

9. What is Satan? Is Satan *Iblis*?

Presently there is no clear understanding of Satan in the Muslim community. We also do not know how Satan influences our minds to mislead us from the path of Allah. Religious scholars use the terms “*Iblis*” and “Satan” synonymously implying Satan is *Iblis*. It is further supposed that Satan is everywhere round the clock misleading the entire people of the world (over seven billion) from the righteous path. It is also foolish to suppose that one *Iblis* is interacting twenty four hours with billions of human beings in the world simultaneously. What we should realize is Satan is not *Iblis*. They are different and have independent existence. Based on computer analogy, a possible explanation to this conundrum [1] is presented here.

Satan appeared on the scene after the creation of Adam as can be inferred from the Quranic revelations. We also get sufficient clue about the identity of Satan from the events that ensued creation of Adam.

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

2:34 And behold, We said to the angels: Bow down to Adam. And they all bowed down except *Iblis*. He refused and was haughty. He became one of the rejecters of Faith.

قَالَ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَلَّا تَسْجُدَ إِذْ أَمَرْتُكَ قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ قَالَ فَاهْبِطْ مِنْهَا فَمَا يَكُونُ لَكَ أَنْ تَتَكَبَّرَ فِيهَا فَاخْرُجْ إِنَّكَ مِنَ الصَّاغِرِينَ قَالَ أَنْظِرْنِي إِلَىٰ يَوْمٍ يُبْعَثُونَ قَالَ إِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنظَرِينَ قَالَ فِيمَا أُغْوَيْتَنِي لِأَفْعُدَنَّ لَهُمْ صِرَاطَكَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ثُمَّ لَآتِيَنَّهُمْ مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ وَعَنْ أَيْمَانِهِمْ وَعَنْ شَمَائِلِهِمْ وَلَا تَجِدُ أَكْثَرَهُمْ شَاكِرِينَ قَالَ أَخْرَجَ مِنْهَا مَذْهُومًا مَذْحُورًا تِلْمَعًا تَبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنْكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

7:12-18 (Allah) said: What prevented you from bowing down when I commanded you? He (*Iblis*) said: I am better than he (Adam). You created me from fire and him from clay. (Allah) said: Get you down from this. It is not for you to be arrogant here; get out for you are the meanest (of creatures). He (*Iblis*) said: Give me respite till the day they (human beings) are raised up (resurrected for judgement). (Allah) said: Be you among those who have respite. He (*Iblis*) said: Because You have misguided me, I will lie in wait for them (human beings) on Your straight way. Then I will assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and from their left; nor will You find in most of them gratitude (for Your Mercy). (Allah) said: Get out from this, disgraced and expelled. If any of them follow you, I will fill Hell with you all.

These verses reveal that when Allah ordered the angels to bow down to Adam following his creation, all the angels except *Iblis* bowed down. Allah asked him to explain his non-compliance. *Iblis* responded boastfully that he was much above man in status and that prevented him from prostrating before Adam. Allah asked him to get out from the divine abode. *Iblis* pleaded for respite till the Day of Judgement when all human beings are raised up again. Allah granted *Iblis* respite. *Iblis* then swore that since Allah misguided him, he would mislead all human beings from the divine path except the most sincere and pious ones. How does *Iblis* go about misleading man and what is his strategy are some of the important questions that remain unanswered. The revelations following these verses shed light on these important issues. The points to be noted are indicated in boldface in parentheses and their explanations are given in subsequent discussion.

وَيَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ فَكُلَا مِنْ حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ فَوَسْوَسَ لَهُمَا الشَّيْطَانُ لِيُبْدِيَ لَهُمَا مَا وُورِيَ عَنْهُمَا مِنْ سَوْآتِهِمَا وَقَالَ مَا نَهَاكُمَا رَبُّكُمَا عَنْ هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةِ إِلَّا أَنْ تَكُونَا مَلَكَتَيْنِ أَوْ تَكُونَا

مِنَ الْخَالِدِينَ وَقَاسَمَهُمَا إِنِّي لَكُمَا لَمِنَ النَّاصِحِينَ فَذَلَّاهُمَا بِغُرُورٍ ۖ فَلَمَّا ذَاقَا الشَّجَرَةَ بَدَتْ لَهُمَا سَوْآتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ
عَلَيْهِمَا مِنْ وَّرَقِ الْجَنَّةِ ۖ وَنَادَاهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا أَلَمْ أَنْهَكُمَا عَن تِلْكَ الشَّجَرَةِ وَأَقُلْتُ لَكُمَا إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ لَكُمَا عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ قَالَا رَبَّنَا
ظَلَمْنَا أَنْفُسَنَا وَإِن لَّمْ تَغْفِرْ لَنَا وَتَرْحَمْنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ قَالَ اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ
وَمَتَاعٌ إِلَىٰ جَبِينٍ قَالِ فِيهَا تَحْيَوْنَ وَفِيهَا تَمُوتُونَ وَمِنْهَا تُخْرَجُونَ

7:19-25 O Adam! You and your wife dwell in the Garden and enjoy (its good things) as you wish but do not approach this *Tree* or you run into harm and transgression. Then Satan (**not Iblis**) began to whisper suggestions to them to uncover their shame that was hidden from them (before). He (**it**) said: Your Lord only forbade you this *Tree* lest you should become angels or such beings as live for ever. And he (**it**) swore to both of them: I am indeed your sincere advisor. So by deceit he (**it**) brought their fall. When they tasted of the *Tree*, their shame became manifest to them and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies. And their Lord called to them: Did I not tell you that Satan (**not Iblis**) was an avowed enemy to you? They said: Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls. If You do not forgive us and bestow upon us Your Mercy, we shall be certainly be lost. (Allah) said: Get you down with enmity between yourselves. The earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a term. He (Allah) said: Therein shall you live, and therein shall you die, and from there shall you be taken out (resurrection).

The first reference to Satan appears here. Allah asked Adam and Eve to live in the Garden. They were ordered by God not to touch the *Tree* there. That was the only directive Allah had given to test them. However, they were lured and misguided by the loathsome Satan (not *Iblis*) to disobedience. They fell an easy prey to Satan's temptations and failed in the test – they ate of the tree. That led to their ouster from the Garden to Earth. It is important to note that it was *Iblis* who vowed before Allah to mislead man. But it was not *Iblis* but Satan who put the misleading suggestions onto the minds of Adam and Eve. The Quran did not use the word *Iblis* after his conversation with Allah (i.e., after verse 7:18), but used the word “Satan” instead. The use of the word Satan in place of *Iblis* in the above verses (Q. 7:19-25) is glaring. It is because Satan is different from *Iblis*. If not, there is no need to introduce a different term. The ulema have not distinguished the two terms from each other. The situation has led to so much confusion in understanding the verses, which is reflected in Quran translations. For instance, Yusuf Ali commented: “*Iblis* in ii. 34 is apparently the Power of Evil, with the root idea of desperateness or rebellion. “Satan” in this verse (i.e., 2:36) is the Power of Evil, with the root idea of perversity or enmity.” [2]. But such an interpretation is not consistent with the Quranic revelations and does not clarify what Satan is. A plausible explanation can be given based on the computer model of human biosystem [3]. Treating *Iblis* and Satan at par is not correct. They are physically different because Allah warned Adam and Eve of Satan and not *Iblis* as avowed enemy. Further Allah conversed with *Iblis* and not Satan.

It may be recalled here that the angels are at the command of Allah executing His orders through appropriate programs. Since *Iblis* was an angel at the time of creation of Adam, it may be presumed that *Iblis* was using Allah's programs. This is evident from the statement of *Iblis* that it is with Allah's permission and power he misleads human beings.

قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنْظَرِينَ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ الْوَقْتِ الْمَعْلُومِ قَالَ فَيَعِزُّنَكَ لِأَعْوَابِهِمْ أَجْمَعِينَ إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ قَالَ فَالْحَقُّ
وَالْحَقُّ أَقُولُ لِأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنْكَ وَمِمَّن تَبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

38:80-85 (Allah) said: Respite then is granted to you (*Iblis*) till the Day of the Time Appointed. (*Iblis*) said: Then by Your (Allah's) Power, I (*Iblis*) will put them all in the wrong except Your sincere and purified servants among them. (Allah) said: Then it is just and fitting and I say what is just and fitting – That I will certainly fill Hell with you and those that follow you – everyone.

“Allah’s Power” mentioned in the above verses indicates Allah’s program or commands. Going by the computer model, the human robot system requires a program to make misleading suggestions to the processor mind. It may therefore be inferred from these verses that with Allah’s permission *Iblis* installed a suitable program in Adam’s biosystem. This program thus became part of Adam’s *nafs*. In computer parlance it was a virus program that was installed by *Iblis*. A computer virus is a small program designed to interfere with the functioning of the system the way its author wanted. Satan mentioned in the Quran may be understood as virus program. The intention of *Iblis* was to mislead man from Allah’s path. Satan virus does this job by interfering with the decision-making function of the human *qalb* (mind) by offering tempting (evil) suggestions to it (Q. 7:19-25). Since Eve was created from Adam’s *nafs*, the Satan virus also entered Eve’s biosoftware. Thus we find Satan putting suggestions onto the *qalbs* of Adam and Eve instead of *Iblis*. The virus analogy enables us to visualize how *Iblis* carries out his threat. The Satan is the tool of *Iblis* operating inside the human biosystem and not from outside as is believed now. It is through Satan virus and not by direct physical involvement *Iblis* who is given respite by Allah till the end of the world carries out his threat of misleading man from the divine righteous path. This view is further strengthened by the use of the word “command” (*amr*) in the following verse to characterize the nature of action of Satan on human mind (my translation in boldface added).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُواتِ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ وَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْ خُطُواتِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ ۗ وَلَوْ لَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ مَا زَكَا مِنْكُمْ مِنْ أَحَدٍ أَبَدًا وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَنِ يَشَاءُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

24:21 “O you who believe! Follow not the footsteps of Satan. If any will follow the footsteps of Satan, he (**it**) will (but) command what is shameful and wrong....”

It is also noteworthy that *Iblis* says it is because Allah misled him, he is misleading Allah’s servants – human beings. The entire episode involving *Iblis* that took place in the divine abode following creation of Adam must be seen as part of Allah’s scheme for installing Satan virus to make human robot testing efficient. Since Satan is a program, the pronoun “it” is the appropriate one and not the pronoun “he” that is used in translations to refer to Satan. This correction is indicated by giving “it” in boldface in parentheses in the translations of the verses quoted.

Satan virus being a small program exists as stored information on the chromosome. This virus program is present in each and every cell of human body as it is copied during cell division. In this way it enters gametes and germ line. Thus every human individual carries Satan virus in his biomemome. It is this extremely powerful virus program installed by *Iblis* in Adam’s biosystem to mislead man from Allah’s path that is referred to in the Quran as Satan and an avowed enemy of mankind.

That *Iblis* is not Satan is further evident from the use of plural term of Satan – *shayateen* – at many places in the Quran whereas the term “*Iblis*” is not used in plural. Consider for instance verse 7:30.

قَرِيبًا هَدَىٰ وَقَرِيبًا حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الضَّلَالَةُ إِنَّهُمْ اتَّخَذُوا الشَّيَاطِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنََّّهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

7:30 Some He (Allah) has guided. Others have (by their choice) deserved the loss of their way. In that they took the evil ones (*shayateen*) in preference to Allah for their friends and protectors and think that they receive guidance.

Based on the traditional view, the verse would appear to convey the existence of so many Satans or *Iblis* although it is not possible to explain how a large number of *Iblis* can arise. As already mentioned, every human being carries Satan virus. An individual by virtue of his freewill can either follow Allah’s directions or Satan’s. An individual who obeys Satan’s directions and acts accordingly is therefore referred to as Satan in the Quran. The plural *shayateen* is used in the Quran to describe a group of such people. Obviously they will also be friends with one another. It is to be realized that mere presence of this virus program in the body does not make a person Satan but the individual must be following the evil path consequent to his surrender to the virus program. If that were not the case, all of us would have been Satans (*shayateen*) as we all carry Satan virus or to use the computer jargon, we are all ‘infected’ with it. Consider a situation in which a person meets a group of individuals (Satans) who have gone astray from Allah’s path. He will be influenced not only by the Satan virus in his biosystem but also by the viruses residing in the people of that group. That group can function as a collection of Satans or *shayateen*. The person *does not see* the virus in others. He takes them as friends. In the traditional view, we have to suppose many *Iblis* to match the term “*shayateen*” which is clearly wrong. The following verses (Q. 7:27, 6:112) make it further clear that the word *shayateen* refers to the misled human beings and not many *Iblis*.

يَا بَنِي آدَمَ لَا يَفْتِنَنَّكُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ كَمَا أَخْرَجَ أَبَوَيْكُم مِّنَ الْجَنَّةِ يَنْزِعُ عَنْهُمَا لِبَاسَهُمَا لِيُرِيَهُمَا سَوْآتِهِمَا إِنَّهُ يَرَاكُمْ هُوَ وَقَبِيلُهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا تَرَوْنَهُمْ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا الشَّيَاطِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

7:27 O children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment, to expose their shame: for he (**it**) and his (**its**) tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them: We made the evil ones (*shayateen*) friends to those without faith.

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَا لِكُلِّ نَبِيٍّ عَدُوًّا شَيَاطِينَ الْإِنسِ وَالْجِنِّ يُوجِي بَعْضُهُمْ إِلَىٰ بَعْضٍ زُخْرُفَ الْقَوْلِ غُرُورًا وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ مَا فَعَلُوهُ فَذَرْهُمْ وَمَا يَفْتَرُونَ

6:112 Likewise we made for every messenger an enemy – evil ones (*shayateen*) among men and jinns, inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception. If your Lord has so planned they would not have done it. So leave them and their inventions alone.

وَلَقَدْ صَدَّقَ عَلَيْهِمْ إِبْلِيسُ ظَنَّهُ فَاتَّبَعُوهُ إِلَّا قَرِيبًا مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

34:20 And on them did *Iblis* prove true his idea and all except the believers followed him.

The verse (Q. 34:20) indicates the success of *Iblis*’s idea of diverting people from Allah’s path. The use of the word *Iblis* in this verse is not in contradiction with the virus analogy because whoever succumbed to the lure of Satan in effect followed *Iblis*.

The use of the word “Satan” instead of “*Iblis*” may not be changing the implied message in a verse but it does affect our perception of *Iblis* and Satan. From several verses, we can understand that Satan virus influences human mind in a variety of ways. This is also evident from the statement of *Iblis* during his conversation with Allah (Q. 7:12-18 quoted above) that he will assault them from before them and behind them, from their right and from their left. In these verses, *Iblis* is telling Allah that he will mislead Allah’s servants. This may be taken to mean that he misleads man with the help of his tool, Satan virus. Satan is a powerful program capable of diverting man from Allah’s path. See also the following verses.

إِنْ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَّا إِنَّا وَإِنْ يَدْعُونَ إِلَّا شَيْطَانًا مَرِيدًا لَعَنَهُ اللَّهُ وَقَالَ لَأَتَّخِذَنَّ مِنْ عِبَادِكَ نَصِيبًا مَفْرُوضًا وَلَا ضِلَّانَهُمْ
وَلَأَمْنِيَّتَهُمْ وَلَا مَرْتَبَهُمْ فَلْيَبْتَئِكُنَّ آذَانَ الْأَنْعَامِ وَلَا مَرْتَبَهُمْ فَلْيَغَيِّرَنَّ خَلْقَ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ يَتَّخِذِ الشَّيْطَانَ وَلِيًّا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَقَدْ خَسِرَ
خُسْرَانًا مُبِينًا يَعِدُهُمْ وَيُمَنِّيهِمْ وَمَا يَعِدُهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا أُولَئِكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَلَا يَجِدُونَ عَنْهَا مَحِيصًا

4:117-121 They invoke, besides Him, only female (deities). They only invoke the arrogant Satan! Allah had cursed it. And it said: “I will take a fixed share from Your servants. I will mislead them and I will create in them false desires. I will order them; then they will slit the ears of cattle. I will order them; then they will deface Allah’s creations.” Whoever takes Satan for a protector forsaking Allah, he has indeed sustained a clear loss. The Satan makes promises to them and creates in them false desires; but Satan’s promises are nothing but deception. Their abode is Hell and they will find no place (to escape) from it.

References

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