

2 Kings 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 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?

[1 : 00] 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. Fifty men of the sons of the prophets also went and stood at some distance from them, as they both were 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.

[2 : 19] And he saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes, and tore them in two pieces. 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.

[3 : 26] 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? 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 yeered 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.

[4 : 36] Second Kings chapter 2 is a passage that describes the transition from the ministry of Elijah to that of Elisha. Elisha was called back in 1 Kings chapter 19, but we haven't seen anything of him again until this point.

The chapter begins by telling us that Elijah is about to be taken up by God into heaven by a whirlwind. And this seems to be widely known. It seems to be known to Elijah, to Elisha, and to a number of the sons of the prophets.

And the account of this chapter begins with a series of three journeys. Elijah asks Elisha on three occasions to stay behind. But yet, on each of the three occasions, Elisha insists on following him. As he's going to Bethel, as he's going to Jericho, and then to the Jordan. Sandwiched between these requests from Elijah, Elisha is also asked by the sons of the prophets at Bethel and at Jericho if he is aware that the Lord is going to take his master up from him.

And the repeated requests from Elijah and questions from the sons of the prophets raises this sense of anticipation. We're arriving at a significant point. The presence of the sons of the prophets here is actually surprising.

[5 : 50] They're not characters that we've really seen much to this point. But now, suddenly, there seem to be a lot more faithful Israelites around. The ministry of Elijah seems to be a very lonely one.

He's very much a solitary figure. But when we move into the ministry of Elisha, there seem to be a lot more other characters around. The journey they take is from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho and then to the Jordan River.

This is almost doubling back on themselves as Gilgal is nearer to the Jordan than Bethel is. Each of these places is closely associated with Joshua's conquest of the land.

It's as if Elijah is rewinding the conquest narrative. And then the narrative will be taken up again and moved forward by Elisha. Elijah's ascension is also Elisha's Pentecost.

As he is taken up into heaven, his spirit will be given to Elisha and Elisha will continue his ministry. Elisha is told that he will receive the firstborn portion of Elijah's spirit, the double portion, if he sees Elijah as he's being taken up.

[6 : 57] It seems to be that this is some sort of visionary event. There are a number of events within the story of Elijah and Elisha where only those with the eyes to see can see. And we see these things in the Gospel too.

Something like the baptism of Christ and the heavens being opened, we shouldn't necessarily expect that that would have been visible to everyone. Rather, it's seen and presented as a visionary event that John the Baptist and Jesus see, whereas not every bystander would have seen that.

Elisha's ability to see this in some sense is a qualification for his ministry. It sets him apart as someone who has that spiritual perception. And as Elijah is taken up, he's taken up by the chariots of God.

And Elisha proclaims, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen. And this presumably is a statement about Elijah himself.

It's not just describing what he's seeing. Later on in chapter 13, verse 14 of this book, Elisha himself is described in this way. As Joash, the king of Israel, goes down to him and weeps before him, crying, My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen.

[8 : 09] Elisha is the chariot of the Lord and Elijah is the chariot of the Lord. There are two water crossings here which remind us perhaps of Moses' water crossing leading the people out of Egypt and Joshua's leading the people into the promised land.

One is going out of the land and the other is going in. Now, these occur by means of, in the first case, Moses' rod that separates the waters of the Red Sea.

Then the entrance through the Jordan into the promised land is by means of the feet of the Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant. And here, it's the mantle of Elijah is the means by which the waters are split.

And perhaps, we're supposed to see Elijah as a sort of human rod and also a bearer of God's presence. This might explain the meaning of the reference to Elijah as the chariot of Israel. The chariots of fire are God's own throne chariot by which Elijah is taken up to God's presence, presumably to the Divine Council. And the chariot could also be compared to the Ark of the Covenant.

[9 : 15] The Levites carrying the Ark of the Covenant are like the horsemen carrying the chariot of Israel as they go into the land and they are led by their ruler. Now, Elijah is here described as a sort of chariot, as one who is connected with this presence of God among his people.

And the way that it's the mantle that is used this time, a garment that's associated with a person, not a rod, not the Ark of the Covenant, but a mantle associated with a person, suggests that there's a more intimate dwelling of God with and in his people, particularly in the character of Elijah and then his successor, Elisha.

Elijah and Moses have a number of similarities. Both of them have strained deaths or burials. In Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 5 and 6, we read, 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 of the land of Moab opposite Baal Peor, but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.

This might make us think of the struggle the 50 men have in finding where Elijah has been deposited by the chariots of fire. Both Elisha and Joshua take up the reins of leadership on the banks of the Jordan, the far side of the Jordan, and they're both closely associated with the spirit of their master and have a father-son relationship with the one that preceded them.

In Numbers chapter 27, verse 18 following, we read, And then in Deuteronomy chapter 34, verse 9, And Joshua, the son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him.

[11 : 17] So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the Lord had commanded Moses. In Numbers chapter 13, verse 16, we see that Moses had renamed Joshua.

Formerly, he had been called Hosea. So he seems to play a father role in relationship to Joshua. The double portion is the firstborn son portion, as I've already mentioned. We see this in Deuteronomy chapter 21, verse 17.

Moses and Joshua share a single two-stage mission, the father and the firstborn son. And the same thing is true of Elijah and Elisha. In chapter 19 of 1 Kings, Elijah is given a mission and he doesn't actually complete that mission.

The mission is completed by Elisha, his successor. He only performs the first part. Elijah performs eight miracles and Elisha performs 16.

You can maybe think there's another sense of the double portion. Elisha is a doubling of the ministry of Elijah. If Elijah led Elisha to the far side of the Jordan in order to ascend into heaven, Elisha begins by moving the opposite direction.

[12 : 23] It's a re-entry of the land, a replaying of the pattern of Joshua. And that connection between Joshua and Elisha is a very important one. Elisha begins by healing the waters of Jericho.

Waters that had formerly led to death and miscarriage are healed of their former problems. Rather than death, Elisha brings life. There are a number of former events that this might remind us of and also with which it can be contrasted.

The ministry of Joshua begins, among other things, with the destruction of Jericho. And now Jericho, which had formerly been a place of destruction, is made a place of life.

Another thing it might recall are the waters of Mara in the wilderness. After they had crossed the Red Sea, they reached these waters and they're bitter and they're healed by Moses.

However, although Moses healed waters in the wilderness, now we see Elisha healing waters in the land. Elisha also amplifies Elijah's actions in various ways.

[13 : 25] We've seen this in the fact that he performs 16 miracles to Elijah's 8. Elijah raises the widow's son, but Elisha raises the Shunammite's son.

Also, by contrast, Elijah begins by pronouncing a lack of water, a drought, and Elisha begins by providing water. We might also see some connections between chapters 1 and 2 of 1 Kings.

In chapter 1, three sets of 50 strong men are sent to seek for Elijah. And in this chapter, 50 strong men seek Elijah for three days.

There seems to be some sort of parallel. I'm not sure what to make of it, but it seems to invite our attention. Perhaps the number 50 is intended to make us think of military arrangements.

So in chapter 1, there are three units of military men, 50s, that are sent to seek for Elijah. And in chapter 2, there are another set of 50 men.

[14 : 26] There are 50 men mentioned twice. and there it seems that they are people who are, as it were, a military numbering, but now they're sons of the prophets. Israel went out of Egypt in groups of 50s and entered into the promised land in groups of 50s.

It's a military numbering. And here we have a new conquest and now a new group of 50 at the beginning of it. God defeats the armies of the enemy and now raises an army of his own in order to lead that conquest.

This might be part of the meaning. The passage ends with a rather troubling incident as 42 boys or young men are killed by bears as a result of Elisha's curse.

Perhaps the first thing to note here is that we shouldn't necessarily presume that these were young children. We see the same word used to refer to Ephraim and Manasseh when they were in their early 20s and the same word used to refer to Joseph when he was 17.

So they may have been in their late teens they may have been in their early 20s. In chapter 14 of Genesis young men are going out to fight with Abraham so these should not just be presumed to be young kids.

[15 : 38] Others have raised the possibility that the word here may be referring to subordinates young men who are serving under higher officials. The event occurs at Bethel which is the site of Jeroboam I's golden carved shrine and this may suggest that they're not just kids but maybe they're Levites or assistants who serve at the idolatrous shrine.

Elisha's curse is a sort of act of warfare. He's beginning this Joshua-like conquest of the land and beginning it with attack upon a centre of idolatry.

So he's moving on from healing the waters of Jericho that first site of conquest moving into the land he's going to Bethel which is associated with Ai and he's retracing the path of the conquest of Joshua as he's doing so.

Peter Lighthouse has suggested that the mockery of the young men is specifically directed against Elisha because of the taking up of Elijah. They're saying ascend ascend to where your master is you know where you can go Elisha and saying you bald head what's the point of that is it just ridiculing his physical appearance or is it saying that Elijah the man who's associated with hair in the previous chapter and elsewhere has been taken from over him and as a result he's a bald head and so their ridiculing of him may be very targeted at his mission his calling God's purpose that's being achieved through Elijah and Elisha and as they ridicule Elisha they are suggesting that they have the upper hand now these people associated with the shrine of Bethel perhaps that they are the ones that are coming out on top they may have been scared of Elijah but he's gone and now who cares about Elisha he's no threat at all and can be lightly ridiculed they are attacked by two she bears and there are 42 of them who are killed it's an interesting number because in chapter 10 verse 14 of the book

Jehu kills 42 relatives of Ahaziah of Judah who come to visit the royal princes and the sons of the queen mother and Elisha's judgment upon the 42 lads seems to foreshadow the judgment upon the Amri dynasty of Ahab and all related to it both in the north and in the southern kingdom that parallel between Jehu and Elisha might also draw our minds back to chapter 19 of 1st Kings where their ministries of destroying the opponents of the lord are directly related to each other a question to consider the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and the relationship between the two provides a very helpful framework within which to consider the ministry of Christ as it relates to the ministry of John the Baptist and also the ministry of Christ as it relates to the ministry of the church what are some of the ways in which you can see this being played out within the New Testament■■■■■