

2 Kings 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] 2 Kings chapter 6 Now the sons of the prophets said to Elisha, See, the place where we dwell under your charge is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, and each of us get there a log, and let us make a place for us to dwell there.
- And he answered, Go. Then one of them said, Be pleased to go with your servants. And he answered, I will go. So he went with them, and when they came to the Jordan they cut down trees.
- But as one was felling a log, his axe head fell into the water, and he cried out, Alas, my master, it was borrowed. Then the man of God said, Where did it fall?
- When he showed him the place, he cut off a stick and threw it in there, and made the iron float. And he said, Take it up. So he reached out his hand and took it. Once when the king of Syria was warring against Israel, he took counsel with his servants, saying, At such and such a place shall be my camp.
- But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are going down there. And the king of Israel sent to the place about which the man of God told him.
- [1 : 05] Thus he used to warn him, so that he saved himself there more than once or twice. And the mind of the king of Syria was greatly troubled because of this thing. And he called his servants and said to them, Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?
- And one of his servants said, None, my lord, O king. But Elisha the prophet who is in Israel tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedroom. And he said, Go and see where he is, that I may send and seize him.
- It was told him, Behold, he is in Dothan. So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army, and they came by night and surrounded the city. When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city.
- And the servant said, Alas, my master, what shall we do? He said, Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them. Then Elisha prayed and said, O lord, please open his eyes that he may see.
- So the lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the lord and said, Please strike this people with blindness.
- [2 : 18] So he struck them with blindness in accord with the prayer of Elisha. And Elisha said to them, This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.
- And he led them to Samaria. As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, O lord, open the eyes of these men, that they may see. So the lord opened their eyes, and they saw. And behold, they were in the midst of Samaria.
- As soon as the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, My father, shall I strike them down? Shall I strike them down? He answered, You shall not strike them down. Would you strike down those whom you have taken captive with your sword and with your bow?

Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master. So he prepared for them a great feast. And when they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master.

And the Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of Israel. Afterward, Ben-Hadad king of Syria mustered his entire army, and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria as they besieged it, until the donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver.

[3 : 26] Now as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, Help my lord, O king. And he said, If the lord will not help you, how shall I help you?

From the threshing floor or from the winepress? And the king asked her, What is your trouble? She answered, This woman said to me, Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.

So we boiled my son and ate him. And on the next day I said to her, Give your son, that we may eat him. But she has hidden her son. When the king heard the words of the woman, he tore his clothes.

Now he was passing by on the wall, and the people looked, and behold, he had sackcloth beneath on his body. And he said, May God do so to me, and more also, if the head of Elisha, the son of Shaphat, remains on his shoulders today.

Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. Now the king had dispatched a man from his presence. But before the messenger arrived, Elisha said to the elders, Do you see how this murderer has sent to take off my head?

[4 : 27] Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and hold the door fast against him. Is not the sound of his master's feet behind him? And while he was still speaking with them, the messenger came down to him and said, This trouble is from the Lord.

Why should I wait for the Lord any longer? Once again, in 2 Kings chapter 6, Israel is having trouble with the Syrians. There are two connected stories in this chapter. In the previous chapter, Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, had been healed.

And now once again, we will see the reputation of Elisha and the work of the Lord through him spreading to the court of the king of Syria. The chapter starts, however, with the miracle of the axe head raised from the water.

Peter Lighthouse and James Jordan suggest a chiastic, or there and back again structure in chapters 3 to 7. War with Moab in chapter 3 corresponds with war with Syria in chapters 6 and 7.

The provision for the indebted widow at the beginning of chapter 4 parallels with the recovered axe head at the beginning of chapter 6. The raising of the Shunammite's son in the middle of chapter 4 parallels with the healing of Naaman in chapter 5.

[5 : 34] And then at the centre is the healing of the stew and the feeding of the hundred men. Both the stories of the widow whose sons are at risk of being sold into slavery to repay her debt, and the man who loses the borrowed axe head are stories of the redemption of debtors.

An iron axe head would have been a costly item at the time and as he had lost it the man would be liable to pay the full cost of the property according to the law of Exodus chapter 22 verses 14 to 15.

If a man borrows anything of his neighbour and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution. If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution.

If it was hired, it came for its hiring fee. The loss of the axe head is occasioned by a building project for the growing band of the sons of the prophets that surround Elisha.

These are maybe like the disciples that follow Jesus. The prophets are going to get a new dwelling place and they go to the Jordan to get the materials. While cutting down trees, the axe head falls off.

[6 : 34] This is the fourth miracle to occur at the Jordan in 2 Kings to this point. There are the two crossings of the river in chapter 2 and Naaman goes down into the Jordan and comes up healed of his leprosy in chapter 5.

The fact that it is the Jordan might recall the significance of the Jordan as the border of the promised land. The manner of the miracle might recall the events of Exodus chapter 14 and 15 where Israel was taken up out of the waters of the Red Sea and then the events of Marah that followed in chapter 15 verses 23 to 25.

When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. Therefore, it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses saying, What shall we drink? And he cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a log and he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.

Elisha's healing of the waters of Jericho in chapter 2 were reminiscent of this event. But the throwing of wood into water occurring again here is likely noteworthy. Earlier in 1 Kings 8 verse 51, Solomon had described the people as follows, They are your people and your heritage which you brought out of Egypt from the midst of the iron furnace.

The identification of Egypt as the iron furnace is also found in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 20 and Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 4. Perhaps this miracle is, among other things, a symbol recalling the Exodus.

[8 : 00] Israel was forged as a nation in the iron furnace of Egypt and then taken up out of the waters through the instrumentality of wood, particularly Moses' rod. Lost outside of the land, if the people seek the Lord, the iron axe head of Israel that has sunk in the waters of the Gentiles in exile can be recovered.

This is also the third time that Elisha has performed a miracle by throwing something into liquid. He healed the waters by throwing salt into the spring. He healed the poisoned part by throwing flour into it.

And now he raises the sunken axe head by throwing the stick into the waters. In the second episode in the chapter, the Syrians come on the scene again. The chronology of the events isn't entirely clear.

We might be dealing with events quite a number of years later. Neither the names of the king of Israel or of Syria are given to us. Syria has been raiding Israel and engaging in small skirmishes.

However, the Lord reveals to Elisha what the Syrians have planned and he is able to warn the king of Israel so that he is delivered from the hands of the Syrians on a number of occasions. The reputation of Elisha has clearly spread widely as one of the servants of the king of Syria knows that Elisha tells the king of Israel the plans of the king of Syria.

[9 : 15] He sends an army to Dothan, the same place from which Joseph was taken as a slave into Egypt, where he had heard that Elisha is. The servant of Elisha is very afraid when he sees the city surrounded by the Syrian army.

But Elisha prays that the Lord will open his eyes. When they are opened he sees the mountain filled with the horses and fiery chariots of the Lord much as Elisha had seen the chariots of fire that had taken Elijah into heaven in chapter 2.

While Elijah had considered himself to be the only one left, Elisha has a recognition of the vast forces arrayed on his side of the spiritual conflict. Elisha is the spearhead of the Lord's operations in the land.

Elijah and Elisha are like angelic messengers to Israel and much as the violent sodomites who sought to take Lot and his guests in Genesis chapter 19, the Syrians are blinded by the Lord.

This sets up an immediate contrast with the servant of Elisha who has his eyes opened to perceive what his master sees and the Syrians who are further blinded so that they lack even physical sight.

[10 : 20] Their loss of sight is most likely not a complete loss of vision but rather a bedazzling. So that even though they are still seeing things, they lack perception. In a comic development, Elisha leads the men into the city of Samaria where their eyes are open to recognise their predicament.

However, Elisha forbids the king from striking them down, instructing the king to provide a meal for them instead, treating them as subdued captives rather than as active enemies.

Elisha leads the king to treat the Syrians with mercy and kindness in a way that might remind us of the Apostle Paul's teaching in Romans chapter 12 verses 19 to 21. Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

This is not the first time that Elisha has shown kindness to the Syrians, of course. He was involved in the healing of Naaman, a commander of their army, in the preceding chapter. Now on his instruction, a Syrian army is shown great mercy.

[11 : 32] They had intended to capture him but he took them captive and brought them to the king of Israel only to set them free again. As a result, they do not raid the land again for some time.

The story of Elisha's mercy to the Syrian army has a sequel though. Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria, musters his entire army and besieges Samaria and there is also a great famine.

It is so serious that unclean donkeys' heads are being sold for a great price for food and people are even buying dove's dung in a desperate search for it. As the king, likely Jehoram at this time, is walking on the wall, a woman calls out to him for help.

The king declares his own powerlessness in response but asks the woman concerning her trouble. She wants him to judge between her and another woman with whom she has made a pact to eat their two sons.

However, after the woman asking for help had given her son to be eaten with the other woman, the other woman hid her own son so that he could not be eaten. This is a twisted version of the case judged by Solomon in 1 Kings 3 verses 16-28 where Solomon judged between the two prostitutes, the one with the dead and the other with a living child.

[12 : 43] It might also recall the petition of the Shunammite woman to Elisha concerning her dead son. In contrast to Elisha, however, the king of Israel lacks any power to help. Perhaps we are also to see here some premonition of what will befall Israel and Judah.

The Omrides of Israel have two great murderous women, Jezebel, the Sidonian wife of Ahab, and Athaliah, the granddaughter of Omri. Athaliah is the murderous mother of Israel who tries to consume the sons of David, killing all of the royal family of Judah, save for Joash who was hidden away by Jehoshabab his aunt in chapter 11.

Like the cannibal mother of this chapter, in the marriage of Athaliah to Jehoram of Judah, the two kingdoms as two women had joined together in a child-consuming pact. In 1 Kings chapter 3, the two nations that would arise from the divided kingdom could be seen in the symbol of the two prostitutes, one who did not care for the seed and the other who protected the seed.

Once again, we see two women struggling over the seed. The woman who repents of her cannibalism of the seed and protects her own child from the cannibal mother might be seen as Judah after the restoration of its kingdom under Joash.

We might further note that this is a fulfilment of one of the curses of the covenant from Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 52 to 57. They shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout all your land and they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land which the Lord your God has given you and you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom the Lord your God has given you in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you.

[14 : 27] The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces and to the last of the children whom he has left so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating because he has nothing left in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns.

The most tender and refined woman among you who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender will begrudge to the husband she embraces to her son and to her daughter her afterbirth that comes from between her feet and her children whom she bears because lacking everything she will eat them secretly in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns.

This is pretty far down the list of curses that have already come upon the northern kingdom. It is swiftly running out of opportunities and will eventually face the ruin of exile for its sins.

The king vents his anger at Elisha. Elisha had spared the Syrian army earlier in the chapter and now the army has come back to destroy them. Like the king of Syria had done earlier in the chapter the king of Israel sends men to take Elisha.

However knowing the intent of the king Elisha gets the men with him to bar the door against the messenger of the king. There were resemblances to the protection of the angels from the men of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19 earlier in the chapter where the Syrians were bedazzled like the men of Sodom.

[15 : 54] And now we might see further resemblances as a door has to be guarded against people trying to take a messenger of the Lord from inside. At this point the king arrives on the scene.

He expresses his anger and his despair at the situation. The Lord had brought this disaster upon the people. While the righteous waited upon the Lord in their distress trusting him to deliver them the king sees no point in doing so any longer.

The Lord is their enemy and he will wait for the Lord no longer. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger. A question to consider.

How should the king of Israel have responded to this situation?