

Background and Context

Ibn Kathir identifies al-Fil as a Makkan surah and presents the defeat of the army of the Elephant as a great favour shown to Quraysh. His historical account describes Abraha's advance from Yemen to destroy the Ka'bah. The surah itself directs attention to what Allah did to that army and its plan. Ibn Kathir connects the protection of the House with the coming mission of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The parent should distinguish the five Qur'anic ayat from the fuller historical reports through which the commentary explains their setting.

Tafsir of the Surah

Ayah 1: The army of the Elephant. Ibn Kathir relates the account of Abraha and the force that set out against the Ka'bah. The elephant was part of the army's intended means of destroying the House. The opening question recalls the outcome of this expedition and directs attention to the action of the Lord. The army's preparations and apparent strength did not place its plans beyond Allah's control.

Ayah 2: Their plan brought to failure. Ibn Kathir explains that Allah destroyed the attackers and frustrated the purpose for which they had advanced. They did not obtain the good outcome they sought. His account includes the elephant refusing to proceed towards Makkah when directed there. The central point of the ayah remains the defeat of their destructive scheme, rather than the power of the army that devised it.

Ayah 3: Birds in successive flocks. Ibn Kathir records explanations of ababil as groups, many birds, or flocks coming one after another and from different directions. The term describes their gathered and repeated arrival. Allah sent them against the army. The surah presents the means of its defeat as part of His command and protection, overturning the expectations created by the expedition's size and equipment.

Ayah 4: Stones of sijjil. Ibn Kathir discusses explanations of sijjil connected with hard stones and baked clay. His historical narration describes the birds casting stones upon the army and the survivors fleeing in a ruined condition. The verse identifies the means of punishment without requiring the reader to settle every detail recorded in the surrounding historical accounts. Its emphasis is the destruction that befell those who came to attack the Sacred House.

Ayah 5: Like eaten crop remains. Ibn Kathir records explanations of 'asf as straw, crop leaves or the covering of grain. The final image is of what has been eaten and broken down. The army that advanced with destructive confidence is itself reduced to ruin. Ibn Kathir treats this as protection of the honoured House and preparation for the Prophet's ﷺ mission. The favour recalled here leads naturally into the following surah, which calls Quraysh to worship the Lord who gave food and security.



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ



Memorised

Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the People of the Elephant?

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ



Memorised

Did He not make their plan go wrong?

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ



Memorised

He sent against them swarms of birds.

تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ



Memorised

Throwing at them rocks of baked clay.

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ



Memorised

Leaving them like chewed-up leaves.

Parent tafsir: adapted from Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, 105:1-5.

Arabic commentary: quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura105-aya1.html

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