



Question:

To what extent do Satan and the other jinn have power over human beings?

Answer:

The words "satan" and "jinn" are repeatedly mentioned in the Qur`an. There is also a chapter in the Qur`an, named "al-Jinn". "Satan" is a common noun that denotes any creature that is mischievous, misleading, and delinquent, whether it be human or not. "Iblis" is a proper noun and is the `Arabic name of the particular satan who deceived Adam and Eve (‘a) and even now lays in wait for any opportunity to deceive the sons of Adam.

The word "jinn" is etymologically derived from a word meaning "to hide" or "to be hidden." It denotes a creature made of fire that possesses both a body and a soul. The jinn are held legally accountable before Allah (awj) and can choose to believe or disbelieve.

Some people’s understanding of the jinn is full of hyperbole and fantastic stories, while others reject their existence all together-repudiating even true accounts of jinn. The Qur`an, and ahadith describe jinn as powerful creatures. For example, in Surat al-Naml (27), Verse 39, the Qur`an, recounts the story of an `ifrit (one kind of jinn) who claimed to be able to bring the throne of Bilqis to Sulayman (‘a) "quicker than you can stand up." It should be noted that Sulayman (‘a) did not repudiate this jinn’s claim, thus indicating that he truly possessed the power. However, one must be careful not to exaggerate such information out of proportion, thereby claiming that jinn have infinite power. Such a belief is tantamount to shirk (the attribution of partners to Allah (awj)). No creature, no matter how powerful, can act without Allah’s (awj) sanction. For this reason, Satan has power to misguide only those people who have relinquished their belief in one Allah (awj) and have surrendered to the temptations of Satan. Accordingly, Satan himself admits that he has no power over Allah’s (awj) sincere servants when he swears,

"shall misguide them all except Your sincere servants." [1]

Satan’s sole influence over man is by way of whispering temptations. He can never strip man of his free will. In philosophical terms, Satan’s non-materiality is not complete; therefore he cannot reach the lofty station that the spirit of the righteous enjoys. Giving into the temptation of the carnal soul (al-nafs al-‘ammarah) opens the way for satanic influence thereby pulling man into Satan’s traps. The sole respite from his grasp is to turn one’s attention to Allah (awj) and seek his protection. Allah (awj) says,

"You (Satan) have no power over my servants". [2]

Detailed Answer

The Etymology of Satan and Jinn

We begin our discussion by analyzing the words "satan" and "jinn," and then investigate the

limits of Satan's power.

"Satan" means "banished" or "mischievous". In its singular form, "satan" has been used 71 times in the Qur`an, and in its plural form, 18 times. Both the Qur`an, and ahadith indicate that Satan is one of the jinn.

"Satan" is a common noun that denotes any creature that is mischievous, misleading, and delinquent, whether it is human or not. "Iblis" is a proper noun and is the `Arabic name of the particular Satan who deceived Adam and Eve (a) and even now lays in wait for any opportunity to deceive the sons of Adam.

The Etymology of Jinn

The word "jinn" has been used 22 times in the Qur`an. "Jinn" is derived from a word denoting "to hide" or "to be hidden." Jinn are created from fire or from an amalgam of fire. In the language of the Qur`an, jinn are conscious beings with free will that are hidden from human perception under normal circumstances. Like mankind, jinn are legally accountable to Allah (awj) and can choose to believe or disbelieve. They will be raised on the Day of Judgment.

Mulla Sadra describes the jinn in the following terms: "Jinn have substantial existence both in this corporeal realm and in the unseen or imaginal world. Now, as for their existence in this world, it is as we explained before-there is no substance that has any type of subtlety and composure whatsoever but that it contains a spirit and a soul which has been infused into it from the source of Pure Activity. Perhaps the reason why jinn can manifest and hide themselves at different times lies in the subtlety of their bodies. They can disperse the components of their bodies and then collate them. When they collate their bodily components, they can be seen. And when they disperse themselves, they become invisible like water vapour which appears like clouds when condensed and disappears when heated."

Just like human beings, jinn possess a body and spirit and are conscious and have free will. Some are male and others female. They reproduce and are legally accountable to Allah (awj). They are born and they die. They can choose to believe or disbelieve.

The Relationship between Jinn and Satan

The Arabic word "shaytan" conveys the adjectival meaning "mischievous." The term has been used in the Qur`an in this very meaning. However, it is also used alternatively for Iblis and for any being for whom mischief has become a deep-rooted character trait. In fact the Qur`an, explicitly states that: a "satan" can be from the ranks of jinn or man.

The Limits of Satan's Power

In the dualistic religion of pre-Islamic Iran, Ahriman was thought to be the creator of all evil.

Some may think Satan in the Qur`an, as the counterpart of Ahriman of ancient Iran. This is a mistaken belief since Satan had no role to play in creation whatsoever. Allah (awj) created everything, and no other being besides Allah (awj) can create independently. In the Qur`an, Allah (awj) derogates such beliefs when he says,

“They make the jinn partners of Allah (awj), when He has created them, and they carve sons and daughters for Him without any knowledge.” [3]

Satan has power to incite man with tempting thoughts, to call him toward evil, and to make evil seem beautiful to him. He has no power to force anyone to do anything.

It is true that both angels and jinn have the power to descend upon people. The descent of angels is not limited to the moment of death. For example, if someone says, “Allah” with full attention, angels descend upon him. Jinn also have certain such powers. For instance, they can perform feats with incredible speed. Though their power of intellect is weak, they are able to move heavy objects with great speed. Some verses of the Qur`an, indicate that jinn-like humans-are physical beings.

In the story of Sulayman (‘a), one jinn claims to be able to bring Bilqis’s throne to Sulayman’s (‘a) court quicker than he can stand up. Though he does not actually perform this feat, Sulayman (‘a) does not repudiate his claim, indicating that he did possess such ability. In other verses, jinn are able to listen to the Qur`an, being recited (a feat requiring that they have the physical faculty of hearing).

Satan’s Influence

Satan launches his assaults on mankind from every direction. As the Qur`an, says:

“I shall approach them head on and from behind and from the right and from the left” [4]

Satan’s exerts his influence on man’s thoughts. He launches his assaults from various fronts, of which we mention a few:

1. He tries to deter man from worshipping Allah (awj) according to the requirements of revelation by tempting him to act according to his own desires.
2. He influences man’s ability to think rationally so that instead of reaching conclusions based on solid reasoning, he accepts fallacies that only seem to be rational.
3. He influences man’s ability to understand reality as it is. He skews man’s understanding or convinces him to reject the possibility of understanding such reality. In this way, Satan first corrupts one’s perception of reality, then his ability to comprehend reality, and finally his actions.

The Qur`an and ahadith indicate that Satan and his cohorts only have influence over people who have surrendered their devotion to Allah (awj) and who-in a fit of heedlessness-have

fallen into a stupor of self-conceit. Of his own admission, he has no influence over Allah's (awj) true servants.

"I shall misguide them all except Your sincere servants." [5]

In philosophical terms, Satan's immateriality is not complete; therefore he cannot reach the lofty station that the spirits of the righteous enjoy. However, this does not stop him from trying to mislead such people.

People have invented a myriad of myths about jinn that do not make logical sense. If however, we strip away the myths, the basic belief in their existence is totally logical. In particular, we have no reason to believe that living beings are limited to those things we can perceive. Rather, the ahadith indicate that imperceptible beings are more in number than perceptible ones: "Allah created the jinn of five types: a type like airborne odours and fragrances, a snake-like type, a type like scorpions, a type like insects of the earth, and a type like mankind who will have to give accounts and will receive retribution." [6]

As history attests, it is in large part because of the myths that people have created around the jinn that many otherwise rational scholars have come to deny their existence altogether. In reality, each group has lost the truth by going to extremes. Islam affirms the existence of the jinn but rejects the fantastic tales surrounding them. It is for this reason that one chapter of the Qur'an, specifically addresses the topic of the jinn.

It is essential to remember that in the Islamic worldview, all that exists-whether they be angels, jinn, or human beings, and whether they are material or immaterial-are creations of Allah (awj), and can only act according to Allah's (awj) will. Allah (awj) constantly reminds us in the Qur'an that no cause, whether material or immaterial, can act independently. Life and death, benefit and loss, are all subservient to His power. Therefore, one must always remember Him and trust in Him and seek sanctuary in Him. It is by establishing such a relationship with Allah (awj) that one can inoculate himself against all harm. As the Qur'an says,

"Nothing can harm them except by Allah's leave." [7]

We are also warned about human beings and jinn who are evil (literally, who are "Satans"), as one author states: "Never incline towards them. Satan is the sworn enemy of Allah and man. He has taken a solemn oath to misguide you. However, his power over you is limited to whispered temptation and he can never negate your free will. The source of evil thoughts is in the human soul itself (al-nafs al-'ammara). This aspect of the soul is the Achilles' heel of the human being through which Satan acts. Allah (awj) has said,

"We created man and we know the temptations of his soul; we are closer to him than his

jugular vein.” [8]

He also said,

“Indeed as for My servants you do not have any authority over them, except the perverse who follow you” [9]Reference:

[1] Surat al-Hijr (15), Verse 39-40:

وَلَأَعْوَبْتَهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ، إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ

[2] Ibid., Verse 42:

إِنَّ عِبَادِي لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانٌ...

[3] Surat al-An’am (6), Verse 100:

وَجَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ الْجِنَّ وَخَلَقَهُمْ وَخَرَقُوا لَهُ بَنِينَ وَبَنَاتٍ يَغَيِّرُ عِلْمَ سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ

[4] Surat al-A’raf (7), Verse 17:

ثُمَّ لَأَنبِتَهُمْ مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ وَعَنْ أَيْمَانِهِمْ وَعَنْ شَمَائِلِهِمْ...

[5] Surat al-Hijr (15), Verses 39-40:

وَلَأَعْوَبْتَهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ، إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ

[6] Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 60, pg. 267:

خَلَقَ اللَّهُ الْجِنَّ خَمْسَةَ أَصْنَافٍ: صِنْفٌ كَالرِّيحِ فِي الْهَوَاءِ، وَصِنْفٌ حَيَّاتٌ، وَصِنْفٌ عَقَابٌ، وَصِنْفٌ حَشْرَاتٌ
الْأَرْضِ، وَصِنْفٌ كَتَبِي آدَمَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْحِسَابُ وَالْعِقَابُ

[7] Surat al-Mujadalah (58), Verse 10:

...وَلَيْسَ بِضَارِّهِمْ شَيْئًا إِلَّا يُدْنِ اللَّهُ...

[8] Surat Qaf (50), Verse 16:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَتَعَلَّمْ مَا تَوْسَّوَسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

[9] Surat al-Hijr (15), Verse 42:

إِنَّ عِبَادِي لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانٌ إِلَّا مَنْ اتَّبَعَكَ مِنَ الْغَاوِينَ

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