

# NOTES ON ATAZHOT

(الطاغوت, ATAŽOT, AT-ṬĀGHŪT)

An ancient pre-Islamic Arabian deity understood to a supreme or cosmic spirit, which generates or creates lesser gods and goddesses, including Allat/Ereskigal, Dagon, and Zaggania. Generally considered to be inimical, *Atazhot* may be the Arabian equivalent of Sumerian *Apsu* or Greek Κρονος. Grammatically, [*Atazhot*] carries the general meaning of "to go beyond limits, a rebel, a tyrant, one who is oppressive, an intruder or intrusion, etc."

The Quran [e.g. 4:51, 4:60, 4:76] refers to *Atazhot* in several verses as a hostile and powerful force associated with Shaitan; ironically, heterodox Sufi groups in Egypt and the North Africa later identified *Atazhot* with Allah. In earlier translations of the Quran, *Atazhot* tends to be translated incorrectly as 'Satan' or 'heathen religion', whereas it is now understood to be a proper name. The plural form "*Aṭawazhūt*" is used as a patronymic to refer to pre-Islamic Arabian deities like Allāt, Dagon, and Zaggān[ia], all understood as the children of the deity. The term was later applied to Shaitan, alternately used to any supernatural power opposed to that of Islam.

*Atazhoth* may be understood as the cosmic expansion of Shaitan; conversely, Shaitan may be seen as the earthly representation of *Atazhoth*, as Gilgamesh is an earthly representation of Shamash.

The cult of *Atazhot*, largely similar to that of the Ka'ba, was made up of **worshipping stones, bloody sacrifices and ritual processions** (Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 54-5). In origin, it must have had in it various, complementary divine mythologies, given shape in different rituals, whose fusion into two rituals, that of the *ḥadjj*. on one hand and that of the *umra* on the other, makes these last two incomprehensible through their composite and fragmentary character.

Thus much of what is identified today as "Islam" is really the remnants of an earlier pagan practice, a veneration of the cosmic spirit *Atazhot* which was understood to be (a) an intruder, (b) a lawless breaker of customs, (c) connected with Shaitan or (d) the origin of Shaitan, perhaps its source and master. Such Islamic rituals as the blood sacrifices, pilgrimages, sacred warfare, circumbulation of the Kaaba, and the Kaaba itself, are all remnants of the worship of *Atazhot*. In many ways, *Atazhot* was similar to the function of the Shaitan, except that the Shaitan was understood to be an earth-bound spirit, where *Atazhot* was entirely alien to Earth and identified rather cosmic, not terrestrial, forces.

This is to say that while the Quran depicts Allah in opposition to *Atazhot* it is more likely that Muhammad adapted the idea of a supreme being (Allah) from *Atazhot*. Thus on the one hand,

Muhammad condemns *Atazhot* as an earlier supreme pagan deity, but on the other hand, it is equally likely that *Atazhot* was understood to be the secret 100<sup>th</sup> name of God, contained within the Quran yet concealed, and understood only to those few mystics who might realize that the apparent duality was simply an illusion. The confusion in the Quranic text may be, as in other places, deliberate.

### The *Atazhot* Verses in the Quran:

"Do you not see how those given a share of the Scripture, now believe in **Atazhot** (الطاغوت)? They say of the disbelievers, "They are more rightly guided than the believers." — Qur'an 4:51

"Do you [Prophet] not see those who claim to believe in what has been sent down to you, and in what was sent down before you, yet still want to turn to **Atazhot** (الطاغوت) for judgement, although they have been ordered to reject them? Satan wants to lead them far astray." — Qur'an, Sura 4: 60

"The believers kill for God's cause, while those pagans kill for **Atazhot** (الطاغوت). Fight the allies of Shaitan: Shaitan's strategies are truly weak." — Qur'an, Sura 4: 76

"There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects **Atazhot** (الطاغوت) and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing, all knowing." — Qur'an, Sura 2: 256

