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# The Tragic Story of Iblis (Satan) in the Qur'an

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## Introduction

The Qur'an describes Iblis-Satan as an important element in the cosmic fate of the human being since he asked to play the role of tempting and leading man astray in his difficult test in the world and God allowed for him. As known, he succeeded in his first attempt and caused the expulsion of Adam and his spouse from Garden. Because the duration of the divine permission expires on the Day of Resurrection, Iblis-Satan and his descendants are still on work. Therefore, man should always remain alert against his old foe and seek refuge in God against Satan's evil and enticement. This is because he constantly desires that God be denied and makes false promises to man, makes the sins attractive and produces enmity and dissension.

In brief, since Satan is permitted to deceive and entice man, he always inspires evil to man. However, his plot can exercise influence only over those whose connection with their Lord is either severed or very weak. He deserts his companions in the world and says in the afterworld final: "Behold, God promised you something that was bound to come true! I, too, held out all manner of promises to you –but I deceived you. Yet I had no power at all over you: I but called you- and you responded unto me. Hence, blame not me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to our cries, nor for you to respond to mine: for, behold, I have always refused to admit that there was any truth in your erstwhile belief that I had a share in God's divinity. ”<sup>1</sup>

This is the synopsis of the characteristics of Iblis or Satan, which only includes the progress and the end of the story. Iblis's tragic story begins with his disobedience to the command of God, "Bow down before Adam."<sup>2</sup> If the Qur'anic wordings at the beginning of the story are taken literally, there arise some theological problems because of fate and divine predestination. On the other hand, the Qur'anic verses involved are interpreted in literal sense in the Islamic exegetical literature and almost all the Muslims have perceived the passages containing the dialogues between Allah and Iblis to be a really occurred interlocution or pretended to have grasped its real meaning and nature though they have not.

### **The Dialogue between Allah and Iblis in the Qur'an**

Repeated seven times with slight differences in various chapters of the Quran, the story of Iblis begins with the Divine address to the angels "Bow down before Adam." All the angels obeyed this Divine command but Iblis defied with the command of his Lord out of vanity and arrogance.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, God asked Iblis "what has prevented you from revering Adam though I commanded you to do so?" "I am superior to him for Thou created me from blaze and him from clay", Satan replied. Henceforth, God said: "Get out of here! It is not possible for you to show arrogance over there [i.e., in your position]. Get out! Now you are a creature despised!" After this Divine rebuke, Iblis asked for permission, saying, "Give me time up to the time when the people will be resurrected." God accepts his demand: "Verily, thou shalt be among those who are granted a respite".

Whereupon Iblis says: "Now that Thou hast thwarted me, I shall most certainly lie in ambush for them all along Thy straight way, and shall most certainly fall upon them openly as well as in a manner beyond their ken, and from their right and from their left, and most of them Thou wilt find ungrateful".

Then, Allah says: "Go forth from here, disgraced and disowned! And as for such of them as follow thee- I will most certainly fill hell with you all"<sup>4</sup>

### **Some Reflections on the Dialogue**

After giving an overview of the story of Iblis in the Qur'an, I would like to discuss the problem whether this dialogue really took place or not. If we pay credit to the words of the exegetes, God and Satan really interlocuted. Moreover, the exegetes are so convinced of their belief that God spoke with Iblis that they made a great mental effort to grasp what the dialogue really means. For instance, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 606/1210) tried to answer the question that seemed to him to be important:

"No one of the grand prophets spoke with God so much as Iblis spoke with Him. On the other hand, God attached value to Moses by saying that "7/A'raf, 143)" and "4/Nisa', 164). If speaking with God means a great honor, why is this honor

granted to Iblis at the highest level? If not, why did God mention this as a token of honoring Moses?"<sup>5</sup>

Since al-Razi takes this episode as the narration of a dialogue which actually occurred, he is compelled to say the following:

“Though Adam knew Iblis very well since Iblis refused to respect him and was condemned as a result of his enmity against him, how did he believe the words of Iblis and did not take heed of the words of God Whom he had known to be his Lord and Helper? Whoever ponders this issue, he feels profoundly surprised and realizes that the tale emphasizes the following truth: However obvious and strong the proof (guide-reason) is, it provides no use till God predestinates something.”<sup>6</sup>

If the story of Iblis is literally taken, the conclusion of al-Razi will be inevitable. However, reducing the start of our experience of being tested with servitude to the arbitrary disposition of the Divine will and thus considering Iblis and Adam apparently free in terms of willing and acting but viewing them in fact as bound pawn and eventually feeling frustrated and saying “Well, what can be done if God predestinated such?” place man in the position of a miserable creation and nullify our experience of existence on the earth. Yet the truth has nothing to do with this picture. More explicitly, the *raison d'être* of our trial in worshipping and servitude should not be so simple and superficial as to be relegated to the polemic which took place between God and Iblis. Therefore, the tale/story should not be understood on literal plain. Otherwise, one cannot escape the intriguing question of Iblis which include some characteristics of the Bektashi logic:

Iblis addresses the angels: I confessed that Allah the Almighty is both the god of mine and the god of the human beings, that He is the Omniscient and the Omnipotent, that He is not questionable for His power and will, that when He wants to bring something into existence, He says “be” and it is, and that He is Wise. However, I have some questions about His wisdom. Then the angels reply: What are your questions and how many are they? Iblis numbers them seven and follows as:

1. Though God had known what I would do before He created me, why did He create me? What is the wisdom in His creation of me?
2. He created me as required by His will. Well, if, from God’s perspective, neither my obedience brings use nor my disobedience harm, why did He make it obligatory for me to know and obey Him? What is the wisdom of such an obligation?
3. He created me and held reliable. As required my reliability, I recognized His Divinity (*uluhiyyah*) and understood that He should be obeyed. So, why did He make it obligatory for me to bow down before Adam? What is the purpose of

the obligation to bow down though this brings no increase in my knowing of Him?

4. Well, He created me and made it obligatory for me to know Him in general and to bow down before Adam in particular. So, why did He condemn and ban me from Garden when I refused to bow down before Adam? Although my only sin (!) is to have said “I do not bow down before anyone save Thee”, what is the wisdom of God’s having condemned and banned me from the Garden?

5. He created me and held reliable generally and particularly. He also condemned and banned me from the Garden. Therefore, why did He allow me to enter the Garden second time and to entice Adam with my whisperings? If He banned me from entering the Garden forever, Adam would certainly feel secure on my side and live there forever. If so, what is the wisdom of this job?

6. He created me and held reliable generally and particularly. He condemned me and then allowed me to enter the Garden again. Though the account which should have been closed is between Adam and me, why did He make me haunt his descendants, a-making-haunt that I see them whence they do not see me and exert influence over them with my whispering. In return, they are able to exercise no influence over me with their power and strength. If God created men in a sound nature (*fitra*) on an ontic plain where there is no creature to deceive/entice him and they lived as completely obedient servants, this situation indeed would be wiser. If this is not the case, what is the wisdom of this job?

7. Let us take for granted that I understood and accepted all of these, i.e., His holding me reliable, His condemning and banning me from the Garden when I disobeyed Him, His allowing me to enter the Garden, His enabling me to harm Adam and making me haunt his descendants. So why did He give me respite (*muhla*) when I asked for it and why did He respond me by saying “You are among the reprieved till the pre-determined time,” when I said “Give me respite till the raising of the dead?” Given that, if God exterminated me at the moment, Adam and other people would feel a deep relief, there would remain no trace of evil in the world. The sustaining of the world depends upon an order which is full of good and beauties, what is the wisdom of this world where the evil [stemming from me] prevails?<sup>7</sup>

If the literal sense of the tale of Iblis is preferred, the only answer to these questions, which are in fact the questions of the human being, will be “As the Omnipotent God, I give no account of my actions to anyone.” Where al-Shahristani (d. 548/1153) quotes this passage, he points out that God exactly gave such a response. Undoubtedly, this response is not the response of God but that of the Ash‘arite theologians who identified God with absolute power because they hold that good and evil are known with narration/*naql* (hearing/*sam‘*-revelation/*wahy*). In this view, good and evil are established by the clarification of God. For example, if God said “adultery is good; theft is vir-

tuous”, adultery and stealing would be good very well because of this “divine prescription.” Since His power recognizes no limit, there is no casualness (wisdom, reason) in His actions. For He gives no account of His actions to anyone or there is no authority to call Him to account. For instance, He can burn a faithful person in Hell, though he deserved Paradise. Justice is not to send the person, who deserved Paradise, to Paradise; rather, justice is the action itself which arises from God. That is, whatever He does becomes justice.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, who is a strict follower of the Ash‘arite School, says just like that in the context of responding to the questions of Iblis above when commentating on the Adam tale in the Sura al-Baqara. Beginning his discussion with the words “Even if all the people in the past and the future come together and judge that good and evil are known by reason, they nonetheless cannot find a refuge to save from the doubts [voiced by Iblis],” al-Razi maintains that the only formula of wiping out such doubts lies in the response which God gave to Iblis: “I am the God with whom there is no god else and I am not called to question of what I have done.” Just as God is the Necessary Being, i.e., His existence depends upon His own existence and needs nobody else, He is independent of any cause and preponderant in His actions. Therefore, there cannot be *raison d’être* in His actions; He cannot be called to question as to why He did what and neither can He be objected. In brief, the Divinity of God cannot be weighed with the Mu‘tazilites’ scale of reason.<sup>9</sup>

This view, which can be understood from the last phrase to be the result of the effort to respond to the Mu‘tazilites, cannot be seen as reasonable and acceptable because it inculcates an image of God whose actions in the past and the future are unpredictable as well because it imposes an absolute determinism (*jabr*) and fatalism. On the contrary, good and evil are essentially known by reason. In other words, the fact that such concepts as justice, perfection or the best (*ihsan*), and virtue are good; in return, such actions as injustice, ungratefulness, the unjustly murdering of man, and lying are evil is established through rationally necessary knowledge. Saving the values from relativity by holding such a conception, the Mu‘tazilites asserted that reason and religion did not ascribe value to the actions but simply clarified what essentially and innately lies in them. Accordingly, good and evil are involved in the *ipseity* of a thing and constitute its essential quality. This is necessitated by the principle of Divine justice. This is because, according to this rule, the human being has free will; in order to use his free will in favor of good, he needs to distinguish good from evil. Besides, if the knowledge of reason related with the values should be reckoned as certain and reliable, these values should be essential to the actions. In short, anything described as good or evil is not good or evil merely because God commanded or prohibited; rather, it is so because of its inherent quality.<sup>10</sup> “Were the source (*illa*) of good or evil Divine injunction or prohibition, fairness and justice should be evil when God prohibits these two virtues. Similarly, lying and

injustice should be good when God forbade them. For the source or reason is the same in both of the cases. However, it is well known to all of us that though irreligious people (*mulhid*) are unaware of the Divine prohibition and the Prohibitor, they well know that injustice and lying are evil.<sup>11</sup>

The Mu'tazilites also holds the notion, which is included in the scope of justice, that man is the author of his actions and God recognizes for man freedom of volition. Thus, the principle of justice is intended to transfer the responsibility of man's evil actions from God to man himself. This is because the Divine justice requires the punishing of the committer of sin and calls for the rewarding of the doer of good deed. In other words, God, who is just, must remain faithful to His promise of rewarding to the believer and must realize His threat of punishment to the unbeliever. This is required by the Divine justice. However, the condition of man's responsibility and freedom in his actions are indispensable for the realization of justice. When the opposite is thought, i.e., if man's power to act freely is negated, one cannot speak of man's deserving rewarding or punishment. Moreover, God's punishment of a creation that has no free will in his actions is an obvious injustice. In short, the freedom of man and the justice of God are like two sides of a coin. To negate one of them necessarily requires the negation of the other and eventually leads to the loss of the meaning of both the human being and God.<sup>12</sup>

After all these argumentations, I would like to re-emphasize the point that the Qur'anic tale of Iblis should be taken figuratively. Pointing to the conflict between the stimuli of good and evil (*taqwa-fujur* or *khayr-sharr*) which are innate to the human nature<sup>13</sup>, this tale is composed in accordance with the cultural and intellectual settings of the first Divine address and thus has a completely symbolic and/or metaphoric character. Undoubtedly, the Qur'an is purely true and truth; yet, the truth which it presents to us can only be an appearance of the invisible truth extant in the Divine Presence or a pale shadow of it. In other terms, the Qur'anic revelation is as excellent as the perception of the human mind just as it is diseased with the shortcomings of man's language and concepts. Therefore, when addressing us, God uses such concepts as angel, who wishes good for us, and Satan, who leads on us to evil. In fact, Iblis and/or Satan is just a metaphor. We can understand what he does only by means of our psychological experiences. The story concerning Iblis's rejection to bow down before Adam can be interpreted as the metaphor of the refusal to surrender to the injunctions of reason. Therefore, Iblis is the embodiment of the obstacle which keeps man away from God and, in fact, is not other than our own sin.

Moreover, the story of Iblis is not special to the Qur'an. Similar stories are found in the Mesopotamian mythology as well as in Jewish and Christian tradition. For instance, according to the story occurring in a text of Christian culture, Michael calls on the angels to bow down before Adam. Yet Iblis claims that Adam is a naive creature and inferior to himself and refuses to bow down along

with his companions. Therefore, he and his proponents are exiled to earth. According to another Christian tale, God bestows upon Adam dominion over all the creatures. Hence, the angels bow down before him. But Iblis grows jealous of Adam and says, “in fact, they should have bowed down before me for I am composed of light and air though he is made only of soil.” Because of this insolent behavior of his, he is expelled from Paradise along with his supporters and has been called Satan and Jinnee since then.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Etymological Derivation of the Words “Iblis” and “Shaytan”**

The word “Iblis” occurs eleven times in the Qur’an.<sup>15</sup> Occurring in singular mode in all of these verses, the root of the word is disputable. To majority of the exegetes, the word is a diptote name (*ghayr munsarif*) derived from the verb “*iblas*”, which means despairing and giving up of hope.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to this view, some philologists such as Abu ‘Ubayda (d. 210/825), Ibn al-Anbari (d. 328/940) and Zajjaj (d. 311/923) claimed that the origin of the word is not Arabic.<sup>17</sup> To some Western scholars, this name derived from a word of Hebrew root which means going against, preventing or blaming. To Jeffrey Burton Russell, the word “Iblis”, which the Prophet Muhammad possibly learned from the Aramaic-speaking Christians<sup>18</sup>, is translated into Greek with the word *diabolos*, which means rival. Then it is conveyed into Latin as *diabolus*, into German as *teufel*, and into English as *devil*. This word basically means “opponent” and occurs in the form of name several times in the Old Testament<sup>19</sup>.

The Qur’an uses another name to refer sometimes to Iblis and sometimes to all the human beings and the Jinns who produce evil: *Shaytan* (pl. *Shayatin*). Some Western scholars claim that the historical and linguistic root of the word goes back to the pre-Islamic Jewish and Arab sources. Thus, the word should be of Hebrew origin in the sense of “evil” (*khabith*) and of Arabic origin in the sense of “supra-human being.”<sup>20</sup> Muslim philologists dwelled on two possibilities regarding the etymological derivation of the word *Shaytan*, which occurred more than the name *Iblis* in association with the tempting and enticement of people. According to the first, *Shaytan* derived from the word *sha-ta-na* which means being distant or far and became a proper name that means distant from good or Divine mercy. Occurring as the attribute of Satan in the Qur’an, the word *rajim*, which means “banned”, supports this view. According to the second possibility, the word derived from the root *sha-ya-ta*, meaning inflaming with the fire of fury. This view is corroborated with the Qur’anic verses that inform that Satan is created from fire. However, Majd al-Din Ibn al-Athir pointed out that the first view is more accurate.<sup>21</sup>

The concept of Satan exists in pre-Islamic Arab society. The sources drew attention to the existence of the belief among the Arabs before Islam that there are male and female Satans. In addition, in the narration known as the “Hadith of *Jassasa*”, there is spoken of a very strange creature, who is thought to be female



Satan whose body is covered with hair. Furthermore, the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period called the slaughter of animal without cutting the jugular veins “the splitting of Satan”.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that the Qur’an mentions Satan as the quality of both men and Jinns and uses it mostly in plural form suggests that it signifies rather than a creature of physical reality, an incorporeal evil powers and/or various elements and factors which produce evil. Defined by Abu ‘Ubayda as “a collective name for all the violent creatures including the species of human, animal and Jinn”, Satan is at the same time used to refer to every kind of bad character in the human being, as a hadith reads: “Jealousy is Satan; fury is Satan (*al-hasad shaytan wa al-ghadab shaytan*).”<sup>23</sup>

The following illustration of Abu Hilal al-‘Askari (d. 400/1009) points out that Satan is in fact an image of evil: “Satan is an invisible evilness. Therefore, a human producer of evil is called Satan; yet such a human being is not described as Jinnee. For the word “*Shaytan*” comprises the sense of evil whereas *Jinni* (Jinnee) includes only the sense of secrecy. So, though they say “God condemned Satan”, they do not use an expression like “God condemned Jinnee.” This is because Jinnee is a common name while Satan is an attribute.”<sup>24</sup> As some exegetes asserted that Iblis took the name “Satan” because of his disobedience, others maintained that the name “Iblis” is used in his relation with God and the name “Satan” is used in his relation with men. Therefore, Iblis and Satan refer to the same being. For example, the name of the being which disobeyed God’s injunction to bow down occurs as Iblis in the 34<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-Baqara whereas in the 36<sup>th</sup> verse of the same Sura the name of the being who played role in the expulsion of Adam and his spouse occurs as Satan. In conclusion, Iblis or Satan is objectification of the enemy perceived outside of our psyche or personification of an evil or devastating power. Though this personification has no concrete correspondence perceived by man, it is not possible to deny the ontological reality of evil. In this respect, Satan is not an outdated figure but a fact of active and constant power, which makes itself felt in the human soul.<sup>25</sup> As for the story in the Qur’an, it seems to be not more than a description of this fact in a system of mythical language.

### **The Nature of Iblis**

According to the letter of the story in the Qur’an, Iblis is a being of objective existence. However, his ontological nature is not clear. However, the 50<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura Kahf remarks that Iblis is from the Jinns. On the other hand, in all the Qur’anic passages, which contain the God-Iblis dialogues, Iblis’s failure to respect Adam is cited in association with God’s command directed to the angels. Departing from this, one can claim that Iblis was in fact an angel. Yet, if one considers the verses, which inform that Iblis is created from fire (7/A’raf 12; 38/Sad 76) and keeps in mind that the angels are innocent and meticulously obedient to the commands of God while the Jinns are morally volatile creatures, one

infers that he is not an angel. Nevertheless, though one can speak of an ontological kinship relying on the knowledge that the angels are created from light (*nur*) and the Jinns are created from fire (*nar*) –the two original Arabic words are closely related both morphologically and phonetically-, the problem remains unresolved. This is because, as pointed out by Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida, we have no proof to make a distinction between the angels and the Jinns in their essence.<sup>26</sup> The relationships between various spirits and spiritual beings are quite vague in Islam as the case in Greek-Roman philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Muslim scholars mostly think of Iblis as being from the tribe of the angels.<sup>28</sup> According to the narration ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbas, his real name is ‘*Azazil*. Though he was a grand angel with four wings in the beginning, he lost his position as a result of his rebellion against the command of God and thus was called *Shaytan*. The narrations coming from the first and second Muslim generations say that Iblis’s real name is *Haris*. He functioned as the guardian of Garden. He was the leader of the angels in charge of the sky of the world, or he was one of the Jinns dwelling on the earth and was captured and taken up to the heavens in his youth by the angels of punishment sent by God. He was appointed arbitrator or ruler over the Jinns by God and carried on his duty for one thousand years. Then he produced dissension for one thousand years among the Jinns as result of being captivated by self-importance. He sought refuge in the heavens after God sent fire exterminating the Jinns. He had remained a very faithful servant until Adam was created. He was the most industrious and knowledgeable of the angels. Therefore, he governed all the creatures between the heaven and earth. Eventually, he objected to the command of God out of his arrogance arising from these merits and privileges. So, he was exiled from the spiritual world to the earth as Satan, i.e., banned from his Lord’s mercy.<sup>29</sup>

To the scholars who believed that Iblis was an angel of high rank in the beginning, the 18<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-Kahf, which includes the knowledge “Iblis was from the Jinns”, does not contradict that his real nature was that of an angel because, Ibn Abbas relates, Iblis in fact belongs to a tribe involved in the family of angels. Called “Jinn”, this tribe is created from poisonous fire and the other angels from light.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the angels and Jinns have some kind of resemblance though their kinship is not known exactly. In addition, the phonetic and morphologic similarity between the words *nur* and *nar* also alludes to this closeness. Furthermore, the fact that the term *jinn* designates most generally “non-physical and invisible creature” signifies another common aspect of the angels and the Jinns. Due possibly to this reason, Iblis is cited in the context of the Divine address to the angels in the 34<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-Baqara.<sup>31</sup>

However, in final analysis, the Muslim scholars pointed to the distinctiveness of the Jinns from the angels and stated that the word *jinn* should be used as the name of a species which is distinct from the human beings and the angels, which

cannot be perceived by the senses, which has free will like the human beings and was made reliable to follow the Divine injunctions. As is known, the Jinns are created from the fire without smoke (blaze).<sup>32</sup> Yet, the 27<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-Hijr informs that the Jinns were created from toxic fire before the appearance of man in the realm of being. These statements led some contemporary Muslim researchers to developing several theories such that the Jinns are not more than carbon acid, rays, energy, the UFO, or microbes.<sup>33</sup>

As a matter of fact, the concept of the jinnee has maintained its existence since the Sumerian civilization up to the present time though with different appellations. Referred to in a variety of religions and cultures with many names such as *edimmu*, *utukku*, *daimon-demon*, *genius*, *kuei*, *deva*, *kara neme-yek*, *leviathan*, *dibbuk*, the Jinns constituted the subject of a very common belief among the Arabs before Islam. They believed that some stones and trees, wells and caves harbored the beings which had influence in human life. The angels and some of the Jinns constitute the good and beneficial part of the world of spirits as the Satans and some of the Jinns constitute its evil and harmful part. The pre-Islamic Arabs regard the Jinns as the deities residing on the earth and believe that many of the physical phenomena are realized by them. In addition, they forge a link of kinship between the Jinns and God and set them partners with God. They also believed that the Jinns too live in tribes and clans; they fight among them, and cause such natural phenomena as raining and storm. Furthermore, they thought that the Jinns killed men; some Jinns helped men and even some of them married the human beings. Besides, they believed that they take on the form of various animals and notably the form of snake, that they usually live in dark and desolate places, that they eat and drink like men, that diseases emanate from them, that the mad are occupied by them.<sup>34</sup>

It is hardly surprising that almost all of these beliefs are found in the Turkish-Islamic culture in Anatolia. But the Qur'an addresses the concept of the jinnee more often than not in a religio-moral context and informs that they are also created to worship God, that God sent prophets to them, too; however, some of them preferred the denial.<sup>35</sup> Besides, the Qur'an spoke of the Jinns by reminding of some legends known by the first audience of the Divine address. As in the case of stealing report from the heaven, some verses correct the wrong beliefs existing in the pre-Islamic Arab culture. On the other hand, the hadiths which talk of the Jinns include many beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arab culture. For instance, every human being is attended by a jinnee; the Jinns transfigure; some Jinns try to spoil the prayer of believer; the Prophet caught a jinnee who tried to spoil his prayer and wanted to tie him to a pole to show him to his companions but then gave up this idea –for some reason-; this jinnee tried to scorch the Prophet's face; the Jinns of Nusaybin dispatched a delegate; the garbage in houses serve as the meeting room for the Jinns; the Jinns marry and have children.<sup>36</sup> These accounts, in part, reflect the pre-Islamic Arab perception of the jinnee.

On the other hand, the information concerning the identity of Iblis found in the exegetical narrations are largely extracted from Jewish and Christian reservoir. For instance, the report that Iblis's real name is 'Azazil belongs to Jewish tradition. Not occurring in the Qur'an and canonic hadith collections, this word means "one whom God gave power" in Hebrew. The oldest report on this issue is found in the Book of Enoch (Hanok or Idris) which is deemed unauthentic. According to this report, the name "Azazil" is mentioned among the leaders of the two hundred angels who came down to the earth as result of their being enchanted by the beauty of human girls. This story is likely related with the tale of "God's Sons" in the sixth chapter of the Genesis. According to the tale, God punished these angels before the waters of the Deluge covered the earth as a result of the evils sewed by the giants (Nafilim), born from their intercourse with the human females; meanwhile, God had Raphael, who is one of the grand angels, tied the hands and feet of 'Azazil and had the former thrown the latter into a well in Dudael. The belief, which existed among the Jews and disseminated among the Arabs too by way of the literature of the biblical tales, that 'Azazil is one of the countless Jinns of desert who inflict a variety of torments upon the voyagers possibly goes back to the same tale.<sup>37</sup>

In short, Iblis, 'Azazil or Mastema is one of the Sons of God (*Bene-ha-Elohim*) and manifestation of God, even if indirectly. *Bene-ha-Elohim* constitutes the pantheon of gods. But some of the angels in this pantheon committed sin because of sensual desire and vanity and thus were exiled from Paradise. Afterwards, they were thrown into deep pits to pay for their crime; so, they were imprisoned either on the earth (underground) or exiled into the darkness of the heavens. These wicked angels not only commit sin but also incite the humankind to committing sin. Sometimes, all the sins are ascribed to the leader of the angels in exile, 'Azazil. God Jehova recognized for him the right to continue his evils in the world. So, distant from the Divine content as he might seem, 'Azazil is in final analysis the servant and arm of God and thus represents a Divine aspect.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Reason for Iblis's Transgression or the Real Author of the Action of Enticing**

One of the problems which appear if the verses related with the story of Iblis are interpreted literally is who is the real author of the action of "ighwa", i.e., temptation or enticement, which occurs in the 16<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-A'raf (*fabima aghwaytani*) and in the 15<sup>th</sup> verse of the Sura al-Hijr (*rabbi bi-ma aghwaytani*). If Iblis's words are to be taken into consideration, the author of this action is God Himself. So, Iblis had no chance not to transgress. Since the Sunni exegetes and notably the Ash'arite ones took the verses in literal sense, they did not eschew producing interpretations which confirm the thought that God manipulated Iblis as a pawn. For instance, commentating on Iblis's word, "[O my Lord!] in return for Thy temptation of me", Fakhr al-Din al-Razi said the following:

“You should know that we are not making exaggeration when we say that with the word “*ighwa*” is meant “temptation”. For the gist of our word goes back to the word of Iblis which has the position of proof. We can also present several rational proofs as to the issue that God is the author of tempting Iblis. Given the fact that a moving being has a mover; a still being has a stopper; a guided being has a guide; so, a misled being should have a misleader. Provided the fact that Iblis is tempted and led astray, there should be someone who tempted and led him astray. One who tempted Iblis is either Iblis himself or another creature or God. The first option is wrong because no creature with sound mind deliberately asks for being tempted and led astray. The second option is wrong, too. Otherwise, either/both an infinite succession of causes (*tasalsul*) or/and vicious circle will be unavoidable. The right option is the third one, [i.e., it is God who tempted and led Iblis astray] God knows best.<sup>39</sup>

**Al-Qurtubi (d. 671/1273) also says similar words:**

“The opinion of *Ahl al-Sunnah* is this: God led Iblis astray and created denial (*kufir*) within him. This is why the action of the temptation is ascribed to God, which is right. For there is nothing in the realm of being who is not the creation of God and has not emanated from His will. The Imamiyya, the Qadariyya (Mu‘tazilites) and some other sects opposed this view. However, though they obeyed Iblis on every issue which he ornamented for them, they turned away from the obedience on this issue and said: Iblis is mistaken. Even though he ascribed the action of temptation to his Lord –God is far exalted above that-, he willingly and knowingly made mistake. One can respond to the claims of these sects as the following: Let us assume that Iblis willingly and knowingly made mistake. So, what do you say about the word which Noah –peace be upon him-, an honorable and innocent prophet, said to his tribe: “If God wills to tempt (*ighwa*) those of you, my preach produces no effect though I want to preach you. He is your Lord and those of you will be returned to Him. (11/Hud 34) According to a narration, a person, who is accused of denying fate and regarded as one of the great scholars of Islamic jurisprudence (*faqih*), comes over to Tawus in *Masjid al-Haram*. After the person took his place in the session, Tawus asked him: “Are you standing up or being made to stand up?” Upon this word, the person stood up. Meanwhile, Tawus was told, “Is he asking this question of a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence?” In response, Tawus said: “Though Iblis is cleverer (*afqah*) than this man, he said: “My Lord! In return for Thy temptation of me.” Yet, this man says “It is me who tempts and leads myself astray.”<sup>40</sup>

As is seen, for the Sunni exegetes, who took the tale in literal sense, the author who led Iblis astray is God Himself. How not? God is identical with absolute power. This conception presumes that there is no ethical principle to bind God; thus, He is free to do everything as the case with Iblis. As for the Mu‘tazilites tradition which highlights ethicality, they forcefully reject the above interpreta-

tion on the grounds of the principle that every evil action should be negated from God. For instance, after remarking that the narration ascribed to Tawus is a forgery, al-Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143) describes *Ahl al-Sunnah*, i.e., the Ash‘arites as *Mujabbirah* (Determinists) and blames them to be as ferocious as to ascribe very nasty actions such as “tempting” and “leading astray” to God and to forge numerous slanders on behalf of the Prophet, his companions and *tabi‘un* (second Muslim generation).<sup>41</sup>

To the Mu‘tazilite scholars, the word “My Lord! In return for Thy temptation of me” belongs to Iblis, not God. Iblis may have said such because he believed that denial and ignorance are created by God; however, this word of his is by no means a proof. According to another negationist interpretation, the temptation and transgression in Iblis arose in concomitance with God’s command to bow down before Adam. Thus, the action of temptation is attributed to God in this sense. This is similar to the expression, “Do not perform a behavior which requires me to beat you up!” or “Do not force me to beat you up!”

According to another interpretation, the *ighwa* (temptation) in this context means extermination or bringing to ruin. The *ighwa* occurring in the verse 34<sup>th</sup> of the Sura al-Hud, “If God wills to tempt those of you” also has the same meaning.<sup>42</sup> In conclusion, all of these Mu‘tazilite interpretations also result from the taking of Iblis’s story in literal sense; however, their interpretation is at least more coherent and reasonable than the Sunnite interpretations.

### **Iblis, Evil, and the Problem of Theodicy**

While the problem of evil is inherent and prevalent in Islam as in Judaism and Christianity, the three religious traditions have divergent approaches to its definition, source, and real nature. In fact, this divergence stems from the way of perceiving the problem; thus, the problem cannot be satisfactorily defined. As a matter of fact, evil is just as it is perceived by the human being. In addition, evil is never abstract and thus should be perceived on the basis of the suffering felt by the human being. In this regard, the pompous formulations like “evil is in fact the absence of good or it is nihilism” are not worth considering. For, as put by Russell, evil is real and immediate<sup>43</sup>; in essence, it is the hurting of a being capable of sensing or suffering. What is important here is the suffering itself. Evil is immediately perceived by mind and emotionally experienced by the senses. The existence of evil requires no evidence other than its experience.<sup>44</sup>

Evil is personified in many societies in parallel to its perception as an intentional power. Possibly being the product of such a personification, Iblis or Satan, according to the letter of the story in the Qur’an, appears as a manifestation of the Sacred and/or as part of the Divine. Here there arise a number of problems: First question/problem is whether Satan is responsible for the first sin of the humankind or he has an indirect and unnecessary role in it. A more difficult question is to what extent the evil represented by Iblis or Satan is part of the Divine

plan. The most caustic aspect of the problem of evil form Judaism, Christianity and Islam is reconciling God's power and good with the existence of evil. This is a meaningful dilemma and constitutes the foremost ground of Atheism. This is because: 1) God possesses an absolute power. Thus, He also possesses the power to create a cosmos which includes no evil. 2) God is always good. Therefore, He wants to create an evil-free cosmos. 3) Hence, evil cannot exist. 4) On the contrary, the cosmos is bathed in evil. 5) Therefore, there is no god.<sup>45</sup>

Judaism, Christianity and Islam insist on an omnipotent and omniscient god. According to the credo of Islam in particular, God's absolute power encompasses everything; nothing occurs outside of His willing. Hence, along with good, evil, suffering and anguish are from God. At this very point, punishment and trial (*jaza'* and *bala'*) appear as two ways for the Qur'an to reconcile suffering and anguish with the Divine mercy. Sufferings are punishment for our sins. God is merciful and gracious; but at the same time He is just. The suffering of sinner is required by the Divine justice. Even those who devoted their lives to God have to bear the worldly sufferings as trial. The best answer to suffering is Islam, i.e., a complete submission, surrender and patience.<sup>46</sup> For God does not promise to the people Paradise in this world; quite contrary, He stresses that the test is very hard. He says, "We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits" (2/Baqara 155) and advises us to give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere at the end of the verse.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand, though Islam does not approve of evil, it does ignore it. Why? It is so that the trial would be a trial in the fullest sense of the term. This very spirit of trial implies that the evil embodied by Iblis and Satan is in fact part of the Divine plan. Nevertheless, the Qur'an holds that no one can produce pretext for his crime on the basis that Satan caused him to commit the sin since Satan has only the power to tempt but not the power to force or impose. After all, the nature of the central evil is not completely resolved in a world where a god with limitless power and mercy is defeated. In this point, the Muslims incline either to delimit God's goodness in order to emphasize His omnipotence (Sunnite-Ash'arite discourse) or to restrict His omnipotence in order to stress His goodness and justice (Mu'tazilite discourse). If the Ash'arite viewpoint which stresses the absolute power of God is taken as ground, God is directly or indirectly the cause of the existence of evil. The Maturidite School maintains that all of the actions are willed by God but some of them did not take place in agreement with His willing of the good. Yet this explanation provides no answer to the question why He allows for this.<sup>48</sup>

In brief, the troubles produced by the efforts to bring the Divine justice and good into harmony with mercy and absolute power appear in the famous "Three Brothers' Story" (*ikhwan thalathah*). The first one of the brothers in this fictive story died as believer; the second died as denier; the third died as underage. The believer one lived quite long and was rewarded with Paradise. The denier also

died at his age of adolescence but entered into Hell as result of his denial. As for the minor boy, he is saved from the torment but not allowed to enter Paradise either. Therefore, he said, "O my Lord! I wished Thou had granted to me a long life, and I could have entered Paradise by acting upon Thy injunctions." God replied: "If I had prolonged your lifespan, you would have committed sin and thus entered Hell. For I had known this, I took your life when you were a child [out of mercy for you.] Upon this reply, the third brother shrieked from Hell: "O my Lord! Why had you not killed me as an innocent child?!"<sup>49</sup>

### **Iblis-Satan and the Duality of Good-Evil in the Cosmos**

If the story of Iblis is taken literally, the nature of the duality of good-evil appears as another problem. In fact, the dualism which takes away some of God's absolute power in order to preserve His absolute goodness exists with different tones in a wide range of traditions from Zoroastrianism to Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Undoubtedly, Islam is the religion of monotheism. However, though created by God, evil is on work under the name of Satan and very often outweighs good. According to the story in the Qur'an, the being of Satan on work depends upon the Divine permission and extends to the Day of Resurrection. This means that evil or Satan is part of the Divine order, which relies on the fight between good and evil. Satan is the commander of the troops of evil on this plain. In addition, the best of good ones is God; the worst of evil ones is Satan. As a matter of fact, this is an obvious dualism. However, the fact that Iblis or Satan is created by God means that this dualism exists only on ontological plain.

On the other hand, the fact that Satan, who gained existence with the Divine will and injunction, is allowed to tempt and lead men astray up to the Day of Resurrection suggests that God has two divergent faces and harbors tensions in His Essence. Likewise, the dominant Sunni discourse maintains that everything exists with the creation of God and there is thus nothing in the universe that is not His creature. Therefore, all the beings in the cosmos are an extension of God or His manifestation. As it were, everything is made of His texture. The anguish of the person, who starved or experienced torture, is a real anguish and part of the cosmos weaved from the Divine texture. However, the desire to withstand evil is another face of the same texture. Therefore, God's integrity involves good along with evil.<sup>50</sup>

To summarize, as required by God's cosmic plan, evil should exist. The existence of evil does not harm His justice since man is the being of testing which should comprise evil and good. Thus, the world is not the best of the possible worlds in opposition to the claim of al-Ghazzali (d. 505/1111), who is very optimistic about the problem of theodicy: "it is not possible that there can be better than what is" (*laysa fi al-imkan abda' min ma kana*). Rather, the world is best of the worlds which are staged as the scene of testing. This world of al-Ghazzali, which comes to the effect that everything in the universe is very nice and wise,



is not other than degrading the deep sufferings in our life, as rightly expressed by Voltaire.<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

The Qur'an describes the world as the stage of testing. The gist of the test is the coexistence of good and evil. In other words, in order that the test gains meaning, everything should stand upon its own opposite. We do not and cannot know why God felt the need to create a being of trial called "human being", who harbors the conflict of opposites in his nature. Nevertheless, I am sure that good and evil are encoded into our nature like single-egg twins.

If everything in the universe is created by God, evil is His creation, too. More clearly, evil is created as indispensable part of God's cosmic plan, and called *Iblis* or *Shaytan* in the Qur'an. Considering the verses which inform that Iblis from the Jinns and the Jinns are created from fire, we are compelled to acknowledge that this name refers to an abstract and at the same time objective being. Yet, if one takes into account the characteristics of Satan which is sometimes used as another name or attribute of Iblis, one says that this is a personification of evil; thus, the story in the Qur'an is a representation designed to call attention to the conflict of good and evil taking place in the horizons and selves, i.e., in the inward and outward worlds.

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