

2 Kings 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 10 October 2020

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Kings chapter 1. After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel. Now Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria and lay sick. So he sent messengers, telling them, Go inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness.

But the angel of the Lord said to Elijah the Tishbite, Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say to them, Is it because there is no god in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Now therefore, thus says the Lord, You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.

So Elijah went. The messengers returned to the king, and he said to them, Why have you returned? And they said to him, There came a man to meet us, and said to us, Go back to the king who sent you, and say to him, Thus says the Lord, Is it because there is no god in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die. He said to them, What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things? They answered him, He wore a garment of hair and a belt of leather about his waist. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite. Then the king sent to him a captain of fifty men with his fifty. He went up to Elijah, who was sitting on the top of a hill, and said to him, O man of God, the king says, Come down. But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty. Then fire came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. Again the king sent to him another captain of fifty men with his fifty, and he answered and said to him, O man of God, this is the king's order. Come down quickly.

But Elijah answered them, If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty. Then the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty. Again the king sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty, and the third captain of fifty went up and came and fell on his knees before Elijah and entreated him, O man of God, please let my life and the life of these fifty servants of yours be precious in your sight. Behold, fire came down from heaven and consumed the two former captains of fifty men with their fifties. But now let my life be precious in your sight. Then the angel of the Lord said to Elijah, Go down with him, do not be afraid of him. So he arose and went down with him to the king and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, is it because there is no god in Israel to inquire of his word? Therefore you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die. So he died according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken.

Jehoram became king in his place in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, because Ahaziah had no son. Now the rest of the acts of Ahaziah that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? 2 Kings chapter 1 is a chapter of ups and downs. The opening verse of the chapter concerns the rebellion of Moab against Israel, a narrative thread that is introduced at this point only to be suspended until chapter 3. The rest of the chapter compares and contrasts king Ahaziah and the prophet Elijah. Ahaziah suffers a fall from the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria. There are other upper chambers in the books of the kings. In chapter 17, there is the upper chamber in which the son of the widow of Zarephath is raised, and in 2 Kings chapter 4, there is another upper chamber in which a son is raised, the son of the Shunammite woman. In both of those cases, the upper chamber is the elevated place of proximity to God, and also the place where the prophet dwells. In the case of Ahaziah, however, he is cast down from the upper chamber, and he lies sick. Wondering what his fate will be, he sends messengers to Beelzebub, the god of Ekron. The name

[4 : 07] Beelzebub, lord of the flies, is probably a twisting of the actual name of the god, which would have been Beelzebul, lord prince. However, he is called lord of the flies, or Beelzebub, as a form of dishonour.

He's the lord of the trash heap. The angel of the lord, however, has other plans for Ahaziah. He sends Elijah the prophet to intercept the messengers of Ahaziah, and delivers the answer to Ahaziah's question. He will not come down from the bed to which he has gone up. He will surely die. The story begins with Ahaziah falling down. Now he is spoken of as having gone up to a sickbed, and he will not come down. We might expect it to be the other way around. The messengers return to Ahaziah with the message. The primary part of the message is a challenge to Ahaziah's idolatry, and his service of foreign gods. He has turned to the god of Ekron, rather than looking to the god of Israel. Ahaziah asks his servants to describe the man that met them. The messengers literally describe him as a bale of hair.

He's a lord of hair, a hairy man. We could perhaps speculate that as part of his prophetic calling, Elijah has taken a Nazarite vow, and has not cut his hair, and so is distinguished by the great amount of hair that he has. Whether that is the case or not, the use of the term bale in reference to Elijah contrasts him with the character of Beelzebub. The lord of hair stands in contrast to the lord of the flies. We should also keep the hairiness of Elijah in mind, because the next chapter there will be a man who's ridiculed for being bald. There is, as it were, a shaving off of the hair of the prophet, so the hairy prophet Elijah has his successor in the hairless prophet, Elisha. Ahaziah recognises Elijah from the description of his men immediately. He sends 50 soldiers with their captain to bring Elijah back. We should note, these aren't messengers, these are soldiers. There is a threatening aspect to this. Elijah is sitting on the top of a hill, and he is instructed to come down. He answers the military captain that if he is a man of God, that fire should come down from heaven and consume him and his 50 men, and fire comes down and consumes them. There might well be a play upon the words for fire of God and man of God here. Having lost the first 50 men with their captain, the king sends another 50 men with their captain, and he says much the same thing, delivering the order of the king to Elijah to come down from the hill. Once again, Elijah calls down fire from heaven upon him and his 50 men. We should recall the theme of the ups and downs here. Ahaziah fell down at the beginning of the story, then he went up into his sickbed, and the Lord declares that he will not come down from his sickbed. Now men of Ahaziah are telling Elijah to come down from the hill upon which he has gone up, and he is not going to come down.

Rather, he calls down the fire of God. We should bear this all in mind as we come to the next chapter, as the next chapter is a story of ascension. Elijah will be taken up once and for all. The king having gone up on his sickbed and not coming down, and Elijah going up on his hill and not coming down, offers an ironic parallel between the two characters. Ahaziah, who fell down from the upper room, is going to die, whereas Elijah is going to be taken directly up into heaven to God's very presence.

In the following chapter, we'll also see groups of 50 men that look for Elijah, and just as there are three captains with their 50 in this chapter, in the next chapter there will be three times when Elisha is told to go back and does not do so. This suggests that the themes of ascension, of going up in this chapter, must be read alongside the chapter that follows. The two chapters are a natural pair.

[7 : 46] Likewise, the lord of hair, the bale of hair, that Elijah is described as at the beginning here, will naturally connect with Elisha, who follows him, who is a bald man and is ridiculed for that at the end of chapter 2. After two captains in their 50s have come and been destroyed by the fire of the Lord, a third captain comes, and this time he speaks with honour and deference to the prophet of the Lord.

He goes up and falls down on his knees, and pleads for his life and for the life of his men. And now the Lord instructs Elijah to go along with the men, so he goes to meet the king, and delivers the message that has already been delivered to him before. The message of judgment concerning the fact that he has gone to a foreign god rather than turning to the Lord, and the message that he will die, and not come down from his sickbed. The message of the Lord concerning Ahaziah comes to pass, he dies, and in his place Jehoram his brother becomes king. Jehoram becomes king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. These are two different Jehorams, but the presence of a Jehoram in the southern kingdom of Judah, and a Jehoram in the northern kingdom of Israel, suggests a twinning of the two. The two nations are a lot more entwined in this period, as we will see in the judgment that comes through Jehu.

A question to consider. In verse 17 we are told that Jehoram became king in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat. However, in chapter 3 verse 1 we are told that Jehoram of Israel became king in the 18th year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. And to make matters a lot more complicated, in chapter 8 verse 16 we are told that Jehoram of Judah began to rule in the fifth year of Jehoram Israel. How could we explain these seeming contradictions?