



The Story of Adam and Iblīs: A Study in the Rhetoric of the Qur'ānic Narrative Structure

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Abstract:

This study aims to elucidate both the Sharī'ah and rhetorical purposes of the Qur'ānic narrative to determine its narrative structure and to identify the general framework within which the narrative appears in the Noble Qur'ān as a whole. It analyses, in particular, the story of the beginning of creation, identifies the loci of Qur'ānic inimitability in the verses that address it, uncovers the rhetorical secrets it contains, and shows how artistic depiction is employed in narrating its events and occurrences as although we were watching and living them in detail. All this beauty, this ingenuity, and this skill appear in a melodious, fluid composition of complete coherence and fine crafting that seizes the minds and captivates the hearts.

Keywords: Qur'ānic narrative; narrative structure; artistic depiction; story of Adam (peace be upon him); rhetoric.

L'histoire d'Adam et d'Iblis : une étude de la rhétorique de la structure narrative coranique

Résumé :

Cette étude vise à élucider les finalités religieuses et rhétoriques du récit coranique afin d'en déterminer la structure narrative et d'identifier le cadre général dans lequel il s'inscrit au sein du Noble Coran. Elle analyse en particulier le récit de la création, identifie les passages d'une originalité coranique dans les versets qui le relatent, dévoile les secrets rhétoriques qu'il recèle et montre comment la représentation artistique est employée pour narrer

ses événements et ses péripéties, nous donnant l'impression de les vivre en détail. Toute cette beauté, cette ingéniosité et cette maîtrise se manifestent dans une composition harmonieuse et fluide, d'une cohérence et d'une finesse exceptionnelles, qui captive l'esprit et touche le cœur.

Mots-clés : *récit coranique ; structure narrative ; représentation artistique ; histoire d'Adam (que la paix soit sur lui) ; rhétorique.*



Introduction:

The narrative mode in the Noble Qur'ān is one of its many means for realising its aims and essential purposes; for above all, it is a book of proclamation and guidance, “and the story is one of its means for conveying this summons and making it firm” (Quṭb, 1994), moving souls to take heed from past accounts and the fate of those who opposed, so that they may be guided, submit to the truth, and yield to it.

The story of Adam and Iblīs, like other noble Qur'ānic narratives, appears in the Noble Qur'ān and is repeated in various places because it encompasses an enduring theme that did not end with the death of Adam—peace be upon him—who is the prominent exemplar and principal character around whom the story revolves from its beginning to its end; instead, its theme—namely, the ongoing conflict between the progeny of Adam and their implacable enemy, Iblīs—will continue so long as there is a human being upon the face of the earth.

Among the purposes of this story are “to alert the sons of Adam to Satan’s seduction, to highlight the abiding enmity between him and them since their father Adam, and to bring out this enmity by means of narrative in a way that is more splendid and more powerful, and that more strongly prompts utmost caution against every prompting in the soul that calls to evil, attributing it to this enemy who does not wish people any good” (Quṭb, 1994).

Contemplating the narrative structure of this story (length), one finds that most of its events and occurrences are unfamiliar to humankind and human nature, beginning with the creation of Adam from sounding clay formed from

dark mud – the low kind of clay – then the Lord of Might, exalted be He, breathed into him of His spirit: this is “the lofty breath which distinguished him from the rest of living beings, granting him his human characteristics that set him apart, from his very origin, from all living creatures, so that he followed a path other than theirs from the outset, while they remained at their animal level without exceeding it” (Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*, 1996). His enemy, Iblīs, had previously been created from the fire of scorching wind, and Iblīs retained some of the qualities of scorching wind, for he affects “the elements of clay by virtue of being of the fire” (Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*, 1996), and he is characterised “by harm and by hastening to it by virtue of being of the fire of scorching wind; then, from the folds of the story, the qualities of delusion and arrogance are revealed to us – qualities not far, in conception, from the nature of fire” (Qutb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*, 1996) – until the incident of Adam’s being sent down from Paradise and Iblīs being expelled from it.

Furthermore, the place where the story's events unfolded is also unfamiliar, as they occurred in the highest assembly, where veils are lifted and where the cosmic norms and laws of nature are pierced.

Although the element of time has its efficacy in constructing the Qur’ānic narrative, since the story represents the beginning of creation, it nonetheless belongs to the realm of the unseen, known only to God, exalted be He – this is about the descent of Adam, his wife, and his enemy to the earth. For the time of Adam’s creation, peace be upon him, and Iblīs’s seduction of him, all these incidents were not subject to the dominion of the time known to us, for time as operative upon the face of this earth pertains to



the earth and is tied to it alone, having no effect outside it. His saying evidence this:

وَإِنَّ يَوْمًا عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ سَنَةٍ مِّمَّا تَعُدُّونَ [الحج: 47]

And indeed, a day with your Lord is as a thousand years of what you count. [al-Hajj: 47]

يقوله سبحانه

فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ [المعارج: 4]

On a day whose measure is fifty thousand years. [al-Ma'ārij: 4]

For the characters,¹ there are two prominent figures: Adam, peace be upon him, and Iblis, and there are secondary figures: Ḥawwā', the wife of Adam, peace be upon him, and the angels, peace be upon them.

“Indeed, the character of Adam—peace be upon him—in the Qur'ānic narratives is a model for the human being with all his components and characteristics; and among the most evident of those components and characteristics is that greatest human weakness which gathers all other aspects of weakness—the weakness before the desire for immortality. Iblis touched this point of weakness, Adam responded to him, and Ḥawwā' responded to him:

¹ We do not mean by "characters" here the human beings among God's servants, thereby restricting the discussion to them; instead, we mean every persona from whom events issued and from whom expressions and ideas proceeded that played a role in the story. Let no one suppose that God—majestic and exalted—is encompassed within this; exalted is God far above that, supremely exalted.

قَالَ يَا آدَمُ هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَى شَجَرَةِ الْخُلْدِ وَمُلْكٍ لَّا يَبْلَىٰ [طه: 120]

He said, 'O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of immortality and a dominion that does not decay?' [Tā Hā: 120]

For the mortal human is ever eager for immortality; when he did not attain it as Satan promised him, he continued – and will continue – to seek it by various means: through progeny, through remembrance, and through imagination; and if all this does not benefit him, religion benefits him, for it guarantees him resurrection once again and guarantees him a kind of immortality as well! As for the character of Iblīs, it is the character of Satan – full stop!" (Quṭb, *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, 1994).

This is a subtle point regarding Adam's obedience to his enemy and his disobedience to his Lord, exalted as He, mentioned by Imām al-Rāzī in his exegesis. He says, "Know that the incident of Adam – peace be upon him – is astonishing, for God Most High encouraged him towards the perpetuity of ease and the orderliness of livelihood by His saying:

فَلَا يُخْرِجَنَّكُمَا مِنَ الْجَنَّةِ فَتَشْقَىٰ إِنَّ لَكَ أَلَّا تَجُوعَ فِيهَا وَلَا تَعْرَىٰ وَأَنَّكَ لَا تَظْمَأُ فِيهَا وَلَا تَصْحَىٰ [طه: 117-119]

Therefore, let him not expel you both from the garden, lest you should suffer. Indeed, it is ordained for you that you will not go hungry therein nor be unclothed and that you will not thirst therein nor suffer from the sun's heat. [Tā Hā: 117-119]

And Iblīs also encouraged him towards the perpetuity of ease by saying:



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هَلْ أَدُلُّكَ عَلَى شَجَرَةِ الْخُلْدِ / طه: 120

Should I direct you to the tree of immortality? [Ṭā Hā: 120]

In addition, with respect to the orderliness of livelihoods, his saying:

وَمُلْكٍ لَا يَبْئَىٰ / طه: 120

A domain that does not decay. [Ṭā Hā: 120]

Thus, the very thing to which God encouraged Adam is that to which Iblīs encouraged him, except that God Most High made it contingent upon guarding against that tree, whereas Iblīs made it contingent upon approaching it. Then, although Adam—peace be upon him—possessed complete intellect and knew that God Most High is his Patron, his Helper, and his Nurturer—and although He had informed him that Iblīs is his enemy—since he refused to prostrate to him and exposed himself to the curse on account of his enmity—how is it that, in this single incident and for this single aim, he accepted the word of Iblīs, knowing full well his utter enmity towards him, and turned away from the word of God Most High, knowing that He is the Helper and the Nurturer? Whoever reflects upon this matter will find his astonishment prolonged and will ultimately recognise that this story serves as an alert that there is no repeller of God’s decree and no preventer thereof and that even if the proof is at the utmost of clarity and the height of strength, no benefit is obtained from it unless God Most High decrees and ordains it” (al-Rāzī, 1990).

In addition, Imām al-Rāzī—may God have mercy on him—alerts us to another element of the Qur’ānic story, namely, decree and predestination, for God, majestic and

exalted, decreed that the earth be the theatre for the ongoing conflict between the human being and Satan:

فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَّتْ لُهُمَا سَوْآتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِنْ وَرَقِ الْجَنَّةِ وَعَصَى آدَمُ رَبَّهُ فَغَوَى [طه: 121]

Then, they both ate from it, and so their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden; Adam disobeyed his Lord and so went astray. [Tā Hā: 121]

Thus, the events of the story came embodying God's will, His decree, and His will to bring about what He willed, exalted be He.

For the secondary characters, the angels are mentioned in the story only in the incident in which they were commanded to prostrate and, carrying out the command of their Lord, they prostrated to Adam – peace be upon him.

For his wife, Hawwā', her name is not explicitly stated in the Noble Qur'an; instead, she is referred to by the expression "spouse" in His saying:

وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ [الأعراف: 35]

And We said, 'O Adam, dwell – you and your spouse – in the Garden.' [al-A'raf: 35]

and by the pronoun in His saying:

فَأَكَلَا مِنْهَا فَبَدَّتْ لُهُمَا سَوْآتُهُمَا وَطَفِقَا يَخْصِفَانِ عَلَيْهِمَا مِنْ وَرَقِ الْجَنَّةِ وَعَصَى آدَمُ رَبَّهُ فَغَوَى [طه: 121]

Then, they both ate from it, and their nakedness became apparent to them, and they began to cover themselves with leaves of the garden; Adam disobeyed his Lord and so went astray. [Tā Hā: 121]



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and the dual pronoun in the verse refers to Adam and his wife, Ḥawwā' – peace upon them both.

“The connection between events and characters in the story is too strong to require demonstration or to call the mind’s attention to it, for they are the two principal elements in every story. We cannot conceive of a person without events that befall him or occur to him. True, we do not deny that the Qur’ānic story, owing to its brevity, may render the salient element in its composition the element of events and may obscure the element of persons, making it general and indistinct; but this does not justify conceding that the story is devoid of this element, however much the other element stands out and stands alone in the field.” (Allāh, 1965).¹

Among the elements that enter into the construction of the Qur’ānic story are dialogue and intimate address (munājāh). The story of Adam—peace be upon him—and Iblīs opens with a dialogue between God, exalted be He, and His angels—peace be upon them—where He presented to them His will to appoint a vicegerent on earth, and what they responded with by way of denying this, reasoning that this vicegerent would be a cause of corruption and the shedding of blood, and the ruin of tillage and progeny, as in His saying:

¹ I caution that this book contains the author's opinions and ideas that undermine religion at its very foundation; let its readers beware.

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا
وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ [البقرة: 30]

And when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing on the earth a vicegerent,' they said, 'Will You appoint therein one who will cause corruption therein and shed blood, while we hymn Your praise and sanctify You?' [al-Baqarah: 30]

God, exalted be He, then showed them the shortness of their view and the paucity of their knowledge when He created Adam and taught him the following names:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ
صَادِقِينَ [البقرة: 31]

And He taught Adam the names—all of them—then He presented them to the angels and said, 'Tell Me the names of these, if you are truthful.' [al-Baqarah: 31]

With the angels' obedience to God's command and their prostration to Adam—peace be upon him—the page of dialogue with them is folded. They disappear from the scenes of the narrative to open a new page of vivid, stirring scenes that bring to the fore the phenomenon of refusal, stubbornness, ingratitude, and arrogance at their height and in their prime. It is the page of the dialogue between the Lord of Might—exalted be He—and Iblis when he refused to prostrate to Adam, the consequence of which was that he was expelled from the mercy of God Most High and driven out of Paradise. "At that point, the nature of rancour and the nature of evil are revealed... He asked for reprieve until the Day of Resurrection, not to regret his sin in the presence of the Almighty Creator, nor to repent to God, turn back, and atone for his grievous offence, but to take revenge on Adam and his progeny in return for God's cursing him and



expelling him. He links God's curse upon him to Adam and does not link it to his brazen, detestable disobedience of God!" (Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 1996).

Iblīs then begin to carry out what he had threatened: the seduction of Adam and his progeny after him. He turned to Adam, making disobedience to God Most High seem fair to him; his weapon and his equipment in all of this are to make falsehood and ugliness appear fair and adorned and to entice one, by its fabricated adornment, to commit it.

In a moment of heedlessness on the part of Adam – whom Iblīs had bewitched with his enticement, his seduction, and his false promises – he falls into the disobedience of his Lord. Iblīs abandons him at that moment, for he has carried out what he threatened and prevailed over his opponent in the first round of the ongoing struggle that will continue until God bequeaths the earth and all who are upon it, and he has attained his wish.

Here, Adam awakens from his heedlessness and turns to his Lord, confiding in Him, pleading for His mercy, seeking His forgiveness, and repenting to Him:

فَتَلَقَّى آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَاتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ [البقرة: 37]

Then, Adam received from his Lord words, and He turned to him in mercy; indeed, He is the Oft-Relenting, the Most Merciful. [al-Baqarah: 37]

After that, proclamations, directives, decisions, and rulings follow in succession, to which none can object and whose imports cannot be repelled.

- The command was issued to the two implacable adversaries to descend to the land of the long battle after the first round:

قَالَ اهْبِطَا مِنْهَا جَمِيعًا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ [طه: 123]

- He said, 'Descend from it, both of you, altogether, enemies to one another.' [Tā Hā: 123]
- The enmity was proclaimed among the two weighty kinds so that Adam and his descendants thereafter would have no excuse for any of them to say, 'I was taken unawares, without knowing,' for he knew and learned. This supernal decree was proclaimed in the whole of existence:
 - «بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ»
 - 'Some of you are enemies to others.'

"With this proclamation that resounded through the heavens and the earths, witnessed by all the angels, God's mercy for His servants willed that He should send to them His messengers with guidance before He takes them to task for what their hands have earned; so, on the day He proclaimed the great enmity between Adam and Iblīs, He announced to them that He would bring them guidance from Him, and thereafter each would be recompensed according to whether he went astray or was guided" (Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 1996).

Therefore, whoever is guided and follows the messengers of God, exalted be He, will return to that Garden to which they were accustomed and from which they were expelled after this long estrangement and grievous separation, and it will be said to them:

ادْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَا أَنْتُمْ تَحْزَنُونَ [الأعراف: 49]

'Enter the garden; no fear shall be upon you, nor shall you grieve.' [al-A'raf: 49]

In addition, where they are called from the highest assembly:



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أَنْ تَلِكُمْ الْجَنَّةَ أَوْرَثْتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ [الأعراف: 43]

'That is the garden which you have been made to inherit for what you used to do.' [al-A' rāf: 43]

It is as although this were the return of emigrants and the homecoming of exiles from the abode of bliss; as although they deserved to come back and were made to inherit the garden, for they disobeyed Satan after following him had been the cause of expulsion." (Quṭb, *al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, 1994).

In this "return" to the garden, there is harmony in presentation, concord in words, coherence in meaning, and sequence in expression with that initial "departure" from it. With respect to whoever goes astray and follows Satan, he remains stumbling in his estrangement, darkness, and bewilderment:

▪ وَنَحْشُرُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَعْمَى [طه: 124]

'And we shall gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind.' [Ṭā Hā: 124]

He is blind to sight and insight:

▪ مَا أُولَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّمَا خَبَتْ زِدْنَاهُمْ سَعِيرًا [الإسراء: 97]

'Their abode is Hell; whenever it abates, We increase for them the blaze.' [al-Isrā': 97]

Conclusion:

Thus, the Qur'ānic narrative comes in complete harmony and coherence, with a tight interconnection between what precedes and what follows, between beginnings and endings—or premises and results—and it carries within its folds the aims, intents, and purposes for which it was

presented and narrated: reminder, admonition, and a call to take heed. The Exalted says:

وَكَذَلِكَ نَقْصِلُ الْآيَاتِ وَلِتَسْتَبِينَ سَبِيلَ الْمُجْرِمِينَ [الأنعام: 55]

And thus, we expound the signs so that the way of the sinners may become manifest. [al-An‘ām: 55]

and He, exalted as He, says:

لِيَهْلِكَ مَنْ هَلَكَ عَنْ بَيِّنَةٍ وَيَحْيَىٰ مَنْ حَيَّ عَنْ بَيِّنَةٍ [الأنفال: 42]

Therefore, he who perishes may perish upon evidence, and he who lives may live upon evidence. [al-Anfāl: 42]

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