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David D. Thomas
SIL-UND

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Elephants in Glass Houses: Aesop Revisited

David Thomas

Once upon a time, in a far-away land, eight blind wise old linguists decided to study the elephant, that marvelous beast they had heard so many tales about.

On approaching, the first man touched the right front leg of the elephant, felt it carefully, and pronounced, "The elephant, I see, is much like a tree." No. 2 stepped up, ran his hands along the elephant from the tip of his trunk to the end of his tail, and exclaimed, "'Tis like a string of interconnected parts of various sizes, forsooth." No. 3 in turn felt the sinews and tendons, commenting on how this must be indeed the essence of the elephant, binding it together in a prosodic unity. No. 4 came to the back right leg and agreed to the tree-like structure of the elephant. No. 5 went around to the left side and agreed with No. 4, as did also No. 8 later. But No. 6, a meek lamb-like man, with some knowledge of anatomy, upon investigation of the beast, declared, "Colleagues and gentlemen of science, behold how the elephant, like other animals, has at its essence a network of blood vessels and nerves. This must be the true description of an elephant." When No. 7 stepped forward, he too happened to touch the head first then traced the outline along the surface to the tail, upon which he agreed with No. 2 that the elephant was a series of connected parts in a row.

At this they fell to arguing among themselves, each man stoutly maintaining the rightness of his own analysis of the elephant and the ignorant errors of his colleagues. Finally No. 1 spoke up and said, "You see, my

friends, how four of us are in agreement. Surely we must be right. Come get on the bandwagon with us." But the others would not hear to it. Then No. 2 tried, "Brethren, as fellow-members of SIL we should all stick together, as you see No. 7 and I are doing. Come join us." But this attempt failed too, and the eight of them returned to their arguing.

The elephant, bewildered, left them and trundled back into the forest.

Moral (every fable must have a moral): Elephants in glass houses shouldn't throw stones at wise linguists.

Epilogue: Confucius says, Man who throws mud loses ground.