sup> On Dokuzuncu Mektup, 427.



well. This demonstrates another particular feature of the prophets that other people do not possess: prophets can communicate easily with different creatures.<sup>78</sup> Nursî concludes that since prophets can teach even angels, who are perfect creatures, all people need to learn from the prophets.

Nursî says angels had a special relationship with the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, they constantly praised, recited salutations, and sent blessings (*ṣalawāt*) upon him. This can be seen as an example for humans in that they also need to constantly praise and send blessings to the Prophet Muhammad. Although the angels are unable to sin but utter praises for the Prophet, humans, with their ability to sin, should praise and recite salutations for the Prophet Muhammad even more.<sup>79</sup> Thus, by praising the Prophet, people show their appreciation for his lifelong struggle.

### **1.6 The Angels' Remembering and Praising God (*Dhikr*)**

Everything that is created in the universe is constantly remembering, recollecting, and referring to God (*dhikr*) by thanking Him for its existence. God says in the Qur'ān:

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory: there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; And yet ye understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbear, Most Forgiving! (17:44)

Since everything in heaven praises God, and angels usually reside in heaven, they also praise and glorify God continuously. This example of the inhabitants of skies should be an example that the inhabitants of earth, humans, should also follow. Although they are not vicegerents, angels are important examples for humans to follow. Though humans are ranked higher than the angels, they need to thank God for their prestigious position as well.<sup>80</sup> Nursî emphasizes that recollecting God helps people to remember and better appreciate and understand their mission on earth; recollection will purify people's hearts and make them better servants of God.

Discussing the importance of remembrance (*dhikr*) in Islamic tradition and in connection to angels, Nursî says that since angels do not eat or drink, their food is the remembrance and recollection of God. Angels cannot exist without glorifying God.<sup>81</sup> To illustrate, Nursî uses another verse from the Qur'ān regarding glorifying God:

Seest thou not that to Allah bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth,- the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among mankind? But a great number are (also) such as are fit for Punishment: and such as Allah shall disgrace,- None can raise to honour: for Allah carries out all that He wills. (22:18)

Discussing the verse above, Nursî warns people that humans are the only ones who do not glorify God as they should; everything else in the universe praises Him appropriately. Hence, humans should take care that they do not break the beauty of the universe by neglecting the important act of being grateful to God for all the blessings He gave to them. The divine command to remember God is part of God's law in the universe, and people should join in and not absent themselves from such a noble and honorable task.<sup>82</sup>

Nursî is very concerned about human forgetfulness and believes that forgetfulness leads to straying from the divine path. Therefore, he exhorts men to think about the way the angels praise God. People should reflect and ask themselves why the angels praise and ask God's forgiveness when they cannot commit any sin. Such reflections should lead them to realize that they are in greater need of

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<sup>78</sup> On Dokuzuncu Mektup, 447.

<sup>79</sup> Yirmi Dördüncü Mektup, 488.

<sup>80</sup> On Dördüncü Söz, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Yirmi Dördüncü Söz, 154.

<sup>82</sup> Yirmi Dördüncü Söz, 153-57.



forgiveness since they are constantly vulnerable to manipulation by their passions and desires. The angels' praise of God should be an example for people as to how important it is to constantly remember God.<sup>83</sup>

By highlighting the importance of remembering God, as discussed above, Nursî says that angels can have many heads, maybe forty thousand or hundreds of thousands of heads<sup>84</sup> and that every head can have forty thousand tongues and that every tongue can glorify God forty thousand times.<sup>85</sup> This statement shows both how obedient and submissive angels are to God and also signals to men the significance of remembering God (*dhikr*). Remembering God should be conducted not only through mandatory prayer at specific times; rather, this remembrance should be constant throughout all activities of everyday life. If people are constantly remembering Him, they will be able to control their actions, purify themselves, and reach a high level where God will be pleased with them. Remembering God is an expression of loving Him and an expression of their wishes to constantly be with Him.

### **1.7 The Advantage of Believing in Angels**

Nursî says that belief in angels is not only a requirement of faith but also psychologically beneficial for human beings. For example, loving 'Azrâil, the angel who takes human lives<sup>86</sup> – otherwise known as the Angel of Death – helps people not to be frightened of dying. Their souls are the most valuable things that people possess, and they want to be sure that when they die, they will place their souls in trustworthy hands.<sup>87</sup> Who can be more trustworthy than the angel 'Azrâil, who eases people's concerns so they can entrust their souls to him with full confidence and faith?

Loving death and not being fearful of 'Azrâil is a prevalent approach among the Muslim mystics (*şūfîs*). It is a part of their spiritual journey; therefore, those who have no fear of death can be compared to devoted and pious mystics. Nursî explains that 'Azrâil, being aware of his difficult task, told God that people would hate him because, by taking their souls, he would end their lives. But God consoled 'Azrâil by saying that He would give sickness and other calamities to humans so they would not hate death but instead consider it a mercy. Nursî also says that not all people can understand this divine secret and the wisdom and beauty of death.<sup>88</sup>

Nursî does not say anything here about people who die as the result of illness or an accident. He only asserts the need for trust that people should have in surrendering their souls to one of the most important angels of God.<sup>89</sup> Apart from a strong faith in God, it seems that Nursî does not provide any good argument for willingly and without hesitation letting the angel perform his duty. The desire to live is strong, and the fear of death is always present among people.

Discussing the benefits in believing in the existence of angels, Nursî discusses another value by giving an example of a type of angels known as *Kirāmen Kātibîn* (Honorable Scribes).<sup>90</sup> These angels are constantly with human beings, and their task is to record people's deeds. Continuously having such observers makes people careful about committing sinful acts. According to popular Islamic beliefs, one angel sits on a person's right shoulder and the other on the left, recording their actions (bad and

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<sup>83</sup> Onuncu Risale, 1351.

<sup>84</sup> İkinci Şuâ, 851.

<sup>85</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 981; On Dördüncü Söz, 63.

<sup>86</sup> Otuzuncu Lem'a, 813.

<sup>87</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 979.

<sup>88</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 980-81.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 980-981.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 979.



good).<sup>91</sup> Although God is capable of checking people's deeds without assistance, when people know that there are additional "watchers" constantly following them and recording their deeds, they are more careful about what they do. Apart from these "watcher" angels, Nursî reminds people that there are also two angels, Munkar and Nakir (the Denied and the Denier), who interrogate people in the grave when they die. These two angels ask people various questions regarding their beliefs and what they did while on earth.<sup>92</sup>

Nursî affirms that the belief in angels has positive psychological effects because it gives people bliss, comfort, and happiness.<sup>93</sup> Believing in angels provides security and relief. There are moments in people's lives when they may be far from their loved ones (physically or psychologically), and at these times, believing that these pure and perfect creatures – obedient servants who always glorify God – are there with them and that they are not alone can help them worry less.<sup>94</sup>

Nursî provides an example of the benefit of believing in angels from his own experience. He says that he once received news of the death of two very religious and pious relatives. In the beginning, he was depressed about their loss, but then, when he thought about it a little more, he became content. Knowing that these two good people were in the company of angels gave him comfort. He provides another example. When an innocent little boy's brother dies, a friend comforts him, telling him not to worry because his brother is now in heaven, flying with with angels. Just as this little boy's sorrow would be eased by this good news, so Nursî felt peace and harmony knowing that his good relatives were with the angels, far from the worries of this world.<sup>95</sup>

In his writings about angels, Nursî repeatedly states that knowing about the existence of angels is essential for people because it reminds them that they have to be attentive and in control of their acts. Being aware that angels are always present and recording everything that people do keeps them from doing evil. Without knowing about the presence of angels, people might forget to control their deeds, and as a result, their sins would increase.<sup>96</sup>

The existence of angels to record people's actions is also evidence of the hereafter. Since everything people do is recorded, it follows that there is a place where this record will be calculated and that people will be held responsible for their actions. If such a place did not exist, it would not be necessary to keep a record for evaluation.<sup>97</sup> Hence, knowing that one's deeds are documented means that there is a place in which people will be responsible and accountable for their behavior on the earth.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Believing in angels is an essential part of the Islamic creed. The Qur'ân and the prophetic tradition discussed this matter, and this topic attracted the attention of Muslim theologians. The idea of angels goes beyond Islamic belief; it is discussed among other monotheistic and polytheistic traditions as well. Despite a wealth of scholarship on this topic among religious scholars of many traditions, there are many mysteries about angels.

In reading Nursî's thinking about angels, the most important part is his thinking about the creation

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 963.

<sup>92</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 979; On Üçüncü Şuâ, 104-44.

<sup>93</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 981.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 978-80.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 978-80.

<sup>96</sup> On Birinci Şuâ, 963.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 961.



of Adam. He probably pays more attention to this topic because the story of God's conversation with angels, Satan, and Adam initiated many debates among Muslim theologians and mystics in particular. This awareness made Nursî investigate this fascinating story to decode some divine mysteries.

Many elements in Nursî's interpretation of angels assist scholars of Islam in understanding the general concept of angels in Islam. Of particular importance are the dialogue between God and angels and the divine wisdom of designating humans to be vicegerents of the world. Also, the discussion regarding God's use of "I" and sometimes "We" (first-person singular and plural) used in the Qur'ân can be considered very interesting not only to better understand the story of creation of Adam but also to understand other Qur'ânic verses that use the first-person singular and plural form of usage.

Nursî discusses many aspects of the angels' creation and appeals to people to believe in their existence. He provides a good deal of information regarding these creatures of the invisible world. However, his information is valuable mainly for those who already believe in their existence. Nursî's effort to convince people to believe in angels was very limited and challenging. As in other aspects of religious creeds, it remains a challenge to prove the existence of something unseen using reason only. However, Nursî tries to help people not only believe in angels but also to see them as examples and to adore them without any fear, even though one day angels will end their earthly lives.



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