

2 Kings 2:23-24: Elisha and the Mauling of Forty-Two Youths

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"Elijah was a ninth-century prophet in the northern kingdom (Israel) who challenged King Ahab's court-sponsored Baal worship, ultimately defeating the prophets of Baal in a dramatic encounter on Mount Carmel and receiving a commission from Yahweh on Mount Horeb to set in motion the end of the Omri dynasty."¹ He was a major figure in Israel's spiritual history. Indeed, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain, the two persons who appeared and spoke with him were Elijah and Moses (Mat. 17:3; Mk. 9:4; Lk. 9:30).

Elisha the son of Shaphat was Elijah's God-appointed successor (1 Ki. 19:15-21). That succession was effected when Elisha was given a double portion of Elijah's spirit upon Elijah's ascent into heaven (2 Ki. 2:9-13). "In terms of inheritance, [his receiving a double portion] does not mean that Elisha had twice the spirit that Elijah had; the 'double portion' means 'twice what any other beneficiaries get' and goes normally to the firstborn. *The double portion designates the true heir and successor.*"² In confirmation of the transfer of Elijah's role to Elisha, God promptly parted the Jordan River at Elisha's request, as he had done for Elijah (2 Ki. 2:8, 14). The sons of the prophets³ who were at Jericho, who had gone near the river, declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha" (2 Ki. 2:15a). They then came to meet him and acknowledged his preeminence among prophets by bowing to the ground before him (2 Ki. 2:15b).

Elisha then spent several days in Jericho (2 Ki. 2:17-18). The men of the city, recognizing that he was Elijah's spiritual heir, told him about the poor quality of their water. Elisha threw some salt in the local spring and said, "Thus says the LORD, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it" (2 Ki. 2:20-21). 1 Kings 2:22 declares, "So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke." It was a great blessing bestowed on those who received God's special prophet for who he was.

¹ James K. Mead, "Elijah" in Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 249. His ministry was during the reigns of Ahab (c. 869-850), Ahaziah (c. 850-849), and Jehoram (c. 849-842). Mead (2005), 251.

² As John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 170 (emphasis supplied).

³ The phrase "sons of the prophets" probably refers to "'disciples of the prophets,' based on the ancient (esp. Semitic) idea that the teacher-pupil relationship was conceived of as a father-son relationship." Chrys C. Caragounis, "בְּנֵי" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:674. According to C. F. Keil, the phrase "sons of the prophets" means "disciples or scholars of the prophets, from which it is very evident that these sons of the prophets stood in a relation of dependence to the prophets (Elijah and Elisha), i.e., of subordination to them, and followed their instructions and admonitions." C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. by James Martin (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006; reprint 1866-91)], 2:499. See also, Joachim Jeremias, "נְבִיִּים" in Ernst Jenni and Clause Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:700.

Elisha then went from Jericho to Bethel, a city in the central hill country about 12 miles to the northwest.⁴ Bethel was a center of the northern kingdom's apostasy from true Israelite religion. 1 Kings 12:26-33 states:

²⁶ And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. ²⁷ If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." ²⁸ So the king took counsel and made *two calves of gold*. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." ²⁹ And he *set one in Bethel*, and the other he put in Dan. ³⁰ Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. ³¹ *He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites.* ³² And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he *offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made.* ³³ He went up to *the altar that he had made in Bethel* on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings.

God made his displeasure with the altar at Bethel unmistakably clear by sending a prophet from Judah to Bethel to denounce it. 1 Kings 13:1-3 states:

And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the LORD to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings. ² And the man cried against the altar by the word of the LORD and said, "O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.'" ³ And he gave a sign the same day, saying, "This is the sign that the LORD has spoken: 'Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.'"

This prophecy was fulfilled about three hundred years later by the Judean king Josiah (2 Ki. 23:15-20). In the interim, the mid-eighth-century prophet Amos confirmed God's anger regarding the altars of Bethel (Amos 3:13-14) and the sinfulness of the worship offered there (Amos 4:4-5). When Amaziah the priest of Bethel told Amos that he must never again prophesy at Bethel because it was the king's (Jeroboam II) sanctuary and a temple of the northern kingdom, Amos replied (Amos 7:14-17):

I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶ Now therefore hear the word of

⁴ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 387.

the LORD. "You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'¹⁷ Therefore thus says the LORD: "Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.

The fact Bethel was a center of apostasy may explain the topographically anomalous statement in 2 Ki. 2:2 that Elijah and Elisha *went down* to Bethel, when according to v. 1, they were coming from the area of Gilgal. If, as seems likely, the Gilgal referred to is the Gilgal near Jericho,⁵ the journey would have been one of ascent rather than descent. Burnett argues that the odd reference to "going down" to Bethel serves to avoid any worship implications (and thus prophetic validation) that might mistakenly be attached to the phrase "going up" to Bethel because "going up" was regularly used "to indicate travel or pilgrimage to a sanctuary site (e.g., Beersheba, Gen 26:23; Mizpah, Judg 21:5, 8; Shiloh, 1 Sam 1:3, 7, 21-22; 2:19; Carmel, 1 Kgs 18:42; Jerusalem, 1 Kgs 12:27-28; Ps 122:3-4; Jer 31:6; Zech 14:16-19)."⁶ No such danger was posed by mention of Elisha's "going up" to Bethel on his return trip (2 Ki. 2:23) because, in addition to other factors, the phrase in that case was "he went up *from there*" to Bethel. "Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is the phrase 'to go up from there' (עלה משם) used in a context of worship."⁷

2 Kings 2:23-24 states (ESV modified):²³ *He [Elisha] went up from there [Jericho] to Bethel, and while he was going up on the road, some youngsters came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!"*²⁴ *And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the youths.* As Walter Kaiser observed decades ago, certain assessments of this text "have brought more criticism of the Bible than almost any other narrative." He states, "Put in its sharpest form, the complaint goes: How can I believe in a God who would send bears to devour toddlers for innocently teasing an old man whose appearance probably was unusual even for that day."⁸ This is misguided on several levels.

The age of the perpetrators is notoriously difficult to pin down. The key phrase in v. 23, which I have rendered "youngsters," is *nē'ārîm qēṭannîm*. The noun *na'ar* generally refers to "a male who is available for marriage and is not yet betrothed," meaning an adolescent or young man,⁹ but as Victor Hamilton observes:

The word is used to cover a wide range of age-groups, from an unborn child (Judg 13:5, 7, 8, 12), to one just born (1 Sam 4:21), to a three-month-old child (Exod 2:6), to a child not yet weaned (1 Sam 1:22), to a child recently weaned (1 Sam 1:24), to a seventeen-year-old Gen 37:2 [NIV, "a young man"]), to a thirty-year-

⁵ There is no known city in ancient Israel called Gilgal that was at a higher elevation than Bethel. Joel S. Burnett, "Going Down' to Bethel: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 129 (2010), 284-285.

⁶ Burnett (2010), 286 (fn. 15); see also, 294-295.

⁷ Burnett (2010), 295.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 122.

⁹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson (Boston: Brill, 2001), 1:707.

old (Gen 41:12; cf. v. 46 [NIV "a young Hebrew"]). There seems to be no case where a *na'ar* was married. Thus, we may conclude that one meaning of *na'ar* is that it refers to any young person from infancy to just before marriage.¹⁰

When *na'ar* is combined with the adjective *qāṭān*, which means small or young,¹¹ the phrase can refer to a small child (e.g., 2 Ki. 5:14), but it can also refer to the relatively young who are not prepubescent, meaning teenagers and a bit older. This is evident from the fact the perpetrators, the *ne'ārîm* of v. 23, are referred to in v. 24 as *yēlādîm* (plural of *yeled*). That word has an age range equivalent to *na'ar*,¹² and yet, in Gen. 44:20, it is combined with *qāṭān* to refer to Benjamin when he is in his twenties.¹³ The terms simply are too amorphous to provide certainty about the age of the perpetrators, which is why I prefer the vagueness of "youngsters" and "youths."

A large group (scores) of youths emerged from the city of Bethel, and as Elisha passed by on the road, they began deriding and taunting him (*qālas*) from behind. They yelled, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" This was no childish teasing of a man about his appearance. Rather, it was an anti-Elisha demonstration, an open and hostile rejection of this newly appointed leader of God's prophets that reflected the spirit of Bethel, its hardness toward God and his prophets. They were telling Elisha that he needed to keep going up the road, to "go away" (NRSV, NAB) or "get out" (NIV), because he was not welcome in Bethel.¹⁴ The changing of the guard from Elijah to Elisha was the impetus for this action, letting the new man know how it was going to be. If most adults in Bethel had not shared the sentiments of these young people, they would not have been allowed to act as they did.

Elisha's head probably was bald because he had shaved it in mourning the loss of Elijah. Shaving the head was a common mourning rite (Isa. 15:2, 22:12; Job 1:20; Amos 8:10; Mic. 1:16),¹⁵ and Elisha had just lost the one whose side he would not leave and whom he called "Father" (2 Ki. 2:2, 4, 6, 12). The fact he engaged in the mourning act of tearing his clothes¹⁶ when Elijah departed (2 Ki. 2:12) makes it easy to believe that he also shaved his head. In that

¹⁰ Victor Hamilton, "נַעַר" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:125.

¹¹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson (Boston: Brill, 2001), 2:1093.

¹² Victor Hamilton states in "ילד" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:457: "The nuances of the word *yeled* range from (i) newborns (Exod 1:17, 18; 3:6, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2 Sam 12:15), (ii) to children who have been weaned (Gen 21:8), (iii) to teenagers (Gen 21:14, 15, 16; 37:50; 42:22), (iv) to youths (2 Kgs 2:24), (v) to young men (Dan 1:4, 10, 15, 17) old enough to serve in foreign courts, (vi) to descendants (Isa 29:23)." According to Stephen D. Renn, ed., *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 176, *yeled* is "largely synonymous with *na'ar*."

¹³ See, Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 74-78.

¹⁴ If they were telling him to "go up" to the sanctuary at Bethel in the sense of worship there, they were highlighting their resentment of the fact the Lord's prophets would not do so, would not validate Bethel's illegitimate cult.

¹⁵ The prohibition of shaving the head in mourning in Lev. 21:5 was directed to priests. The prohibition of Deut. 14:1 refers to a pagan mourning practice of shaving the head "between the eyes," presumably in a kind of reverse mohawk. Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 85.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31.

light, by ridiculing his bald head the mob was scorning him for mourning the passing of a prophet they rejected, one they, like King Ahab, saw as a "troubler of Israel" (1 Ki. 18:17).

When Elisha turned around and saw those deriding him, "he cursed them in the name of Yahweh" (2 Ki. 2:24). As explained in the note in the NET: "A curse was a formal appeal to a higher authority (here the Lord) to vindicate one's cause through judgment." Thus, it renders the phrase "he cursed them in the name of Yahweh" as "he called *God's judgment* down on them." What happened to the perpetrators was not a judgment inflicted by Elisha, but a judgment executed by the omniscient and perfectly holy and righteous creator of all things.

God brought forth two female bears from out of the woods who proceeded to maul forty-two of the perpetrators (2 Ki. 2:24). Youth is no excuse or defense for treating God with contempt by despising his prophet. By justly judging the perpetrators in such a dramatic and terrifying manner, God gave those of Bethel and all Israel a stark warning to turn from their stubbornness and accept the ministry of his prophets that they might be spared. If they had done so, they could have avoided the worse fate inflicted on them in the judgment brought through the Assyrians.¹⁷ But they refused. As was said of Judah in 2 Chron. 36:15-17:

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place.

¹⁶ But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. ¹⁷ Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand.

Kaiser states, "Instead of demonstrating unleashed cruelty, the bear attack shows God trying repeatedly to bring his people back to himself through smaller judgments until the people's sin is too great and judgment must come full force."¹⁸

¹⁷ This point is made in Kaiser (1988), 125.

¹⁸ Kaiser (1988), 125.