

Beware the Angry Prophet: 2 Kings 2:23-25¹

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There was once a commercial on television for a certain margarine where Mother Nature was offered a taste of something she was told was butter. Instead of being butter, however, she actually ate margarine. When told of the deception, she replied, "it's not nice to fool Mother Nature" at which point a storm erupts.

This rather humorous commercial serves as a useful introduction to the passage under consideration (as well as making it fairly plain that I am no spring chicken myself, admittedly) because in this passage we hear, apparently, a message which declares that "it's not nice to make fun of a prophet". As a storm erupted when Mother Nature was deceived, so also a storm of terrible proportions is unleashed on some hapless children who happen to call Elisha a bald headed man. Why were these 42 children mauled or killed by two bears simply because they called Elisha a name? That is the question we shall attempt to address in what follows.

This essay is a major revision of an earlier essay I wrote for the *Journal of Biblical Studies* under the same title. I want to thank my various peer reviewers for their

¹ Originally published online in the 'Journal of Biblical Studies'. That website has, however, disappeared so I've reproduced the essay here. It may not be redistributed without the author's express written permission.

very welcome insights and suggestions and of course all failings here are my own and not theirs.

To begin first, the requisite preliminary remarks which fall into two categories: on one hand, what makes this story interesting is the way that it is virtually disregarded in the scholarly literature. In attempting to assemble a bibliography for this text I was able to find only limited references that transcended a sort of apologetic glossing. T.R. Hobb's ignores the thorny issue of the cursing of the children completely in his 1985 commentary on 1 and 2 Kings in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. The new commentary published in 2000 by Robert L. Cohn, in the *Berit Olam* series, offers a tantalizingly incomplete explanation when he says

"Their repeated taunt... hardly seems severe enough to warrant Elisha's curse. On the other hand, if their jeer is intended as an invidious contrast between the hairless Elisha and the hirsute Elijah, his anger is perhaps understandable (!). In any case, the episode provides an occasion for the writer to show the fledgling prophet calling down divine curse as well as blessing, hurt as well as healing. The power at Elisha's disposal is raw and amoral. Whether or not the bad boys of Beth-el got what was coming to them, the tale engenders in the reader a healthy respect for the authority of Elijah's successor."

Susanne Otto describes the Elisha stories in 2 Kings as bits that were "inserted to give prophecy a legitimate foundation in the history of Israel" in a very fine essay from the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, "The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History" (JSOT 24.4, 2003, 487-503). I disagree with the assessment of Otto, however, because the Elisha stories do not legitimize prophecy, they de-legitimize the office. Unfortunately, Otto does not discuss our passage, nor does she mention it.

David Marcus alone covers our passage in fine detail in his witty *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (1995)(where he also provides an exceptional overview of previous interpretation). Marcus clearly, and I think persuasively, and convincingly, demonstrates that there certainly were “anti-prophet” segments of Judean society. More on this later. A summary of Marcus’ observations would suggest that “the story contains major characteristics of satire, such as fantastic situations, grotesqueries, exaggerations, irony, parody, and ridicule...” (p. 64) and is intended to criticize, not the boys, but the prophet, for abusing his power by invoking an “atrociously severe curse for a seemingly mild offense” (p. viii).

Thus, in short, this very scintillating tale has evoked a few essays and a paragraph or two here and there and most of these along the lines of “there is no serious point in this incident, it is just a ‘puerile tale’” (Marcus quoting John Gray)(op cit. p.44). This is astonishing in light of the fact that other passages of lesser interest (at least to me) have generated monographs and articles and essays in the hundreds.

On the other hand, a quick “googling” of the passage results in some 7000 hits, many of which do a grand dance of evasion, twirling and whirling around like 18th century dancers whizzing along the floor while a Mozartian minuet plays in the background. For example, someone named Wayne Jackson in *The Christian Courier* (and apologies to you, sir, if you are present), opines:

“Elisha being taunted (cf. qalas, qarah) by young lads (perhaps teen-age ruffians) (II Kgs 2:23) who as members of covenant families ought to have been taught God’s law whereby cursing his servant was tantamount to cursing him and rightly punishable by death (cf. qalal)” (Harris, et al., 1980, 2:795). Obviously, therefore, the immediate context in which na’ar is used will determine the maturity of the subject so designated.

The young men of Bethel mocked Elisha. The Hebrew word *qalas* means to scoff at, ridicule, or scorn. The term does not suggest innocent conduct. Note the Lord's comment elsewhere: "...they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets, until the wrath of Jehovah arose against his people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:16). Too, the expression, "Go up...Go up," is held by many scholars to reflect the wish of these young men that the prophet go ahead and ascend (as did Elijah – 2 Kgs. 2:11), i.e., leave the earth, that they might be rid of him! Also, the taunt, "thou bald head," was likely a reproach. Old Testament scholar John Whitcomb has suggested that this was an expression "of extreme contempt. They were pronouncing a divine curse upon him, for which baldness was often the outward sign (cf. Isa. 3:17a, 24)" (1971, p. 68).

When it is said that Elisha "cursed them," there is no implication of profanity (as our modern word suggests), nor was this a venting of passion for personal revenge. Holy men of God sometimes were empowered with divine authority to pronounce an impending judgment upon rebellious persons (cf. Gen. 9:25; 49:7; Deut. 27:15ff; Josh. 6:26). Christ uttered a curse upon the barren fig tree (Mk. 11:21) as an object lesson that previewed the doom that was to be visited upon Jerusalem. Also, it is clearly stated that Elisha's curse upon them was "in the name of the Lord," meaning by "divine appointment, inspiration, authority" (see Orr, 1956, 4:2112).

The tragedy that befell these young men obviously was of divine design [my emphasis]. Elisha, as a mere man, would have possessed no power to call forth wild animals out of the woods merely at his bidding. But the sovereignty of Jehovah over the animal kingdom frequently is affirmed in the Scriptures. God sent fiery serpents to bite the Israelites (Num. 21:6); the Lord slew a disobedient young prophet by means of a lion (1 Kgs. 13:24ff.). Jehovah shut the lions' mouths to protect Daniel (Dan. 6:22). He prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah (Jon. 1:17), and guided one to Peter's hook (Mt. 17:24ff). Clearly, therefore, it was the Lord God who brought those bears out of the forest. And so, if, when the divine record says that the bears "tare" the lads, it means they were killed (and not

all scholars are sure that death is indicated), then it was a divine punishment. As Alfred Edersheim has written: "...it should be noticed that it was not Elisha who slew those forty-two youths, but the Lord in His Providence, just as it had been Jehovah, not the prophet, who had healed the waters of Jericho" (n.d., 6:107).

It is the general view of conservative Bible scholars that the young men of Bethel likely were idolaters, and that, as such, their reproaches upon Elisha were expressions of contempt for his prophetic office, thus, ultimately directed at the God whom he served. They were entirely responsible for their actions. Their punishment, therefore, was a divine judgment intended to serve as a dramatic example of rebellion in horribly wicked times. It affords no comfort to modern skepticism!

Indeed, examples such as this can easily be multiplied from the world wide web. The authors of such material will expend any energy necessary in order to justify both the action of the prophet and that of God.

So, whereas Marcus sees satire and this brought into play because of anti-prophetic sentiments, and other scholars dismiss the passage as puerile; conservative scholars see the text not only as a cautionary tale but a direct warning to liberals that they had better beware of getting on the wrong side of God.

Having done with the preliminary matter at hand (which is the requisite review of previous literature) we turn now, hopefully, to a more reasonable and focused exposition of our passage. We must first conclude that there is no reason, from a textual or translational perspective, that the passage should cause any problems. It is straightforward and textually certain (so far as that term can be used of any text). It is not

the meaning of the words that causes problems but the meaning of the things those words say! The text follows and with it some textual and grammatical notes:

2 Kings 2:23-25

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה בֵּית־אֵל וְהוּא עָלָה בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיְעָרִים קְטָנִים יִצְאוּ מִן־הָעִיר
וַיִּפְּזוּ אֶת־רִיב וַיִּרְאוּם וַיִּמְלְלֵם ²⁴ וַיִּתְקַלְסוּ־בּוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ עָלָה קִרְחַת עָלָה קִרְחַת:
בָּשָׂם יְהוָה וַתִּצְאָנָה שְׁתֵּי־דָבִים מִן־הַיַּעַר וַתִּבְקַעְנָה מֵהֶם אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁנַיִ
וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהִר הַכַּרְמֶל וּמֹשֶׁה שָׁב שָׁמְרוֹן: ²⁵ פ ילדים:

23. He went up from there to Bethel; and as he was going up by the way, there came forth young lads out of the city, and mocked him, and said to him, Go up, you baldy; go up, you baldhead.

24. He looked behind him and saw them, and cursed them in the name of Yahweh. There came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and mauled forty-two lads of them.

25. He went from there to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

Textually the Septuagint adds a few clarifying remarks which make the actions of the young lads a tad more reprehensible and thus their punishment a bit more tolerable.

Note 1 is expanded by GL with the phrase *και ελιθαζον αυτον*, and note 2 here after

“Yahweh” adds *παραβασεως και αργιας και ειπεν τεκνα*. Marcus notes on page 57

of his previously cited work that “they stoned him” may reflect a metathesis of Hebrew

“saqal” “to stone”. Thus Lucian would have here a doublet, one reflecting Hebrew

“qalas”, “to mock” and the other “saqal”, “to stone”. The question, as Marcus poses it,

then becomes, is this a textual error or an intentional change? Interestingly, these

Septuagintal expansions are not even mentioned by the editors of *Biblia Hebraica*

Stuttgartensia. Perhaps, as an aside, the newly appearing *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* will do

so. The Qumran manuscripts do not contain this passage, but it would certainly be

interesting to see how they would have appeared there. The meaning of the Septuagint’s

expansion is clear enough. These lads are vicious and hence deserve a good chewing.

Grammatically the passage likewise offers nothing that is unusual or difficult. Gesenius uses verse 23 as an illustration of those noun clauses "which occur at the beginning of a period, and are intended to lay stress upon the fact that the first action still continues on the occurrence of the second" (Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, sec. 116u). Nothing remarkable here, I'll admit. And that's rather something of the point. The passage, as we have it, makes perfect sense.

Contextual analysis allows us to see the pericope in its larger setting and may indeed offer us clues to its purpose and meaning in its present context. 2 Kings 2 is concerned with the appointment of Elisha as the successor of Elijah. Once appointed, Elisha takes his master's cloak and strikes the water, parting it (2:13-18). When he arrives in Jericho, his first prophetic challenge is to "heal the waters" (2:19-22). Then comes our passage- the Cursing of the Boys (2:23-25) and the action next moves to Elisha's counseling action in the Moabite War (3:1-27). Next Elisha performs a series of six miracles, the chief of which is the raising of the dead and the healing of the leper (4:1-6:7). The following segment concerns itself with Elisha's activity during the Aramean Wars (6:8-8:15). Once that has run its course, Elisha encourages Jehu's purge of Baalism (8:16-10:36). The final mention of Elisha occurs in 13:1-25 where his last activities and death are recorded.

What we have, then, if we were to summarize the activity of Elisha is:

Calling as Elijah's Replacement

The Healing of the Waters of Jericho

Cursing of the Lads- A Personal War

The Moabite War

Miracles of Healing

The Aramean War

The Purge of Baalism- A Religious War

Death

This clearly oversimplified outline demonstrates that after the initial act of healing the prophet takes on a bloody and strife filled ministry characterized by a nearly unbroken chain of destruction. This, I think, serves to highlight the miracles even more in the mind of the reader. The initial action of the curing of the waters leads one to expect a prophetic ministry of peace and healing but instead the cursing of the children shows the reader that Elisha is a violent man with a violent temper, easily set off and more than willing to destroy any enemy- personal or otherwise. His compassionate concern for those in need in Jericho and in the miracle stories strikes the reader as out of character and indeed, as almost surreal in light of the episode involving the children.

Does the story of the purifying of the waters or the story of the cursing of the children, then, set the stage for how the reader is to understand this Prophet? Is the redactor suggesting to us that what began positively soon turned in an amazingly negative direction? Is it possible that the story is told to demonstrate that the Prophet was really a cruel and vindictive soul

whose entire ministry was one of destruction and warfare? If this is so, then were the miracle stories added at a later stage of the tradition in order to ameliorate the perception of the reader regarding the violence of the man Elisha? Or, indeed, do the miracle stories show us what prophets should be like but more often than not, weren't? These questions are, at this stage, not answerable, at least by me. What we do have at hand is the final redaction of the story, and the introductory section where Elisha is called and immediately active in a violent series of events after what seems such a promising start makes us wonder if the story is a positive assessment of the man or a negative one. In other words, is Elisha a hero or a villain and how does the redactor wish us to understand him? For, it seems to me, redactors and editors have as much to do with our perception of literary characters as do authors.

Our story, I think, demonstrates Elisha to be quite villainous. His unbelievable pettiness is striking and serves, I think, to paint him darkly in order to criticize the prophetic office. An office, to be sure, which was originally positive but lost that ideal and became destructive and self-serving. No other prophet acts with such violence against their opponents. Even Jeremiah does not call the curse down on his rivals but simply announces to them that God will bring them to account. So again, it seems

to me, it's as though the redactor wishes us to say to ourselves—"this is what prophets have become: vicious petty warlords".

But why? As a post exilic composition the so called "Deuteronomistic history" serves the newly restored community as a warning against prophets and their kind. Post exilic prophecy, when compared to the pre-exilic giants Isaiah and Hosea, is stale and limp and colorless and quite uninspiring and powerless. Prophecy was to the ear what the restored temple was to the eye. Perhaps, then, in Judaism at that time, Prophecy's decline was assisted by a story in which a prophet is portrayed as a curser of children and a violent warrior. Tired of war and its effects, the population was no longer interested in the "Hawkish" mentality of classical prophecy and instead became enamored of the "end time apocalyptic" sort of hope embodied in Daniel and Third Isaiah. The cursing of the children insures the cessation of prophecy. Soon after this story circulated classical prophecy died. In the story the children are mauled by the prophet's curse; but in the end the curse returns to the head of the prophet, who in the eyes of the post-exilic lot stands for prophecy as an institution. In the end, it is not hapless children with bad attitudes who are destroyed; but prophecy itself. The Priest replaces the prophet as the oracle of God. Maybe Wellhausen wasn't so wrong after all.

