



DAJJĀL

DAJJĀL (the great deceiver), in Islamic tradition the maleficent figure gifted with supernatural powers whose advent and brief, though quasi-universal, rule will be among the signs heralding the approach of the resurrection. The Dajjāl may be thought of as the Antichrist, for he is often styled *al-masīh al-dajjāl* and it is generally to Jesus (after his second coming) that the task of killing him is assigned. The role of the Dajjāl differs from that of the Antichrist in several respects, however, the most important being that his defeat and death are envisioned in the context of the universal triumph of Islam in the last days of the world. A Syriac origin has been suggested for the word *dajjāl*, partly because of its absence from the Qur'ān (Abel, p. 76). Arabic lexicographers have sought, however, to explain its origins in relation to a series of words derived from the root *d-j-l*: *dajjala* "to cover" because the Dajjāl will cover the globe with unbelief and sin, as well as with the multitude of his forces; *dajjala* "to gild" because he will manifest the contrary of what he conceals; *dajjal* "defiler" because he will defile the earth with his foulness; and *dojjāla* "the refuse of mankind" because it is a fit description for his followers (Zabīdī, p. 318). The very multiplicity of these explanations casts doubt on their etymological accuracy, but their semantic suitability is striking. An attempt has also been made to find an Iranian origin for the word *dajjāl* (Majlesī, tr. Davānī, p. 973), but it must be rejected, not least because the savior in Iranian religious tradition has no maleficent counterpart.

The traditions concerning the Dajjāl in both Sunnite and Shi'ite sources are numerous and often contradictory; it is remarkable that no attempt appears to



have been made to reconcile or harmonize them, even by Shi'ite authors, for whom the Dajjāl is linked with the appearance of the Mahdī, one of the defining themes of their doctrine.

The briefest evocations of the Dajjāl are found in several prophetic traditions in which either six or ten “signs of the hour” are listed (Moslem, pp. 1503-04; *Ḳātūnābādī*, p. 167). He appears in either second or third place in these listings, immediately before “the beast” (*al-dabba*; Qur’ān 27:82). The traditions are in broad agreement on the circumstances that will precede his appearance, the Shi'ite traditions being particularly copious in this respect. They include the filling of the world with corruption, the inclination of men to men and women to women, the metamorphosis of innovators (*ahl al-beḍ’ā*) into monkeys and pigs, the hypocrisy of those who recite the Qur’ān, the gilding of mosques and the erection of tall minarets, the giving of false witness, and men’s hearts becoming “more putrid than carrion” (*Ḳātūnābādī*, pp. 187, 190-95; *Majlesī*, pp. 192-94). It is also said that the appearance of the Dajjāl will be preceded by three years of severe famine, during which drought will cause the loss first of one third, then of two thirds, and finally of the entirety of all crops. This material weakening will help to make men receptive to the pretensions of the Dajjāl, for he will bring with him a tempting abundance of foodstuffs (*Moḥammad-Šafi’*, p. 40).

Varying locations are given for the eventual appearance of the Dajjāl: somewhere between Syria and Iraq (Moslem, p. 1516), Khorasan or Sīstān (*Qomī*, I, pp. 439-40), and, most commonly, Yahūdīya, the Jewish quarter of Isfahan (*Majlesī*, p. 197). This last point is one of a number of hints that the Dajjāl may be Jewish; other such hints include the reports that his mother will be Jewish and that in the lifetime of the Prophet Moḥammad a child was born among the Jews of Medina who seemed to fit the description of the Dajjāl (*Tabrīzī*, III, p. 1521). The Persian translator of Ṭabarī also declared that the Dajjāl will be a giant who rules over the Jews (quoted in Carra de Vaux, p. 887). There is, however, no clear identification of the Dajjāl as a Jew in the traditions of the Prophet, though Ebn Ṣayyād (see below) sought to dispel suspicions that he himself was the Dajjāl by claiming to be Muslim, whereas the Prophet had said the Dajjāl would be a Jew (Moslem, p. 1512).

The Dajjāl’s most striking physical feature will be his single functioning eye, set in the middle of his forehead, brilliant like the morning star, though marred by a blood clot; the other eye will have been obliterated (*mamsūḥ*). Also on the forehead of the Dajjāl the word *kāfer* (unbeliever) will be written



in such a way that even the illiterate will be able to read it. His physical deformity will also be manifest in his walk, with the big toes of his feet almost touching and his heels far apart, as well as in his repulsive matted and frizzy hair. Although enjoying all the vigor of youth, he will be unable to sire offspring (Kātūnābādī, pp. 190-97; Kašmīrī, pp. 162-64; Bokārī, p. 75; Moslem, p. 1516). The only riding beast that will consent to carry him will be a donkey of blinding whiteness possessing a head measuring a mile between its ears and capable of traversing one third of a *farsak* with each step (Bokārī, p. 76).

Despite these palpable imperfections, the Dajjāl will proclaim his divinity, using the words of the pharaoh “I am your supreme lord” (Qur’ān 79:24) and deceiving men with a display of supposed miraculous powers, most involving inversion of the natural order. For example, he will be accompanied by water that burns and fire that has the effect of cold water. He will bring into being a garden resembling hellfire and a fire resembling the garden of paradise. He will walk swiftly across the face of the earth, “like a cloud driven by the wind,” and the ground will yield its hidden treasures wherever he treads. He will descend into the ocean, and the sun will accompany him. Wherever he goes a mountain of black smoke will precede him, and a mountain of white smoke will follow him. Those who accept his claims will be rewarded with abundant crops, and those who reject him will suffer famine (Kātūnābādī, p. 192; Kašmīrī, p. 163; Majlesī, pp. 193-94).

The followers of the Dajjāl, it is said, will be 70,000 Jews (from Isfahan, according to Moslem, p. 1525), nomadic Arabs, bastards, drunkards, singers, people of frivolity (*ahl al-lahw*), and a large contingent of women. Wherever they go all the acts forbidden by Islam will be freely committed, to the extent that adultery and sodomy will take place in full public view (Kātūnābādī, pp. 197-99).

Few places will be spared from his triumphant onslaught. All traditions agree that Mecca and Medina will be among them; in some Jerusalem and Mount Sinai are also excepted, and, according to Shiite traditions, the resting places of the imams will also be immune to the Dajjāl (Majlesī, p. 195). In a number of traditions the inability of the Dajjāl to enter Medina is emphasized. He will come as far either as Oḥod or as a salt marsh overlooking the city, and the ground of Medina will be shaken by three tremors, whereupon all the hypocrites in the city will come forth to join him. Pious people will also come out to challenge him; one of them he will cut in two, flinging the parts of the corpse wide enough apart to ride his donkey between them before restoring



him to life with the aid of demons in his entourage. The one thus brought back to life will, however, continue to mock the Dajjāl's claims until finally he becomes invulnerable to the Dajjāl's sword (Moslem, p. 1518; Boḳārī, p. 75).

The period of the Dajjāl's dominion is generally set at forty days, the first day being like a year, the second like a month, the third like a week, and the remainder "like your days," that is, days of normal duration (Kašmīrī, p. 112).

According to most Sunnite traditions on the subject, it is Jesus who will put an end to the rule of the Dajjāl. That will, in fact, be the first task of Jesus after his return to the earth, and the Dajjāl is mentioned in about four fifths of all Sunnite traditions relating to the second coming (Kašmīrī, *passim*). Jesus will descend, it is said, "at the white minaret in the east of Damascus" and immediately seek out the Dajjāl. As soon as Jesus lays eyes on him, the Dajjāl will begin to dissolve, "like rock salt in water," but it is the divine will that he shall be visibly killed. Jesus will therefore kill him, with either a lance or a sword, in the valley of Afīq in Syria or at the gates of Lodd (Lydda) in Palestine (Kašmīrī, p. 118).

It is appropriate that it should be Jesus who kills the Dajjāl, for the latter is in many ways the maleficent counterpart to the Messiah, parodying such miracles as curing the blind and the leper. Other parallels include his riding a donkey and his explicit designation in certain traditions as the "messiah of misguidance" (*masīḥ al-ḡalāla*) and the "counterfeit messiah" (*al-masīḥ al-dajjāl*; Kašmīrī, p. 102). Nonetheless, in some Sunnite traditions the task of eliminating the Dajjāl is reserved for the Mahdī, and, according to all relevant Shi'ite traditions, the Dajjāl will be killed by "the one behind whom Jesus will pray," that is, the twelfth imam, the Shi'ite Mahdī returned to the manifest plane (Ḳātūnābādī, p. 198). This shift obviously corresponds to the paramount eschatological role reserved for the Mahdī; it is he, the savior of humanity, who must eliminate the gross manifestation of cumulative evil that is the Dajjāl. Some Sunnite authorities have put forward a compromise solution, suggesting that it is indeed Jesus who will put the Dajjāl to death but that he will do so on behalf of the Mahdī and under his authority (Kašmīrī, p. 150).

In all the traditions discussed so far the appearance of the Dajjāl is placed at the end of time, but there are others, found in both Sunnite and Shi'ite collections, in which it is suggested that he was already alive in the time of the Prophet or at least that his appearance was then thought to be imminent. Most of these traditions are centered on the figure known in Medina as Ebn Ṣayyād



(less frequently Ebn Ṣā'ed), whom even the Prophet appears to have suspected of being the Dajjāl. He questioned Ebn Ṣayyād as an infant, for the latter was able to speak preternaturally early (another parallel with the miracles of Jesus). Ebn Ṣayyād refused to acknowledge the messengerhood of the Prophet, claiming it instead for himself. He pronounced himself able to see intuitively the true and the false and declared that he saw “a throne on the waters”; the Prophet identified it as the throne of Satan. When challenged to discern what was on the Prophet’s mind, Ebn Ṣayyād replied, *al-dok*. *Sūrat al-dokān* (Qur’ān 44) was being revealed at the time, and Ebn Ṣayyād’s abbreviated answer was taken as the result of satanic and therefore cloudy inspiration. On what appears to have been another occasion the Prophet concealed himself behind some palm trees in order to watch Ebn Ṣayyād, in the hope of discovering his true identity (Moslem, pp. 1511-12; Kātūnābādī, pp. 192-98).

In several traditions it is reported that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb regarded Ebn Ṣayyād as the Dajjāl (Kātūnābādī, p. 190), but, when ‘Omar b. al-Ḳaṭṭāb also affirmed that Ebn Ṣayyād was the Dajjāl, the Prophet remained silent (Tabrīzī, p. 1521). Most relevant traditions, indeed, terminate inconclusively, with the Prophet warning his community against the Dajjāl as “the greatest trial since the creation of Adam” and beseeching God to keep the Dajjāl either concealed or confined until the end of time (Kašmīrī, p. 105).

Belief in a concealed Dajjāl found support in the narration of Tamīm Dārī, a Christian who converted to Islam in the time of the Prophet. He claimed to have seen the Dajjāl chained to a rock on an island far distant from Arabia, and the Prophet supposedly assented to the truth of his story (Moslem, p. 1522). In later tradition the island was placed near Zābaj (Java?) in the “China Sea.” It was surrounded by mountains, and sailors from Sīrāf and Oman who passed close to its shores claimed always to hear rising from it the sound of drums and tambourines, of dancing and clapping (Mas‘ūdī, *Tanbīh*, pp. 61-62). For their part, a number of Shi‘ite writers took the prolongation of the Dajjāl’s life for the satanic counterpart of the occultation of the twelfth imam, and in polemics they upbraided Sunnites for believing in the former but not in the latter (Ebn Bābūya, p. 210).

A further complication is provided by still other traditions, in which the appearance and defeat of the Dajjāl are predicted for the time of the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims. Soon after the Byzantine capital had been conquered, it was said, Satan would call out to the Muslims that the Dajjāl had taken their places among their families. The Muslims would then descend into



Syria to do battle with the Dajjāl, being joined forthwith by Jesus, who would put the Dajjāl to death (Moslem, pp. 1501-03; Kašmīrī, p. 103).

A possible solution to the apparent contradictions is provided by those statements of the Prophet in which he spoke of a whole series of *dajjāls*, either thirty or twenty-seven in number, four of them being women (Kašmīrī, pp. 102-03). The *dajjāl* that will appear (or be released from confinement) at the end of time can thus be regarded as the supreme *dajjāl* (*al-dajjāl al-akbar*) and the others as his precursors.

Ebn al-‘Arabī and Sufis of his school regarded this series of *dajjāls* as identical with those called “the friends of Satan” (*awlīā’al-šayṭān*) in the Qur’ān (4:76), a satanic hierarchy opposed to the succession of saints or even to that of the twenty-seven prophets discussed by Ebn al-‘Arabī in his *Foṣūṣ al-ḥekam* (apud Chodkiewicz, pp. 36, 109). More commonly, Sufis have classed the satanic tricks of false claimants to sanctity (*estedrāj*) with the false miracles to be performed by the Dajjāl; the false Sufis thus will become in some measure agents of the Dajjāl (Rāzī, p. 314). Sufis have occasionally internalized the concept of the Dajjāl. ‘Alā’-al-Dawla Semnānī (d. 737/1336) thus called on the believer to summon up in himself a manifestation of the Mahdī in order to dissipate the forces of his inward Dajjāl (Corbin, p. 309). Both Najm-al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 654/1256; 1353 Š./1974, pp. 140-43) and ‘Abd-al-Karīm Jīlī (d. 820/1417; Nicholson, p. 135) similarly regarded the killing of the Dajjāl by Jesus as symbolic of the defeat of the instinctual soul (*nafs*) by the spirit (*rūḥ*).

Modern times have elicited fresh interpretations of the concept of the Dajjāl. The Turkish writer and thinker Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960) thus put forward the idea of a universal Dajjāl and a “Dajjāl of Islam,” hinting strongly that the former was Bolshevism and the latter Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (pp. 445–60). Moḥammad Asad, a well-known European convert to Islam, took the one sound eye of the Dajjāl to be emblematic of the one-sided materialism that allegedly characterizes modern Western civilization and the false miracles he will perform as so many parables for the feats of modern technology (pp. 293-95; see also Thomson, *passim*). Another European Muslim, René Guénon (‘Abd-al-Wāḥed Yaḥyā), held the sharply contrasting view that the Dajjāl stands as the embodiment of a pseudospiritual and postmaterialist age, whether or not he becomes manifest as an individual (pp. 325-28).

The appeal of such interpretations has been limited in Persia, doubtless because of the connection in Shi‘ite belief between the appearance of the



Dajjāl and that of the Maḥdī. To hint at the presence of the Dajjāl would be to suggest that the Maḥdī is also at hand and thus to disturb the attitude of patient expectation that is fundamental to Twelver Shi'ism. 'Alī Šarī'atī's identification of the Dajjāl with the one-dimensional man of Herbert Marcuse (p. 49) was idiosyncratic and had no appreciable impact. The consensus remains that the emergence of the Dajjāl will be the supreme test of the Muslims, clearly dividing true believers from false on the eve of the parousia of the Maḥdī (Majlesī, tr. Davānī, p. 969).

See also [apocalyptic ii](#); [eschatology iii](#).

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