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Elisha and the She-Bears

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Today I discuss the troubling passage at the end of 2 Kings 2, where forty-two are killed after ridiculing the prophet Elisha. This discussion was prompted by Jonathan Pageau's discussion of this passage: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_djUCI10iU.

Within the video, I reference Peter Leithart's 1&2 Kings commentary in the Brazos series (<https://amzn.to/2S8NONN>) and Rachele Gilmour's monograph, 'Juxtaposition in the Elisha Cycle' (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/juxtaposition-and-the-elisha-cycle-9780567663726/>).

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today, I'm going to be commenting on the strange and troubling story of Elisha and the two bears that we find at the end of 2 Kings 2. Jonathan Paggio has just posted a video on this in which he takes a more allegorical reading of the text. I'll be looking at the context of the passage and see some of the details that can help us to understand what's taking place here.

There are a number of details that I think give us more of a sense of what's occurring within the literary context. And within my discussion, I'll be relying heavily upon this book, 1 and 2 Kings by Peter Leithart. An absolutely superb commentary on the book.

One of the best that I've come across in the way of commentary more generally on scripture. And I've already recommended that here. I want to recommend it again.

I'll leave the link for that in the notes below. So, to begin with, I think we should read the passage beginning at verse 19. So, the water remains healed to this day, according to the saying of Elisha, which he spoke.

And he went up from there to Bethel. And as he was going up the road, some youths came from the city and mocked him and said to him, go up, you bald head, go up, you bald head. So he turned around and looked at them and pronounced a curse on them in the name of the Lord.

And two female bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the youths. Then he went from there to Mount Carmel. And from there he returned to Samaria.

So this is the beginning of the ministry of Elisha. It's interesting, we see a number of parallels here with the beginnings of earlier ministries. It begins with a water miracle.

Moses' ministry began with the turning of the water of the Nile into blood. Jesus with turning the water into wine. And Elisha's begins with this miracle as well.

And there's a crossing of the water miracle. But this is the first sign, as it were, in a more public setting. And so there would be seemingly some parallels that are taking place here.

And I'll draw out a few more of those as we go along. The story of Elisha meeting these 42 little children, according to some translations, is troubling precisely because, well, primarily because of the identity of these figures, that they are little children. And that is the interpretation that many Bibles have.

That's the interpretation that many follow. There are reasons to doubt that this is the way that we should interpret it. It could be young men.

We see the same sort of terminology used of the young men that grew up with Rehoboam, that he turns to for advice instead of the elders at the beginning of his reign after Solomon. Now, these young men were in their 40s, late 30s and 40s. They had grown up with Rehoboam and they're described with the language of children or young men.

But they could be subordinates or young officials. These are not necessarily young children, little children. Now, if we had that expression just in isolation, it would seem to be little children.

In the context, there is a fair argument to be made that these are these are young officials or people who, young men who are serving at the shrine at Bethel or something

like that. So there's a bit more going on here than people would see in the reference to just young children. These may be young officials who are associated with a pagan shrine.

There are a large number of them. Only some of them are mauled by the bears, but even some of them makes up 42. That's a significant number.

And in scripture, it's not the meaning of life, the universe and everything. But 42 is a significant number, as we'll see as we go along. Forty two young men have their lives taken by these female bears who come forth from the woods.

Rochelle Gilmore points out the poetic parallel here that there is there are these young men that come forth from the city. They march forth out from the city. And then there are two female bears that march out from the woods.

And the language that's used coming out is one that has a certain military overtones to it. So marching out from the city, marching out from the woods. And those words are very similar.

Marching out from the city, out from the woods. They're very similar. And so there's some sort of poetic juxtaposition here.

Her book is Juxtaposition in the Elisha Cycle. I'll leave the link for that below. And I highly recommend her treatment of this.

She draws attention to an important number of the literary parallels and devices that are used. Another thing that she points out is that this is associated with the previous account. The previous account is one that mentions bereavement.

The water of Jericho is one that brings bereavement. It's sterile. The land is sterile and it's barren.

And the water also causes abortions and miscarriages and bereavements. And so the association with the bears being bereaved of their cubs, female bears in scripture are repeatedly associated with being bereaved of cubs. We see this, for instance, in 2 Samuel 17.

Elsewhere, we see it in the book of Hosea, chapter 13, verse 7. Now those two creatures that I mentioned, the lion and the she-bear, they're significant. We see within the story of first kings that there is the judgment upon the prophet from Judah. And that prophet from Judah is judged and he's killed by a lion on the way.

Here we have two she-bears and these are both agents of divine judgment. These are agents of divine judgment associated with bereavement. The she-bear deprived of her cubs and then the people who are deprived of their children, bereaved of their children

by the polluted water of the city of Jericho.

And so there's cleansing of the water in both cases. There's cleansing of the water and leading to removal of the problem of bereavement. But now there is a judgment upon children or young men or these young officials.

And the language of children might be significant here because it's juxtaposed with the previous account where there is a deliverance from bereavement of children. And now there is a judgment of bereavement of children that's placed upon the people by the she-bear that has she-bears that have presumably been deprived of their cubs. There's more going on here.

When we look in the broader passage, we see that there is a broader chiasm stretching the whole thing. And it helps to interpret what's taking place. Peter Lighthouse draws attention to this in his commentary.

And he observes that there is a parallel between at the centre of this chiasm is Elijah being taken up by the whirlwind into heaven. On either side of that, there's a chariot separating them. And then Elijah seeing and calling to the chariot and tearing his clothes.

And then on the other side of that, there's Elijah requesting the spirit and then paralleled with that receiving the mantle of Elijah as it descends. Then on either side, there's Elijah dividing the waters of the Jordan and then Elisha dividing the waters of the Jordan. And on the side of that, there are 50 men that meet them at Jericho.

50 men of the sons of the prophets went and stood facing them at a distance while the two of them stood by the Jordan. And then there are 50 men at the end of that narrative where it says, look, now there are 50 strong men with your servants. Please let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the spirit of the Lord has taken him up and cast him upon some valley, mountain or into some valley.

And then there's the bald head. At the beginning of this passage, Elijah, Elisha is told that his master will be taken from him. His master will be taken from his head, literally.

And Elijah has just been described as the bald of hair, a master of or lord of hair, this hairy man within the previous chapter in 2nd Kings, chapter 1, verse 8. He was a hairy man and wore a leather belt around his waist. And so this hairy man has been removed and Elisha is left alone without his master. And now as he meets these young men, we don't know where he meets them.

They may be just outside of Jericho. They may be near Bethel. They may be associated with the shrine.

They may be associated with the city that has just been healed from its polluted water

that bereaved its mothers. And so the she bears of Jericho, there may be a judgment that occurs as the she bears of the forest judge them, the she bears of the land, take the lives of their children because their children are wicked. But we don't know exactly where these figures are.

One way or another, I think there is a significance to be found in the ridicule of Elisha as bald head. Go up, you bald head. Go up, you bald head.

Go up being associated with the ascension that has occurred. The ascension of Elijah. Elijah has ascended.

He's gone up. His master has gone up and now he's left alone without his master on his head. And he's bald, as it were.

He's left without this hairy man as his head. And now he seems weak. He seems to be an object of ridicule.

And so this large gang of young men or this of youths or young officials come out to ridicule him, that he's powerless. And he calls this judgment of God upon them. And or actually he calls a curse from the Lord upon them.

And then God judges them in this way. And this judgment of the Lord is a serious judgment. And I think we need to be aware of wanting to get away from the scandal of this text.

These could be children. And if they were children, it would still be appropriate for what happens. This is a passage that scandalizes us in many respects because we don't like the idea of God taking life.

We like the idea of God being safe and nice. And if we're if unless we do something really, really bad, nothing will happen to us. But we depend upon God for our survival.

And when we rebel against God, a rebellious people will lose their children. The judgment, for instance, when we think about the issues like abortion within our country and within our nations, abortion is a judgment upon a people. It's not just something that taking the lives of innocent individuals.

We're not just individuals. We're a body of people. And the wickedness of a body of people can lead to the deaths of its children.

And there are severe consequences. And there are also consequences for messing with God, for not honoring him. And this is something that we struggle with.

We do not take seriously the holiness of God, that God is not mocked. God is a consuming fire that we will reap what we sow. And if we mock God, then we will face the consequences.

And we see this within the books of Leviticus and Numbers on a number of occasions, that God's holiness is often something that breaks out against the people. It's very dangerous to be near God's presence. If we look at cases like Ananias and Sapphira, there is severe judgment that falls upon people who reject the word of the Lord, who oppose God's presence when God's presence has come in the form of the prophet or the apostle, or in terms of someone like Moses and Moses coming to the land of Egypt.

The judgment is severe. You do not stand in the way of this God. God is a consuming fire and he will take the lives of your children.

He will kill your children if you do not let these people go. And this, we balk at this, but we need to take this seriously. God is not mocked.

And God is a God who is a holy God. And we live every day suspended by his power. He's the creator who gives us life, breath and all things.

And if we mock him, if we treat him with ridicule, there is a sort of the wrath of God is like leaving this force, elemental force that has consequences. And we can't mock God without facing this. And the land is often seen as a means of enacting these consequences.

In Leviticus 22 or Leviticus 26, verse 21 to 22, then if you walk contrary to me and are not willing to obey me, I will bring on you seven times more plagues according to your sins. I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock and make you few in number and your highways shall be desolate. This is a very serious thing that as they break the covenant, the land starts to become dangerous to them.

It starts to become a mean, a cause of barrenness and the death of their offspring. As we see in the case of Jericho, in this story. And it also becomes and the wild beasts start to come out from the forest and start to make the highways desolate.

It's not safe to walk around. These bears will take your young men. And so I think there is a very significant covenantal background to this as they rebel against the word of the Lord.

The lives of their children are taken, whether these children are young men of in their 20s to 40s or something like that, or whether they are just little children. These are the consequences of mocking God. And if your children are mocking this prophet along the way, that is not something that just happens that children naturally do.

Nor is it naturally something that the children would mock the prophet for in such a pointed way that points at the loss of power when his master has gone. And so I think there is something significant taking place there. Other literary parallels that need to be taken into account.

Within the preceding chapter, we see three sets of 50 men sent that try and take Elijah down from the mountain. They are sent by Ahaziah and Ahaziah has an illness and he wants to inquire Beelzebub. These men are confronted by Elijah who says, is there not a prophet in Israel that you would inquire Beelzebub? And when they meet Elijah, Elijah calls down fire from heaven upon the first sets, two sets of 50 men.

And then the leader of the third set beseeches him to come with him and not to cause fire to come down upon him. Now, earlier within the story of first kings, we see two sets of 50s. We see Obadiah in charge of the house of Ahab.

So in this situation, as the men of the Umayyad dynasty are sent, these soldiers are sent to find Beelzebub in quiet. And as they seek the life of the prophet, two sets of 50 of them are killed. And this I think is juxtaposed with the two sets of 50 prophets that proceed in the story of first kings.

In the chapter that immediately follows, there is again two sets of 50 men. There's two sets of 50. There's a set of 50 at the very beginning.

There are 50 men who stand at a distance, the sons of the prophet, who stand facing and look at the miracle taking place. And then there's the 50 strong men who are offered to seek after Elijah's whereabouts at the end of that particular section. So again, we see two sets of 50.

42, do we find that anywhere else in the story of second kings? We do. And we find it within the story of second kings, chapter 10, verse 14. I'll read from verse 12.

And he arose, Jehu, and departed and went to Samaria. On the way, Beth Eched of the shepherds, Jehu met with the brothers of Ahaziah, king of Judah, and said, who are you? And they answered, we are the brothers of Ahaziah. We have come down to greet the sons of the king and the sons of the queen mother.

And he said, take them alive. So they took them alive and killed them at the well of Beth Eched. 42 men, and he left none of them.

So there's a judgment upon those who have allied themselves with the wicked Amre'ah dynasty of Ahab. And this judgment is associated with the killing of 42 men, brothers of Ahaziah. And here we have the young men that come out from Bethel or meet him on the way from Jericho.

This is a significant parallel, I think. And these are the sorts of parallels that the book of Kings has at a number of different points. It helps us to understand that what's taking place here is part of a broader conquest of the land.

Elijah was the prophet of the desert, and he succeeded by the prophet of the land. Moses, followed by Joshua, who leads the conquest of the land. John the Baptist, this

man of the desert who's associated with Elijah, that is succeeded by Jesus, this prophet that goes into the land.

And the crossing of the Jordan is significant here as well. It begins the conquest. There's a crossing of the Jordan, and then there are events at Jericho.

There's a healing event at Jericho. And after that, there is a conflict that takes place. Now, that particular account, I think, helps us to see that what we're seeing here is in some respects a repetition of the Harem warfare that we have in the story of Joshua.

That there is a judgment falling upon the land. God's presence is coming into the land, and there will be no quarter given. Those who stand against it will face the severest of consequences.

We see this also within the larger mission as Elijah is given three anointings that he has to perform. There has to be the anointing of Elisha as his successor, Jehu, and Hazael, king of Syria. And each one of these figures will be means by which God's judgment will be brought upon the rebellious people of Israel.

And that's what we see here, this continuation of this ministry, this ministry of judgment, of scouring the land of its wickedness. And the judgment upon 42 young men here, or 42 even little children, is supposed to shock us. And it would shock the original readers as well.

You do not mess with God. Our God has consumed fire. God may be good, but he's not safe.

And when God comes on the scene, people need to be prepared. And there is no... Those who are not prepared, those who put themselves in God's way, are putting themselves in severe peril. Whether they be little children or not.

And this, I think, the scandal of this, is something that we need to deal with. Whether these are little children or not, God's judgment is one that is not of the type that we would like to see within a culture of dignity, a culture of the law court, and things like that. This is the judgment of creation.

A judgment mediated by creation, where God removes the boundaries that protects us, where the waters flood in and destroy, where the beasts arise from the mountains and the woods and devour us. Where we start to eat our children because of famine. Where the land no longer supports us, but brings barrenness and death.

God supports us at each stage. We are ridiculing, we are dishonoring the one who's holding us in our very life and our being. And that does not lead to just regular sorts of judgment.

There is something that is more serious about this sort of thing. It's not just a regular judgment between two agents and how one has wronged the other. No, we are dependent upon God for our very being.

We're dependent upon God for our safety. God holds these animals at bay. But as people ridicule him, these things are removed.

God is the one that gives fertility and life to the land. But as people disobey him and rebel against him, the rain will no longer be given to the land. The ground will become barren.

The water will become a source of death rather than a source of life. And the fruitfulness and this land flowing with milk and honey will be withered and dried up. It will become a means of death and judgment.

And this is the vision that we see within the book of Deuteronomy in particular. And at the end of Leviticus, these curses of the covenant that fall upon the people. And this is what's falling upon the people at this point.

And God compares himself in Hosea, as I've mentioned, to this wild beast that comes forth to devour them. To this lion. To this she-bear deprived of its cubs.

And these are the covenant judgments that we see within the book of 1st and 2nd Kings. As God comes out and judges the prophet from Judah. As he judges these men, young men from Bethel or from somewhere along the way between Jericho and Bethel.

This should scandalize us. This is something that goes against so many of our instincts as modern day people. Who believe that we are just detached individuals and that God owes us something.

Who do not recognize ourselves as held in being. Held in life by God. And who believe that we can mess with this consuming fire.

That we can ridicule God. That we can despise God without consequence. Yes, this is scandalous.

And it is something that we need to become aware of. It's something that we see, again, at these points where God comes on the scene. At the point of the exodus.

At the point of heron warfare as God enters into the land of Canaan leading his people. And this is another repeat of that pattern. We see it at the start of the book of Acts.

As people resist the spread of the kingdom of God and his presence in the church. There is a punishment that seems vastly disproportionate to the crime. And that is because God's presence is not just a lex talionis.

Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth type of thing. There is a poetic justice that takes place here. But there is the severity of judgment.

Just reveals the severity of taking God as a light thing. Of treating his holiness as something to be despised. And ridiculed.

Of marking his prophets. And of opposing his mission. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account. The links for both of those are below. Along with links to the books that I've referenced.

Peter Lighthouse's First and Second Kings commentary in the Brazos theological commentary series. And Rochelle Gilmore's book on juxtaposition in the Elisha cycle. Thank you very much for listening.

And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.