



Second Kings - Chapter Two

Summary of Chapter Two

The prophetic mantle passes from Elijah to Elisha. As Elijah has called fire down from heaven in Chapter 1, so he now will be lifted in fire up into heaven and dogged Elisha, who refuses to leave his teachers side, will be authenticated as his successor.

II 2 Kings 2:1-10:36 - Elisha and Israel

Elijah's days have been numbered since 1 Kings 19:15-18, and particularly God's instructions there about Elisha. The end of the war with Baal worship will not come about until Elisha has succeeded Elijah, and Hazeal and Jehu have appeared. This section of 1-2 Kings now tells of these events.

II.a 2 Kings 2:1-25 - Elijah Gives Way to Elisha

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.a.i 2 Kings 2:1-12 - Elijah Ascends to Heaven

Elijah was on his final journey from Gilgal through Bethel and Jericho, and then across the Jordon. At each stage he told Elisha by the local company of prophets that they should part but Elisha would not leave his mentor's side. The other prophets knew what was going on and advised Elisha that Elijah was to be taken from him. Elisha already knew this.

Finally, Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted and Elisha stated that he wanted to inherit Elijah's role as prophet. This would be granted only to Elisha if he stayed with his master until the end. This he did and it was dramatic as Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

¹ Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

2 Kings 2:1

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind. The idea of going up to heaven at the end of an earthly life was not common in ancient Israel. The OT more characteristically speaks of the deceased's 'going down' to Sheol, the world of the dead, for example: <<*As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up*>> (Job 7:9), and: <<*You journeyed to Molech with oil, and multiplied your perfumes; you sent your envoys far away, and sent down even to Sheol*>> (Isaiah 57:9); refer also to the comment made on 1 Samuel 2:6. It was the fate even of mighty heroes of the Hebrew tradition to be 'gathered to their people' in this way: <<*This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people*>> (Genesis 25:7-8), and: <<*Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David*>> (1 Kings 2:10). Elijah represents a remarkable exception to this way of speaking; as was Enoch in Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5. This does not mean that the OT faithful had no fellowship with God after they died, but only that this idea is seldom made explicit in the OT. There are clear indications of hope for continuing fellowship with God after death in Psalm 16:10-11, 17:15, 23:6 and 115:17-18, Ecclesiastes 12:7 and certainly here in v.11. In the NT, Jesus implied that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive and in God's presence: <<*"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living*>> (Matthew 22:32); Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Jesus in Mark 9:4; and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus implied fellowship in Abraham's presence immediately after death, refer to Luke 16:22-25.

Extra-biblical texts underline the unusual nature, in the ancient Near Eastern context, of any idea that mortals can enter and remain in heaven. The best known of these is the Akkadian myth of Adapa, the son of Ea, who visits heaven and almost obtains eternal life, but is compelled in the end to return to earth.

It is not clear whether the Lord has any reason for sending Elijah from Gilgal to Bethel, and then on to Jericho (vv.2-4); but all three cities appear in Second Kings as locations of prophetic communities, i.e. the company of the prophets, and Elijah is probably their leader, just as Elisha becomes later.

² Elijah said to Elisha, '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.

2 Kings 2:2

Bethel is identified with Jeroboam's apostasy in 1 Kings Chapters 12-13.

Stay here. It is never made clear why Elijah, in the course of his roundabout journey, keeps trying to get Elisha to remain behind on the very day that the prophetic succession is to take place: <<**today the Lord will take your master away from you**>> (v.3), but it is probably a testing of Elisha's mettle as the professed disciple and designated successor to Elijah. This may provide further evidence of Elijah's reluctance to fully embrace God's plans for the future; refer back to 1 Kings 19:13-21. Elijah affirms a little later that Elisha can receive Elijah's spiritual power only if he sees him when he is taken away by God (vv.9-10). The prophets in the meantime are to be silent or keep quiet about it; after all, it is disrespectful to speak of Elijah's passing while he is still around.

As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. Elijah seemed to test the devotion of Elisha. Since it was known that Elijah would soon depart to heaven in an unusual way, Elisha wanted to stay as close as possible to his mentor.

³ The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' And he said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent.'

2 Kings 2:3

The company of the prophets is literally 'the sons of the prophets' but they are not their physical descendants, just groups of prophets usually affiliated with a more prominent prophet; refer also to 1 Samuel 10:5 and 19:20, 1 Kings 18:4, and 2 Kings 4:1, 4:38, 6:1 and 9:1. The phrase 'sons of' can mean 'members of a guild of' as in: <<**the sons of the gatekeepers**>> (Ezra 2:42 ESV), although other translations give this as 'descendants of gatekeepers'. Although groups of false prophets also exist, e.g. 1 Kings 22:6, the prophetic groups associated with true prophets such as Samuel and Elijah are never viewed as false prophets but as servants of God, and therefore they must have received special revelations from God, which is the requirement for a true prophet: <<**I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command**>> (Deuteronomy 18:18), <<**And the Lord said to me: The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds**>> (Jeremiah 14:14), and: <<**The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are prophesying; say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the Lord!' Thus says the Lord God, Alas for the senseless prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!**>> (Ezekiel 13:1-3); however, none of their prophecies are recorded in Scripture. In this text God has revealed to them that today the Lord will take Elijah away.

Apparently, this was somewhat common knowledge. Elijah, Elisha and the company of the prophets each knew that Elijah would soon be carried into heaven by a whirlwind; presumably there was a prophecy announcing this that at least some knew.

⁴ Elijah said to him, 'Elisha, 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. ⁵ The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' And he answered, 'Yes, I know; be silent.'

2 Kings 2:4-5

Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho. Elijah continued to test the devotion of Elisha and he continued to stay with his mentor until Elijah's anticipated unusual departure. Elijah knew that God had a dramatic plan for the end of his earthly life, yet he was perfectly willing to allow it all to take place privately, without anyone else knowing.

Christians often like to make a show of doing the Lord's work. There are times when it should be clearly seen: <<And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons>> (Mark 3:14-15), <<And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah>> (Acts 5:42); and there are times when it can remain hidden: <<But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 'And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you>> (Matthew 6:3-6).

Jericho is in the Jordan Valley about 10 miles or 16 km to the northwest of the Dead Sea and is best known as the city that the Israelites first conquered in Canaan, the account of which can be found in Joshua Chapter 6.

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, '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. ⁷ Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. ⁸ Then Elijah took his

mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

2 Kings 2:6-8

The Jordan River runs along a short stretch of a geological fault that starts in the north in Syria and extends southward into Africa. It provided a formidable barrier between the lands to the east and west as there were limited crossing places. The average width of the riverbed is about 98 feet while the depth ranges from 3 to 10 feet. During flood times, the Jordan swells to a width of half a mile in certain areas.

So the two of them went on. Elisha would not leave his mentor until God took him away in the dramatic way expected. This would have been partly out of duty to his master, out of respect for the man who had taught him so much and out of expectation that God was about to do something of great significance.

Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. This was a strange and unique miracle on a day of strange and unique miracles. Elijah walked in the steps of Moses and Joshua as ones whom God used to miraculously part waters, for this scene of the crossing of the Jordan is reminiscent of Moses at the Red Sea, where the people also crossed on dry ground (Exodus 14:15-31, especially vv.21-22), and of the people entering the Promised Land in Joshua Chapter 3. Later in the chapter, Elisha proves that he is Elijah's successor by re-crossing the river in a similar manner; refer to the comment made on v.14.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, 'Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.' Elisha said, 'Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.'

2 Kings 2:9

Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you. This was a significant invitation, but Elisha demonstrated his tenacity by refusing to leave his mentor. It was with the objective of testing the spirit of his friend that the departing seer had urged him again and again to leave him. And it was only when Elisha had withstood the test with such unwavering resolution that Elijah was able to give him this carte blanche offer.

Elijah's offer to Elisha is similar to that of the Lord to a young King Solomon: <<At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask what I should give you'>> (1 Kings 3:5).

Elisha requests of Elijah what an eldest son would expect of a father in Israel: a double share or portion of the inheritance; refer to Deuteronomy 21:15-17. In this case, however, the inheritance is not land, property, business or wealth, but is spiritual power. Elisha has already left behind him normal life and the normal rules of inheritance; refer to 1 Kings 19:19-21.

It is worthwhile considering if this was generally a good or a bad thing. Normally, Christians do not think of one person inheriting the ministry of another. The relationship between Elijah and Elisha - and God's apparent blessing on their ministries - shows that at least sometimes God intends one person to inherit the ministry of another. Succession planning is quite permissible in churches and ministries.

¹⁰ He responded, 'You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.'

2 Kings 2:10

You have asked a hard thing. It is not clear how Elisha's request can be hard, given that Elisha is ordained by God to succeed Elijah as a Spirit-empowered prophet. Is Elijah simply looking for difficulties? It seems that Elijah is simply making it clear that life as a prophet can be very hard and dangerous indeed.

Yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not. Elijah tested the devotion of his mentee by seeing if he would persistently stay with him through these last remarkable hours. If the devotion of Elisha remained strong through the testing, his request to be the successor of the Elijah would be fulfilled.

¹¹ As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. ¹² Elisha kept watching and crying out, 'Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!' But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

2 Kings 2:11-12

As they continued walking and talking. One can only wonder at the depth and diversity of their conversation. Elijah stood on the brink of eternity with God. These conversations must have been a wonder to contemplate as must have been the many conversations that Jesus would have had with his disciples during his three year earthly ministry that have not been recorded in Scripture.

A chariot of fire and horses of fire. The divine army, last encountered waging war on Ahab in 1 Kings 22:1-38, has come for Elijah; Elisha sees it, as he will see it

again in 2 Kings 6:8-23. In biblical tradition, both chariotry and fire have strong associations with God's self-disclosure. Both images come together in the most common natural form of divine appearing or theophany in the OT: the thunderstorm – the storm cloud representing the divine chariot or throne in Ezekiel Chapter 1 and Habakkuk 3:8, and the fiery lightning bolts representing the divine weapons: <<*And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings, and routed them*>> (Psalm 18:14), and: <<*the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear*>> (Habakkuk 3:11). In response to this particular theophany, Elisha grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. This is perhaps part of a mourning ritual: <<*Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days*>> (Genesis 37:34), <<*The king rose, tore his garments, and lay on the ground; and all his servants who were standing by tore their garments*>> (2 Samuel 13:31), and: <<*When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord*>> (Isaiah 37:1), but it is also suggestive of leaving his old life behind, as he picks up instead the cloak of Elijah (v.13), which was used in 1 Kings 19:19-21 to symbolise Elisha's prophetic call.

Elijah was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind, not in the chariot and horses of fire which merely came between the two of them and cut Elijah off from human sight. These chariots and horsemen in Scripture symbolise strong protection as well as the forces of God's spiritual presence which were the true safety of Israel.

This would not be the only occasion that Elisha would witness this heavenly event for he saw chariots of fire at Dothan: <<*Then Elisha prayed: 'O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha*>> (2 Kings 6:17).

Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen! With these words Elisha recognised the true strength of Israel. Elisha saw that the strength of Israel had been that of the presence of the prophet of God. It is more than a coincidence that when presently Elisha himself passed away, Joash, the reigning king, uttered the same exclamation: <<*Now when Elisha had fallen sick with the illness of which he was to die, King Joash of Israel went down to him, and wept before him, crying, 'My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!'*>> (2 Kings 13:14).

This realisation is not as dramatic as that of a pagan Roman Centurion on witnessing the death of Jesus: <<*Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'*>> (Mark 15:39).

This was the end of a remarkable ministry, one that was in many ways similar to the ministry of Moses. Both Moses and Elijah:

- Stood alone for righteousness.
- Were associated with fire upon mountains.
- Were associated with the desert.
- Met God on Mount Sinai.
- Were chased out of their countries by pagan rulers.
- Knew God's miraculous provision for food and water.
- Wandered in the desert for a period measured by 40.
- Fasted for 40 days.
- Were powerful examples of men who prayed.
- Parted waters.
- Had close associates who succeeded them.
- Had successors that parted waters also.
- Had mysterious or strange departures from life.

Almost nine hundred years later both men would meet with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration; refer to Matthew 17:1-3, Mark 9:2-8 and Luke 9:28-36.

Elisha kept watching. This fulfilled the requirement mentioned in v.10. Elisha would indeed inherit the prophetic ministry of Elijah. Yet Elisha was not happy when this happened; he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces as an expression of deep mourning. Clearly, Elisha did not celebrate Elijah's passing because it offered him promotion and higher status. He mourned the passing of this faithful prophet, mentor and friend.

II.a.ii 2 Kings 2:13-18 - Elisha Succeeds Elijah

A company of prophets had stayed by the Jordan and had witnessed Elijah's departure from a distance. When Elisha returned he used Elijah's cloak to strike the river and it parted for him to cross, thus the other prophets knew that Elisha had succeeded Elijah. However, they urged Elisha to allow them to go out to search for Elijah. Initially, he refused them but eventually gave in to their requests. They searched for three days but Elijah could not be found.

¹³ He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. ¹⁴ He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

2 Kings 2:13-14

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him. Since the mantle was the special mark of a prophet, this was a demonstration of the truth that Elisha truly had inherited the ministry of Elijah. The reader should contemplate what it must have been like for Elisha to pick up that mantle. The mantle did not fall from heaven and rest on his shoulders; he had to decide to pick it up and put it on. He had to decide, “Do I really want to put this on?” Elijah’s ministry was one of great power, but also of great pressure and responsibility. Elisha now willingly accepted the role by taking up the mantle.

Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah? Elisha knew that the power in prophetic ministry did not rest in mantles or fiery chariots. It rested in the presence and work of the living God. If the Lord God of Elijah was also with Elisha, then he would inherit the same power and direction of ministry.

This was a great question to ask. If God expected Elisha to continue with the ministry of Elijah, then he must be present for the junior prophet in the same way he had been for the senior prophet. It was as if Elisha could have asked the question more specifically:

- Where is the God who kept Elijah faithful when the whole nation turned away from God?
- Where is the God who mightily answered prayer from Elijah?
- Where is the God who provided miraculously for Elijah?
- Where is the God who raised the dead through Elijah?
- Where is the God who answers prayer by sending fire from heaven?
- Where is the God who encouraged the discouraged prophet?
- Where is the God who carried Elijah away into heaven?

Charles Spurgeon said, “And when you have got their mantle, do not waste precious time in lamentations about them any more; get to your business. There is a river in your way; what then? Well, go to the Jordan as the prophet Elisha did, and try to pass it. Say not, Where is Elijah? but Where is the Lord God of Elijah? Elijah is gone, but his God is not; Elijah has gone away, but Jehovah is present, still.”

The water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

The Spirit who empowered Elijah has now come upon Elisha, and miracles immediately follow. As Elijah’s true successor, Elisha is able to repeat Elijah’s action in parting the waters (v.8). There is also a kind of parallel in the life of Joshua, for Joshua also crossed the Jordan and entered the land of Israel near Jericho, repeating Moses’ action in parting the waters. In Joshua’s case, he did not use a mantle to strike the water as it was the presence of God through the Ark of the Covenant that caused the waters to part on that occasion.

¹⁵ When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.’ They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

2 Kings 2:15

The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. The succession of Elisha to the power and office of Elijah was apparent to others. Elisha did not need to persuade or convince them of this with words. God’s blessing on his actions was enough to prove it. Jesus called on those who failed to accept him to do as these prophets did in Elisha’s day: <<*If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father*>> (John 10:37-38).

They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. The roots of the Jericho community’s allegiance to Elisha lie in their conviction that he is Elijah’s bona fide successor and therefore is anointed by the Lord for the role.

¹⁶ They said to him, ‘See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley.’ He responded, ‘No, do not send them.’

¹⁷ But when they urged him until he was ashamed, he said, ‘Send them.’ So they sent fifty men who searched for three days but did not find him. ¹⁸ When they came back to him (he had remained at Jericho), he said to them, ‘Did I not say to you, Do not go?’

2 Kings 2:16-18

Please let them go and seek your master. The company of prophets seem to understand that the prophetic succession has taken place, but do not fully understand what has happened. Standing at a distance (v.7), they have seen the fire and the whirlwind (v.11), but they have not perceived what was happening in the storm’s midst. They wonder, therefore, whether the Spirit of the Lord has not simply caught Elijah up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley; and they at least want to retrieve Elijah’s body for burial just as the men of Jabesh-gilead had done when King Saul and his sons were killed in battle; refer to 1 Samuel 31:11-13.

But when they urged him until he was ashamed. Elisha must have wondered if the other prophets were starting to think that he did not care about the fate of Elijah or that he was glad that he was not longer around so that Elisha could wear the ‘crown of the prophet’ in his place. This was not true of course, but Elisha’s

only response to clear up this misunderstanding was to let them go to look for Elijah. It was a fruitless search for God had taken him.

Did I not say to you, Do not go? Elisha knew that the mission would be futile and it was. Elijah had been carried up to heaven, not to some other place on this earth as was later seen in the case of the evangelist Philip: <<*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea*>> (Acts 8:39-40).

II.a.iii 2 Kings 2:19-25 - Elisha Performs Miracles

The water at Jericho was contaminated and so Elisha took salt and purified the water in the name of the Lord. It was immediately wholesome and remained so throughout the period of the historical record.

A group of youths at Bethel taunted Elisha and verbally abused him so he cursed them in the name of the Lord and forty two of them were mauled by bears. Elisha continued his journey first to Mount Carmel and then to Samaria.

¹⁹ Now the people of the city said to Elisha, ‘The location of this city is good, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.’

²⁰ He said, ‘Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.’ So they brought it to him. ²¹ Then he went to the spring of water and threw the salt into it, and said, ‘Thus says the Lord, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.’ ²² So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.

2 Kings 2:19-22

The water is bad, and the land is unfruitful. This is the first of two stories that further authenticate Elisha as Elijah’s prophetic successor, a man able both to bless and to curse in the Lord’s name, similar to Moses in Deuteronomy Chapter 28. Jericho was in an area ideal for settlement because of the presence of the perennial spring ‘Ain es-Sultan, which irrigated the fertile land around it. This story, however, tells of contamination of the water supply, most likely since the rebuilding of the city had taken place under the shadow of Joshua’s curse; refer to Joshua 6:26 and 1 Kings 16:34. The remedy offered by the new Joshua, i.e. Elisha, who has just crossed the Jordan, involves **a new bowl** and **salt**. New items, being uncontaminated, were customarily employed in rituals in the ancient Near East, for example: <<*He said to her, ‘If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else’*>> (Judges

16:11), and: <<About that time, when Jeroboam was leaving Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him on the road. Ahijah had clothed himself with a new garment>> (1 Kings 11:29a). Elsewhere in the OT, salt is associated with the covenant and is included as part of offerings made to the Lord: <<You shall not omit from your grain-offerings the salt of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer salt>> (Leviticus 2:13), and: <<All the holy offerings that the Israelites present to the Lord I have given to you, together with your sons and daughters, as a perpetual due; it is a covenant of salt for ever before the Lord for you and your descendants as well>> (Numbers 18:19), as well as being used in other specific rituals: <<Abimelech fought against the city all that day; he took the city, and killed the people that were in it; and he razed the city and sowed it with salt>> (Judges 9:45), and: <<As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths>> (Ezekiel 16:4). The use of salt here is likewise symbolic, for by itself a tiny bowl of salt would have no effect on a constantly flowing spring. The healing of the water was therefore accomplished by supernatural means: Thus says the Lord, I have made this water wholesome, which means it is healed. The miracle did not happen because Elisha wanted to impress others or because he thought it would be a good thing to do it. This was a work of God, and it was a word from the Lord that announced the healing of the water.

²³ 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 jeered at him, saying, ‘Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!’ ²⁴ When he turned round and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.

2 Kings 2:23-24

Some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him. The ancient Hebrew word translated small boys or youths here means young men in a very broad sense. This term applied to Joseph when he was 39 years old (Genesis 41:12), to Absalom as an adult (2 Samuel 14:21), and to Solomon when he was 20 (1 Kings 3:7).

The focal point for Israel’s apostasy was Bethel; refer to 1 Kings 12:25-13:34. Therefore, it is no surprise to find young people from this city adopting a disrespectful attitude towards a prophet of the Lord, and to treat a prophet with disrespect is to treat God himself with disrespect.

Go away, baldhead! The reference to the baldhead is not clear, as his lack of hair was not age related since his work continued for some fifty years from this point. Elisha might have already been so bald by nature that to youthful eyes he looked grotesque, especially in contrast to the hairy Elijah: <<They answered him, ‘A

hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.’ He said, ‘It is Elijah the Tishbite’>> (2 Kings 1:8); or perhaps some prophets, like later Christian monks, shaved their heads as a mark of their vocation; or perhaps he had taken a vow to the Lord: <<After staying there for a considerable time, Paul said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut, for he was under a vow>> (Acts 18:18). The idea behind the words Go away, literally go up, was that Elisha should ‘go up to heaven’ just as Elijah had done. It mocked Elisha, his mentor Elijah, and the God they both served.

He cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. Although this judgement may at first seem harsh, the group must have included over fifty youths old enough to be out running in a pack, and so they constituted something of a physical threat to Elisha. More importantly they mocked his ministry, that of Elijah and the God they both served. The authors of Kings regularly show that contempt towards divinely called prophets is disastrous for God’s people and punishment often results.

Bears, lions and other wild animals were quite common in the region at the time. The Hebrew term translated mauled does not necessarily mean that they were killed. Whatever their fate, it was justified as they had mocked God.

²⁵ From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria.

2 Kings 2:25

The succession narrative now complete, Elisha ends his journey with a visit to Mount Carmel – the scene of Elijah’s great victory – and a return to Samaria to continue the war against Baal worship.