

Tafseer Surah al-Fil (الفيل)

Notes on Nouman Ali Khan's Concise Commentary of the Quran

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Introduction

- This surah is in reference to the story of Abraha, who was a Christian military leader and part of the Roman empire, and it took place before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). He built a huge church and wanted the Arabs to venerate it instead of the Ka'ba. He also wanted to do this for financial reasons because due to the Ka'ba, Mecca was a center for business and he wanted to shift the financial attention to his own region in Yemen
 - Some Arabs went to his new church and defecated in it to insult him for trying to take attention away from the Ka'ba. Abraha was furious and decided to take an army of 60,000, which would consist of elephants as well, to Mecca to destroy the Ka'ba in vengeance
 - However, when he got close to the Ka'ba with his army, Allah destroyed them by sending birds who pelted them with stones
 - Some suggest this was the year in which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was born
- Some of the companions viewed this surah and the one after it (Surah al-Quraysh) as one surah. They would not put Basmallah between them for that reason
 - They both need to be understood together because they complement each other and are connected
 - This surah discusses the security of Mecca and Surah al-Quraysh discusses its prosperity. For any society to prosper, it needs both of these things
 - We need to understand that the safety and prosperity of Mecca was due to the supplication of Ibrahim (pbuh), which he made when he was building the Ka'ba with his son Ismaeel (pbuh)
 - He had asked Allah to make Mecca safe and fill it with all kinds of fruit because it was a barren desert without life. He requested safety because in the desert you are more susceptible to be attacked by looters
 - Due to the fact that the Quraysh were considered the custodians of the Ka'ba, they would be left alone when traveling in the desert because of the respect the Arabs had for it

Tafseer of the Verses

1. **Have you not considered, [O Muhammad], how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?**
 - a. The word *ashaab* (companions) is in reference to Abraha's army

- b. Some said this surah is asking the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to contemplate over the incident of Abraha's army and what became of them
 - i. Also how their fall led to Mecca becoming even more prosperous. It's not just about what happened during that time but also the trickle effect it had on the land

2. Did He not make their plan into misguidance?

- a. Meaning he made their scheme into continual waste
- b. The Arabic word *kayd* (plan) refers to a secret plan but Abraha had come openly so why is this word used here?
 - i. Because the actual plot was to remove influence and prosperity from Mecca to Yemen. The open attack was just a front for a greater scheme among them
- c. There is an implicit indication here to the Quraysh that their schemes and plans are also going to go to waste

3. And He sent against them birds in flocks

- a. The Arabic word *tayeer* (birds) is also used to refer to vultures
- b. The Arabic word *abaabeel* (flocks)
 - i. Some said it is in reference to a specific type of bird
 - ii. Linguistically, however, it refers to huge bundles of birds that look like one giant flock and you cannot even tell them apart
 - 1. There can be so many that they darken the sky
- c. Some said it may be a metaphor to mean that some sort of disease afflicted the army

4. Striking them with stones of hard clay

- a. The Arabic word *sijjeel* (hard clay)
 - i. These are specific type of stones found in desert climates
- b. The dominant understanding is that it was the birds who were throwing the stones on top of them by which they would fall dead
 - i. Some said this verse is in reference to Allah throwing the dust on their faces when they fell dead on the ground

5. And He made them like eaten straw

- a. The Arabic word *'asf* (straw)
 - i. It means dried up leaves, crops, hay, etc.
 - ii. It also refers to things that are harsh
- b. The meaning here is that they turned into rotting corpses that were eaten by vultures
- c. This was all done for the convenience of Quraysh and this is why the next surah begins with the verse "[He did this] to make the Quraysh feel secure"