

Question 17: Satan's Influence

Question: How does Satan influence our thoughts?

Brief Answer

Before we can investigate the influence of Satan on our thoughts, we must gain an understanding of who Satan is.

Lexicographers differ over the linguistic root of the word *shaytan* (satan). The strongest opinion states that it comes from "*shatana*" meaning "to be far." As it is known, *shaytan* in 'Arabic, is a common noun, and can therefore be applied to any of a number of beings. However, the archetypical satan—the leader of them all—is known in Arabic as *Iblis*.¹

Satan is a member of the class of beings called jinn. Like all jinn, he can transform himself into various forms, sometimes appearing as a man, sometimes as an animal. The only limitation placed on him is that he cannot manifest himself as a prophet or Imam. It is mainly through these transformations that Satan misguides people. At watershed moments in a person's life, he appears as a well-wishing advisor and lays the groundwork for his destruction.

Salman al-Farisi narrates that Imam 'Ali (ع) said, "The old man who was the first to pledge his allegiance to Abu Bakr and whose forehead was calloused from extensive prostrations, was the accursed Satan."

However, Satan does not always employ this method. He exists in an intermediate state between the material and the immaterial realms. For this reason, he cannot directly affect the immaterial spirit of the human being. Rather, he infiltrates a person's thoughts by means of one aspect of the human soul called *al-nafs al-ammara* (the lower soul). This is the animalistic aspect of the soul, that can be transformed into *al-nafs al-mutma'innah* (the higher soul) through training and enhancement. It is through temptation and by showing the lower soul manifestations of what it desires that Satan paves the way to misguide man. For this reason, Satan is only a part of the cause of human misguidance.

These manifestations take on different forms, yet they all conform to what the lower soul desires:

1. The beautification of ugly deeds: By making ugly actions appear beautiful, Satan effectively strips the otherwise inherent ugliness of sin and mitigates the societal taboo associated with sin in such a way that man easily falls into the trap of sin. This phenomenon can be witnessed in a person who rationalizes his wrong actions.
2. False promises: Through false promises and unattainable hopes, Satan renders man heedless of the Hereafter, death, and even Allah (awj). Such a person becomes a slave to his desires and is prepared to go to any lengths to attain the attainable, even if it means sinning against Allah (awj).
3. Fear: Satan scares man with thoughts of the future, compelling him to accumulate wealth, flee from *jihad*, aid the unjust, etc.

Detailed Answer

To properly understand the answer to this question, we must first gain an understanding of the nature of Satan.

Lexicographers differ over the linguistic root of the word “satan.” The strongest opinion states that it comes from “*shatana*” meaning “to be far.” It is for this reason that anyone that distances man from his Lord is called a “satan.”

Many exegetes of the Qur`an believe that a “satan” is any mischievous being that has been misguided. According to this opinion, “satan” is a common noun that can be applied to any of a number of members, whether jinn or human. However, *Iblis* is a proper name for the particular satan who refused to prostrate before Adam.²

The Qur`an explicitly states that Satan is a jinn³ and is made of fire. The jinn are in an intermediate state between physical and immaterial and can manifest themselves as various physical beings. Human beings, on the other hand, are composed of a body and soul. Man’s soul in turn has two aspects. One aspect is Godly in nature. It is alternatively called the spirit (*al-ruh*) and the higher soul (*al-nafs al-mutma`innah*).

The other aspect of the human soul is animalistic in nature and is called the lower soul (*al-nafs al-ammarah*). To gain control over man, Satan must access this lower soul. Being immaterial himself, he cannot establish direct contact with man’s physical body. It is this connection between Satan and the lower soul of man that is called a “whispered temptation” (*al-waswas*) in Qur`anic terminology.

Therefore, Satan is only a part of the cause and cannot misguide man by himself. Rather he invites man to that which his lower soul desires. Man can then choose to follow Satan’s temptations or the laws of Allah (awj) and the standards of his intellect. It is for this reason that Allah (awj) admonishes man in the following way:

“Do not follow in Satan’s footsteps, for he is your manifest enemy.”⁴

How exactly does Satan incite a person’s irrational desires to push him towards sin? We will enumerate several of the techniques that Satan employs for this purpose:

1. As stated earlier, Satan, being a jinn, is able to manifest himself in different physical forms. At various critical points, he presents himself as a well-wishing advisor for the express purpose of misguiding people. There is ample mention of such instances in history, and it is even possible that such instances have presented themselves in our own lives.

For example, it is narrated from Salman al-Farisi concerning the incident of Saqifah: Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) asked, “Do you know the man who ascended the pulpit and preceded everyone else in pledging his allegiance to Abu Bakr?” I said, “No. But I saw that he was an old man who leaned heavily on his cane, and I saw that on his forehead was a large callous that was the result of lengthy prostrations. He was the first to ascend the pulpit. He expressed with tears running down his cheeks, ‘Praise be to the Allah that did not take my life so that I could see you here. Extend your hand that I may pledge allegiance to you.’ He extended his hand and pledged allegiance, then he came down from the pulpit and left the masjid.” Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) asked, “Salman, do you know who that was?” I said, “No, but he upset me. It seemed as though he spoke facetiously of the Prophet’s death.” Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (ع) said, “That was Satan—may Allah curse him.”⁵

2. The beautification of ugly deeds: Satan makes ugly deeds seem beautiful so that people begin to gravitate toward them. This phenomenon is referred to in the Qur`an as “the confounding of truth and falsehood.”⁶ Beautifying ugly deeds is a relatively easy task that conforms to base human desires. It is for this reason that the following verse was revealed:

“Satan made their actions seem beautiful to them, and then diverted them from Allah’s path.”⁷

3. False promises: By making false promises and encouraging one’s farfetched hopes, Satan keeps a person’s mind engaged in thoughts that are far from reality. As a result, the person remains heedless of Allah (awj). The following verse mentions this phenomenon:

“Satan promises them and compels them to entertain farfetched hopes.”⁸

4. Fear: Another of Satan’s tricks is to frighten people about the future. Such fear results in hopelessness, cynicism in Allah (awj), a lack of trust in Allah (awj), and finally complete abstention from any benevolent actions. For instance, Satan frightens people of poverty to such an extent that they are driven to miserliness, as the Quran states:

“Satan threatens you with poverty and enjoins you toward sin.”⁹

1. Iblis will be denoted as Satan with a capital 's.' When satan as a common noun is intended, it will be spelled with a lower case 's.'

2. Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verse 34:

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

3. Surat al-Kahf (18), Verse 50:

﴿...وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ ﴾

4. Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verse 208:

﴿ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ... ﴾

5. al-Kafi, vol. 8, pp. 343-344:

فَقَالَ لِي يَا سَلْمَانَ هَلْ تَدْرِي مَنْ أَوَّلُ مَنْ بَايَعَهُ عَلِيُّ مَنبَرِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (ص)؛ قُلْتُ: لَا أَذْرِي إِلَّا أَنِّي رَأَيْتُ فِي ظِلَّةِ بَيْتِي سَاعِدَةً حِينَ خَصَمَتِ الْأَنْصَارَ وَكَانَ أَوَّلَ مَنْ بَايَعَهُ بِشِيرُ بَنُ سَعْدٍ وَ أَبُو عَبِيدَةَ بَنُ الْجَرَّاحِ ثُمَّ عُمَرُ ثُمَّ سَالِمٌ قَالَ لَسْتُ أَسْأَلُكَ عَنْ هَذَا وَ لَكِنِ أَتَدْرِي أَوَّلَ مَنْ بَايَعَهُ حِينَ صَعِدَ عَلِيُّ مَنبَرِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (ص) قُلْتُ لَا وَ لَكِنِّي رَأَيْتُ شَيْخًا كَبِيرًا مُتَوَكِّئًا عَلَيَّ عَصَاهُ بَيْنَ عَيْنَيْهِ سَجَادَةً شَدِيدَ التَّشْمِيرِ صَعِدَ إِلَيْهِ أَوَّلَ مَنْ صَعِدَ وَ هُوَ يَبْكِي وَ يَقُولُ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يُمْنِنِي مِنَ الدُّنْيَا حَتَّى رَأَيْتَكَ فِي هَذَا الْمَكَانِ ابْسُطْ يَدَكَ فَبَايَعَهُ ثُمَّ نَزَلَ فَخَرَجَ مِنَ الْمَسْجِدِ فَقَالَ عَلِيُّ (ع) هَلْ تَدْرِي مَنْ هُوَ قُلْتُ لَا وَ لَقَدْ سَأَعْتَنِي مَقَالَتَهُ كَأَنَّهُ شَامِتٌ بِمَوْتِ النَّبِيِّ (ص) فَقَالَ ذَاكَ إِبْلِيسُ لَعَنَهُ اللَّهُ.

6. Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verse 42:

﴿ وَلَا تَلْبِسُوا الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَالْبَاطِلُ بِالْحَقِّ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴾

7. Surat al-Nahl (16), Verse 63:

﴿ تَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمَمٍ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ فَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَعْمَالَهُمْ فَهُوَ وَلِيُّهُمُ الْيَوْمَ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴾

8. Surat al-Nisa` (4), Verse 120:

﴿ يَعِدُهُمْ وَيُمَنِّيهِمْ وَمَا يَعِدُهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ إِلَّا غُرُورًا ﴾

9. Surat al-Baqarah (2), Verse 268:

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

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