ON QUR’ANIC JINN

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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, ghul, si ‘lat, ‘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 Islam: “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 jinni.”

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 jinni beings. In some later cate, 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 ja‘nn created We before of fire flaming” (Q. 15, 27);
“And He created the ja‘nn of a smokeless fire” (Q. 55, 15).

There are three possible interpretations of the word “ja‘nn” as presented in this context:

(a) It might be interpreted to mean Iblis, who, according to a number of scholars, is the father of the jinn. To collaborate this opinion there is Q. 7, 12 where Iblis says to God: “I am better than he (Adam); Thou
createst me of fire...” Ṭāzī holds that this is the opinion of the majority³.

(b) “Jānn” might stand on the same level as “jinn”, representing another name of species (Baydāwī, Alūsī).

(c) Alūsī alone gives the possibility that “jānn” might indicate: “the father of the jinn other than Iblīs” (Mujāhid’s opinion)².

From Q. 15, 27 it is clear that the first jinni 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 jānn was created of fire flaming (min nāri l-samūm). There are two general explanations of “samūm”: (a) fire (Tabarī); (b) a hot wind that kills (Tabarī, Alūsī). But these two general opinions are given various elucidating interpretations. Alūsī adds to the notion of “fire flame” the other notion of “fire without smoke from which thunderbolts are generated”⁴. Zamakhsharī and Baydāwī explain “the hot wind that kills” by “an extremely hot fire which penetrates the pores of the skin”⁵. Ṭāzī says that “samūn” 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)⁶. But the noun “samūm” seems to be linked with the power of this particular wind to penetrate the pores of the body (Ṭāzī, Alūsī). There is also a strict connection between this wind and poison when the samūm blows in it.

In Q. 55, 15, however, it is said that the “jānn” was created from a smokeless fire (min mārijīn min nārin). “Marij” has two possible contrary meanings: (a) a fire blended with smoke; (b) a pure fire. The second meaning is more probable⁷. Tabarī speaks of fire tongues which are the better part of fire, and of a mixture of red, yellow and green flames⁸. But the most simple option of all is perhaps that which defines “mārij” as: “pure flames in which there is no smoke”⁹. These two Qur’ānic verses want to show that fire is related to the jinn just as clay is related to mankind. Essentially both verses repeat one another. Ṭāzī 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 jinni was created from fire, while those who followed him were created from mārij”¹⁰. This distinction between the first jinni, presumably Iblīs, and the rest of the jinn is a result.

of an opinion advanced by Ibn ‘Abbās in which he says that Iblis, being an angel, was created from fire flaming (min nārī l-samūm), while the jinn which are recorded in the Qur’ān were created from a smokeless fire (min mārijīn min nārīn). If this is true, then the word “jinn” in Q. 15, 27 would stand for the first jinni, 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. Alūsī 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 nature. 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 jinni body: whether it is dense or subtle. If it is dense, how is it said that they are stronger than man? 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-arvāh al-sufliyya). These lower spirits are said to be more tractable than the “celestial spirits” (al-arvāh 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.

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, temptation.

The major part of philosophers, however, reject the existence of jinn. Reference is made by the commentators to the opinion of Abū 'Ali b. Sīnā (Avicenna), who in his “Risāla fi hudūd al-ashyā’” 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).

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

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daugthers. 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 dualism. 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 God;
(c) the Christians who say that the Messiah is the Son of God.

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 Fire. 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 Juçgment 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). In this context “serving the jinn” might rightly amount to “adoring the jinn as gods.” In fact Zamakhshari 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.
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: Isutsu, God & man..., p. 17.
for the people images of jinni people and they used to make people believe that they were images of angels and as such worthy of adoration\textsuperscript{22}. Moreover, the satans used to enter inside the idols and get adored themselves\textsuperscript{23}. Or, as Baydawi 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 angel\textsuperscript{24}.

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 Jāhiliyya people used to seek refuge with jinni 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 mankind\textsuperscript{25}. 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'ānic 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 peril\textsuperscript{26}. 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 death\textsuperscript{27}. 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 Islām.

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

\textsuperscript{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...

\textsuperscript{23} Zamakhshari, vol. 3, p. 464.


\textsuperscript{26} Cfr. the two "refugetaking" sûra-s (Q. 113 and 114); for more details on this type of devotion cfr. Padwick, pp. 89-93.

(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.

a) Primary sources:
Al-Âlūsî, Abû al-Thani' Mahmud Shihâb al-Dîn, Râh al-ma 'anî, Misr, Idâra al-tibû 'a al-muniriyya, 1926 (30 vols.)

b) Secondary sources:
Izutsu, Toshihiko, God and man in the Koran: semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung..., Tokyo, Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic studies, 1964.