

GTU - SARS-1000, Qur'ān: Origin, Application, Interpretations  
“Sin and Satan in the Qur'ān and Bible”  
Katy Dickinson, 19 May 2023

In this paper, I consider sin and Satan, with a focus on the stories of Joseph and Job, both in the Qur'ān and in the Bible. I chose this topic because, as a jail Chaplain, I find prisoners are very aware of sin and Satan, and I wanted to learn more. The anthropomorphic personification of Satan is a huge topic, so I have concentrated on a limited set of scriptural verses to keep to term paper length, rather than allowing this to grow into a dissertation. There is much more to be said based on the thousands of scholarly and religious works (many with conflicting opinions) written on these topics over many centuries. I assert that ideas of embodied sin and the personification of Satan evolved over at least a thousand years (between 500 BCE and 610 CE), through Biblical and Qur'ānic stories and exegetical understandings that are sometimes not substantiated by sacred texts. Historical evolution presupposes a starting point, and this paper considers alternatives for the first Biblical mention of sin. Taking both the Qur'ān and Bible as my example, I employ the names *Satan* and *the devil* interchangeably. Being aware of the challenges of reading in English translation, I use the terms *sin* and *evil* as rough equivalents, meaning wrong action or a state of wrongness. Images associated with this paper may be found in my blog post with the same title.<sup>1</sup>

### **Connecting the Scriptures**

I assume in this paper that Qur'ānic and Biblical scriptures after Genesis have some continuity or relationship with prior scriptures. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament frequently refer to stories and passages in the Hebrew Bible. That is, the connection between

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<sup>1</sup> Katy Dickinson, “Sin and Satan in the Qur'ān and Bible,” *KatysBlog*, 19 May 2023, <https://katysblog.wordpress.com/>.

Hebrew Bible and New Testament scriptures is established inside the Bible itself. The Bible and Qur'ān in many cases tell the same stories. For example, the story of Joseph is in both Qur'ān Surah 12 and in the Book of Genesis 37-49.<sup>2</sup> For this paper, it does not matter if the Qur'ān's Joseph story was known in its Biblical form to the Arab people in Mecca prior to the revelation of Surah 12, or if it was revealed directly from God to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel.

### **Traditional Characteristics of Satan**

Satan (or other names, including the devil, the adversary, Beelzebub, or the dragon) as an individual is mentioned about a hundred times in the Bible, both in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Satan (also called the devil, the deceiver or accursed, Iblis and other names) is also mentioned over sixty times in the Qur'ān.<sup>4</sup> Traditional characteristics of Satan in Biblical and Qur'ānic scriptures and commentaries include, he is an adversary / enemy to humans,<sup>5</sup> liar,<sup>6</sup> tempter to evil, leader of other devils,<sup>7</sup> outcast from Heaven / Paradise (a fallen angel or jinn),<sup>8</sup> arrogant / prideful, and powerful but less so than God / Allah.<sup>9</sup> As Neil Forsyth writes, "The essential role of Satan is opposition. Both the Hebrew word *stn* and the Greek *diabolos* have root meanings akin to that of the English word 'opponent' - someone or something in the way."<sup>10</sup>

### **Sin and Satan in History**

The development of the concept of sin and its embodiment in Satan has evolved and become both more complex and anthropomorphic over history. I take as a starting point for this

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<sup>2</sup> Katy Dickinson, "Joseph-Yusuf Presentation," *Katysblog*, 7 March 2023, <https://katysblog.wordpress.com/2023/03/07/joseph-yusuf-presentation/>.

<sup>3</sup> Counting instances of various devilish names and references by searching Bible Gateway.

<sup>4</sup> Counting instances of various devilish names and references by searching Clear Quran.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10, and Qur'ān 35:6.

<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān 7:21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'ān 38:85.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:18, and Qur'ān 18:50.

<sup>9</sup> Barlas / McAuliffe, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4.

evolution the motivated, embodied (but unnamed) *sin* in Genesis 4:7 in which God says to Cain, “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”<sup>11</sup> The contributors to *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* translate this verse, “*Sin is a demon at the door*. Others translate, ‘sin couches [or: crouches] at the door’ ... *You are the one it craves*.”<sup>12</sup> Visualizations of this verse are popular on today’s web, with online images showing a variety of lurking demons, carnivores, and other scary figures. The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* contributors write of Genesis 4:7, “This is the first mention of *sin* in the Bible. In this difficult verse, sin is somehow linked with the risk to Cain if he does ‘not do well’ in dealing with his anger.”<sup>13</sup>

Sin is part of the oldest version of the Joseph story (Genesis 39-50), is in the first extensive characterization of Satan in the Bible (Book of Job 1-2), appears in the earliest stories of Jesus in Mark (the first Gospel), and in later Christian gospels, the letters of Paul, and notably in the Revelation to John. Finally, there are many mentions of Satan and of sin throughout the Qur’ān. I will particularly consider Qur’ānic references in the stories of Joseph and Job.

Identifying the Bible’s first mention of sin may be controversial, and it seems worthwhile to understand where it fits in history. The date of the actions recorded in Genesis can be assumed to have happened much earlier than the date of the scriptural text we have today. John J. Collins (Yale Divinity School’s Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation) writes that the Pentateuch texts are composite, they “incorporate layers from different eras. The Biblical text is not a consistent systematic treatise. Rather it is a collection of traditional materials that places different viewpoints in dialogue with one another and offers the reader a range of points

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<sup>11</sup> Bible Quotes are from Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> W. Gunther Plaut, Ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Reform Judaism Publishing, 2006), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Michael D. Coogan, Ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17.

of view.”<sup>14</sup> The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* contributors write, “Genesis began to be written down sometime after the establishment of the monarchy in Israel in the tenth century BCE or later...Many important parts of Genesis, however, were not written until after the monarchy had fallen in 586 BCE and Judean leaders were living in exile in Babylon.”<sup>15</sup> Collins asserts, “The Pentateuch cannot have reached its present form earlier than the postexilic period.”<sup>16</sup> This postexilic period begins about the time of the Edict of Cyrus in 539 BCE (mentioned in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). The first Biblical mention of sin was probably recorded well over a thousand years before Qur’ān Surah 12 was revealed to Muhammad. The following table presents an approximate timeline of text creation for the Bible and Qur’ān.

1000 BCE	700 BCE to 400 BCE	500 BCE	Year Zero	46 CE to 100 CE	610 CE to 632 CE
Writing of Genesis text started <sup>17</sup>	Writing of the Book of Job <sup>18</sup>	Genesis text reaches present form <sup>19</sup>	New Testament stories started <sup>20</sup>	New Testament text reaches present form <sup>21</sup>	Qur’ān revelation <sup>22</sup>
<p><i>Approximate Timeline of Bible and Qur’ān Text Creation – This information comes from many sources, but the table as a whole is original.</i></p>					

Having presented this chronology of the first Biblical mention of sin and first embodiment of evil, there are still two alternatives to be addressed: the serpent in Eden and *original sin*. While the Qur’ān does not mention serpents being in the garden of Paradise, nor

<sup>14</sup> John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and Deutero-Canonical Books* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Coogan, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, *A Short Introduction*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Coogan, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Coogan, 735.

<sup>19</sup> Collins, *A Short Introduction*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 41.

<sup>21</sup> Powell, 41 and 263.

<sup>22</sup> Adam J. Silverstein, *Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9-10.

does Genesis explicitly associate the serpent with Satan. Yet, pictures of the Eden's serpent as half snake / half woman were popular from medieval times through at least the sixteenth century when Michelangelo painted that image in the Sistine Chapel.<sup>23</sup> Many Christians today regard Eden's serpent in Genesis 3 as the first Biblical appearance of the devil. This is a particularly popular belief today among nondenominational evangelical Christians. However, Collins refutes the belief that Eden's serpent is Satan,

The idea of the tempter is associated in popular imagination especially with the snake in the garden of Eden, the "ancient serpent" of Revelation. But the snake in Genesis is not a supernatural agent. Rather the story in Genesis is a fable that expresses the lure of temptation in a literary way. It was not until the first century CE that the snake was identified with the devil (in Wis 2: 24, written in Alexandria about the time of Christ).<sup>24</sup>

Genesis 3:1 and 3:14 only describe the serpent in Eden as a wild animal or wild creature. The conflation of this animal with Satan seems to be a later exegetical understanding from at least five hundred years after Genesis was written. Identifying the talking serpent with Satan seems to be an early Christian exegetical understanding that is not substantiated by scripture in Genesis. Collins presents the history of connecting Eden's serpent with Satan, "Although the book of Genesis does not associate the crafty serpent of Eden with the Satan, two [New Testament] books appear to mention the Satan in connection with this serpent (Rom 16: 20; Rev 12: 9; 20: 2). The process that led to the identification or association of the Satan with the serpent of Gen 3 is worthy of a study in its own right."<sup>25</sup> This paper is not going to follow that tempting path of study but will continue to consider original sin.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard and Claire Stracke, "Michelangelo, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent," *Christian Iconography*, accessed 16 May 2023, <https://www.christianiconography.info/Wikimedia%20Commons/sistineCeiling.originalSin.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Stokes, Ryan E. *The Satan: How God's Executioner Became the Enemy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans Publishing, 2019), Foreword (eBook).

<sup>25</sup> Stokes, Forward (eBook).

Another contender for the first Biblical use of *sin* is based on the Roman Catholic Christian doctrine of *original sin*, referring to the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (in Genesis 3). The *Catholic Dictionary* presents this definition, “Original Sin. Either the sin committed by Adam as the head of the human race or the sin he passed on to his posterity with which every human being, with the certain exception of Christ and his Mother, is conceived and born.”<sup>26</sup> The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* contributors write of Genesis 3.1-24, “Though this story is often taken by Christians as an account of ‘original sin,’ the word ‘sin’ never occurs in it.”<sup>27</sup> The Britannica Editors write,

Although the human condition (suffering, death, and a universal tendency toward sin) is accounted for by the story of the Fall of Adam in the early chapters of the book of Genesis, the Hebrew Scriptures say nothing about the transmission of hereditary sin to the entire human race. The main scriptural affirmation of the doctrine is found in the writings of St. Paul and particularly in Romans 5:12–19.<sup>28</sup>

Associating the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with the doctrine of original sin seems to be another subsequent exegetical understanding that began with the New Testament, at least five hundred years after Genesis was written. For this paper, Genesis 4:7 is considered to be the first Biblical use of the word *sin*.

In the Qur’ān, Satan is with Adam and his (unnamed) wife in God’s garden, where it says, “Satan made them slip, and removed them from the state they were in” (Q 2:36). Adam soon repents (Q 2:37 and Q 7:23) and is forgiven. However, Asma Barlas writes, “there is no Qur’ānic narrative about original sin or ‘Eve’s’ culpability for the fall...Indeed, there is no

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<sup>26</sup> John A. Hardon, *Catholic Dictionary: An Abridged and Updated Edition of Modern Catholic Dictionary* (New York: Image, 2013), 351.

<sup>27</sup> Coogan, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Original Sin,” *Britannica*, Accessed 8 May 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/original-sin>.

concept of the fall in Islam.”<sup>29</sup> Ramon Harvey agrees that while humans are tempted by the devil, “there is no concept of original sin in the Qur’anic world view.”<sup>30</sup> According to Britannica’s Editors, this seems to be the direction that many Christians are heading as well. They write, “the idea that salvation is necessary because of the universal stain of original sin is no longer accepted by a number of Christian sects and interpretations, especially among those Christians who consider the story of Adam and Eve to be less a fact and more a metaphor of the relation of God and humanity.”<sup>31</sup> That is, the exegetic interpretation of sin in the early parts of Genesis may still be evolving among Christians.

Ryan Stokes writes of a scholarly tradition of Satan in the Bible evolving in three phases over time, beginning with an adversary or obstacle, then developing into a member of God’s court, and finally becoming into an entity named *Satan*. In this scholarly tradition, “By the time of the Chronicles,<sup>32</sup> ‘Satan’ was apparently the name of an evil heavenly being who leads humans into sin.”<sup>33</sup> Ryan notes that many scholars now question the linear trajectory of this Satan tradition and whether the Biblical references are to the same figure. In contrast, sin, and the characterization of Satan in the Qur’ān seem unified and stable; that is, they are consistent and do not change much from surah to surah and from story to story within the surahs.

### **Sin and Satan in Joseph’s Story, Book of Genesis**

Names for Satan are not mentioned in Genesis, but the word *sin* appears about six times, depending on the translation. This count does not include headers that are sometimes added by Biblical editors or publishers as an unstated interpretation of the text. For example, the “New

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<sup>29</sup> Asma Barlas, “Women’s Reading of the Qur’ān,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 259.

<sup>30</sup> Ramon Harvey, *The Qur’an and the Just Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Britannica, “Original Sin.”

<sup>32</sup> The Biblical Books of Chronicles were written in the late fourth century BCE, according to Coogan, 583.

<sup>33</sup> Stokes, Chapter 1 (eBook).

Revised Standard Version” translation heads up Genesis 3.1 with “The First Sin and Its Punishment.” The “Christian Standard Bible” translation labels Genesis 3:8 as “Sin’s Consequences,” and the “New Living Translation” version heads Genesis 3.1 as “The Man and Woman Sin.”<sup>34</sup> These editorial headers represent one exegetical understanding in modern times.

The Bible and Qur’ān sometimes offer different versions and interpretations of the same historical people, actions, and stories, but the story of Joseph is very similar in both scriptures. For example, the use of *sin* in Joseph’s story in Genesis is remarkably like its use in the Qur’ān version revealed at least a thousand years later,

<p>Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master’s wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”</p>	<p>When he reached maturity, We gave him judgement and knowledge: this is how We reward those who do good. The woman in whose house he was living tried to seduce him: she bolted the doors and said, ‘Come to me,’ and he replied, ‘God forbid! My master has been good to me; wrongdoers never prosper.’* She made for him, and he would have succumbed to her if he had not seen evidence of his Lord.”</p> <p>*another translation says “sinners never succeed”</p>
<p>Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife, Genesis 39:6-9</p>	<p>Joseph and Zulaikha, Qur’ān 12:22-23</p>

In this text and throughout Genesis (except for 4:7), *sin* means wrongdoing and does not suggest a personality or evil embodiment. God is quoted in Genesis using the word *sin* several times (in 4:7, 18:20, 20:6, and 22:12), but only in Genesis 4:7 is evil personified. This complexity may be one reason why the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* contributors call Genesis 4:7, “a difficult verse.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See the hundreds of Bible versions on the Bible Gateway website.

<sup>35</sup> Coogan, 17.



## Sin and Satan in Joseph's Story, Qur'ān Surah 12

In telling Joseph's story, Surah 12 includes three references to Satan, and further mentions of *sin*. Satan makes an early appearance in the Qur'ān's Surah 12, when Joseph's father Jacob says, "My son, tell your brothers nothing of this dream, or they may plot to harm you - Satan is man's sworn enemy" (Q 12:5).<sup>36</sup> Jacob's implication is that a prophetic dream showing Joseph in great power would be dangerous if known, causing his brothers to become jealous and violent toward him (as indeed happens), and that their negative response would come from Satan. In this passage, Satan is presented consistently with his traditional characteristics listed above. He is associated with jealousy and violence, and acts as a powerful adversary to humanity in general and to Joseph in particular. It seems as if only Satan is blamed for the devious and damaging behavior of his brothers toward Joseph.

The second mention of Satan in Surah 12, is when Joseph is in an Egyptian prison interpreting the dreams of fellow prisoners, "Joseph said to the one he knew would be saved, 'Mention me to your master,' but Satan made him forget to do this, and so Joseph stayed in prison for a number of years." (Q 12:42). Here, Satan is again acting within traditional expectations. He works against Joseph's interests, distorting the minor human failing of forgetting into the serious harm of incarceration for years. As in the earlier passage, the blame for this harm is given to Satan rather than to the prisoner who forgets.

The last reference to Satan in Surah 12 occurs when Joseph is speaking to his father and praising Allah for his generosity. "My Lord has made [the dream] come true and has been gracious to me - He released me from prison and He brought you - after Satan sowed discord between me and my brothers" (Q 12:100). This reference demonstrates a continuity between the

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<sup>36</sup> Qur'ān quotes are from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

three appearances of Satan in Surah 12. Satan twists Joseph's brothers so they are jealous and violent. He then causes the other prisoner to forget Joseph, abandoning him in jail for years. At the end, Joseph gives glory to Allah for untangling the wrongs that Satan has done.

The uses of *sin* in Surah 12 are less central to the flow of the story and refer to wrongful behavior (but are not embodied or personified). For example, *sin* is used in the story of Joseph and his Egyptian master's wife, who is unnamed in the Qur'ān but in later stories is called Zulaikha. Later adventures of "Yusuf and Zulaikha" were the subject of several major medieval Islamic poems, romances, and artworks, an example of interpreting and extending scripture. When Zulaikha is attracted to Joseph's great beauty and tries to seduce him, he rejects her and flees. Zulaikha accuses Joseph of attempted rape, but her husband sees the truth and says, "Joseph, overlook this; but you [wife], ask forgiveness for your sin - you have done him wrong" (Q 12:29). In another example toward the end of Surah 12, Joseph's brothers use *sin* again when speaking to their father, "The [brothers] said, 'Father, ask God to forgive our sins - we were truly in the wrong'" (Q 12:97). There are potentially other uses of *sin* in Surah 12, as some translations of 12:22-23 and Q 12:91 use the words *sinner*s and *sinful*, but others say *wrongdoers* or *in the wrong*. In none of these Qur'ānic instances is *sin* embodied as in Genesis 4:7. *Sin* is used to mean wrongdoing but is not embodied or personified as Satan.

### **Sin and Satan in the Story of Job**

The story of Joseph is presented chronologically and cohesively in both the Qur'ān and Bible. However, while Job's story in the Bible is all in one lengthy Book of Job, in the Qur'ān, it is very short and mostly split between Q 21:83-84, and Q 38:41-44. There are later Muslim traditions and stories about Job (another example of extending and interpreting scripture), but in

the Qur'ān, his story is only a few lines. In both the Biblical and Qur'ānic scriptures, Job is notable for his patient faithfulness despite great suffering and affliction by Satan.

In the Book of Job, his friends say that Job is afflicted because he sinned, but he (rightly) defends himself as being innocent. The narrator agrees, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing” (Job 1:22). Much of the Biblical story of Job considers the ancient question of theodicy, why bad things happen to good people. Theodicy and sin are not in the story of the Prophet Ayyub (Job) in the Qur'ān. Instead, God presents the restoration of Job's family as an example, “a sign of Our mercy and a lesson to all who understand” (Q 38:43). Ryan writes, “While the Satan of Job is not quite yet the evil, antagonistic figure he would eventually become in Jewish and Christian tradition, in the book of Job this enemy of the righteous begins to emerge.”<sup>37</sup> The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* contributors agree. They write of Satan in the Book of Job that he is the adversary of humans; however, “he is not the ‘devil’ of later Jewish and Christian literature.”<sup>38</sup>

In my understanding, the character of Satan in the Biblical story of Job is partway evolved between the embodiment of evil seen Genesis 4:7 and the fully developed Satan featured in the Revelation of John which says, “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him” (Revelation 12:9).<sup>39</sup> Satan as featured in Qur'ān Surah 12, “Satan is man's sworn enemy” (Q 12:5), and in Surah 35, “Satan is your enemy – so treat him as an enemy – and invites his followers only to enter the blazing fire” (Q 35:6), seems to consistent with the fully developed evil character of Revelation.

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<sup>37</sup> Ryan, Chapter 2 (eBook).

<sup>38</sup> Coogan, 736.

<sup>39</sup> Written in about 81 CE to 96 CE, according to Powell, 545.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented how the ideas of embodied sin and the anthropomorphic personification of Satan have evolved over at least a thousand years, from the earliest Biblical mention in Genesis 4:7 through the fully developed and stable characterization of the devil in the Qur'ān. I have also presented several examples where stories and interpretations featuring sin and Satan have evolved over time through understandings that are not always substantiated by sacred texts. There is much more that could be said if time and space allowed.

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