

## The Birth of Prophet Muḥammad in the Qur’ān: A Critical Analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ’s Thought in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja fī Tathbūt al-Nubuwwa*

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Published date: 20 December 2018

To cite this article: Azmi, A.S. 2018. The birth of Prophet Muḥammad in the Qur’ān: A critical analysis of al-Jāḥiẓ’s thought in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja fī Tathbūt al-Nubuwwa*. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 25(Supp.1): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2018.25.s1.5>

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**Abstract.** According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Muḥammad was born in the Year of the Elephant, the year of Abraha’s unsuccessful expedition against Mecca. Relying on references made from the Qur’ānic text alone, not a single verse refers definitively to the event of the Prophet’s birth. However, some Muslim biographers have chosen *sūrah al-Fīl* of the Qur’ān as the verse which carries an early sign of the Prophet’s emergence, while others attributed this chapter to the event of the Prophet’s birth. Al-Jāḥiẓ was among them, and this notion was articulated in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja fī Tathbūt al-Nubuwwa*, where he expressed his opinion on the exegesis of this chapter. Thus, the present study aims to explore the narrative of the Prophet’s birth, analyse the historical connection between the occurrence and *sūrah al-Fīl* and examine hermeneutical responses of Muslim exegetes on the verse, especially al-Jāḥiẓ. The study is qualitative in nature in which the researcher employed both critical and analytical approaches to the works of *tafsīr* and *sīra*. Findings of this study assert that conviction and zeal to authenticate the story of the People of the Elephant seems to have influenced al-Jāḥiẓ to adduce *sūrah al-Fīl* as a solid basis of evidence of the whole truth of this narrative.

**Keywords and phrases:** Abraha, al-Jāḥiẓ, infancy, Muḥammad, prophethood

### Introduction: Development of Muslim Exegesis of *Sūrah al-Fīl*

In general, *sūrah al-Fīl* of the Qur’ān appears to be entirely about a famous incident in the Arabian Peninsula that took place before the beginning of the preaching of the Islamic teachings. It occurred prior to the birth of Muḥammad (pbuh), and the entire chapter has been dedicated to this significant incident. Every verse in the chapter articulates scenarios of the occasion; and apparently there is

no ideal connection to be alluded to the event of Muḥammad's birth. Most of the second-century Muslim's exegetes only give a literal interpretation of each verse. Mujāhid (d.102/722) and al-Ḍahhāk (d.105/725), for instance, focus on explaining the meaning of particular words, and both of them seem to concentrate more on presenting their comprehension of the words *abābil* and *ma'kūl* (Mujāhid 1989; al-Ḍahhāk 1999). Philological elucidation and linguistic approaches dominate their nature of interpretation; and yet there is no clear association between this chapter and the birth of the Prophet in Islamic sources from the first half of the second century.

However, when it came to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d.150/767), the way Muslims understood the Qur'ān indicates a slight growth in theological development. In his *tafsīr*, Muqātil made a brief allusion to the event of Muḥammad's birth in his interpretation of the chapter, suggesting that the Prophet was born forty years after the incident (al-Azadī 2003). Muqātil seems to be among the earliest exegetes to connect these Qur'ān's verses to the occasion of Muḥammad's birth. However, this connection did not become a regular feature of Qur'ānic exegesis. The third century Muslim scholars, al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 211/826) and al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), did not mention this particular event in their *tafsīr* of this chapter; al-Ṣan'ānī simply quotes Ma'mar ibn al-Rāshid's (d. 153/770) commentary, while al-Tustarī writes only a simple explanation when interpreting this chapter. There is no direct reference to Muḥammad in this context in either of their works (al-Ṣan'ānī n.d.; al-Tustarī 1423 AH).

It is equally interesting to note that al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), an eminent scholar renowned for compiling all the available sources, did not make any reference to Muhammad's birth when commenting on this chapter in his *tafsīr*. Two related conclusions may be drawn from an analysis of his works: he appears to have believed that there could not have been any possible relationship between this chapter and the narrative of the Prophet's birth. In this particular *sūrah*, there is certainly no evidence that al-Ṭabarī developed any theological interpretation of his own in writing *tafsīr*. His technique appears as entirely derivative in this *sūrah*, as he did not develop his own theological interpretation of the chapter, but merely adduced traditions related to it. In the same vein, neither did Ibn Abi Zamānayn (d. 399/1008), a fourth-century Muslim commentator on the Qur'ān, make any reference to the Prophet's birth in his commentary on *sūrah al-Fīl* (Ibn Abi Zamānayn 2002). Examining all these kinds of Muslim exegeses, it is worth noting that most of Muslim scholars, from the first to the end of the fourth century did not mention any particular relationship between *sūrah al-Fīl* and the birth of Muḥammad. Most of them simply drew their attention to a literal elucidation of the chapter.

## Al-Jāḥiẓ and the Prophet Muḥammad's Birth in *Tafsīr*

Muslim understanding of references to Muḥammad's birth in the Qur'ān was gradually nurtured at the outset of the fifth/eleventh century, when al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1036) tried to determine the exact date of the invasion of Mecca led by Abraha (al-Tha'labī 2002). In his *tafsīr*, al-Tha'labī presented all reports related to the Prophet's birth and the invasion of Abraha. While it is uncertain precisely why he used Muḥammad's birth as the point from which to deduce the exact date of Abraha's invasion, it should be noted that the connection between these two events was thus revitalised. Al-Baghawī (d. 510/1116) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 543/1148) did the same approach in their *tafsīr*, without any further explanation of the connection between these two events (al-Baghawī 2000; al-Zamakhsharī 1407 AH).

When it came to Ibn Kathīr, the association between Muḥammad's birth and Abraha's invasion became more significant. According to Ibn Kathīr, *sūrah al-Fīl* of the Qur'ān was not only revealed to remind the Quraysh of one of the favours God had done them; but it was also regarded as giving a sign to them from God, as well as preparing the way for the coming of the Messenger of Allah. Ibn Kathīr said:

However, this was a mean of giving a sign and preparing the way for the coming of the Messenger of Allah. For verily, he was born during that same year, according to the most popular opinion. So the tongue of destiny was saying, "We will not help you, O people of Quraysh, because of any status you may have over the Ethiopians (Abyssinians). We are only helping you in order to defend the Ancient House (the Ka'bah), which We will honor, magnify, and venerate by sending the unlettered Prophet, Muḥammad, the Finality of all Prophets". (Ibn Kathīr 1419 AH)

The connection between Muḥammad and this chapter gained strength in later centuries. When examining these verses, Sayyid Quṭb elucidates this chapter as a revelation from God that conveys a significant message about the authenticity of Muḥammad's mission. Every single action accomplished by him, even anything related to his surroundings, was purely designed by God alone. In his *tafsīr*, Sayyid Quṭb adduces the tradition that relates the story of how Muḥammad's camel sat down some distance from Mecca on the day when the Hudaybiyya peace agreement was concluded. Muḥammad said: "She has been prevented by the same will which debarred the Elephant from entering Mecca" (Quṭb 1412 AH). Even though this tradition is presented to show Muḥammad's acknowledgment of Abraha's invasion, it also implies that there is a clear development of thought among Muslims through the ages. Sayyid Quṭb's *tafsīr* presents novel and additional

information that we might not find it in sources from previous generations. He also adduced the narration of Muḥammad's speech on the day of the conquest of Mecca. Muḥammad stated: "Allah has protected Mecca against the Elephant but He allowed His messenger and the Believers to conquer it (few years later)" (Qutb 1412 AH). Both these traditions indicate a strong relationship between the Prophet and God who reveals the Qur'ān; and it implies that the failure of Abraha's invasion and the later conquest of Mecca led by Muḥammad demonstrate part of God's delicate plan and his satisfaction with Muḥammad's accomplishment.

To summarise, after analysing the facts that accumulated from the various kind of Muslim *tafsīr*, there is a strong indication that Muslim exegetes, from the first to the end of the fourth century, did not refer to any particular relationship between *sūrah al-Fīl* and the birth of Muḥammad. Furthermore, it is hard to find Muslim commentators who relate this chapter as a sign of prophethood, when the chapter itself apparently fails to yield any connection to the event of the Prophet's life. Their centre of discussion in this chapter focuses mainly on linguistic points of view. A modern study has suggested that it is hard to find a solid connection between historical event of the Prophet's early life and the Qur'ān (Azmi 2016). It is surprising, however, that the connection between the *sūrah* and the event of the Prophet's birth is to be found in the work of al-Jāḥiẓ, the third/ninth century scholar. Further analysis needs to be done to scrutinise how this connection appears.

### **Al-Jāḥiẓ and His Qur'ānic Discourse**

Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/869) was an eminent Arab multidisciplinary scholar, *Mu'tazilite* theologian, and an expert in both linguistic and literature. Apart from its emphasis upon linguistic disciplines, the Basra school had a pronounced influence on al-Jāḥiẓ's Qur'ānic knowledge. The Basra school was recognised as an important educational institution in the development of the science of *qira'āt* and *tafsīr* (Shah 2003) and its significant contribution to the problem of *maṣāḥif* is undeniable (Maṣṣūr 1968). As Pellat concludes, receiving an early education in one of the finest institutions of Arabic and Qur'ānic education, the birth place of Arabic prose (Pellat 1969), helped to develop al-Jāḥiẓ's undoubted flair in literacy and also his intellectual skills, which became the most significant interpretive device in his exploration of the meaning of the Qur'ān.

Besides linguistic proficiency, the intellectual fellowship provided by his association with *al-Kuttāb* and Masjidiites nurtured and enriched his fundamental knowledge of religious matters quite considerably. His *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*,

al-Jāḥiẓ mentioned names that could be regarded as his Qurʾānic instructors. The first is Mūsā ibn Sayyār al-Aswārī (al-Ziriklī 2002), who al-Jāḥiẓ described as one of the “wonders of the world”, a scholar eloquent in delivering Qurʾānic exegesis in Arabic and Persian languages. Furthermore, al-Jāḥiẓ honoured him as the next best Qurʾānic reciter after Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, the Prophet’s companion (al-Jāḥiẓ 1423 AH; Kilito 2008). Even though Mūsā won praise from al-Jāḥiẓ himself, he seems not to have been a very familiar figure among *mufasssirūn* (the Qurʾān’s commentators). Mūsā’s opinion is only recorded in *Tafsīr al-Baḥr Muḥiṭ* and *Tafsīr al-Dur al-Maṣūn* with regard to the method of recitation (*al-qirāʿat*), and not as Qurʾānic interpretation (al-Andalūsī 1420 AH; al-Halabī n.d). The other Qurʾānic scholar mentioned by al-Jāḥiẓ in this work is Abū ʿAlī al-Uswārī, who, according to him, was a master in Qurʾānic exegesis, and who delivered his lectures for 36 years in mosques.

Al-Jāḥiẓ illustrates his Qurʾānic expertise by emphasising the meticulous care and time he consumed in explaining just one verse of the Qurʾān. According to him, because of Abū ʿAlī’s immense knowledge of the *siyār* (the Prophet’s history), *wujūh al-taʾwīlāt* (different kinds of Qurʾānic interpretations) and hadīth, his explanation of one verse could take weeks to complete. Unlike Mūsā al-Aswārī, Abū ʿAlī seemed to have gained popularity among *mufasssirūn*. His opinion is cited in *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī (2000), al-Thaʿlabī (2002), Ibn ʿAṭīyya (1422 AH), Ibn al-Jawzī (1422 AH), al-Qurṭubī (1964), Ibn Kathīr (1419 AH), al-Shawkānī (1414 AH) and others. Apart from being well-versed in the area of Qurʾānic studies, al-Jāḥiẓ was also renowned as a pupil of scholars of ḥadīth (Pellat 1969), theology, especially the *Muʿtazilite* doctrine (Aḥmad 2005), and similarly, in Arabic literature and language. His amassing of this great wealth of knowledge on religious subjects undoubtedly sharpened his view and enhanced his understanding, in particular of his study of the Qurʾān.

The intellectual works of al-Jāḥiẓ evidently impressed his contemporaries and even the later scholars. Indeed, Abū Muḥammad al-Andalūsī is most fulsome, even hyperbolic, in his praise of al-Jāḥiẓ, and asserts that he “would be more than satisfied to swap the graces of the heaven with the works of al-Jāḥiẓ” (Yaḳūt 1993). More than 200 titles of his works are known (Thomas 2009; Murād 2011; Shatūh 2009). Of these, many comprise specific discussions of Qurʾānic discourse, including *Masāʾil al-Qurʾān*, *Maʿāni al-Qurʾān*, *Āyy al-Qurʾān*, *Naẓm al-Qurʾān* and *Kitāb Khalq al-Qurʾān* (al-Baghdādī 1951). Al-Jāḥiẓ’s undoubted dedication to the composition of particular works devoted to Qurʾānic discourse indicates his fresh notions and broad knowledge of Qurʾānic discourse.

A distinguishing feature of al-Jāḥiẓ's work is that, occasionally, the titles of his compositions appear as a mainspring (or possibly an emblem) of Qur'ānic inspiration. Arifin's observations suggest that the title of al-Jāḥiẓ's work, *Kitāb al-Zar' wa al-Nakhl wa al-Zaitūn wa al-A'nāb* (The Book of Agriculture and the Cultivation of Palm, Fig and Grapes), is adapted from verse 16:11 of the Qur'ān (Arifin 2005). Montgomery offers another intriguing analysis. According to him, al-Jāḥiẓ's work, *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* may be more appropriately translated as "The Book of Living" rather than "The Book of Animal". He finds evidence that al-Jāḥiẓ himself alludes to this meaning. However, what is more important is that this translation is in profound congruence with the Qur'ānic notion alluded to in 29:64. In this verse, the word *al-Ḥayawān* connotes "living"; and therefore Montgomery believes that al-Jāḥiẓ intended this title to convey the unique nature of the specific Qur'ānic context of the word (Montgomery 2013). These interesting observations show al-Jāḥiẓ's both profound and penetrating understanding of the Qur'ān. Exploring and employing the Qur'ān as his supportive evidence, the present researcher merely ponders the similar notion as proposed by Montgomery. In a broader sense, al-Jāḥiẓ apparently does not confine the scope of discussion in *al-Ḥayawān* on the animal only but rather indicates all the living things.

It is apparent that Qur'ānic thought is established as the fundamental bedrock of his work, and the pervading influence of Qur'ānic teaching may be traced throughout it. Zabidi found that al-Jāḥiẓ's satirical work, *Kitāb al-Tarbī' wa al-Tadwīr*, demonstrates a very strong Qur'ānic influence, both in language and content (Zabidi 1983). Al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* is yet another work that witnesses the impact of Qur'ānic discourse, especially his allusion to Satan and his actions. Al-Jawzī offers another instance in which, according to him, the story of Cain and the concept of *al-ḥasad* (envy) is clearly evident and al-Jāḥiẓ's *al-Rasā'il al-Adabiyya* bears strong evidence of Qur'ānic inspiration (Ibn al-Jawzī 1422 AH).

### ***Kitāb al-Ḥujja fī Tathbīt al-Nubuwwa***

The full title of the work is *Kitāb al-Ḥujja fī Tathbīt al-Nubuwwa*, which appears in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, a title ascribed by al-Jāḥiẓ himself. Later scholars, however, bestow several different names to this work, possibly due to the loss of the complete original work, which necessitated the re-naming of the work, based on the remaining content which survived only in fragments (Arifin 2005). Some parts of the work are clearly absent. Since the scope of the present study is only on the subject of the Prophet's birth, the incident of Abraha and its Qur'ānic reference, the researcher believes that the similar content are mentioned in the source of his disposal. For example, in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, al-Jāḥiẓ elaborates the event of Abraha's incursion into Mecca with his elephants and refers specifically to the



event, which he declares “has a long discussion on it and we have delivered it in the *Kitāb al-Hujja*”. In this context, *Kitāb al-Hujja* here in high possibility is referring to the present work of this study (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH; see also Arifin 2005; Thomas 2009).

### **Al-Jāḥiẓ's Methodology: Analysing Qur'ānic References in *Kitāb al-Hujja fī Tathbūt al-Nubuwwa***

To analyse why al-Jāḥiẓ invented the connection between the event of the Prophet's birth with *sūrah al-Fīl*, the researcher initiated the study by examining al-Jāḥiẓ's method in consulting Qur'ānic verses in his work. Qur'ānic references cited by al-Jāḥiẓ in this work are infrequent. Indeed, there is an obvious differences between the method of *ahl al-ḥadīth* (Azmi 2017b) and the style of al-Jāḥiẓ who is also known as a *Mu'tazilite* scholar. In exploring the meaning of the Qur'ān, *ahl al-ḥadīth* such as Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Bukhārī appear to employ the method of *tafsīr bi al-ma'thūr* (tradition-based exegesis) as an instrument of interpretation. Both scholars also demonstrate their Qur'ānic-based approach in discussions regarding doctrinal, legal and historical issues in their works (Azmi 2017d). On the other hand, al-Jāḥiẓ's method in analysing the subject might be the result of his particular mode of discourse, which was influenced by *Mu'tazilite* methods of reason and logic, in which such an argument is usually presented within a particular rational and logical framework rather than drawing solely on religious tradition. Compared to previous Muslim scholars such as Ibn al-Layth and Ibn Rabban (Azmi et al. 2017), al-Jāḥiẓ cites the fewest Qur'ānic references, only 16 references are given in this work, and this includes some of the verses which are later repeated two or three times. Nevertheless, like the other authors, Qur'ānic references employed by al-Jāḥiẓ are included to support his argument on a particular issue. The references may be summarised as follows:

1. At the beginning of a discussion, al-Jāḥiẓ explains that certain evidence is sometimes insufficient in itself to achieve the objective that was intended by its author. According to al-Jāḥiẓ, this phenomenon has already been elucidated in the Qur'ān when the Prophet was sent with all of his divine guidance and evidence but was, even so, still unable to convince the non-believer to accept its veracity. In this regard, al-Jāḥiẓ offers references from the Qur'ān (9:33 and 61:8), which illustrate that God has sent His prophet with guidance “to prevail” (*liyuzhirahu*) over all religions, but the non-believer is persistently denying and refusing to accept the guidance. Explaining the meaning of verse 9:33, the author proposes that “the most basic level on which ‘to prevail’ is by presenting the evidence (*iẓhār al-ḥujja*) to those who resist God”. Setting the references (9:33 and

61:8) in context, these verses actually alluded to the People of the Book (*ahl al-Kitāb*), in which this phrase usually connotes the Jews and Christian. Considering this context, it is reasonable to suggest that al-Jāḥiẓ in his introduction has offered an indication or intimation to his audience, to whom the work was addressed, by quoting these references from the Qur’ān. The third reference cited by al-Jāḥiẓ strengthens this hypothesis, when he introduces verse 34:28 of the Qur’ān, which says: “We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin)”. This verse apparently indicates that the intended audience of the work (the proof of Prophethood) was not exclusively Muslims, but included non-Muslims too, Jews and Christians specifically.

Commenting on verse 9:33, al-Jāḥiẓ suggests that at a fundamental level, the proclamation of guidance and prevailing upon the audience of the religion of truth is two-fold: the first stage is achieved by adducing true evidence (*iẓhār al-ḥujja*) (al-Jāḥiẓ 1964); the second is established through acquiring political power. This unique interpretation seems to be a novel analysis propagated by al-Jāḥiẓ. Previous commentators, including Muqātil, Yaḥyā ibn Salām, al-Ṣan’ānī and al-Tustarī had never attained the originality of al-Jāḥiẓ’s approach, method or reasoning. It would not be until about a century later that al-Maturīdī, in his *tafsīr, Ta’wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah*, produced a reading which employs an approach similar to al-Jāḥiẓ’s. Interpreting the verse, al-Maturīdī clarifies its meaning by proposing two possible interpretations. According to him, the first is God disseminates His guidance and the religion of truth by endowing the Prophet with evidence and proofs (*bi al-ḥujaj wa al-āyāt*). The second interpretation is that God reveals the religion of truth through His Prophet, by the expansion of Islamic territory. Al-Jāḥiẓ’s proposition, with his original commentary of the verse, implies his deep understanding of the Qur’ān (al-Maturīdī 2005).

2. With regard to the reason why God sends the prophets, al-Jāḥiẓ cites verse 4:165 of the Qur’ān. Chronologically, this verse has been used by Ibn al-Layth in same ground – to explain the reason for sending the prophets. Among *mufasssirūn* (between the eighth and ninth centuries), Muqātil’s commentary seems to be in agreement with this reading. However, he places the verse in a specific context. According to him, verse 4:165 is apparently revealed within a specific setting, namely the one in which the Jews were questioning Muḥammad about Moses. It is in response to



this question that God revealed 4:164 to clarify the issue. Elucidation continues with verse 4:165, in order to explain the reason for sending the prophets (al-Azadi 2003). Furthermore al-Jāḥiẓ elaborates that humankind needs prophets in order to learn ways of worshipping God, learn the stories of previous nations and prophets and identify benefits (*maṣāliḥ*) for them.

3. Al-Jāḥiẓ continues to illuminate the astounding truth of Muḥammad's message – even in the contexts of differing races, human nature and cultural backgrounds, the people of the world embrace his mission with astonishing rapidity. He then develops his line of reasoning by arguing that human beings of widely differing backgrounds, coming from different provenance still may identify a message of truth. For this reason, the willing acceptance of Muḥammad's prophethood by people from diverse multiracial backgrounds from different nationalities proves the veracity of Muḥammad's prophethood. By explaining the diversity of humankind and their countries, al-Jāḥiẓ supports the significance of loving one's homeland by adducing verse 4:66 from the Qur'ān and claiming: "God compared the attachment to ones homeland with attachment to life itself" (al-Jāḥiẓ 1964).
4. It is obvious in this work that, one of al-Jāḥiẓ's methods of adducing Qur'ānic references is by employing them to illustrate the circumstances of historical events. For example, to give a picture of how the Jews refused Moses' message, he quotes verses 7:138, 4:153 and 5:24, references which illustrate the Jews' refusal to embrace Moses' call (al-Jāḥiẓ 1964). In portraying the rejection of the message of Muḥammad by the people of Mecca, and their excuses for refusing to accept and believe in the Qur'ān, al-Jāḥiẓ quotes verses 8:31, 25:32, 10:15 and 25:4 (al-Jāḥiẓ 1964). He also offers chapter 105th of the Qur'ān to depict the story of the companions of elephant (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH). As mentioned before, this last reference is only found in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* where al-Jahiz alludes to the discussion as "we have delivered it in the *Kitāb al-Ḥujja*".

### **Qur'ānic References to the Prophet Muḥammad's Early Life**

Not only are the Qur'ānic references found in this work small in number, the references to Muḥammad's early life are almost as hard to trace. There exist only two direct references to the Prophet's early life. The first reference is to his admirable attitude and personal conduct, as recognised by the Arabs before his ascendance to the prophethood. In fact, no Qur'ānic reference is employed here.

The second reference concerns the story of Abraha's incursion into Mecca with his elephant troops, during which God's divine intervention protected the holy city from an aggressive invasion. Only in this section does al-Jāḥiẓ cite chapter 105th of the Qur'ān to give a solid historical value and context to the story. Analysing the story and its Qur'ānic context, al-Jāḥiẓ in his *al-Hayawān* asserts that the elephants that were used by the Christian ruler of Yemen to attack Mecca were proof of Muḥammad's prophethood. The elephant at the head of the incursion stopped short of the boundary of the city, refusing to advance. The name of the elephant as mentioned by al-Jāḥiẓ and Ibn Hishām, was Maḥmūd' (Ibn Hishām 1955). Maḥmūd's fellow fighting elements followed his lead and similarly refused to attack. The account of Maḥmūd's stubborn refusal to attack the city of Mecca is offered as a proof of Muḥammad's impending advent. It is reasonably self-evident that "Maḥmūd" foreshadows "Muḥammad" (in his fight protecting the truth), and that the other elephants are a metaphor for the *umma*. For this reading, it is no wonder that Manṣūr in his thesis proposes that: "He (al-Jāḥiẓ) holds the miracle (the event of the elephants) as an affirmation in advance of Muḥammad's prophecy and an exaltation of his position" (Manṣūr 1968).

So far as this research is able to establish, there is no other reference to Muḥammad's early life in this work. There is just one Qur'ānic verse employed by al-Jāḥiẓ to allude to Muḥammad's early life. Even so, al-Jāḥiẓ does mention the famous battle which took place during the war of *al-Fijār*, in which the Prophet participated in his teenage years. However, this story as presented by al-Jāḥiẓ, is not employed as reference to Muḥammad; rather, it is mentioned by the author to illustrate his acquaintance with the narrative itself. With his deep understanding of Qur'ānic sciences and wide knowledge of ḥadīth and Islamic tradition, al-Jāḥiẓ seems hesitant to ascribe an occurrence during Muḥammad's early life as tangible evidence of his prophethood.

In his other works, al-Jāḥiẓ is cautious and lists those instances that indicate his acquaintance with the account of Muḥammad's early life. This includes, for example, the nobility of the Prophet's genealogy (al-Jāḥiẓ n.d.); mention of Muḥammad's wet nurse, Ḥalīma al-Sa'diyya (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH); his account of the *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl* (league of the virtuous) (Ibrahim 1982); and his narration of the events of *Ḥarb al-Fijār* (sacrilegious war) (Landau-Tasserion 2014), both incidents which were attended by the Prophet. All of these accounts imply al-Jāḥiẓ's knowledge of Muḥammad's early biography. Again, in all these narrations, no Qur'ānic verses are cited, which leads us to conclude that even with his profound understanding of the Qur'ān and intense familiarity with the Prophet's history, it is difficult to establish a strong relationship between the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's early life in al-Jāḥiẓ's work, especially in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja*.

Given his biographical details, one might acknowledge that al-Jāḥiẓ was a central figure during this particular period. He was widely recognised as a celebrated scholar in Basra and Baghdad. Having learned from distinguished experts in a multiplicity of intellectual disciplines, his own intellectual discourse evidently impressed his contemporaries, and even later scholars. In fact, he was appointed initially by the court to provide an education for the children of Caliph al-Mutawakkil (reign between 847–861, d. 861). Given recognition by the court, and being a figure of public audience at the centre of the Islamic empire, he possessed a very advanced level of scholarship, had access to intellectual works and discourse, and was known as a prominent scholar of his time. Nevertheless, his discourse about the Prophet's life, adduces barely any references from the Qur'ān. This suggests that the connection between the Qur'ān and the narratives of the Prophet's life is fragile, and was not an association that was either made or widely understood at the time.

### **Qur'ānic References to the Prophet Muḥammad's Birth**

It is evident that al-Jāḥiẓ employed *sūrah al-Fīl* as his reference to the narrative of the Prophet's birth which according to him, the destruction of Abraha and his elephant troops is a sign of the birth of the final prophet. Indeed, a literal reading of the *sūrah al-Fīl* does not hold any information about the Prophet's birth; but later scholars tend to use it as an allusion to the sign of the emergence, the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad (Ibn Kathīr 1419 AH; al-Ṣāliḥī 1993). In the *sīra*, Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām adduce verses from the *sūrah*, merely to demonstrate the religious, historical and social context and milieu of the event by using the words of the Qur'ān itself. Furthermore, according to Ibn Ishāq, when the Prophet was rejected by his own people, God revealed this *sūrah* to remind them of God's mercy in protecting Mecca and surrounding major trade routes from any harm (Ibn Hishām 1955). Al-Jāḥiẓ, however, offers a novel appraisal. Rather than employing the *sūrah* as an auxiliary element to elucidate the context and scope of the event, al-Jāḥiẓ provides a further inference to the purpose of the *sūrah*, in which, according to him, the whole *sūrah* is an evidentiary instrument to vindicate the truth of Muḥammad's prophethood. Moreover, he deems the miraculous event as an initial sign of the advent of the Prophet (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH).

In order to analyse the *sūrah*, it is appropriate to examine the entirety of its verses. The *sūrah* says:

Have you not considered, (O Muḥammad), how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did He not make their plan into misguidance? And He sent against them birds in flocks, striking them with stones of hard clay, and He made them like eaten straw. (*Sūrah al-Fīl*: 1–5)

Literally, the *sūrah* does not appear to have any bearing on the Prophet's birth or the sign of the emergence of the Prophet. In fact, the events narrated in the *sūrah* were described somewhat ambiguously. The identity of *aṣḥāb al-fīl* (the People of the Elephant) was obscure; and the reason for God's destruction of them is uncertain. What is apparent on the surface, however, is that, God reminds Muḥammad to ponder the story of how He deals with the People of the Elephant, whereas the rest of the *sūrah* explains how God foils the plan organised by the People of the Elephant. It is worth noting that there is not much detail regarding either the characters or the plot of the story. In contrast, the Islamic tradition is furnished in great detail with personalities and the plot of the story. The People of the Elephant are identified as Abyssinians; their leader is Abraha; the target is the Ka'ba; the elephant's name is Maḥmūd, the *mahout* (*sā'is*, or elephant-handler) is Unays; and the Meccan negotiator is 'Abd Muṭṭalib. The paucity and obscurity of information in the actual *sūrah* is, in fact, elucidated in great detail in the work of *sīra* (Shahīd 2001).

Besides the considerable detail, the *sūrah* also employs verses of *sūrah al-Fīl* to cast a light on the event. They provide an interpretation of the verse to illuminate the narration. According to Ibn Ishāq, the *sūrah* was revealed to remind the Quraysh of God's mercy to them (Ibn Hishām 1955). However, Ibn Hishām offers a literal interpretation of apparently ambiguous words in the *sūrah* [i.e., *abābīl* (in flocks) and *sijjīl* (hard clay)] (Ibn Hishām 1955). It is interesting to note that al-Jāḥiẓ comes to offer a different and more confident interpretation: besides a parallel reading with Ibn Ishāq in recognising the *sūrah* as a mechanism to silent Muḥammad's opponents, al-Jāḥiẓ in his *al-Ḥayawān*, asserts that the event as pictured in the *sūrah* is, in actual fact, an early sign of Muḥammad's prophethood. He informs the reader, moreover, that the topic has already been covered thoroughly by him in his special discussion of Muḥammad's prophethood in his work entitled *Kitāb al-Ḥujja* (The Book of Evidence). This idea recurs in his other work, *Risāla Faḍl Hāshim 'Alā 'Abd Shams*. In this epistle (*risāla*) the event is described as *irhāṣ*, a theological term which denotes an early sign of prophethood (al-Jāḥiẓ n.d.). Asserting the same concept in his various works repeatedly, al-Jāḥiẓ implies the depth and seriousness of his nature in convincing the reader of his belief that the miraculous incident is, without doubt, an early sign of Muḥammad's prophethood.

### **Creating Connection between Miraculous Event and the Qur'ān**

Al-Jāḥiẓ appears to consider this phenomenal event as a historical fact. To validate his argument, he adduces extensive lines of pre-Islamic (*jāhili*) poetry as his main evidence which, according to him, originated from indisputable sources (*lā yartābu bihā ahad min al-ruwa*) (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH). The supposedly authentic

pre-Islamic poetry (*al-shi'r al-jāhili*) derive from the narrations of Abū Qays ibn al-Aslat, Ṭufayl al-Ghanawī, Abū Umayya Rabī'a Ibn Abī al-Ṣalt, Nufayl ibn Habīb al-Khath'amī and al-Mughīra ibn Abdullah al-Makhzūmī. Finally, to strengthen his stance and prove the authenticity of the account, al-Jāḥiẓ presents *sūrah al-Fīl* to persuade the reader that not only is the event recorded by human hands, but it is also engraved in the Book of God. To conclude his message, al-Jāḥiẓ maintains that even though the reader does not witness the incident at first hand, it does not necessarily mean that it never actually occurred. He adduces verses 89:6, 25:45 and 3:143 and comments logically that all these past events are events that we cannot, by their very nature, witness directly (but these events did happen, as told in the Qur'ān) (al-Jāḥiẓ 1424 AH). Al-Jāḥiẓ's reliance on the Qur'ān is obvious here. To avoid any rational argument regarding the authenticity of the extraordinary occurrence, he employs the Qur'ān not only to reassure and reduce any hesitation in belief concerning the authenticity of the events, but also to anticipate further questions that could be raised by the reader. If the reader chooses to argue about eye-witnesses of the event, al-Jāḥiẓ reminds us that there are numerous events in the Qur'ān that were not witnessed but which are nevertheless held firm, and are central to our belief.

The *sūrah* infuses and supports the works of al-Jāḥiẓ. He cites the *sūrah* three times in various topical discourse in his encyclopaedic works, *al-Ḥayawān*. The first use was to describe how God makes use of animals as instrument of punishment against human beings (*Āyāt fī ta'zīb al-nās bi al-ḥayawān*). The second is a discussion of Qur'ānic verses related to birds (*Mā jā'a fī zikr al-ṭayr*). And the last one, indeed, the most important one for the present work, is his discourse on the story of the elephant (*Qiṣṣa al-fīl*). It is this part where he arrives at the conclusion that the event is one which elicits proof of Muḥammad's prophethood. He even creates a specific topic entitled "the Evidence in the Elephant" (*Al-Āya fī al-fīl*), which proposes that the event is regarded as the initial foundation of Muhammad's prophethood (*ta'sīsā li nubuwwa al-nabī*).

The use of Qur'ānic verses as reference to Muḥammad's early life is evident here, even though it is difficult to find clear connection between the Qur'ān and the narrative of Muhammad's early life in the works within this period (Azmi 2017a). When al-Jāḥiẓ employs the word *irhāṣ*, it is clearly an allusion to the Prophet's early life. The word *irhāṣ*, literally means "laying of a foundation" (Yusuf 2009), and is a theological term that is used to refer to any anticipatory miracle of the Prophet before his call (Houtsma 1993). In this context, the author suggests that the miraculous event of the People of the Elephant is an evidentiary miracle (*akbar al-āyāt wa a'ẓam al-burhānāt*) of Muḥammad's prophethood, and an initial basis of his emergence, the birth of the Prophet. Based on al-Jāḥiẓ's

statement, Maṣṣūr in his thesis concludes that: “He (al-Jāḥiẓ) holds the miracle (the event of the elephants) as an affirmation in advance of Muḥammad’s prophecy and an exaltation of his position” (Maṣṣūr 1968). Al-Jāḥiẓ’s objective in using this Qur’ānic reference is clear, which is to strengthen his point that the event did really happen, and did not do so gratuitously, without meaning or cause. In this connection, al-Jāḥiẓ appears to propose that the revelation of the *sūrah* was not only to remind the Quraysh about God’s mercy to them, but it was also to remind them that the event is an early sign of the emergence of the final prophet.

### Why Did al-Jāḥiẓ Creat the Connection?

The connection made by al-Jāḥiẓ between the *sūrah* and Muḥammad’s prophethood is apparently an innovative enterprise. It became apparent in previous studies that it is hard to find any authors of *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *dalā’il* and *sīra* of the ninth century that make any tangible connection between the *sūrah* with the emergence of Muḥammad’s prophethood (Azmi 2016). For example, al-Farrā’ (d. 208/823), al-Ṣan’ānī (d. 211/826), al-Akhfash (d. 215/830), al-Azraqī (d. 250/864) and al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) discuss the *sūrah*; but none of them makes a personal remark connecting the *sūrah* with the emergence or sign of Muḥammad’s prophethood. Only later authors of *tafsīr* and *sīra*, such as Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 942/1535) and other modern scholars like Abū Shahba (1992) and Akram Ḍiyā’ al-‘Umarī (1994), associate the *sūrah* with the Prophet’s birth (Abū Shahba 1992; al-‘Umarī 1994). Earlier scholars described the various details of the event and provided lexical discourse of the *sūrah*, rather than further reading on the verse. It seems that al-Jāḥiẓ is the only author to initiate a connection. The matter in question now is what makes al-Jāḥiẓ initiate this connection in the first place?

Since al-Jāḥiẓ mentions that a discussion about the *sūrah* has already been delivered in detail by him in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja* (al-Jāḥiẓ’s specific work discussing on the proof of Muḥammad’s prophethood), there exists the possibility that the connection was initiated due to the heated debate concerning the authenticity of Muḥammad’s prophethood. According to Adang and Azmi, there are two arguments raised by the non-Muslims that question Muḥammad’s prophethood. One of them is the absence of miracle performed by Muḥammad (Adang 1996; Azmi 2017c). The dispute about Muḥammad’s prophethood probably led al-Jāḥiẓ to compile miraculous incidents that occur around the Prophet’s life in order to establish and cement the proof of his prophethood. In this respect, it would seem that al-Jāḥiẓ is trying to attest that not only was Muḥammad able to perform miracles, but that there were also miraculous occurrences that took place before his prophethood. These occurrences, according to al-Jāḥiẓ, are, in fact, the proof of Muḥammad’s prophethood, and signs of his emergence. That is why al-Jāḥiẓ vigorously compiled available materials



to substantiate the authenticity of this otherwise incredible-sounding account. Moreover, he emphasises that all his sources are, in fact, originally pre-Islamic (*jāhili*) and are indisputable evidence. He also cites statements of scholars such as Abū Bakr al-Muznī who support his idea. These incidents are proof (*āya*) that occurred in the pre-Islamic period (*jāhili*) and a sign of Muḥammad's prophethood (*irhās li al-nubuwwa*). The culmination of this discussion is al-Jāḥiẓ's reference to the Qur'ān as his ultimate proof. Even if pre-Islamic poetry and scholarship are not accepted, then the word of God should certainly not be rejected. At the end, al-Jāḥiẓ concludes that an event that is not witnessed ourselves does not necessarily imply that it never happened. He adduces verses from the Qur'ān and says: "This is all that we never witnessed". His conclusion completes our hypothesis that al-Jāḥiẓ stands firm in the midst of a debate. His method is noticeably dialectical, he starts with providing evidence in support of his own argument, and at the end, he concludes his discourse and clinches his own argument by anticipating and forestalling possibly sceptical question that might be raised by his opponent. The heated debate about Muḥammad's prophethood apparently leads al-Jāḥiẓ to cite *sūrah al-Fīl*, as evidence in support of his own line of reasoning, and accordingly connects the *sūrah* with events of Muḥammad's early life.

There is another question that should be considered here: if the connection was made by al-Jāḥiẓ as a result of his own eagerness to compile evidence and prove the authenticity of the event, what is it that makes al-Jāḥiẓ believe that the event is indeed a proof of Muḥammad's prophethood? The answer may lie in the way in which al-Jāḥiẓ interprets the Qur'ān, and the methodology underpinning his reasoning. In his discussion, "The Human Weakness and Its Limited Capacity" (*'Ajz al-Insān wa Sighar Qadrihi*), al-Jāḥiẓ (1424 AH) explains how God inflicts chastisement on humans, using tiny creature to illustrate how weak the human species may be. He then adduces verse 7:133 as an example, in order to demonstrate how God sent a small creature as medium of punishment to the non-believer during the time of Moses. Al-Jāḥiẓ goes further by emphasising that all of these small creatures, including locusts, lice and frogs are actually "the best signs" [of truth] sent by God to His enemy (*afḍal āyātihi wa al-'adhab alladhī arsalahu 'alā a'dā'ihī*). It is evident here that al-Jāḥiẓ is trying to highlight how a small creature may function as a mechanism of punishment on the enemy of Moses, and yet, at the same time, it may be regarded as a sign of the truth. When comparison is made between the story of Moses and the story of the People of the Elephant, some elements appear as obvious similarities in both narratives. The enemy of God in *sūrah al-Fīl* is Abraha and his elephant troop (*aṣḥāb al-fīl*), the small creatures are the flock of birds (*abābil*) and the story in its entirety is a sign of the truth of Muḥammad's prophethood.

## Conclusion

His conviction and zeal to authenticate the story of the People of the Elephant seems to have influenced al-Jāhiz to adduce *sūrah al-Fīl* as a basis of evidence of the whole truth of this narrative. When the Qur'ān itself attributes God's punishment as a sign of truth (*ayat*), it would seem reasonable to assume that al-Jāhiz deems the punishment of God on the People of the Elephant as an evidential sign of Muḥammad's emergence (birth) and vindication of his prophethood. The inclusion of *sūrah al-Fīl* in the discussion of the signs of Muḥammad's prophethood leads Muslim scholars to indirectly make an initial connection between the Qur'ān and the emergence of Muḥammad, the messenger of truth.

Al-Jāhiz's novel's inference is however disputable. Recognised as one of the *Mu'tazilite* scholars, nevertheless, it could be argued that he probably utilised Qur'ānic references just to convince the reader after all the reasoning method fails to vindicate the miraculous incident. The wording of the account he employed is apparently free from Qur'ānic terminology or phrases, which indicates the independent origin of the story from Qur'ānic periscope. At the end of his explanation, however, al-Jahiz begins to adduce chapter 105th of the Qur'ān, not only to give an authorisation of the story but also may be seen as an embellishment of the report with a specific Qur'ānic element. Since al-Jahiz's contemporaries from mufassir camp have never interpreted the verse in line with his view, the researcher believe that the novel reading produce by al-Jāhiz is clearly an innovative enterprise that open to be discussed.

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