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A Comparative Study of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Marāgī's: Interpretations of the Terms *Ṭairan Abābīl* and *al-Sijjīl* in Surah al-Fīl

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Abstract

Surah al-Fīl contains two key terms, *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl*, which have long generated divergent interpretations among Qur'anic exegetes. This study aims to comparatively analyze the interpretations of these two terms in *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī* as a representative of classical exegesis and *Tafsīr al-Marāgī* as a representative of modern exegesis. This research is a library-based study employing a comparative-descriptive approach. The findings reveal two main points. First, al-Ṭabarī interprets *ṭairan abābīl* literally as flocks of birds and *al-sijjīl* as stones made of hardened or baked clay, relying heavily on reports from the Companions and the Successors. Second, al-Marāgī interprets *ṭairan abābīl* as flying creatures in the form of disease-carrying insects and *al-sijjīl* as toxic dry soil particles that caused epidemics. These findings indicate that, despite differences in methodological approach and material explanation, both exegetes share a common understanding of *ṭairan abābīl* as entities coming in groups and *al-sijjīl* as material originating from hardened soil. The differences in interpretation are influenced by the historical context, methodological orientation, and intellectual background of each exegete.

Keywords: *Surah al-Fīl, ṭairan abābīl, al-sijjīl, al-Ṭabarī, al-Marāgī*

Introduction

Surah al-Fīl narrates the event of the destruction of Abraha's army, historically known as the episode of *Ashāb al-Fīl*. In the Qur'an, this event is expressed through two

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key terms, namely *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl*, which have long been the subject of differing interpretations among Qur'anic exegetes. These differences are not merely related to the lexical meanings of the two terms, but also concern interpretive methodology and the way exegetes understand the relationship between revealed text and empirical reality. Some exegetes explain that the term *ṭairan abābīl* in the surah refers to a group of birds that came from various directions and originated from the sea, carrying pebbles or heated stones that were burned (*al-sijjīl*). Others are of the opinion that *al-sijjīl* refers to stones originating from Hell.[1] In a number of historical reports, it is also mentioned that after the incident of *Aṣḥāb al-Fīl*, the Arabian Peninsula was struck by an infectious epidemic that caused deaths. This statement is originally based on a narration from ʿIkrimah and Ibn ʿAbbās, who stated that at that time smallpox and measles first appeared in the Arabian Peninsula.[2]

Based on this reading, the author finds a fairly significant divergence of views among exegetes, particularly between those who interpret the verses textually and those who understand them through a contextual approach. Textually oriented exegetes generally interpret *ṭairan abābīl* as birds that came in groups or flocks, while *al-sijjīl* is understood as small stones originating from hardened, burned clay. In contrast, exegetes who adopt a contextual approach do not restrict the meaning of *ṭairan abābīl* solely to birds in the literal sense, but rather understand it as flying creatures, whether large or small, without necessarily being identical to birds as commonly conceived. As for *al-sijjīl*, it is interpreted as stones or certain materials containing harmful elements, such as toxins or disease agents. Indeed, some exegetes and modern researchers have even linked this event to epidemiological studies, thereby opening the possibility that the destruction of *Aṣḥāb al-Fīl* was related to the outbreak of diseases such as smallpox or measles that afflicted the troops.

Interestingly, a tendency toward textual interpretation is more dominantly found among classical-era exegetes, one of whom is al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH/923 CE), who is widely known as an exegete emphasizing the riwāyah approach (*bi al-maʾśūr*), relying on ḥadīth, the opinions of the Companions, and the Tābiʿīn in interpreting Qurʾanic verses.[3] In his monumental work, al-Ṭabarī does not merely compile various narrations, but also demonstrates a critical and selective attitude toward these sources. Each narration is examined for its authenticity by distinguishing between what is *ṣaḥīḥ* and *ḍaʿīf*, and then weighed to determine the most authoritative (*rājiḥ*) opinion amid differing views among the Companions and the Tābiʿīn.[4] Consequently, his tafsīr became a primary reference for later generations, and he is often regarded as a pioneer among early exegetes whose

[1] Abī Abdullah Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ lī Ahkām al-Qur'ān (Tafsir al-Qurṭubī)*, Tahqiq: Aḥmad al-Bardunī and Ibrahim Athfayish, juz 20 (Kairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Mishriyyah, 1964), h. 198.

[2] Al-Qurṭubi, *al-Jāmiʿ lī Ahkām al-Qur'ān (Tafsir al-Qurṭubī)*, juz 20, h. 198.

[3] A Fahrur Rozi and Niswatur Rokhmah, 'Tafsir Klasik: Analisis Terhadap Kitab Tafsir Era Klasik', *Jurnal Kaca Jurusan Ushuluddin STAI AL FITHRAH*, 9.2 (2004), 33–58.

[4] Asep Aburrohman, "*Metodologi al-Ṭabari dalam Tafsir Jamī' al-Bayān fī Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*," *Kordinat: Jurnal Komunikasi Antar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* 17, no. 1 (2018): 65–88.

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Qur'anic commentary was comprehensively compiled and has remained preserved to this day.[5]

By contrast, the contextual approach has been more extensively developed by modern-era exegetes, one of whom is al-Marāghī (d. 1371 AH/1952 CE). He is recognized as a modern exegete who tends to employ a rational and contextual approach (*bi al-raʾyī*), taking into account developments in science and the social conditions of society.[6] As an influential exegete during the twentieth-century Islamic intellectual revival, al-Marāgī sought to bridge the classical tafsīr tradition with a rational and progressive spirit. This effort is evident in the systematic presentation of his commentary, the use of clear and communicative language, and discussions supported by strong arguments that are relevant to scientific developments and the demands of the time.[7]

These differences in methodological orientation have direct implications for their respective interpretations of the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl*, as mentioned in the words of Allah swt. in QS. al-Fīl/105: 1–5,

اَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِاَصْحٰبِ الْفِيْلِ ۗ ١ اَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِيْ تَضْلِيْلٍ ۙ ٢ وَّاَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ
طَيْرًا اَبَابِيْلَ ۙ ٣ تَرْمِيْهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّنْ سِجِّيْلٍ ۙ ٤ فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُوْلٍ ٥

Translation:

> "Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did He not render their scheme astray? And He sent against them *flocks of birds*, striking them with *stones of baked clay*, and thus made them like eaten straw."[8]

This surah depicts a historical event involving the army of elephants (*Ashāb al-Fīl*) led by Abrahah, the governor of Yemen, who intended to destroy the Kaʻbah after his attempt to redirect the center of pilgrimage through the construction of a magnificent church known as al-Qullays had failed. When the Arab community continued to perform pilgrimage to the Kaʻbah and a group from the Kinānah tribe vandalized the church as an act of protest, Abrahah launched a major military expedition toward Mecca with a fully armed force, including war elephants. Despite resistance from several local figures such as Dzū Nafar and Nufayl ibn Ḥabīb al-Khasʻamī, as well as the attitude of 'Abdul Muṭallib, who refrained from physical confrontation and entrusted the protection of the Kaʻbah entirely to Allah swt., Abrahah's army continued its advance toward the sacred territory. However, when the army attempted to enter Mecca, the elephants refused to move toward the

[5] Saiful Amin Ghofur, *Profil Para Mufassir al-Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Insan Madani, 2008), h. 68.

[6] Wajidi Sayadi, *Aplikasi Ilmu Kritik Hadits dalam Menyeleksi Asbāb al-Nuzūl: Studi Atas Riwayat dalam Tafsir al-Marāgī,* h. 39.

[7] Fithrotin, *"Metodologi dan Karakteristik Penafsiran Aḥmad Muṣṭafa al Marāgī dalam Kitab Tafsir al Marāgī (Kajian atas QS. al-Hujurat Ayat 9)*," *Al-Furqon: Jurnal Ilmu al-Qur'an dan Tafsir* 1, no. 2 (2018): 107–20.

[8] Kementrian Agama Republik Indonesia, *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya: Edisi Yang Di Sempurnakan*, jilid 10 (Jakarta: Widya Cahaya, 2011), h. 601.

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Ka'bah, and suddenly they were destroyed through an extraordinary event described by the Qur'an as an attack by *ṭairan abābīl* pelting them with stones of baked clay (*al-sijjīl*).[9] The use of these two distinctive terms indicates a form of divine intervention in history and simultaneously opens space for divergent interpretations among Qur'anic exegetes.

A number of previous studies have examined surah al-Fīl from various perspectives, both theological and historical. Among them are the research by Harfin and Halimatussa'uda entitled *"The Story of the Destruction of the Army of the Elephant in Sūrah al-Fīl from an Epidemiological Perspective"* [10], and the study by Mahbub Ghozali and Chandra Kartika Dewi entitled *"A Reinterpretation of Sūrah al-Fīl in the Context of an Epidemic* [11]. These studies interpret the destruction of Abrahah's army in surah al-Fīl as being associated with an epidemic that struck the Arabian Peninsula at that time. Meanwhile, other studies, such as the article by Muhammad Azmi, Akhmad Dasuki, and Ade Afriansyah entitled *"Ṭair Abābīl: The Perspectives of Muhammad 'Abduh and Wahbah az-Zuḥailī"* [12], as well as the work of Alfadilah et al. entitled *"A Critique of the Interpretation of Ṭairan Abābīl in Muhammad 'Abduh's Tafsīr"*[13], focus more on analyzing the interpretations of exegetes regarding the meanings of *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl*. However, studies that specifically compare al-Ṭabarī's and al-Marāgī's interpretations of the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl* remain relatively limited. In fact, such a comparison is important for understanding the dynamics of tafsīr epistemology between classical and modern traditions.

Based on this background, this study aims to compare al-Ṭabarī's and al-Marāgī's interpretations of the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl* in surah al-Fīl, as well as to identify the similarities and differences between their interpretations. Through a comparative approach, this research is expected to provide an overview of how differences in interpretive methodology influence the understanding of Qur'anic texts, particularly in interpreting historical events that are rich in theological dimensions. This study employs a library research method. The primary data sources consist of two tafsīr works, namely *Tafsīr Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, volume 10, by Imam al-Ṭabarī, published by Dār al-Fikr, Beirut, in 1988, and *Tafsīr al-Marāgī*, volume 10, by Aḥmad Muṣṭafā al-Marāgī, published by Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāṡ al-'Arabī, Beirut, in 1946. The secondary data sources include relevant books and academic journals, as well as scholarly works related to the topic of this research.

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[9] Buya Hamka, *Tafsir al-Azhar: Diperkaya dengan Pendekatan Sejarah, Sosiologi, Tasawuf, Ilmu Kalam, Sastra Dan Psikologi*, jilid 9 (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2015), h. 664-666.

[10] Harfin Harfin and Limmatus Sauda', "*Kisah Kehancuran Tentara Bergajah Dalam Surah Al-Fil Tinjauan Ilmu Epidemiologi*," *Ulumul Qur'an: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 2, no. 1 (2022): 98–110.

[11] Mahbub Ghozali and Chandra Kartika Dewi, 'Reinterpretasi Surat Al-Fiil Dalam Konteks Wabah', *Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy*, 1.2 (2020).

[12] Muhammad Azmi, Akhmad Dasuki, and Ade Afriansyah, '*Ṭair Abābīl*: *Perspektif Muhammad Abduh Dan Wahbah Zuhaili*', *Syams: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 1.2 (2020), 59–67.

[13] Alfadilah, Eka Putra Wirman, and Faizin, 'Kritik Penafsiran Tairan Ababil Dalam Tafsir Muhammad 'Abduh', *Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir*, 1.2 (2023), 35–55.

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Results and Discussion

1. *Analysis of al-Ṭabarī's Interpretation of the Terms Ṭairan Abābīl and al-Sijjīl*

In interpreting Allah's words "*wa arsala 'alaihim ṭairan abābīl*" (and He sent against them flocks of birds), al-Ṭabarī explains that Allah sent groups of birds arriving in successive formations from various directions. He emphasizes that the word *abābīl* denotes large groups of birds moving in successive bands. In his interpretation, al-Ṭabarī cites various scholarly opinions and transmitted reports regarding the singular form of the expression *ṭairan abābīl*. One narration from Abū Baidān Maʿmar ibn al-Muṡannā states that no scholar has been able to determine the singular form of "*abābīl*" and thus the term is considered a plural without a known singular, similar to the words "*al-syamāṭīṭ*" and "*al-ʿabādīd*". This view is supported by Imām al-Farrā', who also said he had never heard its singular form used by Arabs. However, al-Ṭabarī notes the existence of an alternative view put forth by Abū Jaʿfar al-Rawwāsī, who claimed to have heard its singular form as "*ibbalah*". Meanwhile, according to al-Kisā'ī, some linguists mention "*ibbūl*" or "*ibīl*" as possible singular forms.[14] These varying opinions indicate that the exegetes do not possess a strong consensus regarding the etymological origin of the word "*abābīl*". Thus, the stronger view is to understand "*abābīl*" as a plural form meaning "groups of birds that arrived in successive waves."

Al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the phrase *ṭairan abābīl* is further reinforced by a wide range of transmitted reports. He compiles numerous chains of narration, all of which converge upon a similar meaning: *ṭairan abābīl* refers to "birds sent by Allah that arrived in groups, in large numbers, and in successive formations." Narrations from ʿAbdullāh, through multiple transmission routes, affirm that *ṭairan abābīl* means birds arriving in caravans, with one group following another. Ibn ʿAbbās likewise narrates the same meaning, stating that these birds did not come individually but followed one another in great numbers. Reports from Ibn ʿAbbās, followed by other narrations such as those of Isḥāq ibn ʿAbdillāh, Qatādah, al-Ḥasan, and Mujāhid, consistently indicate that *abābīl* means "in crowds," "in successive groups," "in great multitude," or "arriving one after another in continuous waves." Some scholars add that the birds came from multiple directions, and some even state that ṭairan abābīl consisted of birds coming from the direction of the sea.[15]

Al-Ṭabarī then presents various reports concerning the physical characteristics of *ṭairan abābīl*, beyond their description as birds arriving in groups. The exegetes differ regarding the color and form of these birds. One report from Ibn ʿAbbās describes them as having beaks like ordinary birds but feet resembling those of dogs. Another narration from ʿIkrimah states that the birds were green, came from the direction of the sea, and even possessed heads resembling those of wild beasts. Other reports mention that the birds

[14] Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1988), h. 296.

[15] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 296-297.

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were pitch black, carrying small stones with their beaks and claws, while Saʿīd ibn Jubayr describes them as green with yellow beaks. Taken together, these narrations show that the scholars differ in detailing the physical appearance of *ṭairan abābīl* (whether in terms of color, head shape, beaks, or feet), though they agree that the birds carried stones or pebbles used to destroy Abrahah's army.[16]

This diversity of interpretations indicates that the physical description of *ṭairan abābīl* was not a point of major consensus, unlike the meaning "arriving in successive groups." Al-Ṭabarī does not choose any single opinion as definitively superior; rather, he simply presents the various narrations as they are.

Furthermore, in interpreting Allah's words "*tarmīhim bihijāratin min sijjīl"* (pelting them with stones of *sijjīl*), al-Ṭabarī explains that the verse refers to the flocks of birds (*ṭairan abābīl*) sent by Allah to the elephant army, throwing stones of *sijjīl*, which he identifies as stones made of hardened, baked clay. He then presents a range of narrations describing the nature and origin of these stones. Most opinions revolve around the basic meaning that *al-sijjīl* refers to stones derived from hardened clay or dense mud. Through transmission routes from ʿIkrimah, Ibn ʿAbbās, and Qatādah, explanations emerge that the term *sijjīl* denotes stones originating from *ṭīn* (clay). Some exegetes even associate the term with a Persian expression, "*sanka wakil*" meaning a combination of earth and stone.[17]

In addition to explaining the origin of these stones, al-Ṭabarī also provides a detailed description of their physical characteristics and the impact they caused. Several reports from Mūsā ibn Abī ʻĀisyah mention that the size of the stones ranged between that of a pod and a lentil—small, yet fatal when they struck their target. This depiction is reinforced by the narration of Bishr from Qatādah, which states that each bird carried three stones: two in its feet and one in its beak, then hurled or dropped them toward Abrahah and his army. This narrative offers a more concrete illustration of the attack mechanism of the *ṭairan abābīl*. Other narrations even highlight the medical and biological effects of the stones' impact. According to the report of Yaʻqūb from 'Ikrimah, when a stone struck a person, symptoms resembling smallpox would appear. It is even mentioned that this event marked the first emergence of smallpox on earth.[18]

Through this collection of narrations, al-Ṭabarī does not present only one opinion; rather, he gathers all views from earlier scholars to provide a comprehensive picture. The most prominent position is the consensus that "*sijjīl*" refers to small stones made of hardened clay that were used as instruments of destruction against the army of elephants, and that the annihilation of Abrahah's forces was a form of direct divine intervention carried out through extraordinary means.

2. *Analysis of al-Marāgī's Interpretation of the Terms Ṭairan Abābīl and al-Sijjīl*

Al-Marāgī explains the verse "*wa arsala ʻalaihim ṭairan abābīl, tarmīhim bihijāratin*

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[16] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 297-298.

[17] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 298.

[18] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 299.

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min sijjīl", stating that Allah sent groups of birds (*ṭairan abābīl*) that dropped small stones (*sijjīl*) made of hardened clay. According to al-Marāgī, these birds were dispatched as instruments of destruction that struck each individual within Abrahah's ranks. These small stones were not merely physical projectiles; they carried deadly consequences: the army was afflicted with a plague resembling smallpox or measles that spread over their bodies, causing them to collapse one by one until they perished. Thus, this divine act becomes a tangible manifestation of how Allah thwarted their grand plan, broke the power they were proud of, and turned all their efforts into destruction that fell solely upon themselves.[19]

Al-Marāgī further explains that the birds mentioned in the verse were not ordinary birds commonly known, but rather a type of small creature more akin to mosquitoes or flies, tiny beings capable of carrying disease. Al-Marāgī views the "*stones of sijjīl*" thrown at them not as large or fire-like stones resembling the punishment of Hell, but as clumps of dried clay contaminated as if infected with certain toxins or harmful pathogens, which were carried by the wind and then attached to the feet of these birds. When the tiny birds approached the army and their feet touched the skin of a soldier, the toxin or pathogen entered through the pores, spread within the body, and caused severe lesions. These wounds then damaged bodily tissues, caused the flesh to peel away, and resulted in the physical destruction of Abrahah's forces.[20] This process subsequently developed into an epidemic that spread among the troops, thereby destroying them before they reached Mecca.

Through this interpretation, al-Marāgī aligns with the view of Muḥammad ʿAbduh, who asserts that the destruction of Abraha's army was a manifestation of God's power operating through natural mechanisms that lie beyond ordinary human experience. Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that al-Marāgī interprets the term *ṭairan abābīl* as a type of mosquito or fly that carried deadly viruses or pathogenic germs. As for the term *al-sijjīl*, al-Marāgī interprets it as stones that contained deadly viruses or toxins capable of causing severe wounds and the disintegration of flesh, ultimately leading to death. This view reflects al-Marāgī's tendency to interpret the phenomena in Surah al-Fīl through a more rational approach that aligns with modern scientific explanations, without negating the textual meaning of the verse or the miraculous nature accompanying it.

3. *Similarities and Differences Between the Interpretations of AlṬabarī and Al-Marāgī Regarding the Terms Ṭairan Abābīl and Al-Sijjīl*

In interpreting surah Al-Fīl, several significant similarities can be identified between Tafsīr Al-Ṭabarī and Tafsīr Al-Marāgī. These similarities primarily center on establishing the meaning of the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl.* The following is the researcher's analysis of the similarities between Al-Ṭabarī and Al-Marāgī in interpreting these terms in Surah Al-Fīl:

[19] Aḥmad Musṭafa al-Marāgī, *Tafsir al-Marāgī*, jilid 10 (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turas al-'Arabi, 1946). Jilid. 10, h. 242-243.

[20] Al-Marāgī, jilid 10, h. 243.

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The meaning of the word abābīl. Al-Ṭabarī cites numerous narrations from early exegetes such as Ibn Mas'ūd, Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, and Qatādah, who interpret *abābīl* as "groups, crowds, swarms, successive formations, or numerous gatherings." He also mentions that this word is a plural form that does not have a singular form.[21] Likewise, Al-Marāgī affirms that *abābīl* means "groups" and is a plural form that has no singular form.[22] Both Al-Ṭabarī and Al-Marāgī agree that, definitively, abābīl refers to birds that came in groups and that the term is a plural word with no singular form (*mufrad*).

The meaning of the word al-sijjīl. There is a fundamental similarity regarding its origin: both agree that *sijjīl* is related to clay or stones made from earth. Al-Ṭabarī cites the opinions of Ibn 'Abbās and Qatādah, who interpret *sijjīl* as "earth within stones" or min ṭīn meaning "from clay." He also notes that *sijjīl* is considered a Persian expression (*sanka wakil*) meaning "stone and clay". Meanwhile, al-Marāgī defines *sijjīl* as "hardened clay." He also mentions that these stones came from "dried clay" that had been contaminated with poison. In terms of material origin, both emphasize that *sijjīl* comes from earth, and in terms of characteristics, both portray it as a hard and lethal substance.

Implications related to smallpox and measles outbreaks. Al-Ṭabarī essentially maintains a literal interpretation that Abrahah's army was destroyed by the attack of the birds. However, he also records a narration from 'Ikrimah stating that the destruction was actually caused by an outbreak of smallpox and measles that annihilated the army. Another narration from Ya'qūb ibn 'Utbah ibn Al-Mughīrah ibn al-Akhnas further asserts that during that year, smallpox and measles appeared for the first time in the Arabian Peninsula, coinciding with the growth of bitter plants[23] such as Harmal, Hanzalah, and 'Ursy.[24] As for al-Marāgī, he gives more weight to the rational interpretation that the event was caused by a smallpox or measles outbreak transmitted by creatures resembling mosquitoes or flies.

The differences between al-Ṭabarī and al-Marāghī in interpreting the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl* lie in their methodological orientations and in how each understands the relationship between text and context. These differences have direct implications for their explanations of the mechanism behind the destruction of Abrahah's army as well as for their interpretations of the accompanying natural phenomena. To clarify the points of divergence between the interpretations of al-Ṭabarī and al-Marāgī regarding the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl* in surah al-Fīl, the researcher presents the summary in the following table:

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[21] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 296.

[22] Al-Marāgī, jilid 10, h. 241.

[23] Harmal, Hanzhalah, and 'Ursy are plants known in traditional medicinal literature as types of medicinal herbs. Alfred Guillaume (1955) identifies these three plants with different scientific names: Harmal as *Ruta graveolens*, Hanzhalah as *Citrullus colocynthis*, and 'Ursy as *Asclepias/Calotropis gigantea*, commonly known as "Biduri."See John S Marr, Elias J Hubbard, and John T Cathey, 'The Year of the Elephant', *WikiJournal of Medicine*, 2.1 (2015), 1–5.

[24] See al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'An Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, jilid 10, h. 298.

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ASPECT OF STUDY	AL-ṬABARĪ	AL-MARĀGĪ
Interpretation of the Term *Ṭairan Abābīl*	1. *Abābīl* is a plural form that has no singular (*mufrad*). 2. *Abābīl* means groups, flocks that fly one after another, large numbers, formations moving in succession, coming from all directions and even from the sea. 3. Regarding physical form, reports vary: some say they were white, pitch-black, or green; some say their beaks resembled ordinary birds, while others say they had heads like wild animals, claws, or dog-like feet.	1. *Ṭairan abābīl* is not limited to birds but refers to anything that can fly, whether large or small. 2. *Ṭairan abābīl* were a type of insect, such as mosquitoes or flies. 3. *Ṭairan abābīl* carried deadly poison and disease-causing bacteria.
Interpretation of *al-Sijjīl*	1. Stones made of earth that was burned, extremely hard, and struck with great force. 2. Earth contained within stones—pebbles formed from dried clay, larger than lentils but smaller than peas. 3. *Al-sijjīl* is not an Arabic word; it comes from Persian (sank and wakil), meaning stone and earth.	1. Hardened and dried clay, or stones originally made from clay that underwent a drying process. 2. Earth or stones mixed with deadly poison and carrying disease-causing pathogens. 3. Attached to the feet of the birds and caused bodily destruction through toxic contamination entering the pores, damaging tissue and causing flesh to fall off.
The Destruction of "*Aṣḥāb al-Fīl*"	1. The destruction of Abrahah and his forces was caused by flocks of birds dropping burning stones from scorched earth, leading to their immediate devastation and death.	1. The destruction of Abrahah was caused by a severe outbreak of smallpox and measles that annihilated anyone afflicted by it.

In light of the comparative analysis above, it becomes evident that the divergent interpretations of al-Ṭabarī and al-Marāghī concerning the terms *ṭairan abābīl* and *al-sijjīl* stem primarily from their distinct exegetical methodologies and epistemological assumptions. Al-Ṭabarī's reliance on transmitted reports (*riwāyāh*) leads him to emphasize a literal and narrativized understanding of the Qur'anic account, portraying the destruction of Abrahah's army as a direct and extraordinary intervention through flocks of birds and burning stones. In contrast, al-Marāghī's contextual and rational approach frames the same event through natural processes, interpreting the Qur'anic imagery as pointing to the outbreak of devastating epidemics mediated by small creatures.

Despite these methodological differences, both interpretations converge on a

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shared theological conclusion: the affirmation of God's absolute power to protect the Kaʿbah and to annihilate a formidable force through means that transcend human expectation. Consequently, these differing readings should not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary perspectives that enrich the exegetical tradition and demonstrate the dynamic interplay between text, context, and interpretive methodology in Qur'anic exegesis.

Conclusion

In general, al-Ṭabarī interprets *ṭairan abābīl* literally as groups of birds coming from various directions and pelting Abrahah's army with stones made of burning clay (*al-sijjīl*). The classical reports he cites describe diverse physical characteristics of these birds, such as black, white, or green colors, beaks like ordinary birds, heads like wild animals, or feet resembling those of dogs. Conversely, Al-Marāgī interprets *ṭairan abābīl* rationally as small creatures, such as mosquitoes or flies, that carried infectious diseases. Meanwhile, *al-sijjīl* is understood as toxic dried clay particles that caused smallpox and measles among Abrahah's troops. Both exegetes agree that *ṭair* refers to something that flies, *abābīl* means groups or waves, and *al-sijjīl* refers to stones of earthly origin. Additionally, both acknowledge that the destruction of Abrahah's army was a manifestation of divine intervention responding to his hostile intentions. Their interpretive differences arise from methodology, source preferences, and differing historical-intellectual contexts.

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