

## 2 Kings 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     2 Kings chapter 7 But Elisha said, Hear the word of the Lord, thus says the Lord, Tomorrow about this time a seer of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seers of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria.

Then the captain on whose hand the king leaned said to the man of God, If the Lord himself should make windows in heaven, could this thing be? But he said, You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it.

Now there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate, and they said to one another, Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say, Let us enter the city, the famine is in the city, and we shall die there.

And if we sit here, we die also. So now come, let us go over to the camp of the Syrians. If they spare our lives, we shall live, and if they kill us, we shall but die. So they arose at twilight to go to the camp of the Syrians.

But when they came to the edge of the camp of the Syrians, Behold, there was no one there. For the Lord had made the army of the Syrians hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to come against us.

[ 1 : 1 2 ]     So they fled away in the twilight, and abandoned their tents, their horses and their donkeys, leaving the camp as it was, and fled for their lives. And when these lepers came to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent and ate and drank, and they carried off silver and gold and clothing, and went and hid them.

Then they came back and entered another tent, and carried off things from it, and went and hid them. Then they said to one another, We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news.

If we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore come, let us go and tell the king's household. So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city and told them, We came to the camp of the Syrians, and behold, there was no one to be seen or heard there, nothing but the horses tied and the donkeys tied, and the tents as they were.

Then the gatekeepers called out, and it was told within the king's household. And the king rose in the night and said to his servants, I will tell you what the Syrians have done to us. They know that we are hungry.

Therefore they have gone out of the camp to hide themselves in the open country, thinking, When they come out of the city, we shall take them alive and get into the city. And one of his servants said, Let some men take five of the remaining horses, seeing that those who are left here will fare like the whole multitude of Israel who have already perished.

[ 2 : 3 2 ]     Let us send and see. So they took two horsemen, and the king sent them after the army of the Syrians, saying, Go and see. So they went after them as far as the Jordan. And behold, all the way was littered with garments and equipment that the Syrians had thrown away in their haste.

And the messengers returned and told the king. Then the people went out and plundered the camp of the Syrians. So a seer of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two seers of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.

Now the king had appointed the captain on whose hand he leaned to have charge of the gate. And the people trampled him in the gate, so that he died, as the man of God had said when the king came down to him.

For when the man of God had said to the king, Two seers of barley shall be sold for a shekel, and a seer of fine flour for a shekel, about this time tomorrow in the gate of Samaria, the captain had answered the man of God, If the Lord himself should make windows in heaven, could such a thing be?

And he had said, You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat of it. And so it happened to him, for the people trampled him in the gate, and he died. In the story of 2 Kings chapter 6 verses 8 to 23, where the Syrians had tried to capture Elisha in Dothan, the story had begun with an attack from the Syrians, from which the Lord miraculously delivered his people, concluding with the provision of a great feast and the departure of the Syrians.

[ 3 : 57 ]     Albeit in a rather different manner, the same pattern plays out again here in chapter 7. Perhaps this invites comparisons and contrasts between the two accounts, as narratives designed to be read alongside of each other.

As Peter Lightheart notes, the whole narrative is chiastically structured, as a there and back again story. It begins with Elisha's prediction to the officer in verses 1 to 2, and ends with the fulfilment of that prediction in verses 16 to 20.

It then has the four leprous men discovering the abandoned camp in verses 3 to 8, which corresponds with the return of the messengers of the king in verse 15.

The lepers return to report the empty camp in verses 9 to 11, and the messengers of the king are sent out in verses 14 to 15. At the centre of the pattern are verses 12 and 13, in which the king expresses his suspicions concerning a trap set by the Syrians, and one of his men suggests that they send out some horses and some men with them, to discover whether a trap indeed had been set.

Chapter 6 ended with the king coming against Elisha, whom he blamed for the horrific crisis of the siege and the famine that had befallen Samaria. Now, as the king comes to Elisha's door, Elisha responds to him.

[ 5 : 14 ]     Elisha's prophecy is astonishing. Samaria's famine isn't merely the result of the siege, as can be seen in the following chapter. It's gone on for several years. To claim that the Lord would provide such a quantity of food that the people of Samaria would almost instantly go from selling a donkey's head for 80 shekels of silver and a small quantity of dove's dung for 5 shekels of silver, to a situation where barley and fine flour would be so cheaply obtained, was difficult to countenance.

A famine does not instantly lift. In this respect, it isn't like a drought, where the coming of rains can change the situation in a matter of hours. Rather, access to food takes some time to be restored after a famine.

Food has to be grown, harvested, brought to the people and then sold to them. Each of these stages takes time, a lot longer than a day. The sudden end to the famine reminds us of the sudden end to the drought in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings chapter 18.

Once again, the power of the word of the Lord would be demonstrated to a resistant, onrident king. The captain who accompanied the king refused to believe it, and he expressed his disbelief, to which Elisha responded with a word of judgment, which would also serve as a further confirmation of the word of the Lord concerning the event.

We don't see many lepers in the narrative of the Old Testament, but there are a cluster of lepers in these chapters, Naaman the Syrian, Gehazi the servant of Elisha, and the four lepers of this chapter.

- [ 6 : 41 ] The lepers, on account of their uncleanness, were excluded from the city, although there is some irony in this fact, when we consider that the people within the city were eating donkey's heads, dove's dung, and even their own children.

The lepers are outsiders, the people excluded from the community, but they will be the first to enjoy the fruit of the Lord's deliverance, and they become the bearers of the good news. The lepers, excluded from the beleaguered city, decide that they have nothing to lose by going to the camp of the Syrians in search of food.

However, when they go there, there is no one to be found. In the previous story, the Lord had confused the eyes of the Syrians, so that they could not recognize Elisha, or where they were. In this story, we discover that the Lord had deceived the ears of the Syrians, so that they heard the sound of chariots, horses, and a great army, causing them to flee.

In discussing the structure of the books of the kings, Lighthouse and James Jordan observed that the events of chapter 6 verse 24 to chapter 7 verse 20 are parallel to the earlier story of chapter 3, concerning the battle against the Moabites.

Lighthouse writes, In both stories, a siege is broken. In both, Elisha prophesies, specifically about provisions for Israel. In 2 Kings chapter 3, the Moabite king sacrifices his son on the wall of Kirharashath, and in 2 Kings chapter 7, a woman tells the king about killing and eating a child on the wall of Samaria.

- [ 8 : 09 ] In both chapters further, Yahweh is revealed as a trickster, a god who is shrewd with the shrewd. He tricks the Moabites into thinking that the three kings have slaughtered each other, in chapter 3 verses 21 to 24, and he tricks the Arameans in the opposite way, by chasing them away from their camp so that Israel can plunder them, in chapter 7 verses 6 to 7.

The two chapters are chiastically linked, and are neatly inverted. In 1, an army leaves a city expecting to find an empty camp, and is surprised to find an army. In 2, lepers leave a city expecting to find a full camp, and are surprised to find an empty camp.

In both stories too, Elisha prophesies miraculous provision, of water in chapter 3 verse 17, and food in chapter 7 verse 1. The lepers arrive at the camp at twilight, and the Syrians flee the camp in the twilight.

The implication might be that they flee before the lepers. They believe that the sound that they hear must be the sound of the kings of the Hittites and the Egyptians, and they presume that Israel has hired them against them.

In his commentary on the book, Ian Provan notes that there is a strong pun on the word for lepers, Mitzrayim, and the word for Egyptians, Mitzrayim. Once again, the involvement of the Lord in the situation is comic in character.

- [ 9 : 29 ] The pun gives weight to the suggestion that the Syrians are mistaking the lepers for the first of the Egyptians, and fleeing before four outcasts scavenging for food. On the other hand, in the previous account of the Syrians trying to capture Elisha and Dothan, the city had been surrounded by invisible chariots and horses of the Lord, and now the city of Samaria is delivered by an invisible, yet audible army of chariots and horses.

Israel's forces look beleaguered, but they have a far greater force surrounding them. In Psalm 34 verse 7 we read, The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them.

The deliverance here might also have echoes of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus. Israel was cornered, seemingly with no hope of escape. However, the Lord completely eliminated the threat, causing the enemies to flee, and delivered his people, with his people enjoying the spoil of their enemies.

They hide the spoil, but they rightly think better of their actions, and determine to go back to the city and deliver the news. They inform the gatekeepers of Samaria, telling them about the empty camp, and the gatekeepers pass on the news to the king's household.

Besides, what do they have to lose if they die at the hand of the Syrians, rather than dying in the city like everyone else? When they seek to follow the path of the Syrian army, however, they discover that the way was littered with abandoned clothes and equipment, which they had abandoned in their haste.

His failure to believe the word and the power of the Lord meant that he tragically missed out on the Lord's deliverance. A question to consider.

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