

QUR'ÂNIC EXEGESIS: MUHAMMAD & THE JINN

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Readers of *Melita Teologica* may now be familiar with my articles treating the spiritual beings - non-human, non-angelic - which the *Qur'ân* calls *jinn*. This time we shall treat two main problems which concern Muhammad directly, the prophethood of whom had at a point in history to be defended against accusations of *jinnî* possession. The *Qur'ân* presents Muhammad not only as "the seal of the prophets" (*Khâtam al-anbiyâ'*) i.e. the last prophet in a long series and the one who sets the divine message on a definitive basis; but it also pin-points him as the universal prophet, i.e. the one whom the Most High has sent to all peoples in any future time since the foundation of *Islâm*. His universality extends to all beings even to *jinn*.

This brings us to the enunciation of the two main problems forming our topic:

(a) Was the Prophet of Islâm possessed by *jinn*? This question amounts to the quest whether Muhammad was merely an inspired poet, or an authentic Prophet of God upon whom revelation came down.

(b) Muhammad's special mission to the *jinn*. This includes the quest whether any special prophet, besides Muhammad, was ever sent to the *jinn*, and whether among the *jinn* there exist any faithful Muslims. It should be made clear from the very beginning that here we shall take into account only what is narrated in the *Qur'ân* text; other elements on this subject which have their origin in Muslim tradition will be exposed in a future study.

Muhammad was neither a possessed person nor a poet

Contrary to the accusation advanced by the Prophet's enemies, the *Qur'ân* insists that Muhammad was not a person possessed by *jinn*. "Have they not reflected? No

madness (*jinna*) is in your comrade; he is naught but a plain warner”¹. If according to the *Qur’ân* Muhammad was not possessed, it will therefore follow that neither was he a poet, for there is an intimate connection between possession by *jinn* and poetic muse.

It was a current idea among the *Jâhiliyya* Arabs - an idea which continued to circulate long after the advent of *Islâm* - that the poet was one who, through connection with *jinn*, used to acquire cognizance of unseen knowledge. In fact the word for poet in Arabic is *shâ’ir*, present participle of verb *sha’ara* or *sha’ura*, meaning “to know; to have cognizance of”. It was not the poet who chose his *jinnî*; on the contrary, it was the *jinnî* who chose his poet among men of his liking. This happened by means of an initiation ceremony; when the *jinnî* threw the man of his choice to the ground, knelt upon his chest, and forced him to become his mouthpiece to the world. After this act of possession there was established between the *jinnî* and the poet an intimate relationship, and at intervals *jinnî* used to “send down” upon his poet poetic inspiration. This poetic inspiration was somehow felt to be coming down from above and was thus called *nuzûl*, verbal noun from *nazala*, meaning “to descend”. But even *Qur’ânic* revelation is called *nuzûl*, and it seems that in moments of prophetic inspiration the Prophet of *Islâm* gave certain symptoms which were common to those manifested by *jinnî*-inspired poets. Add to this the fact that, according to the pagan mentality, every spiritual and invisible being, including God Most High, was “*jinn*”², and out comes the reason why Muhammad was often called *majnûn* by those who could not understand his revealed message. Apart from the two citations we reported above, the *Qur’ân* mentions six other instances when the Prophet was accused of possession³. But it is clear that Muhammad’s fate with the enemies of God is a repetition of that suffered by the Prophets that came before him - they were all accused of magic or possession: “...not a Messenger came to those before them but they said, ‘a sorcerer, or a man possessed!’”⁴. The *Qur’ân* mentions the particular instances when Noah and Moses were both accused of possession by *jinn*.⁵

1. Q. 7: 184; cfr. also Q. 34: 46; on both occasions Arberry renders Arabic *jinna* with “madness”, but properly speaking the word in these contexts “possession of *jinn*”
2. Cfr. Edmund Theuma, “Philological Survey of Arabic Root ‘JNN’”, *Melita Theologica* XLIV (1993/1) 21-31.
3. Cfr. Q. 15: 6; 37: 36; 44: 14; 52: 29; 68: 2; 81: 22.
4. Q. 51: 42.
5. Cfr. Q. 23: 25; 26: 27; 51: 39; 54: 9.

Although in the eyes of pagan Arabs a prophet might have been just another version of a poet, there is of course a great difference between the two “inspired” media. The poet is proclaimed by the *Qur’ân* to be a “guilty imposter.”⁶ Now the Arabic word which Arberry rendered “imposter” is *affâk*, which also means “liar”. i.e. one who refers *ifk*, a lie. But *ifk* is the kind of lie with a much wider sense than is usually attached to a common lie, which is otherwise called *kidhb*. *Ifk* is better conceived as an affirmation with no basis in reality or truth (*haqq*). When the *Qur’ân* says that a poet is an *affâk* it means that a poet refers irresponsibly and without reflection the whisperings of his protective *jinnî*. But Muhammad and the other Prophets receive revelation from God through his Messenger-Angel; and since prophetic inspiration comes ultimately from God, and is thus called “revelation” (*wahy*), it must therefore contain truth (*haqq*) out of necessity: “We send not down angels, save with truth (*haqq*).”⁷

Muhammad’s special mission to the jinn

The first problem discussed by scholars is whether there arose among the *jinn* some messenger or prophet that was sent especially to them by God. The polemic is provoked by Q. 6:130: “Company of *jinn* and mankind, did not Messengers come to you from among you, relating to you my signs and warning you of the encounter of this your day?...” There are two schools promoting contrary opinions regarding this problem:

a) The group guided by *al-Dahhâk* retains that from this verse it becomes clear that messengers of the *jinn* were sent to the *jinn*, just as messengers of mankind were sent to mankind. The adherents to this group base their arguments on Q. 10: 46; 16: 35 and 35:23, where it is stated that every nation has its messengers. The word for nation is *umma* which is more exactly a “community” and has also the sense of English “kingdom” in such expressions as “the animal, vegetative, spiritual,

6. Q. 26: 222.

7. Q. 15: 8, cfr. T. Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung schavving* (Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies; Tokyo 1964) 169-175, where the author explains also in what manner Muhammad cannot be called a soothsayer (*kâhin*); for which see Q. 52:29: “...by thy Lord’s blessing thou art not a soothsayer neither possessed,” and Maxime Rodenson, *Mohammed* (trans Anne Carter) (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1976) 94-96.

etc... kingdom". In this sense the *jinn* are included with those communities, the totality of them, to whom some Messenger of God was sent.⁸

(b) The other group, led by *Ibn 'Abbâs*, holds that to be Messenger of God is a special prerogative of man; and if in Q. 6:130 God did not clarify the distinction between *jinn* and mankind, that happens because, as He was speaking about His Messengers, it was natural that He meant His selected Messengers from mankind. But owing to Q. 46: 29: "...Then, when it (the reciting) was finished, they (the *jinn*) turned to their people, warning", it is clear that the *jinn* are messengers of the Messenger of God. This is the opinion of the majority. On the other hand, however, both groups seem to agree that Muhammad was sent to both *jinn* and men. *Al-Kalbî* says: "Before Muhammad, may God bless him and keep him, was sent, the Messengers used to be sent only to mankind, but the Messenger of God, may God bless him and keep him, was sent to both mankind and *jinn*."⁹

That some of the *jinn* (a company of them) heard the Prophet reciting the *Qur'ân* is quite clear from what is narrated in Q. 46: 29; 72: 1. What remains unclear, however, is in what manner did this happen. The *Qur'ân* remains silent on this subject, but, relying on the *hadîth*, scholars are divided into two opinion groups!

(a) Some think that Muhammad did not see *jinn*, neither was he ordered to recite the *Qur'ân* for them, but they eavesdropped him while he was performing the *salât* (ritual prayer) and reciting the *Qur'ân*. Their presence was then revealed to him: "Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a company of *jinn* gave ear...'"¹⁰ Heading this group is *al-Hasan*.

(b) Others hold that the Prophet was expressly sent to the *jinn* by God to call them to *Islâm* by means of *Qur'ânic* recitation. This means that he saw them and talked to them and sent a delegation of them to announce *Islâm* to the other *jinn* and to warn the unbelievers among them. "...Then, when it was finished, they turned

8. The Authors of *Tafsîr al-Manâr* explain how some of *sûfi*, basing themselves on Q. 35: 23, retain that animals are morally responsible (*taklîf al-hayawân*). One wonders whether they also hold that messengers were sent to animals and to other inferior beings!

9. Cfr. *Tabarî*, Vol. 8, pp. 35-37; *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 2, p. 52; *Râzî*, vol. 13, pp 194-195; *Baydâwî*, vol. 1, p. 403; *Alûsî*, vol. 8, p. 25; *Al-Manâr*, vol. 8, pp. 105-107.

10. Q. 72: 1; cfr. also Q. 46: 29.

back to their people, warning".¹¹ This opinion is held by a group headed by *Ibn 'Abbās*.

What is the most interesting in this narration is perhaps the fact that the *jinn* who heard the *Qur'ân* being recited believed in it, and they seem to have surrendered immediately to God's will, thus becoming Muslims. "We have indeed heard a *Qur'ân* wonderful, guiding to rectitude. We believe in it, and we will not associate with our Lord anyone. He - exalted be our Lord's majesty! - has not taken to Himself either consort or a son".¹² They seem to have immediately understood what Islamic preaching is all about: the absolute uniqueness of God; and they straight away entered into polemic against those who hold that God has sons and consorts.

It is against the fool among them, that "spoke against God outrage" (Q. 72: 4), proclaiming against Him this abominable doctrine, that they now have to fight.¹³

(Q. 46: 29-32) confirm that the *jinn* made it a point that they should give a helping hand to Muhammad, announcing the new religion to their companions: "...Then when it was finished, they turned to their people, warning. They said, 'Our people, we have heard a Book that was sent down after Moses, confirming what was before it, guiding to the truth and to a straight path. Our people, answer God's summoner, and believe in Him (God), and He will forgive you some of your sins, and protect you from a painful chastisement. Whoever answers not God's summoner cannot frustrate God in the earth, and he has no protectors apart from him; those are in manifest error.'"¹⁴ In these verses the very primitive kerygma of *Islâm* is put on the *jinn*'s lips. The *jinn* did not only believe in God's message, but they also cooperated with His Messenger to spread *Islâm* even in the invisible kingdom of the spirits. The universality of *Islâm* is thus reached.

A curious question arises regarding the religion of these *jinn*. In Q. 46: 30 they said: "...We have heard a Book that was sent down after Moses..." Why did they

11. Q. 46: 29; cfr. *Tabarî*, vol. 26, pp 30-55; *Râzî*, vol. 30, p. 152; vol. 28, pp. 31-33.

12. Q. 72: 1-3.

13. Cfr. *Tabarî*, vol. 29, p. 107; *Zamakhsharî*, vol. 4, p. 498-506; *Baydâwî*, vol. 2, p. 553-557; *Alûsî*, vol. 29, p. 85; commentators agree that the expression "the fool among the *jinn*" (Q. 72: 4) refers to *Iblîs* (the Devil) from whom any calumny emanates. For more about *Iblîs* cfr. Edmund Theuma, "The Nature of *Iblîs* in the *Qur'ân* as interpreted by the Commentators", *Melita Theologica* XXXI (1980/2) 10-21

14. Q. 46: 29-32.

not mention Jesus, who was the last Prophet before Muhammad upon whom revelation came down? According to the commentators three might be the reasons for this. The most plausible one is perhaps the first one:

(a) the Book that was sent down to Moses is the most ancient of revelations and it includes in it the message preached by Jesus.¹⁵

(b) Others think that those *jinn* were Jews and the only revelation they accepted was that contained in the Book of Moses (*al-Tawrât*). (c) Still others retain that those *jinn* totally ignored Jesus: they had never heard about him.¹⁶

To sum up we give the five parenthetical conclusions reported by *Râzî* which explain the purpose of the *Qur'ânic* pericope of Muhammad and the *jinn*. The author says that these narrations want to show the *Quraysh*:

(a) that just as the Prophet of *Islâm* was sent to Mankind, he was also sent to the *jinn*;

(b) that the *jinn*, in spite of their rebellion, recognised the wonder of the *Qur'ân* and believed in it;

(c) that the *jinn* are held morally responsible just like mankind;

(d) that the *jinn* eavesdrop our talk and understand our language;

(e) that he who believes must call others of his tribe to faith.¹⁷

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15. Cfr. Matthew 5, 17.

16. Cfr. *Zammakhasharf*, vol. 4, pp. 246-248; *Baydâwi*, vol. 2, p. 432; vol. 28, pp. 31-33; *Alûsî*, vol. 26, p. 28.

17. Cfr. *Râzî*, vol. 30, p. 153.

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