

Sura 105: Al-Fil (The Elephant)

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Verses 1 to 5:

- 1. Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant?*
- 2. Did He not completely confound their plans?*
- 3. And He sent against them swarms of birds,*
- 4. Striking them with stones of baked clay.*
- 5. Then He made them like eaten straw.*

This Sura refers to a well known incident that took place in the Arabian Peninsula before the advent of Islam. The incident shows clearly the level of protection that God bestowed on this sacred land which God has chosen to be the spot from which the last light emanates; the spot He chose to be the incubator for the new faith.

This story refers to the invasion of Mecca by Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of Yemen. Abraha built a huge church in Yemen under the name of the king of Abyssinia. His goal was to attract the Arabs who used to perform pilgrimage to Mecca to his church. But the Arabs did not relinquish the K'aba in favor of Abraha's church. The K'aba was the pride of the Arabs who believed that they were the descendants of Prophet Abraham (PBUH) and Prophet Ishmael (PBUH) who built the K'aba. Abraha decided to destroy the K'aba so that the Arabs would be forced to come to his church to perform the rites of pilgrimage. Abraha led a huge army. The army included a number of elephants. Several Arab tribes tried to stop Abraha's army but he was able to defeat all of them. The army camped in a place called Al-Maghmas between the city of Taif and the city of Mecca. Abraha sent one of his lieutenants on the head of a battalion to Mecca. They were able to capture camels and other booties. Among the booties were two hundred camels that belonged to Abd Al-Muttaleb ibn Hashem, the chief of Quraish. Abraha sent a messenger to Quraish to tell them that he did not come to fight them. All what he wanted is to destroy the K'aba. If they do not fight his army, the army will not attack them. Abraha also wanted to speak to the chief of Quraish, so Abd Al-Muttaleb went to see him. Abd Al-Muttaleb was a handsome and respectable man; when Abraha saw him he was quite impressed. Abraha left his throne and sat with Abd Al-Muttaleb on the ground. Abraha asked Abd Al-Muttaleb through a translator if there is anything that Abraha could do for him. Abd Al-Muttaleb said, "I want my camels back." Abraha was disappointed, he said to Abd Al-Muttaleb, "I was impressed when I first saw you, but that impression was lost when I heard you speak about your camels. I came to destroy the house that you consider part of your faith and the faith of your forefathers; and you are only worried about your camels? Abd Al-Muttaleb said, "I am the Lord of the camels. The house has a Lord who will protect it." Abraha said, "It will not be protected from me." Abd Al-Muttaleb said, "It is your business." Abd Al-Muttaleb got his camels back and left. Abd Al-Muttaleb went back to his people and told them to evacuate the city and go to the mountains. They all prayed God to protect the K'aba and left.

Abraha moved with his army towards Mecca, however, just before entering Mecca the elephants sat down and refused to move. God then sent swarms of birds that pelted them with stones of clay. The whole army was destroyed and Abraha was wounded and he died upon his return to Yemen.

Some scholars tried to explain the action of the birds using human logic. However, we are inclined to think of this as miracle. This inclination is corroborated by the style and language of the Sura. The main objective of the Sura is to emphasize the fact that God wanted to preserve

this house so that it becomes the place from which the Islamic faith starts. The environment in Mecca at that time was conducive to the achievement of this goal. So, it was the most suitable place for Islam to start.

We do appreciate the efforts of the scholars who tried to find logical explanations of the phenomenon mentioned in this Sura. They wanted to steer away from mythical explanations which may lead to superstition. However, we would like to state that we should not try to force the Qur'anic verses into forms that fit known scientific or logical models. Scientific and logical models may change from time to time while the Qur'an is permanently unchangeable. Qur'anic verses should be the source from which we receive our fundamental facts about our faith. These facts should shape our logical approach to all events and incidents. We should accept whatever the Qur'an states as facts. Our intellect is a product of our limited reality and our limited experience. We are inclined to accept the Sura at its face value and treat what happened to the army of Abraha as a miracle.

The Sura starts with a rhetorical question, *"Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant?"* This incident was well known to the Arabs to the extent that they used the year in which it happened as a standard for their Almanac. The Prophet (PBUH) was born in the year of the Elephant, meaning that he was born in the year this incident took place. The intention of the question was to remind the Arabs of the story.

Then the verse explained how God dealt with the attacking army, *"Did He not completely confound their plans?"* God frustrated the plans of the attackers and they lost their way. How did this happen? *"He sent against them swarms of birds, striking them with stones of baked clay. Then He made them like eaten straw."*

There are many lessons to be learnt from this Sura.

God did not want to give the idolaters of Mecca the honor of protecting His House. God wanted to save His House Himself through a miracle.

It would have been logical for the idolaters to remember the miracle which God provided to protect His House at the time of the advent of the Prophet (pbuh) and to accept his call to Islam. However, they abused the House that God protected by placing their idols in it. They used this as an excuse to resist the call to Islam.

God did not want Abraha and his army to destroy His House even when the House was being abused by the idolaters of Mecca. God wanted this House to remain pure and free from any type of control.

The Arabs did not have any major role to play before the advent of Islam. Under the banner of Islam they were able to play a major role in the history of humanity.