

## Surah Fil, Chapter 105

(The Elephant)

Number of Verses: 5

### [Contents of the Surah](#)

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

#### *In The Name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful*

This Surah, as its name indicates, refers to the well-known historical event that happened in the year of the birth of the holy Prophet (S) when Allah protected the Ka'aba against the attack of the army of pagans who, riding on the backs of elephants, came from Yemen intending to destroy it.

This Surah is a recollection of the miraculous event which many people of Mecca remember, because it happened not so long ago.

Its remembrance is a warning against the proud, arrogant pagans to make them aware that they have no power to stand in the way of the Power of Allah, Who destroyed that great army of elephants by little, tiny birds who pelted them with 'small stones of petrified clay' and He can punish these stubborn oppressors, too.

Their equipment was no more than that of Abrahah nor did the number of their fighters match his. In other words, they had seen that event with their own eyes and yet, were so arrogant.

### [The Virtue in Studying Surah Fil](#)

On the virtue of reciting this Surah, a tradition from Imam Sadiq (as) says:

*"He who recites Surah Fil in his obligatory prayers, any level land, mountains or any clods of dirt will bear*

witness for him, on the Day of Judgement, that he has been one of the prayerful (believers). and on that Day, a herald calls saying,

'You are right about My servant I accept your witness for him or against him Let him enter Paradise without Reckoning him. Verily, he is the one of whom he and his action I like.'<sup>1</sup>

It is obvious that these magnificent, abundant bounties and rewards are for he who, with its recitation, gets down from the horse of arrogance and goes on the right path along side which he seeks the satisfaction of Allah.

## Surah Fil, Verses 1-5

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

***In The Name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful***

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ

تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ

1. "Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?"
2. "Did He not make their stratagem go awry?"
3. "And He sent upon them birds in flocks,"
4. "Pelting them with stones of petrified clay,"
5. "Thus He made them like straw eaten up."

## The Occasion of Revelation

Ali-ibn-al-Husain (as) says in a tradition:

*"Abu-Taleb always defended, with his sword, the Messenger of Allah (S), in the wars."*

He continued and said:

*"(One day) Abu-Taleb said:*

*'O my nephew, are you appointed for all peoples, entirely, or only for your own people in particular?'*

The Prophet (S) said that he had been appointed for all the human beings, entirely, whether they are white or black, Arab or non-Arab, and by Him in Whose hand was his soul, he was (appointed) to invite to the portent (the religion), all peoples, either white or black whether they were on the tops of the mountains or in the depths of the seas, and he was (appointed) to invite (the speakers of all) languages in Persia (Iran) and Rome,

*"Then, the Quraish, (hearing that), became astonished and considered it great and said:*

*'Do you not hearken to your nephew and what he says? By Allah, if Persians and Romans hear this, they will snatch us from our land and surely they will break the Ka'ba into pieces of stone.'*

Hence, Allah sent down this verse:

***"They say: 'If we were to follow the guidance with thee, we should be snatched away from our land'. Have We not established for them a secure sanctuary, to which are brought as tribute fruits of all kinds..."*** [2](#)

And for the phrase that they said:

***'they break the Ka'ba into pieces of stone'***,

*He sent down Surah Fil (in order to tell them that no one could accomplish such an action)",*

## **The Story of the Companions of the Elephants**

Commentators and historians have cited this story differently and they are divided as to when it had happened. But, the story, on the whole, is so well-known that it is counted in the line of widely transmitted chains of narrations. Here is a summary of it according to what is mentioned in 'Sirah' by Ibn-i-Husham, Buluq-ul-Irab, Bihar-ul-Anwar, and Majma'-al-Bayan.

Zu-Nuwas, the king of Yemen, persecuted the Christians of Najran, who lived there, in order to force them to leave their Faith.

(The Qur'an has pointed out with the terms of

***/ashab-i-uxdud/ 'the makers of the pit of Fire'***

in Surah Buruj, No. 85. The story of that persecution is mentioned in Volume 1 of this commentary, pages 295–296.)

After that terrible massacre, a man by the name of 'Dus' was able to escape and went for refuge to the Caesar of Rome, who was Christian, and described to him the event.

Since there was a long distance between Rome and Yemen, Caesar wrote a letter to Najashi, the king of Yemen, advising him to take revenge on the murder and sent the letter by the man, himself.

Najashi prepared an army of about seventy thousand men and sent them to Yemen under the leadership of 'Irbat'. Abrahah was also one of the commanders of that army.

The army invaded Yemen and before long defeated Zu-Nuwas, and 'Irbat' became the ruler of Yemen. But, after a short time, Abrahah rose against him and killing him, substituted Irbat.

The news reached Najashi who decided to punish Abrahah. Abrahah shaved the hair of his head and with some soil of Yemen sent this to Najashi as a sign of complete submission and loyalty.

When Najashi understood the situation, he forgave him and retained him in his position.

Then, to show his good behaviour and gratification, Abrahah had built a great, beautiful, splendid church unsurpassed in the world at that time. After that he introduced it as 'Ka'ba', to the people of Arabia, instead of the real Ka'ba and decided to make it the center for the Arab Haj pilgrimage and to transfer the great central place of gatherings of Mecca to that place.

For this purpose, he sent many preachers to different places and among the Arab tribes in Arabia. But, Arabs, who intensely loved Mecca and the Ka'ba and knew it as the greatest sign of Prophet Abraham, the Khalil (as), felt danger.

According to some narrations, a group of people hiddenly burnt the church, and according to some other narrations some people hiddenly desecrated it and thus they showed their intense reaction against that vast invitation and discredited Abrahah's church.

Abrahah became very angry and decided to destroy the Ka'ba, totally, both in order to take revenge, and to attract Arabs to the new temple. He set out to invade Mecca with an army which consisted of soldiers and elephants.

Approaching the outskirts of Mecca, Abrahah's men captured 200 camels belonging to Abdul-Muttalib, the grandfather of the holy Prophet (S).

Abrahah sent a man to Mecca to find the supreme chief of Mecca and tell him of his intentions of destroying the Holy Ka'ba and to inform the authorities that if they did not stand against him he would not kill anyone.

The man arrived in Mecca and looked for the chief of the city. Everyone showed Abdul-Muttalib to him and he gave him the message.

Abdul-Muttalib said that they were not in a position to fight with them and the Ka'ba would be protected by Allah, Himself.

The man told Abdul-Muttalib that he should accompany him to see Abrahah. When Abdul-Muttalib approached the military camp he was received, respectfully, and Abrahah gave him an honourable seat near him and then he asked him about the purpose of his visit. Abdul-Muttalib said that he had come to complain to Abrahah about the two hundred camels that Abrahah's men had taken away and to request him to return his animals to him.

Abrahah was taken aback when Abdul-Muttalib spoke like this.

The conversation between the two is reported thus:

*"What? I have come to destroy your place of worship, the Ka'ba, and you, instead of pleading to save the Holy House, speak of your camels!"*

Abdul-Muttalib replied:

*"The camels belong to me and I, as the owner of the camels, have come for them. The Ka'ba belongs to Allah and it is the concern of the Owner of the Ka'ba to save it or to leave it to its fate in your hands".*

(This statement shook Abrahah and he ordered that the camels be returned to Abdul-Muttalib).

Abdul-Muttalib returned to Mecca and advised the citizens to take refuge in the mountains around the city so as to be safe from being hurt by the invaders and he, himself, with a group of men went beside the Ka'ba to pray to Allah and ask for help.

O Lord! I hope not against them save thee.

O Lord! Withdraw Thou therefore Thy protection from them.

O Lord! Verily he who is the enemy of this House is Thine enemy.

Verily, they have not defeated Thy forces.

Then, Abdul-Muttalib went to the valleys around Mecca with a group of the Quraish and sent one of his sons over Abu-Qubays mountain to see what was happening. He returned and said that he had seen a black cloud coming from the Red Sea.

Abdul-Muttalib became happy with that news and said:

*"O citizens of Quraish! Return to your houses because Allah has sent you His help".*

This was the scene on one side. On the other side, when Abrahah, riding on his elephant by the name of 'Mahmood' and intending to destroy the Ka'ba, entered the city, a huge flock of tiny birds, like a cloud, appeared in the sky; each bird with three small stones, as small as a pea, carrying one in its tiny beak and two in its claws. They dropped them on the invading soldiers and they were killed at once.

Abrahah tried to go forth on elephant-back, but the animal did not move until it turned its head and moved swiftly toward Yemen, and there Abrahah, too, died in San'a, the capital of Yemen.

Ideas are divided as to the number of elephants that Abrahah had brought with himself in that invasion. Some have mentioned only one, Mahmood; some others have cited eight elephants; some ten; and some have considered them twelve elephants.

In the same year, the holy Prophet (S) was born and brightened the world with the light of his being. Some believe that there is a relation between these two happenings.

At any rate, this miraculous event was so important that that year was called /'amulfil/ 'the year of the elephant' and was known as a beginning date in the history of Arabs.

In the first verse, of this Surah, the holy Prophet (S) is addressed and questioned:

***"Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant"?***

They had come, with that massive army and power, to destroy the Ka'ba when Allah, with an apparently very small army; tiny birds and small stones, destroyed it to show them that no power, even with those strong elephants, can prevail over the plan of Allah, and made Man's weakness, in that case, manifest.

The phrase

***'Have you not seen'***

refers to the occurrence of the event which was very close to the time of the birth of the Prophet (S) though he was not born yet, or at his birth time. Besides, the happening was so well-known and famous as if the Prophet had seen it with his own eyes, and of course, some people of his time like Abdul-Muttalib had witnessed it.

The term

***'the companions of the elephant'<sup>3</sup>***,

used in the verse, refers to the few elephants that were brought from Yemen both to scare the Arab defenders and their horses and camels, on the battlefield.

***"Did He not make their stratagem go away?"***

They intended to destroy the Ka'ba hoping that they would make the new established church, in Yemen, the Center for all Arabs of Arabia. But, they not only did not succeed in discrediting and destroying the Ka'ba, but it increased the fame and importance of the Holy Ka'ba and Mecca throughout Arabia, and attracted more loving thoughts and eager hearts to Mecca than ever before; it proved to be a location of security and of sanctuary; better and more wide spread.

The purpose of using the term /tadlil/ which means 'to lead astray' is that 'they never succeeded'.

Then, describing the details of the happening, it says:

***"And He sent upon them birds in flocks",***

The term /ababil/, inspite of what is known among people, is not the name of that kind of bird, but, it has an adjectival sense. Some have considered it with the meaning of 'separate groups', i.e. the mentioned birds came from all sides in 'separate groups' towards 'the army which had elephants'.

However, the term /tayr/, here has the plural meaning and these two terms, /tayr/ and /ababil/, both mean 'birds in a flock'.

What kind of birds were those birds? As it was mentioned in the description of the story, it is commonly known that some birds, like swallows, appeared from the side of the Red Sea as hosts above the head of that army of Abrahah.

***"Pelting them with stones of petrified clay".***

Further, in the description of the event which has been compiled from history, commentaries, and Islamic narrations, it was said that each of these small birds had three tiny stones with them as small as a pea, or smaller than that of which one was carried in its tiny beak and two in its claws. Anyone of these small stones would immediately kill anyone on whom it was dropped.

***"Thus He made them like straw eaten up"***

The term /'asf/ means 'leaves and stalks of corn or plants of which the grain has been eaten by cattles in other words, it means 'straw'.

The phrase /ma'kul/ 'eaten up' indicates that this straw has been ground and smashed, completely, by the teeth of the animal, then, in the stomach of the animal, it has been ground for the third time. This meaning shows that the small stones would smash the one upon whom it would fall.

This idea, besides being an evidence for the intense action of crushing, points to the weakness and unworthiness of that tyrant, arrogant group who were apparently forceful.

## **Explanation: This House Has An Owner**

It is interesting that as a means of waking Man up, the Holy Qur'an tells this long story in a few short sentences which are extremely eloquent and expressive, and illustrates the weakness of arrogant Man compared to the great Power of Allah.

This happening shows that it does not necessarily need, as some people think, miracles to occur by the intercession of the Prophet or sinless Imams (as) but in any condition that Allah wishes or necessitates, He does it. The purpose is that people may become acquainted with the greatness of Allah and the legitimacy of His religion.

This miraculous punishment has a clear difference with the miracles that happened for the punishment of other disobedient nations such as in Noah's Flood, a shower of stones for Lot's people, the storm for 'Ad's people, and lightning for Thamood's people.

They were a series of natural happenings which were miracles only in those special circumstances, but the story of Abrahah and the birds pelting his army with little stones from their beaks and claws is not something like a natural event.

The raising up of these little birds, coming towards that army, carrying the little stones, their accurately pelting exactly upon the soldiers of Abrahah, and destroying a very large army simply with some little stones is something extraordinary, but we know that they are naught compared with the Power of Allah.

Allah, who has put the power of the atom inside the very little stones which produces a great explosion when it is released, can easily charge them with a property that makes the bodies of Abrahah's army like 'straw eaten up'; and there is no need of saying, as some Egyptian commentators did to justify the event as a natural occurrence, that the stones were poisoned with some microbes of plague, typhoid fever, small pox, or some other justifications.

The thing that we can say is that the stones contained such a surprising effect which destroyed the bodies, and we know no more, but, in any event, there is nothing difficult for the Power of Allah to perform.

## **The Gravest Punishment By the Least Means!**

It is noteworthy that Allah has shown the oppressors His Power in the most surprising ways.

There may be no divine punishment, in the world, more grievous than the punishment of Abrahah's army where a great many forces were so destroyed that they changed into a state of 'straw eaten up' and that they were destroyed by the means of tiny clay-stones carried by some little birds which is, itself, astonishing to all the arrogant, tyrant, oppressors of the world, and is a sign for them to know how weak they are when the Power of Allah works.

Still, sometimes Allah gives these grand missions to some smaller agents to perform. For example, He commissions a microbe, which is never visible to the naked eye, to increase into a very large, massive number through reproduction, in a very short time. Then they infected the strong members of a society or societies with a dangerous, contagious disease, such as a plague, during a short length of time which rapidly destroys them all. This is the Power of Allah when He wills.

## The Purposes of the Story of the 'Elephant'

The Surah after this one, Surah Quraish, illustrates, well, that one of the purposes of Surah Fil is the remembrance of the splendid blessings of Allah for the Quraish tribe to show them that had it not been for the Grace of Allah neither any trace of this sacred center, i.e. Mecca and Ka'ba, would remain nor of the Quraish tribe, themselves, in order that they might reduce their pride and arrogance and accept the invitation of the holy Prophet (S).

On the other hand, this event, which was nearly close to the time of the birth of the holy Prophet (S), in fact, paved the way for that great advent, and was the messenger of the importance of that rising. This is the same thing that is called */irhas/* 'indication' by commentators.

And, again, on the other hand, it is a warning to all arrogant ones in the world, whether they are from the Quraish or not, to know that they can never stand against the Power of Allah; they should submit to His Command and accept the right and justice.

And, further, it refers to the importance of the Holy House, the Ka'ba, that when the enemies plotted to destroy it and decided to transport its center of importance, which had a background from Abraham's (as) time, to another land, Allah taught them such a lesson which serves as an example for all others and increased the importance and honour of that sacred center.

Moreover, providence, Who accepted the supplication of Abraham, the Khalil (as), about the security of that sacred land and guaranteed it, proved in that event that the Will of Allah has designed this center of monotheism and worship to remain secure forever.

## A Certain Historial Event

It is interesting to note that the story of

***'Ashab-i-Fil', 'the companion of the Elephant'***,

was so well-known and certain, among Arabs, that it became the beginning point of the date in history for Arabs and as it was said before, the Holy Qur'an mentions it with the phrase

***la lam taral 'Have you not seen?'***

and also, addressing the Prophet (S) who was not present at the event and did not see it, which is

another sign of the certainty of that happening being sure. Besides, when the holy Prophet (S) recited these verses for the pagans of Mecca no one denied it.

If it were a doubtful matter, at least a group of people would reject it and that rejection, like their other rejections, would be recorded in history, especially since the Qur'an has stated the matter with the phrase

***la lam taral, 'Have you not seen?'***

By the way, the splendor of this Sacred House is evidently proven with this certain historical miracle.

## **Supplication**

*O Lord! Grant us the success to protect this great Center of Monotheism.*

*O Lord! Cut off the hands of those who intend to keep only outward aspects of this Sacred Center and not to hearken to its real message from it.*

*O Lord! Sustain us, its Pilgrims, to visit it with complete acknowledgement.*

1. Majma'-al-Bayan. vol. 10. p. 539.

2. Surah Qasas, No. 28, verse 57

3. The word 'elephant' is used here in the singular, but, it has the meaning of the plural form.

---

### **Source URL:**

<https://www.al-islam.org/enlightening-commentary-light-holy-quran-vol-20/surah-fil-chapter-105#comment-0>