72

The Jinn

*al-Jinn*

*Al-Jinn* is a late Makkan *sūrah* that takes its name from the mention of *jinn* in the first verse and the report about a group of jinn who heard the Prophet’s recitation of the Quran, recognized it as Divine Revelation, and embraced Islam. This *sūrah*’s response to the travails of the last Messenger (*rasūl*) sent to humanity, Muhammad, connects it to the previous *sūrah*, which tells of the travails of Noah, widely regarded as the first messenger (*Āl*), although he had been preceded by other prophets (*anbiyāʾ*), who are thought to have had a less universal function, such as Adam. Some commentators also see a connection between the mention of the *abundant rains* promised to Noah’s people in 71:11 and the *abundant water* promised to the Quraysh in 72:16 (*Āl, Sy*).

This *sūrah* is said to have been revealed at a time of great difficulty for the Prophet, in the year 619, when he had lost the protection of his uncle Abū Ṭālib and was vulnerable to those in Makkah who opposed his mission. At that time, the Prophet traveled to the nearby town of Ṭā’if seeking support from its leaders, but they reviled him and set a mob upon him. The Prophet and Zayd ibn Ḥārith (d. 629), who had traveled with him, sought refuge in an orchard, where the Prophet prayed to God for support. There he met Salmān al-Fārīsī, an originally Zoroastrian slave from Persia, who helped him escape and later became one of his closest Companions. While traveling in the desert, still searching for a protector, the Prophet stood for prayer at Nakhlah. Some say that he was reciting *al-Raḥmān* (*Sūrah 55*), when a
group of seven or nine jinn came upon him and stopped to listen; enraptured, they repented and embraced Islam. In light of this account, this sūrah is seen as a gift of solace from God, letting the Prophet know that, despite his trials, the message continued to be heard and his mission continued to spread.

According to another account, al-Jinn was revealed at a time when the jinn were distraught that they were no longer able to intercept messages from Heaven. After consulting among themselves, the jinn realized that obstacles to their receiving messages could only have resulted from a momentous event, so they searched the globe. A group of them came upon the Prophet while he was leading his Companions in the morning prayer. When they heard the Quran, they listened to it attentively and said, “This is what has caused obstacles between us and the reports from Heaven.” They went back to their people and said, “O our people, we have heard a marvelous Quran which directs us to the right path; we affirm our faith in it, and we would never associate anyone with our Lord.” Then God revealed this sūrah.

To contextualize this account and the place of the jinn, one must consider the nature of the spiritual cosmology of the Quran. In Islamic cosmology, there is something both literal and symbolic about the heavens and the earth. God is not literally physically “above and beyond” the heavens; yet “up” is the reality in physical space that best symbolizes and communicates the meaning of “toward God.” In this sense, the heavens represent both higher physical levels and higher ontological planes. The jinn, as psychic beings unseen to most human beings, occupy an intermediate state between the material realm of our physical experiences and the angelic and spiritual realms. Nonetheless, they are also on the earth, and according to some occupied the earth before human beings. As witnesses to the cosmic order in ways to which most human beings are denied access, the jinn are said to have the ability to “eavesdrop” on angelic communications, inform people of what is to come, and grant special powers. It should be noted, however, that in Islamic spirituality knowledge that comes from the jinn carries no spiritual value, and the spiritual masters have always made a distinction between the forms of knowledge of the Unseen that are tantamount to magic and those that result from what is believed to be a Divine or angelic inspiration. Differentiating between these different kinds of “inspiration” is in fact an important traditional
Say, “It was revealed unto me that a group of jinn listened, and said, ‘Truly we have heard a wondrous Quran that guides to sound judgment; so we believe in it and will ascribe none as partner unto our Lord. And He—exalted be the Majesty of our Lord—has neither consort nor child. Truly the fool among us has uttered outrages against God, though we had thought that mankind and jinn would not utter lies regarding God. Indeed, individuals among mankind did seek refuge with individuals among the jinn, and so increased them in oppression. They thought, as did you, that God would resurrect no one. We reached out to Heaven and found it filled with mighty sentries and flaming stars. We used to sit in places thereof to listen, but whosoever listens now finds a flaming star lying in wait for him. We do not know whether evil is desired for those upon the earth, or whether their Lord desires guidance for them. Some among us are righteous, and some among us are otherwise; we are on paths divided. We knew for certain that we could never thwart God on earth; nor could we ever thwart Him by fleeing. And when we heard the guidance, we believed in it, for whosoever believes in his Lord shall fear neither detraction nor oppression. Some among us submit and some among us are unjust; those who submit seek guidance; and as for the unjust, they are kindling
And [say], “[It was revealed unto me] that if they hold firm to the path, We shall give them abundant water, that We may try them therewith, and whosoever turns away from the remembrance of His Lord, He leads him to a grievous punishment, and that places of worship are for God; so do not call upon another alongside God, and that when the servant of God rises to call upon Him, they well-nigh swarm upon him.” Say, “I call only upon my Lord, and I ascribe none as a partner unto Him.” Say, “I have no power over what harm or guidance may come to you.” Say, “None will protect me from God, and I shall never find refuge apart from Him if I do not convey from God and His messages. And whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger, his shall be the Fire of Hell, abiding therein forever, such that when they see what they are promised, they will know who is weaker in helpers and fewer in number.” Say, “I know not whether that which you are promised is nigh or whether my Lord has appointed a term; Knower of the Unseen, He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, save to the one whom He approves as a messenger. Then He dispatches before him and behind him a guard, that He may know that they have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord. And He encompasses whatsoever is with them and keeps a numbered count of all things.”

**Commentary**

1 Say, “It was revealed unto me that a group of jinn
listened, and said, ‘Truly we have heard a wondrous Quran

1 The jinn listened to the Prophet’s recitation of the Quran (JJ). Their response, the speech that begins here, in which they marvel at the Quran and affirm it (v. 2), is said to have been addressed to their own community of jinn upon their return (JJ). This event is also said to be the one referred to in 46:29–32. A wondrous Quran could also be rendered “an amazing Quran,” which is understood as a reference to an unparalleled eloquence that amazed the jinn (Bg), as it did human beings.

***

2 that guides to sound judgment; so we believe in it and will ascribe none as partner unto our Lord.

2 Sound judgment translates rushd, which can also mean “the right path,” as it denotes a way that is free of turns and bends and thus without ambiguity. Spiritually, it can be understood to mean a way of life that is free of iniquities.

***

3 And He—exalted be the Majesty of our Lord—has neither consort nor child.

3–13 Each of these verses begins with the same particle, which can be read in one of two ways: if read anna, each verse would follow upon it was revealed unto me that (v. 1) and represent the words of the Prophet; if read inna, each verse would follow upon a group of jinn listened, and said and relate the words that the jinn are reported to have said to their own kind after hearing the Quran (Bg, Q). The latter interpretation is favored here and has thus been followed in the translation.

3 This is one of many verses where the Quran criticizes the idea that God has sons or daughters (see also 2:116; 6:100; 9:30; 10:68; 17:40, 111; 18:4; 19:35, 88–93; 21:26; 25:2; 37:149, 153; 39:4; 43:16, 81–82; 52:39). It is similar to 6:100 and 37:158, both of which criticize human beings who identified jinn as sons and daughters of God. Elsewhere it is said that some human beings worship jinn, as in 34:41: They will reply, “Glory be to Thee! Thou art our Protector, apart from them!” Nay, they worshipped jinn, most of them believing in them.
4 Truly the fool among us has uttered outrages against God,

4 The fool among us refers to Satan (Bg, IK), who is said by some to have been originally one of the jinn (see 27:39). Fool could also be taken to mean “the impudent” or “the insolent.”

5 though we had thought that mankind and jinn would not utter lies regarding God.

5 According to this verse, until the jinn heard the Quran, they had believed the assertions made by men and other jinn that God had a consort and offspring, because they did not believe that anyone would tell such egregious lies (Bg, R), thus indicating that they had only fallen into such ignorance out of blind adherence (taqlīd) and that they now renounced that belief (R).

6 Indeed, individuals among mankind did seek refuge with individuals among the jinn, and so increased them in oppression.

6 In pre-Islamic Arabia it was a common custom for people to seek protection from the jinn when they were traveling in the desert (IK, R). But doing so reportedly increased the false opinion that the jinn had of themselves and thus led them to further misguide and oppress. Here oppression translates rahāq, which indicates a combination of sin, evil, transgression, and oppression (Bg).

7 They thought, as did you, that God would resurrect no one.
7  The failure of the Arabs to believe in Resurrection is a matter with which the Quran and the Prophetic *ahādīth* are particularly concerned, as even some who confirmed the Oneness of God, still denied Resurrection; see 31:25–26c; 43:87c.

***

8  We reached out to Heaven and found it filled with mighty sentries and flaming stars.

9  We used to sit in places thereof to listen, but whosoever listens now finds a flaming star lying in wait for him.

8–9  According to several *ahādīth*, these verses, along with 15:16–18 and 67:5, refer to the role that jinn are said to have played in facilitating fortune-tellers and sorcerers. As subtle beings, jinn are said to have more direct access to other realms of existence than do human beings, who are more closely bound to the form and matter of this world. And it is believed that jinn employ such powers to “eavesdrop” on angels, but that they then deceive human beings, leading them astray with half-truths. Regarding this matter, a *hadīth* states, “Some people asked the Messenger of God about the fortune-tellers. He said, ‘They are nothing.’ They said, ‘O Messenger of God, sometimes they tell us of a thing that turns out to be true.’ The Messenger of God replied, ‘A jinn snatches that true word and pours it into the ear of his friend, but then mixes a hundred lies with it.’” It is said that after the Prophet Muhammad began receiving revelations, the jinn ceased to be able to access true words from Heaven (see the introduction to the *sūrah*). Angels were then established as sentries to bar their access, and meteors were the means by which God repelled them. Regarding the transmission of such messages and the inability of the jinn to “eavesdrop” on the angels, another *hadīth* states, “As we were sitting during the night with the Messenger of God, a shooting meteor gave a dazzling light. The Messenger of God said, ‘What did you say in the pre-Islamic days when there was such a shot?’ They said, ‘God and His Messenger know best, but we used to say that that very night a great man had been born and a great man had died.’ Whereupon the Messenger of God said, ‘These [meteors] are shot neither at the death of anyone nor on the birth of anyone. God issues a command when He decides to do a thing. Then [the angels] supporting the Throne sing His Glory; then sing the inhabitants of Heaven who are near to them until this Glory of God reaches those who are in the Heaven of this world. Then those who are near the supporters of the Throne ask these supporters of the Throne, “What has your Lord said?” And they inform them of what He says. Then the dwellers of Heaven
seek information from them until this information reaches the Heaven of this world. In this process of transmission [the jinn snatches] what he manages to overhear and carries it to his friends. And when the angels see the jinn, they attack them with meteors. If they narrate only what they manage to snatch, that is correct, but they combine it with lies and make additions to it.”

***

10 We do not know whether evil is desired for those upon the earth, or whether their Lord desires guidance for them.

10 Here the jinn admit that they cannot listen to God’s secret converse and have no knowledge of the Unseen, which indicates that the advice of fortune-tellers and soothsayers, both of whom claimed to receive their wisdom from the jinn, is ultimately not founded upon real knowledge; rather, the jinn seek to inspire each other with flowery discourse in order to deceive (6:112).

***

11 Some among us are righteous, and some among us are otherwise; we are on paths divided.

11 Some jinn are believers and others disbelievers (Bg, T), thus indicating that jinn are just like human beings in relation to God and that there is therefore no basis for the exalted status that some human beings attribute to them. In this vein, 51:56 states, I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me.

***

12 We knew for certain that we could never thwart God on earth; nor could we ever thwart Him by fleeing.

12 The pre-Islamic Arabs were given to calling upon jinn and idols for help. Some thus thought that they could thwart or evade God, to Whom the Prophet was calling them. But here the jinn are made to say that they themselves cannot thwart God, with the implication that they cannot assist anyone else in doing so either. The idea that one can thwart God or His signs is criticized in over a dozen verses (6:134; 8:59; 9:2–3; 10:53; 11:19–20, 33; 16:46; 22:51; 24:57; 29:22; 34:5, 38;
39:51; 42:31; 46:32), since from a Quranic perspective *naught in the heavens or upon the earth can thwart God* (35:44; see also 52:8).

***

13 And when we heard the guidance, we believed in it, for whosoever believes in his Lord shall fear neither detraction nor oppression.

13 Here *the guidance* refers to the Quran (Bg, JJ, Q, R), which is referred to as such in several verses (see 2:2, 97; 3:138; 6:157; 7:52, 203; 10:57; 12:111; 16:64, 89; 27:2, 77; 41:44). The Torah and the Gospel are similarly referred to as “guidance” (see, e.g., 3:3–4; 5:46; 40:53–54c); and “The Guide” (*al-hudā*) is one of the names of the Quran. That believers shall *fear neither detraction nor oppression* is understood to mean that the good deeds they perform will not decrease and their evil deeds will not increase (IK, Ṭ).

***

14 Some among us submit and some among us are unjust; those who submit seek guidance;

15 and as for the unjust, they are kindling for Hell.””

14–15 These are the only two verses where *qāsiṭ* is used to describe the disbelievers. Here translated *unjust*, it indicates those who have deviated from the right course and is thus the direct opposite of those who *seek guidance*. Qāsiṭ derives from the same root (*q-s-t*) as *muqsiṭ* and *qist*, meaning “just” and “justice,” respectively. Al-Qurṭubī explains that the *qāsiṭ* is one who “turns away from the truth” and the *muqsiṭ* is one who “turns toward the truth.” The idea that the jinn are also liable to punishment in Hellfire is stated most emphatically in God’s declaration: *I shall surely fill Hell with jinn and men all together* (11:119; 32:13).

***

16 And [say], “[It was revealed unto me] that if they hold
firm to the path, We shall give them abundant water,

16 Although the preceding verses clearly refer to the jinn, this verse can be seen as a reference to either the jinn (R) or the Quraysh (Bg). According to many commentators, this verse refers to a seven-year drought that would be relieved, were the disbelievers to accept Muhammad as a messenger of God (Bg). Abundant water can be seen as an allusion to Divine Provision (rizq; Bg, IK, Q, R), al manner of benefit and good, (Bg, R), a life of ease and abundance (Bg, T), or Paradise, which is often described as having Gardens with rivers running below (see 2:25c; 3:195; 5:12; 48:5; 64:9; R). Conversely, this verse can be understood as a reference to the wealth and provision by which God allows those who are astray to continue fooling themselves, going further astray “little by little” (cf. 7:182; 68:44; T).

***

17 that We may try them therewith, and whosoever turns away from the remembrance of his Lord, He leads him to a grievous punishment,

17 When v. 16 is viewed in a positive manner, as a reference to those who hold firm to the path of Islam, this verse refers to the manner in which belief must be manifested by dealing properly with those things over which God has appointed human beings as trustees (see 57:7), for example, by paying the necessary alms tax on wealth and spending it in the way of God (2:195, 261–62; 8:60; 47:38; 57:10). But if v. 16 is viewed in a negative manner, as a reference to those who hold firm to the path of disbelief or opposition, this verse indicates that God allows disbelievers to fall further into deception and delusion, continuing to commit even greater sins because they think that wealth and apparent success in this world demonstrate their favor with God. But from an Islamic perspective, the wealth of this world can in fact result from the exact opposite of Divine Favor, as in 6:44: So when they forgot about that whereof they had been reminded, We opened unto them the gates of all things, till, as they exulted in what they were given, We seized them suddenly, whereupon they came to despair; and in 15:3: Leave them to eat and enjoy themselves and to be beguiled by hopes, for soon they will know (see also 7:182–83; 16:55; 23:54–56; 68:44). The remembrance can refer to the Quran (Aj, T), being a servant of God (Aj, R), testifying to the Oneness of God (Aj), or simply remembering God and His message. A grievous punishment is literally “an ascending punishment,” said to be ascending because it only increases.
in severity (Bg) or because there is no relief from it (Ṭ).

***

18 and that places of worship are for God; so do not call upon another alongside God,

18 Places of worship translates masājid, the plural form of both masjid (place of prostration) and masjad (instrument of prostration; Bg). Masjid is the standard word used by Muslims for “mosque,” from which this English word derives, and is translated as such in most of its occurrences, but here is taken as a reference to all houses of worship for all religions (Bg) or to the whole of the earth (Bg, Q, Ṭ) in accordance with a famous saying of the Prophet: “The earth has been made a place of prostration (masjid) for me, and has been purified” (Q). If taken as the plural for masjad, it refers to the seven parts of the body that should all touch the ground in the formal prostration position for Muslim prayer: the forehead, the hands, the feet, and the knees (Bg).

***

19 and that when the servant of God rises to call upon Him, they well-nigh swarm upon him.”

19 The servant of God (ʿabd Allāh) is one of the seven names by which the Prophet is called in the Quran (see 73:1–2c) and one of the most common names by which the Prophet is known in the Islamic tradition. To be the servant of God is one of the highest spiritual stations, as it represents complete surrender to God. Overall, this verse can be taken as a reference to the jinn, who were amazed at the Quran and nearly piled upon one another to hear it (Bg, Ṭ). Or it can be seen as a reference to the jinn reporting to their own companions how amazed they were to see the devotion of the Prophet’s Companions (Bg). Finally, it can be seen as a reference to the disbelievers among the Quraysh and among the jinn who would put obstacles in the Prophet’s way and press in upon him when he prayed at the Kaʿbah (Bg). The verses before this verse support the interpretation of it as a reference to the jinn, while those after it support its interpretation as a reference to the disbelievers among the Quraysh.

***
20 Say, “I call only upon my Lord, and I ascribe none as a partner unto Him.”

20 *I call only upon my Lord* is a response to the objections of the Quraysh, who accused the Prophet of infringing upon the people and demanded that he abandon the message he was preaching (Q, R).

***

21 Say, “I have no power over what harm or guidance may come to you.”

22 Say, “None will protect me from God, and I shall never find refuge apart from Him

21–22 Here the Prophet is being told to deny that he has any power beyond that of delivering God’s message faithfully, a frequent Quranic theme (see 67:26c). Given the tendency of the Arabs toward idol worship, this theme recurs throughout the Quran, as in 3:79–80: *It is not for any human being, God having given him the Book, judgment, and prophethood, to then say to the people, “Be servants of me instead of God.”* Rather, “Be sages, from having taught the Book and from having studied.” And he would not command you to take the angels and the prophets as lords. Would he command you to disbelief after your having been submitters?

***

23 If I do not convey from God and His messages. And whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger, his shall be the Fire of Hell, abiding therein forever,

23 *If I do not convey from God and His messages* could have two different grammatical functions. In this translation, *if . . . not* renders *illā* as a contraction of *in lā* (R, T), meaning, “None will protect me from God if I do not convey His messages” (T), or “*If I do not convey . . . I shall never find refuge*” (R). *Illā* could also be read as a clause of exception related to v. 21 (R, T, Z), meaning, “I have no power over you . . . except to convey to you what God has commanded me to
convey from God and His messages” (Ṭ), or “I have no power over what harm or guidance may come to you (v. 21), only to convey from God” (Q, R). It could also be understood as a clause of exception related to the last phrase of v. 22, meaning, “I shall never find refuge apart from Him, save in conveying from God and His messages” (Q, R).

***

24 such that when they see what they are promised, they will know who is weaker in helpers and fewer in number.”

24 What they are promised refers to either the Day of Judgment (Bg), which is referred to elsewhere as the Day that they are promised (43:83; 51:60; 70:42), or the punishment (Bg), or both. Some also understand it as a reference to the Battle of Badr (JJ). This verse is similar to 19:75: Whosoever is in error, the Compassionate will extend his term till, when they see that which they have been promised, be it the punishment or the Hour, they will know whose position is worse, and whose host is weaker (see also 25:42). For this reason the Day of Judgment is also known as the Day of Division (37:21; 44:40; 77:13–14, 38; 78:17), since when the ambiguities of this world are cast aside, the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes clear to all.

***

25 Say, “I know not whether that which you are promised is nigh or whether my Lord has appointed a term;

25 In both the present verse and 21:109, that which you are promised refers to the Day of Judgment (IK), the punishment the disbelievers will receive, or both. Both verses can be read as a response to the question posed by disbelievers in other verses: When will this promise come to pass, if you are truthful? (10:48; 21:38; 27:71; 34:29; 36:48; 67:25); see 36:48c.

***

26 Knower of the Unseen, He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone,
27 save to the one whom He approves as a messenger. Then He dispatches before him and behind him a guard,

26–27 Elsewhere God is referred to as *Knower of the Unseen and the seen* (6:73; 9:94, 105; 13:9; 32:6; 39:46; 59:22; 62:8; 64:18), usually taken to mean that He has knowledge of this world, the Hereafter, and all that exists on all levels of reality. V. 26 and 34:3 are the only verses in which God is referred to simply as *Knower of the Unseen*. In this context, *the Unseen* can be taken as a reference to all that is unseen, to *that which you are promised* from the previous verse (R), or to revelation (Ṭ). The reference to God’s disclosing *His Unseen* indicates the manner in which God teaches the prophets revelation (Ṭ). The caveat that God only reveals to the one whom He approves reafﬁrms the denunciation of sorcerers and fortune-tellers in vv. 8–9 (R). Some also take it as refutation of the possibility that miracles could be performed by anyone other than prophets (Z), though Sunnis and Shiites generally accept the reality of “lesser miracles,” which are known as karāmāt, while miracles performed by prophets are known as muʿjizāt, or “evidentiary miracles.” The guards are angels who ensure that none of the jinn who attempt to gain knowledge of the Unseen hear the revelation before it reaches the prophet for whom it is intended (Ṭ); they are said to be four in number (IK).

***

28 that He may know that they have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord. And He encompasses whatsoever is with them and keeps a numbered count of all things.”

28 As translated, this verse indicates that God sends the angels, so that God Himself may know that the prophets have conveyed the messages with which He sent them (JJ). But it can also be rendered “that he may know,” indicating that it is for the Messenger to know that the angels have conveyed the messages to the prophets (Bg, Q, Ṭ), or else to know that the angels have received the message (Ṭ). In this latter sense, it may refer to the particular covenant that God makes with the prophets in 3:81 and 33:7, that they will confirm or bear witness to the revelations sent to one another. *That He may know* translates li-yaʿlama, which could also be read li-yuʿlima, meaning “to inform,” thus indicating that God dispatches the angels as guards to inform the people that the prophets have indeed conveyed the messages of their Lord (Bg, Q).