In a special ceremony, Adam (AS) was honored by all the angels. In an act of obedience to Allah’s command, without hesitation, they all fell in prostration before Adam (AS). Iblis refused.

“And (mention O Prophet) when We said to the angels prostrate yourselves before Adam. They did except Iblis, he refused” (al-Baqarah, 2:30).

One may ask, why did Iblis refuse to prostrate before Adam? And, is Iblis an angel? If not, why was he in the company of the angels?

Indeed Iblis was not an angel. He is from the Jinn kind. Surat al-Kahf explains, “And when We said to the angels prostrate yourselves before Adam, they did except Iblis. He was from the Jinn” (al-Kahf, 18:). The Jinn kind are creatures whose origin is from fire and they were created far before mankind who were created from clay. “And indeed We created man from dried clay out of dark mud, and the Jaan (Jinn kind) We created before from the fire of scorching wind” (al-Hijr, 15:26,27).

Just as humans evolved through stages of the clay substance, the Jinn kind whose essence is fire went through similar stages. Surat al-Rahman explains yet another stage of the evolution of the Jinn, “He created man from dry clay like (that of) pottery and He created the Jaan (Jinn kind) out of a fusion of fire (or smokeless fire)” (al-Rahman, 55:14,15).

According to some commentators, the word “Jaan” refers to the father (ancestor) of the Jinn just as Adam is considered the father of humans (abu al-Bashar). Iblis was a descendant of Jaan. According to Aisha (RAA), the messenger of Allah said, “The angels were created from light, Iblis was created from smokeless fire (or pure fire), and Adam was created from that which has been described to you (i.e. clay, a mixture of dirt and water)” (Muslim).

Therefore, it is an established fact that Iblis was not an angel. The ayah regarding the command of prostration, “they all did except Iblis refused” may indicate that Iblis is an angel. Even though “Light” from which angels are created, and “Fire” have similar properties, they nevertheless are different. Iblis is from the Jinn kind and not the angelic type. One may then ask, why blame Iblis for not responding to the command of Allah (SWT) when He was clear in His instruction, “And when We said to the Angels prostrate to Adam ... ” Another important question is, what was Iblis doing with the angels?

To answer the questions we need to learn more about Iblis. Who is Iblis? First of all, Iblis, a name given to him in the Qur’an (7:172).
by Allah (SWT), which comes from the trilateral root “Ba La Sa or Balasa” means to despair. Iblis is the most frustrated one, one who is hopeless and one who is in despair. Prior to becoming Iblis he was known as Azazeel. Because of his extraordinary piety, he was elevated to the rank of the angels as their equal even though he was from a different kind, the Jinn kind. According to biblical traditions, Azazeel was one of the leaders of the angels.

Because of his position among the angels he was called, “Tawus al-Mala’ikah” or “The Peacock among the Angels.” Perhaps because in the kingdom of birds, peacocks can be spotted quickly. And so Azazeel (being from the Jinn kind) can easily be distinguished from all angels. His distinction is due to his personal choice to obey Allah (SWT) unconditionally.

Muhammad bin Ishaq (RA) reported that Ibn `Abbas (RAA) said, "Before he undertook the path of sin, Iblis was with the angels and was called Azazeel. He was among the residents of the earth and was one of the most active worshippers and knowledgeable persons among the angels. This fact caused him to be arrogant. Iblis was from a genus called Jinn." It was mentioned that he was the most honorable, most learned and most pious and that Iblis had been the head of the angels in the worldly heavens according to a group of prominent companions.

These traditions narrated by Ibn Abbas (RAA) among other companions are typically borrowed from the Isra’iliyyat (reports narrated from Jewish sources) and may not be reliable. Although the Prophet (SAW) encouraged the companions to relay the Jewish traditions, one must be careful. The Jewish sources, for example, believe that Iblis was an angel, thus the concept of the “Fallen Angel.” Muslims cannot accept that claim simply because it contradicts the Qur’an. In brief, Iblis was created from fire, possessed free will and because of his excessive piety he was elevated to the ranks of the angels.

Now that Iblis enjoys the company of the angels, by default the command of prostration was directed at him as well, for two main reasons. One, generally speaking, statements or commands that are general in nature would include only individuals of the same kind, type, class, etc. The Arabs, however, utilize what is called “al-taghleeb” or the Rule of Preference in the fiqh (rules) of the Arabic language, which indicates that in certain cases, general statements may include other kinds that have a relationship with the original kind.

And two, when superior beings like angels were required to honor Adam, inferior beings like Iblis who happened to be in their company must be included in the command. Take for example, the President of the United States walking into Congress to deliver a speech. Out of respect, everyone is expected to stand up for him, not only congressmen and senators but also their aids, secretaries and whoever else may be present who is lower in status than congressmen and senators.

By the same analogy, Iblis who was in the company of the angels should have responded to the order of Allah (SWT) and fallen in prostration along with the angels before Adam. However, he consciously decided to disobey. One reference in the Qur’an affirms that Iblis clearly disobeyed the command of his Lord, “And when We said to the angels prostrate yourselves before Adam, they did except Iblis. He was of the Jinn and he disobeyed the command of his Lord.” (al-Kahf, 18:50). The word “disobeyed” in the ayah is fasaqa which renders a more accurate meaning of rebelliousness.

The following ayah clearly demonstrates that Iblis was indirectly ordered to prostrate before Adam (AS), ‘God said, ‘What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you’” (al-A’raf, 7:12). Clearly, Iblis was commanded and required to obey his Lord as all the angels did.

Angels could not have disobeyed Allah, because they have no free will. Iblis, on the other hand who possesses free will, chose to disobey. Surat al-Isra’ says, “…they all fell in prostration except Iblis” (al-Isra’, 17:61), “…they all fell in prostration except Iblis, he refused” (Ta Ha, 20:116), “…except Iblis, he was not of those who fell in prostration” (al-A’raf, 7:12), “Except Iblis, he refused to be among those who fell in prostration” (al-
These ayat demonstrate that Iblis was determined to disobey his Lord’s command. The stubbornness of Iblis and refusal to obey his Lord made him a disbeliever. According to shari’ah, giving up an obligation ordained by God is a sin and transgression that can be repaired. It does not constitute *Kufr* or disbelief. However, to reject a command of Allah (SWT) (small or big) amounts to *Kufr* and places one outside the pale of Islam even if they consider themselves Muslims.

Iblis became a disbeliever (*kafir*) because he defied and challenged a divine commandment. In Iblis’ opinion, Adam (AS) was not worthy of being honored. He flatly refused to pay respect to him and instead argued his superiority over Adam, “*(Iblis) said, ‘I am better than him, You created me from fire and him from clay’*” (al-A’raf, 7:12).

Ibn Jarir (RA) reported that Muhammad Ibn Sirin (RA) (famous for his book on dreams) said that the first one to reach a conclusion by reasoning was Iblis. Reason (of the mind) without the pure fitrah (pure intrinsic nature humans are born with) can be fatal. Unlike Christians who are discouraged from using reasoning in theological debates, reasoning is not only allowed in Islam, it is encouraged. We, humans, are the only species with the faculty of intellect and it must be utilized to the fullest extent, but with wisdom and the requisite knowledge.

Reason of the mind without the pure intrinsic nature (*fitrah*) humans are born with can be fatal. Muslim students of humanities and social sciences among other disciplines in the West must be very careful. They are taught concepts based on pure reasoning. Using our intellect without Divine Wisdom may lead to ruin. Indeed the Qur’an is the climax of wisdom.

To Iblis, he used pure reasoning to conclude that fire is superior to clay and indeed this is true. Iblis examined only the animal side, and the material aspect of Adam and ignored the other facet. As a matter of fact, not only is Adam superior to Iblis, he and his progeny stand at the top of Allah’s creation simply because of the imbedded Divine spark, the spirit (*ruh*) that came from His Divine Essence. That, Iblis could not accept. Because of his pride and vanity, Iblis acted like an arrogant fool and was deprived from Allah’s grace.

There are some who defend Iblis and propose that the reason he did not prostrate to Adam is because he prostrates only to Allah and will not prostrate to any other than Him. Had this been the case Iblis would have argued as such. On the contrary, Iblis himself tells us why he refused to prostrate. “*(Iblis) said, ‘I was not to prostrate to a bashar (human) whom You created out of dried clay from dark mud’*” (al-Hijr, 15:33). In reality, the real reason is as he insisted, “I am better than him.”

Iblis who was in the company of angels was well aware of the event to come, i.e. the special ceremony honoring Adam. Therefore, it was not an instantaneous command where Iblis was taken by surprise and acted spontaneously. His rebellion was well thought out and Iblis out of his pride and arrogance knew exactly what he was doing. Perhaps that explains the idiom, “as proud as a peacock,” which means to be excessively proud or to possess an overly high opinion of oneself.

Upon the disobedience of Iblis, Allah (SWT) not only demoted Iblis, He expelled him from the blissful place and company of the angels, “*God said, ‘Get down from here! You have no reason to act so proud about it. Get out: You will be among the humiliated’*” (al-‘Araf, 7:13). This moment was indeed a dark moment in the life of Iblis. Thereafter, his destiny became hell, yet he requested respite, “*(Iblis) said, ‘Reprieve me until the day when they are raised from the dead.’ God replied, ‘You are reprieved’*” (al-‘Araf, 7:14,15). While Allah (SWT) granted Iblis his wish, He (SWT) gave him respite only until a time determined by Allah (SWT), and not necessarily on Iblis’ terms, *when all shall be raised from the dead*. Iblis thought he could bypass death but time will prove that he is foolish.
“God said, ‘Get out of here, you are an outcast, for you are accursed. And a curse shall be on you until the Day of Judgment.’ (Iblis) said, ‘Then, O my Lord, grant me a respite until the day when all shall be raised from the dead!’ (God) said, ‘then indeed: you shall be among those who are granted respite until the day of the appointed Time’’ (al-Hijr, 15:34-38). The knowledge of the ‘appointed time’ is known only to Allah (SWT) and may come as a surprise to Iblis.

The rebellion of Iblis is repeated and emphasized in seven places in the Qur’an. This event in the history of creation is very important for us to understand and we must be cognizant of it and learn from it. Iblis plays a major role in the theatre of life and unless we know enough about him and his agents we will not be able to fulfill our purpose as humans created solely to worship and obey Allah.

No one should think that he or she is immune from the influence and whispering of Iblis. He vowed to destroy us and is our avowed enemy. We must never underestimate his ability to lead people astray.

Therefore, one must never reject any command of Allah (SWT) be it big or small. Our attitude must always be, “We listen and we obey” no matter how weak our faith might be. Secondly, humility toward Allah (SWT) and people is essential to receive Allah’s Grace. Stubbornness, pride and arrogance are traits of Iblis. Thirdly, one must refrain from boastful phrases with the word “I” in pride as Iblis bragged, “I am better than him.” One should never consider himself better than anyone particularly when it comes to matters of piety/taqwa, race, class, gender, ethnic background, skin color, etc.

Furthermore, we must keep in mind that the quantity of deeds may not save one from doom on the Day of Judgment. It is the quality of deeds and the intention behind them that count. Deeds are weighed not measured. ‘We will set up scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection so that no one can be wronged in the least, and if there should be even the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it out- We take excellent account’” (al-Anbiya, 21:47). The enormous good deeds of Iblis will be outweighed by the one single misdeed he committed.

Last but not least, one must never despair from the Mercy of Allah (SWT). The Prophet (SAW) was instructed, “Say, O My servants who transgressed against yourselves, do not despair of God’s mercy, for God forgives all sins. He is truly the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful” (al-Zumar, 39:53). It was not the act of disobedience that made Iblis hopeless, it was his stubborn refusal and arrogance.

May Allah (SWT) protect us from Iblis and all acts of evil, Ameen.

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1. Ibn Kathir
2. For example, the word “Abawayn” in Arabic literally means two fathers in masculine dual tense. However, although it is masculine, the term includes both genders, the father and the mother. The historical preference with Arabs are males, so they use the masculine gender to include the feminine gender in statements that are general.