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Woman and Man's "fall": A Qur'anic Theological Perspective

Muslims generally—like Christians and Jews—believe that Eve was responsible for Adam's "Fall". This belief is not grounded in the Qur'anic text which neither upholds the idea of the "Fall" nor the idea that woman was responsible for man's exodus from *al-janna* (Paradise) as an analysis of relevant passages would demonstrate. Here one may note that the Qur'an is not chronologically structured like Genesis in the Bible. Just as it does not refer to the subject of human creation in Sūra 1, or in one place, it also does not refer to the subject of the departure of the human pair from *al-janna* in one place. There are three references to this incident in the Qur'an and these are given below:

First Reference: Sūra 2: *Al-Baqara*: 35–39

And We said: "O Adam, dwell thou and thy zawj (mate) in the garden, and eat freely thereof, both of you, whatever you may wish; but do not approach this one tree, lest you become wrongdoers."

But Satan caused them both to stumble therein, and thus brought about the loss of their erstwhile state.¹ And so We said: "Down with you (and be henceforth) enemies unto one another; and on earth you shall have your abode and your livelihood for a while!"²

1 *The Jerusalem Bible*, 8–9.

2 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980). Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as "brought about the loss of their erstwhile state" is "brought them out of what they had been, i.e., by inducing them to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree," 10, footnote 29.

Thereupon Adam received words (of guidance) from his Sustainer, and He accepted his repentance: for, verily, He alone is the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace. (For although) We did say, “Down with you all from this (state)”, there shall, none the less, most certainly come unto you guidance from Me: and those who follow My guidance need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve; but those who are bent on denying the truth and giving the lie to Our messages—they are destined for the fire, and therein shall they abide.³

Second Reference: Sūra 7: *Al-A‘rāf*: 19–25

And (as for thee), O Adam, dwell thou and thy *zawj* (mate) in this garden, and eat, both of you, whatever you may wish: but do not approach this one tree, lest you become evildoers (*ẓālimīn*).

Thereupon Satan whispered unto the two with a view to making them conscious of their nakedness, of which (hitherto) they had been unaware;⁴ and he said: “Your Sustainer has but forbidden you this tree lest you two become (as) angels, or lest you live forever.”⁵

And he swore unto them, “Verily, I am of those who wish you well indeed!”—and thus he led them with deluding thoughts.

But as soon as the two had tasted (the fruit) of the tree, they became conscious of their nakedness; and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the garden. And their Sustainer called unto them: “Did I not forbid that tree unto you and tell you, ‘Verily, Satan is your open foe?’”

The two replied: “O our Sustainer! We have sinned against ourselves—and unless Thou grant us forgiveness and bestow Thy mercy upon us, we shall most certainly be lost!”

Said He: “Down with you,⁶ (and be henceforth) enemies unto one another, having on earth your abode and livelihood for a while: there shall you live”—

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as “with a view to making them conscious of their nakedness, of which (hitherto) they had been unaware” is “so as to make manifest to them that of their nakedness which (hitherto) had been imperceptible to them,” 205, footnote 14.

5 Ibid. Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as “or lest you live forever” is “or (lest) you become of those who are enduring.” He adds that this statement instilled in the first human pair “the *desire* to live forever and to become, in this respect, like God,” 205, footnote 15.

6 Asad observes: “As in the parallel account ... in Sūra 2: (*Al-Baqara*): 35–36, the dual form of address changes at this stage into the plural ... thus making it clear that the story of Adam and Eve is, in reality, an allegory of human destiny,” *The Message of the Qur‘an*, 205, footnote 16.

He added—“and there you shall die, and thence shall you be brought forth (on Resurrection Day).”⁷

Third Reference: Sūra 20: *Ṭā-Hā*: 115–123

And, indeed, long ago did We impose Our commandment on Adam, but he forgot it, and We found no firmness of purpose in him.

For (thus it was) when We told the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam!”—they all prostrated themselves, save *Iblīs*, who refused (to do it); and thereupon We said: “O Adam! Verily this is a foe unto thee and thy wife: so let him not drive the two of you out of this garden and render thee unhappy.⁸ Behold, it is provided for thee that thou shalt not hunger here or feel naked,⁹ and that thou shalt not thirst here or suffer from the heat of the sun.”

But Satan whispered unto him, saying: “O Adam! Shall I lead thee to the tree of life eternal, and (thus) to a kingdom that will never decay?¹⁰

And so the two ate (of the fruit) thereof: and thereupon they became conscious of their nakedness and began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the garden. And (thus) did Adam disobey his Sustainer, and thus did he fall into grievous error.

Thereafter, (however), his Sustainer elected him (for His grace), and accepted his repentance and bestowed His guidance upon him, saying: “Down with you all from this (state of innocence, and be henceforth) enemies unto one another! Nonetheless, there shall most certainly come unto you guidance from Me: and he who follows My guidance will not go astray and neither will he be unhappy.¹¹

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as “render thee unhappy” is “so that thou wilt become unhappy” (483–484, footnote 104).

9 Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as “feel naked” is “be naked.” He adds that since Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness only after their fall from grace, “it is but logical to assume that the words ‘thou shalt not ... be naked’ have a spiritual significance, implying that man, in his original state of innocence, would not *feel* naked despite all absence of clothing.” *The Message of the Qur'an*, 484, footnote 105).

10 With reference to “the tree of life eternal,” Asad observes: “This symbolic tree is designated in the Bible as ‘the tree of life’ and ‘the tree of knowledge of good and evil’ (*Genesis*, Chapter 2:9), while in the above Qur’anic account Satan speaks of it as ‘the tree of life eternal (*al-khuld*)’.”

11 Ibid.

*DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENESIS,
CHAPTER 3 AND THE QUR'ANIC TEXTS
RELATING TO THE HUMAN PAIR'S
DEPARTURE FROM AL-JANNA*

*1. Reason for the Beguiling
of the Human Pair*

Whereas in *Genesis*, Chapter 3, no explanation is given as to why the serpent tempts either Eve alone or both Adam and Eve, in the Qur'an the reason why *Iblīs* (or *al-Shayṭān*) sets out to beguile the human pair in *al-janna* is stated in a number of passages. To understand this reason, it is necessary to know about a very important event that preceded it. This is narrated in the texts that are cited below:

a. Sūra 2: Al-Baqara: 30–34, read as follows:

And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: "Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it."¹²

They said: "Will Thou place on it such as will spread corruption thereon and shed blood—whereas it is we who extol Thy limitless glory, and praise Thee and hallow Thy name?"

(God) answered: "Verily, I know that which you do not know."

And He imparted unto Adam the names of all things; then He brought them within the ken of the angels and said: "Declare unto Me the names of these (things), if what you say is true."

They replied "limitless art Thou in Thy glory! No knowledge have we save that which Thou hast imparted unto us. Verily, Thou alone art all-knowing, truly wise."

Said He: "O Adam, convey unto them the names of these (things)."

12 Asad has stated that the literal meaning of the expression which he has translated as "establish on earth one who shall inherit it" is "establish on earth a successor or a vice-gerent." He adds, "The term *khalīfā*—derived from the verb *khalafa*, 'he succeeded (another)'—is used in this allegory to denote man's rightful supremacy on earth, which is most suitably rendered by the expression "he shall inherit the earth" (in the sense of being given possession of it), *The Message of the Qur'an*, 8, footnote 22.

And as soon as (Adam) had conveyed unto them their names, (God) said: "Did I not say unto you, 'Verily, I alone know the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth, and know all that you bring into the open and all that you would conceal?'"

And when We told the angels, "Prostrate yourselves before Adam!—they all prostrated themselves, save *Iblīs*, who refused and gloried in his arrogance: and thus he became one of those who deny the truth."¹³

b. Sūra 15: Al-Hijr: 26–43

And, indeed, We have created man out of sounding clay, out of dark slime transmuted—whereas the invisible beings We had created, (long) before that, out of the fire of scorching winds.

And lo! Thy Sustainer said unto the angels: "Behold, I am about to create mortal man out of sounding clay, out of dark slime transmuted; and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him of My spirit, fall down before him in prostration!"

Thereupon the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together, save *Iblīs*: he refused to be among those who prostrated themselves.

Said He: "O *Iblīs*! What is thy reason for not being among those who have prostrated themselves?"

(*Iblīs*) replied: "It is not for me to prostrate myself before mortal man whom Thou hast created out of sounding clay, out of dark slime transmuted!"

Said He: "Go forth, then, from this (angelic state): for, behold, thou art (henceforth) accursed, and (My) rejection shall be thy due until the Day of Judgment!"

Said (*Iblīs*): "Then, O my Sustainer, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be raised from the dead!"

Answered He: "Verily, so be it: thou shalt be among those who are granted respite till the Day the time whereof is known (to Me alone)."

(Whereupon *Iblīs*) said: "O my Sustainer! Since Thou hast thwarted me, I shall indeed make (all that is evil) on earth seem goodly to them, and shall most certainly beguile them into grievous error—(all) save such of them as are truly Thy servants!"

Said He: “This is, with Me, a straight way: verily, thou shalt have no power over My creatures—unless it be such as are (already) lost in grievous error and follow thee (of their own will): and for all such, behold, hell is the promised goal.”¹⁴

c. *Sūra 17: Al-Isrā’*: 61–64

And lo! We said unto the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam”—whereupon they all prostrated themselves, save *Iblīs*.

Said he: “Shall I prostrate myself before one whom Thou hast created out of clay?”

(And) he added: “Tell me, is this (foolish being) the one whom Thou hast exalted above me? Indeed, if Thou wilt but allow me a respite till the Day of Resurrection, I shall most certainly cause his descendants—all but a few—to obey me blindly!”

(God) answered: “Go (the way thou hast chosen)! But as for such of them as shall follow thee—behold hell will be the recompense of you (all), a recompense most ample!

Entice, then, with thy voice such of them as thou canst, and bear upon them with all thy horses and all thy men, and be their partner in (all sins relating to) worldly goods and children, and hold out (all manner of) promises to them: and (they will not know that) whatever Satan (*ash-Shaitan*) promises them is but meant to delude the mind.”¹⁵

d. *Sūra 18: Al-Kahf*: 50

And (remember that) when We told the angels, “Prostrate yourselves before Adam,” they all prostrated themselves, save *Iblīs*: he (too) was one of those invisible beings, but then he turned away from his Sustainer’s command. Will you, then, take him and his cohorts for (your) masters instead of Me, although they are your foes? How vile an exchange on the evildoers’ part!¹⁶

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

e. *Sūra 38: Ṣād: 71–85*

(For,) lo, thy Sustainer said unto the angels: "Behold, I am about to create a human being out of clay; and when I have formed him fully and breathed into him of My spirit, fall you down before him in prostration!"

Thereupon the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together save Iblīs; he gloried

in his arrogance, and (thus) became one of those who deny the truth.

Said He (God): "O *Iblīs*! What has kept thee from prostrating thyself before that (being) which I have created with My hands? Art thou too proud (to bow down before another created being), or art thou of those who think (only) of themselves as high?"

Answered (*Iblīs*): "I am better than he: Thou hast created me out of fire, whereas him Thou hast created out of clay."

Said He (God): "Go forth, then, from this (angelic state)—for, behold, thou art henceforth accursed, and My rejection shall be thy due until the Day of Judgment!"

Said (*Iblīs*): "Then, O my Sustainer, grant me a respite till the Day when all shall be raised from the dead!"

Answered He (God): "Verily, so (be it:) thou shalt be among those who are granted respite till the Day the time whereof is known (only to Me)."

(Whereupon *Iblīs*) said: "Then (I swear) by Thy very might: I shall most certainly beguile them all into grievous error—(all) save such of them as are truly Thy servants!"

(And God) said: "This, then, is the truth! And this truth do I state: Most certainly will I fill hell with thee and such of them as shall follow thee, all together!"¹⁷

With reference to the above passages, the following points may be noted:

17 Ibid.

- a. God announces to the angels (*malā'ika*) that Adam has been appointed as God's vice-gerent (*khalīfa*) upon the earth. This clearly indicates that Adam was meant to live on the earth.
- b. The angels respond by saying that while they are continuously engaged in glorifying God, Adam will "spread corruption ... and shed blood."
- c. God tells the angels, "I know that which you do not know" and proceeds to hold a "contest" between the angels and Adam. God asks the angels to name some things. Unable to do so, they respond by saying that they only know what God has imparted to them. God then asks Adam to name those things and he does so. God then asks the angels to recognize Adam's superiority and prostrate before him. They all do so except *Iblīs*.

The ability that Adam has—which elevates him above the celestial beings—is the faculty of reason, God's special gift to him, which enables him to "name" things, i.e., to form concepts, or to move from the concrete to the abstract. It is due to its ability to conceptualize that humankind is able to transcend the level of instinctive or innate knowledge possessed by other creatures. It is also this ability that makes it possible for him to discern between right and wrong, as pointed out by Asad.¹⁸

- d. Upon God's command, the celestial beings accept Adam's superiority (in terms of knowledge), but *Iblīs* refuses to do so. His refusal follows from his belief that being a creature of fire he is elementally superior to Adam who is a creature of clay. When condemned for his arrogance by God and ordered to depart in a state of abject disgrace, *Iblīs* throws a challenge to the Almighty: he will prove to God that Adam and Adam's progeny are unworthy of the honour and favour bestowed on them by God, being—in general—ungrateful, weak, and easily lured away from "the straight path" by worldly temptations. Not attempting to hide his intentions to come upon human beings from all sides, *Iblīs* asks for, and is granted, a reprieve until the Day of the Appointed Time. Not only is the reprieve granted, but God also challenges *Iblīs* to use all his wiles and forces to entice human beings and see if they would follow him.

A cosmic drama now begins, involving the eternal opposition between the principles of right and wrong or good and evil, which is lived out

as human beings, exercising their moral autonomy, who must now choose between "the straight path" and "the crooked path".

2. The Responsibility for the Act of Disobedience

In *Genesis*, Chapter 3, verses 1–5, the dialogue preceding the eating of the forbidden fruit by the human pair in the Garden of Eden takes place between the serpent and Eve (though Adam was "with her" as mentioned in verse 6). When Adam is asked by God if he has "been eating of the tree I forbade you to eat?" (verse 11), he responds by saying, "It was the woman you put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it" (verse 12). God apparently accepts Adam's statement and says, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife"; he will suffer much to eke out a bare living on earth. The biblical verses cited above have been made the basis for the popular casting of Eve into the role of tempter, deceiver and seducer of Adam who got him expelled from the Garden of Eden. Generally speaking, woman, not man, has been viewed as the primary agent of the "Fall" by many formulators—both Catholic and Protestant¹⁹—of the Christian tradition. This viewpoint is reflected by Tertullian (160–225 CE), a Church Father from North Africa, in the following passage that he addressed to women:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law, you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.²⁰

It is difficult to overstate the negative impact of the theological assumption that woman was the primary agent of the "Fall of Man" on the lives of millions of women. This theological assumption, though Christian in origin, came to influence both Jewish and Muslim tradi-

18 Ibid., 226, footnote 52.

19 John Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran* (Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1975), 107.

20 Tertullian's *De culte feminarum* 1.1, cited in Leonard Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations of Woman* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 346.

tions, mainly because the cultures in which the three traditions developed were patriarchal and viewed women in antagonistic terms. A number of biases against women found in the Christian and Jewish traditions, as well as the Greek-Hellenistic, and pre-Islamic, Bedouin Arab tradition, have, unfortunately, become incorporated into popular Muslim culture. It has, therefore, been possible to describe women as *fitna*, a word that can be defined as “temptation, trial, punishment, misfortune, and discord”.²¹ However, it must be stated here, with clarity and emphasis, that negative ideas and attitudes regarding women find no support whatsoever in the Qur’an which recognizes the vulnerability of girls and women in society, and consistently shows concern and compassion for them.

Unlike Genesis, Chapter 3, the Qur’an does not indicate that Adam’s *zawj* is primarily responsible for the human pair’s act of disobedience. In the Qur’an, *Iblīs* has no exclusive dialogue with Adam’s *zawj*. The three passages referring to this part of the episode have been cited earlier. In two of these passages, namely, Sūra 2: *Al-Baqara*: 35–39 and Sūra 7: *Al-A‘rāf*: 19–25, *Iblīs* is stated to have led both Adam and *zawj* astray, though in the former (verse 36) no actual conversation is reported. In the remaining passage, namely Sūra 20: *Ṭā-Hā*: 115–123, it is Adam who is charged with forgetting his covenant with God (verse 115), who is tempted by *al-Shayṭān* (verse 120) and who disobeys God and allows himself to be seduced (verse 121). In the last-cited passage, the “dialogue” which preceded, and led to, the act of disobedience, is stated to be between *Iblīs* and Adam. If this was indeed the case then the responsibility for the act would rest upon Adam who is mentioned thrice in this passage, and not his *zawj* who is not mentioned at all. However, if one looks at the three above-mentioned passages, as well as the way in which the term *Adam* functions generally in the Qur’an (as stated in an earlier chapter), it becomes clear that it is a symbol for humanity rather than the name of an individual.

3. *The Act of Disobedience and its Consequences*

In terms of the Qur’anic narrative what happens to the human pair in the Garden is a sequel to the interchange between God and *Iblīs*. In the

sequel we learn that the human pair have been commanded in Sūra 2: *Al-Baqara*: 35 and Sūra 7: *Al-A'raf*: 19 not to go near the Tree lest they become *ẓālimīn*. Seduced by *Iblīs* they disobey God. However, in Sūra 7: *Al-A'raf*: 23, they acknowledge before God that they have done *ẓulm* to themselves and earnestly seek God's forgiveness and mercy. They are told to "go forth" and "descend" from the Garden, but in giving this command, the Qur'an uses the dual form of address only once (in Sūra 18: *Ṭā-Hā*: 123); for the rest the plural form is used which necessarily refers to more than two persons and is generally understood as referring to humanity as a whole.

There is, strictly speaking, no "Fall" in the Qur'an. What the Qur'anic narration focuses upon is the moral choice that humanity is required to make when confronted by the alternatives presented by God and *Iblīs*. This becomes clear if one reflects on Sūra 2: (*Al-Baqara*) 35 and Sūra 7: (*Al-A'raf*) 19, in which it is stated: "You (dual) go not near this Tree, lest you (dual) become the 'ẓālimīn'." In other words, the human pair is being told that if they go near the Tree, then they will be counted amongst those who perpetrate *ẓulm*.

Commenting on the root *ẓulm*, Toshihiko Izutsu says:

The primary meaning of *ẓulm* is, in the opinion of many authoritative lexicologists, that of "putting in a wrong place." In the moral sphere it seems to mean primarily "to act in such a way as to transgress the proper limit and encroach upon the right of some other person." Briefly and generally speaking, *ẓulm* is to do injustice in the sense of going beyond one's bounds and doing what one has no right to.²²

By transgressing the limits set by God, the human pair became guilty of *ẓulm* toward themselves. This *ẓulm* consists in their taking on the responsibility for choosing between good and evil.

As pointed out by the modern Muslim scholar, Muhammad Iqbal:

The Qur'anic legend of the Fall has nothing to do with the first appearance of man on this planet. Its purpose is rather to indicate man's rise from a primitive state of instinctive appetite to the conscious possession of a free self, capable of doubt and disobedience. The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is

21 John Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Koran*, 107.

22 Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philosophical Studies, 1959), 152–153.

man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness ... Nor does the Qur'an regard the earth as a torture-hall where an elementally wicked humanity is imprisoned for an original act of sin. Man's first act of disobedience was also his first act of free choice; and that is why, according to the Qur'anic narration, Adam's first transgression was forgiven ... A being whose movements are wholly determined like a machine cannot produce goodness. Freedom is thus a condition of goodness. But to permit the emergence of a finite ego who has the power to choose ... is really to take a great risk; for the freedom to choose good involves also the freedom to choose what is the opposite of good. That God has taken this risk shows His immense faith in man; it is now for man to justify this faith.²³

Muhammad Asad's views on the human pair's act of disobedience are similar to those of Iqbal, and are cited below:

In his earlier state of innocence man was unaware of the existence of evil and therefore, of the ever-present necessity of making a choice between the many possibilities of action and behavior: in other words, he lived, like all other animals, in the light of his instincts alone. Inasmuch, however, as this innocence was only a condition of his existence and not a virtue, it gave to his life a static quality and thus precluded him from moral and intellectual development. The growth of his consciousness—symbolized by the willful act of disobedience to God's command—changed all this. It transformed him from a purely instinctive being into a full-fledged human entity as we know it—a human being capable of discerning between right and wrong and thus of choosing his way of life. In this deeper sense, the allegory of the Fall does not describe a retrogressive happening, but, rather, a new stage of human development: an opening of doors to moral considerations. By forbidding him to approach this tree, God made it possible for man to act wrongly—and, therefore, to act rightly as well: and so man became endowed with that moral free will which distinguishes him from all other sentient beings.²⁴

In the framework of Qur'anic theology, the order to go forth from *al-janna* given to Adam or the Children of Adam cannot be considered a punishment because, as mentioned in *Sūra 2: Al-Baqara*: 30, Adam was always meant to be God's vice-gerent on earth. As pointed out by Al-lama Iqbal, the earth is not a place of banishment but is declared by

²³ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1971), 85.

²⁴ Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 205, footnote 16.

the Qur'an to be humanity's dwelling place and source of profit to it.²⁵ This idea is reiterated by Dr. Fathi Osman, who states:

I have a reservation about the expression "Man's Fall". According to the Qur'an, Adam was forgiven for eating from the "forbidden tree" (Sūra 2: *Al-Baqara*: 37), and he came to inhabit and develop the earth, not as a punishment, but as a divine plan indicated in "I shall establish on earth a "*khalīfa*" (Sūra 2: *Al-Baqara*: 30). Further, it is stated in Sūra 11: *Hūd*: 61, "He brought you into being out of the earth, and brought you to develop it and thrive thereon (*istakhlafakum fihā*). I understand the "coming down" (*hubūt*) of Adam as a change of place according to the Creator's plan, and not a "fall" or a punishment.²⁶

In Summation

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is clear that according to Qur'anic theology, the human pair's departure from *al-janna* is not regarded negatively as it has generally been in the Christian tradition, and that no sin or stigma is attached to Adam's *zawj* in the context of this story.

25 Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, 84.

26 This citation is taken from a personal communication from Dr. Fathi Osman, dated October 10, 2008.

