

Sūrah 111: al-Masad

Period of Revelation

Although the commentators have not disputed its being a Makki Sūrah, yet it is difficult to determine in which phase of the life at Makkah precisely it was revealed. However, in view of Abu Lahab's role and conduct against the Prophet's message of Truth, it can be assumed that it must have been revealed in the period when he had transgressed all limits in his mad hostility to him, and his attitude was becoming a serious obstruction in the progress of Islām. It may well have been revealed in the period when the Quraysh had boycotted the Prophet together with the people of his clan and besieged them in Shi'b Abi Talib, and Abu Lahab was the only person to join with the enemies against his own relatives. The basis of this assumption is that Abu Lahab was the Prophet's uncle, and public condemnation of the uncle by the tongue of the nephew could not be proper until the extreme excesses committed by the uncle had become visible to everyone. If the Sūrah had been revealed before this, in the very beginning, the people would have regarded it as morally discourteous that the nephew should so condemn the uncle.

Background

This is the only place in the Qur'ān where a person from among the enemies of Islām has been condemned by name, whereas in Makkah as well as in Madinah, after the migration, there were many people who were in no way less inimical to Islām and the Prophet Muhammad than Abu Lahab. The question is, what was the special trait of the character of this person, which became the basis of this condemnation by name? To understand that it is necessary that one should understand the Arabian society of that time and the role that Abu Lahab played in it.

In ancient days since there prevailed chaos and confusion, bloodshed and plunder throughout Arabia, and the condition since centuries was that a person could have no guarantee of the protection of life, honour and property except with the help and support of his clansmen and blood relations, therefore silah rehmi (good treatment of the kindred) was esteemed most highly among the moral values of the Arabian society and breaking off of connections with the kindred was regarded as a great sin. Under the influence of the same Arabian tradition when the Prophet began to preach the message of Islām, the other clans of Quraysh and their chiefs resisted and opposed him tooth and nail, but the Banu Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib (children of al-Muttalib, brother of Hashim) not only did not oppose him but continued to support him openly, although most of them had not yet believed in his Prophethood. The other clans of Quraysh themselves regarded this support by the blood relations of the Prophet as perfectly in accordance with the moral traditions of Arabia. That is why they never taunted the Banu Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib in that they had abandoned their ancestral faith by supporting a person who was preaching a new faith. They knew and believed that they could in no case hand over an individual of their clan to his enemies, and their support and aid of a clansman was perfectly natural in the sight of the Quraysh and the people of Arabia.

This moral principle, which the Arabs even in the pre-Islāmic days of ignorance, regarded as worthy of respect and inviolable was broken only by one man in his enmity of Islām, and that was Abu Lahab, son of Abdul Muttalib. He was an uncle of the Prophet, whose father and he were sons of the same father. In Arabia, an uncle represented the father especially when the nephew was fatherless. The uncle was expected to look after the nephew as one of his own children. But this man in his hostility to Islām and love of kufr trampled all the Arab traditions underfoot.

The traditionists have related from Ibn Abbas with several chains of transmitters the tradition that when the Prophet was commanded to present the message of Islām openly, and he was instructed in the Qur'ān to warn first of all his nearest kinsfolk of the punishment of God, he ascended the Mount Safa one morning and called out aloud: Ya sabahah (O, the calamity of the morning!) This alarm in Arabia was raised by the person who noticed early at dawn an enemy tribe advancing against his tribe. When the Messenger made this

call, the people inquired as to who had made the call. They were told that it was Muhammad. There at the people of all the clans of Quraysh rushed out. Everyone who could, came; he who could not, sent another one for himself. When the People had assembled, the Messenger calling out each clan by name, viz. O Banu Hashim, O Bani Abdul Muttalib, O Bani Fir, O Bani so and so, said: "If I were to tell you that behind the hill there was an enemy host ready to fall upon you, would you believe me?" The people responded with one voice, saying that they never had so far experienced a lie from him. The Prophet said: "Then I warn you that you are heading for a torment." Thereupon, before anyone else could speak, Abu Lahab, the Prophet's uncle, said: "May you perish! Did you summon us for this?" Another tradition adds that he picked up a stone to throw at the Prophet. (Musnad Ahmad, Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Ibn Jarir, and others)

According to Ibn Zayd, one day Abu Lahab asked the Prophet: "If I were to accept your religion, what would I get?" The Prophet replied: "You would get what the other believers would get." He said: "Is there no preference or distinction for me?" The Prophet replied: "What else do you want?" Thereupon he said: "May this religion perish in which I and all other people should be equal and alike!" (Ibn Jarir)

In Makkah Abu Lahab was the next door neighbor of the Prophet. Their houses were separated by a wall. Besides him, Hakam bin As (Father of Marwan), Uqbah bin Abi Muait, Adi bin Hamra and Ibn al-Asda il-Hudhali also were his neighbors. These people did not allow him to have peace even in his own house. Sometimes when he was performing the Prayer, they would place the goat's stomach on him; sometimes when food was being cooked in the courtyard, they would throw filth at the cooking pot. The Prophet would come out and say: "O Bani Abdi Manaf, what kind of neighborliness is it?" Abu Lahab's wife, Umm Jamil (Abu Sufyan's sister), had made it a practice to cast thorns at his door in the night so that when he or his children came out of the house at dawn, they should run thorns in the foot. (Baihaqi, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Jarir, Ibn Asakir, Ibn Hisham)

Before the proclamation of Prophethood, two of the Prophet's daughters were married to two of Abu Lahab's sons, Utbah and Utaibah. After his call when the Prophet began to invite the people to Islām, Abu Lahab said to both his sons: "I would forbid myself seeing and meeting you until you divorced the daughters of Muhammad." So, both of them divorced their wives. Utaibah in particular became so nasty in his spitefulness that one day he came before the Prophet and said: "I repudiate An-na'jmi idha haw and Alladhi dana fatadalla" and then he spat at him, but his spittle did not fall on him. The Prophet prayed: "O God, subject him to the power of a dog from among Your dogs." Afterwards, Utaibah accompanied his father in his journey to Syria. During the journey the caravan halted at a place which, according to local people, was visited by wild beasts at night. Abu Lahab told his companions, the Quraysh: "Make full arrangements for the protection of my son, for I fear the curse invoked by Muhammad (upon whom be God's peace) on him." Accordingly, the people made their camels sit all around Utaibah and went to sleep. At night a tiger came which crossed the circle of the camels and devoured Utaibah tearing him to pieces. (Ibn Abdul Barr: Al- Istiab; Ibn Hajar: Al-Isabah; Abu Nuaim al-Isfahani: Dalail an-Nubuwwat; As-Suhaili: Raud al-Unuf. Here there is a difference of opinion. Some reporters say that the divorce took place after the Prophet's proclamation of Prophethood and some say that it took place after the revelation of Tabbat yada Abi Lahab. There is also a difference of opinion about whether Abu Lahab's son was Utbah or Utaibah. But this much is confirmed: that after the conquest of Makkah, Utbah embraced Islām and took the oath of allegiance at the Prophet's hand. Therefore, the correct view is that it was Utaibah).

Abu Lahab's wickedness can be judged from the fact that when after the death of the Prophet's son Qasim, his second son, Abdullah, also died, this man instead of condoling with his nephew in his bereavement, hastened to the Quraysh chiefs joyfully to give them the news that Muhammad had become childless that night. This we have already related in the commentary of Sūrah al-Kawthar.

Wherever the Prophet went to preach his message of Islām, this man followed him and forbade the people to listen to him. Rabiah bin Abbad ad-Dill has related: "I was a young boy when I accompanied my father to the face of Dhul-Majaz. There I saw the Messenger who was exhorting the people, saying: 'O people, say:

there is no deity but God, you will attain success.’ Following behind him I saw a man, who was telling the people; ‘This fellow is a liar: he has gone astray from his ancestral faith.’ I asked; who is he? The people replied: He is his uncle, Abu Lahab.” (Musnad Ahmad, Baihaqi). Another tradition from Rabiah is to the effect; “I saw that the Prophet went to the halting place of each tribe and said: ‘O children of so and so, I have been appointed God’s Messenger to you. I exhort you to worship only God and to associate none with Him. So, affirm faith in me and join me so that I may fulfill the mission for which I have been sent.’ Following close behind him there was a man who was saying: ‘O children of so and so, he is leading you astray from Lat and Uzza and inviting you to the religion of error and innovation which he has brought. Do not at all listen to what he says and do not follow him.’ I asked my father: who is he? He replied: he is his uncle, Abu Lahab.” (Musnad Ahmad, Tabarani). Tariq bin Abdullah al-Muharibi’s tradition is similar. He says: “I saw in the fare of Dhul-Majaz that the Messenger was exhorting the people, saying: ‘O people, say La ilaha ill-Allah, you will attain success’, and behind him there was a man who was casting stones at him, until his heels bled, and he was telling the people: ‘Do not listen to him, he is a liar.’ I asked the people who he was. They said he was his uncle, Abu Lahab.” (Tirmidhi)

In the 7th year of Prophethood, when all the clans of Quraysh boycotted the Banu Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib socially and economically, and both these clans remaining steadfast to the Prophet’s support, were besieged in Shib Abi Talib, Abu Lahab was the only person, who sided with the disbelieving Quraysh against his own clan. This boycott continued for three years, so much so that the Banu Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib began to starve. This, however, did not move Abu Lahab. When a trade caravan came to Makkah and a besieged person from Shib Abi Talib approached it to buy some article of food, Abu Lahab would shout out to the merchants to demand a forbidding price, telling them that he would make up for any loss that they incurred. Thus, they would demand exorbitant rates and the poor customer had to return empty handed to his starving children. Then Abu Lahab would purchase the same articles from them at the market rates. (Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Hisham).

On account of these very misdeeds this man was condemned in this Sūrah by name, and there was a special need for it. When the Prophet’s own uncle followed and opposed him before the Arabs who came for hajj from outside Makkah, or gathered together in the fares held at different places, they regarded it as against the established traditions of Arabia that an uncle should run down his nephew without a reason, should pelt stones at him and bring false accusations against him publicly. They were, therefore, influenced by what Abu Lahab said and were involved in doubt about the Prophet. But when this, Sūrah was revealed, and Abu Lahab, filled with rage, started uttering nonsense, the people realized that what he said in opposition to the Prophet was not at all reliable, for he said all that in his mad hostility to his nephew.

Besides, when his uncle was condemned by name, the people’s expectation that the Messenger could treat some relative leniently in the matter of religion was frustrated forever. When the Messenger’s own uncle was taken to task publicly the people understood that there was no room for preference or partiality in their faith. A non-relative could become a near and dear one if he believed, and a near relation a non-relative if he disbelieved. Thus, there is no place for the ties of blood in religion.

Sūrah 111: al-Masad¹⁸⁷⁴

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

1. May the hands of Abū Lahab be ruined,
and ruined is he.¹⁸⁷⁵
2. His wealth will not avail him or that
which he gained.
3. He will [enter to] burn in a Fire of
[blazing] flame
4. And his wife [as well] - the carrier of
firewood.¹⁸⁷⁶
5. Around her neck is a rope of [twisted]
fiber.

¹⁸⁷⁴ *Al-Masad*: Fiber. This *sūrah* is also known as *al-Lahab* (Flame).

¹⁸⁷⁵ Abū Lahab (the Prophet's uncle), who was an enemy of Islām.

¹⁸⁷⁶ She used to put thorns in the Prophet's path and slander him. The word "firewood" was used by the Arabs to allude to slander and backbiting.