

A Page of History: Abraha and the Year of the Elephant

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Introduction

Have you ever met Muslims who mentioned this historical event, the *Year of the Elephant*? I have heard such references only a few times. It is an interesting story, however, and some Muslims emphasise proudly that through this event Allah showed that Christianity was defeated even before Muhammad's birth. It is good, therefore, for Christians to be aware of it. The following text is taken from the book written by John Gilchrist, *Muhammad—The Prophet of Islam*, 1994, pages 11-14.

The Christian King of Abyssinia

An event that took place near Mecca not long before the rise of Islam has to be included in any assessment of the environment in which Muhammad founded the new faith. After the demise of Dhu Nuwas the king of Abyssinia, Abraha decided to make the Christian faith dominant in southern Arabia, and he had a fine cathedral built at San'a to which he hoped to draw all the Arabs as pilgrims. The city survives to this day, in what is now Yemen, though the church he built has long since vanished.

Abraha, although a determined warrior, had a good reputation in the region. He was known to be a Christian of sincere conviction, indeed a very zealous one, and he was renowned for his keen sense of justice, his charitable

nature and the manner in which he championed the cause of the poor and the unfortunate.

Nonetheless, he was determined to make San'a the commercial centre of the Arabian Peninsula and soon after the completion of his cathedral, he issued a proclamation obliging all Arabs to visit it annually. He was well aware of the popularity of the Ka'aba in Mecca and he was fixed in his purpose to displace it as the commercial and religious centre of Arabia. His decree generally went unheeded, however, and the Christian King of Himyar watched with grief as the hordes of pilgrims set out each year for Mecca instead.

An independent record of his contests with the resident tribes in the area of the Yemen is introduced with an inscription introducing the name of the Triune God of the Christians in terms that show that the exact essence of the Trinity was well known to the Christians of Arabia, notwithstanding a misrepresentation of it in the Qur'an. A record of his management of the repairs to the dam of Marib in southern Arabia begins with these words: "By the power of the Merciful One (*Rhmn*), and His Messiah (*w-Mshhw*), and of the Holy Spirit (*rh quds*)". The Qur'an acknowledges Allah as *ar-Rahman* (Surah 17.110) and recognises Jesus as *al-Masih* (Surah 4.171), but it regards the Trinity as representing Allah, Jesus and his mother Mary (Surah 5.78,5.119)

while the Holy Spirit (*ruhul-quddus*) is identified as the medium of revelation (*Surah* 16.102), elsewhere said to be *Jibril*, the Angel Gabriel (*Surah* 2.97).¹ The use of the correct trinitarian formula in an Arabian inscription not long before the rise of Islam, however, shows that the Qur'an is not treating an error among the local Christians and its own misconception does tend to give the impression that the founder of Islam himself was in some confusion at this point.

Abraha's March on the Ka'aba at Mecca

News came to the Christian king one day that a member of the tribe of Kenanah had entered his cathedral and had desecrated it by strewing animal dung all over its interior. Abraha was infuriated, more particularly when he heard that the tribes in the vicinity had revolted against his rule and had assassinated his ally Muhammad ibn Khuza'a, the king of Modar. So he decided to lead an expedition to Mecca with the sole purpose of destroying the Ka'aba.

A large contingent set out with numerous soldiers and horsemen. A unique feature of the army was the inclusion of an elephant among the other animals taken along, a circumstance which was later to give the year in which the march took place its name, the *Year of the Elephant*. (The actual year was 570 AD). When it reached Mughammis near Mecca, Abraha sent a contingent to the outskirts of the city and the soldiers plundered what they could including

two hundred camels belonging to 'Abd al-Muttalib who was to become Muhammad's grandfather.

The *Quraysh* meanwhile decided it was useless to try to resist the large army and Abraha, sensing their unwillingness to engage him, sent a messenger to Mecca telling them he did not wish to fight anyone but sought only to destroy the Ka'aba. He summoned a representative to come out and meet him and 'Abd al-Muttalib duly went forth. When he arrived, he demanded that his camels be returned to him. Abraha was surprised that he should only be concerned about his animals when the centre of his religious faith was about to be eliminated but the Arab retorted that, while the camels were his concern, the Lord of the Ka'aba would look after his own house and would defend it against him.

Abraha returned the camels and set out for the Ka'aba. The *Quraysh* decided to withdraw to the hills around the town after 'Abd al-Muttalib had first taken hold of the metal ring in the door of the shrine and had prayed to Allah to protect it. Meanwhile the elephant was brought to the front of the army and was decked in festive apparel. The guide of the procession marching on Mecca, Nufayl, was very reluctant to proceed with the journey and in a whispered but emphatic voice, he commanded the elephant to kneel. He had learnt the words of command, which the beast had been trained to understand, and caused it to go down on its knees and refuse to march any further. Abraha was annoyed but no matter how hard he tried to persuade it

to rise and press on with his army the elephant would not march on the city.

The Destruction of Abraha's Army

It is not known exactly how the army came to grief but something dramatic appears to have happened to it to cause it to be decimated and give up the march on Mecca. A logical explanation can be given in that, as the *Quraysh* were occupying the hills, they may have rained down stones and rocks on the exposed force and obliged it to withdraw. An outbreak of smallpox or some other plague could likewise have caused Abraha to pull back without accomplishing his goal. A legend soon grew, however, that the army had been beaten back miraculously by a flock of birds which hurled down rocks and stones upon the soldiers. A record of this is found in the Qur'an itself in the following chapter:

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did he not make their guile go astray? And he sent against them flights of birds, hurling against them stones of baked clay, and he made them like green stalks that have been consumed.

Surah 105.1-5

The traditional story of this event describes these unique birds as about the size of a swallow with green plumage and yellow beaks. Each one is said to have had three pebbles, one in its beak and one each in its claws, and as they pelted the army hundreds perished as the pebbles, hurled with an unbelievable ferocity, pierced the soldiers' coats of mail and found their

mark. The rest of the army returned to Yemen and many others died on the way (giving the impression that it was most probably an outbreak of a disease such as small-pox that caused the catastrophe). Abraha himself died not long after returning to San'a and no further excursions from the city were undertaken.

The Qur'an, however, takes the legend at face value. The deliverance of the Ka'aba was obviously regarded by the Arabs as a miracle and a sign that the shrine had a divinely sanctioned significance. It is interesting to note that the Qur'an elsewhere describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in much the same way, saying that they too were assailed with "stones of baked clay" (*hijaratam-min sijil- Surah 15.74*).

The sanctity of the Ka'aba, both prior to Islam and within its realm, is in no small measure the result of this incident. During his lifetime, Muhammad always regarded it as a genuinely holy shrine despite the fact that it was surrounded by idols. The very sequel of an Arabian prophet may well have had some connection with this event, creating as it did a sense of divine protection upon the city of Mecca.

Two other factors may also assist in determining why that claimant to universal prophethood should have been Muhammad himself. Firstly, it was his own grandfather who took the lead and initiative in opposing the Abyssinian ruler and in assuring him that the Lord of the Ka'aba would look after his own house just as the Arab chieftain had seen to his. Secondly, it

has always been believed by Muslim historians that Muhammad himself was born in 570 AD, the very Year of the Elephant, and it has been customary for Muslims throughout the history of Islam to regard the destruction of Abraha's army as a sign of the imminent rise of a final messenger who would withstand all the attempts of pagans and unbelievers to destroy the ultimate revelation of God which would be given to him through the mediation of a divinely-inspired Scripture.

It is not known for certain when Muhammad was actually born but there can be no doubt of his lineage and the place of his birth. He was born in Mecca of two members of the *Banu Hashim*, 'Abdallah and his wife Amina. His father died shortly before he was born though his grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib lived on for some years and was the young boy's official protector. Amina died six years after his birth, leaving the young Muhammad an orphan but one who was destined to transform the religious and social characteristics of his people and to eventually become the founder of the only major world religion to succeed the Christian faith.

Conclusion

The above represents the text according to Gilchrist. The significance of this event should not be underestimated. In conclusion, I would like to highlight the following points:

- Muslims see this whole story as a sign from Allah, who confirmed through this historical event the significance of Mecca as the place of pilgrimage, which cannot be touched or destroyed by non-Muslims.
- At the same time, Muslims believe that through this event, the holy character of the Ka'aba is confirmed.
- The fact that it was Muhammad's grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, who took the initiative and stepped forward, praying for the protection of the Ka'aba, is seen by Muslims as a further sign that Muhammad is indeed the true and final prophet.
- In addition, Muslims regard this event as a sign that Christianity was defeated even before the rise of Islam. It is seen as the first victory against Christianity.
- Therefore, Muslims believe that Allah will, in similar miraculous ways, protect the Ka'aba and Islam as a whole against all future attacks by Christians.
- That Muhammad is born in the same year as the *Year of the Elephant* is regarded as yet another sign that Allah brought Muhammad as a final messenger, who will for all eternity make sure that the Ka'aba cannot be destroyed by non-Muslims.

Footnotes

- 1 *Jibril*, Gabriel in the Qur'an, is a Spirit who is not introducing himself (*Surah* 2.97-98; 66.4). Since the message does not agree with the Bible, it cannot be the same Angel (see Luke 1.26-33).