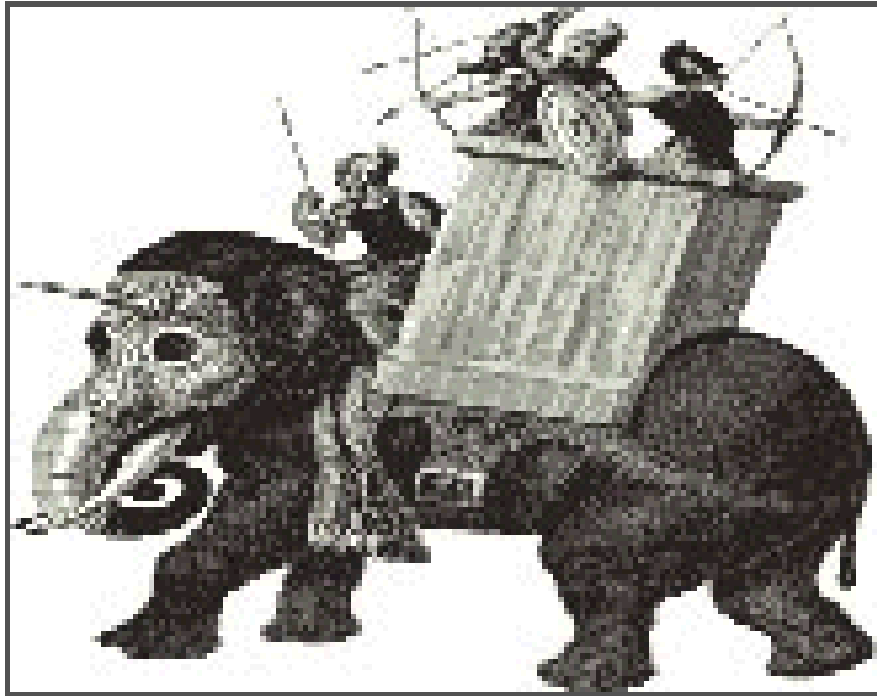


## The Year of the Elephant

Rev. Craig Moro



*“Didn’t you see how your Lord dealt with the Masters of the Elephant?”  
(Qur’an 105:2)*

We affirm in our UU principles that the sources we share to support whatever it is we do include “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” In practice, this usually means *stories* which grab our attention. If a scripture is short on stories, our patience with it is also likely to be short. The Qur’an is such a scripture. If we’re to understand how it can be a source of inspiration and strength to those for whom it is the central text in the world; and if it is to become a resource for us as well, we’ll need to find the stories which are somewhere in its vicinity, if not in the text itself. My task today is to locate just one such story, tell it, then try to hear its original, living voice clearly together with you. Here it is, first in its original language.

*Bismillahi-r-rahmaani-r-rahim  
A-lam tara kaifa fa‘ala rabbuka bi ashaab al-fiil  
A-lam yaj‘al kaidahum fii tadliil  
Wa arsala ‘alaihim tairan abaabiil  
Tarmihim bi hijaritin min sijjiil  
Wa ja‘alahum ka ‘asfin ma’kuulin*

## **The Elephant**

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

[Every passage of the Qur’an begins with these words like a prologue, suggesting that compassion and mercy are what we most need to know ‘about’ God, or what we ourselves most need to learn.]

Didn’t you see how your Lord dealt  
with the Masters of the Elephant?

Didn’t he make their plans go astray?

He sent swarms of birds against them,  
that pelted them with pebbles made of clay.  
and made them like digested hay... (Qur’an, Surah 105)

Now what was that all about, elephants and birds and pebbles? “The Elephant” is a chapter of the Qur’an that is not self-contained. Its few striking images conjure a fuller narrative, a story known to any inhabitant of Mecca in the 7th century when the Qur’an first appeared; a story detailing events which supposedly took place in the year 570 of the common era, decades before the rise of Islam. Mecca was the largest city in Arabia, a trade center governed loosely by a few clans. It was also the destination for religious pilgrims from throughout the region. The sacred center of the city, the Ka’aba or Cube, was not dedicated to any religious confession or deity in particular. It was associated in many minds with

the story of Abraham known to us from the Old Testament. Abraham, father of Arabs and Hebrews, was said to have rebuilt the structure, long after Adam built the original Ka'aba as the first work of human hands. Surrounding this black cube there were also shrines to Hubal, the god of the moon, the goddesses al-Lat, Manat, and al-'Uzzah, as well as shrines to roughly 360 other gods including a little-known creator god called Al-lah, or simply "The God". (Creators often have relatively minor status in polytheistic pantheons, like screenwriters who are forgotten while movie stars are celebrated.) It was a pluralistic shrine for a pluralistic religion.

All who came to Mecca for the caravan trade were welcome to bring their gods along with their goods, and so they did. Paintings of Jesus and Mary had recently been hung inside the Ka'aba itself. An annual pilgrimage (called the *Hajj*) included circumambulation of the cube and performances by poets called kahin who, while possessed by one of the many watching gods, chanted ecstatic verses in praise of them. It was an incredibly rich flow of spectacle and performance, meeting, greeting, eating, conversation, contemplation, fatigue and exhilaration--that was the pre-Islamic Hajj. So far as we know, this pilgrimage to Mecca was the only "institution" of religious life for most people in the region except the Christians and Jews, who also came to enjoy it. My guess is that many people just lived for the Hajj, eagerly waiting for it to come again each year. Meccans made a huge portion of their living from the it, like many U.S. stores do with Christmas today. The Hajj included trade and business dealings, which meant a great deal of wealth flowing into the purses of the Meccan citizens who hosted the pilgrims. Spiritual and physical abundance went hand in hand in Mecca. Goods and gods were gathered where it felt good for everyone just to get together. Over time, the city acquired a sort of gravitational pull, which was still increasing in 570 A.D.

To the south, what is today Yemen had been conquered by the (Christian) Abyssinian Empire and was governed by the vice-regent Abrahah, who had seized the country from its former Jewish rulers. He then built a great cathedral there, in the city of San'a, using stones salvaged from the ancient palace of the Queen of Sheba. He wrote to his emperor that he now planned to use the cathedral to hijack the Hajj and draw the wealth of the pilgrim trade south from Mecca to San'a. The emperor told him to spare no expense in accomplishing his plan. We don't know if the Abyssinian people were consulted, bribed with promises of economic goodies, or even persuaded that the people of Mecca needed to be saved from spiritual and political chaos by the superior combination of Christianity and Empire. With overwhelming military power, a shiny new house of worship instead of some old black *cube*, and a better religion than the local brand, how could such a plan fail?

The plan did not sit well with the Meccans, of course, who felt threatened both in their economic and their spiritual welfare. A man who lived between the two cities (and had wealthy relatives in Mecca) went to the cathedral one night and “defiled” it, we’re not told how. Maybe it was graffiti or maybe something much more naughty--I think of how we boys in Illinois used to try to write our names in the snow. The outraged Abrahah gathered his army with surprising speed, and headed north to tear the Ka’aba to the ground. To “shock and awe,” and break any possible resistance by the Meccans, he positioned at the head of his army the most formidable piece of military hardware of the day: an armored war elephant.

Near the outskirts of the city, Abrahah’s troops found a herd of 200 camels grazing and seized them as booty. He then sent a messenger to warn the inhabitants not to interfere with the destruction of the sacred precincts if they wished to preserve the rest of the city, their personal property, and their lives. This was to be a precision strike on the Ka’aba only, intended to permanently degrade Mecca’s most important capability and gain control of its most important resource, the flow of pilgrims and trade.

Heads of the leading clans in Mecca met, and concluded that resistance was futile. To avoid a bloodbath, they would withdraw to the hills overlooking the city but not fight. They sent a respected elder named ‘Abd al-Muttalib (who happened to be the owner of the seized camels), back with Abrahah’s messenger to act as their spokesman. Abrahah was impressed with this old man’s noble demeanor--I imagine him being played in a movie by the late Alec Guinness-- and inquired if, before departing, he had any favor to ask. ‘Abd al-Muttalib requested that his camels be returned to him. The general expressed disappointment to hear such concern for camels instead of the religion which was about to be destroyed (for if you destroy the sacred site of a religious life which has pilgrimage as its center, rather than texts or an organized clergy, you may indeed destroy the religion.) Traditional histories record the old gentleman’s reply as follows:

“I am the lord of the camels, and the temple likewise has a lord who will defend it. “He cannot defend it against me,” said Abrahah. “We shall see,” said ‘Abd al-Muttalib. “But give me my camels.” And Abrahah gave orders for the camels to be returned. <sup>1</sup>

We can guess the identity of the “lord” of the temple to whom ‘Abd al-Muttalib was referring from the name of his adult son, a caravan trader called ‘Abd al-Lah, “servant of Allah”. Soon, ‘Abd al-Lah’s own first child would be born, a

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Lings, Muhammad, p. 20. My debt to Mr. Lings and his book is immeasurable.

boy named Muhammad. Yes, he's the same Muhammad who 40 years later would become a prophet. He was born in what has come to be known as "the Year of the Elephant," but that's all we'll hear of his story today.

Next morning the assault began, the decorated war elephant walking ahead of the heavily armed troops to inspire awe and serve as a wrecking ball. It must have been a magnificent spectacle. Thinking cinematically, this would be a marvelous scene to film for one of our cast-of-thousands directors like Cecil B. De Mille or David Lean; full of strident horns and tympany rolls, sweat, shouts and sunshine. Then, the big surprise.

Given the command to advance into the city, the elephant suddenly knelt to the ground. Commanded to rise, goaded, then finally beaten with sticks and iron bars, the beast remained kneeling, rock-still, immovable. The frustrated Abrahah ordered the troops to turn on their heels and pretend for a moment to begin marching away, and the elephant stood to follow. When the soldiers turned back toward Mecca, down it went to its knees again, as if rooted to the spot. Finally, Abrahah threw up his hands and ordered his troops to advance on the city, leaving the elephant where it was. (We should probably change directors now to film the next scene. My pick would be Steven Spielberg, working with the special effects crew at Industrial Light and Magic, to do it justice.)

The camera follows the gaze of Abrahah (played by the great Samuel L. Jackson), running along the trunk of the kneeling creature, up its head, then high up its great back, to the hills where the citizens of Mecca stand watching huddled in fear, and finally out toward the western horizon, which we see is rapidly turning black in broad daylight. Now the camera holds. An unearthly noise begins, at first distant, then deafeningly loud in chest-rumbling Dolby sound, as the sky fills with birds. It's like one of the swarm scenes from Hitchcock's *The Birds* but multiplied to the tenth power, with every giveaway hint of corniness polished out by computers and millions of dollars--so many birds, it's a miracle they don't collide as they whirl and maneuver over the troops.

These are not like any birds which anyone has ever seen. I followed convention in translating the Qur'an verse as "swarms of birds", but the Arabic text names the kind of bird, using a word which is only known to occur in the language in that one single verse: *Abaabeel* birds, all of a kind but a kind no one has ever seen before. All carry three pellets of clay, one in each claw and one in its beak. They drop the pebbles like rain on the army, and each pebble accelerates much faster than gravity can account for. The pellets whiz down, change course,

following human breath or heartbeat or body heat. They strike. The pellets pierce armor and shields and helmets. A huge portion of our film's budget goes into displaying their effects. Where a pebble strikes a soldier, he begins to rot away, science-fiction fast. Some are killed instantly, some stagger and flee, decomposing as they run. Skins burst, guts empty out. All who are touched by the pebbles die. We can see the devastation close up and in panorama. Abrahah is left to return as a wreck of himself to San'a; a worse wreck than he'd planned to make of the Ka'aba and the morale of the Meccan people; a wreck from which nothing can be salvaged. Samuel Jackson could convey this with one look of his eyes.

Where should we go now that we've come to the scene of these events? Let's step back from the legend to the Qur'an, which alludes to its gruesome aspects without getting too specific. Everyone knew the story of the Masters of the Elephant, so there was no need for morbid details. The Qur'an evokes the whole story with a few words. "Didn't you see how your lord dealt with the Masters of the Elephant?" Some translators render the Arabic as "Seest Thou not" or "Didst Thou not see", but it's really an informal 2nd person singular, plain as can be. This may in fact be the only passage in the world's sacred scriptures that begins with a *Didncha--?* Didn't *you* see? 'You' who? You must be someone who needs a little jostling, reminding, someone who doesn't get it yet. What were you supposed to see?

Maybe you missed the most obvious lesson: that you shouldn't punish a whole community for the actions of a single individual. The man who did whatever naughty thing it was to the cathedral at San'a may have been expressing a popular sentiment, but he was one man acting alone. He was not even a Meccan. Neither the Qur'an nor the legend has any praise for his act, and the people of Mecca may very well have been happy to disown him. It's obvious that the Abyssinian leader was waiting for an excuse, any provocation to put a long-planned operation into action. His military response was already in gear and he wasn't willing to wait any more.

Don't mistake this story for a partisan warning, that God will choose Islam or Muslims over all. At this time the Ka'aba is still a pluralistic shrine. God defends this shrine for all people against an unjust attack. What's more, at the time this passage of the Qur'an was revealed, the handful of Meccan citizens who had joined with the Prophet Muhammad would face Jerusalem when they prayed, not the center of their own town. Ten more years would pass before the *qiblah* (or direction of worship) would shift toward the Ka'aba. In other words, the human actors in the story do not include any Muslims as we understand that word today,

spelled in English with a capital ‘M’. In the Year of the Elephant there simply weren’t any of those Muslims, nor would there be until another generation had come of age. Justice, as the Qur’an proclaims it here, is not only for “Muslims.”

The Qur’an does not lead us back to the year of the Elephant to tell us that God is always and only on the side of Muslims. It contains instead a profound warning to all of us against just this kind of certainty. The Abyssinian general has marched on Mecca doubly sure of himself. Nothing can stop his military force equipped with the Stealth bomber of its time, a war elephant. It’s possible that he called his plan Operation Desert Thunder, as if he has harnessed nature itself on his behalf, and he’s certain it will do his bidding.

His other certainty is that he is doing God’s work. When the Ka’aba is destroyed, people will flock to his new cathedral town to praise God’s only son, and the wealth that will accumulate there will be a material sign of spiritual glory. He has made his plans, and, with God and Nature working for him, he won’t wait long to see them fulfilled. The conquered people will adopt his system in a flash. He’ll only need to stay until this is accomplished, not one day longer.

Then we hear the Qur’an ask: “Did he not make their plans go astray?” *Their plans*. Please forgive me. I’ve been slipping into the easy error of singling out Abrahah. The single villain makes for an easier story, but the Qur’an names ‘Masters,’ not one Master, and underscores *their* plans. *Masters*, no ‘Abrahah’ : scripture doesn’t personalize even if the legend does. Masters are above all the planners. They’re the small group who make all real decisions. They set up the system, balance the weights of costs and benefits. They determine who or what to employ in their plans, and how to employ them, whether it’s elephants, soldiers, or even God.

The Masters of the Elephant did not then and do not now realize that God is compassionate, merciful, and unemployed. The Qur’an may tell us to turn to God, but never that God will do exactly what we want. God does not work for any plan or any system, not theirs, not yours, not mine. Didn’t you see? Don’t you see yet? God is not on your side. God does not work for your system. God is not the biggest elephant, cannot be harnessed and used as an instrument of human will. Perhaps nature can be, but only up to a point. The elephant might not move when it’s ordered to advance at the crucial moment. Nature can break from our control with a vengeance, leaving us frightfully exposed. (Think of our precarious weapons stockpiles, and of diseases toughened to ferocious power by overused antibiotics.)

Here the Qur'an weighs what is light enough to fly against what is heavy enough to crush all hope, then shows us how things tip. The elephant is a heavy piece of war equipment that becomes in an instant just a weight that slows the Masters down. The birds are all maneuverability and lightness, carrying nothing but those even lighter pebbles of clay. God, in the Qur'an, first makes humans from clay, then breathes life into us, so the pebbles could signify acts of humanity--each so light and fragile--overcoming the Masters with their weight when they're all put together. It may be more than a curiosity that the particular word for 'clay' used here (*sijjiil*) is not Arabic but from the Persian *sang-o-gil*. Persia had seen empires greater than Abyssinia rise and fall, and the word might evoke the dust of those empires, rolled into pellets on a wet morning. What's heavy can become so light when it's been emptied out--no center to hold its mass.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.  
Didn't you see how your Lord dealt with the Masters of the Elephant?  
Didn't he make their plans go astray?  
He sent swarms of birds against them, that pelted them with pebbles made of clay,  
and made them like digested hay...

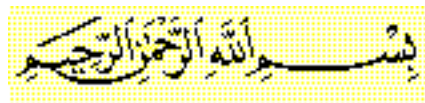
The five lines of this slender passage suggest a great *mass* of story, and meaning. The last words describe what finally became of the grand plans of the attackers, if not the attackers themselves. They were left, according to the Arabic, *ka 'asfin ma'kulin*, literally "like eaten grain." Some commentators suggest this means chaff and straw, what's left over after edible grain has been removed from harvested crops. Others suggest that the words might refer to an animal's fodder which has been passed through its digestive tract, meaning: the Masters' plans turned into you-know-what.

That happens to plans, and that's the earthy meaning I suggest in my translation, "digested hay." In the sun, over time, it gets even lighter than pebbles--then just blows away. You can go from feeling like a Master to feeling like "digested grain" more quickly than you can imagine. "Didn't you see...that digested grain?" The first words and the last come so close together in such a short passage: from eyes looking proudly forward to staring at what's dropped behind you in one short hour of fear. *There it is: what remains of our plans, our unique vision. There it is, the waste of a once-healthy Constitution.* We've taken too much awful shock to feel embarrassed now, or even to wipe--our eyes. But the point of this image is not to defile, but to humble us. There's hope at the end, if we can remember the compassion and mercy at the beginning.

I know that these past two years have been awfully shocking, a real bear, or an elephant, if you will, and many of us may feel like that stuff left at the end of the passage when we think about the future--prospects for peace or more cycles of terror and violence. We may also feel that our interests and our security are inextricably bound up with those of the Masters and the planners for now. It may affect how we act, and even how we vote. We may go for more elephants, for a while, because we think they'll make us safer. But I'm as confident as the Qur'an is that your hearts are with the birds that drop the pebbles; with the almost weightless acts of ordinary humanity, that bit by bit *will* make the world more compassionate and merciful. It will take patience.

*Sabr jamiil* says the Qur'an elsewhere: "Patience is beautiful." Patience guides the best plans. Do you think that you can establish a new pilgrimage center at will? Just build it like a shopping mall, maybe bulldoze the old churches downtown and they will come to yours? Light the beacon of democracy just with bombs and fire? Abrahah didn't stop to think that Mecca had acquired its gravitational pull stone by stone, pebble by pebble over generations, not overnight. Its gravity was never from size or weight alone. Pilgrimage is about *going*, step by step, not being pulled there all at once. The Masters of the Elephant are always impatient, but lightweights like us can't afford to be.

I hope I've given you an idea of what a deep resource the Qur'an can be, and not only for Muslims. I'm certain that "The Elephant" has served as the resource text for many sermons in recent months, though mostly in languages we can't understand. I wish more effort would go into studying resources like this chapter--at least as much as goes into calculating petroleum reserves in the Islamic world and our elaborate plans to use them. I hope we have the patience to go step by step through the difficult parts and stick with what may sound like a lightweight interest in the "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life" so it can do just that, and give our little pebbles the momentum they will need. *Amen.*



أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ ﴿١﴾ أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي  
تَضْلِيلٍ ﴿٢﴾ وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ ﴿٣﴾ تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّنْ  
سِجِّيلٍ ﴿٤﴾ فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ ﴿٥﴾