

Chapter 7 – Satan and Evil

Evil (*sharr*), as the opposite of good (*khair*) and as perpetrated by man, has been dealt with where we discussed individual and collective human conduct. Here we shall discuss the *principle* of evil, which the Qur'ān often personifies as Iblīs or Satan, although the latter personification is much weaker than the former: the Qur'ān, particularly in the Meccan *suras*, speaks frequently in the plural of "satans"—which sometimes also refer, probably metaphorically, to humans as well: "But when they [the hypocrites] are alone with their own satans" (2.al-Baqarah:14); "And even so have We appointed for every Messenger enemies, satans from among humans and the *jinn*" (6.al-An'ām:112).

But if the term "satans" is regarded as metaphorical with respect to humans, is it so also with regard to the *jinn*? In his useful but as yet unpublished study, *The Pneumatology of the Qur'ān* (which discusses angels, Satan, and *jinn*). Dr. Alford Welch reaches the conclusion in Chapter V that what the Qur'ān calls the "hordes of Iblīs [the Devil]" in 26.ash-Shu'arā':95 are the *jinn*, who say "We touched the heavens and found it full of intensive watch and shooting-stars. We used to take up secret positions in order to listen [to what transpired in heaven] but anyone who would try to listen now, will encounter a shooting-star guardman" (72.al-Jinn:8-9). This is so in view of the repeated statements of the Qur'ān that satans (in the plural) attempt stealthily to snatch news from heaven but are driven away (15.al-Ĥijr:17; 67.al-Mulk:5; 72.al-Jinn:8-9; etc.).

That the *jinn* is a creation more or less parallel to humankind except that the former are made of fire whereas the latter are made of "baked clay" is affirmed by the Qur'ān (7.al-A'rāf:12; 55.ar-Raĥmān:14-15). The Qur'ān also states (18.al-Kahf:50) that the Devil (Iblīs) was "of the *jinn* and he disobeyed the command of his Lord." Dr. Welch's view, therefore, does have some plausibility, provided it is made applicable only to some *jinn*, since the *jinn* are generally conceived of in the Qur'ān as a genre of creation parallel to man. God's messages are addressed to them also, though perhaps secondarily:

When We turned some of the *jinn* to you [O Muhammad!] in order to listen to the Qur'ān, when they attended to its [recitation], they said [to each other], Listen. And when it ended, they went back to their own people as warners, saying, O our people! We have heard a Book which has been sent down after Moses, confirming what has gone before it and guiding to the truth and the straight path. O our people! Respond to the Messenger of God and believe in him. God will pardon your sins and save you from a painful punishment. (46.al-Aĥqāf:29-31)

In *sura* 72.al-Jinn itself, where the *jinn* say that they *used* to overhear the transactions of the High Council in the heaven but that none can do so now (72.al-Jinn:8-9), they say at the very beginning of the *sura* that they have accepted the Qur'ān because of its excellent teaching. An interesting point is that both in this *sura* and in the passage we have quoted from *sura* 46.al-Aĥqāf, the Prophet himself is not represented as having heard or seen the *jinn* directly; it is God who informs him of what the *jinn* have said or done. Again, in *sura* 72.al-Jinn, from the *jinn*'s mouth, "Some of us are virtuous, while others are below this state" (72.al-Jinn:11), and, "When we listened to the Guidance [the Qur'ān], we believed in it. ... Some of us are Muslims [i.e., have surrendered ourselves to God's will], while others are unjust"

(72.al-Jinn:13-14). It is, therefore, difficult to believe that all or even most of the *jinn* are for the Qur'ān "the hordes of the Devil" or fallen angels—although the *jinn* do appear to be on the whole more prone to evil than is humankind.

There is no mention in the Qur'ān of any messengers having been sent to the *jinn* directly and from their own kind; from the fact that they believed in Moses and Muḥammad (PBUH), and the fact that they worked as slave-labor for Solomon (34.Saba':12, 14), it seems that, despite their fiery nature and much greater physical powers (including the ability to be invisible), they are not fundamentally different from men, except for their greater proneness to evil and stupidity. The Qur'ān often addresses them or otherwise couples them together with humans (6.al-An'ām:130; 7.al-A'rāf:38, 179; 17.al-Isrā':88; 27.an-Naml:17; 41.Fuṣṣilat:25, 29; 46.al-Aḥqāf:18; 55.ar-Raḥmān:33, 39, 56, 74). From 34.Saba':41 and 6.al-An'ām:100 it is clear that before Islam at least some Arabs worshiped the *jinn* and from 15.al-Ḥijr:27 as well as from 7.al-A'rāf:38 that the *jinn* antedate the creation of man. Could the *jinn* represent some earlier stage in the course of evolution? Be that as it may, mention of the *jinn* ceases in the Madinan period of the Qur'ān, which continues to call itself "guidance for man" and, in fact, never addresses the *jinn* primarily, or even directly. (As we have said, even in the two passages where the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, the Prophet himself did not experience them but the Qur'ān reported to him about it.

As for Satan or the Devil, as we underlined in Chapter II in connection with the story of the creation of Adam, as such he is a contemporary of man even though he had been there before Adam in the form of a *jinn*. This points to a fundamental moral fact, that the struggle between good and evil is reality for man and man alone. The Qur'ān, therefore, portrays Satan as a rebel against God's command but as rival and enemy of man rather than God, since God is beyond where the devil can touch him; it is man who is his aim, and it is man who can either conquer him or be vanquished by him. In metaphysical terms, therefore, Satan is not coordinate with God (as is the Zoroastrian Ahirman, the rival of Yazdān). Hence the constant Qur'ānic warnings to man that he has to struggle with Satan:

Satan caused them [Adam and Eve] to fall from it [the state of bliss] and be expelled from that [state] in which they had been, and We said to them [to Adam and Eve and Satan], Go down as mutual enemies. (2.al-Baqarah:36; cf. 7.al-A'rāf:22, 24)

O people! eat from the earth that which is good, clean, and lawful and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is to you a manifest enemy. (2.al-Baqarah:168)

O people! enter all of you into peace [i.e., the Islamic brotherhood] and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is your manifest enemy. (2.al-Baqarah:208; see also 6.al-An'ām:142)

Satan is a manifest enemy for man. (12.Yūsuf:5; 17.al-Isrā':53)

Do you take Satan and his progeny as [your] friends rather than Me, while they are your enemies? (18.al-Kahf:50)

Satan is your enemy, so take him as your enemy. (35.Fāṭir:6)

The most salient idea that one gets from the Qur'ān is that the activities of Satan are all-pervasive in the human sphere and that man must constantly be alert and on his guard. Whenever the human self relaxes its tension, it is liable to be preyed upon by Satan's "beguiling." Although every human is, to some extent and in principle, as it were, exposed to Satan's tempting or beguiling, people who have *taqwā* (i.e., are on guard against moral danger) do not really lapse into evil but become quickly aware of Satan's machinations. Thus, the Prophet is told, "Should a disturbance from Satan

invade you, seek refuge in God—God is hearing, knowing. Those who are on their guard, when a seductive glamor from Satan touches them, they [quickly] remember and thus *see* [once again]" (7.al-A‘rāf:200-201).

This means that the Devil's activity essentially consists in confusing a person and temporarily (or, in the case of evil people, almost permanently) clouding his inner senses. The Qur’ān is emphatic, however, that although no human is in principle totally immune from the touch of the Devil, he has really no sway over those who are on guard against an invasion of their moral integrity. Thus, God said to Satan, "Indeed, upon my servants you will be able to exercise no influence, but only those errant ones who follow you" (15.al-Ĥijr:42; cf. 17.al-Isrā’:65); again, "He has no authority over those who believe and put their faith in their Lord" (16.an-Nahl:99).

Satan's tentacles alone are not strong; it is only man's weakness and lack of moral courage and alertness that make Satan look so strong. According to the Qur’ān, Satan's beguiling activity is rooted in his desperation and utter lack of hope. In Chapter II we quoted Qur’ānic verses to the effect that lack of hope, just like its opposite (pride) is a satanic act. At first, Satan refused to bow down to Adam out of sheer pride, because he thought he was "superior" to Adam; when God condemned him for his pride, he became desperate and came to symbolize the lack of all hope:

God said, O Iblīs! Why were you not with those who bowed down [to Adam]? He replied, I am not going to bow to a human whom You have created from baked clay of dark mud that has been altered [in its nature]. God said, Out you go from the paradise, for you are cursed and my curse shall pursue you till the Day of Judgment. He replied, O my Lord! give me respite till the Day of Resurrection. God replied, You have the respite [i.e., you are free to indulge in your activity] till the day of the Appointed Time. He said, O my Lord! since You have condemned me, I shall also embellish for men [their evil deeds] on earth and shall [try to] lead all of them astray—except Your sincere servants.(15.al-Ĥijr:32-40)

This utter hopelessness is expressed by Satan in his desperate strategies to waylay man: "He [Iblīs] said [to God], "Now that You have condemned me to error, I shall waylay their [humans'] straight path to you. Then I shall approach them from their front and their back, their right and their left, so that You will not find most of them grateful [to You]" (7.al-A‘rāf:17).

Iblīs or Satan thus appears more cunning and artful than strong, more deceitful and contriving than forthrightly challenging, more beguiling, treacherous, and "waylaying" than giving battle. This is why he shall say on the Day of Judgment to those who will accuse him of leading them astray, "God made you a true promise whereas I made you a false promise. I had no power over you but only invited you [to error] and you accepted my invitation. Do not blame me but [only] yourselves. I cannot help you, nor can you help me. I declare void your associating me with God [as His peer]" (14.Ibrāheem:22). As I have said, Satan's power is ultimately to be construed in terms of the weakness of man, for he has little inherent strength. His master-stratagem consists in "embellishing" or "causing to look attractive" the dross of the world as tinsel, or causing to look burdensome or frightening that which is really fruitful and consequential: "Satan has caused to look attractive to them the [evil] deeds they had been perpetrating" (6.al-An‘ām:43); "Satan made their [evil] deeds look attractive in their eyes" (8.al-Anfāl:48; also 16.an-Nahl:63; 27.an-Naml:24; 29.al-‘Ankabūt:38; 47.Muḥammad:25); "It is only Satan who frightens his followers" (3.Āli ‘Imrān:175).

It is, therefore, up to man how much power Satan will have and we have discussed man's own weakness at some length in Chapter II. Satan himself is often described by the Qur'ān as a rebel against God (37.aṣ-Ṣāffāt:7; 22.al-Hajj:3; 4.an-Nisā':117), but this finally means nothing more than his desperation. We have already seen that he will admit at the final judgment the futility of his endeavors and that he had really no power over humans. The Qur'ān, indeed, says, "Satan promises them nothing except deceit" (17.al-Isrā':64; 4.an-Nisā':120), which obviously means that there is nothing solid in his "promises." Again, "The believers are fighting in the cause of God, while those who disbelieve are fighting in the cause of the Devil [*tāghūt*]; hence fight, O Muslims!, the friends of Satan, for the stratagem of Satan is weak!" (4.an-Nisā':76). From this conviction that evil is inherently weak and truth strong is born the invincible faith of the Qur'ān that falsehood and evil can and will be vanquished: "These people are the party of Satan—lo! the party of Satan shall be the losers" (58.al-Mujādilah:19); "It is the party of God that will be victorious" (5.al-Mā'idah:56); "God is pleased with them and they with God; these are the party of God—lo! it is the party of God that will be successful" (58.al-Mujādilah:22).

As we have already seen, then, Satan will betray his "friends" and leave them in the lurch. Further, "Satan *will* forsake man" (25.al-Furqān:29). Even in this life, after man has submitted to his machinations, Satan refuses to take any part of the responsibility upon himself: "Like Satan who [first] invites man to commit infidelity to God, but when man does so, says, 'I am quit of you, I fear God the Lord of the world' " (59.al-Hashr:16). It is not the strength of Satan, then, but the failure of man himself to show strength against Satan's blandishments, that constitutes the real threat to man. This tinsel so catches his heart and mind that he "gets lost" in the immediate and "forgets" the *ākhira*, the real, solid, long-range and consequential ends, the highest purposes. We saw in Chapter II how short-sighted and narrow-visioned man himself is—indeed, this was found there to be his main weakness. Now, we find that this is precisely what is exploited by Satan. In a sense, then, Satan is nothing but a force that strengthens the evil tendencies innate in man. When both join together, on the surface of it, the conjunction becomes impregnable. If he is to negate this powerful alliance, it becomes all the more important for man to consciously align himself with God in order to strengthen and develop the good tendencies that he carries in himself by nature.

Because of the treachery of Satan's cunning machinations and his ultimate sterility—because in effect, Satan's desperate efforts are counterproductive—man is frequently asked by the Qur'ān not to "follow the footsteps of Satan," presumably because these footsteps lead man nowhere except to self-destruction; Satan *is* the real enemy of man. These "footsteps" of Satan, therefore, mean any evil committed by man, whether it is wastefulness, corruption, war, or any other. "O people! eat of those lawful and good things that are in the earth [i.e., all things that are good to eat or drink], but do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is clearly your enemy" (2.al-Baqarah:168). Again:

Those are the losers who kill their children out of stupidity and without knowledge and who prohibit what God has given them by way of [good] food by falsely attributing things to God—they have got lost and are not apt to find guidance. And it is He Who has created gardens, terraced and untterraced, and date-palms and agricultural produce of different tastes and olives and pomegranates— [fruits] that both resemble each other and differ from each other; eat from this fruit when it matures but also give [to the needy their] share when you harvest it, and do not waste,

for God does not like the wasteful. [And He has created] from the cattle such as are for carrying burdens and such as are for riding—eat of that which God has given you as [good] food, but do not follow the footsteps of Satan for he is clearly your enemy. (6.al-An‘ām:140-142; cf. 17.al-Isrā’:27, Indeed, those who waste are Satan's brothers)

Similarly, on war, "O you who believe, enter into peace, all of you, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is your clear enemy. And should you lapse after clear signs have come to you, then you must know that God is mighty and wise" (2.al-Baqarah:208-209). After speaking about the attempts of the hypocrites to sow sedition among Muslims, the Qur‘ān talks about moral corruption, "O you who believe! do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for whosoever follows his footsteps, he commands [his followers to commit] obscenity and evil, and but for God's favor upon you and His mercy, none of you could ever be pure, but God purifies whomsoever He wills—He is hearing and knowing" (24.an-Nūr:21); cf. also, "O children of Adam! let not Satan seduce you, just as he caused your ancestors to be expelled from the Garden by rending away from them their clothing in order to expose their private parts—indeed, he and his ilk see you whence you do not see them; We have made satans friends of the unbelievers" (7.al-A‘rāf:27).

The idea that a human can or does follow the "footsteps" of the Devil has two main aspects. First, Satan never forces, nor can he force, anyone to do evil but he tries to entice or tempt the possible victim. His enticement consists in presenting the immediate superficial ends or tantalizations of this world's life in such a manner that many people are victimized, most of them temporarily but many permanently, these latter being termed the "friends" or the "party" of the Devil. Secondly, these footsteps lead nowhere but to the destruction of the victim, just as the footsteps of some contriver might lead a victim to a chasm. It is all-important for man to recognize the footsteps of Satan for what they are, otherwise it is extremely difficult, indeed impossible, for man to save himself from perdition. Thus, the real problem lies within man himself, for he is a blend of good and evil ignorance and knowledge, power and impotence (cf. the doctrine of human tensions described in Chapter II). The key to man's defense is *taqwā*, which literally means defense but which (see Chapter II), is a kind of inner light, a spiritual spark which man must light within himself to distinguish between right and wrong, seeming and real immediate and lasting, etc. Once a human does this—and *taqwā* is, of course, capable of gradations—he should be able to see Satan's footsteps for what they are and not be beguiled by them.

The fact that man does carry within himself evil tendencies as well as good tendencies distinguishes him from angels, who are free from evil tendencies and are automatically "good," and puts him close to the *jinn* although the *jinn* are more prone to evil than he is. In any case, there is a struggle between these two trends in man. But the evil trend does become very strong through the objective fact of the existence of Satan, whose machinations have myriad forms (including creation in man of placidity and self-satisfaction in his own virtue) and who, because of man's innate tendency toward the easy and the immediate (compounded further by his dangerous capacity for self-deception), is able to dress up evil as good before him; thus Satan can all but destroy the capacity for inner vision of man described by the Qur‘ān as *taqwā*.

It is this conjunction of the evil in man and an objective Satan that makes it necessary for man to join God or ask for God's help. For the Qur‘ān, God not only helps but promises that His side or party is going to win eventually: "Those who side with God and his Prophet are the believers, God's party shall be the victorious one"

(5.al-Mā'idah:56), even as we saw earlier that the "party of Satan will be the losers (58.al-Mujādilah:19).

This idea of a subjective and an objective evil, as the opposites of a subjective and an objective good, means that the existence of Satan must be objective. As we said at the beginning of this discussion, however, although Satan does not exist "in" man except metaphorically, he is nevertheless a coeval of man, since before Adam there was no Satan and there can be no Satan independent of human nature. Moreover, the workings of Satan are "in" man inasmuch as he affects man's mind through suggestion, temptation, and "invitation": "So Satan whispered into their mind [i.e., the minds of Adam and Eve, to tempt them to the forbidden tree]" (7.al-A'rāf:20; also 20.Ṭā Hā:120; 23.al-Mu'minūn:97). But the mind of man (or rather, his lower instincts) is also represented as "whispering" to man (50.Qāf:16). Indeed, man's lower instincts are spoken of as not only tempting him to evil but "commanding" him to commit evil: "[Joseph said], I do not acquit myself [of almost being tempted by the Egyptian woman] for the [lower] self ever command evil except insofar as my Lord has mercy [and saves His servants]; indeed, my Lord is pardoning and merciful (12.Yūsuf:53). On the basis these and similar verses, some Muslim thinkers, particularly many Sufis, have been of the view that Satan is really "in" man, or is identical with the negative self of man, but probably such verses are to be interpreted as meaning that when the potential evil in man is powerfully aroused by an external evil force, the combination is a veritable "commanding" i.e., a well-nigh irresistible reality.

The question whether Satan is the objective principle of evil or is a "person" is, however, more difficult to answer. Certainly, evil is usually personalized, particularly in connection with the story of Adam, where his proper name is mentioned as Iblīs: Iblīs not only disobeyed God and refused to honor Adam but engaged in a fairly lengthy controversy with God. But later, when Adam and Eve are tempted to eat of the forbidden fruit, their tempter is termed not Iblīs but Satan, the normal term for the evil principle, and since the story of the creation and fall of Adam are obviously presented in a dramatized form, it is a question whether the Qur'ān is speaking literally there of "persons." Besides the story of Adam (38.Ṣād:74-75; 20.Ṭā Hā:116; 18.al-Kahf:50; 17.al-Isrā':61; 15.al-Hijr:31-32; 7.al-A'rāf:11; 2.al-Baqarah:34), the term Iblīs also appears in 26.ash-Shu'arā':95: "They [those who are being worshipped as God's partners] and the erring ones [those who worship the former] shall be hurled therein [into Hell], and all the hordes of Iblīs" (here "the hordes" is probably used metaphorically to include both evil *jinn* and men), and, again, in 34.Saba':20: "Iblīs had correctly judged them [to be his victims], for they did follow him except a group of believers" (the reference is to the people of South Arabia, who were afflicted with the flood of 'Arim and subsequent trials). In this second instance, too, the term Satan (*Shaiṭān*) could well have been substituted for the term Iblīs, since Iblīs is used in a much less emphatically personal sense than in the passages connected with Adam's story.

As for the term *Shaiṭān*, although it is usually employed in the singular, the plural usage is by no means rare. The usage in the plural is in certain cases obviously metaphorical, as in the phrase "satans of humans and *jinn*" (6.al-An'ām:112); or "When they [the hypocrites] meet with those who believe, they say, We [too] believe, but when they are alone with their [own] satans [co-hypocrites], they say, We are with you, we are only joking [with Muslims]" (2.al-Baqarah:14); indeed, "And by your Lord! We shall certainly gather them [those who deny the reality of resurrection] and the satans" (19.Maryam:68). Because Satan, in the singular, was given "respite" by

God until the Last Day to allow him to pursue his work so that there should apparently be no question of his resurrection. [Note that the term "gathering [*hashr*] used in connection with the last Judgment *means* resurrection.]

There are many contexts in which "satans" in the plural cannot be taken metaphorically, however, as: "Indeed, they [the disbelievers] have taken satans as their lords [or friends] to the exclusion of God" (7.al-A'rāf:30); or 7.al-A'rāf:27, "We have made satans friends for those who do not believe." Again, some satans did pearl diving for Solomon, besides undertaking other works (21.al-Anbiyā':82); although here most probably evil *jinn* are meant, since *jinn* served Solomon (27.an-Naml:17).

Indeed, some people—particularly poets who indulged in extravagant image-mongering—received messages from satans, from whom the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) was immune (despite the fact that no human, including all the prophets, are in principle immune from the approach of Satan), as we read towards the end of *sura* 26.ash-Shu'arā': "Satans have not brought it [the Qur'ān] down nor does it behoove them to do so, nor yet can they do it—they are barred from hearing it [i.e., when the Trusted Spirit or the Angelic nature reads it mentally to the Prophet, cf. Chapter V]" (26.ash-Shu'arā':210-212). Further, "Shall I inform you of those upon whom satans descend? They descend upon every liar and sinful person. They listen eagerly [to the voice from the Unseen] but mostly they are liars. As for poets, the erring ones follow them. Do you not see that they wander unbridled in every valley? And they say what they do not do?—except those who believe and do good deeds" (26.ash-Shu'arā':221-227). Just as God reveals His Message to His prophets, so satans send messages to their wicked followers; and just as prophets draw strength from contact with the divine, so the wicked draw their strength from satans, except that this strength, not founded upon truth, is unreal in the sense that it cannot withstand the divine strength and thus is *bāṭil*, i.e., both false and defeatable.

Another name used by the Qur'ān for objective evil is *ṭāghūt*, which apparently means simply the evil or ungodly principle (39.az-Zumar:17; 16.an-Naḥl:36; 2.al-Baqarah:256-257; 4.an-Nisā':51, 60, 76; 5.al-Mā'idah:60—in 2.al-Baqarah:257 it is used with the plural meaning). This term begins to occur in the later Meccan years, where it occurs twice, and persists through the Madinan period, whereas the name Iblīs occurs almost entirely in Mecca and there is only one early Madinan mention of it (2.al-Baqarah:34). As for *Shaiṭān*, probably all of its *non-metaphorical plural* occurrences are also in Mecca (for it is possible to take 2.al-Baqarah:102, as well as 2.al-Baqarah:14—both early Madinan—metaphorically). Thus, in Madina, Iblīs disappears, as does the plural of *Shaiṭān*; *Shaiṭān* or Satan (in the singular) remains, while at the same time the use of *ṭāghūt* becomes relatively more frequent. *Ṭāghūt* appears to be the objective ungodly principle rather than a person. Satan may well be the same. On the other hand, it is also possible to hold that evil is the force or principle of ungodliness and vice, but that when it becomes related to or affects a given individual, it becomes "personalized" as Satan. (This is not analogous with angels, for angels are not only spoken of throughout the Qur'ān in the singular and plural as persons but some also have names [2.al-Baqarah:98], although it is possible to argue that *Jibrīl* and *Mikhāl* are not angels, but supra-angelic spirits, as, indeed, we have actually held with regard to *Jibrīl* (Gabriel) while discussing the issue of the agency of Revelation, since it is not identified with any angel in the Qur'ān.)