

The Jinn and the Shayatīn

If by “demon” one understands an evil occult being, then its equivalent in the Islamic narrative is the intersection of the category *jinn* with that of the *shayātīn*: a demon is a *shaytān* from among the *jinn*. The literature in the Islamic tradition on these subjects is vast. In what follows, we will select some key elements from it to provide a brief summary: first on the nature of the jinn, their nature, and their relationship to God and human beings; second, on the origin, nature, and role of *Shaytān* (Satan himself) and the *shayātīn* in the moral drama of Islam. Then, we will take a closer look at the relationship between jinn and humankind, according to Islam, and the phenomena of the demonic as it manifests itself in that relation. In the process, I will entertain, tentatively, some philosophical speculation as to the nature of that ultimately mysterious relation and phenomena, drawn from what we find in the religious sources.

1) The Jinn

The jinn are a distinct creation from both angels and humans. They are not fallen angels, or ghosts of dead human beings roaming the Earth. They are described in the Qur’an as a creature of a radically different nature from the human being. While humans are described as having been created from clay, the jinn were created long before us from a kind of fire described in the Qur’an as the ‘fire of scorching winds’ (*nar al-samūm*) and as a ‘smokeless flame’ (*mārijin min nar*).

“And indeed, We created men out of clay from altered black mud. And the jinn, We created before from the fire of scorching winds (*nar al-samūm*).” (15:26-27)

“And He created the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire (*mārijin min nar*).” (55:15)

The term *mārij* can also mean ‘mixed with’. (El Zein 2009, 32) Classical scholars explained this element as the edge of the flame, and that part of the flame ‘which is mixed with the blackness of the fire.’ (Ashqar 2005, 20) Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad reported him as saying: “The angels were created from light, the jinn were created from the smokeless flame of fire, and Adam was created from that which you have been told.” (Sahih Muslim, no. 2996). Thus, jinn are not disembodied spirits, but have a different kind of body. That is, they are not strictly immaterial.

In connection with this, we should remember that the fundamental ontological ‘dualism’ in the Islamic worldview is that between the Creator and creation, and not that between the ‘spiritual’ or immaterial, and the material. God, of course, is not material, but whether creation is divided between that which is material, and the immaterial, was a matter of debate in the Islamic theological and philosophical tradition. There were rich discussions, for instance, as to the nature of the human soul and whether it is material or immaterial. But in cases where the existence of immaterial souls or other immaterial beings were postulated, and thus the distinction between the two categories, it is always secondary to that between Creator and creation, and always a product of philosophical speculation.

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What this means is that God does not belong to a category of immaterial beings (angels, ghosts, demons, etc.) from which he differs only by being the 'biggest' spirit in the 'spirit world'. This would have been the case for pre-Islamic pagan Arabs, who shared a belief common in the wider region, that angels are the product of a reproductive union between God and jinn. The Qur'an rejects this notion: "He begets not, nor is He begotten, and there is nothing like Him." The difference between God and creation is infinitely greater than the differences between types of created things, and everything other than God is created, whether understood as material or immaterial.

In fact, no clear reference seems to be present in the primary sources of Islamic theology (the Qur'an and hadeeth) to an ontological distinction between the material and immaterial among created beings. Instead, there is the distinction between the 'seen' (*shahada*) and the 'unseen' (*ghaib*). Nothing is unseen for God, so this is an epistemological distinction relative to the faculties of the creature - for our purposes of course, the human being. The 'jinn' are so-called, because they are hidden from human powers of perception.

In Arabic, each time the two letters *jinn* and *nun* occur together, like in *jinn*, they convey the meaning of invisible, unseen, or hidden. Thus, paradise is *jannah* because it is hidden from the human sight. *Janin* is the fetus in the womb because we do not see it. The expression *ajannahu al-layl* means the night covered him or hid him, etc. (El-Zein 2009, xvi)

Thus, the jinn are not 'supernatural' if that is taken to mean that they transcend nature as such. They are natural in the classical philosophical sense, that they are created of an element, undergo change, and are bound by time and space. Whether they are 'material' is perhaps as ambiguous as the question whether fire - the element of which they are created - is 'material'; or perhaps as ambiguous as our conception of matter (whether, for example, we make a sharp ontological distinction between 'matter' and 'energy'). They are 'supernatural' only in a sense relative to human nature and perhaps to 'nature' as conceivable from the perspective of the human being.

In some ways, the jinn are similar to human beings. As with all living creatures according to the Qur'an, they form communities of their own. There are nations and tribes of jinn with their own kings, chiefs, and so forth. In most aspects, however, they are radically different from human beings and other animals with which we are familiar. They have a much longer lifespan. They have an array of powers beyond our own, including the ability to travel great distances throughout the universe at incredible speeds. Though they are normally hidden from our perception, they can appear to us in various forms, including those of animals and other humans. In spite of these advantages, human beings are described as at least potentially more intelligent and imaginative, as will become clear in what follows.

The etymological connection of the term 'jinn' to the Arabic terms for Paradise and the unborn, mentioned above, indicates that neither the *jinn* nor the general condition of hiddenness or mystery in relation to human perception carry any essential negative moral connotation. Of course, carelessly or needlessly dabbling in this region, and exposing oneself to its dangers is morally problematic, but this is not because the jinn as such are necessarily evil, any more than playing with poisonous snakes is morally problematic because of any

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essential evil inherent in snakes. The fault in such a case lies with the careless dabbler. Indeed, the moral status of the jinn is the same as that of human beings, having been created for the same moral purpose, as the Qur'an says:

And I created not the jinn and mankind except that they should worship Me alone. (51:56)

The Qur'an also presents Islam as a divine message addressed no less to the *jinn* than to humanity. They have will and moral responsibility, and are subject to God's plan of salvation just as human beings are. They can be believers or unbelievers, exhibit religious diversity, and are subject to God's commands and rules, just as human beings are.

O you assembly of jinn and mankind! Did not there come to you messengers from amongst you, reciting unto you My verses and warning you of the Meeting of this Day of ours? They will say: 'We bear witness against ourselves.' It was the life of this world that deceived them. And they will bear witness against themselves that they were disbelievers. (6:130)

A significant implication of this, is that human nature is not itself the basis of an absolute moral standard, since jinn are not judged by God as evil simply in virtue of their radical alterity to human nature. The ultimate moral reference, in the case of both creatures, is our relation to God. Though given our very different natures certain rules may apply to humans that do not apply to jinn, and vice versa, human nature in itself is not the benchmark that determines the moral status of all creation. God, and not the human being, is the moral center of the universe. Though, as we will see, God has given the human being a certain status above the rest of creation, this status is a consequence of God's decree rather than an essential feature of human nature, and is contingent on our fulfilling the purpose for which we are created. It would be a grave mistake, then, for us to consider ourselves morally superior to the jinn, simply on the basis of our own nature. Such a delusion, and not the fire of which jinn are created, is the true origin of the demonic.

2) Shaytān and the Shayatīn

In Arabic, *Shaytān* ('Satan') is used both as a proper name and a common noun. It both refers to Satan himself and carries the meaning of any creature following his path of rebellion against God, whether of jinn or human nature. In the plural, the term is *shayatīn*. In the Qur'an, Shaytān himself is most frequently referred to by the name *Iblis*. "*Balas* in Arabic means the one who has nothing good in him. *Ablasa* in Arabic means to be filled with despair and confusion." (Ashqar 2005, 30). As we will see, Iblis is a jinni. But his moral nature, and that of the shayatīn generally (whether of human or jinni origin), is explained by the Qur'anic story of his fall from Divine favor. This story is inseparable from that of the creation of Adam, recounted in the following verses:

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And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know." And He taught Adam the names - all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, "Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful." They said, "Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise." He said, "O Adam, inform them of their names." And when he had informed them of their names, He said, "Did I not tell you that I know the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth? And I know what you reveal and what you have concealed." (2:30-33)

The angels have no capacity to disobey God. They are in perfect obedience to a perfect Creator. From their point of view, the only thing that would be accomplished by the creation of a creature with agency - a *khalifa* ('successive authority') - is the potential for imperfection and disobedience: one who causes corruption and sheds blood while the angels praise and sanctify God. The divine purpose in creating the human being, then, is beyond the capacity of these perfectly reasonable creatures to comprehend, and is known only to God. Adam was taught the 'names of things', which the angels did not know. Though there is no space to explore it here, this clearly has some connection to the status that, according to the Qur'an, was accorded to Adam when Allah commanded the angels to prostrate to him.

And [mention] when We said to the angels, "Prostrate before Adam"; so they prostrated, except for Iblīs. He refused and was arrogant and became of the disbelievers. (2:34)

This is the event that signifies the fall of Satan. It is described in several other passages of the Qur'an. Many, like this, if taken in isolation, seem to imply that Iblīs was an angel, for the same command is described both as having been addressed to the angels, and as having been disobeyed by Iblīs.

And We have certainly created you, [O Mankind], and given you [human] form. Then We said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam"; so they prostrated, except for Iblīs. He was not of those who prostrated. (7:11)

And [mention] when We said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam," and they prostrated, except Iblīs; he refused. (20:116)

And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "I will create a human being out of clay from an altered black mud. And when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit (*ruh*), then fall down to him in

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prostration." So the angels prostrated - all of them entirely.
Except Iblīs, he refused to be with those who prostrated.
(15:28-31)

In the last of these passages, there are two seemingly contrary implications. The last statement, again with the phrase 'except Iblīs', seems to imply that Iblīs was one of the angels. But the statement just prior, that the angels prostrated 'all of them entirely' (*kulluhum ajma'oon*, meaning 'all of them together' or 'all of them as a group') seems to imply the contrary. For if the angels all prostrated as a group, then Iblīs, who did not, would not be, by implication, among that group. Another passage (below) is similar in this regard.

So the angels prostrated - all of them entirely. (38:73) Except
Iblīs; he was arrogant and became among the disbelievers.
(38:74)

The following passage, however, contains the same apparently ambiguous implication that Iblīs was one of the angels, followed by an explicit assertion that he is a jinn.

"And mention when we said to the angels: "Prostrate to Adam," and they prostrated, except for Iblīs. He was one of the jinn and departed from the command of his Lord."
(18:50)

There has naturally been a good deal of discussion over this question in the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), but the majority opinion has been that Iblīs is a jinn, giving more weight to the explicit assertion over the apparent, and apparently ambiguous implications. There were various interpretations as to the meaning of his implied inclusion among the angels. One classical scholar, Al-Baydawi (d. 1286), speculated that, as a child, Iblīs had been captured in the war between angels and jinn that had taken place before the creation of Adam, and had consequently been raised among the angels (El Zein 46). Another, Ibn Taymiyyah, said he had the outward appearance of an angel, without the inner nature (Ashqar 2005, 32).

I favor the view that Iblīs' implicit inclusion among the angels indicates the possibility open to him of angelic status, by way of obeying God's command, and that this possibility of angelic status is independent of his origin, as being made from fire rather than light. It is well understood that an individual can carry multiple different identities, depending on which dimension of her person or role in the scheme of things she takes as a point of reference. As we will see, Iblīs' refusal to obey represents his own self-identification in reference to the element of which he was made, instead of the possibility made available to him through obedience to God's command.

Thus, in 18:50, when it says, 'he was one of the jinn and departed from the command of his Lord,' this should not be taken as an explanation of his disobedience, as though his being made from fire caused it. Rather, it is an explanation of the possibility of his disobedience (which would not be possible

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for an angel). Perhaps we may also understand his explicit classification as a jinn in this context, as a reflection of his own choice, since in choosing to disobey, he chose to identify himself in terms of his origin rather than in terms of that possibility which could have been realized through obedience.

[Allah] said, "What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?" [Satan] said, "I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay." (7:12).

He [Allah] said, O Iblīs, what is [the matter] with you that you are not with those who prostrate?" He said, "Never would I prostrate to a human whom You created out of clay from an altered black mud." (15:28-29)

And [mention] when We said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam," and they prostrated, except for Iblīs. He said, "Should I prostrate to one You created from clay?" (17:61)

[Allah] said, "O Iblīs, what prevented you from prostrating to that which I created with My hands? Were you arrogant [then], or were you [already] among the haughty?" He said, "I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay." (38: 75-76)

This makes it clear that the tragic flaw that led to Iblīs' fall (and by extension, the origin of satanic evil, or rebellion against God) is his arrogant self-evaluation in relation to Adam: "I am better than him." Furthermore, he makes this judgment based on a comparison between their respective elemental natures: fire and clay. At the same time, the fundamental fact that invalidates this judgment is so evident that Iblīs expresses it himself. "I am better than him. *You created me* from fire and created him from clay."

Properly understood, this is almost directly a self-contradiction. Iblīs did not create himself from fire, so why should his being made from fire be to his credit, such that it could be a reason for thinking he is 'better'? Notice that every time this satanic self-justification is recounted in the Qur'an, the role of God as Creator is acknowledged in the very statement. "Should I prostrate to one You created from clay?" Since his elemental nature is the work of God and not himself, it is irrelevant to the question. If we remove the irrelevant terms, the result is revealing. *Should I prostrate to one You created?* In the words of Ibn Arabi, "Looking into the essence of his own constituent element, which was fire, he then laid claim to the potter, and inclined to overweening pride." (El-Zein 2009, 46)

Satan's fall from grace, however, was not sealed with his refusal to bow to Adam. The Qur'anic narrative continues in the following three passages.

[Allah] said, "Descend from Paradise, for it is not for you to be arrogant therein. So get out; indeed, you are of the debased.
[Iblīs] said, "Reprieve me until the Day they are resurrected."
[Allah] said, "Indeed, you are of those reprieved." [Iblīs] said, "Because You have put me in error, I will surely sit in wait for

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them on Your straight path. Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, and You will not find most of them grateful [to You]." (7:13-17)

[Allah] said, "Then get out of it, for indeed, you are expelled. And indeed, upon you is the curse until the Day of Recompense." He said, "My Lord, then relieve me until the Day they are resurrected." [Allah] said, "So indeed, you are of those relieved until the Day of the time well-known." [Iblīs] said, "My Lord, because You have put me in error, I will surely make [disobedience] attractive to them on earth, and I will mislead them all, except, among them, Your chosen servants." [Allah] said, "This is a path [of return] to Me [that is] straight. Indeed, My servants - no authority will you have over them, except those who follow you of the deviators. And indeed, Hell is the promised place for them all. (15:34-43)

[Iblīs] said, "Do You see this one whom You have honored above me? If You delay me until the Day of Resurrection, I will surely destroy his descendants, except for a few." [Allah] said, "Go, for whoever of them follows you, indeed Hell will be the recompense of you - an ample recompense. And incite [to senselessness] whoever you can among them with your voice, and assault them with your horses and foot soldiers, and become a partner in their wealth and their children, and promise them." But Satan does not promise them except delusion. Indeed, over My [believing] servants there is for you no authority. And sufficient is your Lord as Disposer of affairs. (17:62-65)

Satan blames God for his disobedience: 'because You have put me in error.' Perhaps this is also related to his self-identification with his elemental origin, the reasoning being that his refusal to bow was a result of having been made from fire, and therefore God's doing. When he thought this was a reason for thinking himself superior to Adam, he gave the credit to himself; but when he saw it as the source of error, he blamed God, and on that basis swore to take revenge by destroying Adam's descendants, by making disobedience seem attractive to us, thereby proving most of us to be ungrateful.

God himself prescribes the methods Satan should use for this purpose: to incite us with his voice, assault us with his 'horses and foot soldiers' (those among jinn and humanity whom he can incite to join his evil cause), become a partner in our wealth and children, and promise us delusion. Iblīs is in rebellion against God, but there is no real conflict in the sense that Satan represents any kind opposing force independent of God's power. By necessity, he can never accomplish anything that is outside of God's own plan. The incitement of Satan's voice is referred to as the *waswas* ('whisper'), and naturally, his first target was Adam and Hawa (Eve).

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And "O Adam, dwell, you and your wife, in Paradise and eat from wherever you will but do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers." But Satan whispered to them to make apparent to them that which was concealed from them of their private parts. He said, "Your Lord did not forbid you this tree except that you become angels or become of the immortal." And he swore [by Allah] to them, "Indeed, I am to you from among the sincere advisors."
(7:19-21)

So We said, "O Adam, indeed this is an enemy to you and to your wife. Then let him not remove you from Paradise so you would suffer. Indeed, it is [promised] for you not to be hungry therein or be unclothed. And indeed, you will not be thirsty therein or be hot from the sun." Then Satan whispered to him; he said, "O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and possession that will not deteriorate?" And Adam and his wife ate of it, and their private parts (shame) became apparent to them, and they began to fasten over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And Adam disobeyed his Lord and erred. Then his Lord chose him and turned to him in forgiveness and guided [him]. (20:117-122)

As this was the first satanic waswas, an examination of its description in these passages can shed light on the nature of the demonic in the Qur'anic narrative. The aim of this whisper, we are told, was to make Adam and Hawa aware of what was concealed from them of their private parts. The essence of its message was suspicion as to the rationale of God's prohibition. "Your Lord did not forbid you this tree except that you become angels or immortal." Perhaps, in fact, God forbade them so that *through obeying him* they could 'become angels' (inasmuch as we understand the essence of the angelic as perfect obedience), for obedience to God can only be realized in response to a specific command. But Satan's suggestion was that through *disobeying* they might become angels. This implies an understanding of the essence of the angelic as lying in the fact that they are made from light, rather than in their obedience. So the same satanic delusion that led him to refuse prostrating to Adam is operative here.

Satan suggested that through disobedience they might become "of the immortal" (*min al-khālidīn*). He calls the forbidden tree the "tree of immortality" (*al-shajarat al-khuldī*), and "the possession that does not deteriorate" (*al-mulk la yablā*). God, we are told, has already promised that He would provide for them food, clothing, drink, and comfort. Satan is promising a 'possession that does not deteriorate', which implies that the provision that Adam and Hawa were given was temporal; that is, that it did deteriorate, but that God replaced it, as promised, with new provision. Thus, they were in constant, complete dependence on God in every moment.

The significance of a 'possession that does not deteriorate' is that it would, hypothetically, render them independent of God. This promise is, obviously, impossible. Nothing can be independent of God. Satan himself knows

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this (he asks God to give him respite until the Day of Judgment). So we can conclude that the original waswas was a promise of gaining independence of God, based on the delusion that any being or status independent of God is possible. And this, in turn, was based on a perceived intrinsic constitutive nature (that one is made fire, clay, a certain race, lineage, and so on independent of God). The effect of heeding the whisper was that what was previously concealed from them of their private parts became apparent to them. God said he would provide clothing, and He did. After biting into the delusion of self-sufficiency, this clothing was removed.

So he made them fall, through deception. And when they tasted of the tree, their private parts became apparent to them, and they began to fasten together over themselves from the leaves of Paradise. And their Lord called to them, "Did I not forbid you from that tree and tell you that Satan is to you a clear enemy?" They said, "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers." [Allah] said, "Descend, being to one another enemies. And for you on the earth is a place of settlement and enjoyment for a time." He said, "Therein you will live, and therein you will die, and from it you will be brought forth." (7:22-25)

The response of Adam and Hawa to God was opposite that of Iblīs. They said: "Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers." Recall that Iblīs' response was: "My Lord, because you have put me in error, I will surely make [disobedience] attractive to them on earth, and I will mislead them all except, among them, Your chosen servants." Even Iblīs acknowledges Allah as his Lord. The difference is that Iblīs accuses Allah of wronging him, while Adam and Hawa acknowledge that they wronged themselves, and that they are dependent on God's forgiveness and mercy.

Then his Lord chose him and turned to him in forgiveness and guided him. [Allah] said, "Descend from it (i.e. Paradise) – all being enemies to one another. And if there should come to you guidance from Me – then whoever follows My guidance will neither go astray nor suffer. (20: 122-123)

Satan said he would mislead them all "except your chosen servants" (15:40). Of Adam, above, it says "his Lord chose him, turned to him in forgiveness and guided him." Importantly, this took place before God sent him down from Paradise. Therefore, Iblīs did not ultimately succeed in leading Adam astray. "[Allah] said, "This is a path [of return] to Me [that is] straight. Indeed, My servants - no authority will you have over them, except those who follow you of the deviators" (15:41-42). The key difference is that Adam and Hawa blamed themselves and acknowledged their dependence on God's forgiveness and mercy (thus they acknowledged God's mercy). But they had all

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disobeyed. So the distinctive feature of Shaytān is not that he is made of fire, nor simply that he disobeyed God, but that after disobedience he did not blame himself and seek forgiveness, but blamed God and sought revenge. He refused to acknowledge his dependence on God's mercy and was therefore cut off from it. Repentance is the path to God. Those 'of the deviators' who follow Shaytān, are not *all* the deviators, but those who refuse repentance.

O children of Adam, We have bestowed upon you clothing to conceal your private parts and as adornment. But the clothing of righteousness - that is best. That is from the signs of Allah that perhaps they will remember. O children of Adam, let not Satan tempt you as he removed your parents from Paradise, stripping them of their clothing to show them their private parts. Indeed, he sees you, he and his tribe, from where you do not see them. Indeed, We have made the devils allies to those who do not believe. (7:26-27)

The clothing of righteousness is our acknowledgment of complete dependence on God. The danger posed by Shaytān is in tempting us to deceive ourselves into thinking we can be independent of God. He and his tribe see us from where we cannot see them, but who are his 'tribe'? Understood in reference to his elemental origin, they would be the jinn, who can indeed see us from where we cannot see them. But not all jinn are in rebellion against God, and some human beings are. Understood in this sense, his tribe would not be all and only the jinn, but rather those who blame God for their faults, reject His mercy, and seek revenge by leading others to join them, whether from among jinn or human beings. Since we cannot see into the hearts of people, then it is reasonable to suppose that those of his tribe of *shayatīn* among human beings can also see us from where do not see them. But can they see themselves from where they do not see themselves?

3) Human – Jinn relations

One chapter, or *surah*, of the Qu'ran named *Al Jinn*, opens with the following verses:

Say (O Muhammad): It has been revealed to me that a group of jinn listened (to this Qur'an). They said: Verily, we have heard a wonderful Recitation. It guides to the Right Path, and we have believed therein, and we shall never join (in worship) anything with our Lord. (72: 1-2)ⁱ

It goes on to describe this group of jinn acknowledging that Allah 'has not taken a wife or son' (72:3) and that 'our foolish one has [or 'the foolish among us have'] been saying about Allah an excessive transgression' (72:4).ⁱⁱ This is not just a reference to Christian Trinitarian doctrine. Many pre-Islamic Arab pagans believed, for instance, that angels are the product of marriage between God and daughters of the jinn, and sometimes worshipped jinn on the basis of this relationship. Elsewhere, the Qur'an rejects such notions:

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But they have attributed partners to Allah – the jinn, while He has created them – and have fabricated for Him sons and daughters without knowledge. Exalted is He and high above what they describe. (6:100)

The group of jinn Muslim converts described in Surah *Al Jinn* acknowledge that ‘there were men from among mankind who sought refuge in men from the jinn, so they increased them in burden; and they thought, as you thought, that Allah would never send anyone (as a messenger)’ (72: 6-7). This refers to the prevalence of ‘seers’ among pre-Islamic Arabs, thought to have a special relationship with a jinni (and sometimes to have been the product of marriage between a human and jinni) who, in exchange for a sacrifice or fulfillment of some demand, would provide information gained by his ability to approach near to Heaven and ‘spy’ on the Divine proceedings there. The seer then communicated this information in the form of metered poetry.

Pre-Islamic legend described some of these seers in quite extraordinary terms. One was a half-person, with one leg, one arm, and one eye. Another’s body would roll up like a mat when receiving communication from his jinni. His only bone was his skull and his face was on his chest (El-Zein 2009, 56). As the jinn here describe, these seers only made life more complicated (‘increased the burden’) for those who depended on them. But after the revelation of the Qur’an, this limited ability of the jinn to spy on Heaven was blocked.

We have sought to reach the Heaven, but found it filled with powerful guards and burning flames. And we used to sit therein in positions for hearing, but whoever listens now will find a burning flame lying in wait for him. And we do not know [therefore] whether evil is intended for those on earth or whether their Lord intends for them a right course. (72: 8-10)

Finally, the group of jinn describe their own diversity in respect to morality and religion; some are righteous and others not, some are Muslims and others unjust.

And among us are the righteous, and among us are not so; we were of divided ways. And we have become certain that we will never cause failure to Allah upon earth, nor can we escape Him by flight. And when we heard the guidance, we believed in it. And whoever believes in his Lord will not fear deprivation or burden. And among us are Muslims, and among us are the unjust. And whoever has become Muslim - those have sought out the right course. But as for the unjust, they will be for Hell, firewood (72: 11-15).

The Muslim hadeeth literature elaborates on this and other events relating to jinn. One such companion, Ibn ‘Abbas, related that when the *jinn* found themselves prevented from spying on Heaven, they knew that something momentous must have occurred, and sent teams throughout the Earth to

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investigate (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 773). One such team found the Prophet Muhammad and some of his companions reciting the Qur'an in their morning prayer, so they went back and made their report, saying:

O our people! Verily, we have heard a Book sent down after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to the Straight Path (46:30).

Thereafter a delegation of jinn visited the Prophet for religious instruction on a night called the 'Night of the Jinn'. Two things that happened on this night indicate both the parallel relationship that humans and jinn have with respect to God, and the radical difference between the two creatures. First, the Prophet is reported to have recited to them a chapter of the Qur'an named Surah *Al Rahman* ('the Infinitely Merciful'). This chapter stands out among others as exceptionally beautiful in its poetry (it has been dubbed, 'Bride of the *Qur'an*'). It features vivid descriptions of God's creation, the rewards of Paradise, and the punishment of Hell, arranged between the repeated refrain: 'so which of the favors of your Lord will you two deny?' – the 'two' addressed here being humanity and the jinn.

It reiterates that God created both mankind and jinn in their respective, very different natures: "He created man from clay like that of pottery, and He created the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire. So, which of the favors of your Lord will you two deny?" (55: 14-16). Later, it asserts the limitations on both, as finite creatures: "O company of jinn and mankind, if you are able to pass beyond the regions of the heavens and the earth, then pass – you will not pass except by Divine authority. Then which of the favors of your Lord will you two deny?" (55: 33-34). Finally, it affirms the accountability of both before God on the Day of Judgment: "Then on that Day none will be asked about his sin among men or jinn. Then which of the favors of your Lord will you two deny?" (55: 39-40). The hadeeth literature records the Prophet describing his session with the jinn to his companions. Each time he read the refrain asking which of God's favors they would deny, the jinn responded: "We do not deny any of Your blessings, O Lord, and to You be praise." (Jami' al-Tirmidhi, no. 3291).

Another interesting fact about this meeting is that the jinn asked the Prophet for provision. "You will have every bone over which the name of Allah has been mentioned; when it falls into your hands it will have plenty of meat on it," he replied, "and all droppings are food for your animals." (Jami' al-Tirmidhi, no. 3258) Their request for provision is most probably explained by the fact that, having become Muslim, these jinn would refrain from the sacrificial meat offered to them as per pagan practice. Instead, the bones of animals slaughtered by Muslims, 'over which the name of Allah has been mentioned' would sustain them. In another report, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (another companion of the Prophet and the second Caliph of the Muslims) described witnessing someone offer an animal sacrifice to one of the idols in Mecca.

An unseen creature shouted at him, and I have never heard anything harsher than his voice. He was crying: 'O you bold evildoer! A matter of success! An eloquent man is saying: None has the right to be worshipped except Allah!' (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 3866)

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As a consequence of this promise of provision to the Muslim jinn, by means of bones and dung, the Prophet instructed the Muslims, ‘Do not use (these things) for cleaning yourselves after relieving yourself, for they are the food of your brothers.’ (Jami’ al-Tirmidhi, no. 3258) So while the jinn are radically different in nature from humankind (for example, our refuse is their food), we both stand in a parallel respective relationship of accountability to God, and reciprocal moral obligations to each other, to the extent that the Prophet described the Muslims among jinn as the brothers of those among humanity.

Love, marriage, and even children between humans and jinn were features of pre-Islamic Arab lore that continued to be understood as a possibility in Islam. Early Muslim jurists tried to muster arguments that marriages between jinn and humans are prohibited in Shari’ā. One of the pre-eminent founders of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam Malik, concluded that there was no evidence on which to base such a prohibition, but disapproved of it nevertheless, for concern that unwed women found pregnant could simply claim to have a jinni husband (Ashqar 2005, 39). Of course, such a union could only be valid under Shari’ā if the jinn husband were Muslim.

Conflicts can occur between jinn and humans, and depending on the circumstances the jinn may be in the right. Among the Muslim contemporaries of the Prophet was one who returned home to find snake inside. He immediately killed it with his spear, whereupon the house shook, and according to the witnesses, ‘we do not know whether the snake or the man died first.’ They went to the Prophet Muhammad and asked him to pray that God bring the man back to life. The Prophet told them, instead, to pray for the man, because the snake he attacked was a Muslim jinn. He then instructed them, that if anyone finds a snake in their house they should not immediately kill it. Instead, they should warn it and give it three days to leave. If after three days it doesn’t leave, then it is either an evil jinn or just a normal snake and can be killed (Ashqar 2005, 49-50). Interestingly, this corresponds to traditional Islamic rules of hospitality according to which a guest is entitled to at least three days’ stay.

4) Demons and the Demonic

As for the jinn among the shayatīn, we might think they pose more of a danger, on account of their unique powers and hiddenness. On the other hand, the human shayatīn may actually be more dangerous and deceptive because of their familiarity. In either case, the Islamic depiction of the real danger indicates that it almost always comes down to a matter of our own human moral weaknesses and follies. This is evident in the case of the *qareen*, an unseen companion that God has assigned to each individual. The Prophet Muhammad is recorded in the hadeeth as having said to a group of his people: “There is no one among you but there has been appointed for him a qareen from among the jinn and a qareen from among the angels.” They asked, “And you too, O Messenger of Allah?” He said, “Me too, but Allah helped me against him and he has become Muslim, and he does not tell me to do anything but good.” (Sahih Muslim, no. 2814).

The Qur’an indicates that, even in the case of us normal human beings who are not prophets, the nature of the qareen depends on our own moral state in relation to God. “And whosoever turns away blindly from the remembrance

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of the Most Gracious,” it says, “We appoint for him Shaytān to be a *qareen* to him.” (43:36). Also: “Verily, we made the Shayatīn *awliyaa’* (helpers and protectors) for those who believe not.” (7:27). The hadeeth indicates that the primary role of the qareen is to make suggestions, to do either good or evil. In the case of the angel, the suggestions will necessarily be for the good.

As for the suggestions of the jinn qareen, we may presume that they are variable depending on the degree of our remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. The language of the two verses of Qur’an, meanwhile, implies that having a shayatīn as a qareen is equivalent to having Shaytān himself as a qareen, since the former is acting under the command of the latter. The constant aim of a shaytāni qareen is just as Iblīs said: to make evil seem good to us, in order to mislead us into ungratefulness to God.

Given the fact that the Qur’an, as it describes itself, is addressed to jinn as well as humans, and that both are subject to moral accountability before God, one might ask whether the jinn have also been assigned a qareen? In the hadeeth just mentioned, the Prophet said ‘there is not one among you’ who have not been assigned a qareen from among angels and one from among jinn. If this applies to jinn as well, then each jinn would be assigned a qareen from among jinn. They would be paired up and there wouldn’t be any left to assign to human beings. But the Prophet’s audience here was a group of human beings, ‘not one of’ whom has not been assigned a qareen.

The Qur’an, on the other hand, tells us that God assigns Shaytān as qareen to those who turn away from His remembrance, without specifying that this only applies to human beings. What if it applies to jinn as well? Since there are shayatīn from both races, there would be, in principle, enough to distribute to them all. That is, if there were a one to one correspondence with an equal number on each side, the shaytāni human and shaytāni jinni could be mutual qareen to each other.

A second thing to consider is that we are told in the hadeeth that every human has been assigned a jinni qareen, whether or not he has turned away from the remembrance of God. God helped the Prophet against his qareen, and consequently, he became Muslim and thereafter only told him to do that which is good. We know that for human beings, becoming Muslim does not entail only ever doing the good. Muslims make moral mistakes, and this presumably should apply to jinn as well. So the Prophet’s qareen not only became Muslim, but exceptional. This is obviously connected to the fact that the Prophet was in constant remembrance of God, and that is how God helped him against his qareen. He did not say God replaced his qareen for a better one. The very same qareen became Muslim.

This raises the question: when one turns away from the remembrance of God, and is assigned a shaytāni qareen, as the Qur’an describes, is it that his previous qareen is replaced by an evil one, or does the same qareen become evil? Again, this is not specified, so we can only speculate. But if we draw an analogy here, from how the Prophet described the affair with his qareen, it would lead us to conclude that in other cases, it is the same qareen that becomes shaytāni when a person turns away from God. We should also consider the fact that, when a person does turn away from God, it is in response to the misleading waswas of his qareen. And we have already seen that God Himself said that Shaytān would have no power over any of His servants, ‘except those who follow

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you of the deviators.’ Which, then, becomes shaytāni first, the person or his jinni qareen? Perhaps it is not possible to answer this question unambiguously. What emerges is the appearance of a parallel, mirror-like relationship. Is each the qareen of the other?

In western culture, this idea of a qareen is present in the image of the little angel and devil hovering over each shoulder, as we find in old cartoons. Often, they are depicted as angelic and devilish versions of the very individual they are hovering over, and this reflects our notion that these are metaphors for opposing dimensions of the moral character of the person himself, and not separate entities. In Islam, Shaytān, the shayātīn, and jinn are most certainly not mere metaphors.ⁱⁱⁱ And yet, to think that the ‘metaphorical’ nature of the modern western depiction means that the ‘little devil’ just is the person is perhaps to misunderstand the metaphor. The depiction itself reflects a deep ambiguity in the relation. The character so depicted stands at a crossroad. The question faced is precisely whether the person *is* the ‘little devil’ or not. They are, in that moment, neither wholly identical nor wholly separate.

Perhaps we might say the devil is ‘mixed with’ him, or in the Arabic, *mārij*. Recall, that this is the word the Qur’an uses to describe the jinn: *mārijin min nar*. In the hadeeth, the Prophet is recorded as saying, “the Shaytān flows through the children of Adam like blood.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 7171). He is mixed with us. The ambiguity of the relation is most evident in the case of the *majnūn*, which is the Arabic term for an insane person, but literally means one who is possessed by a jinni. In the Islamic tradition, this phenomenon is described very similarly to the way it is experienced in virtually all cultures.

The individual performs erratic, often violent, sometimes amazing acts that are not his own, and speaks in a voice that is not his own. It is him, and yet not. It is the unseen demon that has mixed himself with the victim, and special measures must be taken in order to separate them. Islamic methods of exorcism, naturally, are based on invoking God, reciting select verses of the Qur’an, and commanding the jinni to leave. Interestingly, classical Muslim scholars also describe a process that starts with reasoning with the jinni by means of Islamic legal arguments. The jinni, according to them, must be given the chance to repent and respond voluntarily. They too have rights of due process under God’s law, just as humans do. Only then can more forceful measures be taken. These culminate in literally beating the jinni out of the victim, which of course is done by beating the victim; though again it is not the victim being beaten but the jinni, so that the jinni feels pain until he finally leaves, after which the victim is completely unscathed, remembering nothing about the event. (Ashqar 2005, 203-212)

Interestingly, Islamic sources give us reason to think that jinni possession is usually not demonic in nature. Various motivations have been noted as to why a jinni would do it, as reported by the jinn themselves, in the process of exorcism. These include intense love for the possessed human, and unwillingness to be separated from him or her. Other times, it may be out of revenge for some real, imagined, intentional, or unintentional harm the human committed against the jinni. (Ashqar 2005, 203). We don’t find here, the aim of misleading the person away from God and into hell, and the simple reason is that outright possessing a person would not be an effective way for a shaytān to achieve that. In Shari’ā, the majnun is not morally or legally responsible for his /

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her actions. Nothing a person does in such a state of mind will be accounted for on the Day of Judgment. These are not voluntary acts of disobedience, ungratefulness, or forgetfulness of God. Therefore, nothing the jinni makes someone do in the state of possession would directly further the shaytāni agenda.

This is achieved by means of the whisper. Thus its danger is more subtle and its harm infinitely greater. With it, furthermore, the degree of 'mixing' and 'separation' between the individual and the shaytāni whisperer is more thorough. The whisper is initially experienced as something coming from within one's self, and not as a forced imposition of someone or something distinct. This is so, even, for example, when the evil suggestion is made through the voice of another human being. Then the one who resists the temptation – or what amounts to the same thing, the one whom God guides – separates himself from it. But the one who responds to, and acts on the whisper has indeed become his shaytān, having taken ownership of his evil; and the shaytān, unlike the merely possessive jinn, completely leaves his victim in full possession of the evil he has willingly chosen.

And Satan will say when the matter has been concluded, "Indeed, Allah had promised you the promise of truth. And I promised you, but I betrayed you. But I had no authority over you except that I invited you, and you responded to me. So do not blame me; but blame yourselves. I cannot be called to your aid, nor can you be called to my aid. Indeed, I deny your association of me before. Indeed, for the wrongdoers is a painful punishment." (14:22)

The shayatīn, whom Shaytān himself deceived and through whom he worked his deception, enter hell together with those whom they deceived. Presumably, these will be the shaytāni qareen, along with those who turned away from God, to whom those qareen were assigned. And this brings us back to our question: who were the deceived and who were the deceivers? Or were they, in reality, mutually the qareen of each other? This can amount to nothing but speculation, and God alone knows the truth of it. But the following verse of the Qur'an is intriguing in this respect.

[Allah] will say, "Enter among nations which had passed on before you of jinn and mankind into the Fire." Every time a nation enters, it will curse its sister until, when they have *all* overtaken one another therein, the last of them will say about the first of them "Our Lord, these had misled us, so give them a *double* punishment of the Fire. He will say, "*For each is double, but you do not know.*" (7:38)

What we can conclude, is that human beings share the moral universe of Islam with a distinct species of unseen beings, radically different and yet parallel in our duties to God and to each other. Human life is *mixed* with these beings to the extent that each of us is attached to an intimate associate from among them, and that the moral nature of our unseen companion reflects our own. To the extent that we turn toward or away from God, we do so together.

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Those among them who turn toward God are the brothers of those among us who do likewise, and those who turn away from Him are our enemies, potentially including even our own selves, if we so choose. They are the shayatīn, the servants of one sworn to mislead us into hell – except those whom God guides. Thus, the closing chapter of the Qur'an instructs:

Say: "I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind,
The Sovereign of mankind,
The God of mankind,
From the evil of the retreating whisperer
Who whispers into the breasts of mankind
From among the jinn and mankind. (114: 1-6)

Dr. 'Umar S. al-Ashqar, *The World of the Jinn & Devils* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005)

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Sahih Bukhari (New Delhi: Kitab Bhaven, 1984)

Sahih Muslim (Riyahd: Dar-us-Salaam, 2007)

ⁱ This event, in which a group of *jinn* converted to Islam upon hearing the Prophet Muhammad recite the Qur'an, is also mentioned in Surah 46:29-32

ⁱⁱ The phrase, *safihuna*, can be understood either in the singular ('our foolish one') or plural ('the foolish among us'), reflecting the relation between *Iblīs* (*the Shaytān* himself - 'our foolish one'), and the *shayātīn* (those who follow in his footsteps - 'the foolish among us').

ⁱⁱⁱ Here, it should be said that in an important sense, metaphors in Islam are not 'merely' metaphors. For more on this see: Edward Moad, "Al-Ghazali's Reflections on the Metaphysics of Metaphor in the Mishkat al-Anwar," *Sophia* 46 (2):163-175 (2007).