

# PHILOLOGICAL SURVEY OF ARABIC ROOT "JNN"

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In the not so distant past *Melita Theologica*\* published five articles of mine treating about the Jinn in the Qur'ân and in Muslim tradition. The *jinn* are spiritual intelligent beings, non-angelic and non-human. Since these beings are mentioned in the Qur'ân and are widely present in Muslim Tradition, they constitute a theological problem, which, if studied and treated with due scientific severity, will surely shed more light on Christian-Muslim dialogue and mutual understanding.

The present philological survey is meant to complement these five articles.

We shall first look into the meaning of *janna - yajunnu* (1st form), *junna* (1st form passive), the derived forms of the verb, and the meaning of nouns coming from the same root which are likely to raise our interest, i.e. *jinn, jinnî - jinniyya, jinna, junûn, junûnî, majanna, majnûn, jânn, janan, and janûn*.

## *First form active*

The verb in the active mood 1st form (*janna - yajunnu*; verbal noun: *jann*)

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- \* (1) Vol. XXXI (1980/2) "The Nature of "Iblîs" in the Qur'ân as interpreted by the Commentators";  
(2) Vol. XXXII (1981/1-2) "On Qur'ânic Jinn";  
(3) Vol. XXXV (1984/1-2) "More on Qur'ânic Jinn";  
(4) Vol. XXXVIII (1987/1) "Some Qur'ânic Exegesis: Prophet Solomon and the Jinn";  
(5) Vol. XXXIX (1987/2) "The Solomon Legend in Muslim Tradition".

and *janûn*) has attached to it the general meaning implied by the root. Almost all authors consulted agree in putting “to cover, hide, conceal, veil” as being the first meaning of the verb, followed by “to descend, fall, be or become dark (night)”, and by other nuances deriving from the same idea, such as: “to protect, and to be enveloped by a rich vegetation” (Kazimirski).

The early meaning reported by Bercher, with verbal noun *junûn* is “être pris d’un accès de folie, s’emporter.” Cuhe distinguishes between “*janna* - *yajinnu*, verbal noun: *jann*, meaning: couvrir, envelopper, cacher”, and “*janna* - *yajunnu*, verbal noun: *junûn*, meaning: être fou, être possédé du démon...” Beaussier gives first preference to “entrer, être en fureur” and last preference to “couvrir, envelopper”. While in his sixth preference Kazimirski says: “rendre fou, démoniaque, s’emparer de quelqu’un (se dit d’un démon).” But perhaps the solution to the problem of preferences which should indicate the primitive meaning of verb *janna* may be deduced from Dozy who explains: “Dans le sens de devenir fou, est chez le vulgaire, non pas *junna*, comme dans la langue classique, mais *janna*...” Therefore, remaining within the limits of the classical language, one would prefer to retain “to cover, conceal, etc.” to be the primitive meaning of the verb. This would be in accordance with Lane’s lexicon, and what is more, with the classical dictionaries of the Arabic language such as *Lisân al-‘Arab* and *Tâj al-‘Arûs*, which prefer to speak of “possession and madness” when they explain the derived forms of the verb, while they give a very eminent position to “covering and concealing” in the case of *janna* - *yajunnu*.<sup>1</sup>

### *First form passive*

Regarding the passive voice of *janna*, which is *junna*, Kazimirski still persists in giving first preference to the “covering - concealing” nuance, naturally in its passive form: “être couvert et dérobé aux regards”. He gives fourth place to “être possédé, fou”. In doing so he agrees with *Lisân al-‘Arab* which explains: “*wa-kullu shay<sup>in</sup> sutira ‘anka*” with “*fa-qad junna ‘anka*”;<sup>2</sup> and with *Tâj al-‘Arûs* which says: “*wa-kullu mâ sutira ‘anka fa-qad junna ‘anka*”.<sup>3</sup>

1. Cfr. AL-ZABÎDÎ, SAYYID MUHAMMAD MURTADÂ, *Tâj al-‘Arûs*, vol. 9 (Misr 1306/1889) 163-167; IBN MANZÛR, MUHAMMAD B. MUKARRAM B. ‘ALÎ B. AHMAD AL-ANSÂRÎ AL-IFRÎQÎ AL-MISRÎ JAMAL AL-DÛN ABÛ AL-FADL, *Lisân al-‘Arab*, vol. 15 (Misr 1300-1307/1883-1890) 244-253.
2. Cfr. *Lisân*, 244.
3. Cfr. *Tâj*, 163.

The more recent dictionaries insist on the "possession - madness" idea, e.g. Freytag: "Daemone obsessus et insanus fuit ac furiosus"; Wehr: "to be or become possessed, insane, mad, crazy..." Hava prefers to give his particular graduation starting with "madness - possession", passing on to "grass-covering" and the "buzzing of insects", back again to "madness", this time provoked by joy or anger, and last preference he gives to "concealing".

### *Derived forms of janna*

*Jannana* (2nd form) means "to craze, drive mad, enrage, infuriate..." The "Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano" published by l'Istituto per l'Oriente of Rome in 1966 together with Belot add to this meaning the one given under the 4th form, "to cover", placing it before the above-mentioned nuance of "madness".

Opinions differ when the 4th form of the verb is discussed. Wehr, *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano*, Cuhe, and Hava give first preference to "craziness" and second to "concealing". Belot and Ben Sedira prefer "to cover" only. Freytag's sole insertion is: "Insanum reddidit aliquam Deus", and completes his insertion by the expression: "mâ 'ajannahu, meaning : quam insanus est!" Kazimirski gives his first six preferences to six different shades of meaning implying the idea of "covering and concealing", he then gives seventh preference to "rendre fou, rendre furieux", reporting the same expression as Freytag. Lane holds that there are instances where the 4th form is equal in meaning to the 1st and to the 8th, "to be or become concealed". He then goes on to "possession by jinn and madness". When explaining the expression "mâ 'ajannahu", Lane agrees with the classical Arabic dictionaries when he says that the expression "is anomalous being formed from a verb of the passive form, namely *janna*; for of the *madrûb* one should not say, *mâ 'adrabahu...*" Again in accordance with the classical dictionaries Lane holds that 'ajanna "also signifies *waqa'a fi majannat*"<sup>4</sup>, i.e. "he came to a place haunted by jinn".<sup>4</sup>

The fifth form, "*tajannana*" according to the more recent dictionaries has the meaning of "to go mad, become crazy" (Wehr, *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano*, Freytag), or "to show symptoms of madness" (Belot, Hava, Freytag), or else "to play the insane", a nuance which is also implied in the 6th form (Ben Sedira, Hava). Kazimirski puts "to be covered by a rich vegetation (said of the soil)" in the first place, "to be possessed or mad" in the second place, while he gives third preference to "il donne des symptômes de folie..."

Explaining the 6th form, *tajâna* or *tajânana*, Kazimirski limits himself to

4. Cfr. *Lisân*, 248-249.

the nuance of “*madness*”, but he does not give the special nuance attached to this form, that of feigning madness. Lane recalls what he said under the 5th form: “he feigned himself *majnûn*...” Generally speaking all other dictionaries agree with Lane, and this, as usual, is in accordance with the classical lexica.<sup>5</sup>

Few are those dictionaries that report *ijtanna* (8th form): only three of those that have been consulted. They all agree with Lane who says that according to the Qur’ân *ijtanna* means “he was, or became, veiled, concealed, hidden...”

First meaning attached to the 10th form, “*istajanna*”, is that of “*veiling and concealing*”. For this purpose Lane and Belot recall what was said for the 1st and 8th forms. The *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano*, basing itself on Wehr, reports in the first place: “*essere coperto, nascosto*”, and then it moves on to “*considerare qualcuno pazzo*”. Kazimirski dedicates his first four preferences to the “*concealing*” nuance, accompanied by the special characteristics of the 10th form, such as: “*chercher asile, protection...*” He confines to the fifth place the meaning “*être gai*” a nuance reported also by Lane: “He excited him to mirth, joy, gladness, or sport”, and in *Tâj al-‘Arûs*.<sup>6</sup> Both Kazimirski and Freytag speak about the passive of the 10th form, both agreeing that it means “*Daemone obsessus fuit*” (Freytag).

### *Nouns derived from root JNN*

The first noun deriving from root JNN to raise our interest is *jinn*. Lane, Kazimirski, and Freytag prefer to remain within the realms of classicism when they start explaining this word as “the darkness of night” (Lane) or as “*voile de la nuit, obscurité...*” (Kazimirski). Only later on do they speak of “the genii” (Lane) or of “*daemones, genii, spiritus, angeli*” (Freytag). All other dictionaries speak directly of *jinn* as spiritual beings. *Jinn* (masculine) and *jinna* (feminine) are both collective nouns, the latter is sometimes used as plural of the former. To express the singulative one has to use relative *jinnî* for the masculine or *jinniyya* for the feminine. But in many dictionaries the plural of the noun is not given. Ben Sedira gives *jinna* and *janûn* both as plural of *jinn*, Beaussier gives *janûn* only, while Kazimirski retains that *janûn* is another collective term like *jinn*. *Lisân al-‘Arab*, which is much more authoritative, gives *jinân* for plural both of *jinn* and of *jinna*.<sup>7</sup>

5. Cfr. *Lisân*, 248.

6. Cfr. *Tâj*, 166.

7. Cfr. *Lisân*, 247.

It is interesting to report some definitions of "jinn" which are to be found in the dictionaries consulted. Wehr: *jinn* are "invisible beings, either harmful or helpful, that interfere with the lives of the mortals." The *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano*: *jinn* are "esseri intermedi fra gli uomini e gli angeli; spiriti folletti." Kazimirski: *jinn* are "démons (bons au mauvais)." *Lisân al-'Arab*: *jinn* are "a type of created beings; they are given this name because of their being concealed from sight and because they hide themselves from people and they are not seen".<sup>8</sup> Lane is more complete in his definitions; he reports various opinions taken from the classical commentaries on the Qur'ân which discusses whether the angels and the devils should be considered as *jinn*, they being invisible.<sup>9</sup>

As we have said, to express the singulative of *jinn* the relative *jinnî* or *jinniyya* is described as a female demon, or a fairy: Dozy gives also "déesse ... nymphe, sirène." But grammatically speaking the primitive meaning of *jinnî* must be "ad daemones pertinens (Freytag).

A word very near to *jinn* is *jânn* which has two meanings. It might be "serpens albus, nigris oculis praeditus, innoxius et frequens in domibus" (Freytag), or it might also be "the father of the *jinn* who was created from fire and from whom his descendants were created".<sup>10</sup> *Lisân al-'Arab* reports an interesting story about the origin of the *jânn* narrated by *Abû Ishâq*: "Creatures called *jânn* lived on earth but they caused mischief in it and shed blood, so God sent his angels who drove them away from the earth; and it is said that these angels became the inhabitants of the earth after the *jânn*."<sup>11</sup>

A noun of place which might be of some interest is "*majanna*". The first meaning of *majanna* would be a "country haunted by demons". Freytag, Hava, Kazimirski, Cuhe, and Belot all agree with this. All these authors, except Cuhe, give madness as secondary meaning. While Wehr and *Vocabolario Arabo-Italiano* limit themselves to "madness and insanity" only.

Other words that have a link with what has been said up till now are the following:

8. Cfr. *Lisân*, 247.

9. Cfr. Edmund Teuma, O.F.M. Conv., "The Nature of *Jblîs* in the Qur'ân as interpreted by the Commentators", *Melita Theologica* XXXI(1980/2) 10-21; "More on Qur'anic *Jinn*", *Melita Theologica* XXXV(1984/1-2) 37-45.

10. Cfr. *Lisân*, 249.

11. Cfr. *Lisân*, 249.

- junûn* — possession, obsession, mania, madness, diabolical fury... Kazimirski still persists upon “obscurité de la nuit”, but second in preference to “folie, fureur”. It may also mean “passion (Hava). Dozy gives three different kinds of uses implying the word *janûn*: “1. les folies de la jeunesse; 2. végétation abondante; 3. l’épilepsie.” Both Hava and Kazimirski report a shortened version of *junûn*, viz. *junun*, which means the same thing. Wehr draws out the relative form of the noun, viz. *junûnî* to mean “crazy, insane, mad, frantic, frenzied.”
- majnûn* — possessed, obsessed, insane, mad... “Possessed by a jinnî, or by jinn, or by a devil, or demon; a demoniac... and hence meaning bereft of reason; or mad, insane, unsound in mind or intellect, or wanting therein...” (Lane).
- janan* — tomb, corpse, shroud. Kazimirski’s second preference after “tombeau” and before “mort, cadavre” is “suaire dans lequel on enveloppe le cadavre.”

Evidently there are other derivations from root JNN, such as: *janna* (garden, Paradise), *junna* (protection, shield), etc., words which in some way or another all imply the primitive meaning of the root, but which are not of direct interest for our purpose. What one should make clear, however, is the way one is to justify the fairly abundant elements within the semantic range of the root. Once it is established that “to conceal, hide...” is the primitive meaning of the root, it is from this concept that one has to start in trying to explain the presence of words like “*jinn*, *junûn*, *janna*, *janan*,” etc. within the semantic area of the root.

We have already seen in what way does *Lisân al-‘Arab* justify the presence of the word “*jinn*” among the realms of root JNN. The dictionary says that the *jinn* are thus called because they are invisible beings and as such they escape human perception. We have also seen that a “*majnûn*” is first and foremost a person possessed by *jinn*, invisible spirits. It was only later on, and by association of ideas, that the word *majnûn* began to signify a mad person. This would also point out to the fact perhaps in primitive times madness was considered to be a sort of possession by evil spirits. Hence the association of ideas between “madness” and “concealing”. *Janna* (garden) too comes from the same root. But even here the idea of “concealing” is to be found at the base of the acquired idea. A garden is a green area covered with grass or leaves. In fact Kazimirski explains *junna* (1st form passive) and *tajannana* (5th form) by “to be covered by a rich vegetation (said of the soil).” Another idea is that of night, when the sun is absent, which is expressed by the 1st form of the verb

in the active (*janna al-Ilayl*). On the other hand, *janan*, is also linked to root JNN. When *janan* means tomb, one should not forget that the tomb is man's access to the underworld where darkness prevails, hence the idea of "concealing". When it means corpse, it is attached to something which does not pertain anymore to the world of the living, but something to be deposited in a tomb and not to be seen anymore, hence again the idea of "concealing". Finally, when it means shroud, it approaches to the idea of veil (*junna, janân, jinn*) in which the idea of "concealing" is much more in evidence.

From what has been said, one must recollect that the ideas of *janna* "to conceal", *jinn* "good or evil spirits", *junûn* "madness", and *janan* "tomb, corpse" are closely linked together. This brings us very close to *Baydâwî*'s opinion reported in Lane's lexicon that the *jinn* might be taken to be "human souls separate from their bodies".<sup>12</sup> In modern English we would call such human souls "ghosts", a very common element in the folk tales of Western Europe.

### *Root JNN in other Semitic languages*

In Hebrew we find the verb *gânan*, meaning "to cover, surround, defend", corresponding to Arabic *janna* and to Aramaic *aggên*. It is only used in the *qal* and the *hiphil* forms. Whence two nouns denoting "enclosure, garden": *gan* (masculine) and *gannâh* (feminine). They are said to be equivalent to Arabic *janna*, Assyrian *gannu* or *gannatu* (word of uncertain meaning), and to Aramaic *ginnâ*'. In Hebrew we also find the word *mâgên* (masculine), meaning "shield", equivalent to Arabic *mijann*, and to Aramaic *m'ginnâ*'. Then, again in Hebrew there is *m'ginnâh* (feminine), meaning "covering", which in the construct state with *lêb* (*m'ginnat-lêb*) means "covering of the heart", an expression which recalls that in Qur'ân 6,25: "and We lay veils upon their hearts — *wa-ja'alnâ 'alâ qulûbihim akinnat'*." One would object that *akinna* (plural of *kann*, meaning "cover, shelter...") is not of the root JNN. Perhaps this is a case where the Hebrew letter "*gimel*", owing to its guttural sound, developed into Arabic "*kâf*" instead of to "*jîm*" as it usually does. One wonders whether Arabic root KNN, meaning also "to hide, conceal, cover..." is a repeated version of JNN carrying in it the phonetic evolution from "*kâf*" to "*jîm*" or vice versa. Or else one might think that both KNN and JNN are two Arabic versions of the same primitive root GNN, where the protosemitic sound "*gimel*" is represented by "*kâf*" in the case of KNN, and by "*jîm*" in the case of JNN.

12. Cfr. Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon in eight parts...*, Part 2 (Librairie du Liban, Beirut 1968) 462.

Finally one has to note that the same root is also present in Ugaritic. In one instance it is presented in the sequence *GN*, meaning "garden" and as such it is equivalent to Hebrew "*gan*" and to Arabic "*janna*", or it might also represent the name of a month. In another instance we find the sequel *mGNm* (plural), meaning "shields" corresponding to Hebrew *mâgên* and obviously to Arabic *mijann*.

Jeffery reports the word *janna* among his own list of foreign vocabulary employed in the Qur'ân.<sup>13</sup> He says that the more primitive meaning of the root whence *janna* is got is "enclosure". Mentioning the widespread presence of the word in Semitic languages, Jeffery records Akkadian *gannatu*; the above-mentioned Hebrew and Aramaic equivalents; the Syriac and Ethiopic equivalents; and Phoenician '*GNN* (also *GN*). According to Jeffery the connotation of "Paradise" acquired later on by *janna* is a borrowing from Aramaic through Syriac. Its origin is therefore Christian. Although the word is largely used in the *Jâhiliyya* poetry, only those verses influenced by the Qur'ân make it don the nuance of "Paradise", otherwise it signifies "garden, vines and grapes". This would point to the fact that most probably Muhammed adopted the sense of "Paradise" attached to *janna* directly from Christian, or at least from Jewish, sources.<sup>14</sup>

### *Other fantastic figures relative to jinn*

Apart from the *jinn* there are also other mythological figures which one encounters in Arabian folk tales. The stories of "A Thousand and One Nights" abound with these fantastic monsters. What is more, each region from Morocco to Persia has its own particular tales which project the intense popular belief in such spiritual beings. Some countries have their own theories about the existential qualities of such creatures. For example, people in Yemen believe in two classes of *jinn*: the '*udrût* and the *dubb*. Here we are going to examine briefly three kinds of fantastic figures, which, although non-Qur'ânic, nevertheless complement what is said about the *jinn*.

(a) *Ghûl* (plural *ghîlân* and *aghwâl*) from *ghâla* - *yaghûlu*, meaning "to destroy". According to *The Encyclopaedia of Islâm* two are the primitive ideas behind root *GHWL*: (1) the ability to assume different forms; (2) the treacherous attack. Lane defines *ghûl* thus: "a kind of goblin, demon, devil, or

13. In his list of foreign vocabulary the author does not enlist other forms deriving from root JNN.

14. For root JNN in the Qur'ân cfr. Teuma, *More on Qur'ânic Jinn*".

jinnee, which, the Arabs assert, appears to men in the desert, assuming various forms, causing them to wander from the way, and destroying them." Essentially the same is the definition given in *The Encyclopaedia of Islâm*: "fabulous being believed by the ancient Arabs to inhabit desert places and, assuming different forms, to lead travellers astray... to fall upon them unawares and devour them..."

In a *hadîth* the Prophet is made to deny the *aghwâl* saying: "*lâ ghûla*" (there is absolutely no such thing as *ghûl*). Some authors, however, discuss whether by his expression Muhammed actually denies the total existence of such beings or whether he denies the assertion of the Arabs respecting their assuming various forms and their being able to cause one to go astray.

Another discussion regarding the *aghwâl* refers to their sexual qualities. Authors do not seem to agree whether a *ghûl* is a male or a female. However, the feminine form of the word, *ghûla* is often used, and what is more, a female *ghûl* is usually called *si'lât*.

(b) *Si'lât*, or *si'lâ'*, or *si'lâ*, from *sa'ala - yas'ilu*, meaning "to cough", i.e. "having a motion whereby nature expels somewhat hurtful emissions from the lungs and the organs therewith..." (Lane). As has been stated above *si'lât* is the female counterpart of the kind of goblin designated by *ghûl*. There is an opinion that this kind of vampire would be the most wicked and the most guileful of the *aghwâl*. Metaphorically the same word is also applied to a very clamorous, foul-tongued woman, or to a woman "foul in face, evil in disposition" (Lane).

(c) *Iffît* (plural *'afârît*) from *'afara*, meaning "to rub with dust, to roll someone in the dust", and by extension: "to bring someone low" (*Encyclopaedia of Islâm*), i.e. to insult, to offend someone. Strictly speaking this is not a particular category of spiritual being as is the *ghûl*, but is a quality applied to a being be it man or spirit. Lane defines *'iffît* any person "insolent and audacious in pride and in acts of rebellion or disobedience, who rolls his adversary in the dust". So like the word *shaytân*, *iffît* is metaphorically applied to man. But more properly it is applied to a *jinnî* and signifies the evil and wicked disposition in the spirit as in the case of Qur'ân 27,39: "An *efreet* of the *jinnns* said, 'I will bring it to thee...'", which, by the way, is the only time the word is used in the Book. In this case authors agree that the expression "an *efreet* of the *jinnns*" simply means "a wicked *jinnî*".

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