



Second Kings - Chapter Three

II 2 Kings 2:1-10:36 - Elisha and Israel (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

One expects that Elisha, as Elijah's successor, will also be involved in politics, and in this story he is consulted about a military campaign. When Jehoram became king of Israel the king of Moab saw this as an opportunity to remove his people from the subjugation of Israel, and so he rebelled. Jehoram called King Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom to join him in a campaign against Moab but the armies found there was no water for them. When Jehoshaphat said they should enquire of the Lord then Elisha was summoned, who made it clear that he would only seek the Lord because he had regard for the king of Judah and not the apostate king of Israel.

Elisha informed the kings that the Lord would indeed fill the land with sufficient water to sustain his armies and it was so. When the Moabite army came out they saw the water and thought it was the blood of their enemies who must have fought amongst themselves but they were wrong and were defeated in battle. The narrative noticeably echoes 1 Kings 22:1-28.

II.b 2 Kings 3:1-27 - Elisha and the Conquest of Moab

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.b.i 2 Kings 3:1-3 - Jehoram Reigns over Israel

Following the death of Ahab and his son Ahaziah, Ahab's son Jehoram became king of Israel. He continued in the apostasy of the kings of Israel.

¹ In the eighteenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah, Jehoram son of Ahab became king over Israel in Samaria; he reigned for twelve years.

² He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, though not like his

father and mother, for he removed the pillar of Baal that his father had made. ³ Nevertheless he clung to the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he caused Israel to commit; he did not depart from it.

2 Kings 3:1-3

In the eighteenth year of King Jehoshaphat of Judah was 852 BC.

Jehoram son of Ahab became king over Israel in Samaria. Jehoram came from a family that was far beyond dysfunctional. His father Ahab was one of the worst kings the northern kingdom of Israel ever knew and his mother Jezebel was certainly the worst queen of Israel and was the driving force behind Ahab.

Though not like his father and mother. As one of a number of surprises in Chapter 3, Jehoram son of Ahab is distanced from the rest of his family by the way in which his reign is described. The implication is that while he tolerated the Baal cult, he did not himself worship Baal since he removed the pillar of Baal from the temple; refer to 1 Kings 14:23.

Nevertheless he clung to the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he caused Israel to commit; he did not depart from it. Jeroboam was the first king over the northern kingdom and it was he who introduced the golden calves as idols for the Israelites to worship. Jehoram was better than his father and mother, but he was still a wicked man. He was the ninth consecutive bad king over the northern kingdom, which never had a godly king throughout its entire history.

II.b.ii 2 Kings 3:4-27 - War with Moab

When King Ahab of Israel died, King Mesha of Moab seized the opportunity to throw off the yoke of tribute imposed on his people by David. Israel, Judah and Edom, which still belonged to Judah, joined forces to attack Moab, but their efforts failed to re-subdue the nation. Perhaps emboldened by Moab's success, Edom later revolted against the rule of King Jehoram, also called Joram, of Judah. At the same time, the western town of Libnah revolted against Judah as well.

When the king of Moab rebelled against Israel, Jehoram called King Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Edom to fight with him against this enemy. When the armies travelled towards Moab they found the land to be dry without water to sustain them. Jehoshaphat wanted to seek the Lord and so Elisha was called. Because of his regard for the king of Judah, Elisha sought and received the word of the Lord, who would miraculously fill the land with the water needed and it was so. Because the water looked in the light of dawn, the Moabites mistook it for the blood of their enemies, believing they had fought amongst themselves, so they rode in to take the spoil but were soundly defeated in battle as the word of the Lord through Elisha had said.

The Moabite Stone, currently in the Louvre Museum in Paris, is a stele set up by Mesha, king of Moab, to commemorate his achievements. Mesha makes his version of a war fought with Israel in 850 BC prominent; the Israelite account appears in this chapter. The two accounts differ: Mesha emphasises his victories over Israel, and the biblical writer emphasises Israel's successful counterattacks.



Moab, Edom, and Libnah Revolt 853 BC and 848 BC.

⁴ Now King Mesha of Moab was a sheep breeder, who used to deliver to the king of Israel one hundred thousand lambs, and the wool of one hundred thousand rams. ⁵ But when Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.

2 Kings 3:4-5

Now King Mesha of Moab was a sheep breeder. The Moabites lived on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, and were under tribute to Israel. When King Ahab died, the king of the Moabites saw an opportunity to escape the taxation that the king of Israel had forced upon him. Mesha was a 9th Century king of Moab, the successor of his father Chemosh-yatti according to the Moabite Stone. He began his reign under the dominion of the Israelite house of Omri, and was required to pay his overlord tribute in the form of a percentage of his agricultural produce of lambs and wool, which is understandable given the importance of sheep in the economy of ancient Palestine. After the death of Ahab, Mesha took advantage of the new situation and rebelled, inciting Ahab's son Jehoram to launch the military campaign described in this chapter; refer to the map and introductory comments.

Later, Isaiah counsels Moab to resume this payment of tribute: <<*Send lambs to the ruler of the land, from Sela, by way of the desert, to the mount of daughter Zion*>> (Isaiah 16:1).

⁶ So King Jehoram marched out of Samaria at that time and mustered all Israel. ⁷ As he went he sent word to King Jehoshaphat of Judah, 'The king of Moab has rebelled against me; will you go with me to battle against Moab?' He answered, 'I will; I am with you, my people are your people, my horses are your horses.' ⁸ Then he asked, 'By which way shall we march?' Jehoram answered, 'By the way of the wilderness of Edom.'

2 Kings 3:6-8

As he went he sent word to King Jehoshaphat of Judah. Like his father before him, Jehoram seeks help from his southern neighbour Jehoshaphat, whose initial response is recognisable from 1 Kings 22:4: I am with you, my people are your people, my horses are your horses. Missing on this occasion, however, is any desire on Jehoshaphat's part to discover the counsel of the Lord before going off to war, which is a contrast to 1 Kings 22:5; here he moves directly from agreement to tactics, and from tactics to action (v.9). This is surprising. The tactics involve attacking Moab from the south, through the wilderness of Edom, rather than from the north. This is possible because Edom is under Judæan rule (1 Kings 22:47) and its king is Jehoshaphat's deputy rather than an independent monarch.

Jehoshaphat was a godly king according to 1 Kings 22:41-43, who followed in the godly footsteps of his father Asa; refer to 1 Kings 15:9-15. Yet Asa fought against Israel (1 Kings 15:16), while Jehoshaphat made peace with the northern kingdom (1 Kings 22:44). Although greater in its physical size, the entire nation of Israel was long since separated by a civil war, the two nations, Judah and Israel, were now willing to come together to fight this common enemy.

⁹ So the king of Israel, the king of Judah, and the king of Edom set out; and when they had made a roundabout march of seven days, there was no water for the army or for the animals that were with them. ¹⁰ Then the king of Israel said, ‘Alas! The Lord has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab.’

2 Kings 3:9-10

When they had made a roundabout march of seven days. The combined armies of Judah, Israel and Edom had to travel a considerable distance to attack Moab from the south. The action involved a march in which the combined armies become short of water because their circuitous march had taken them away from the normal water supplies in the region. Unsurprisingly, a military venture, undertaken without prophetic advice, faced disaster.

Alas! The Lord has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab. Jehoram’s guilty conscience convinced him that this calamity was the judgement of God. His own sin made him think that everything that happened against him and those travelling with him was the judgement of God upon them.

¹¹ But Jehoshaphat said, ‘Is there no prophet of the Lord here, through whom we may inquire of the Lord?’ Then one of the servants of the king of Israel answered, ‘Elisha son of Shaphat, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah, is here.’ ¹² Jehoshaphat said, ‘The word of the Lord is with him.’ So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.

2 Kings 3:11-12

Is there no prophet of the Lord here? Jehoshaphat’s memory suddenly returns, and he asks the right question; refer to 1 Kings 22:7. Both Jehoram and Jehoshaphat believed there was a spiritual, divine element to their current crisis. Jehoram believed that God was to be avoided because of the crisis, while Jehoshaphat believed that God should be sought because of the crisis.

Elisha son of Shaphat, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah is probably a reference to Elisha’s role as Elijah’s servant. It is a wonderful title for any

servant of God. Elisha was the humble and practical servant of Elijah. This was spiritual service that prepared him for further spiritual service. Elisha is found to be in their midst or, at least, somewhere nearby. Unimpressed as he was with Jehoram's piety, Elisha agreed to help because of righteous albeit forgetful Jehoshaphat's presence in the alliance.

So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him.

This was encouraging humility on the part of these three kings. Normally, kings demand that others come see them. These three were willing to go to the prophet.

¹³ Elisha said to the king of Israel, 'What have I to do with you? Go to your father's prophets or to your mother's.' But the king of Israel said to him, 'No; it is the Lord who has summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab.' ¹⁴ Elisha said, 'As the Lord of hosts lives, whom I serve, were it not that I have regard for King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I would give you neither a look nor a glance.' ¹⁵ But get me a musician.' And then, while the musician was playing, the power of the Lord came on him.

2 Kings 3:13-15

What have I to do with you? This Hebrew idiom is commonly employed to express emphatic denial: <<*But the king said, 'What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, "Curse David", who then shall say, "Why have you done so?"*>> (2 Samuel 16:10), or differences of opinion between the persons involved: <<*And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come'*>> (John 2:4).

Go to your father's prophets or to your mother's. Elisha's call was to continue the ministry of Elijah, and here he imitated Elijah's plain speaking to powerful people. Elisha's plain speaking struck the conscience of the king of Israel.

Were it not that I have regard for King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I would give you neither a look nor a glance. It was not that Elisha was against every king or powerful person. He was willing to speak to these three kings for the sake of Jehoshaphat, the godly king of Judah.

But get me a musician. The type of music is not specified but it seems likely that it was either a psalm or other praise song for such edify the believer and, in this case, put Elisha's spirit in communion with the Holy Spirit of God in order to perceive what the Spirit had to say: <<*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches*>> (Revelation 2:7).

And then, while the musician was playing, the power of the Lord came on him. Music plays a part in Elisha's attainment of the prophetic state in which he utters

his prophecy; refer to 1 Samuel 10:5-11 and the associated comment made on 1 Samuel 10:5. When Elisha wanted to become more sensitive to the leading and speaking of the Holy Spirit he asked for the service of a musician. This demonstrates the great spiritual power in music.

¹⁶ And he said, ‘Thus says the Lord, “I will make this wadi full of pools.”’ ¹⁷ For thus says the Lord, “You shall see neither wind nor rain, but the wadi shall be filled with water, so that you shall drink, you, your cattle, and your animals.”’ ¹⁸ This is only a trifle in the sight of the Lord, for he will also hand Moab over to you. ¹⁹ You shall conquer every fortified city and every choice city; every good tree you shall fell, all springs of water you shall stop up, and every good piece of land you shall ruin with stones.’

2 Kings 3:16-19

The immediate crisis of having no water (v.9) is to be dealt with by a miracle, as the nearby wadi shall be filled with water from an unspecified and unexpected source for they will see neither wind nor rain. This was a strange promise from God. Water would be provided, but without any apparent rain or storm. God will further grant the alliance a comprehensive victory over Moab.

This is only a trifle in the sight of the Lord. The kings came to Elisha inquiring about water. God wanted to give them more than their immediate need. God wanted to give them more than immediate provision; he wanted to give them complete victory over their enemies. This was a miracle that was beyond the abilities of mankind at the time and even in modern times would have taken a major engineering project to achieve it, but the Lord could do it with ease and immediately: <<***He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water***>> (Psalm 107:35), and: <<***I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water***>> (Isaiah 41:18). Jesus promised even greater miracles than this: <<***Jesus answered, ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these’***>> (John 1:50). More astonishingly, he stated that he would work through his disciples to achieve greater things still: <<***Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father***>> (John 14:12).

They will attack and conquer every fortified city and every choice city, or perhaps major towns, devastating the land as they move through it. Deuteronomy 20:19-20 prohibits this kind of destruction in normal cases, but here it appears that Elisha portrays the Moabites as a nation to be given over to desolation just like the cities of Canaan in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, rather than simply subjugated.

²⁰ The next day, about the time of the morning offering, suddenly water began to flow from the direction of Edom, until the country was filled with water. ²¹ When all the Moabites heard that the kings had come up to fight against them, all who were able to put on armour, from the youngest to the oldest, were called out and were drawn up at the frontier. ²² When they rose early in the morning, and the sun shone upon the water, the Moabites saw the water opposite them as red as blood. ²³ They said, 'This is blood; the kings must have fought together, and killed one another. Now then, Moab, to the spoil!' ²⁴ But when they came to the camp of Israel, the Israelites rose up and attacked the Moabites, who fled before them; as they entered Moab they continued the attack. ²⁵ The cities they overturned, and on every good piece of land everyone threw a stone, until it was covered; every spring of water they stopped up, and every good tree they felled. Only at Kir-hareseth did the stone walls remain, until the slingers surrounded and attacked it.

2 Kings 3:20-25

Events begin to unfold in line with Elisha's prophecy. Water mysteriously began to flow from the direction of Edom, Hebrew 'Edom, fooling the Moabites into thinking the allies have slaughtered each other because in the morning sunlight the water appears red (Hebrew 'adummim) as blood (Hebrew dam); notice the play on words with 'Edom. Their reckless advance on the Israelite camp is met with force.

Edom means red as seen in the account of Jacob and Esau: <<Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' (Therefore he was called Edom)>> (Genesis 25:30).

Every good tree they felled probably does not include fruit trees as that would have been contrary to God's instructions given to the Israelites through Moses: <<*If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siege-works against the town that makes war with you, until it falls*>> (Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

The combined armies act out Elisha's words point by point, attacking all the Moabite cities including Kir-hareseth, strategically situated on a rocky hill

overlooking the Dead Sea about 17 miles or 27 km south of the Arnon Gorge and 11 miles or 18 km east of the Dead Sea.

²⁶ When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom; but they could not. ²⁷ Then he took his firstborn son who was to succeed him, and offered him as a burnt-offering on the wall. And great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and returned to their own land.

2 Kings 3:26-27

Facing defeat by Israel, Mesha offered his firstborn son as a burnt-offering on the wall. As a consequence, great wrath, Hebrew *qetsep*, came upon Israel. This is not to be understood as divine anger, because on the one hand the biblical authors did not regard the Moabite god Chemosh as a real god (1 Kings 11:7), and on the other hand Israel's God would surely not have acted on Moab's behalf as a result of a ritual practice that was abhorrent to him; refer to 2 Kings 16:3, 17:17 and 21:6, and Jeremiah 7:31. It seems, instead, that this great wrath is human wrath, as on both other occasions in Kings when *qetsep* appears in 2 Kings 5:11 and 13:19. Mesha's troops respond to his desperate act with an anger that causes the allied armies to withdraw.

So they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. The radical determination of the king of Moab convinced the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom that they could not completely defeat Moab. They left content with their near-complete victory.