

Toweka: The Vanishing Elephant

by Steven J. Kolbe

The elephant kept popping in and out of the savannah--which is to say, in and out of existence. It was an African bush elephant, which made this trick even more impressive. Our village knew everything about this elephant when he was on the savannah. He stood over three meters high and weighed just at five tonnes, and furthermore his tusks were as white as my baby daughter's teeth, and his wrinkled skin was the soft gray of my grandmother's hair before she passed. But we knew nothing about the elephant when he was not on the savannah. What was his skin like over there? Was his skin this thick, dun armor still, or something soft like wild cotton? There was no way to know. Perhaps he was not even a bush elephant at all over there. Perhaps in that place, he got to be a gazelle skipping about the over-there savannah. We could offer only idle speculation.

Scientist from every field--biology, physics, chemistry, biochemistry, biophysics, molecular biophysical chemistry...there was even an elephantologist--visited our little village to examine him. They recorded their data in notebooks and tablet computers, jotting down notes and making voice recordings about every little thing. You could tell the newbies because they would all jump at seeing this great behemoth vanish for the first time. The seasoned ones would just look up from their notes or write down the time and wait for him to return.

After a few months of close analysis, they could tell us nothing. "Not without cutting its brain open," one of the lab coat men said, disdainfully. We would not let them kill our prize attraction--a fact many were mad, even belligerent about. Our compromise was to let them dress him up.

They would dress our elephant, whom we had begun calling Toweka, in giant sun hats, and they would drape colorful rugs over his back. Toweka liked these dress-up sessions so much that he would wait until the game was over to return to perform his disappearing trick. Toweka would fade into the savannah and then materialize moments later, nude once again. Wherever he was going, he was leaving these outfits there. And so our world lost matter at the rate of one giant, ridiculous costume an hour. Until they tired of that game as well, that is.

Of that other place, these experts could tell us nothing substantial. Some hypothesized it was another dimension, but they never did agree. What they all seemed to know for sure was that it had nothing to do whatsoever with the God of Abraham.

Before they left, the scientists paid us some money for our time and for some clothes and trinkets that they took home with them as souvenirs.

In the middle of the night, some weeks later, we heard a bang and came outside to discover that Toweka had disappeared in a new and terrific way, leaving this time an imprint of his outline in the air, an imprint that slowly dissipated while we waited for him to return. We waited and waited but no Toweka returned to our little savannah. Like a meerkat burrowing into the earth, Toweka had ducked his head into that other place for good. Who knew if he would ever emerge again?

Eventually we all took down our signs and put away the pamphlets we had had printed in the city. People stopped coming to our village and we stopped wanting them to come.

And so was our diversion concluded for us, and the time of hard

work recommenced.

