

# SOME QUR'ÂNIC EXEGESIS: PROPHET SOLOMON & THE JINN

Edmund Teuma, O.F.M. Conv.

The only prophet, besides Muhammad, about whom the Qur'ân declares that he had some kind of communication with the *jinn*, was Solomon: "*And his hosts were mustered to Solomon, jinn, men and birds; duly disposed. . .*" (Q. 27,17). Solomon had dominion over them and they rendered him servitude by God's order: ". . . *And of the jinn, some worked before him by the leave of his Lord; and such of them as swerved away from Our commandment, We would let them taste the chastisement of the Blaze*" (Q. 34,12).<sup>(1)</sup> This was one of the gifts the Lord gave to the son of David.<sup>(2)</sup> From Q. 38,37 it is known that the *jinn* subjected to Solomon were builders and divers. They used to build for him any construction he liked and they used to dive for pearls, so that Solomon is said to be the first one ever to draw pearls out of the sea.<sup>(3)</sup> Q. 34,13 is more specific: "*fashioning for him whatsoever he would — places of worship, statues, porringers like water-troughs, and anchored cooking-pots*".<sup>(4)</sup> The "*places of worship*" have been described as "*fortified castles and noble mosques*", and they are called "*mahârîb* (plu. of *mihrâb*) because they were defended by means of war (*harb*). The statues which the *jinn* worked were images of angels and prophets, made of copper, brass, glass, and marble. They were accustomed to hang them in temples so that people may pray and perform adoration

EDMUND TEUMA, O.F.M. Conv., was born in 1948 and ordained priest in 1974. He read Theology at the 'Istituto Teologico Sant'Antonio' in Padua, Italy, and Hebrew and Semitic languages at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. In 1974, he obtained his S.Th.B. from the Pontifical Theological Faculty "San Bonaventura", Rome, and a Diploma in Librarianship from the Vatican School of librarian sciences. He obtained also a double licentiate in Arabic and Islamic studies from the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies, Rome, in 1978. He is a Visiting Lecturer in Islamics at the Faculty of Theology, Malta.

1. Cfr. also Qur'ân 38,37.

2. Cfr. Q. 38,39; other gifts granted by God to Solomon were: the subjection of the wind (Q. 21,81; 34,12; 38,35–36); the fount of molten brass (Q. 34,12); the speech of birds, which the Prophet inherited from his father (Q. 34,16); this speech of ants (Q. 27,18–19); besides judgment and knowledge (Q. 21,79; 21,81; 27,15). For a parallel Biblical text cfr. I Kings, ch. 4–5 where the greatness and glory of Solomon are extolled.

3. Al-Zamakhsharî, Abû al-Qâsim Mahmûd b. 'Umar, *al-Kashshâf 'an haqâ'iq al-tanzîl*, Misr (Cairo), al-Maktaba al-tijâriyya al-kubrâ, 1933, IV 74–75.

4. For a parallel Biblical text cfr. Qohelet 2, 4–10.

directed towards them as though they were the “*qibla*”.<sup>(5)</sup> This means that the prohibition of statues is a relatively recent law. Moreover, it is narrated that the *jinn* worked for Solomon two lions at the base of his throne and two eagles on top of it; when he wanted to be lifted the lions spread their forefeet, and when he sat down the eagles overshadowed him with their wings.<sup>(6)</sup>

When one confronts the story of Solomon with Q. 23,97: “*I take refuge in Thee from the evil suggestions of the satans, and I take refuge in Thee, o my Lord, lest they attend me*”; one cannot help asking: how is it that Solomon sought this sort of commerce with *jinn*? First of all we have to observe that not all the *jinn* were under Solomon’s command: “*and of the jinn, some worked before him. . .*” (Q. 34,12). Secondly, it was God himself who permitted that Solomon was not afraid of the *jinn*. It was the Lord who gave His Prophet strength to subject the *jinn* and make workers out of them.<sup>(7)</sup> This subjection of the *jinn* to Solomon was considered a punishment for them. The reason of the punishment, however, remains unmentioned: “. . . *the jinn saw clearly that, had they only known the Unseen (al-*gayb*), they would not have continued in the humbling chastisement*” (Q. 34,14). In fact Q. 38,38: “*and others (other jinn) also, coupled in fetters*” seems to allude to rebellious *jinn* who would not submit to Solomon’s orders since these orders weighed upon them because of their punishing tone. Some think that he used to tie their hands to their necks and to fetter them in the temples, that they might abstain from wickedness.<sup>(8)</sup> In normal circumstances a human being should beware of *jinn* and keep them off his life as much as possible, for communion with them might end up in corruption (Q. 23,97).<sup>(9)</sup> But since

5. “*Qibla*” means “direction”; here it refers to the direction one has to face when performing canonical or liturgical prayer. The official “*qibla*” of Islâm is the holy city of Mekka. In primitive Islâm it was Jerusalem, but then it was changed to Mekka by Muhammad himself following discord with the Jews.

6. Zamakhsharî, *al-Kashshâf* III 451–453; al-Baydâwî, ‘Abd Allâh b. ‘Umar b. Muhammad b. ‘Alî Abû al-Khayr Nâsir al-Dîn, *Anwâr al-tanzîl waasrâr al-ta’wîl*, Istanbul (no date) II 285–286.

7. “Shortly after his accession he was in a valley between Hebron and Jerusalem, when he received his authority over winds, water, demons, and animals from the four guardian angels in charge of these spheres. Each one gave him a jewel which he placed in a ring composed partly of brass and iron. With the brass he sealed his orders for the good *jinn*, while with the iron he sealed his orders for the evil *jinn*” . . . *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam edited on behalf of the Royal Netherlands Academy by H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers. . .*, Leiden, E.J. Brill; London, Luzac & Co., 1961, 549–551.

8. Zamakhsharî, *al-Kashshâf* IV 74–75. For a parallel Biblical text cfr. Zechariah 5, 7–8. *Aydhâb*, on the Red Sea, was assigned by him as a place of incarceration for the demons, cfr. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islâm* 549–551.

9. Apart from seducing man to serve idols, commentators agree that they also provided man with lustful desires and with ways and means to obtaining them. Cfr. Zamakhsharî, *al-Kashshâf* II 50–52; Baydâwî, *Anwâr al-tanzîl* I 462; Al-Alûsî, Abû al-Thanâ’ Mahmûd Shihâb al-Dîn, *Ruh al-ma’anî*, Misr (Cairo), Idâra al-tiba’a al-muniriyya, 1926, VIII 22–23; ‘Abduh, Muhammad; Ridâ, Rashîd, *Tafsîr al-Qur’ân al-hakîm (tafsîr al-manâr)*, al-Qâhira (Cairo), Dâr al-Manâr, 1934–42, VIII 66.

“some worked before him by the leave of his Lord”, Solomon’s relationship with the *jinn* could not have contained corruption, for it was God himself who willed it.<sup>(10)</sup>

As to the possible origin of the various elements composing the Solomon legend both in the Qur’ān and in the “Stories of the Prophets”,<sup>(11)</sup> it is said that they come from Jewish Targum and Midrash, and from Babylonian Talmud.<sup>(12)</sup> But here we have mentioned only a few elements of the Solomon legend alluded to in the Qur’ān. Official revelation is usually not so prolific as other sources. In fact the bulk of the material on this subject makes part of Islamic Tradition and it will be treated in another article, in which it will be interesting to examine some *hadīth* narrations<sup>(13)</sup> in which Solomon and his *jinnī* servants are the principal protagonists.

10. Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh Muhammad b. ‘Umar b. al-Husayn, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Mīsr (Cairo), al-Matba‘a al-Misriyya, 1933, XXV 246–250.

11. Al-Tha‘labī, Abū Ishaq Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Ibrahīm, *Kitāb qisas al-anbiyyā’*, Mīsr (Cairo), al-Matba‘a al-Amira, 1898.

12. Cfr. Sidersky, D., . . . *Les Origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes*, Paris, Librairie Orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1933, 115–122, where the author reports passages from Jewish literature which are parallel to the Muslim version of the Solomon legend. For more profound studies cfr. Speyer, Heinrich, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Oran*, Hildesheim, G. Olms, 1961, 372–404. The same arguments are sustained in short in *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 549–551.

13. *Hadīth narrations* are reported sayings from Muslim Tradition concerning Muhammad and showing him prophesying and giving oracles that were not included in the text of the Qur’ān.