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From the Quranic Perspective, are Iblīs and Shayṭān (Satan) the same individual?

Question

From the perspective of the Qurʾān, are *Iblīs* and *Shayṭān* (Satan) the same individual?

Answer

In order to arrive at an answer to this question, it is necessary to first define these two words – *Shayṭān* and *Iblīs*.

Shayṭān: This word comes from the Arabic root word “شطن” – ‘*shaṭana*’ which has multiple meanings associated with it – however, to summarize, any creation which exhibits a rebellious and

recalcitrant behaviour is referred to with this title; whether it be a human being, a *jinn* or an animal.¹

The word *Shayṭān* has been used in the Qurʾān in three different ways:

1. Singular tense without the *alif* and *lām* preceding it (*shayṭān* - شيطان). When it is used in such instances, the meaning of *shayṭān* is non-specific and can include all creations from amongst the *jinn* and human beings (who display those specific traits previously mentioned). For example, there is a verse of the Qurʾān which reads:

﴿وَمَنْ يَعْشُ عَنْ ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ﴾

And whoever turns oneself away from the remembrance of the Beneficent (God), We appoint for him a *shayṭān* (satan), so he (satan) becomes that person's associate.²

2. Singular tense with the *alif* and *lām* preceding it (*al-shayṭān* - الشيطان). When it is used in this way, in most cases it refers to a specific individual – meaning *Iblīs*, for example the following verse of the Qurʾān states:

﴿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﴾

¹ *Al-Munjid fī al-Lugha*

² *Qurʾān*, Sūrah al-Zukhruf (43), verse 36

O children of Adam! let not the *Shayṭān* (The Satan) cause you to fall into affliction, just like he expelled your parents from the garden, pulling off from them both their clothing that he might show them their evil inclinations, he surely sees you, he as well as his host, from whence you cannot see them; surely We have made the *Shayāṭīn* (The Satans) to be the guardians of those who do not believe.³

In certain limited instances, it can also denote a general trait [as opposed to a specific individual] – for example in the below verse:

﴿الشَّيْطَانُ يَعِدُكُمُ الْفَقْرَ وَيَأْمُرُكُم بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَاللَّهُ يَعِدُكُم مَّغْفِرَةً مِنْهُ وَفَضْلًا وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ﴾

The *Shayṭān* (satan) threatens you with poverty and enjoins you to be miserly, and God promises you forgiveness from Himself and abundance; and God is Ample-Giving, Knowing.⁴

In this example, the *alif* and *lām* which comes at the front of the word *shayṭān* refer to the genus, and thus in this context it is understood as anyone who frightens another individual that they will suffer in a state of poverty. Therefore, it can be seen that inviting a person to perform actions which go against the sacred teachings (of Islam) can from time to time, be something which devilish people can also instigate.

³ *Qur'ān*, Sūrah al-A'rāf (7), verse 27

⁴ *Qur'ān*, Sūrah al-Baqarah (2), verse 268

3. The third way this word is used in the Qurʾān is in the plural tense and this usage shows us that *shayṭān* can actually exist in numerous appearances. If the word *shayṭān* was simply a name for one specific individual (*Iblīs*), then it would have only been used in the singular tense. In addition to this, in some verses of the Qurʾān, after mentioning the word *shayāṭīn* (the plural of *shayṭān*), various types of this genus have been mentioned – such as the verse which reads:

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

And thus did We make for every prophet an enemy, the *shayāṭīn* (satans) from among the men and the *jinn*, some of them suggesting to others varnished falsehood to deceive (them), and had your Lord pleased they would not have done it, therefore leave them and that which they forge.⁵

Iblīs: This word comes from the root word “إبلاس” – ‘*iblās*’ which means ‘sadness and sorrow which stems from an extreme feeling of hopelessness and despair.’ In this regards, God states the following in the Qurʾān:

﴿وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُبْلِسُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ﴾

⁵ Qurʾān, Sūrah al-Anʿām (6), verse 113

And at that time when the hour will come, the guilty will be in despair.⁶

Iblīs is called by this name because of the fact that he felt despair from the mercy of God, and this was brought upon due to him disregarding the command of God, the Most High.

In this regards, the Qur'an states:

﴿وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ ۗ أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِي وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ بِئْسَ لِلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا﴾

And when We said to the angels: Make prostration to [wards] Adam; they [all] made prostration except for *Iblīs* (who did not). He was from among the *jinn*, so he transgressed the commandment of his Lord. What! Would you then take him and his offspring for friends rather than Me, and they are your enemies? Evil is (this) change for the unjust.⁷

God then asked him:

﴿قَالَ يَا إِبْلِيسُ مَا مَنَعَكَ أَنْ تَسْجُدَ لِمَا خَلَقْتُ بِإِيْدِي ۗ أَتَعْتَبَرُ
أَمْ كُنْتَ مِنَ الْعَالِينَ﴾

⁶ *Qur'an*, Sūrah al-Rūm (30), verse 12; *Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur'an*.

⁷ *Qur'an*, Sūrah al-Kahf (18), verse 50

He said: O Iblis! What prevented you that you should do obeisance to him whom I created with My [own] two hands? Are you proud or are you from among the exalted ones?⁸

To this, he replied to God saying:

﴿قَالَ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِنْهُ خَلَقْتَنِي مِنْ نَارٍ وَخَلَقْتَهُ مِنْ طِينٍ﴾

He said: I am better than him. You created me from fire, and You created him from clay.⁹

It was at this point of the conversation that God ordered him to leave that space and said to him:

﴿قَالَ فَأَخْرُجْ مِنْهَا فَإِنَّكَ رَجِيمٌ﴾

He said: Then get out of it [here], for surely you are driven away.¹⁰

﴿وَإِنَّ عَلَيْنَا لَلْعَنَتِي إِلَى يَوْمِ الدِّينِ﴾

And surely My curse is on you until the Day of Judgment.¹¹

It was at this point that he was removed from the assembly of the angels.¹² Of course he was never an angel, but it was due to his servitude, obedience and spiritual proximity to his Lord that he had developed that he became stationed among the ranks of the angels.¹³

⁸ *Qur'ān*, Sūrah Ṣuād (38), verse 75

⁹ *Ibid.*, verse 76

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, verse 77

¹¹ *Ibid.*, verse 78

¹² Ref: *Tafsīr-e Namunah*, vol. 19, p. 341

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, p. 462

We have a tradition from Imām ‘Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā عليه السلام in which he states, “The actual first name of *Iblīs* was Ḥārth or Ḥārith, and he was [later on] named *Iblīs* because he fell into despair from the mercy of God.”¹⁴

In speaking about the specific naming of *Iblīs*, Ibn ‘Arabi, the author of the book *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makiyya* writes, “The first individual who was ever named *Shayṭān* was Ḥārith, and it was God Himself who named him *Iblās* – meaning one who fell into despair in regards to the mercy of God.”¹⁵

The Qur’ān states that once God determined to remove him from the ranks of the angels, he (*Iblīs*) asked God:

﴿قَالَ رَبِّ فَأَنْظِرْنِي إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ﴾

He said: My Lord! then respite me until the day that they are raised.¹⁶

God replied to him:

﴿قَالَ فَإِنَّكَ مِنَ الْمُنْظَرِينَ﴾

He said: Surely you are of the respited ones.¹⁷

God then concluded by saying:

﴿إِلَى يَوْمِ الْوَقْتِ الْمَعْلُومِ﴾

Until the period of the time made known.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Ṣafīna al-Biḥār*, vol. 1, pg. 99

¹⁵ *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makiyya*, vol. 1, pg. 134

¹⁶ *Qur’ān*, Sūrah Ṣuād (38), verse 79

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, verse 80

¹⁸ *Ibid.* verse 81

Once *Iblīs* was sure that he would be given a long life, he then replied to God by stating:

﴿قَالَ فَبِعِزَّتِكَ لَأُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ﴾

He said: Then by Your Might I will surely make them live an evil life, all of them.¹⁹

He followed this up by saying:

﴿إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ﴾

Except Your servants from among them, the purified ones.²⁰

Therefore, he became the sworn enemy of humanity and thus we see the emphatic advice given by God to all of humanity that:

﴿إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ فَاتَّخِذُوهُ عَدُوًّا إِنَّمَا يَدْعُو حِزْبَهُ لِيَكُونُوا مِنْ أَصْحَابِ السَّعِيرِ﴾

Surely the *Shayṭān* is your enemy, so take him for an enemy; he only invites his party that they may be inmates of the burning fire.²¹

Of course it is important to mention that all of the *shayāṭīn* (devils) in existence are followers of the orders of *Iblīs* and work under his command, and the Noble Qurʾān refers to this group as the Party of Satan (*Hizb al-Shayṭān*):

¹⁹ Ibid., verse 82

²⁰ Ibid., verse 83

²¹ Qurʾān, Sūrah Fāṭir (35), verse 6

﴿سَتَحَوِّذَ عَلَيْهِمُ الشَّيْطَانُ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ ذِكْرَ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ حِزْبُ
الشَّيْطَانِ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ الشَّيْطَانِ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ﴾

The *Shayṭān* has gained mastery over them, so he has made them forget the remembrance of God; they are Satan's Party; now surely Satan's Party are the losers.²²

CONCLUSION: *Therefore*, *Iblīs* is the name of a specific satan (*shayṭān*) who due to not following the orders given by God, the Most High, was outcast; and the word *shayṭān* is a universal term which refers to any creation which becomes unruly and disobedient, and thus can include *Iblīs* and other satanic figures – from among the *jinn*, humanity and even the animal kingdom!



O Allāh! Send Your prayers upon Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad!

²² *Qurʾān*, Sūrah al-Mujādilah (58), verse 19