

ON QUR'ANIC JINN

Edmund Teuma O.F.M. Conv.

Going through the stories of **"A Thousand and One Nights"** and other Arabian folk tales, one encounters many fantastic and mythological figures, such as: **jinn, ghûl, si 'lât, 'ifrit**, etc. Each region from Morocco to Persia has its own particular tales which project the intense popular belief in such spiritual beings.

Of these beings the Qur'ân mentions only the **jinn**. The word **'ifrit** is used only once in the Holy Book of Islâm: **"An efreet of the jinns said, 'I will bring it to thee...'"** (Q. 27, 39). It appears that **'ifrit** is not a particular category of spiritual being, but it is a quality applied to a being be it man or spirit. Lane defines **'ifrit** any person **"insolent and audacious in pride and in acts of rebellion or disobedience, who rolls his adversary in the dust."** He thus connects the word **'ifrit** (plu. **'afârit**) with **'afar**, meaning **dust**, and holds that both these words are derived from the verb **'afara**, meaning: **to rub with dust, to roll someone in the dust; and by extension: to bring someone low, i.e. to insult, to offend someone.** In the case of Q. 27, 39 authors agree that the expression **"an efreet of the jinns"** simply means **"a wicked jinnî."**

Since the **jinn**, spiritual intelligent beings non-angels and non-humans, are mentioned in the Qur'ân, they constitute a serious theological problem. What are they really? What can we say about the God-jinn relationship?

In the present study we shall try to find an answer to these and other questions. But we do not pretend to give an adequate and final interpretation of the existential nature of **jinn** resulting from some modern exegetical conclusion. For the time being we shall content ourselves by what classical Muslim exegetes of the Qur'ân have to say regarding **jinnî** beings. In some later date, God willing, we shall perhaps be in a position to make our own attempt to provide a more adequate and modern interpretation.

a) CREATION OF JINN

The very first relationship that the Qur'ân establishes between God and **jinn** are God's creatures:

"And the jânn created We before of fire flaming" (Q. 15, 27);

"And He created the jânn of a smokeless fire" (Q. 55, 15).

There are three possible interpretations of the word **"jânn"** as presented in this context:

(a) It might be interpreted to mean **Iblîs**, who, according to a number of scholars, is the father of the **jinn**. To collaborate this opinion there is Q. 7, 12 where **Iblîs** says to God: **"I am better than he (Adam); Thou**

createst me of fire..." *Râzi* holds that this is the opinion of the majority¹.

(b) "Jânn" might stand on the same level as "jinn", representing another name of species (*Baydâwi, Alûsi*).

(c) *Alûsi* alone gives the possibility that "jânn" might indicate: "the father of the jinn other than Iblîs" (*Mujâhid's* opinion)².

From Q. 15, 27 it is clear that the first jinnî was created before Adam, the first human being. Thus Q. 15, 27 is the continuation of Q. 15, 26 which says: "Surely We created man of clay of mud moulded." This is agreed upon by all the commentators.

According to Q. 15, 27 the jânn was created of fire flaming (*min nâri l-samûm*). There are two general explanations of "samûm": (a) fire (*Tabarî*); (b) a hot wind that kills (*Tabarî, Alûsi*). But these two general opinions are given various elucidating interpretations. *Alûsi* adds to the notion of "fire flame" the other notion of "fire without smoke from which thunderbolts are generated"³. *Zamakhsharî* and *Baydâwi* explain "the hot wind that kills" by "an extremely hot fire which penetrates the pores of the skin"⁴. *Râzi* says that "samûn" is the hot wind that blows during the day or during the night, but according to tradition it also indicates the burning force of jahannam (hell)⁵. But the noun "samûm" seems to be linked with the power of this particular wind to penetrate the pores of the body (*Râzi, Alûsi*). There is also a strict connection between this wind and poison when the samûm blows in it.

In Q. 55, 15, however, it is said that the "jânn" was created from a smokeless fire (*min mârijin min nârin*). "Mârij" has two possible contrary meanings: (a) a fire blended with smoke; (b) a pure fire. The second meaning is more probable⁶. *Tabarî* speaks of fire tongues which are the better part of fire, and of a mixture of red, yellow and green flames⁷. But the most simple option of all is perhaps that which defines "mârij" as: "pure flames in which there is no smoke"⁸. These two Qur'anic verses want to show that fire is related to the jinn just as clay is related to mankind. Essentially both verses repeat one another. *Râzi* tries to draw a parallel conclusion: "Adam, the first among mankind, was created from dry clay, but those who came after him were created from his loins. It is the same with jinn: the first jinnî was created from fire, while those who followed him were created from mârij"⁹. This distinction between the first jinnî, presumably Iblîs, and the rest of the jinn is a result

1. *Râzi*, vol. 19, pp. 180-181.

2. *Alûsi*, vol. 27, p. 91.

3. *Alûsi*, vol. 14, pp. 32-33.

4. *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 2, p. 449; *Baydâwi*, vol. 1, pp. 647-648.

5. *Râzi*, vol. 19, p. 181.

6. *Râzi*, vol. 29, pp. 98-99.

7. *Tabarî*, vol. 27, pp. 125-127.

8. *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 4, p. 354; *Baydâwi*, vol. 2, p. 484; *Alûsi*, vol. 27, p. 91.

9. *Râzi*, vol. 29, pp. 98-99.

of an opinion advanced by Ibn 'Abbâs in which he says that Iblîs, being an angel, was created from fire flaming (*min nârî l-samûm*), while the *jinn* which are recorded in the Qur'ân were created from a smokeless fire (*min mârijîn min nârin*)¹⁰. If this is true, then the word "jann" in Q. 15, 27 would stand for the first *jinnî*, while the same word in Q. 55, 15 would stand for the whole species of *jinn*.

b) EXISTENTIAL NATURE OF JINN

Once it is established that the *jinn* were created from fire, we should now take a look into the existential problem of their species. Alûsî says that *jinn* are intelligent beings in which the fiery element is prevalent, just as dust is prevalent in the human constitution. Because of the *jinn*'s ability to shape their invisible nature in different forms, it is thought that air together with fire is one of the first principles of their nature¹¹. But owing to the *jinn*'s similarity with angels, some think that, like the angels, they are composed of all four elements. When they are seen they do not appear in their original forms, except when they enter into contact with the prophets or with other privileged people. It is perhaps this affirmation that induced those philosophers who believe in the existence of *jinn* to define these spiritual beings as essences subsisting in themselves deprived of accident. Of course, no Muslim commentator holds that the *jinn* are on an equal footing with God. Their non-bodily existence is something negative, and what is more, they are of different natures: some are good, others are bad; some are strong, others are weak. No one knows their number, their sorts and qualities but God.

Nevertheless, scholars discuss at length about the quality of the *jinnî* body: whether it is dense or subtle. If it is dense, how is it said that they are stronger than man?¹². Others retain that the *jinn* are pure spirits with no bodies whatsoever. Anyhow, the believers in spiritual existence, the ancient philosophers, and those who believe in *jinn* agree to call the *jinn* "lower spirits" (*al-arwâh al-sufliyya*). These lower spirits are said to be more tractable than the "celestial spirits" (*al-arwâh al-falakiyya*), but they are weaker.

Other curious theories about the *jinn* follow: it may be possible that among the different sorts of *jinn* there are those who are able to perform difficult acts which man is unable to perform. It is also possible that each sort of *jinn* is attached to a special kind of earthly bodies. It is thought

10. *Tabarî*, vol. 14, pp. 30-31.

11. *Baydâwî*, vol. 2, p. 553.

12. *Râzî*, vol. 26, pp. 210-211, where it is also said: "*Al-Jubbâ'î* asserts that their bodies are not dense and he holds that people used to see them during Solomon's time, but when Solomon died God killed those *jinn* and satans and He created another type of *jinn* and satans with their bodies extremely subtle and with no strength at all."

that when human souls and rational spirits separate from their bodies, they increase in strength, and when they meet another body which resembles the body which they separated from, they get attached to it. This spirit would thus become the helper of the spirit of the body it attached itself to. The person in question would then turn out to be a sort of medium. Now, if the attachment takes place between two good spirits, the helper would be called an angel and the assistance given, inspiration. If, on the contrary, it verifies itself between two bad spirits, then the helper would be a satan, while the assistance imparted, temptation¹³.

The major part of philosophers, however, reject the existence of *jinn*. Reference is made by the commentators to the opinion of **Abû 'Alî b. Sinâ** (Avicenna), who in his "*Risâla fi hudûd al-ashyâ'*"¹⁴ says that the *jinn* are airy animals fashioned in different forms. According to Avicenna the reality "*jinn*" does not have an external existence — it is only an idea which exists in the mind (*sine fundamento in re*)¹⁵.

c) THE JINN FEARED

But notwithstanding the theoretical disowning of *jinn* by many philosophers, and backed by the theoretical demonstration of their "real" existence by some others, popular piety, highly susceptible to superstition, remained attached to the invisible world of the spirits, be they lower or celestial. Owing to the mysterious character of their supposed existence, the *jinn* were soon allotted grades and power which, from the orthodox point of view are proper to God alone. Q. 6, 100; 34, 41; 37, 158; and 72, 6 contain accusations against "unbelievers" who trusted in *jinn* to such a point that they ascribed to them certain omnipotent protective powers, forgetting, at the same time, that the *jinn* are merely God's creatures.

"Yet they ascribe to God, as associates, the *jinn*, though He created them; and they impute to Him sons and daughters without any knowledge. Glory be to Him!" (Q. 6, 100). It is clear that the upgrading of the *jinn* to the level of God's associates is as abominable as imputing to Him sons and daughters. What is not clear, however, is what exactly is meant by "*jinn*" in this context. Some say it refers to the angels whom the polytheists among the *Quraysh* used to serve, believing that they were God's

13. *Râzi*, vol. 13, pp. 154-156.

14. The title of Avicenna's book is reported in different ways in different sources. GAL, supp. I, p. 819 gives: "*Risâla fi hudûd al-ashyâ' wa-rusûmiha*." According to Goichon the more ancient manuscripts have "*kitâb*" instead of "*risâla*" in the title. For more details cfr. Goichon, p.v. Avicenna's own definition in Arabic is this: "*Haddu l-jinni hawq hayawdnun hawâ'yyun nâtiqun mushaffu l-jirmi min sha'nihi 'an yatashakkala bl-'ashkâlin mukhtalifatin wa-laysa hâdhâ rasmahu bal ma 'nâ 'smihi*."

15. *Baydâwî*, vol. 1, pp. 647-648; *Alûsî*, vol. 14, pp. 32-33; vol. 29, p. 82; *Râzi*, vol. 30, pp. 148-151.

daughters¹⁶. Others think that "jinn" refers to satans, whom the *kuffâr* used to obey, thus disobeying God and assigning to Him partners. Still others believe that, in this context, by "jinn" the Qur'ân means "Iblîs". If this is true, then the verse would have been written in polemic against the dualists (*al-zanâdiqa*) who held that God and Iblîs were brothers: God is the origin of light and good, while Iblîs is the origin of darkness and evil. *Râzî* opts for this opinion, but he says that in this case the word "*al-zanâdiqa*" refers to the adherents to Mazdaism (*al-majûs*) who hold that every good thing is originated from *Yazdân*, and every bad thing from *Abraham*, thus falling into dualism¹⁷. Making a final balance, one would say that in Q. 6,100 three are the categories of people that are condemned:

- (a) those who superstitiously believe in the absolute power of the jinn;
- (b) the Jews who said that 'Uzayr (Ezra) is the son of God¹⁸;
- (c) the Christians who say that the Messiah is the Son of God¹⁹.

What has been said of Q. 6,100 holds also for Q. 37, 158 which is a parallel verse. "They have set up a kinship between Him and the jinna; and the jinna know that they shall be arraigned." Commentators discuss about the pronoun "they" of "they shall be arraigned": does it refer to the *kâfirûn* or to the *jinna* themselves? Perhaps it refers to both, for both the *kâfirûn* who obeyed the *jinn*, and the *jinn* who led men astray are to be arraigned to the Fire²⁰. In this way this verse would find an echoing answer in Q. 34, 41, which, by the way, makes a clear distinction between angels and *jinn*. On the Day of Judgment the angels will reply to God's quest: "Was it you these were serving?" (Q. 34, 40). "They shall say, 'Glory be to Thee! Thou art our Protector, apart from them; nay rather, they were serving the *jinn*; most of them believed in them.'" (Q. 34, 41)²¹. In this context "serving the *jinn*" might rightly amount to "adoring the *jinn* as gods." In fact *Zamakhsharî* says that the satans used to fabricate

16. Some of the *Quraysh* believed that God had a marital relationship with the females of the *jinn*, and from this relationship the angels were born. In *Montgomery Watt, Islâm*, p. 44 it is stated that the phrase "daughters of God" should not be taken in the personal sense given to it in the Greek conception, and therefore it means no more than "beings sharing in the divine character."
17. The word "*zanâdiqa*" may mean "free-thinkers or atheists", but it is clear that in this context it stands for "dualists".
18. See: Q. 9,30. The fact here mentioned is not historically verifiable.
19. *Tabarî*, vol. 7, pp. 296-298; *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 2, p. 41; *Râzî*, vol. 13, pp. 112-117; *Baydâwî*, vol. 1, p. 394; *Alûsî*, vol. 7, p. 209; *al-Manâr*, vol. 7, pp. 645-646.
20. *Tabarî*, vol. 23, pp. 107-109; *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 4, p. 49; *Râzî*, vol. 26, p. 168; *Baydâwî*, vol. 2, p. 335; *Alûsî*, vol. 23, pp. 137-138.
21. The angels are generally depicted in the Qur'ân as creatures ever faithful to God (see: Q. 4,172), while the *jinn* are not always that faithful. But the Book makes it clear that *jinn*, like mankind, were created exclusively to serve God (see: Q. 51,56). See also: *Izutsu, God & man...*, p. 17.

for the people images of *jinn* people and they used to make people believe that they were images of angels and as such worthy of adoration²². Moreover, the satans used to enter inside the idols and get adored themselves²³. Or, as *Baydâwî* puts it, *jinn* used to appear to people and make them believe they were angels, and the people, used to adore what they believed was an angel²⁴.

In other verses, however, other aspects of believing in *jinn* and serving them come into evidence. "Then their friends among mankind will say, 'Our Lord, we have profited each of the other'..." (Q. 6, 128). It is thought that in times of fear the *Jâhiliyya* people used to seek refuge with *jinn* leaders against harm. That is, man used to profit from the *jinn* by securing protection, while the *jinn* used to profit of man's fear, increasing their tyranny on mankind²⁵. This is further illustrated in Q. 72, 6: "But there were certain men of mankind who would take refuge with certain men of the *jinn*, and they increased them in vileness." Now it is known that in the Qur'anic and Islamic mentality, refuge taking is something totally reserved to God. God alone can protect His creatures, and God's creatures are duty bound to seek protection from Him alone in times of peril²⁶. From what follows after this verse it becomes clear that the *jinn* were not only usurping God's rights as Creator, but were also trying to seduce people, making them believe "that God would never raise up anyone" (Q. 72, 7). That is, God would never send any prophets to mankind, neither would He resurrect anyone after death²⁷. One has to note that in Arabic the verb: *ba'atha* means both to send, and to resurrect from death. The pun is therefore alluding to the sending of Messengers and Prophets, especially of Muhammed, and to the Resurrection of the Body in the Day of Judgment. These are two of the principal dogmas of Islâm.

In this study we have mostly seen in what way the *jinn* are related to God. First and foremost, in order of property, they are God's creatures, too mysterious to be fully comprehended by the human mind. We have also said that owing to their invisible quality, popular piety, in no way free from superstition, allotted to them certain magical powers and made of them a class of semi-gods. Following that, therefore, the *jinn* acquired an improper and blasphemous relationship with the Most High

22. See: *Fahd*, pp. 78-84, where the author speaks about the connection between pagan deities, especially *al-Jadd*, and belief in *jinn*. See also: *Rodinson*, pp. 96-97, 104...

23. *Zamakhshari*, vol. 3, p. 464.

24. *Raydâwî*, vol. 2, p. 293; *Râzi*, vol. 25, p. 265; *Alûsî*, vol. 22, p. 140.

25. *Tabari*, vol. 8, pp. 33-34; *Zamakhshari*, vol. 2, pp. 50-52; *Râzi*, vol. 13, p. 191; *Baydâwî*, vol. 1, p. 402; *Alûsî*, vol. 8, pp. 22-23; *al-Manâr*, vol. 8, p. 66.

26. Cfr. the two 'refugetaking' sûra-s (Q. 113 and 114); for more details on this type of devotion cfr. *Padwick*, pp. 83-93.

27. *Alûsî*, vol. 29, pp. 85-86; *Tabari*, vol. 29, pp. 107-109; *Zamakhshari*, vol. 4, pp. 498-499; *Râzi*, vol. 30, p. 156; *Raydâwî*, vol. 2, pp. 553-554.

(*shirk*: the sin of association). We said nothing about the good *jinn*. But about the bad *jinn* we said that they profited of the sin of association and increased their insolence towards God and their oppression upon mankind. Their insolence and oppression are highly condemned by the Qur'ân which, even in this sphere, proves itself to be an unwavering defender of the Oneness of God. Spiritual beings though the *jinn* are, they are but mere creatures. Since they are intelligent beings they are morally responsible and will surely be punished for their abominable actions.

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b) *Secondary sources:*

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