

The Year of the Elephant; the year of the Prophet's ﷺ birth

قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ولدت عام الفيل

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, 'I was born in the Year of the Elephant.'

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was born on a Monday in 570 C.E., in the Year of the Elephant. This refers to a very special and rememberable episode that happened in Makka. In fact, it is so special that one entire Sūrah from the Holy Qur'ān is devoted to it.

At the time, Yemen was under the control of Abyssinia and an Abyssinian called Abraha was the Khalifa (vicegerent). Abraha was a Christian who built a magnificent cathedral in the capital of Yemen, San'ah. After building this cathedral and decorating it with gold, he said he would not rest until he had destroyed the Ka'ba and divert the Arab's pilgrimage to his cathedral. An army of sixty thousand men set off under the command of Abraha, led by a number of powerful elephants. His destination was Makka, where he intended to demolish the House of Allāh to the ground.

On route, some of the Arab tribes tried to put up a fight. One such tribe was Khath'am. They were quickly brushed aside by the strong army. Their tribal leader Nufayl was captured. By way of ransom of his life, he offered to act as a guide.

When they reached Tā'if, the locals came out and told them not to confuse their own temple of al-Lāt with the Ka'ba. They offered them a guide to lead them to the Ka'ba though they already had Nufayl. They took on the guide (whose name was Abū Righāl), but he died on the way at a place called Mughammis. Afterwards the Arabs took to stoning his grave, a practice that still continues to this day.

Abraha halted at Mughammis and sent his horsemen to plunder the city of her wealth. This included two hundred camels which belonged to the Prophet's (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) grandfather Abd al-Muttalib. Meanwhile, Quraysh and the other neighbouring tribes held a meeting and they decided it was pointless to put up a fight. Abraha asked to speak to the chief of Makka (Abd al-Muttalib). He wanted to explain that he did not want pointless bloodshed; his intention was to destroy the Ka'ba and to return to Yemen.

When Abraha met Abd al-Muttalib he was very impressed by him. He even stood to greet him. He asked him if he had any favours. Abd al-Muttalib said to him that he wanted his two hundred camels back. Abraha was surprised that rather than being worried about the Ka'ba, he was more worried about his camels. Abd al-Muttalib coolly responded:

اني انا رب الابل و ان للبيت ربا سيمنعه (القرطبي، ٢٠: ١٣٠)

Indeed I am the lord of the camels. Similarly the Ka'ba has a Lord Who will defend it.

The camels were returned.

The army was gradually moving towards Makka and was only a matter of time before it had arrived. The people of Makka, including Abd al-Muttalib, had no intention of defending the Ka'ba and fighting this huge army. They had already decided in their hearts that they would retreat to the mountains until the army had left and pray to Allāh to protect the Ka'ba.

The next morning Abraha prepared to enter Makka with his elephant leading the army. However, as they all approached the Ka'ba the elephant (who was named Mahmūd) stopped, knelt down and refused to move further towards the Ka'ba. The army tried every trick to make the elephant move but they could not. They beat the animal with iron bars but to no avail. Some of the army members turned their backs to the Ka'ba and faced the direction home to Yemen. At that point, the elephant rose. But no sooner did they face the Ka'ba, it sat down again.

Abraha should have read the signs here, but he did not. Instead, he marched forward. At that point, the skies turned black with a cloud of birds. Survivors report that each bird had three pebbles, the size of peas (one in the beak and one in each claw) All the stones hit their targets. Some died immediately, some died later. Some fled to the hills but all were terror-stricken. Abraha was injured badly and died when he reached Yemen. It is said that other than Mahmūd, there were thirteen other elephants. All were killed. Mahmūd was saved (*Ziā al-Nabī*, I: 455).

This incident became famous and the story reached all corners of Arabia. Thereafter, Quraysh were known as the 'people of Allāh' (اهل الله). In *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, it is reported that in the house of Umm Hānī, there were some remaining stones that the birds had pelted down.

Sūrah al-Fil talks about this incident. The Sūrah is translated below.

Al-Fil (the Elephant)

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the Elephant?

Did he not make their plan astray?

And He sent against them birds, in flocks,

Which pelted them with stones of baked clay

And so He made them like chewed dry grass.

This Sūrah is addressing the Arabs at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and reminded them of the great favours Allah had done for them. The mighty army of Abraha was too powerful for all Arabia to fight. Allah destroyed the entire army swiftly.

This year became known as the Year of the Elephant. It was in this year, 570 C.E., that an even greater event took place, which would change the course of world history. Fifty days after the failed attack on the Ka'ba, a special child was born in Makka to Sayyida Aamina and her husband Sayyidunā Abd Allāh (may Allāh be pleased with them), who had recently passed away. The birth of this child was celebrated in the heavens above and foretold in the divine scriptures. He would enlighten the world with his *Nūr*, removing the clouds of darkness and chains of ignorance.

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