

ELISHA AND THE LADS OF BETHEL

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In the book of 2 Kings, there is an intriguing narrative that has generated considerable controversy. Concerning the prophet Elisha, the text reads as follows.

And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, “Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.” And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them (2:23-24).

Atheists have appealed to this incident in an attempt to involve the Bible in moral difficulty. A careful consideration of the facts, however, will dissolve the problem.

First, the translation, “there came forth **little children** out of the city” (KJV) is an unfortunate rendition (cf. “young lads”—ASV, or “youths”—NIV, NKJV). The Hebrew word rendered “children” derives from *na’ar*—used 235 times in the Old Testament. *Na’ar* is a very broad root word, and can have reference to anyone from a newborn child to an adult. Further, the Hebrew word rendered “little” comes from *qatan*, and generally means young or small. In commenting on this term in 2 Kings 2:23, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* remarked:

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 (*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.

Second, 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 Chronicles 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 Kings 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. Isaiah 3:17a, 24)” [1971, p. 68]. Third, 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. Genesis 9:25; 49:7; Deuteronomy 27:15ff.; Joshua 6:26). Christ uttered a curse upon the barren fig tree (Mark 11:21) as an object lesson of the doom that was to be visited upon Jerusalem. Also, it is stated clearly that Elisha’s curse upon them was “in the name of the Lord,” meaning “by divine appointment, inspiration, authority” (see Orr, 1956, 4:2112).

Fourth, the tragedy that befell these young men obviously was of divine design. Elisha, as a mere man, would have 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 (Numbers 21:6); the Lord slew a disobedient young prophet by means of a lion (1 Kings 13:24ff.); yet, He shut the mouths of lions to protect Daniel (Daniel 6:22). He prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah (Jonah 1:17), and many years later guided one to Peter’s hook (Matthew 17:24ff.). Clearly, therefore, it was Jehovah who brought those bears out of the forest.

Additionally, 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, and thus, ultimately directed at the God Whom he served. And so, their punishment was a divine judgment intended to serve as a dramatic example in horribly wicked times.

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