

The Poetics of Iblīs Narrative Theology in the Qurʾān, by Whitney S. Bodman, (Harvard Theological Studies, 62), (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Theological Studies, Harvard Divinity School: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2011), xii + 311 pp., ISBN: 978-0-674-06241-2, \$25.00 (pb)

To engage in the delineation of a “narrative theology” of evil as it is found in the world presumes that a discussion of evil is communicated most easily and profoundly through stories. For Whitney Bodman, narrative has the ability to capture “the tragic dimensions of life, the ambiguities of fate, the confusion of flawed characters, noble intentions with ruinous outcomes.” (p. 1) The problem of evil, he suggests, cannot be resolved into a dualistic vision of the struggle between the divine and the human because that “belies the truth of human experience;” (p. 1) such a perspective is the realm of normative dogmatic theology and lacks the insights that narratology can provide.

In chapter two of this work Bodman explores the challenges of approaching the Qurʾān as a literary text and the theoretical bases on which that must be conducted. He points out that Iblīs, but not Shayṭān, is a character in the series of stories that mention him in the Qurʾān. Shayṭān, for Bodman, is bereft of narrative interest, for he is an “actor” only, having no shifting personality as the story progresses; characters, on the other hand (Bodman here uses a distinction derived from Mieke Bal’s work on narratology) have distinctive human characteristics and carry themselves with human demeanor (regardless of whether they are human or not).

The heart of Bodman’s work is the analysis of the seven accounts of Iblīs found scattered throughout the Qurʾān. His interpretations are intentionally conducted in isolation from one another with the goal of deriving the insights from each one separately, contrary to usual approaches which attempt to resolve the narratives into one coherent whole. However, he first explores (in chapter 3) the mythic background of the figure of Iblīs through a range of “logical parallels” that provide narrative explanations for the existence and nature of evil. The purpose of doing so is to “discern alternative meanings and implications of specific elements” (p. 59) when it comes to the analysis of the Qurʾānic narratives. Bodman isolates the combat myth

(the dualistic struggle between good and evil and the emergence of apocalyptic thinking), the heavenly prosecutor myth (as when Satan argues with God concerning Job), the watcher myth (as associated with the guardian angels), the famous fallen angel myth, and the myth of sibling rivalry (as with Cain and Abel). These five typologies set the framework for the examination of the Qurʾānic stories. Bodman thus argues that he has positioned himself to stay alert to repetition, twists, and new strains of thought therein.

The analysis of the Iblīs narratives in *sūras Ṭā-Hā*, *al-Kahf*, *al-Ḥijr*, *Ṣād*, *al-Isrāʾ*, *al-Aʿrāf*, and *al-Baqara* is undertaken within the context of each *sūra* as a whole and follows the development of the overall narrative in which Iblīs finds his place, ranging from short renderings in a single verse to full narrative expositions stretching over a paragraph or more. The stories show Iblīs sometimes being incidental to other narratives and more an actor than character (especially in *sūras Ṭā-Hā* and *al-Baqara*) and, on other occasions, embodying various of the mythic versions as in *sūrat Ṣād*'s use of the heavenly prosecutor and *sūras al-Isrāʾ* and *al-Aʿrāf*'s resonances with the combat myth. *Sūrat al-Ḥijr* is of special interest because it appears to develop the sibling rivalry myth in Iblīs' "coherent" argument as to why God should not entrust matters to Adam and his own sense of injustice at this affront.

The challenge in this book that Bodman deals with at the outset is the notion of "tragedy" itself. For Muslims, Bodman indicates, Iblīs cannot be viewed as a tragic figure: "Iblīs becomes a tragic figure once we grant him some justification for his refusal to bow down to Adam and his refusal of God's direct command." (p. 24) This is "tragic" because that was the right thing to do; yet it was also the wrong thing to do. Such a theology is more at home in Christianity in which the redemption through the crucifixion of Jesus blends the human and the divine in what is viewed as the ultimate tragedy. So, this reading of the character of Iblīs appears to be a Christian one. That, for Bodman, is not an outcome to be resisted: in fact, on the theoretical grounds of reader-reception theory, he argues that it must be that way for him as a reader. That others who do not share his initial perspective might then see the narrative of Iblīs in a new way because of his reading is to be wished for; in Bodman's terms, the readings are hoped to be within the range of "possible readings" with which some readers will resonate. However, he also suggests that

such ideas can be found in Muslim writing (beyond those of Sufis as was previously explored in Peter Awn's classic 1983 study, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology*) where the implications of the Qur'ānic narratives are explored. Bodman draws attention to the role of Iblīs in four works of modern fiction written by Muḥammad Iqbāl, Naguib Mahfouz, Nawal el-Saadawi, and Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm, and finds the tragic figure emerging, especially in the latter three, as these writers face the challenges of the contemporary world in their own narratives. What is uncovered is a Qur'ān that is not univocal, which might be taken to suggest that the text itself is conveying a sense of the tragic by its inability to provide a simple, singular answer to the dilemma of the existence of evil.

Overall, this is a well-written and interesting work. It goes well beyond what most academic work on the Qur'ān does in its level of theological engagement. Bodman finds confirmation of his view of "the tragic dilemma" of human existence – tragedy being "the courage to choose, and the possibility, perhaps even the inevitability, to make the wrong choice for the right reasons." (p. 265) He is, however, fully open, and he expresses himself without condescension, in finding that "there is a certain reasonableness to Iblīs' discreet accusation" against God but that this is "an unacceptable conclusion for a Muslim." (p. 264) Further, "[w]hile most Muslims may deny that the Islamic tradition countenances any concept of tragedy, the human condition dictates otherwise." That there may be another answer that is neither the normative theological absolutism that Bodman associates with Islam, nor the tragic vision that he considers a part of the journey through the "reefs of human existence," is not entertained. Still, as a textual study and an experiment in hermeneutical reflection, the book is well worth close attention.

Andrew Rippin

University of Victoria, Victoria British Columbia-Canada