

# Satan's longing

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**Despite being deceived by appearances and arrogantly logical, Iblis has inspired mystics like Iqbal through his dedication to his beloved**

**T**he history of Iblis (Satan) is older than man. How old we can never be quite sure, but if we believe in angels, then so we must in Iblis. His creation predates our biological forefathers being consigned to their bodily forms. He surpassed his angelic peers in prestige, thanks to his matchless worship and dedication to the All Powerful. He was one adversary in the cosmic dialogue between God, His angels and the newly created Adam. Although this dialogue can seem artificial from the divine perspective, yet for mortal "sinners" like us it captures the very essence and purpose of mankind: the constant tension between good and evil, destiny and free will, reward and punishment, seduction and penitence.

Ranging from his stately conversations in the divine presence to his furtive whispers in our hearts, the passionate Satan possesses our passions. The major world religions based on the Abrahamic faith have taught a consistent biography. Names vary but the basic import remains constant, and even the names are similar. Other ancient religions also portray an evil character under different guises. Then, in the geniuses of poets and philosophers, Iblis has assumed the dual roles of the villain and the hero; the tragic lover separated from his beloved and the despicable creature condemned to hellfire.

The history of Satan starts with the start



**'Which way shall I fly infinite wrath and infinite despair? Which way I fly is hell'**



**Husayn Ibn-e-Mansur Hallaj makes a hero out of a villain in simple, elegant Arabic verse. Azazyl is no longer an emotionless product of determinism, but a vibrant figure who loves the Lord and chooses to inflict upon himself the heaviest of losses for a true lover – separation from the beloved**



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- [So many unanswered qu](#)

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- [Art](#)
- [Scene](#)
- [Fashion](#)
- [Tribute](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Top Ten](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Focus](#)
- [Insight](#)
- [Loose talk](#)
- [Two steps to exile](#)
- [Confessions of a cricket](#)
- [Have you been brainwas cabal?](#)

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- [Need for a dialogue](#)
- [The protean Al Qaeda](#)
- [Setback to Iran's nuclear blessing for Pakistan](#)
- [The one-sided message](#)
- [Doctored religious mess](#)

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[Afghans](#)
- ['Real MMA' to support ar](#)  
[candidates in by-electior](#)
- [Decision to shift trade fa](#)  
[highlights security fears](#)

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- [True Lies](#)
- [Such Gup](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Nuggets](#)



punish him? After all the ability to lead man astray was also granted to him *by God*. How could he be held accountable for his acts when God never surrendered his Will? It was the Will that always held sway.

This argument most naturally was also transported to the plane of human actions. It crystallised with the controversies between free will ( *qadr*) and predestination ( *jabr*). The Mu'tazilites upheld the view that man was essentially free to choose between the right and wrong, as only then did God's justice and the promises of punishment and reward make sense. Between the Mu'tazilites and the absolute fatalists, the Ash'arites took a middle stance. They believed that all actions and their consequences originated in God's Will. Man was responsible because he acquires the freedom to act from God's Will.

Based on the story of his revolt, Iblis has been clad in different forms in ecstatic Oriental literature. The Iblis motif, when viewed through the literary and philosophical kaleidoscope, explodes into a collage of complex images. He is generally portrayed as an evil but tragic character, wrong but sincere and a condemned but loving creature. As such he sugar-coats his personality with all kinds of pleasantries.

For example, Iblis has quite often been presented as a true monotheist. The mystic-martyr Husayn Ibn-e-Mansur Hallaj (d 922) was the first poet to highlight the monotheist's tragedy. His *Kitab-e-tawasin* makes a hero out of a villain in simple, elegant Arabic verse. Azazyl is no longer an emotionless product of determinism, but a vibrant figure who loves the Lord and chooses to inflict upon himself the heaviest of losses for a true lover – separation from the beloved. Interestingly, Hallaj compares his own fate to that of Iblis – both seek fortune in affliction that stems from pristine love of the Pristine Being. One is exiled from life, the other from heaven.

Another fine Iranian philosopher, Ayn-ul-Qudat Hamadani (d 1131), a student of Hamid Ghazzali's brother, sketched out the diagram of Iblis. According to Hamadani, Iblis is the chamberlain of *illa Allah* ("but Allah"). This means that no one can acquire God's pleasure without passing the strict tests laid out by Iblis. Iblis is akin to the curls on the beloved's face. The curls are lucky enough to caress the beloved's cheek but can also entangle man in the cobweb of earthly desires, restricting his summoning into the beloved's court.

Hamadani explains that Iblis teaches by contrast. Iblis and his satanic accomplices invite bad deeds so that virtue becomes recognisable. How could one appreciate almsgiving, for example, if meanness of heart did not exist? Good and evil are therefore interdependent and man may be tested when both choices are open before him.

Iblis's misguidance of humanity is yet another sign of God's matchless

Power, argues Hamadani and quotes the Quranic verse: *"He said, by Your Power, I will indeed lead astray all of them."* (38:82)

Separation from heavenly premises is another hallmark of Iblis that evolves in rhapsodic literature. Persecution is the true test of a sincere lover and separation is the confirmatory test. Union is important because it prepares the lover for separation, but only through separation, can excellence in love be attained. Hamadani therefore lifts the soul of the separated Iblis:

*Separation from You is more agreeable than union with others,*

*To be repudiated by You is better than acceptance of others.*

For the same reason, Iqbal in his cosmic travelogue *Javid namah* calls Iblis 'Khwaja-e-Ahl-e-Firaq' (The Leader of the Separated Ones). Other themes in Iqbal's poetry are similar to Hamdani's views. Separation is better than union because it represents dynamism and an active fervour to achieve the cherished goal. Union lacks this sense of zeal and vigour and for both Hamadani and Iqbal, it is the zest for restless motion that polishes man's character.

*In the cosmos of yearning, separation is far better than union,*

*Nearness is the poison of longing, Distance, the honey of craving,*

*United with my beloved, I shied away from seeing Him face-on,*

*Even though my careless sight had always vied to intersect His majestic glance.*

*Separation is warmth of desire, separation, is the cacophony of wailings,*

*Separation teaches the wave its tossing, separation, is the honour of the drop.*

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