

SŪRAH 111

Al-Masad

(Fire Flames)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed
is he. (1)*

*His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing.
(2)*

He shall have to endure a flaming fire, (3)

and his wife, the carrier of firewood, (4)

*shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.
(5)*

تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ ﴿١﴾

مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَبَ ﴿٢﴾

سَيَصْلَىٰ نَارًا ذَاتَ لَهَبٍ ﴿٣﴾

وَأَمْرَأَتُهُ حَمَّالَةَ الْحَطَبِ ﴿٤﴾

فِي جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِّن مَّسَدٍ ﴿٥﴾

Background

Abū Lahab, whose real name was `Abd al-`Uzzā ibn `Abd alMuṭṭalib, was the Prophet's uncle. He was so nicknamed because of the radiant look on his face. Together with his wife, Abū Lahab was one of the most hostile opponents of God's Messenger and the ideas he propagated.

Ibn Ishāq related the following report by Rabī`ah ibn `Abbād al-Dayli: "When I was young I once watched, with my father, God's Messenger preaching Islam to the Arab tribes, saying 'O sons of... (calling their respective tribal names), I am God's

Messenger sent to order you to submit to, and worship Him alone, invoking nothing else beside Him, and to believe in me and protect me until I carry out what God has entrusted to me.’ A cross-eyed, bright-faced man was behind him, who used to say, after he had finished, ‘O sons of... This man wants you to forsake al-Lāt and al-`Uzzā [two prominent idols worshipped by the pagan Arabs] and your allies of the *jinn*, the children of Mālik ibn Aqmas and to substitute for them these innovations and nonsense he has come up with. Do not listen to him, nor follow what he preaches.’ I asked my father who that man was and he told me that it was Abū Lahab, the Prophet’s uncle.” [Related by Aḥmad and al-Ṭabarānī.]

This is but one incident of Abū Lahab’s intimidation and ill-will towards the Prophet and his message. His wife, Arwā bint Ḥarb ibn Umayyah, Abū Sufyān’s sister, gave him unfailing support in his virulent, relentless campaign.

Such was Abū Lahab’s attitude towards the Prophet from the very start of his divine mission. Al-Bukhārī relates, on Ibn `Abbās’s authority, that “one day the Prophet went out to al-Baḥā’, a large square in Makkah, climbed a hill and summoned the people of the Quraysh. When they came to him, he addressed them, saying, ‘Were I to tell you that an enemy is drawing near and will attack you tomorrow morning or evening, would you believe me?’ ‘Yes,’ they replied. ‘o listen to me,’ he went on, ‘I am warning you of [God’s] gruesome torment.’ Abū Lahab was there and snapped at him, ‘Damn you! For this have you called us?’ [Another version says: Abū Lahab stood up shaking the dust off his hands and saying, ‘Damn you all day long...’] Then this *sūrah* was revealed.

Another instance was when the Hāshimite clan [i.e. the Prophet’s own clan], under Abū Ṭālib’s leadership, decided on grounds of tribal loyalty to protect the Prophet despite their rejection of the religion he preached. Abū Lahab was the only one to take a different stand. He joined with the Quraysh instead, and was with them in signing the document imposing a complete social and business boycott on the Hashimites so as to starve them out unless they delivered the Prophet to them.

Abū Lahab also ordered his two sons to renounce Muḥammad’s two daughters to whom they had been engaged before Muḥammad’s prophetic assignment. His aim was to burden the Prophet with their living and welfare expenses.

Thus, Abū Lahab and his wife, Arwā, who was also called Umm Jamīl, continued with their persistent onslaught against the Prophet and his message. The fact that they were close neighbours of the Prophet made the situation even worse. We are told that Umm Jamīl used to carry thorns and sharp wood and place them along the Prophet’s path [although it is thought that the phrase *the carrier of firewood* in the *sūrah* is used only metaphorically to indicate her lies and malice about him].

The Final Word

This *sūrah* was revealed as a counterattack against Abū Lahab's and his wife's hostile campaign. God took it upon Himself to say the final word on behalf of His Messenger.

"Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he." (Verse 1) The Arabic term, *tabba*, rendered here as 'doomed' also signifies failure and cutting off. The term is used twice in two different senses. It is used first as a prayer, while in the second instance it implies that the prayer has been already answered. So, in one short verse, an action is realized which draws the curtains upon a battle scene. What later follows is merely a description of what took place with the remark that *"his wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing."* (Verse 2) He can have no escape. He is defeated, vanquished and damned.

This was his fate in this world, but in the hereafter *"he shall have to endure a flaming fire."* (Verse 3) The fire is described as having flames in order to emphasize that it is raging.

"And his wife, the carrier of firewood," will reside there with him having *"a rope of palm-fibre round her neck,"* with which, as it were, she is being dragged into hell, or which she used for fastening wood bundles together, according to whether a literal or metaphorical interpretation of the text is adopted.

The language of this *sūrah* achieves remarkable harmony between the subject matter and the atmosphere built around it. Abū Lahab will be plunged into a fire with *lahab*, which is the Arabic for flames; and his wife who carries the wood, a fuel, will be met with the same fire with a palm-fibre rope around her neck. Hell, with its fiercely burning *lahab*, or flames, will be inhabited by Abū Lahab. At the same time his wife, who collects thorns and sharp woods, materials which can significantly increase the blaze of a fire, puts them all in the Prophet's way. Hence, she will, in time, be dragged into hell with a rope tied round her neck, bundled like firewood. How perfectly matched are the words and the pictures portrayed: the punishment is presented as being of the same nature as the deed: wood, ropes, fire and *lahab!*

Phonetically, the words are arranged in a way which provides wonderful harmony between the sounds made by the tying of wood into bundles and pulling the neck by ropes. Read in Arabic the opening verse, *"Tabbat yadā abī Lahabin wa tabb."* You will not fail to note that it sounds like a hard sharp tug, analogous to that of bundles of wood or an unwilling person being dragged by the neck into a wild fire; all is in phase with the fury and violent, bellicose tone that goes with the theme of the *sūrah*. Thus, in five short verses making up one of the shortest *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān, the vocal melodies click neatly with the actual movement of the scene portrayed.

This extremely rich and powerful style led Umm Jamīl to claim that the Prophet was in fact satirizing her and her husband. This arrogant and vain woman could not get over being referred to by such a humiliating phrase as *'the carrier of firewood,'* who *'shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.'* Her rage grew wilder when the *sūrah* became popular among the Arab tribes who greatly appreciated such fine literary style!

Ibn Ishāq relates: "Umm Jamīl, I was told, having heard what the Qur'ān said about her and her husband, came to the Prophet who was with Abū Bakr at the Ka`bah. She was carrying a handful of stones. God took her sight away from the Prophet and she saw only Abū Bakr to whom she said, 'Where is your comrade? I have heard that he has been satirizing me. Were I to find him, I would throw these stones right into his face. I, too, am gifted in poetry.' Then she chanted before leaving:

The contemptible we obey not! Nor what he says shall we accept!

"Abū Bakr turned around to the Prophet and said, 'Do you think that she saw you?' 'No,' replied the Prophet, 'God made her unable to see me.

Al-Bazzār relates on Ibn `Abbās's authority that "when this *sūrah* was revealed Abū Lahab's wife sought the Prophet. While he was with Abū Bakr she appeared. Abū Bakr suggested to the Prophet: 'She will not harm you if you move out of her sight.' 'Do not worry,' said the Prophet in a soothing manner. 'She will not see me.' She came to Abū Bakr and said: 'Your friend has lampooned us!' 'By the Lord of this Ka`bah, he has not,' Abū Bakr assured her. 'He is no poet and what he says is not poetry,' he added. She said, 'I believe you,' and then left. Abū Bakr then enquired from the Prophet whether she had seen him and he said, 'No, an angel was shielding me all the time she was here.' So much was her fury and her indignation at what she thought was poetry and which Abū Bakr rightly refuted.

Thus, the humiliating picture of Abū Lahab and his wife has been recorded to last forever in this eternal book, the Qur'ān, to show God's anger with them for their animosity towards His Messenger and message. All those who choose to take a similar attitude towards Islam, therefore, will meet with the same disgrace, humiliation and frustration, both in this life and in the life to come.