

MACCABEES NOT MECCA: THE BIBLICAL SUBTEXT OF *SŪRAT AL-FĪL*

1. Introduction and Summary

Sūrat al-Fīl (Q 105) has traditionally been understood by both Islamic exegetes and modern secular scholars as a reference to King Abrahā's "expedition of the elephant," in which the Christian King of Yemen allegedly attacked pre-Islamic Mecca with an army that prominently featured war elephants – followed by Allah's miraculous destruction of that army.

This article argues that Q 105 is much better understood as Arabic homiletic on the narratives of 2 and 3 Maccabees, Biblical texts that flourished throughout Eastern Christian traditions (including Syriac Christianity). These two Biblical texts center on narratives of polytheistic royal armies that tried to use war elephants to destroy a community of pious Jewish believers. In both texts, God dramatically rescued his faithful Jews, destroying the polytheistic forces and routing their war elephants. The "companions of the elephant" in Q 105 are thus the Seleucid and Ptolemaic antagonists of 2 and 3 Maccabees. Q 105 does not refer to a legendary expedition by Ethiopian Christians and their elephants against pre-Islamic Meccan polytheists.

This Biblical subtext also suggests an elegant solution to classic textual problems. The difficult language of Q 105:3-4 has traditionally been interpreted as meaning that flocks of small birds (*ṭayran abābīla*) destroyed the companions of the elephant by striking them with stones of hard clay (*biḥijāratin min sijjīlin*). As argued herein, Q 105:3-4 is better read as a reference to 3 Macc 6, where angels descended from heaven to rout the Ptolemaic army and its elephants, saving the Jews from annihilation. When angels, rather than birds, are understood to deliver the *biḥijāratin min sijjīlin* of Q 105:4, the surah's text becomes a perfect Qur'anic parallel with Q 11:81-2 and Q 51:33, where angels claim to have punished a wicked people (the city of the prophet Lūt) with *ḥijāratan min sijjīlin/ṭīnin*. For the strange hapax *abābīla*, the *mufasssirūn* correctly grasped its contextual meaning as something like 'divisions' or 'groups in succession.' But rather than 'flocks,' Q 105 simply uses this unusual word to characterize the intervening angelic host as being arranged in 'ranks,' a standard Qur'anic description of angelic hosts. Finally, Q 105 uses *ṭayran* as a metaphorical description of the winged angels (cf. Q 35:1) who descended from heaven to save the believers from the polytheist army – not literal birds.

2. The Text of *Sūrat al-Fīl*

The transliterated Arabic text of Q 105 is as follows:

1. alam tara kayfa fa'ala rabbuka bi-aṣḥābi l-fīli
2. alam yaj'al kaydahum fī taḍlīlin
3. wa-arsala ṭayran abābīla
4. tarmīhim biḥijāratin min sijjīlin
5. fajā'alahum ka'aṣfin makūlin

R. Paret's German translation notes some of the interpretive problems:

1. Hast du nicht gesehen, wie dein Herr (seinerzeit) mit den Leuten des Elefanten verfahren ist?
2. Hat er nicht ihre List mißlingen lassen
3. und Scharen von Vögeln über sie gesandt,
4. die sie mit Steinen von Ton (?) bewarfen,
5. und (hat er) sie (dadurch nicht saftund kraftlos) werden lassen wie ein abgefressenes Getreidefeld (w. wie abgefressene Halme)?

The Salih International English translation is more traditional:

1. Have you not considered, [O Muhammad], how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant?
2. Did He not make their plan into misguidance?
3. And He sent against them birds in flocks,
4. Striking them with stones of hard clay,
5. And He made them like eaten straw.

3. The Traditional Islamic Context of *Sūrat al-Fīl*

The enigmatic *Sūrat al-Fīl* has long been understood as recounting an attempted siege of Mecca by King Abraha, an Ethiopian Christian ruler of Yemen. The *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir is discussed below as a representative example of traditional exegesis.

As related by Ibn Kathir, Dhu Nuwas was a Jewish Himyarite King who killed 20,000 Christians in fiery trenches, the background of Q 85.¹ At the urging of “Caesar” (the Byzantines), the Ethiopian King sought revenge, dispatching a great army into Yemen headed up by Aryat and Abraha. Dhu Nuwas was killed by drowning in the sea. Abraha then defeated Aryat in a duel,² seizing control of Yemen. To appease the Ethiopian King's anger regarding his coup, Abraha built a gigantic Christian church in Sana'a, and tried to force the Arabs to make their pilgrimage there.

This angered the Quraysh, who saw the new church as a competitive threat to the Meccan pilgrimage. A Quraysh youth relieved himself on Abraha's church, desecrating it, followed by a group of young Quraysh men who burned the church down. Enraged, Abraha mounted a huge punitive expedition against the Quraysh, which included an enormous elephant providentially named “Mahmud.” As Yemen naturally lacks elephants, the helpful Ethiopian King An-Najashi had shipped Mahmud across the sea specifically to aid Abraha in his assault against Mecca,

¹ The historicity of the “companions of the trench” (*aṣḥābu l-ukh 'dūdi*) has been questioned. Manfred Kropp has persuasively argued that Q 85 does not refer to a historical incident involving *aṣḥābu l-ukh 'dūdi* killing Christians in a trench/ditch, but rather relates a message about “Inferno-Leute” who will spend eternity in Hell. See M. Kropp, “Koranische Texte als Sprechakte: am Beispiel der Sure 85,” *Vom Koran zum Islam*, ed. Gross/Ohlig (2009).

² Colorfully, Tabari relates that Abraha's slave 'Atwadah killed Aryat, and as his reward chose the “first opportunity for sexual intercourse with every bride from the people of Yemen before she enters the possession of her husband.” Tabari, *History* (tr. C.E. Bosworth) at § 933.

along with twelve other elephants. Theatrically, Abraha planned for his Ethiopian elephants to pull the Ka'aba down by using chains attached to its pillars.

Abraha's expedition headed north into the Hijaz, where he was met on the outskirts of Mecca by the Meccan leader, 'Abdul-Muttalib. Conceding that the Meccans could not defend their city, 'Abdul-Muttalib warned Abraha that Allah nonetheless would defend His Ka'aba. After 'Abdul-Muttalib returned, the Quraysh all fled to mountain tops, trusting to Allah to save their city.

As Abraha's expedition advanced, its lead elephant (Mahmud) knelt down when directed towards the Ka'aba, and refused to budge. When turned in any other direction, Mahmud began walking, but when pointed towards the Ka'aba he knelt reverentially, no matter how he was beaten. After Mahmud's devoted prostration stalled the expedition short of Mecca, Allah sent birds from the sea who dropped tiny stones on Abraha's army. All who were struck perished, both from impact and from pestilence, including Abraha himself, who died from rotting flesh on his return journey.

4. Problems with the Traditional Islamic Context of *Sūrat al-Fīl*

The traditional Islamic interpretation of Q 105, as reminding a Meccan audience of an actual conflict in the city's recent history, suffers from many serious problems.³ Q 105 is no more consistent with the presumption of an unbroken Islamic tradition regarding its original interpretation than is its neighboring Q 106, as well as other 'Early Meccan' surahs like Q 108, Q 111, and Q 112.

First, it is incongruous for Q 105 to cheer the defeat of the monotheistic Ethiopian Christians at the hands of the pagan Quraysh. Why would Allah intervene to save church-burning polytheists from Christians? And why would Muhammad recite Q 105 to remind his Meccan followers about an episode when Allah recently intervened to save the *mushrikūn* from People of the Book?⁴

³ The famous battles of Badr and Mutah, along with the "companions of the trench" massacre, have been subjected to scholarly doubt, critiquing both the reported events' relation to the Qur'anic text and their legendary nature. See F. Donner, "Qur'anic Furqan," *Journal of Semitic Studies* (2007); D. Powers, *Muhammad is Not the Father of any of Your Men* (2009); C. Luxenberg, "Keine Schlacht von 'Badr'," *Vom Koran zum Islam*, ed. Gross/Ohlig (2009); M. Kropp, "Koranische Texte als Sprechakte: am Beispiel der Sure 85," *Vom Koran zum Islam*, ed. Gross/Ohlig (2009). Donner's suggestion that Q 8:41 refers to God's salvation of the Israelites by parting the Red Sea, rather than the Battle of Badr, is particularly close to this essay's theme.

⁴ Ibn Kathir explains that the Ethiopians were Christians, and thus their religion was closer to the true religion than Qurayshi idolatry. But Allah nonetheless destroyed the Christian army to give a sign and prepare the way for Muhammad. The "tongue of destiny" told the Quraysh that God was not helping them because they were any better than the Ethiopians, but only to preserve the House and prepare the way for Muhammad, the final prophet.

That has not resolved the *širk* problem for other *mufassirūn*. A good example is the modern scholar Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, who explains in his *Tafhim al-Qur'an* that the

Second, it makes little practical sense for Ethiopian Christians to besiege the isolated desert city of Mecca by using war elephants.

Third, textual and linguistic difficulties cast doubt on the degree to which traditional Muslim exegesis has preserved the surah's original interpretive context. *Sūrat al-Fīl* contains a cascade of hapaxes, with four of the five rhyme words being hapaxes: *fīl* and *abābīla* are strict hapaxes, *tadlīl* and *makūlin* are hapax forms, and *sijjīl* is a rare loan word.⁵ *Abābīla* is traditionally interpreted as meaning “flocks” based on its context. But Ibn Kathir lists some of the many other interpretations that exegetes have proffered for *abābīla*, including “in groups,” “many,” “in divisions like camels,” “different, coming from everywhere,” “having paws like dogs,” and so forth. The difficult terms *sijjīl* and *ʿasf* posed similar problems for the *mufasssīrūn*. And ‘flocks of birds’ (*ṭayran abābīla*) are a strange agent of divine justice.

Fourth, contemporary non-Arabic sources do not support the traditional Islamic history. Procopius describes Byzantine maritime assistance for the Ethiopian expedition against Dhu Nuwas, the Jewish Himyarite rule of Yemen.⁶ He further describes the Ethiopian/Byzantine victory, and Abraha's subsequent rise to power. If war elephants were used in those events, they likely would have excited the Byzantine historian.⁷ But they are absent from his narrative.

Abraha plainly directed at least one military expedition into the Hijaz. The Murayghān inscription in South Arabia (Ry 506), written in Sabean, records the victory of Abraha's forces at an oasis called Taraban, which is located 100 kilometers east of Ta'if, itself located directly about 100 kilometers to the southeast of Mecca.⁸ The inscription describes Abraha's forces as a sort of confederation of Kinda and other bedouin allies, headed by “Abagabar,” rather than being Ethiopian troops led by Abraha himself. Scholars have pictured an assault on Mecca by the Ethiopians and their war elephants as an adjunct to the campaign described in this inscription.⁹ But the Murayghān inscription describes a Hijazi conflict between bedouin tribes, without directly involving Ethiopian troops. There is no contemporary historical record of any attack on Mecca, with or without elephants, or any antagonism between the Christian ruler Abraha and a polytheistic pilgrimage to the Ka'aba in Mecca. Nor is there any contemporary record of how Abraha himself died; the Murayghān inscription is dated to 553 CE, and it is assumed that

Meccan chiefs temporarily converted to Allah-centered monotheism, calling upon Allah alone to save them from Abraha, and then reverted back to polytheism afterwards. This casuistry illustrates the problem of putting forth pre-Islamic Mecca as the historical background of Q 105.

⁵ See S. M. Toorwawa, “Hapaxes in the Qur'ān,” *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2*, ed. G.S. Reynolds (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān 2011), p. 244.

⁶ Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.20.

⁷ Elephants are usually remembered. Hannibal is still most widely remembered for the elephants he brought over the Alps, even though those elephants played only a minor role in his campaign against Rome, and expired for unknown reasons shortly after their first battle.

⁸ See Stuart Munro-Hay, “Abraha” in Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopia: A-C* (2003).

⁹ See e.g. Francis E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (1994) at p. 88.

Abraha must have died shortly thereafter, as he drops out of history. It is extremely unlikely that the Murayghān victory inscription would have been made had Abraha himself been killed (by avian-delivered clay balls or otherwise), or his army annihilated, during the same Hijazi expedition. The other problem is that the assault on Taraban took place in 553 CE, long before the 570 CE date that Islamic tradition assigns to Abraha's expedition and Muhammad's birth.

Another problem is zoological. The Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*) can be trained to perform a wide variety of tasks, and is still commonly used as a draught animal in Asia. Historically, the overwhelming majority of war elephants have been Indian elephants, which have a rich history of military application, particularly in the Syrian, Persian, and Indian regions. The Seleucid Empire was famed for its intensive use of *Elephas maximus indicus*, with Seleucus I being known as "elephantarch"; that is why elephants feature so prominently as military threats in 2 Maccabees. Seleucid coinage commonly depicted the kingdom's Indian war elephants, which were the dominant symbol of Seleucid royal power.¹⁰ A Seleucid coin depicting Antiochus III is typical:



By contrast, African elephants (an entirely different genus, *Loxodonta*) are much more difficult to train, and have a limited history of military use.¹¹ Elephants are naturally – and wisely – averse to battle; even the more tractable Indian elephant requires extensive specialized training to become a useful battlefield asset.¹² Unlike the long military history of the Indian elephant, African elephants are only known to have been used for warfare in significant numbers by Ptolemaic Egypt, the Carthaginians, and the Romans, with the last reported African elephant

¹⁰ For a detailed recent discussion of the Indian elephant as the symbol of Seleucid royal power and identity, see P. Kosmin, "Apologetic Ethnography: Megasthenes' *Indica* and the Seleucid Elephant," *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*, ed. Almagor and Skinner (Bloomsbury 2013).

¹¹ African and Indian elephants are only known to have clashed on the battlefield once, at the Battle of Raphia near Gaza in 217 B.C.E., when the Indian elephants of Antiochus III clashed with the African elephants of Ptolemy IV. Polybius reports that the African elephants were much smaller and weaker than the Indian elephants, and fled at the sight and smell of them.

¹² See K. Nossov, *War Elephants* (Osprey 2008), p. 8 (citing Kautilya).

battle occurring at the Battle of Thapsus in 46 B.C.E.¹³ If the Ethiopians indeed used war elephants in Yemen in the 6th Century C.E., that would be the first historically attested use of *Loxodonta* in warfare for six centuries – and the last such use ever.¹⁴ The royal carriages of Axumite kings were reportedly drawn by elephants, so at least some African elephants were evidently put to such comparatively undemanding tasks in Late Antique Ethiopia itself.¹⁵ But apart from the claims of later Islamic tradition, they are not known to have been used in warfare. The contention that the Ethiopian King sent significant numbers of African war elephants to assault Yemen, and subsequently the Hijaz, lacks credible historical support. It also requires Ethiopian folly, given the logistical challenge of sending an African war elephant expedition across the sea, and then deep into the Hijazi desert towards the valley of Mecca.

Finally, the traditional Muslim attempt to define the year of Muhammad's birth by reference to Abraha's "Expedition of the Elephant" was one of the first and most obvious points on which critical Western scholarship cast doubt on the sirah's authenticity. Lammens early noted that the chronology which seeks to tie Muhammad's birth to the *'Āmu l-Fīl*, the Year of the Elephant, is defective and artificial.¹⁶ Other scholars have recognized that such an expedition must have happened long before Muhammad's time. Western scholars have nonetheless attempted to puzzle out the historical core of this story, fixing the chronology while removing or suspending belief regarding its many legendary and contradictory details.¹⁷ No good solution has been found.

¹³ There is controversy over which African elephants were used for ancient warfare. Modern genetic analysis has shown that African elephants consist of two distinct species, *Loxodonta africana* (the "bush elephant") and *Loxodonta cyclotis*, (the "forest elephant"). Forest elephants, now limited to Western and Central Equatorial Africa, are considerably smaller than either bush elephants or Indian elephants. Because ancient historians uniformly reported that African war elephants were significantly smaller than their Indian counterparts, it has often been argued that Carthaginian and Ptolemaic war elephants must have been forest elephants, or else the extinct subspecies of North African elephant, *Loxodonta africana pharaoensis*. The issue is complicated by millennia of overhunting of elephant populations in Africa and parts of Asia.

¹⁴ See K. Nossov, *War Elephants* (Osprey 2008), p. 38.

¹⁵ According to the *Chronographia of Theophanes*, the Ethiopian King Arethas "stood on four standing elephants which had a yoke and four wheels," evidently meaning that the king's carriage was drawn by four African elephants, although this report could have referred to elephant carvings on the carriage, or a palanquin carried by four elephants.

¹⁶ Other Islamic contexts involve similarly fictitious Ethiopian history. As Werner Diem has noted, Muhammad's correspondence with the emperor of Ethiopia must be deemed non-authentic on historical and stylistic grounds; the letters are written in a style of rhymed prose that only arose centuries later. See W. Diem, "Arabic Letters in Pre-Modern Times," *Documentary Letters from the Middle East: The Evidence in Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, and Arabic (1st-15 c CE)*, Asiatische Studien LXII, ed. E. Grob and A. Kaplony (2008), p. 858.

¹⁷ See e.g. L. Conrad, "Abraha and Muhammad: Some Observations Apropos of Chronology and Literary *Topoi* in the Early Arabic Historical Tradition," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 50 (1987), pp. 225-40.

Overlooking myriad such problems, Western scholars have long accepted the traditional story of Abraha's elephantine assault on Mecca as a historical fact and as the specific narrative subtext of Q 105.¹⁸ Even today, prominent Qur'anic scholars accept the traditional Islamic account, while admitting Q 105's peculiar historical context relative to other surahs.¹⁹

An admirable exception to this scholarly default is de Prémare's reading of Q 105 as a reference to the post-Muhammad battle of Qadisiyya, although his analysis is somewhat cursory.²⁰ While de Prémare is correct in rejecting the historicity of Abraha's alleged expedition against Mecca, and de Prémare's reading of the "elephant" as a reference to Persian war elephants correctly intuits the basic theme of Q 105,²¹ there is no need to invoke Qadisiyya as the historical referent, or to imaginatively relocate the surah's place of composition to Mesopotamia, when a simple Biblical reference – specifically, the narratives of 2 and 3 Maccabees – is far more plausible, insightful, and better attested.²²

¹⁸ See C.E. Bosworth, *The History of Tabari* (1999), Vol. 5, p. 223 n. 563 (analyzing the historicity of Abraha's expedition, and concluding that it is 'likely'). Watt likewise explains that "Muhammad is said to have been born in the Year of the Elephant. This was the year in which the Abyssinian prince or viceroy of the Yemen marched as far as Mecca with a large army which included an elephant. Scholars have hitherto been inclined to date the Year of the Elephant about 570, but recent discoveries in South Arabia suggest that the Persians overthrew the Abyssinian regime in the Yemen about this date, and the expedition may therefore have been a year or two earlier." W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (1973). On the following page, however, Watt cautions that "[n]ot much is known of Mecca during Muhammad's youth and early manhood. The available material is fragmentary, and it is difficult to separate the history in it from legend."

¹⁹ See N. Sinai, "The Qur'an As Process," *The Qur'ān In Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth (Leiden 2010), at p. 425 ("Both texts deal with local Meccan matters, the miraculous protection of the Meccan ḥaram against invaders in Q 105, and the God-given prosperity of the Meccans in Q 106."). According to Sinai, Q 105 and Q 106 together display "certain conspicuous discontinuities with the rest of the early (and later) Meccan surahs, and these discontinuities may be difficult to accommodate except by assuming that the two texts under discussion chronologically precede all other Qur'anic recitations." By contrast, the interpretation of Q 105 advanced in this paper raises no such difficulty, nor such conspicuous discontinuities.

²⁰ A.L. de Prémare, "Les Éléphants de Qadisiyya," *Arabica* 45 (Leiden 1998), pp. 261-269.

²¹ De Prémare makes a strong argument that Q 105 and Q 106 are independent pericopes.

²² De Prémare reads Q 105 as the product of post-Muhammad historical events, specifically the battle of Qadisiyya. The present analysis instead adheres more closely to the "Biblical subtext" methodology advanced by Reynolds. Cf. G. S. Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and its Biblical Subtext* (Routledge Studies in the Qur'ān; London 2010). The Biblical subtext of Q 105, as discussed herein, does not require the surah's text to be pre-Islamic, delivered by Muhammad himself, or composed post-Muhammad; it is relatively agnostic on that controversial front, although removing the Meccan historical context from Q 105 has broader implications.

5. “Maccabees” Books In Late Antiquity

A numerical sequence of books titled “Maccabees” is used to identify many different texts that circulated across the Near East during Late Antiquity, each with varying degrees of canonicity and prevalence in different religious traditions.

Roman Catholic Bibles include 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees as canonical texts. But Protestant Bibles categorize 1 and 2 Maccabees as Apocrypha. Rabbinical Judaism has not canonized any Maccabean texts. By contrast, Eastern Christianity has been more inclined to grant canonical status to ‘Maccabean’ texts, including 3 Maccabees. The Syriac Christian tradition, which is important because of its proximity to Qur’anic religious terminology and narrative, included 3 Maccabees in its early OT Peshitta manuscripts. As discussed below, 2 and 3 Maccabees form the critical Biblical subtext of Q 105; both texts center on God’s salvation of pious Jewish believers from destruction by royal war elephants.

Scholars have also identified several more books in the numerical series of 4-8 Maccabees, none of which were evidently canonical in any major tradition.²³ The Ethiopian Christian tradition – the traditional background for the alleged elephant assault on Mecca – has its own strikingly unique ‘Maccabean’ texts, called 1-3 Meqabyan.²⁴ Unlike 2 and 3 Maccabees, none of these more peripheral Maccabean and Meqabyan texts discuss elephantine assaults on pious monotheists.

So-called ‘Maccabean’ themes likely appealed across diverse historical and religious contexts because they depict an idealized model of monotheistic salvation, in which a besieged community of believers is assaulted by overwhelming ‘pagan’ or ‘polytheistic’ military forces, but is miraculously rescued through their unswerving faith and devotion to their Lord. The model also lends itself to eschatology, with Yahweh’s salvation of the Jews from pagan armies serving as a precursor of the Lord’s impending final intervention to save his faithful from threatening pagan powers – in Qur’anic terms, the *fur’qān*. Finally, Maccabean themes would have appealed to a broad range of monotheists, including Jews and Christians, and thus constitute ecumenical messages that could be delivered to a diverse community of believers.

²³ With the complicated partial exception of 4 Maccabees.

²⁴ The Bible used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church includes three books known as 1, 2, and 3 Meqabyan. Like the Qur’an, the Meqabyan books recount older Biblical stories in strikingly novel fashion, appropriating and restating Biblical narratives. For example, 1 Meqabyan involves an idol-worshipping king of Media and Midian, named “Tsirutsaydan,” a historical nickname for Antiochus IV. In 1 Meqabyan, however, the Seleucid Antiochus IV has been transformed into an ancient Israelite foe. A Benjamite called “Mebikyās” (*i.e.* Jonathan Maccabeus) subsequently leads a revolt against the evil Midianite king Akrandis, decapitating the king while he was dining – food still in mouth – as his brothers Judas and Meqabis (Simon Maccabeus) destroy the Midianite king’s army in the field.

6. 2 Maccabees – Divine Intervention Rescues The Jerusalem Jews From Annihilation By Seleucid War Elephants

2 Maccabees, a text originally composed in Greek, focuses on themes of fidelity, martyrdom, divine intervention, and bodily resurrection.²⁵ Seleucid war elephants, which epitomized Seleucid royal might, are a consistent threat to the Jews throughout 2 Maccabees, being mentioned in 2 Macc 11:4, 2 Macc 13:2, 2 Macc 13:15, 2 Macc 14:12, and 2 Macc 15:20-21.

The lead villain of 2 Maccabees is Nicanor, who is described as an elephantarch or “master/commander of elephants.” In 2 Macc 8, King Ptolemy appoints the godless Nicanor to attack the Jews. Nicanor gathers an army, promising that they will capture and sell the Jews as slaves in exchange for silver. Judas Maccabeus learns of the plan, however, and defeats Nicanor in time to faithfully celebrate the Sabbath.²⁶

After intervening battles, the new Seleucid King Demetrius again determines to attack the Jews, and “appointed Nicanor, who was the commander of his elephant forces [*i.e.* elephantarch], to be governor of Judea, and sent him there with orders to kill Judas, scatter his followers, and make Alcimus High Priest of the greatest Temple in all the world.” 2 Macc 14:12-13. The text is rather unclear whether this is the same Nicanor as 2 Macc 8,²⁷ but in any event the Nicanor of 2 Macc 14 is identified as a skilled elephant commander.

Nicanor learned that Judas and his men were in the Samaritan region, and so he decided to attack the Jewish forces on a Sabbath, when they could not fight back. The Jews who were forced to accompany Nicanor’s army begged him not to do such a cruel and savage thing, but rather to respect the day that the all-seeing God had honored and made the most holy of all days. Then Nicanor, who the text describes as the “lowest creature on Earth,” asked if there was some sovereign ruler in heaven who had commanded them to honor the Sabbath.

And the Jews replied, “Yes; the living Lord, who rules in heaven, commanded us to honor the Sabbath.” But Nicanor answered, “I am the ruler on earth, and I

²⁵ Martyrdom is particularly prominent. The Seleucids repeatedly try to force the Jews to violate God’s law, but meet staunch refusal. The most spectacular example is 2 Maccabees 7, which recounts hideous torments inflicted by the Seleucids on a Jewish mother and her seven sons, describing their tortures in grotesque detail. None of the Jews relents from their faith, instead accepting terrifying deaths with the expectation of bodily resurrection. “I am glad to die at your hands, because we have the assurance that God will raise us from death. But there will be no resurrection to life for you, Antiochus.” 2 Macc 7:14.

²⁶ “In this way, the evil Nicanor, who had brought a thousand merchants to buy the Jews, was defeated with the help of the Lord by the very people he despised so much. He threw off his splendid uniform and fled all alone like a runaway slave, until he reached Antioch. He had succeeded only in destroying his entire army. This man, who had tried to pay a debt to Rome by selling the people of Jerusalem, showed that the Jews could not be defeated. God was their mighty Defender, because they obeyed the laws he had given them.” 2 Macc 8:34-36.

²⁷ 1 and 2 Maccabees give different accounts of Nicanor’s campaigns against the Jews.

order you to take up your weapons and to do what the king commands.”
However, he did not succeed in carrying out his cruel plan.²⁸

Nicanor’s blasphemous plan illustrates his pagan contempt for God’s law. 2 Macc 15 reports that Nicanor’s plan failed on the field of battle, after Judas prayed to his Lord for aid against the overwhelming Seleucid army and the elephants that epitomized its power:

The enemy troops were already moving forward, with their cavalry on each side of them, and their elephants placed in strategic positions. Judas Maccabeus looked at the huge enemy force, the variety of their weapons, and their fierce elephants. Then he raised his hands toward heaven and prayed to the Lord, who works miracles, because he knew that the Lord gives victory to those who deserve it, not to those who have a strong army.

With their Lord’s miraculous assistance, the Jews easily prevailed against their Seleucid foes and accompanying elephants. “So by fighting with their hands and praying to God in their hearts, the Jews killed more than 35,000 of the enemy. How grateful they were for the help they had received from God!” 2 Macc 15:26-27.

Nicanor’s corpse was subjected to grotesque decapitation and dismemberment at the hands of Judas Maccabeus. The spectacular Maccabean victory over Nicanor was celebrated as a Jewish holiday. “By unanimous vote it was decided that this day would never be forgotten, but would be celebrated each year on the eve of Mordecai’s Day, which is the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, called Adar in Aramaic.” 2 Macc 15:36.

7. 3 Maccabees – Divine Intervention Rescues The Egyptian Jews From Annihilation By Ptolemaic War Elephants

3 Maccabees, also originally written in Greek, shifts antagonists from the Seleucids to the Ptolemaic Kingdom. The book’s name is a misnomer, as it involves no Maccabeans. Instead 3 Maccabees centers on the fate of Egyptian Jews under King Ptolemy IV (221-204 B.C.E). The genre is Greek historical romance. The fantastic narrative likely derives from memories of ancient Ptolemaic kings leading elephants into war against their foes, notably the Seleucids. Despite their different historical settings, scholars have consistently recognized that 2 and 3 Maccabees were composed in a very similar environment, at approximately the same time, with “striking[ly]” similar literary style and content. In marked contrast to Western Christian and later Jewish tradition, “the existence of an old Syriac translation implies a more general interest in the work on the part of the Syrian Church.”²⁹

²⁸ 2 Macc 15:1-5.

²⁹ See H. Anderson, “3 Maccabees,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. II, ed. J. Charlesworth (1983) p. 512. The Syriac Peshitta translation of 3 Maccabees has been described as tending towards free expansion and paraphrase. See N. Clayton Croy, *3 Maccabees* (Leiden 2006) p. xi.

The book's main plot is simple. King Ptolemy IV defeated his Seleucid enemy, Antiochus III, in battle; we know from Polybius that the historical battle of Raphia near Gaza included a significant component of war elephants on both sides, with King Ptolemy ultimately seizing many of the superior Seleucid war elephants as war booty.

After his great victory, King Ptolemy seeks to visit the sanctuary of the great Temple in Jerusalem. Bitterly offended when High Priest Simon forbids that visit, as it would desecrate the Temple, the King returns to Egypt and retaliates by oppressing the Jews there. When the Egyptian Jews resist, the enraged King seeks to destroy them entirely. By the King's order, the Egyptian Jews are all gathered together and confined to a large racing track (hippodrome) in Alexandria, slated for annihilation.

King Ptolemy devises an astonishing plan for destroying the trapped Jews: They shall be trampled to death by five hundred of his trained elephants, who will be driven into a rage by wine and frankincense. The King's plan begins poorly. God puts him to sleep two days in a row, so that he cannot lead his elephants against the Egyptian Jews.

But eventually the divinely-somnolent King heads to the racecourse with his 500 enraged and drunken elephants, eager to exterminate the entire Egyptian Jewry via elephantine trampling. Then a miracle happens. A pious older Jew, Eleazar, prays for divine intervention, and in answer God opens the gates of heaven from which two angels descend:

Then the most glorious, Almighty and true God showed forth his holy face and opened the heavenly gates from which descended two glorious angels, terrible to behold, who were apparent to all except to the Judeans, and they withstood the force of the opponents and filled them with confusion and dread and bound them fast with shackles. And even the body of the king was ashudder and forgetfulness overcame his indignant impudence. Then the beasts turned upon the armed forces accompanying them and began trampling and destroying them.³⁰

The King's own elephants trample and crush his soldiers into complete destruction. In a startling – and quite unbelievable – plot twist, the King experiences a radical conversion while witnessing the angel-maddened elephants trampling his prostrate and cowering troops. King Ptolemy denounces his own evil plan, and angrily blames his counselors. He declares a great festival for the Jews, releasing them with great fanfare. Thus 3 Maccabees ends in a blaze of *deus ex machina*, with the Egyptian Jews celebrating their divine salvation and enjoying an elaborately-described list of royal protections.

8. The Maccabean Subtext Of *Sūrat al-Fīl*

The parallels between 2 and 3 Maccabees and Q 105 are plain. All three texts involve an evil plan, devised by polytheistic royal antagonists, to use war elephants to destroy a pious community of monotheistic believers. In all three texts, the polytheists' evil plan is thrown into disarray and failure when, responding to the believers' unyielding devotion, the true God turns

³⁰ 3 Macc 6:19-21 (New English Translation of the Septuagint).

against their pagan tormentors and dramatically intervenes to save His chosen people. In all three instances, the polytheistic troops who accompany the elephants are left in ruins by God's astonishing intervention.

The Qur'anic account begins by noting that its audience already knows the underlying story; Q 105 opens with the phrase "have you not heard" (*a lam tara*). Q 105 then reminds its audience how their Lord (*rabbuka*) dealt with the companions of the elephant by making the companions' plan/plot (*kaydahum*) go astray (*taḍlīlin*). The Maccabean subtext explains this audience awareness – a community familiar with Biblical stories would have known the stirring tales of Jews being saved from marauding pagan forces and their war elephants through their unyielding fidelity to God. Those tales would have had particular resonance for monotheists in Late Antiquity, where the influence of a successor pagan imperial threat, the Sassanians – which was famed for its use of intimidating Indian war elephants – extended throughout Arabic-speaking regions.³¹

Why the Q 105 emphasis on the *kaydahum*, the evil plan, and its *taḍlīlin*, going astray? The Maccabean subtext provides insight. Both 2 and 3 Maccabees contain central episodes where the pagans' evil plan against the Jews performs an important narrative function *apart* from the plan's attempted execution.³²

In 2 Maccabees, Nicanor's sinister plan to attack the Jews on the Sabbath with an army of elephants is bitterly lamented by his Jewish advisors, and the plan thereby serves to contrast Nicanor's bottomless evil with Jewish fidelity to the divine law. 2 Macc 15:1-5. By focusing on his Sabbath-violating plan as a distinct plot subject, Nicanor's status as the "lowest person on Earth" is contrasted with the faithful Sabbath-observant Jews, who are God's chosen and beloved people. What appears to be the Jews' great weakness, their unyielding devotion to God's law, proves to be their salvation, because God will always reward that fidelity, while punishing the wicked who try to exploit it, dramatized as Nicanor and his plan.

In 3 Maccabees, King Ptolemy's extraordinary plan to exterminate the Egyptian Jews via drunken rampaging elephants is described at great length. But divine intervention repeatedly foils King Ptolemy's plan, initially by making the King fall asleep twice, and ultimately by sending the two invisible angels in response to Eleazar's prayer, who terrify the King's troops and turn the elephants back upon them, trampling the troops to death, just as the King had planned to crush the Egyptian Jews under his elephants' feet.

These evil plans in the Biblical texts form a superior explanation of the *kaydahum* reference in Q 105. But which of the two Maccabean texts and their evil plans is the specific Biblical subtext? Likely both together as a composite, though the possibility that it is either book alone cannot be disregarded. In 3 Maccabees, the King's elephants play the central role in the

³¹ The decisive early military engagement between the Sassanid Persians and the Arab Muslim army, the battle of Qadisiyya in 636 CE, reportedly included a Sassanid complement of 33 Indian war elephants. The Arab forces won a decisive victory against their Sassanid foes.

³² The many military campaigns recounted in the Maccabean texts would all have involved various plans. But only in specific instances is an evil plan named as a central narrative subject.

plot against the Jews, and are probably the stronger influence here. Yet the lack of expanded narrative detail in Q 105 – its cryptic concision – is consistent with the Qur’an’s habit of referring allusively to Biblical stories that its audience already knows. Further, when prevailing scriptural narratives potentially conflict (such as with the story of the sleepers³³), the Qur’an tends to focus on the shared central message, while discounting the differences as immaterial or uncertain. The central theme and message of both 2 and 3 Maccabees is admirably expressed in its Qur’anic reminder, Q 105, stripped of any conflicting narrative details.

This Biblical subtext makes perfectly good sense out of Q 105, particularly given that 2 and 3 Maccabees are both included in early manuscripts of the Syriac Old Testament Peshitta, a presumed influence. Rather than being understood as recounting an implausible historical episode when the polytheistic Quraysh invoked Allah to destroy the elephant army of a Christian ruler advancing upon Mecca, Q 105 is better understood as a straightforward reference to the widespread Biblical stories about the pious Jews of Antiquity who were saved from pagan armies and their rampaging elephants by God’s faithful intervention, foiling the pagans’ evil plan and turning the war elephants back upon their masters. The lesson is persevering in faith in your Lord against pagan worldly power.³⁴ When interpreted in light of this canonical Biblical subtext rather than the traditional Islamic subtext, Q 105 thus powerfully repeats and reinforces central Qur’anic themes. Like other ‘Early Meccan’ surahs, Q 105 commends piety and perseverance whereby the monotheistic believers will triumph against pagan oppression, emphasizing God’s fidelity as protector of his chosen community, and promising divine punishment of the polytheistic unbelievers. That same central theme is emphasized by many other Biblical stories, such as the splitting of the Red Sea, the salvation of Lūt, and so forth, which the Qur’an is fond of recounting. Q 105’s original audience would have readily understood these homiletic reminders, based on Biblical stories that the audience already knew in some form (*a lam tara?*).

9. Brimstone and Birds – or Rather Angels in Ranks – The Remainder of *Sūrat al-Fīl*

The remaining text of *Sūrat al-Fīl* is concisely discussed below. Although the ‘Maccabean’ reading of Q 105 advanced above does not hinge on this further analysis, it nonetheless illustrates how Q 105 should be read in congruence with fundamental Biblical and Qur’anic themes, rather than being understood in traditional fashion as a “conspicuous discontinuity”³⁵ that allegedly refers to a fantastic episode in the history of pre-Islamic Mecca.

³³ “Some would say, ‘They were three; their dog being the fourth,’ while others would say, ‘Five; the sixth being their dog,’ as they guessed. Say, ‘Seven, and the eighth was their dog.’ Say, ‘My Lord is the best Knower of their number.’ It is but few that know their real case. Enter not, therefore, into controversies concerning them, except on a matter that is clear. Nor consult any of them about the affair of the Sleepers.” Q 18:22.

³⁴ This message is consistent with Luxenberg’s reading of *Sūrat al-Kawthar*, Q 108, another ‘Early Meccan’ surah. In Luxenberg’s view, which some scholars have tentatively endorsed, the baffling Qur’anic term *al-Kawthar* in Q 108 is actually a Syriacism that should be understood as meaning *perseverance*, from the Syriac *kuttārā*, which God grants the believer against his *adversary*. See C. Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Qur’an* (2007), p. 295.

³⁵ See N. Sinai, “The Qur’an As Process,” *The Qur’ān In Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu*, ed. A. Neuwirth (Leiden 2010), p. 428.

The difficult language of Q 105:3-4 should be understood as a comparatively straightforward reference to a host of Biblical angels, ordered in ranks, who delivered divine punishment against the companions of the elephant.

Q 105:4 recounts the elephant companions' destruction by a rain of stones of baked clay (*bihijāratin min sijjīlin*). Although the *mufasssirūn* were not able to give a completely satisfactory explanation for what they recognized to be the foreign-derived word *sijjīlin*,³⁶ its rough contextual meaning is readily apparent because a parallel version of the phrase is used in Q 11:82, which recounts the destruction of Lūt's (the Biblical Lot's) sinful city by *hijāratan min sijjīlin*, i.e. "stones of baked clay" in the traditional understanding. Q 51:33 presents another parallel phrase, when divine messengers visiting Ibrāhīm's family proclaim that they were on a mission to hurl *hijāratan min fīnin* against a "criminal people," but had saved one Muslim household from that cryptic punishment – referring to the Biblical Lot's rescue. The Qur'anic term *sijjīlin* has thus generally been understood as the equivalent of the Arabic *tīnin* as used in Q 51:33, meaning clay.³⁷

Probably uncomfortable with birds dropping small clay balls that destroy an army through physical impact, traditional Islamic accounts (such as those relayed by Ibn Kathir) describe the clay balls as also having a pestilential effect, causing smallpox-type boils and making flesh rot off the victims' bones. Abraha reportedly died from such pestilential effects.

More likely the phrase refers to Biblical brimstone, and would be an Arabic allusion, using an exotic word derived from Middle Persian, to the Hebrew term for brimstone from Exodus 19:24, *gaphrith* (גַּפְרִית) – which meant burning sulfur. Q 11:82-83 further describes the *hijāratan min sijjīlin* as being "in layers," and "marked from your Lord," which suggests an inscribed divine order or judgment, perhaps consistent with the Arabicized foreign term *sijjīlin* being understood as a written command from a distant imperial sovereign, imaginatively delivered by Allah's angels as simultaneously both His written judgment and its execution. Q 51:33 varies the formula, with the *hijāratan min fīnin* being "marked for the transgressors," but unlike Q 11:83 the *fīnin* of Q 51:33 are not described as being in layers.

Thus Q 105:4 imagines the wicked pagan army being struck and destroyed by the equivalent of divine brimstone, consistent with the parallel language of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction in Q 11:82 and Q 51:33, as well as the Qur'an's general theme of divine punishment for scoffing oppressors. But there is one critical difference. In both Q 11:82 and Q 51:33, the *hijāratan min sijjīlin/fīnin* is rained down by a host of angels. Yet in the traditional view, Q 105 strangely identifies a 'flock of birds' as delivering that same punishment. Why the difference between these three Qur'anic uses of almost identical punishment language?

³⁶ See A. Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (1938), p. 164

³⁷ Nöldeke's chronology assigns Q 105 to the beginning of his First Meccan Period, Q 51 to the last part of the First Meccan Period, and Q 11 to the Third Meccan Period. It is curious that Q 51:33, with its use of the variant phrase *hijāratan min fīnin*, would chronologically precede Q 11:82, which shares the more archaic phrasing with Q 105. The variation may have reflected discomfort with the strange foreign term *sijjīlin*, as used in the earlier Q 105 text, and its replacement in Q 51:33 by what was then felt to be the closest Arabic equivalent, *fīnin*.

The answer is simple. There is no difference. All three Qur’anic instances of this unusual punishment language should be understood the exact same way: As the divine punishment hurled down by angels against wicked unbelievers. This makes the Qur’anic language consistent. It also comports with the Biblical subtext of *Sūrat al-Fīl*. At the crux of 3 Macc 6:18, God “opened the heavenly gates, from which two glorious angels of fearful aspect descended, visible to all but the Jews.” The angels then routed the Ptolemaic army and its elephants.³⁸ Q 105:4 should be understood as referring to divine punishment similarly delivered by an angelic host, saving the believers (i.e. Biblical Jews) from the companions of the elephant.

This ‘angelic’ reading of Q 105:4 helps solve several intractable problems in its preceding verse Q 105:3, which otherwise remains deeply enigmatic in its Classical Arabic reading as a “flock of birds,” *ṭayran abābīla*, which allegedly hurled the *sijjīlin* at the companions of the elephant. If Q 105:4 refers to brimstone, it is unclear why birds would aid its delivery against the infidels, much less ‘*abābīla*’ birds. Certainly no birds are mentioned in the parallel language of Q 11:82, when Allah destroys the sinners using a rain of *sijjīlin* – with angelic rather than avian delivery. And the Maccabean texts make little reference to birds.³⁹

It is proposed here that the *mufasssirūn* correctly understood *abābīla* to mean ‘divisions’ or a ‘succession of groups.’ But Q 105:3 uses that concept to describe a host of heavenly angels, not flocks of birds. *Abābīla* is simply an unusual word used to state the Qur’anic commonplace that a host of heavenly angels is ordered in ‘ranks’ or ‘rows’ – a concept so pervasive in Qur’anic discourse that an entire surah is entitled *Sūrat al-Şāffāt* (Q 37), the Surah of those Arranged in Ranks, meaning a host of angels arranged in rows. Another example is Q 89:22, where *rabukka* comes for the Day of Judgment *wal-malaku şaffan şaffan*. Likewise Q 8:9, traditionally understood as discussing the Battle of Badr, when the believers are reminded: “When ye sought help of your Lord and He answered you (saying): I will help you with a thousand of the angels, rank on rank [*mur’ difīna*]”⁴⁰ There are numerous other Qur’anic examples. Why did Q 105:3 use the hapax *abābīla* to express this stereotypical characteristic of an angelic host in ranks, rather than more typical Qur’anic equivalents like *şaffan*? A simple explanation is that such Arabic alternatives would have ruined the strict rhyme scheme of Q 105:1-4, which ends each recited verse in a pausal *īl*, while the unusual word *abābīla* works perfectly with that rhyme.

Last we deal with *ṭayran*, as used in Q 105:3, traditionally understood to mean “birds.” This literalism has confused the traditional exegesis of Q 105:3-4. Consistent with the discussion above, *ṭayran* should be understood as a simple metaphorical term for angels, which (like birds) were conceptualized and depicted as winged flying creatures in Christian and Islamic texts of Late Antiquity, including the Qur’an itself. Q 35:1 explicitly describes angels as winged

³⁸ Specifically, the two angels “opposed the forces of the enemy and filled them with confusion and terror, binding them with immoveable shackles. Even the king began to shudder bodily, and he forgot his sullen insolence. The beasts turned back upon the armed forces and began trampling and destroying them.” 3 Macc 6:19-21.

³⁹ With one notable exception. In 2 Macc 15:33, Judas Maccabeus boasts that he will cut out Nicanor’s tongue and feed it bit-by-bit to the birds.

⁴⁰ Pickthall tr.

creatures (*ajniḥatin*): “Praise be to Allah, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, Who appointeth the angels messengers having wings two, three and four.”⁴¹ Angels are thus understood in the Qur’anic discourse as being winged aerial creatures, for which *ṭayran* was a natural metaphor. Quite unlike literal birds, however, Biblical and Qur’anic angels are frequently described as descending from heaven to deliver God’s punishment – just as in 3 Macc 6:18-21. It makes fine Qur’anic sense for a host of winged angels (*ṭayran*) to descend from heaven arranged in ranks (*abābīla*), and to destroy the polytheistic oppressors with *biḥijāratin min sijjīlin*, just as angels do in the Q 11:82-3 and Q 51:33 parallel language.⁴²

This angelic interpretation is significantly more plausible than the traditional view that Q 105:3-4 recounts the time when Allah sent birds that threw stones of baked clay against Christian Ethiopian soldiers. Apart from interpreting *ṭayran* as a reference to angels, the interpretation does not require any novel understanding of the Arabic language or orthography of Q 105. Nor does it require an unusual understanding of the surah’s homiletic message, original social context, or composition. Instead it treats Q 105 as a coherent part of the overall Qur’anic corpus, rendering its language significantly more consistent with broader Qur’anic language and themes.

The surah’s final verse, Q 105:5, is comparatively simple, and describes the destroyed enemy forces as like straw or husks that have been devoured. Although the strange word *‘asf* gave Muslim exegetes considerable trouble, its contextual meaning, as the leftovers remaining after something else was devoured, seems plain enough. The surah’s concluding word *makūlin*, however, breaks the strict preceding *īl* end rhyme scheme, concluding Q 105:5 with *ūl*.

⁴¹ Pickthall tr.

⁴² This may help answer another Qur’anic puzzle: Why does Q 27:17 say that King Sulaymān commanded an army of “*jinn*, men, and birds” (*l-jini wal-insi wal-ṭayri*) who were set in “rows” (*yūza ‘ūna*)? In more archaic usage, the Arabic formula may have used *ṭayri* to mean angels, with the great Davidic king thus commanding a symmetric army of all three types of intelligent created beings, set in military rows. In Christian and Jewish traditions of Antiquity, King Solomon is renowned as a mighty magician who controlled demons and angels along with earthly troops; the pseudepigraphical text known as the *Testament of Solomon* is a good example. But as its monotheistic strictness grew, the Qur’anic milieu may have increasingly viewed Sulaymān’s legendary command of angels as an offensive polytheistic belief, since only Allah has the divine power to command His angelic messengers; *jinn* by contrast were relatively acceptable human servants. Muhammad himself, per Q 15:7, did not command angels. Fixing this *širk* problem in the inherited tradition, Sulaymān’s legendary army of *ṭayran* was reinterpreted in a more literal sense to mean innocuous birds rather than Allah’s own angels. If this admittedly speculative thesis is correct, the Sulaymān stories in the standard Qur’anic text reflects a stage in which this semantic transition was almost completed. By the time Q 27 was composed, Sulaymān now led a literal avian armada, presented in colorful new stories.

10. Conclusion

Sūrat al-Fīl is an evocative text despite its brevity. It would have had considerable power in Late Antiquity, when recited to an Arabic-speaking audience as a poetic reference to the canonical (in Eastern Christianity) Biblical narratives of 2 and 3 Maccabees. Q 105 invokes and repeats the powerful theme of monotheistic devotion that brings salvation via divine punishment of the oppressing polytheists, the same theme which forms the core of 2 and 3 Maccabees, using the same striking motif of royal war elephants as both the symbol and embodiment of hostile pagan power.

With their shared emphasis on martyrdom, perseverance, and divine salvation, the books of 2 and 3 Maccabees present religious views that converge upon what later emerged as Qur'anic theology, and comport with the ecumenical basic Biblical monotheism that scholars have increasingly identified as part of the early Qur'anic milieu. As one of the most archaic Qur'anic compositions, Q 105 would have seized upon its audience's existing knowledge regarding this scriptural tradition of shared Jewish and Christian salvation narratives, which almost any Arabic-speaking monotheist could recognize and heed as a divine message.

That point is reinforced when Q 105:3-4 is interpreted as a reference to a host of angels, arranged in ranks, who descended from heaven to deliver the divine punishment against the wicked pagans, thereby saving the prior Biblical believers.

By contrast to this simple and coherent interpretation of Q 105 based upon widely-known Biblical subtext, the traditional Islamic exegesis of Q 105 (and its secular scholarly equivalent) is sorely afflicted by legendary details, contradictions, and historical problems.