



138506 - Do the angels have free will and the ability to choose? Is it possible for one of them to commit a sin and disobey their Creator?

the question

Do the angels obey Allah willingly, of their own accord? One of the brothers told me that the angels have free will and are able to choose to obey or disobey the commands of Allah, but they choose to obey Him all the time. The evidence that he quoted to explain that they have free will was verse 30 of Surat al-Baqarah. He said: The angels spoke to Allah of their own accord, without Allah commanding them to speak. Also, the hadith which says that Jibril stuffed Pharaoh's mouth full of mud is further evidence, as he said: Jibril did that because he feared that Allah's mercy might reach Pharaoh, and he was not instructed by Allah to do that. And he offered other, definitive evidence that if the angels were like puppets or robots, in this case they would not be deserving of praise. I am asking this question because Shaykh 'Umar Sulayman al-Ashqar wrote in his book about the angels that they do not have the ability to disobey Allah. Furthermore, this idea is repeated in the book of Imam as-Suyuti, *Al-Haba'ik fi Akhbar al-Mala'ik*, where he says: The angels are protected from sin, and he narrated the view that the angels do not have free will from the Sahabi 'Abdullah ibn Salam (al-Hakim: *Mustadrak as-Sahihayn*, and adh-Dhahabi agreed with him). Please can you explain which of the two views is the correct view, according to the Quran and Sunnah?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

I.

One of the pillars of belief in Allah, may He be Exalted, is believing in the angels who are close to Him.



It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah said: The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) appeared before the people one day and Jibril came to him and said: What is faith? He said: "Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, the meeting with Him, and His Messengers, and to believe in the resurrection." He said: What is Islam? He said: "Islam is to worship Allah and not associate anything with Him, to establish the prescribed prayers, to pay the obligatory zakah, and to fast Ramadan." He said: What is ihsan? He said: "It is to worship Allah as if you can see Him, for although you cannot see Him, He sees you." Narrated by al-Bukhari, 50; Muslim, 9.

See the answer to question no. [14610](#) for information on some of the beliefs about the noble angels.

II.

The angels are created by Allah, and are among His slaves. The inclination to worship Allah is naturally instilled in them. There is a great deal of evidence to that effect in the Quran and Sunnah, such as the verses in which Allah, may He be Exalted, says: {they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded} [at-Tahrim 66:6] and {They fear their Lord above them, and they do what they are commanded} [An-Nahl 16:50].

Al-Qurtubi said – after narrating the story of Harut and Marut and what was narrated about their story from the People of the Book, who said that they committed sin after Allah instilled desires in them – :

All of this is weak and is unlikely to have been narrated from Ibn `Umar or anyone else, and nothing has been soundly narrated concerning that, because this view is refuted by the fundamental Islamic belief in the angels whom Allah trusted with His revelation, and they are His envoys to His messengers: {they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded} [at-Tahrim 66:6]; { Rather, they [the angels] are [but] honored servants. They speak not until He has spoken, and they act on His Command} [Al-Anbiya' 21: 26-27]; {They glorify Him night and day, without flagging } [Al-Anbiya' 21:20].

From a rational point of view, it is possible that angels could commit sin, and could do that which



is contrary to what they are enjoined to do, and it is possible that desires could be instilled in them, because that is something that can be imagined and is within the power of Allah, may He be Exalted. Similar to that is the fear of the prophets and of the virtuous, knowledgeable close friends of Allah, but the possibility of that cannot be confirmed unless there is a sound religious text to support that, but there is no such text.

Tafsir at-Tabari, 2/52.

In other words, there is no sound text to prove that they committed sin.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The word malak (angel) gives the sense that he is a messenger who carries out the orders of someone else, so the angels have no control over anything; rather all control is in the hand of Allah, the One, the Subduer, and they carry out His commands. {They speak not until He has spoken, and they act on His Command. He knows what is before them, and what is behind them, and they cannot intercede except for him with whom He is pleased. And they stand in awe for fear of Him} [Al-Anbiya' 21:27-28]; {They fear their Lord above them, and they do what they are commanded. } [an-Nahl 16:50]; { they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded} [At-Tahrim 66:6]. They do not descend except by Allah's command, and they do not do anything except after He gives permission. Therefore they are honourable slaves of Allah; some of them stand in rows [for prayer], some of them constantly glorify Allah, and there is none among them who does not have his known station and does not go beyond it, and he is doing a task that he is commanded to do, in which he does not fall short or go beyond it to do something else. The highest in status among them are those who are with Allah, may He be Glorified; they are not too proud to worship Him, nor do they weary (of worshipping Him). They glorify Him night and day, without flagging.

Ighathat al-Lahfan, 2/127.

What supports this idea is the fact that Allah took away from them all desires, which are what prompt one to commit sin, disobey Allah and drift away.



Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

As Abu Bakr `Abd al-`Aziz – one of our companions – and others said: The angels were created with reason but no desire, the animals were created with desire but no reason, and man was created with reason and desire. If a person's reason controls his desire, he is better than the angels, but if his desire controls his reason, animals are better than him.

Majmu` al-Fatawa, 15/428, 429.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin ash-Shinqiti (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The evidence of those who say that Iblis was not originally an angel is two things, the first of which is that the angels are protected from committing the acts of disbelief that Iblis committed, as Allah, may He be Exalted, tells us about them: {they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded} [at-Tahrim 66:6] and {They speak not until He has spoken, and they act on His Command} [Al-Anbiya' 21:27].

Adwa' al-Bayan, 3/356. See also: *Majmu` Fatawa ash-Shaykh al-`Uthaymin*, 1/233.

III.

The fact that the angels are protected from committing sin does not mean that they have no freedom of choice, or that they are compelled to obey Allah without any power or choice on their part. In that case, they would be like puppets or robots, as mentioned in the question. But the honourable angels of Allah are far above being like that. Rather Allah, may He be Exalted, only mentioned their being protected from sin in the context of commending and praising them, and it is known that one who has no strength to obey and has no freedom of choice cannot be praised in such a way. Rather praise is for one who is able to do either. Among humans, for example, the prophets and messengers of Allah are protected from disbelief, lying and immoral actions, according to scholarly consensus, but that does not mean that they did not have the ability to choose to believe or disbelieve, or that they did not do what they did of belief and acts of worship and obedience by choice, or that they did not refrain from what they refrained from of disbelief



and immoral deeds by choice. Rather they did that by their own choice, and were protected from doing the opposite, because of Allah's perfect help and guidance to them in all situations.

Something similar may be said about the honourable angels: Allah, may He be Exalted, enabled them to obey Him in all situations and at all times, and He protected them from sin, but that does not mean that they had no choice in that, or that they are not to be praised for that. Similarly, the devils are deprived of divine help in all situations, so they do not choose to believe or to obey Allah, even though they have the ability to do so, and they are deserving of blame for their disbelief and disobedience, and they will be punished for choosing that and doing it.

Imam Ibn Hazm (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Some foolish people said that the angels are like the air and wind [meaning that they have no freedom of choice]. Abu Muhammad [Ibn Hazm] said:

This is a lie, and it is offensive and disrespectful, because according to the texts of the Quran and Sunnah, and the consensus of all those of different religions who believe in the angels, the angels have reason and are required to show devotion to Allah, and they are required to heed His prohibitions and carry out His commands, but air and wind are not like that, because they do not possess reason and they are not required to show devotion to Allah. Rather they are controlled and directed, and they have no choice ...

End quote from Ibn Hazm: *Al-Fasl fil-Milal wal-Ahwa' wan-Nihal*, 5/17.

Shaykh `Umar al-Ashqar (may Allah preserve him) said:

We may say that the angels are not accountable in the same sense that the sons of Adam are accountable. As for the view that they are not accountable at all, that is a view that is to be rejected, because they are required to do acts of worship and obedience: {They fear their Lord above them, and they do what they are commanded} [an-Nahl 16:50]. This verse shows that they fear their Lord, and fear is a kind of obligatory act; rather it is one of the most sublime acts of worship, as Allah says regarding them: {And they stand in awe for fear of Him} [Al-Anbiya' 21:27-28].



`Alam al-Mala'ikat al-Abrar, p. 21.

Undoubtedly accountability is something that is dependent on reason, knowledge, ability and freedom of choice. This is affirmed by consensus, as it was narrated by Imam Ibn Hazm (may Allah have mercy on him) that the angels have freedom of choice, and their choice is to obey Allah; they are subject to commands and prohibitions, and they have the ability to comply with both; and they constantly receive divine help and guidance. Therefore they do not choose any option that involves disobeying their Lord.

What indicates that, in addition to the evidence that has been mentioned and quoted above, is the following:

1.The verse {they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded} [At-Tahrim 66:6].

The sinner is not described as disobedient unless he deliberately commits the sin, and the same applies when someone fails to do what he is commanded to do. If the angels were inherently unable (to disobey Allah), Allah would not have praised them for doing what He enjoins, and He would not call what they are unable to do disobedience or sin.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The disobedient one is the one who refuses to obey the command even though he is able to comply with it. If he did not do what Allah enjoined upon him because he is unable to do it, he is not to be called disobedient. When Allah said {they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them} [At-Tahrim 66:6], this is not emphasising the fact that they are doing what they are commanded to do, because the one who is unable to obey cannot be called disobedient, and be described as doing what he is commanded. Rather Allah said: {but [they] do what they are commanded} [at-Tahrim 66:6] to highlight the fact that they are able to do what they are commanded to do, so they do not fail to do it because they are unable to do it or because they want to disobey the command. If someone is commanded to do something, the only reason he may fail to do it is one of two things: either he is not able to do it, or he is disobedient and does



not want to obey. If he is obedient and wants to obey the one who is commanding him to do something, and he has the ability do that, then what he is commanded to do will be done. This is how the angels are: they do not disobey Allah in what He commands them but do what they are commanded.

Majmu` al-Fatawa, 13/61.

2.The hadith of Ibn `Abbas, according to which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: My Lord came to me in the best image – in a dream – and said: O Muhammad. I said: Here I am, my Lord, at your service. He said: What are those on high disputing about? I said: My Lord, I do not know... this is supported by the verse in which Allah, may He be Exalted, says: {I had no knowledge of those on high when they were disputing and discussing} [Sad 38:69]. Here Allah, may He be Exalted, affirms that the angels disputed. This refers to what happened of discussion among them regarding some issues that were mentioned in the hadith, namely degrees of status and acts of expiation.

See the hadith and commentary on it in the answer to question no. [1863](#).

3.The hadith about the man who killed one hundred souls, then he repented. When he died, the angels of mercy and the angels of punishment disputed concerning him, until Allah, may He be Exalted, sent a angel to judge between them. The hadith is narrated in *As-Sahihayn* (al-Bukhari and Muslim).

See also the answer to question no. [65621](#).

Therefore the claim that the angels are like puppets or robots cannot be valid and is far-fetched and has nothing to do with reality, and it is not based on any academic proof. How sound is the description that Imam Ibn Hazm (may Allah have mercy on him) gave to this claim: that it is a foolish lie, as noted above.

Rather the angels are honoured slaves of Allah; they have freedom of choice and they do various acts of obedience and worship, even though they never disobey Allah.



IV.

With regard to the hadith of `Abdullah ibn Salam to which the questioner referred, its text is:

Bishr ibn Shaghaf narrated from `Abdullah ibn Salam, saying: We were sitting in the mosque on a Friday, and he [‘Abdullah ibn Salam] said: The greatest day of this world is Friday. On it Adam was created and on it the Hour will begin. Indeed the most honourable of creation in the sight of Allah is Abul-Qasim (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Bishr said: I said: May Allah have mercy on you, what about the angels? He looked at me and smiled, and said: O son of my brother, do you know what the angels are? The angels are a creation like the heaven, the earth, the wind, the clouds and all other creations that do not disobey Allah at all.

Narrated by al-Hakim in *Al-Mustadrak*, 4/612; and by al-Bayhaqi in *Dala’il an-Nubuwwah*, 5/485, and in *Shu`ab al-Iman*, 1/309, no. 148.

The isnad of this hadith ends with `Abdullah ibn Salam, as is clear, and it is not attributed directly to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). There is nothing in it that that definitively supports the view of one who holds a different view; rather it may support his view, and the other possibility is that what is meant is that the angels (peace be upon them) do not commit acts of disobedience; rather they carry out the commands that Allah issues to them, as the heaven and earth do. This is in accordance with what we have mentioned above, but it does not mean that the angels have no will. What we have quoted above of evidence from the Quran and Sunnah, and so on, definitively proves that the angels do have will and freedom of choice, and this is what Ibn Hazm narrated that there was consensus about.

And Allah knows best.