

SURAH 105 (AL-FIL)

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: The Holy Qur'an | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa (Translator)

OVERVIEW

Surah 105, known as Al-Fil (The Elephant), is a brief but pivotal chapter in the Quran. Historically, it refers to the 'Year of the Elephant' (c. 570 CE), the year of Muhammad's birth, when the Abyssinian Christian viceroy Abraha marched on Mecca with war elephants to destroy the Kaaba. The text asserts that God intervened directly to protect His sanctuary, rendering the invaders' schemes futile. God sent 'swarms of birds' carrying 'hard stones' to annihilate the army, leaving them like 'chewed up hay.' Theologically, this surah serves to validate the sanctity of Mecca and the Kaaba as a divinely protected site prior to the rise of Islam. For the believer, it is a reminder of God's sovereignty, His ability to neutralize powerful enemies, and the futility of plotting against the Divine will. In the context of Rashad Khalifa's translation, the language emphasizes the cognitive realization of this event ('Have you noted...') rather than just visual witnessing.

KEY FIGURES

The Lord (Allah), The People of the Elephant (Abraha's Army), Swarms of Birds (Ababil)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. DIVINE PROTECTION OF SANCTUARY

Assertion: God actively and miraculously intervenes to destroy those who attempt to physically harm His holy house (the Kaaba).

"Have you noted what your Lord did to the people of the elephant? ... He sent upon them swarms of birds."

Evangelical Comparison: In Islam, the Kaaba is the physical 'House of God' (Bayt Allah) and its protection is a sign of divine favor. In Evangelical Christianity, the physical temple in Jerusalem was allowed to be destroyed (AD 70) as predicted by Jesus, signifying the end of localized worship. The New Testament teaches that the true temple is now the body of the believer (1 Corinthians 6:19) and the corporate church (Ephesians 2:21). God protects the spiritual state of the believer, but does not promise immunity for physical structures.

2. RETRIBUTIVE DESTRUCTION

Assertion: God's response to the enemies of His sanctuary is total physical annihilation and humiliation.

"He made them like chewed up hay."

Evangelical Comparison: The Quranic imagery of enemies being turned into 'chewed up hay' emphasizes immediate, crushing temporal judgment. While the Old Testament contains similar accounts (e.g., Sennacherib's army in 2 Kings 19), the New Testament emphasis shifts to the patience of God, 'not wishing that any should perish' (2 Peter 3:9). The Gospel calls for loving enemies (Matthew 5:44) rather than celebrating their physical destruction in the current age, reserving final judgment for the eschaton.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the object of sanctification. Surah 105 celebrates the defense of the Kaaba, establishing Mecca as the center of the faith. Evangelical Christianity, following Jesus's dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4:21-24), teaches that the hour has come where worship is neither on 'this mountain nor in Jerusalem' but in Spirit and Truth. Furthermore, the method of defense—violent annihilation of enemies—contrasts with the Cross, where God absorbs violence to redeem enemies.

Shared Values:

Sovereignty of God; God acts in history; Pride goes before destruction

Friction Points:

1. [Major] Theology Proper (Nature of God's Kingdom) – God defends a physical shrine with lethal force, contradicting the New Covenant spiritualization of the Temple.

2. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Validates a post-biblical Arab tradition as divine revelation equal to or superseding biblical history.
3. [Major] Christology (The Cross) – Presents victory as the survival of the righteous and destruction of the wicked, obscuring the victory of the Cross where the Righteous One dies for the wicked.

Semantic Warnings:

"Lord (Rabb)"

In Text: The Sovereign Master who physically destroys the enemies of Mecca.

Evangelical: Yahweh/Jesus, who is Sovereign but whose Kingdom is 'not of this world' (John 18:36) and who commands love for enemies.

Example: In Surah 105, the 'Lord' sends birds to kill; in Luke 9:54-56, when disciples want to call down fire on enemies, Jesus rebukes them.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: In this text, salvation is temporal deliverance from physical destruction.

How Attained: By God's sovereign intervention; the Meccans did nothing but exist as custodians of the Kaaba.

Basis of Assurance: God's past defense of the Kaaba serves as assurance of His future power.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Not directly applicable to soteriology of the soul in this text, but the concept of 'schemes backfiring' implies that works/plots against God fail, while reliance on God succeeds. It differs from Sola Fide in that the 'salvation' here is corporate and physical, not individual and spiritual.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Implicit Obligations:

1. Acknowledge God's power in history
2. Recognize the sanctity of the Kaaba/Mecca
3. Trust in God's ability to thwart enemy schemes

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. This Surah shows God protecting the Kaaba. Why do you think God allowed the Temple in Jerusalem (which He also commanded to be built) to be destroyed twice?
2. The text says God made the enemies like 'chewed up hay.' How does this compare to how Jesus treated his enemies when they came to arrest him?
3. Do you believe God always protects His holy places physically, or is there a different kind of protection for believers today?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. Schemes Backfiring – Satan and the powers of this world schemed to destroy Jesus at the Cross, but God caused that very scheme to backfire, resulting in the salvation of the world. [1 Corinthians 2:8 - 'None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.']}
2. Divine Intervention – Humanity was under attack by a force we could not defeat (sin/death). We needed intervention from above. [Isaiah 59:16 - 'He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then His own arm brought Him salvation.']}

Spiritual Weight:

1. Territorial Anxiety [Moderate] – The believer ties God's honor to the physical preservation of a site or territory. If the site is threatened or insulted, the believer feels God is diminished, leading to defensiveness or aggression.
2. Fear of Retribution [Severe] – The graphic imagery of being made like 'chewed up hay' instills a fear of God's raw power without the comforting assurance of the Mediator, Jesus Christ, who absorbs that wrath.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Reflection on historical signs (Ayat) interpreted through divine revelation.

Verification Method: The text assumes the reader is aware of the event ('Have you noted') and uses this shared memory to verify God's power.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the self-attesting Word of God and the testimony of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13), rather than appeals to local Meccan history or oral legends.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine Revelation)

Textual Issues: The phrase 'Ababil' is often translated as 'flocks' or 'swarms' but is sometimes treated as a proper noun. The nature of the 'stones of Sijjil' (baked clay) has led to various interpretations, including metaphors for pustules (smallpox).