

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 KINGS, Pt. 1

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2 KINGS 1:1-2:14

Ahaziah's Reign Judged by Elijah, 2 Kings 1:1-18

The Moabites were the descendants of Lot's grandson Moab. Their land was immediately east of the Dead Sea and shared an indefinite border with Israel to the north at approximately the point where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea. Moab was a powerful enemy of Israel until the time of the Judges, when, under the leadership of Ehud, it was subdued. It continued under Israel's subjection until Ahab was defeated at Ramoth Gilead. In chapter 1, the rebellion of Moab is mentioned only briefly in order to place it chronologically within the reign of Ahaziah.

Ahaziah died of injuries received in an accidental fall. The king apparently leaned against the wooden screen and fell through from the second-floor balcony to the ground below. Ahaziah "sent messengers" to a pagan shrine in Ekron, a city in Philistia fifteen miles south of Joppa. There they were to "inquire of Baal-Zebub," a localized version of the great Baal of Syria, whether his injuries were fatal.

Previously, God had spoken to Elijah directly, but on this occasion He spoke through an angel (v. 3). Elijah, following the instructions of the angel, intercepted the messengers and sent them back to Samaria with a prophecy of Ahaziah's impending death. Then, in typical fashion, Elijah abruptly disappeared.

In verse 8, the Hebrew words translated "hairy man" are literally "an owner of hair." This description more than likely refers to the hairy animal skins he wore cinched around his waist with a leather belt, or it could indicate that Elijah himself had long hair. Elijah apparently had adopted this unique clothing style as a mark of his prophetic calling.

Why Ahaziah sent the soldiers to the spot where the messengers had last seen Elijah is not indicated, but the large detachment of armed soldiers is evidence that he intended to use force to bring the prophet back to the palace, dead or alive. Half a hundred armed men is a powerful force to send against one prophet. Elijah's response to the cold command of the captain in verse 10 is given in such a way as to emphasize the word "if," as though to say, "You glibly call me a man of God

while overlooking the power of God to withstand the king's command. If I am a man of God, then...."

The same scene was repeated twice more at verse 11 and verse 13.

Elijah followed the captain back to Samaria and delivered his message in person to Ahaziah. Soon afterwards, the king died "according to the word of the Lord" (v. 17). Since he had no son, his brother Jehoram became king in his place (v. 18).

Elijah's Ministry Ended, 2 Kings 2:1-14

Up to this point in Kings we have seen mostly the grandeur of Elijah – his sudden appearances, abrupt speeches, spectacular miracles, and fiery condemnations. We have seen him as the fearless and forceful personification of God's wrath. But here in 2 Kings 2 the writer shows us the romantic Elijah, the tender side.

Why did Elijah want them to stay behind (v. 2)? He wanted to spare Elisha and the young men the pain of seeing him leave. Furthermore, he didn't want his departure to be a self-aggrandizing spectacle.

Although it has often been interpreted in this way, Elisha was not asking for twice as much of the prophetic spirit as Elijah had possessed. He was not asking to be twice as powerful as his predecessor. Instead, his request relates to the custom in Deuteronomy 21:17 where the firstborn son was entitled to a double share of the father's estate, while the younger sons received only a single share. Elisha wanted to be designated as Elijah's rightful heir, receiving double what the other prophets would get as a signal that he would now be their "lead prophet."

Returning to the Jordan and striking the waters of the river with the mantle again, Elisha made a statement that was not so much a question as a solemn invocation. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" The implied answer, dramatized by the miraculous opening up of the river, was: "He had not abandoned us; He is now with Elisha as He was with Elijah."

2 KINGS 2

THE BEGINNING OF ELISHA'S MINISTRY

Elisha Begins His Miraculous Ministry, 2 Kings 2:15-25

In verse 15, the sons of the prophets, having witnessed Elisha's first miracle, the dividing of the Jordan, acknowledged that he was indeed Elijah's successor: "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." That they still needed a teacher is evident from the

account in verse 16. Although they saw the whirlwind, they did not perceive it as the miraculous vehicle for Elijah's translation. It appeared to them that a mighty "dust devil," a natural whirlwind, had picked up Elijah and no doubt had dropped him as a helpless victim on the side of a rugged mountain or a hidden canyon.

When they returned empty-handed, their confidence in Elisha was strengthened.

There follows in the text the account of two more miracles that seem intended to further accredit Elisha in the eyes of the people as a man endowed with the Spirit and power of God as Elijah had been. The first is the miracle of the purification of Jericho's water source. Calling for a new bowl filled with salt, Elisha went to the source of the spring and ceremonially poured the salt into the water. The purification was not a result of some natural chemical reaction triggered by the salt. Rather, the salt, representing preservation from corruption, was used by Elisha as a symbol of divine cleansing.

The second miracle, the punishment of the young boys of Bethel who jeered at and humiliated the prophet of Yahweh, indicated that the Lord would not allow His servants to be ridiculed with impunity.

2 KINGS 4-5

ELISHA PERFORMS MIRACLES

More miracles follow in 2 Kings 4:1-6:23, each one furthering Elisha's influence and extending the knowledge that the Lord rules every nation and each area of life.

2 Kings 4:1-7. This story and the one that follows may be compared and contrasted with the account of the widow and Elijah in 1 Kings 17:7-24. In both texts a woman is in need, and in both accounts oil helps solve a financial crisis. In the Elijah story, however, the widow receives oil and flour and has only one son, whereas the woman here gets only oil and has more than a single offspring. Finally, the same woman who is helped has her son die in 1 Kings 17, but a second woman suffers the loss in 2 Kings 4:8-37. The stories share likenesses, therefore, but not enough of them to argue that the same story has been told twice.

That one of the prophets was married shows that these individuals led fairly normal lives. The woman seeks help from Elisha because of his status as leader of the prophets. At issue here is whether or not God will help the needy through Elisha as he did through Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 17:7-24). The answer comes when Elisha learns the woman has a little oil. He instructs her to gather as many vessels as

possible, then increases her oil until all jars are full. She sells the oil, which negates her need to sell her sons.

2 Kings 4:8-17. Despite all he has done, Elisha has not yet matched Elijah's greatest feat, for he has not been used to raise the dead. Even this difference is removed when a second woman and her family enter Elisha's life. This woman confesses that Elisha is "a holy man of God" and convinces her husband that they ought to provide a room where the prophet can rest during his travels. This scenario is familiar to seasoned readers of the Scripture. A childless couple endure the shame and pain of not having a son. Through a work of God they are able to conceive. Abraham and Sarah, Elkanah and Hannah, and Manoah and his wife face this situation in the Old Testament, and Zechariah and Elizabeth encounter it in the New Testament. As in nearly all these cases, although the boy in this story is cherished, his life will be endangered.

2 Kings 4:18-37. A crisis emerges when the boy feels pain in his head, then dies in his mother's lap. All at once the woman's joy is reversed. How will she respond to this crisis? The woman formulates a plan to get her son back. First, she lays the boy in the prophet's room at her home. Second, seemingly without telling her husband the child is dead, she determines to go to the prophet. When her husband asks why she wants the prophet, she offers an evasive answer. Third, she travels to Mount Carmel, where the prophet lives. She refuses to reveal to Gehazi, Elisha's servant, what she wants. Clearly, she rests all her hopes on the man of God. Fourth, she clings to Elisha despite Gehazi's attempt to pull her away, a rather stunning break of decorum in the ancient world. Fifth, she reminds Elisha she did not ask for a son, which helps Elisha finally understand what has happened. Each of these actions demonstrates the woman's determined faith. Elisha heals the boy much like Elijah healed the child in 1 Kings 17:7-24. Gehazi goes ahead and finds the boy dead. Elisha lies on the boy, the child recovers, and Elisha restores him to his mother. Elisha's work here proves the same points Elijah's healing demonstrated: the Lord controls death, and the Lord cares for the needy and hurting. This scene also shows that prophets not only are preachers of sin and repentance; they also are agents of God's healing mercy and kind compassion.

Elisha "Cures" Some Stew (4:38-41). This story and the next illustrate that the Lord provides for his followers even during, or perhaps especially during, crisis times. In this way it parallels 1 Kings 17:1-24 and 18:1-15, texts that stress God's provision for Elijah and other prophets during famine and persecution. Thus this "healing" of stew fits the overall context of the Elijah/Elisha accounts, provides hope and assurance for readers, and stresses the Lord's faithfulness.

Elisha Feeds One Hundred People (4:42-44). As in the previous story, God uses Elijah to provide for faithful persons who have come to the end of their resources. Here the prophet causes twenty loaves of bread to be enough to feed one hundred people. An unnamed man brings the food to sustain the prophets. The man's bread is "baked from the first ripe grain," for such offerings were supposed to be given to Israel's priests (Numbers 18:13; Deuteronomy 18:4-5). This miracle is paralleled in the New Testament by Jesus' feeding of the multitudes. Such literary features as the questioning of whether there is enough bread to feed so many, the feeding of a large group, and the fact that there is "some left over" appear in Matthew 14:31-21; Mark 6:30-42; 8:1-21; Luke 9:13-17 and John 6:12-13.

Elisha Heals Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-27). Essential theological themes such as conversion, monotheism, the power of God's word, and the danger of covetousness emerge from the carefully woven story. Few texts in the Old Testament are more fertile ground for teaching, preaching, and personal challenge.

2 Kings 5:1. Naaman, the story's main character, is introduced as a great man who struggles to overcome a physical affliction. He is successful in his military career, for he commands Syria's army, a unit that allows Damascus to dominate the region. His king duly praises him for his work. This leprosy may not have been an extremely advanced type, since he could continue his work; but it was serious enough to him, as the text indicates later. The author states that the Lord gave Naaman his victories. At first this claim may seem startling because Naaman is not an Israelite. However, 1 and 2 Kings emphasize repeatedly God's sovereignty over all nations and all people. The Lord has already laid claim to ownership of Syria's political future (1 Kings 19:15).

2 Kings 5:2-3. A rather obscure source becomes the key to Naaman's healing. Raiding parties into Israel have provided a servant girl for Naaman's wife. This girl tells her mistress that Naaman could be cured if he would see "the prophet who is in Samaria." B. O. Long notes the contrasts between the great man and the maid who helps him:

She is an Israelite, he is an Aramean; she is a "little maiden," he a "great man;" she is a captive servant, he a commander; he has fame in the king's estimation...she has none, for she simply "waited upon"...Naaman's wife.

Still she shares the knowledge that her master needs most. Power and glory cannot save Naaman, but this information can. Perhaps the book's first readers would have noted that the girl in the text is an exile too. Despite her captivity, she is not bitter or unhelpful. Rather, she shares what she knows about the Lord and the prophet out of concern for Naaman and her mistress and desire to see God's glory magnified. In this way she acts like Daniel, Mordecai, Ezra, Nehemiah, and other exiles who care for the spiritual and physical well-being of their conquerors.

2 Kings 5:4-7. Anxious for any possible avenue of healing, Naaman tells his king what the girl has said. Syria's king acts the only way he knows – like a king. He writes a letter of introduction and demand, loads Naaman down with gifts, and sends his commander off to be healed. He does not know that true prophets do not work for money, nor are they paid by the king, nor does the king have authority over them. Thus, sending Naaman to Israel's king does Naaman no good. Israel's king certainly understands the futility of the letter, for he knows he is no healer. He too thinks like a king and suspects that Syria is looking for an excuse to renew old hostilities.

2 Kings 5:8-14. Elisha views Naaman's presence as an opportunity to prove there is a real prophet in Israel, which is the same as saying there is a real God in Israel. When the Syrian arrives with his impressive entourage, the prophet does not come to meet him. Instead, he sends a messenger to instruct him to wash seven times in the Jordan if he wants to be healed. Certainly it is a great test of humble faith and one that Naaman understandably misinterprets as an insult. National pride and personal expectations of a spectacular, magical display lead the commander to stomp away in rage. Once again it is Naaman's servants who come to his rescue. They attack their master's pride with common sense.

2 Kings 15-19a. This text contains one of the great Gentile conversion accounts in the Old Testament. Like Rahab (Joshua 2:9-13), Ruth (Ruth 1:16-18), and the sailors and Ninevites in Jonah (Jonah 1:16; 3:6-10). Naaman believes in the Lord. Naaman's conversion includes a confession of faith. He states that no other god exists besides the Lord, a conclusion he draws from the fact that only the Lord can heal him. Sadly, Naaman's confession of faith condemns most Israelites of that era, since they have rejected the one true God and embraced gods that cannot heal. Jesus makes this point while rebuking the people of Nazareth in Luke 4:23-30.

Naaman asks to take dirt home with him, with which he will build an altar to the Lord in his homeland. Transporting "holy" dirt from one place to another was a fairly common ancient custom. This practice is not unlike the modern tendency to

take home significant personal souvenirs from the Holy Land. Naaman also requests Elisha's indulgence on one point. He requests that the Lord forgive him for participating in worship of Rimmon when such participation is necessary to carry out his career responsibilities. Rimmon was a Syrian version of Baal. Naaman seems to say that this "worship" will not be a real worship, since he has already confessed Yahweh's sole existence and sovereignty. Elisha gives Naaman his blessing.

2 Kings 5b-27. Gehazi certainly thinks Elisha has been too lenient, but he focuses on financial, not spiritual leniency. He determines to get some of the goods "this Syrian" brought as a gift for Elisha. In this way he shows himself as greedy as Elisha is unaffected by wealth. When he catches up to Naaman, Gehazi lies to get silver and clothing, then stashes the loot before he sees his master. Elisha confronts Gehazi by asking where he has been. Once more Gehazi lies, but this time he has lied to a man who knows he has lied. After reminding Gehazi of his special spirits, he rebukes him for accepting money for a healing ministry. One man goes away healed because of his obedience, while the other man, indeed the one who should have known what matters most, walks away with leprosy. Yet another Israelite has made the tragic mistake of choosing a substitute for the Lord, while a Gentile convert has discovered that what his servant girl said about the Lord's prophet is true.

2 KINGS 6-7

Elisha and the Floating Ax Head, 2 Kings 6:1-7

Now we come to the last of the miracles in this collection of six: the widow's oil, the Shunammite's son, the purified stew, the feeding of one hundred, the cure of Naaman's leprosy, and now the floating ax head. The word "ax head" is not actually in the text. Verse 5 literally says, "But as one was cutting down a tree, the iron fell into the water." "Borrowed" is too mild a translation in verse 5. "It was begged" is better. The floating stick was merely a symbol of what Elisha wanted the ax head to do. The text says, "...and he made the iron float."

2 Kings 6:8-23

In this narrative of Israel's skirmish with Syrian troops, the author focuses on four miracles of the prophet Elisha: (1) his supernatural knowledge of the enemy's plans, (2) the opening of his servant's eyes to see the heavenly hosts, (3) the blinding of the Syrians, and (4) the restoration of their sight.

“My camp” in verse 8 does not necessarily imply that Ben-Hadad would himself be with his soldiers; it was simply the location that he, as commander in chief, had chosen for the camp where the troops would secretly lie in wait for Israel’s army. In verse 9, “the man of God” is Elisha, who had been miraculously informed of the Syrian plan for ambush. Immediately the prophet sent a warning to King Jehoram to change my plans he had for travel in that area. The king of Syria was understandably “troubled by this thing.” Actually, the phrase says the king was “storm-tossed” or “in a whirlwind.”

Because Dothan was only eleven miles from the capital with its strong military defenses, it is unlikely that the army Ben-Hadad sent to capture Elisha was very large, even though it is described as “a great army” in verse 14. That could mean an army that was powerful even though small – perhaps a force of crack commandos.

Notice how regularly the miracles of Elisha were preceded by his prayers. “Elisha prayed, and then...” is an often-repeated formula just before the prophet performs some great supernatural act.

Through the eyes of fear and unbelief, the situation at Dothan looked hopeless. No wonder the unbelieving servant sighed, “Alas my master! What shall we do?” (v. 15). But Elisha, facing the identical situation, saw things differently. Elisha asked God to give his servant the same 20/20 vision on the spiritual eye-chart, so he too would not be afraid. Elisha prayed again, and the Syrian warriors lost their eyesight. They were miraculously blocked from recognizing Elisha and, in their ignorance, willingly trusted him when he offered to guide them to “the man whom you seek.” Furthermore, they were miraculously prevented from recognizing the great walled city of Samaria until they were already inside, surrounded by the enemy (v. 19). Once inside Samaria, Elisha prayed still again, and the fourth miracle of this passage took place. “The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw; and there they were, inside Samaria!” (v. 20). Elisha wanted to embarrass his foes with kindness and impress them with the all-sufficient power of Yahweh, so he advised the king to give them food and water and send them back to Ben-Hadad. If they had been killed or, according to normal procedures of war, made slaves, the effect of Elisha’s miracle would have been lost. As it was, with their release, Yahweh’s power was glorified, and peace was ensured, at least for a while.

2 Kings 6:24-33

The famine in verse 25 seems to be restricted to the city of Samaria. It may have resulted from a double cause, a poor harvest in the fields around Samaria and a

military siege that stopped the flow of food into the city. Whatever the cause, the famine was serious. Gruesome details of the conditions it brought about are given in verses 25-29. Food scalpers were asking scandalous black market prices for the most nauseating dishes. By far the most shocking occurrence in the starving city is depicted in verses 28-29. The complaining mother seemed to have no feeling for her dead son, but only for the unfairness of the neighbor woman who refused to keep her word and let her son also be boiled for food.

Faced with this hopeless situation, the king admitted his helplessness (v. 27). Maybe he was angry because he thought Elisha had not asked God to break the siege, or because he thought Elisha had inspired the people to hold out against the enemy instead of surrendering.

2 Kings 7:1-20

With a reverent introduction, the prophet begins his prediction: “Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord...” (v. 1). This is the first time in the Elisha account that he uses this classic introduction to prophetic speech. So incredible was Elisha’s optimistic prediction that the king’s aide-de-camp, his right-hand man, refused to believe it and even sarcastically belittled the message.

Living in a small building erected for them near the city gate were four leprous men. Having weighed their options and assessed the outcomes of various alternatives, they voted to throw themselves on the mercy of the Syrians and take their chances. The same God who caused one Syrian army to see things that weren’t there (2 Kings 6:18) now caused another Syrian army to hear things that weren’t there. The Syrian soldiers stampeded, leaving behind all their provisions in order to retreat more rapidly. They even left their horses and donkeys, believing there was not time to hitch them up.

At first the diseased men gorged themselves and hid the loot they gathered from the empty tents, but then they “came to themselves.” Conscience-stricken, they admitted that their selfishness was not right and that they must share the good news of their discovery with the starving Samaritans.

His paranoia in high gear, the king suspected a Syrian plot; but he was willing to risk a reconnaissance patrol to see if the lepers’ report was true (v. 14). Then all the city ran out to claim God’s deliverance, and Elisha’s prediction came true. “A seah of fine flour was sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord” (v. 16).