

2 Kings 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] 2 Kings chapter 2 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. And Elijah said to Elisha, Please stay here, for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel.
- But Elisha said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So they went down to Bethel, and the sons of the prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you?
- And he said, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet. Elijah said to him, Elisha, please stay here, for the Lord has sent me to Jericho. But he said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.
- So they came to Jericho. The sons of the prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha and said to him, Do you know that today the Lord will take away your master from over you? And he answered, Yes, I know it. Keep quiet.
- Then Elijah said to him, Please stay here. For the Lord has sent me to the Jordan. But he said, As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So the two of them went on.
- [1 : 0 8] Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they were both standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his cloak, and rolled it up, and struck the water.
- And the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you.
- And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me. And he said, You have asked a hard thing. Yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you.
- But if you do not see me, it shall not be so. And as they still went on and talked, Behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.
- And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes, and tore them in two pieces.
- [2 : 0 8] And he took up the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?
- And when he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other. And Elisha went over. Now when the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho saw him opposite them, they said, The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.
- And they came to meet him, and bowed to the ground before him. And they said to him, Behold now, there are with your servants fifty strong men. Please let them go and seek your master.

It may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley. And he said, You shall not send. But when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send.

They sent therefore fifty men, and for three days they sought him but did not find him. And they came back to him while he was staying at Jericho. And he said to them, Did I not say to you, Do not go?

[3 : 09] Now the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful. He said, Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.

So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water, and threw salt in it, and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed this water. From now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.

So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke. He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city, and jeered at him, saying, Go up, you bald head, go up, you bald head.

And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods, and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

2 Kings chapter 2 describes the transition from the ministry of Elijah to that of Elisha. Elisha was called back in 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 19 to 21, but he hasn't really appeared again until this point.

[4 : 18] Elijah, Elisha, and the sons of the prophets all seem to know that Elijah is going to be taken up. Elisha is asked three times by Elijah to stay, as he is going to Bethel, as he is going to Jericho, and then on to the Jordan.

On each of these occasions, Elisha insists on following him. Sandwiched between these requests from Elijah, Elisha is also asked by both the sons of the prophets at Bethel, and those at Jericho, if he is aware that the Lord is going to take his master from over him.

The repetition develops a rising sense of anticipation. Some significant transition is about to occur. The presence of the sons of the prophets at this point might be surprising to us.

As we've read through the story of Elijah, he seems to be largely alone, and he laments that he alone is left. However, here we seem to have communities of faithful prophets at various parts of the country.

These figures will be a lot more prominent in the story of Elisha. Whereas Elijah is an isolated and struggling prophet in the wilderness, Elisha's work occurs in large measure in the context of remnant communities that are being established within the land.

[5 : 22] The journey that they take, from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan River, is significant. The itinerary might surprise us. They almost double back on themselves. And each of these places is closely associated with Joshua's conquest of the land.

It is as if Elijah is tracing back through the conquest narrative of Joshua, a narrative that will later be replayed as Elisha enters into the land. Elisha insists on going with Elijah.

All these opportunities that he has given to go back, he insists on going on at each point. This story has two aspects to it. On the one hand, it's the story of Elijah's ascension. And on the other hand, it's the story of Elisha's Pentecost.

Elisha will receive the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit, the double portion. He will be identified with Elijah and he will complete the ministry that Elijah had started. Elijah never completed the ministry that he was given in chapter 19.

He was given the task of anointing Hazeiel, king of Syria, of anointing Jehu and of anointing Elisha as his successor. He had anointed Elisha as his successor, but he never anointed Hazeiel or Jehu.

[6 : 28] And now Elisha will complete what Elijah had started. Their ministries are one ministry, a two-part ministry in two persons. As we will later see, this has resemblances with the story of Moses and Joshua.

The condition for Elisha to receive the double portion of his master's spirit is that he see him when he is being taken up. He must have the perception to perceive this visionary event.

At a number of points in the story of Elisha, there are visionary phenomena that can only be perceived by those who have their eyes opened. The fact that Elisha can see these things is a sign that he is a suitable successor for Elijah who has gone before him.

We might think of a similar event in the New Testament in the baptism of Jesus. The heavens being opened and the spirit descending upon Christ in the form of a dove is not something that everyone would have seen.

Rather, it's something that John the Baptist and Jesus saw. These were visionary phenomena that you needed spiritual perception to perceive. Chariots of fire and horses of fire separate the two of them and Elijah ascends into heaven in a whirlwind.

[7 : 30] We might have recognized allusions to the story of Jacob at Bethel back in chapter 19 with the angel coming to Elijah while he slept on his journey. Now, however, it is as if Elijah is ascending Jacob's ladder.

He is going to enter into the heavenly place itself. As a prophet, he was one who participated in the divine council, being part of the deliberations of the Lord's court, and now he is ascending to that throne room.

Elisha proclaims, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. There will be a similar statement made in the context of the death of Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 13 verse 14.

The ascent of Elijah in fire also naturally contrasts with what we saw in the previous chapter as fire came down from heaven and consumed the 250s. God's fire destroys the wicked, but it is the means by which the righteous are raised up to his throne.

Peter Lighthouse observes, The story of Elijah's departure into heaven follows the sequence of a sacrificial rite. By their mutual journey around the land, Elijah and Elisha form a unit, a two of them.

[8 : 32] They cross the Jordan as parts of a sacrificial animal will be washed before being placed on the altar. Fire descends from heaven, dividing them in two, one ascending in fire to God as the altar portions of the animal ascend in smoke to heaven.

In the ascension, or holy burnt offering, the skin of the sacrificial animal is given to the priest, and the mantle skin of Elijah, the hairy garment of the bale of hair, is left for Elisha.

Through this human sacrifice, Elisha becomes a successor to Elijah, and a new phase of prophetic history begins. The fact that fifty sons of the prophets stand at a distance, opposite the Jordan, as Elijah and Elisha cross, Elijah ascends, and then Elisha returns, might fill out something of the sacrificial image that's playing out here.

There are two water crossings, which might remind us of Moses' water crossing leading the people out of Egypt, and Joshua's leading the people into the promised land. In the crossing of the Red Sea, it is Moses' rod that is the key thing that affects the crossing.

In the case of the crossing of the Jordan, in the entrance to the land, it's the feet of the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Here it is the mantle of Elijah that is the means by which the waters are crossed.

[9 : 45] Perhaps we are to see Elijah as a sort of human rod, as one who bears God's presence in a more personal way. In bearing the Ark of the Covenant, the Levites were bearing a symbol of God's throne, but here there seems to be a more intimate involvement between God's presence and a person.

The mantle isn't just something that Elisha will carry, it is something that he will wear. As a miracle-working prophet, Elisha will bear the presence of God with him into the land. The Lord will act in and through him.

There are natural comparisons to be drawn between Elijah and Moses. Both have strange deaths or departures, as we see in Deuteronomy 34, verses 5-6. So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.

And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth Peor. But no one knows the place of his burial to this day. Both Elisha and Joshua are closely associated with the spirit of their master, and have a father-son relationship with the one that preceded them, something that we see in Numbers chapter 27, verses 18-23, and Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 9.

In Numbers chapter 13, verse 16, Moses renamed Hosea Joshua. The name Joshua means the Lord is salvation. The name Elisha means God is salvation.

[11 : 02] Moses and Joshua share a single two-stage mission. The same can be seen with Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is the prophet of the wilderness, and Elisha is the prophet of the land.

Moses is the one who leads them through the wilderness, and Joshua is the one who leads them into the promised land. Elijah performs eight miracles. Elisha performs 16. It would seem to be a very natural thing for one who holds the double portion of his father's spirit to do.

After Elisha takes the mantle of Elijah, he calls upon the name of the Lord, and repeats the miraculous crossing by which Elijah had led them over when they had first crossed. There is a natural relationship between chapters 1 and 2, as 50 strong men seek after Elijah for three days.

The preceding chapter had three sets of 50 men seeking Elijah. The men in chapter 1 had sought to bring down the prophet that had gone up, and in this chapter they are looking to see whether the prophet who has been caught up has been set down by the Lord.

The chapter ends with further demonstrations of the connection between Elijah and Elisha, demonstrating that Elisha is the proper successor of Elijah. The story of Elijah began immediately after the description of the rebuilding of the city of Jericho and the death of two sons.

[12 : 16] Now Elisha comes to Jericho, and he begins by healing waters there. The waters are healed from death and miscarriage. Jericho, that had been a place of death, is now made a place where life is found.

The manner of the healing might recall the events of Mara in the wilderness, where the bitter waters were healed immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. It is important to read the miracles of Elisha against the backdrop of the miracles and actions of Elijah.

For example, the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath becomes the raising of the Shunammite son in chapter 4. Elijah's ministry began by pronouncing a lack of water, and here Elisha's ministry begins by healing waters.

Elisha, God is salvation, is also replaying the story of Joshua in various ways. Joshua meaning the Lord is salvation. Joshua crossed over the Jordan and entered into the land and fought against Jericho.

Now Elisha enters into the land, crossing the Jordan, and then heals the waters of Jericho. Whereas Elijah's ministry had been chiefly characterised by conflict, the ministry of Elisha is predominantly characterised by healing and provision of life.

[13 : 24] However, this chapter does end with a judgement story. The story of the 42 lads of Bethel and the She-Bears needs to be read carefully in its context. Peter Lighthouse has some very helpful remarks.

He observes that the sons of the prophets, earlier in the same chapter in verses 3 and 5, speak of the Lord taking Elisha's master from over his head. Lighthouse comments, This repeated statement from the sons of the prophets helps to explain the story at the end of 2 Kings 2, one of the most controversial passages in scripture.

The phrase little boys in chapter 2 verse 23 can mean young men or subordinates. The word in question can be seen elsewhere, used to refer to characters in their late teens or young men who are old enough to fight.

In Genesis chapter 48, it is used to refer to Ephraim and Manasseh, who by that point were in their early 20s. Lighthouse goes on, Bethel is the site of Jeroboam I's golden calf shrine and the context suggests that these are not children but Levites of the idolatrous shrine.

Elisha's curse is an act of warfare, a Joshua-like attack on a centre of idolatry. We should note that Elisha has just crossed the Jordan into the land. Lighthouse observes that there is a chiasmic or there and back again structure to the narrative.

[14 : 39] It begins with removing the head, the fact that Elijah is going to be taken from Elisha. Then there are 50 men mentioned. Then they cross the Jordan with Elijah dividing the waters. Then Elisha requests the spirit of Elijah.

A chariot separates them and then Elijah is taken up by a whirlwind into heaven. And then back again. Elisha sees and calls to the chariot and tears his clothes. Then the mantle is received as Elisha had requested the spirit earlier.

Then Elisha divides the waters as Elijah had divided them earlier. Then 50 men are mentioned again. And finally at the end of the chapter we have the reference to the bald head that corresponds to the removing of the head at the beginning.

Lighthouse proceeds. The young men mark Elijah because his hairy head, his bale of hair mentioned in verse 8 of chapter 1 is taken from him. Perhaps he literally shaves his head in mourning over Elijah's departure.

But it is also possible that they are marking Elisha because they assume he is unprotected without Elijah. Their taunt to Elisha to ascend also points back to Elijah. You know where you can go Elisha.

[15 : 44] Elisha again demonstrates that he bears the spirit of Elijah which is the spirit of Yahweh. For he can call out bears from the forest as readily as Elijah can call out fire from heaven to consume the soldiers of Ahaziah.

If we look back at chapter 1 we should be able to see some of the parallels between these two events. In his commentary on 2 Kings T.R. Hobbes notes that there are similarities between the story of the bears and the story of the fire coming down from heaven.

We can think about the way that the bears correspond with the two times that the fire comes down from heaven. In both there is a challenge offered to the status of the prophet. In chapter 1 the king orders Elijah to come down.

In chapter 2 the young men order Elisha to go up. In chapter 1 the men describe Elisha as a hairy man. In chapter 2 Elisha is described as bald-headed.

Hobbes also observes the similarities in the syntax between the two events of judgment in chapter 1 verse 10 and came down fire from the skies and consumed in chapter 2 verse 24 and came out two she-bears from the forest and devoured.

[16 : 53] Perhaps in the movement from the hairy prophet to the bald-headed prophet we should also see a completion of a Nazarite vow. Elijah has been engaged in a sort of zealous warfare for the Lord and now that the vow has been completed according to the ritual of chapter 6 of Numbers his head is shaved and the hair is burnt up.

Elisha's ministry will take a very different form after this. The fact that it is 42 of the lads that are killed might again be significant. In chapter 10 verse 14 of the book Jehu will kill 42 relatives of Ahaziah of Judah persons who come to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother.

Elisha's judgment upon the 42 lads foreshadows the judgment upon the Amari dynasty of Ahab and upon all who are associated with it. Such a parallel should not surprise us given the relationship between Elisha and Jehu in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 16 to 17.

Beyond the parallels between Elijah and Elisha and Moses and Joshua already mentioned there are parallels to be seen between Elijah and John the Baptist and Jesus and Elisha.

In Mark's gospel chapter 1 verse 6 John the Baptist is described being clothed in much the same way as Elijah is described in chapter 1 verse 8 of this book.

[18 : 08] The dynamics between Elijah and Jezebel and Ahab remind us of the relationship between John the Baptist and Herodias and Herod. John the Baptist like Elijah is a desert prophet a forerunner of a prophet whose work will mostly be in the land.

In the gospels we are told that John the Baptist will come in the spirit and power of Elijah and that he is the Elijah to come prophesied in the book of Malachi. As with Moses and Joshua and Elijah and Elisha there is a transition on the banks of the Jordan.

John the Baptist baptizes Jesus as in the story of Elijah and Elisha there are visionary phenomena and Jesus' ministry begins. Jesus' name of course is related to Joshua.

The Lord is salvation. Once again connecting with Elisha God is salvation. We might also see later in the story of the gospels and of Acts ways in which Jesus is like Elijah.

His ascension in Acts chapter 1 is the church's Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. The leader ascends into heaven and his spirit descends upon his followers. Further interesting details might be noted on this front.

[19 : 12] As already pointed out chapters 1 and 2 of the book of 2 Kings belong together. In chapter 1 three sets of 50 soldiers and their captains are sent to capture Elijah.

doing the maths this is 50 plus 1 three times over 153. As James Bajon points out in the final narrative of the gospel of John as Jesus' ministry transitions to that of his disciples 153 fish are caught.

Perhaps a call back to the transition that we see between Elijah and Elisha in chapters 1 and 2 of 2 Kings. A question to consider.

How might recognising these parallels between the story of Elijah and Elisha and the stories of John the Baptist, Jesus and Jesus' disciples help us to understand the ministry of Jesus and his disciples more fully?

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