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## **Beliefs and Practices in Common**

The pillars of Islam are well known: belief in God, angels, the prophets, the books of revelation, and the Day of Judgement. These are among the first criteria Muslim scholars use in evaluating the orthodoxy of any movement. The concept of God is a complicated subject, and is described in some detail in chapter two. There may be some differences in both theological detail and lore relating to angels, but the basic belief is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Although Muslims accept a number of prophets unknown to Christianity and Judaism, as well as Muhammad, the basic belief in prophets as such is common to all three faiths. Although there is some disagreement about which books are true revelation, not only is the basic belief in written canons a common feature of all three faiths, but all three believe in at least the Torah or Books of Moses.

There are also details of difference regarding the Day of judgement, but it too is a feature of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Therefore we shall merely note briefly the four pillars of belief angels, prophets, books and judgement. They are not only common to all of the faiths, but they are considered fundamental in Islam. These are features of the faiths which are not only a part of belief and practice, but which also appear in the canons themselves. I shall examine a few representative Biblical texts in order to establish the fact that these four beliefs are expressed in the Bible.

Genesis 28:12. `And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.' The knowledge of the existence of angels goes back to the very beginning. Angels are even mentioned in the story of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:24). This verse expresses the role of angels in the communication between God and human-kind.

Psalm 68:17. `The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place.' The role of angels as bearers of the universe is expressed in this Psalm. This idea is found in the prophets as well, and has become a common feature of Bible visionary experience.

Psalm 91:11. `For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.' The role of

angels in relationship to people is one of divine guardianship. The invisible presence of the angels has as its role not so much the guardianship from danger (as the adversary would have it in Matthew 4:6), but the guardianship from falling into sin. The way in which we are kept is the straight and narrow way.

Psalm 103:20. `Bless the Lord, ye his angels that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word.' The role of the angels is not only to carry out the commands of God, but also to carry out His praise and worship. The continual prostration and praise of some angels is described graphically in Revelation 5:11 et al.

Psalm 104:4. `Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.' Human curiosity as to the source of angels in creation is also satisfied in the Bible. Just as humans have come from spirit and earth (Genesis 2:7), so the angels have come from spirit and fire.

Matthew 13:49. `So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just.' The role of angels on the Day of judgement is an active one in dividing the just from the unjust.

Matthew 18:10. `Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.' This warning refers to those who oppress the weak, thinking that they are invulnerable since their victims have no power. In fact, the cry of the oppressed is said to have direct access to God by the angels. The Bible would have us take this into account in our relations with others.

Matthew 26:53. `Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?' The prophets have immediate access to more than twelve legions of angels. It is only amazing that the prophets have shown so much forbearance in dealing with those who not only reject their messages but even oppresses them.

I Corinthians 11:10. `For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.' Human beings are shy in their behavior before other human beings who are visible. The Bible suggests we should be shyer in our behavior when we are alone, since at such times we are still visible to the angels.

Hebrews 1:14. `Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?' Angels are spirits sent out to do the will of God.

Revelation 1:1. `The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.' Messages are brought to the prophets by the medium of the angels.

The central feature of Islamic belief in angels relates to their role in revealing Scripture to the prophets. But the Bible also reflects Islamic belief that the angels are essentially different from human beings as

separate creations.

The Islamic idea of being shy in the presence of angels and thus avoiding bad behavior is also Biblical. The angels' action of prostration is both Biblical and Islamic. The Biblical bearing up of the chariot of God is much like the Islamic idea of angels bearing the throne or Arsh of God. All in all, the Biblical passages referring to angels are well within the Islamic configuration of belief.

Angels bring the divine revelation to certain people. Such people are called prophets. The belief in prophecy is basic to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The principle of prophethood is mentioned in the Bible many times.

`The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.' Deuteronomy 29:29.

Whether we can do as God tells us to do is a false question. Practically every story in the Bible is an illustration of the fact that God tells people to do things and holds them responsible if they do not. This is not to deny all of the ramifications of myth and history, symbol and poetry of the Bible. But it is to state a simple fact. God held Adam and Eve responsible for eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Whatever depths of metaphorical or spiritual meaning there may be in the story, it does strongly imply that they were responsible for their actions.

Again, when God told Noah to build an ark, something far beyond the possibilities of most of us, He expected Noah to build it and held him responsible. When God told Abraham to go, He expected him to do it. This is one of the obvious, incontrovertible facts of the Bible: God commands. A human being either obeys or disobeys. The human being either enjoys or suffers the consequences.

The true question is not whether we can fulfill the commandments of God, but how we can fulfill them. This text in Deuteronomy gives us the first step in how `we may do all the words of this law'. With the single possible exception of the ten commandments, all revelation has come through a prophet. Everything that is revealed is there so that we can know what to do. We cannot obey God unless we know what He is telling us to do. That is what the revelation of the prophets is for.

There is a good deal of Bible evidence for this principle. The following are some of the more important references in the Bible which show that God uses prophets in order to send His verbal revelation to humankind.

2 Kings 17:13. Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets.'

2 Chronicles 20:20. `And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth, Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem;

Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established: believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper.'

2 Chronicles 24:19. 'Yet he sent prophets to them, to bring them again unto the Lord; and they testified against them: but they would not give ear.'

Nehemiah 9:26. `Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets who testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations.'

Jeremiah 7:25, 1. 'Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them.'

Jeremiah 29:19\*. `Because they have not hearkened to my words, said the Lord, which I sent unto them by my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them; but ye would not hear, said the Lord.'

Jeremiah 35:15\*. `I have sent also unto you all my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, Return ye now every man from his evil way, and amend your doings, and go not after other gods to serve them, and ye shall dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your fathers: but ye have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto me.'

Daniel 9:10. `Neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.'

Hosea 12:10\*. `I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets.'

Amos 3:7. `Surely the Lord will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.'

Zechariah 1:4–5\*. `Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried, saying, Thus said the Lord of hosts: Turn ye now from your evil ways, and from your evil doings: but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, said the Lord.'

Zechariah 7:12. `Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts.'

Matthew 5:17. `Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.'

Acts 3:21–23. `Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will

not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

James 5: 10. `Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.' This text is extremely important, since it almost uniquely in the Bible states clearly and overtly that the example of the prophets is normative. Bible religion is one which applies the example of the prophets to all the actions and institutions of life. It is the neglect of this principle which has created an unjust and secular society.

1 Peter 1:10. `Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesized of the grace that should come unto you.'

The religion of the Bible is clearly a faith founded on the revelation of the prophets. The Bible also clearly states which prophets were true and which false. The message of the prophets is to focus attention on the commandments of God. Their purpose is to show what we should do in obedience to God. The prophet who 1) upholds the commandments of God and 2) is in agreement with the earlier prophets and 3) comes to call people to a return to obedience to God, is a true prophet.

The example and messages of the prophets can only reach later generations as they wrote or dictated the revelation in written form. The belief in sacred books is a direct and logical extension of belief in divine revelation through prophets.

In the chain of revelation from God to angels to prophets there is continuity from prophets to the sacred Scriptures, the writings of the prophets which contain the words of revelation given to them. Such writings are referred to often in the Bible. Some representative examples follow.

Matthew 22:40. `On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' The two commandments referred to here are the proclamation of the unity of God in Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and the command in Leviticus 19:18 to treat the rights of the other person with the same regard as one's own. The revelation of God thus deals with human responsibility toward God, toward others, and toward oneself. The law and the prophets in their entirety deal with these three issues.

Luke 24:44. `And he said unto them, These are the words which I speak unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.' At the time of Jesus three categories of sacred prophetic writings were already known: these are the law of Moses or the Torah, the writings of the other prophets, and the Psalms.

2 Timothy 3:16. `All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.' The three categories of scripture mentioned in Luke 24 are described here in terms of how they should be used. They can be used first of all to find out what they present as true teaching or doctrine.

This is basically the use that we have made of them here. We have tried first to find out their teaching about God, for example. But the writings can be used for reproof of wrong actions, for correction of our views, and for instruction in righteousness that is, learning what we should do and how to do it. An example of instruction in righteousness would be in our examination of the Bible texts to find out how the Bible says people should pray.

2 Peter 1:20–21. Knowing this first that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God speak as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Here the apostle notes that what is written in the writings of the prophets is not merely their opinions. He says that what they have written is a revelation from God, inspired by the Spirit of God.

Revelation 1:3. `Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.' There is a threefold blessing on people's relationships to the writings of the prophets. There is a blessing on those who read or recite the words of their writings. There is a blessing on listening to the recitation of the sacred books. Finally there is a blessing on doing what the sacred books tell people to do.

Revelation of the will of God by the means of angels speaking to prophets who write or dictate the message is of little use unless God holds human beings responsible for how they relate to what He has revealed. This is a final point of common ground between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

There is nothing more clear in the Bible than the fact that God brings all creatures into account. He brought Adam and Eve into account. He brought Cain into account for killing his brother. He brought the people of Noah's day into account, and those of Sodom and Gomorrah. He brought the Israelites into account for worshipping other gods, for rejecting the prophets, and for neglecting the example of those sent to guide them. The unity of God, the prophets, and the divine guides are the three great criteria of judgement.

The Bible abounds in overt references to the Day of Judgement. 'It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgement.' Hebrews 9:27.

Deuteronomy 32:41\*. `If I whet my glittering sword, and mine hands take hold on judgement; I will render vengeance to mine enemies, and will reward them that hate me.'

Psalm 9:7–8. `But the Lord shall endure forever: he hath prepared his throne for judgement. And he shall judge the world in righteousness; he shall minister judgement to the people in uprightness.'

Ecclesiastes 11:9. `Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth: and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgement.'

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14. `Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil.' This text points out two points in preparation for the Day of Judgement: 1) to acknowledge the one true God; 2) and to keep His commandments.

Matthew 12:36. `But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgement.' No Bible prophet speaks so much of the Day of judgement as does Jesus Christ. This text is only one example of many.

Hebrews 6:2. 'Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgement.' The author of this epistle points out that the Day of judgement is preceded by three points of readiness: 1) ablutions, or means of purifying; 2) laying on of hands, or swearing allegiance to the divinely appointed; and 3) the resurrection from the dead. All three of these are acts of divine grace, the first through the prophets, the second through the divine guides, and the third directly at the hand of the angels.

2 Peter 2:9. `The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgement to be punished.' Readiness for the Day of judgement depends on the grace of God which delivers the godly out of temptations. This grace has already been described in four points: the proclamation of the unity of God, the justice of God, God's gracious revelation through the holy prophets by the angels and preserved in the holy books, and the divine guides who exemplify the will of God in flesh and blood, in active demonstration.

2 Peter 3:7. `But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word, are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgement and perdition of ungodly men.' This text suggests that the Day of judgement is cataclysmic. It is not merely metaphorical of the condition of human responsibility. It entails a real end of the world as we know it and the beginning of another. It includes real fire.

Revelation 14:7. `Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him, for the hour of his judgement is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.'

With this verse we have a summary of what is called the everlasting gospel in verse six. It tells in one sentence what we have been discovering and uncovering up to this point. It includes first of all the acknowledgement of the one true God who made all things and is thus sovereign over all. It includes three things that we are to do in relationship to this God: 1) we are to fear Him, that is, fear to act in any way contrary to His commandments; 2) we are to give glory to Him, that is we are to live in such a way that we as creatures glorify our Creator; and 3) we are to worship Him precisely in the way that we are commanded to do in the Bible. Finally, this text points to the final aspect of the gospel that we are to live in view of the Day of judgement which is imminently upon us.

Although this final text is from the New Testament and thus not a part of the Jewish canon, the principles it expresses are common to all three Scriptural faiths. Human responsibility is an inherent principle throughout the Bible message, which comes to a pinnacle in the Day of judgement when all are finally brought to account.

Belief in angels, prophets, sacred books and the Day of judgement are fundamental to Islam. They are also beliefs which Muslims share in principle, if not in detail, with Jews and Christians. More importantly, from the point of view of this study, we have seen that all four beliefs are amply described in the Bible from a point of view which is remarkably consistent with Islamic belief.

We shall look at the first pillar of Islamic belief, the belief in God, with a little more attention.

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