

**Chapter 109: AL-FIL
(Elephant)**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

“Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? (1) Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, (2) and send against them flocks of birds, (3) which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? (4) Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves. (5)”

Overview:

The surah of five verses was revealed in Makkah, and is titled after the word ‘al-fil’ (the elephant) that occurs in the first verse. Describing what befell the Abyssinian army of Abrahah, which attacked Makkah in order to destroy the Ka’bah, in 571 CE, fifty days before the birth of Allah’s Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him.

Leaving the details of various traditions, a brief historical account of this incident would be timely. Abyssinian ruler of Yaman, Abrahah, started a campaign with the support of Byzantine empire and Abyssinia to spread Christianity in Arabia on the one hand, and to capture the trade routes in the Peninsula on the other. The Byzantine was in struggle for power against the Sasanid empire of Persia that had controlled all other routes of the Byzantine trade with the East: India, Indonesia, etc.

The pilgrimage was a major occasion for trade exchanges. Abrahah built a magnificent cathedral, called al-Qullais, in Sana the capital of Yaman in an effort to divert the Arabs to make pilgrimage to it instead of Ka’bah. Enraged by this plan, some young men of the Quraish had set fire to the cathedral. When the report reached Abrahah, he swore that he would not rest until he had destroyed the Ka’bah. In year 571 he took 60,000 troops and as many as 13 elephants and set off for Makkah. The tribes living in and around Makkah did not have power to fight such a big army and save Ka’bah. Quraish did not try to put up resistance, withdrew from the city for surrounding mountains along with their families for fear of a massacre.

Abrahah camped at an area called Muhassir by the Muhassab valley between Muzdalifah and Mina. He prepared to enter Makkah, but his largest elephant, Mahmud, which was in the forefront, knelt down. It was goaded and beaten with iron bars, but it never got up. When they made it face south, north, or east, it immediately started off, but as soon as they directed it towards Makkah, it knelt down.

In the meantime swarms of birds appeared carrying stones in their beaks and claws and showered these on the troops. The stones penetrated through the bodies of the soldiers, entering from the head, slicing through their body and exiting from the back. There are other (somewhat unreliable and weak) reports that whoever was hit would start disintegrating. That this was a smallpox epidemic, and it was seen in Arabia for the first time that year. The army was completely destructed as they tried to withdraw. Abrahah died on his way back to Yaman in the country of Khath’am.

This was such a momentous event that it soon spread throughout Arabia and became so famous in Arabian history that the year when it took place came to be known as the Year of the Elephant. Many poets made it the subject of their laudatory poems. In these poems one thing is quite evident that everyone regarded it as a manifestation of Allah's miraculous power, and no one ascribed it to the idols. There are reliable reports that Allah's Messenger, peace and blessing be upon Him, said the Quraish did not worship anyone but Allah for ten years (and according to others for seven years) after this incident.

The scholars of tradition and historians are almost unanimous to state that the event had occurred in the month of Muharram, and Rasulallah, peace and blessing be upon him, was born in the month of Rabi a-lwwal of this year. A majority of them states that the blessed birth took place 50 days after the event of the elephant.

Reason of Revelation:

There is no specific reason of revelation reported in commentaries about this surah. We note however that this surah is believed to be revealed after surah the Disbelievers (chapter 109). There we studied that Rasulallah made it absolutely clear he would never yield to the proposals of Quraish for any compromise in worship to Allah, the One God. That must have frustrated the polytheists in Makkah, and increased their oppression and persecution. It is therefore plausible that the surah was revealed to console and comfort Rasulallah, peace and blessings be upon him, reminding that Allah alone has the power to bring their plots to naught and protect His messenger for their harm even in most adverse conditions.

It may be due to this background that certain sufi schools recommend the recitation of this surah 250 times between maghrib and 'isha prayers, if one fears persecution of an oppressor. Others in their subjective opinion recommend recitation in both units (rak'ahs) of the sunnah in fajr prayer.

Main Themes:

The surah indicates the rank of Rasulallah in the sight of Allah as He destroyed a big army for the sake of His messenger, and protected Ka'bah and Makkah, his hometown, from destruction. It therefore emphasizes one of the four fundamental themes, namely nubuwwah or the institution of messengership. Another important theme presented in this surah is the attribute of Divine power. All things, large and small, dry and wet, odd and even are the same before the Divine power of Allah. An elephant is not stronger than a straw and vice versa in regards to His Might.

Style:

The surah starts with two questions that generate suspense in the reader and attracts his uninterrupted attention. The question is posed in a manner not inviting the reader for an answer, but inviting for reflection over perhaps some forgotten facts by instigating curiosity. The description uses vivid imagery of a huge army with elephants destructed by flocks of birds carrying and throwing stones at them. The matchless style makes the reader feel as if he/she is eye witnessing the entire incident.

Among several literary arts employed by the Qur'an in this short surah, we see beautiful examples of analogy and antilogy presented. The ruined army likened to stalks of devoured leaves, for example. The contrast between an army supported by strong elephants in the

beginning of the surah, and eaten up straws and devoured leaves, so weak that can be flown away by a small breeze at the end of it is fascinating.

It should also be noted that the verses rhyme as they all end in the letter 'L' adding a captivating beauty to its recitation.

Noble Meaning:

1. (أَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ) Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?

The verse addresses first and foremost to Rasulullah, and through him to all others. 'Elam tara' means 'have you not seen'. The verb 'see' is used to indicate that in and around Makkah, and in Arabia in general, there were many people still living who had witnessed with their own eyes this unforgettable event, for it had occurred only forty some years ago. Others heard it over and over again to the extent as if they had seen it with their own eyes.

The surah may be read as an address to the messenger of Allah which would mean a strong consolation and comfort that Allah alone has the power over all things, and He will help his messenger. For others, it gives a forceful warning that no one has the power to cause harm to whom in Allah's protection. Allah by Himself has the power to devastate those who engage in such attempts no matter how strong they appear to be, and has the power to lead their guiles to naught. The surah further indicates that the sublime position of the messenger in the sight of Allah who miraculously protected the peace of Makkah in the eve of his blessed birth, and thus instructs Quraish and all others to come to respect him dearly, protect him, and support him.

The word 'kayfa' is used instead of 'ma' instructing the reader to reflect the nature of the incident, and how it happened, rather than what had happened. The details of the event are therefore omitted in the surah.

The verbs 'fi'l' and 'a'mal' both denote action. However, 'a'mal' is a type of action that requires intention and effort, whereas 'fi'l' has no such connotations. Thus 'a'mal' is never used for Allah in the Qur'an. The divine name 'Rabbuka' points out that Ka'bah was protected as a favor of the Almighty Master for His messenger, and for the divine message He was about to send.

2. (أَمْ يَجْعَلُ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ) Did He not bring their evil scheme to nothing?

The word 'kayd' is used for a secret plan, a conspiracy meant to cause harm. As explained above, sixty thousand troops together with several elephants had openly marched from Yaman to Makkah, and they had kept no secret that their intention was to destroy the Ka'bah. Therefore, the secret was the true motive of the Abyssinians. By destroying the Ka'bah, and crushing down the Quraish, they wanted to take control of the trade routes that extended from south Arabia to Syria and Egypt. This was the motive kept hidden. They announced instead that their campaign was in retaliation for the disrespect shown by Arabs for their cathedral.

Even though 'fi tadril' literally means 'led their plan astray', it is also used as an idiom to mean bringing it to naught, and rendering it fruitless.

3. (وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ) He sent down upon them flocks of birds (unknown in the land),

The word 'ababil' means many separate and scattered groups, herds or flocks of creatures, which come from different sides successively, one after another. For the swarms of birds seen in this incident, the reports are such that they had come from Red Sea direction; that such birds had never been seen before or after. Ibn 'Abbas says that their beaks were like those of birds and claws like the dog's paw. Ikrimah has stated that their heads were like the heads of the birds of prey. Their colors and sizes were different.

4. (تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ) Hurling against them stones of baked clay (an emblem of the punishment due to them),

Ibn Abbas had the view that the word 'sijjil' is originally Persian, and is an amalgamation of two words: 'sang' and 'gil' which means the stones of baked clay. There are other reports that the word denotes hardness and stiffness, and that it denotes excessiveness in the amount as if the stones were poured down from the sky.

Almost all the reporters agreed that each bird carried a stone in its beak and two stones in its claws. The people of Makkah had these stones preserved with them for a long time. Reports show that the stones differed in size: some of them equaled a small pea seed in size and were dark red in color, or that they equaled a pine kernel, or a goat's dropping.

The word 'tarmihim' is in imperfect form which means that the pelting stones repeated over and over again, did not happen just once. The verb also indicates that the throwing stones made purposefully towards a determined target.

There are clear pointers in this surah for modern warfare and weaponry. One important way Qur'an talks about scientific facts and technological advances is in form of narrating stories of the peoples of the past. However, the language and the style are such that the same verses miraculously indicate the highest points that science and technology ever aspire to reach. This wonderful aspect of Qur'an is too comprehensive and vast, and requires much more time and attention. Here, we briefly point out that the elephant in this incident may be a reference to tanks and other armored vehicles. The birds carrying and throwing stones to a target definitely furnishes a reference to military warplanes, aircrafts and helicopters in modern warfare to carry ammunition of various sizes and impacts (such as bullets, bombs, rockets and guided missiles) and shooting them to specific targets. The break of an epidemic seen in reports (not in the text) may be a further pointer for biological weapons.

The purpose of the Qur'an narrating the story is explained above. However, the surah also points out by its wording that such creation of such weaponry is possible, and man will in the future accomplish design of such implements of war.

Badiuzzaman points out in one of his letters to his students that the abjad value of this verse is 1359 which corresponds to 1940 in solar calendar. It is remarkable that this date indicates the time when the military airplanes were used extensively in the warfare. He advanced an interpretation that the verse points to throwing bombs on the heads of materialists of that time whose purpose was to establish a civilization that entices humankind away from the submission to the Divine will into living for the sole purpose of worldly life.

Here is an abjad table for those who would like to verify the dates:

elif ا	1	Ha ح	8	sin س	60	te ت	400
be ب	2	Ti ط	9	`ayn ع	70	peltek se ث	500
cim ج	3	yâ ي	10	fe ف	80	H1 خ	600
dal د	4	kef ك	20	Sad ص	90	zel ذ	700
he هـ	5	lâm ل	30	kaf ق	100	Dad ض	800
vav و	6	mim م	40	ra ر	200	Z1 ظ	900
ze ز	7	nun ن	50	şin ش	300	ğayn غ	1000

5. (فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ) And so He rendered them like a field of grain devoured and trampled.

The word 'asf' means the outer covering of seeds, which the farmer throws away after the grain has been separated from it. Then the animals eat it, and some of it falls down in the chewing and some is trampled under their hoofs.

Unusual events come as signs of a new turning point in human history. This incident was a clear miracle, and is narrated in this surah to present a lesson, a warning for Quraish and for later generations. The event became so famous in Arabian history that the year it took place became a historical marker, and became known as the Year of the Elephant.

Finally, we point out that in sufi commentaries, the surah is interpreted in a totally different context. Abrahah is a symbol that represents carnal self, Ka'bah represents the true House of Allah, the heart of a believer. Abrahah's temple is the body, and nature. The carnal self gathered its forces such as desires, lusts, angers, and other faculties that have the potential and power to inflict evil. The elephant represent the faculty of intellect and reason, the leading force in the war. Allah sent the birds of reflection and remembrance of Allah, and they pelted the carnal self and his army by spiritual ammunition of lights: proofs, evidences, and lights of remembrance of Allah. The army was devastated and their powers to inflict evil are all ruined. The heart and the spirit remained peaceful and are made ready for the reception of the divine light of Qur'an brought by Allah's messenger.

The Qur'an being the word of Allah has multiple layers of meanings, all of which may be accurate as long as the meanings are derived following the principles of Qur'anic sciences.

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May Allah protect us from oppression, persecution, and all other evils. May peace and blessings of Allah be upon His messenger, on his pure family and companions, and on all his noble brothers in messengership.