



Al-Lahab أَلَّهَبُ

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Name

The Surah takes its name from the word *Lahab* in the first verse.

Period of Revelation

Although the commentators have not disputed its being a Makki Surah, yet it is difficult to determine in which phase of the life at Makkah precisely it was revealed. However, in view of Abu Lahab's role and conduct against the Prophet's (peace be upon him) message of truth, it can be assumed that it must have been revealed in the period when he had transgressed all limits in his mad hostility to him, and his attitude was becoming a serious obstruction in the progress of Islam. It may well have been revealed in the period when the Quraish had boycotted the Prophet (peace be upon him) together with the people of his clan and besieged them in Shiab Abi Talib, and Abu Lahab was the only person to join with the enemies against his own relatives. The basis of this assumption is that Abu Lahab was the Prophet's uncle, and public condemnation of the uncle by the tongue of the nephew could not be proper until the extreme excesses

committed by the uncle had become visible to everyone. If the Surah had been revealed before this, in the very beginning, the people would have regarded it as morally discourteous that the nephew should so condemn the uncle.

Background

This is the only place in the Quran where a person from among the enemies of Islam has been condemned by name, whereas in Makkah as well as in Madinah, after the migration, there were many people who were in no way less inimical to Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) than Abu Lahab. The question is, what was the special trait of the character of this person, which became the basis of this condemnation by name. To understand that it is necessary that one should understand the Arabian society of that time and the role that Abu Lahab played in it.

In ancient days since there prevailed chaos and confusion, bloodshed and plunder throughout Arabia, and the condition for centuries was that a person could have no guarantee of the protection of life, honor and property except with the help and support of his clansmen and blood relations, therefore *silah rehmi* (good treatment of the kindred) was esteemed most highly among the moral values of the Arabian society and breaking off of connections with the kindred was regarded as a great sin. Under, the influence of the same Arabian tradition when the Prophet (peace be upon him) began to preach the message of Islam, the other clans of Quraish and their chiefs resisted and opposed him tooth and nail, but the Bani Hashim and the

Bani al-Muttalib (children of al-Muttalib, brother of Hashim) not only did not oppose him but continued to support him openly, although most of them had not yet believed in his Prophethood. The other clans of Quraish themselves regarded this support by the blood relations of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as perfectly in accordance with the moral traditions of Arabia. That is why they never taunted the Bani Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib in that they had abandoned their ancestral faith by supporting a person who was preaching a new faith. They knew and believed that they could in no case hand over an individual of their clan to his enemies, and their support and aid of a clansman was perfectly natural in the sight of the Quraish and the people of Arabia.

This moral principle, which the Arabs even in the pre-Islamic days of ignorance, regarded as worthy of respect and inviolable was broken only by one man in his enmity of Islam, and that was Abu Lahab, son of Abdul Muttalib. He was an uncle of the Prophet (peace be upon him), whose father and he were sons of the same father. In Arabia, an uncle represented the father especially when the nephew was fatherless. The uncle was expected to look after the nephew as one of his own children. But this man in his hostility to Islam and love of *kufr* trampled all the Arab traditions under foot.

The traditionists have related from Ibn Abbas with several chains of transmitters the tradition that when the Prophet (peace be upon him) was commanded to present the message of Islam openly, and he was instructed in the

Quran to warn first of all his nearest kinsfolk of the punishment of God, he ascended the Mount, Safa one morning and called out aloud: *Ya sabahah* (O, the calamity of the morning!). This alarm in Arabia was raised by the person who noticed early at dawn an enemy tribe advancing against his tribe. When the Messenger (peace be upon him) made this call, the people inquired as to who had made the call. They were told that it was Muhammad (peace be upon him). There the people of all the clans of Quraish rushed out. Everyone who could come, did come. He who could not, sent another one for himself. When the People had assembled, the Messenger (peace be upon him) calling out each clan by name, viz. O Bani Hashim, O Bani Abdul Muttalib, O Bani Fihri, O Bani so and so, said: If I were to tell you that behind the hill there was an enemy host ready to fall upon you, would you believe me. The people responded with one voice, saying that they never had so far experienced a lie from him. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: Then I warn you that you are heading for a torment. Thereupon, before anyone else could speak, Abu Lahab, the Prophet's (peace be upon him) uncle, said: May you perish! Did you summon us for this. Another tradition adds that he picked up a stone to throw at the Prophet (peace be upon him). (Musnad Ahmad, Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Ibn Jarir, and others).

According to Ibn Zaid, one day Abu Lahab asked the Prophet (peace be upon him): If I were to accept your religion, what would I get. The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: You would get what the other believers would

get. He said: Is there no preference or distinction for me. The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: What else do you want. Thereupon he said: May this religion perish in which I and all other people should be equal and alike! (Ibn Jarir). In Makkah Abu Lahab was the next door neighbor of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Their houses were separated by a wall. Besides him, Hakam bin Aas (Father of Marwan), Uqbah bin Abi Muait, Adi bin Hamra and Ibn al-Asda il-Hudhali also were his neighbors. These people did not allow him to have peace even in his own house. Sometimes when he was performing the Prayer, they would place the goat's stomach on him; sometimes when food was being cooked in the courtyard, they would throw filth at the cooking pot. The Prophet (peace be upon him) would come out and say: O Bani Abdi Manaf, what kind of neighborliness is it. Abu Lahab's wife, Umm Jamil (Abu Sufyan's sister), had made it a practice to cast thorns at his door in the night so that when he or his children came out of the house at dawn, they should run thorns in the foot. (Baihaqi, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Jarir, Ibn Asakir, Ibn Hisham).

Before the proclamation of Prophethood, two of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) daughters were married to two of Abu Lahab's sons, Utbah and Utaibah. After his call when the Prophet (peace be upon him) began to invite the people to Islam, Abu Lahab said to both his sons: I would forbid myself seeing and meeting you until you divorced the daughters of Muhammad (peace be upon him). So both of them divorced their wives. Utaibah in particular became so nasty in his spitefulness that one day he came before the

Prophet and said: I repudiate *An-najmi idha hawa* and *Alladhi dana fatadalla* and then he spat at him, but his spit did not fall on him. The Prophet prayed: O God, subject him to the power of a dog from among Your dogs. Afterwards, Utaibah accompanied his father in his journey to Syria. During the journey the caravan halted at a place which, according to local people, was visited by wild beasts at night. Abu Lahab told his companions, the Quraish: Make full arrangements for the protection of my son, for I fear the curse invoked by Muhammad (peace be upon him) on him. Accordingly, the people made their camels sit all around Utaibah and went to sleep. At night a tiger came which crossed the circle of the camels and devoured Utaibah tearing him to pieces. (Ibn Abdul Barr: *Al-Istiab*; Ibn Hajar: *Al-Isabah*; Abu Nuaim al-Isfahani: *Dalail an-Nubuwwat*; As-Suhaili: *Raud al-Unuf*). Here there is a difference of opinion. Some reporters say that the divorce took place after the Prophet's proclamation of Prophethood and some say that it took place after the revelation of *Tabbat yada Abi Lahab*. There is also a difference of opinion about whether Abu Lahab's this son was Utbah or Utaibah. But this much is confirmed that after the conquest of Makkah, Utbah embraced Islam and took the oath of allegiance at the Prophet's hand. Therefore, the correct view is that it was Utaibah.

Abu Lahab's wickedness can be judged from the fact that when after the death of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) son Qasim, his second son, Abdullah, also died. This man instead of joining with his nephew in his bereavement,

hastened to the Quraish chiefs joyfully to give them the news that Muhammad (peace be upon him) had become childless that night. This we have already related in the commentary of Surah Al-Kauthar.

Wherever the Prophet (peace be upon him) went to preach his message of Islam, this man followed him and forbade the people to listen to him. Rabiah bin Abbad ad-Dili has related: I was a young boy when I accompanied my father to the fare of Dhul-Majaz. There I saw the Holy Messenger (peace be upon him) who was exhorting the people, saying: O people, say: there is no deity but Allah, you will attain success. Following behind him I saw a man, who was telling the people, this fellow is a liar: he has gone astray from his ancestral faith. I asked; who is he? The people replied: He is his uncle, Abu Lahab. (Musnad Ahmad, Baihaqi).

Another tradition from Rabiah is to the effect: I saw that the Prophet (peace be upon him) went to the halting place of each tribe and said: O children of so and so, I have been appointed Allah's Messenger to you. I exhort you to worship only Allah and to associate none with Him. So, affirm faith in me and join me so that I may fulfill the mission for which I have been sent. Following close behind him there was a man who was saying: O children of so and so, he is leading you astray from Lat and Uzza and inviting you to the religion of error and innovation which he has brought. Do not at all listen to what he says and do not follow him. I asked my father: who is he? He replied: he is his uncle, Abu Lahab. (Musnad Ahmad, Tabarani).

Tariq bin Abdullah al-Muharibi's tradition is similar. He

says: I saw in the fare of Dhul-Majaz that the Messenger (peace be upon him) was exhorting the people, saying: O people, say *La ilaha ill-Allah*, you will attain success, and behind him there was a man who was casting stones at him, until his heels bled, and he was telling the people: Do not listen to him, he is a liar. I asked the people who he was. They said he was his uncle, Abu Lahab. (Tirmidhi).

In the 7th year of Prophethood, when all the clans of Quraish boycotted the Bani Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib socially and economically, and both these clans remaining steadfast to the Prophet's (peace be upon him) support, were besieged in Shib Abi Talib, Abu Lahab was the only person, who sided with the disbelieving Quraish against his own clan. This boycott continued for three years, so much so that the Bani Hashim and the Bani al-Muttalib began to starve. This, however, did not move Abu Lahab. When a trade caravan came to Makkah and a besieged person from Shib Abi Talib approached it to buy some article of food, Abu Lahab would shout out to the merchants to demand a forbidding price, telling them that he would make up for any loss that they incurred. Thus, they would demand exorbitant rates and the poor customer had to return empty handed to his starving children. Then Abu Lahab would purchase the same articles from them at the market rates. (Ibn Saad, Ibn Hisham).

On account of these very misdeeds this man was condemned in this Surah by name, and there was a special need for it. When the Prophet's (peace be upon him) own uncle followed and opposed him before the Arabs who came for

Hajj from outside Makkah, or gathered together in the fairs held at different places, they regarded it as against the established traditions of Arabia that an uncle should run down his nephew without a reason, should pelt stones at him and bring false accusations against him publicly. They were, therefore, influenced by what Abu Lahab said and were involved in doubt about the Prophet (peace be upon him). But when this, Surah was revealed, and Abu Lahab, filled with rage, started uttering nonsense, the people realized that what he said in opposition to the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not at all reliable, for he said all that in his mad hostility to his nephew.

Besides, when his uncle was condemned by name, the people's expectation that the Messenger (peace be upon him) could treat some relative leniently in the matter of religion was frustrated forever. When the Messenger's (peace be upon him) own uncle was taken to task publicly, the people understood that there was no room for preference or partiality in their faith. A non-relative could become a near and dear one if he believed, and a near relation a non-relative if he disbelieved. Thus, there is no place for the ties of blood in religion.

1. May the hands of Abu Lahab be ruined, and ruined is he.*¹

تَبَّتْ يَدَا أَبِي لَهَبٍ وَتَبَّ

*¹ His real name was Abd al-Uzza, and he was called Abu Lahab on account of his glowing, ruddy complexion. Lahab means the flame of fire, and Abu Lahab the one with a flaming, fiery face. His being mentioned here by his

nickname (*Kunyat*), instead of his real name, has several reasons. First, that he was better known by his nickname than by his real name; second, that the Quran did not approve that he should be mentioned by his polytheistic name Abd al Uzza (slave of Uzza); third, that his *kunyat* goes well with the fate that has been described of him in this Surah. Some commentators have translated *tabbat yada Abi Lahab* to mean: May the hands of Abu Lahab be broken, and *tabba* to mean: may he perish or he perished. But this, in fact, was not a curse which was invoked on him, but a prophecy in which an event taking place in the future, has been described in the past tense, to suggest that its occurrence in the future is certain and inevitable. In fact, at last the same thing happened as had been foretold in this Surah a few years earlier. Breaking of the hands obviously does not imply breaking of the physical hands, but a person's utterly failing in his aim and object for which he has exerted his utmost. And Abu Lahab indeed had exerted his utmost to defeat and frustrate the message of Islam presented by the Prophet (peace be upon him). But hardly seven or eight years after the revelation of this Surah most of the big chiefs of Quraish, who were a party with Abu Lahab in his hostility to Islam, were killed in the Battle of Badr. When the news of the defeat reached Makkah, he was so shocked that he could not survive for more than seven days. His death occurred in a pitiable state. He became afflicted with malignant pustule and the people of his house left him to himself, fearing contagion. No one came near his body for three days after his death,

until the body decomposed and began to stink. At last, when the people began to taunt his sons, according to one tradition, they hired some black people, who lifted his body and buried it. According to another tradition, they got a pit dug out and threw his body into it by pushing it with wood, and covered it up with earth and stones. His utter failure became manifest when the religion which he had tried his utmost to impede and thwart, was accepted by his own children. First of all, his daughter, Darrah, migrated from Makkah to Madinah and embraced Islam; then on the conquest of Makkah, both his sons, Utbah and Muattab, came before the Prophet (peace be upon him) through the mediation of Abbas, believed and took oath of allegiance to him.

2. His wealth will not avail him and that which he earned.*2

مَا أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُ مَالُهُ وَمَا كَسَبَ



*2 Abu Lahab was a stingy, materialistic man. Ibn Jarir has stated that once in the pre-Islamic days he was accused of having stolen two golden deer from the treasury of the Kabah. Though later the deer were recovered from another person, the fact that he was accused of stealing indicates the opinion the people of Makkah held of him. About his riches Qadi Rashid bin Zubair writes in his *Adh-Dhakhir wat-Tuhaf*: He was one of the four richest men of the Quraish, who owned one *qintar* (about 260 oz) of gold each. His love of wealth can be judged from the fact that when on the occasion of the battle of Badr the fate of his religion was

going to be decided forever, and all the Quraish chiefs had personally gone to fight, he sent Aas bin Hisham to fight on his own behalf, telling him: This is in lieu of the debt of four thousand dirhams that you owe to me. Thus, he contrived a plan to realize his debt, for Aas had become bankrupt and there was no hope of the recovery of the debt from him. Some commentators have taken *maa kasaba* in the meaning of the earning, i.e. the benefits that accrued to him from his wealth were his *kasab* (earning), and some other commentators have taken it to imply children, for the Prophet (peace be upon him) has said that a man's son also is his *kasab* (earning). (Abu Daud, Ibn Abi Hatim). Both these meanings fully correspond to the fate met by Abu Lahab. For when he was afflicted with the malignant pustule, his wealth availed him nothing, and his children also left him alone to die a miserable, wretched death. They did not even bury him honorably. Thus, within a few years the people witnessed how the prophecy which had been made in this Surah about Abu Lahab was literally fulfilled.

3. He shall (enter to) burn into a blazing Fire.

سَيَصَلَّىٰ نَارًا ذَاتَ هَبٍ ﴿٣﴾

4. And his wife,^{*3} the carrier of slander (or wood thorns).^{*4}

وَأَمْرَأَتُهُ حَمَّالَةَ الْحَطَبِ ﴿٤﴾

*3 Her name was Arwa and her nickname (*kunyat*) Umm Jamil. She was sister of Abu Sufyan and was no less bitter than her husband, Abu Lahab, in her enmity to the Messenger (peace be upon him). Abu Bakr's daughter Asma has related that when this Surah was revealed, and

Umm Jamil heard it, she was filled with rage and went out in search of the Prophet (peace be upon him). She carried a handful of stones and she was crying some verses of her own, satirizing the Prophet (peace be upon him). She came to the Kabah, where the Prophet (peace be upon him) was sitting with Abu Bakr. The latter said: O Messenger of Allah, there she comes and I fear lest she should utter something derogatory to you. The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: She will not see me. The same thing happened. She could not see the Prophet (peace be upon him) although he was there. She said to Abu Bakr: I hear that your companion has satirized me. Abu Bakr replied: No, by the Lord of this house, he has not satirized you. Hearing this she went off. (Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn Hisham; Bazzar has related an incident on the authority of Abdullah bin Abbas also, which closely resembles this). What Abu Bakr meant was that she had not been satirized by the Prophet (peace be upon him), but by Allah Himself.

*4 The words in the original are *hammalat al-hatab*, which literally mean: carrier of the wood. The commentators have given several meanings of it. Abdullah bin Abbas, Ibn Zaid, Dahhak and Rabi bin Anas say: She used to strew thorns at the Prophet's (peace be upon him) door in the night; therefore, she has been described as carrier of the wood. Qatadah, Ikrimah, Hasan Basri, Mujahid and Sufyan Thauri say: She used to carry evil tales and slander from one person to another in order to create hatred between them; therefore, she has been called the bearer of wood idiomatically. Saaid bin Jubair says: The one who is loading

himself with the burden of sin is described idiomatically in Arabic as: *Fulan-un Yahtatibu ala zahri bi* (so and so is loading wood on his back); therefore, *hummalat al-hatab* means: The one who carries the burden of sin. Another meaning which the commentators have also given is: she will do this in the Hereafter, i.e. she will bring and supply wood to the fire in which Abu Lahab would be burning.

5. Around her neck will
be a rope of palm-fiber.*5

فِي جِيدِهَا حَبْلٌ مِّنْ مَّسَدٍ

*5 The word used for her neck is *jeed*, which in Arabic means a neck decorated with an ornament. Saeed bin al-Musayyab, Hasan Basri and Qatadah say that she wore a valuable necklace and used to say: By Lat and Uzza, I will sell away this necklace and spend the price to satisfy my enmity against Muhammad (peace be upon him). That is why the word *jeed* has been used here ironically, thereby implying that in Hell she would have a rope of palm-fiber round her neck instead of that necklace upon which she prides herself so arrogantly. Another example of this ironical style is found at several places in the Quran in the sentence: *Bashshir-hum bi-adhab-in alima* "Give them the good news of a painful torment.

The words *habl-um min-masad* have been used for the rope which will be put round her neck, i.e. it will be a rope of the *masad* kind. Different meanings of this have been given by the lexicographers and commentators. According to some, *masad* means a tightly twisted rope; others say that *masad* is the rope made from palm-fiber; still others say that it means the rope made from rush, or camel-skin, or camel-

hair. Still another view is that it implies a cable made by twisted iron strands together.

