

Sūrah 105: al-Fīl

Historical Background

In retaliation for the persecution of the followers of the Prophet Jesus in Najran by the Jewish ruler Dhun-Nuwas of Yemen, the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia invaded Yemen and put an end to the Himyarite rule there, and in 525 A.D. this whole land passed under Abyssinian control. This happened, in fact, through collaboration between the Byzantine empire of Constantinople and the Abyssinian kingdom, for the Abyssinians at that time had no naval fleet. The fleet was provided by Byzantium and Abyssinia sent 70,000 of its troops by it across the Red Sea to Yemen. At the outset one should understand that all this did not happen under the religious zeal but there were economic and political factors also working behind it, and probably these were the real motive, and retaliation for the Christian blood was just an excuse. Since the time the Byzantine empire had occupied Egypt and Syria, it had been trying to gain control over the trade going on between East Africa, India, Indonesia, etc., and the Byzantine dominions: from the Arabs, who had been controlling it for centuries, so as to earn maximum profits by eliminating the intermediary Arab merchants. For this purpose, in 24 or 25 B.C., Caesar Augustus sent a large army under the Roman general, Aelius Gallus, which landed on the western coast of Arabia, in order to intercept and occupy the sea route between southern Arabia and Syria. But the campaign failed to achieve its objective on account of the extreme geographical conditions of Arabia. After this, the Byzantines brought their fleet into the Red Sea and put an end to the Arab trade which they carried out by sea, with the result that they were left only with the land route. To capture this very land route they conspired with the Abyssinian Christians and aiding them with their fleet helped them to occupy Yemen.

The Arab historians statements about the Abyssinian army that invaded Yemen are different. Hafiz Ibn Kathir says that it was led by two commanders, Aryat and Abrahah, and according to Muhammad bin Ishaq, its commander was Aryat, and Abrahah was included in it. They both agree that Aryat and Abrahah fell out, Aryat was killed in the encounter, and Abrahah took possession of the country; then somehow he persuaded the Abyssinian king to appoint him his viceroy over Yemen. On the contrary, the Greek and Syriac historians state that when after the conquest of Yemen, the Abyssinians started putting to death the Yemenite chiefs, who had put up resistance, one of the chiefs, named As-Sumayfi Ashwa (whom the Greek historians call Esymphaeus) yielded to the Abyssinians and promising to pay tribute obtained the Abyssinian king's warrant to be governor over Yemen. But the Abyssinian army revolted against him and made Abrahah governor in his place. This man was the slave of a Greek merchant of the Abyssinian seaport of Adolis, who by clever diplomacy had come to wield great influence in the Abyssinian army occupying Yemen. The troops sent by the Negus to punish him either warned him or were defeated by him. Subsequently, after the death of the king, his successor was reconciled to accept him as his vicegerent of Yemen. (The Greek historians write him as Abrames and the Syriac historians as Abraham. Abrahah perhaps is an Abyssinian variant of Abraham, for its Arabic version is Ibrahim).

This man through passage of time became an independent ruler of Yemen. He acknowledged the sovereignty of the Negus only in name and described himself as his deputy. The influence he wielded can be judged from the fact that after the restoration of the dam of Marib in 543 A.D. he celebrated the event by holding a grand feast, which was attended by the ambassadors of the Byzantine emperor, king of Persia, king of Hirah, and king of Ghassan. Its full details are given in the inscription that Abrahah installed on the dam. This inscription is extant and Glaser has published it.

After stabilizing his rule in Yemen Abrahah turned his attention to the objective which from the very beginning of this campaign had been before the Byzantine empire and its allies, the Abyssinian Christians, i.e. to spread Christianity in Arabia, on the one hand, and to capture the trade that was carried out through the Arabs between the eastern lands and the Byzantine dominions, on the other. The need for this increased because the Byzantine struggle for power against the Sasanian empire of Persia had blocked all the routes of the Byzantine trade with the East.

To achieve this objective, Abrahah built in Sana, the capital of Yemen, a magnificent cathedral, called by the Arabian historians al-Qalis, al-Qullais, or al-Qulais, this word being an Arabic version of the Greek word Ekklesia, church. According to Muhammad bin Ishaq, after having completed the building, he wrote to the Negus, saying: "I shall not rest until I have diverted the Arabs pilgrimage to it." Ibn Kathir writes that he openly declared his intention in Yemen and got it publicly announced. He, in fact, wanted to provoke the Arabs into doing something which should provide him with an excuse to attack Makkah and destroy the Ka'bāh. Muhammad bin Ishaq says that an Arab, enraged at this public proclamation somehow went into the cathedral and defiled it. Ibn Kathir says this was done by a Qurayshite and according to Muqatil bin Suleman, some young men of the Quraysh had set fire to the cathedral. Either might have happened, for Abrahah's proclamation was certainly provocative and in the ancient pre-Islāmic age it cannot be impossible that an Arab, or a Qurayshite youth, might have been enraged and might have defiled the cathedral, or set fire to it. Whatever happened, when the report reached Abrahah that the devotees of the Ka'bāh had thus defiled his cathedral, he swore that he would not rest until he had destroyed the Ka'bāh.

So, in 570 or 571 A.D., he took 60,000 troops and 13 elephants (according to another tradition, 9 elephants) and set off for Makkah. On the way, first a Yemeni chief, Dhu Nafr by name, mustering an army of the Arabs, resisted him but was defeated and taken prisoner. Then in the country of Khath'am he was opposed by Nufail bin Habib al-Khath'am, with his tribe, but he too was defeated and taken prisoner, and in order to save his life he accepted to serve him as guide in the Arab country. When he reached near Tā'if, Bani Tha'qif felt that they would not be able to resist such a big force and feeling the danger lest he should destroy the temple of their deity Lat, too; their chief, Mas'ud came out to Abrahah with his men, and he told him that their temple was not the temple he had come to destroy. The temple He sought was in Makkah, and they would send with him a man to guide him there. Abrahah accepted the offer, and Bani Tha'qif sent Abu Righal as guide with him. When they reached al-Mughammas (or al-Mughammis), a place about 3 miles short of Makkah, Abu Righal died, and the Arabs stoned his grave and the practice survives to this day. They cursed the Bani Tha'qif too, for in order to save the temple of Lat they had cooperated with the invaders of the House of God.

According to Muhammad bin Ishaq, from al-Mughammas, Abrahah sent forward his vanguard and they brought him the plunder of the people of Tihamah and Quraysh, which included two hundred camels of Abdul Muttalib, the grandfather of the Messenger of God. Then, he sent an envoy of his to Makkah with the message that he had not come to fight the people of Makkah but only to destroy the House (i.e. the Ka'bāh). If they offered no resistance, there would be no cause for bloodshed. Abrahah also instructed his envoy that if the people of Makkah wanted to negotiate, he should return with their leading chief to him. The leading chief of Makkah at that time was Abdul Muttalib. The envoy went to him and delivered Abrahah's message. Abdul Muttalib replied: *"We have no power to fight Abrahah. This is God's House. If He wills He will save His House."* The envoy asked him to go with him to Abrahah. He agreed and accompanied him to the king. Now Abdul Muttalib was such a dignified and handsome man that when Abrahah saw him he was much impressed; he got off his throne and sat beside him on the carpet. Then he asked him what he wanted. Abdul Muttalib replied that he wanted the king to return his camels which he had taken. Abrahah said: *"I was much impressed when I saw you but your reply has brought you down in my eyes: you only demand your camels but you say nothing about this House which is your sanctuary and the sanctuary of your forefathers."* He replied: *"I am the owner of my camels and am requesting you to return them. As for the House, it has its own Owner: He will defend it."* When Abrahah said that He would not be able to defend it against him, Abdul Muttalib said that that rested between Him and him. With this Abdul Muttalib left Abrahah and he restored to him his camels.

One thing which becomes evident is that the tribes living in and around Makkah did not have the power to fight such a big force and save the Ka'bāh. Therefore, obviously, the Quraysh did not try to put up any resistance. The Quraysh on the occasion of the Battle of the Trench (Ahzāb) had hardly been able to muster strength numbering ten to twelve thousand men in spite of the alliance with the pagan and Jewish tribes; they could not have resisted an army 60,000 strong.

Muhammad bin Ishaq says that after returning from the camp of Abrahah Abdul Muttalib ordered the Quraysh to withdraw from the city and go to the mountains along with their families for fear of a general massacre. Then he went to the Ka'bāh along with some chiefs of the Quraysh and taking hold of the iron ring of the door, prayed to God Almighty to protect His House and its keepers. There were at that time 360 idols in and around the Ka'bāh, but on that critical moment they forgot them and implored only God for help. Their supplications which have been reported in the books of history do not contain any name but of God, the One. Ibn Hisham in his Life of the Prophet has cited some verses of Abdul Muttalib, which are to the following effect:

“O God, a man protects his house, so protect Your House; Let not their cross and their craft tomorrow overcome Your craft. If You will to leave them and our qiblah to themselves, You may do as You please.” Subail in Raud al-Unuf has cited this verse also in this connection: “Help today Your devotees against the devotees of the cross and its worshipers.”

After making these supplications Abdul Muttalib and his companions also went off to the mountains. Next morning Abrahah prepared to enter Makkah, but his special elephant, Mahmud, which was in the forefront, knelt down. It was beaten with iron bars, goaded, even scarified, but it would not get up. When they made it face south, north, or east, it would immediately start 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. Whoever was hit would start disintegrating. According to Muhammad bin Ishaq and Ikrimah, this was smallpox, which was seen in Arabia for the first time in that year. Ibn Abbas says that whoever was struck by a pebble, would start scratching his body resulting in breaking of the skin and falling off of the flesh. In another tradition Ibn Abbas says that the flesh and blood flowed like water and bones in the body became visible. The same thing happened with Abrahah too. His flesh fell in pieces and there arose bores on his body emitting pus and blood. In confusion they withdrew and fled towards Yemen. Nufail bin Habib, whom they had brought as guide from the country of Khatham, was searched out and asked to guide them back to Yemen, but he refused and said: “Now where can one flee when God pursues?”

The split nose (Abrahah) is the conquered; not the conqueror.”

As they withdrew they were continually falling by the bay and dying. Ata bin Yasar says that all the troops did not perish at the spot; some perished there and others perished by the wayside as they withdrew. Abrahah died in the country of Khatham.

This event took place at Muhassir by the Muhassab valley, between Muzdalifah and Mina. According to the Sahih of Muslim and Abu Dawud, in the description of the Prophet's farewell pilgrimage that Imām Jafar as-Sadiq has related from his father, Imām Muhammad Baqir, and he from Jabir bin Abdullah, he says that when the Prophet proceeded from Muzdalifah to Mina, he increased his speed in the valley of Muhassir. Imām Nawawi has explained it saying that the incident of the people of the elephant had occurred there; therefore, the pilgrims have been enjoined to pass by quickly, for Muhassir is a tormented place. Imām Malik in Muwatta has related that the Prophet said that the whole of Muzdalifah is a fit place for staying but one should not stay in the valley of Muhassir. In the verses of Nufail bin Habib, which Ibn Ishaq has cited, he describes this event as an eyewitness;

“Would that you had seen, O Rudaina, but you would not see, What we saw by the valley of Mubassab. I praised God when I saw the birds, and I feared lest the stones should fall upon us. Everyone was asking for Nufail as though I owned the Abyssinians a debt.”

This was such a momentous event that it soon spread throughout Arabia and 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 God Almighty's miraculous power, and no one, even by allusion, said that the idols which were worshipped in the Ka'bāh, had anything to do with it. For example, Abdullah ibn Az-Zibara says:

“The sixty thousand returned not home, Nor did their sick man (Abraham) survive on return. Ad and Jurham were there before them, and there is God, above the servants, Who sustains it.” Abu Qais bin Aslat says; *“Rise and worship your Lord and anoint the Corners of the House of God between the Mountains of Makkah and Mina. When the help of the Owner of the Throne reached you, His armies repulsed them so that they were lying in dust, pelted with stones.”*

Not only this, but according to Umm Hani and Zubair bin al-Awwam, the Prophet said: *“The Quraysh did not worship anyone but God, the Only and One, for ten years”* (and according to others, for seven years).

The Arabs describe the year in which this event took place as Am al-Fil (the year of the elephants), and in the same year the Messenger of God was born. The traditionists and historians almost unanimously state that the event of the people of the elephant had occurred in Muharram and the Prophet was born in Rabi al-Awwal. A majority of them states that he was born 50 days after the event of the elephant.

Theme and Substance

If Sūrah al-Fil is studied in the light of the historical details as given above, one can fully well understand why in this Sūrah only God's inflicting His punishment on the people of the elephant has been referred and described so briefly. It was an event of recent occurrence, and everyone in Makkah and Arabia was fully aware of it. The Arabs believed that the Ka'bāh had been protected in this invasion not by any God or Goddess but by God Almighty Himself. Then God alone had been invoked by the Quraysh chiefs for help, and for quite a few years the people of Quraysh having been impressed by this event, had worshipped none but God. Therefore, there was no need to mention the details in Sūrah al-Fil, but only a reference to it was enough so that the people of Quraysh, in particular, and the people of Arabia, in general, should consider well in their hearts the message that the Prophet Muhammad was giving. For the only message that he gave was that they should worship and serve none but God, the Only and One. Then, they should also consider that if they used force to suppress this invitation to the truth, they would only be inviting the wrath of God, Who had so completely routed and destroyed the people of the elephants.

Sūrah 105: al-Fīl¹⁸⁵⁹

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful

1. Have you not considered, [O Muham-
mad], how your Lord dealt with the
companions of the elephant?¹⁸⁶⁰
2. Did He not make their plan into mis-
guidance?¹⁸⁶¹
3. And He sent against them birds in
flocks,
4. Striking them with stones of hard clay,
5. And He made them like eaten straw.¹⁸⁶²

¹⁸⁵⁹ *Al-Fīl*: The Elephant.

¹⁸⁶⁰ i.e., the army under the command of Abrahah al-Ashram which was accompanied by a huge elephant and came with the intention of destroying the *Ka'bah* at Makkah.

¹⁸⁶¹ Causing them to perish.

¹⁸⁶² i.e., husks which have been chewed by cattle. This event took place in the year of the Prophet's birth.