

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE BOYS AND THE BEARS

2 KINGS 2 AND THE PROPHETIC AUTHORITY OF ELISHA¹

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Summary

A view of 2 Kings 2 that is commonly encountered regards the cursing of the children of Bethel as a meaningless act that is beneath the dignity of the prophet. This paper argues that the curse uttered by Elisha in 2 Kings 2:24 is a covenant curse based on Leviticus 26:22 and is intended to warn Israel of what lies in store if it disregards the prophetic word. In this it complements the story of the healing of the waters of Jericho (2 Kings 2:19-22) which establishes the corollary principle. The events of 2 Kings 3–8 then illustrate this principle in a variety of contexts both nationally and internationally.

1. Introduction: The Problem of 2 Kings 2:19-25

The story of Elisha and the bears he unleashes on the mocking children from Bethel is one that has long unsettled interpreters. This story is recounted only here in the Old Testament and unfolds as follows. Earlier in the chapter, Elijah has been taken up to heaven in spectacular fashion. Before leaving, however, he passes his prophetic mantle onto his protégé, Elisha. This seems little consolation, however, and dejected and alone, Elisha makes his way back toward Bethel and the

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hill country. Near Bethel, the prophet meets a group of boys² from the city who ridicule him with the repeated taunt, ‘Go on up, you bald-head!’ The point of the taunt is not entirely clear. It may be a way of saying, ‘Keep moving, we don’t want you around here!’³ or a reference to the activity and ascension of Elijah and a mocking suggestion that if Elisha is indeed his heir, he should act likewise. Given the use of references to ‘going up’ (עלה) and ‘coming down’ in 2 Kings 1–2 it would seem that the latter is most likely. In the previous chapter, Elijah is commanded to ‘go up’ to confront the messengers of the king (2 Kgs 1:3). Later, the prophet ascends a hill and is commanded by the officer to ‘come down’ (2 Kgs 1:9). In 2 Kings 2:1 and 11, עלה is the term used to describe Elijah’s departure and is the very one used by the taunting children of Bethel (2 Kgs 2:23). Whatever the precise reference, the action of the boys shows considerable disrespect for the prophet, whose baldness may show that he is in mourning over the loss of his mentor.⁴ Faced with this verbal harangue, Elisha suddenly and unexpectedly calls down a curse on the children whereupon two bears emerge from the woods and maul forty-two of them before retreating (v. 24). The Hebrew verb בקע has the sense of ‘split open’ and appearing here in the *Piel* likely indicates that the boys were severely injured if not killed. The text offers no formal postmortem on the children, choosing instead to focus solely on the progress of Elisha, stating that, ‘From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria’ (verse 25).⁵

Not surprisingly, this episode has long troubled commentators. In the sixth century, Caesarius of Arles (ca. 468–542) dealt with the story by interpreting it as prophetic of Christ’s passion, equating the double taunt of the children with the two-fold cry of the Jews, ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ and understanding the two bears to represent Vespasian and Titus who by his reckoning attacked Jerusalem forty-two years

² Heb. וְנַעֲרִים קְטָנִים. The use of the modifier קְטָנִים can refer to size/age (Song 2:15) or status/importance (2 Kgs 2:23; 18:24; Isa. 36:9; Jer. 16:6; Ps. 115:13). Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the more common term for ‘child’ is טֵף. It may be that the depiction here of the mocking וְנַעֲרִים קְטָנִים from Bethel is intended to contrast with the אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר of Jericho who seek out the advice of the prophet (2:19).

³ Gwilym. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, Vol. II (1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 25:30), NCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 389.

⁴ While shaving the head in mourning is prohibited in a few Old Testament texts (Lev. 21:5; Deut. 14:1), in others it is assumed to be a common practice for Israelites (Jer. 16:6; Ezek. 7:18; Amos 8:10; Mic. 1:16) and foreigners (Isa. 15:2; Ezek. 27:31).

⁵ All translations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

after Christ's death.⁶ Gwilym Jones speaks for the majority of late-twentieth century commentators in stating that, 'the point of narrating this anecdote is not clear'.⁷ In his ICC volume, Montgomery suggests that the story was originally intended to frighten youngsters into obeying their elders.⁸ Snaith condemns the account as an example of 'pre-moral exhortation to respect the prophets' that does 'not stand examination from any moral point of view'.⁹ Gray is most condescending, opining that,

This is in every respect a puerile tale, and serves as a gauge of the moral level of the dervish communities from which the strictly hagiographical material in the Elisha cycle emanated. ... There is no serious point in this incident, and it does not reflect much to the credit of the prophet. ... The supposition that Elisha invoked the name of Yahweh to curse the boys, with such terrible consequences, is derogatory to the great public figure, and borders on blasphemy.¹⁰

Hobbs remarks that the incident is 'characterized by excess'.¹¹

For his part, Robert Cohn is conflicted, seeing the jeering of the children as undeserving of the response Elisha calls down, but regarding the episode over all as an example of the prophet's power and the respect owed him, a view shared by Volkmar Fritz.¹² Provan's view is similar, understanding the event to reflect a disrespect for *Yahweh* whom the prophet represents and thus demanding an immediate response.¹³

It will be my suggestion that the narrative of 2 Kings 2:23-25 is not a haphazard or meaningless literary artefact, but is a textual element integral to the final form of the narrative and one that contributes to the overall message of 2 Kings 2 and the broader interests of the book.

⁶ Caesarius of Arles, *A Figure of the Amendment of the Jews After Christ's Passion*, quoted in *1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, ed. Marco Conti and Gianluca Pilari, ACCS-OT 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 149-50.

⁷ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, Vol. II, 389. So also John Gray, *1 and 2 Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 479.

⁸ James A. Montgomery and Henry S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1951), 355.

⁹ Norman H. Snaith, 'II Kings (Exegesis)', in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, 3:187-338. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1954), 196.

¹⁰ Gray, *1 and 2 Kings*, 428-29.

¹¹ T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, WBC 13 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 24.

¹² Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 17; Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 239-40.

¹³ Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 175.

2. Attacks by Animals in Canonical Context

A widely overlooked feature of this short narrative is the fact that the prophet's first response to the taunt of the children is to call out a *curse* (קלל) upon them in the name of Yahweh (יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה) (v. 24), this despite the fact that the practice of prophets pronouncing curses in the name of Yahweh is a common feature of Old Testament prophetic literature. In pronouncing curses the prophets were ones who issued divine warnings intended to alert the people to their waywardness in the hope that they would return to following Yahweh. These curses are formally catalogued in two places in the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In each context, the most severe covenant curse is invasion by a foreign enemy and exile from the land (Lev. 26:30-33; Deut. 28:36, 49-68). To note just one example, Amos unleashes just such a curse in the name of Yahweh when he addresses the women of Samaria,

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness:
The time is surely coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.
Through breaches in the wall you shall leave,
each one straight ahead;
and you shall be flung out into Harmon,
says the LORD. (Amos 4:2-3)

Between Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, one covenant curse in particular stands out in relation to 2 Kings 2. Leviticus 26:22 warns that if Israel does not follow God's teaching, then,

וְהִשְׁלַחְתִּי בָכֶם אֶת־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה וְשִׁבְלָה אֶתְכֶם וְהִכְרִיתָה אֶת־בְּהֵמַתְכֶם
וְהִמְעִיטָה אֶתְכֶם וְנָשְׂמוּ דֶרֶכֶיכֶם

'I will send wild animals (אֶת־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה) against you, and they shall bereave (וְשִׁבְלָה) you and destroy your livestock; they shall make you few in number (וְהִמְעִיטָה אֶתְכֶם), and your roads shall be desolate.' (My translation)¹⁴

¹⁴ The connection between the attack of the bears in 2 Kgs 2:24 and Lev. 26:22 seems first to have been noted by W. Brian Aucker ('Putting Elisha in His Place: Genre, Coherence, and Narrative Function in 2 Kings 2–8' [Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2000], 91-92) and Mark K. Mercer ('Elisha's Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25', *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21.2 [2002], 190-91) and later developed independently by the author in the presentation on which this paper is

This same curse of being bereaved by wild animals occurs in prophetic literature in Ezekiel 5:17¹⁵ where it appears as part of a sequence of other covenant curses from Leviticus 26:14-26. In Amos 5:18-19, an attack by wild animals reflects a form of the covenant curse found in Deuteronomy 32:24b ('The teeth of beasts I will send against them, with venom of things crawling in the dust'). Speaking of Israel's misconceptions about the Day of Yahweh, the prophet says,

[18] Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!
 Why do you want the day of the LORD?
 It is darkness, not light;
 [19] *as if someone fled from a lion,
 and was met by a bear;
 or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
 and was bitten by a snake.* (Amos 5:18-19)

When compared to the other covenant curses, the curse of being attacked by wild animals is extremely odd. One way to understand the logic of this curse is to see it as an undoing of the blessing given to humans by God at creation and repeated in various forms to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 17:2, 5-6). In Genesis 1:28, God blesses the first human couple with the words: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' The creation account in Genesis 1 is intended to take a world that is 'formless and empty' (תֶּהוֹ וְבֵהוּ) and give it structure and substance such that it becomes a place where humans can flourish. The command to rule over animal life is in keeping with this purpose by allowing humans to keep the animal world in check. In contrast to this, the presence of roaming wild animals is an impediment to normal human life and represents an inability of humans to exercise authority over the animal realm that was granted them at creation. Moreover, while Genesis 1:28 situates the command to rule over the animal realm in close connection to human population *growth* ('be fruitful and

based ('When Animals Attack [and Other Unfortunate Events]: Examining Covenant Curses in Biblical Narrative', delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies held in Victoria, British Columbia, 2-4 June, 2013) and by Keith Bodner (*Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 4). I would like to thank Keith Bodner for the pre-publication proof of his book provided following the delivery of my 2013 paper and W. Brian Aucker for providing me with a copy of his dissertation.

¹⁵ Other curses in this verse that are present also in Lev. 26 include, 'famine' (רָעָב), 'plague' (דִּבְרָה), and 'sword' (חֶרֶב). See also Ezek. 14:15.

multiply'), in Leviticus 26:22 the *loosing* of wild animals among humans leads to a *decrease* in population ('you will be *bereaved* and made *few*') and moves Israel's world from the ordered and productive to the chaotic and deteriorating.¹⁷ In general then, the curse of bereavement at the hands of wild animals would seem to represent a reversal of the blessing given to humans at creation. In the case of Israel in particular, the curse of Leviticus 26:22 may be regarded as the suspension of the covenant promise given to Abraham that Israel would become a great nation, as numerous as the stars of the heavens.

3. The Attack of the Bears and the Message of 2 Kings 2:1-25

Returning to our passage, the recognition that Elisha is pronouncing a covenant curse helps us understand that this incident is not just random violence or solely a statement that one must show respect for the prophet. The episode goes beyond the latter to say that if you disregard or are dismissive of the prophet of Yahweh, then you will eventually begin to experience the curses of the covenant. The covenant curse of wild animals that Elisha pronounces, therefore, is in itself a prophetic warning – a single, localised event that warns the people of Bethel of worse to come if it persists in its disobedience. With regard to Bethel, the reality of this sober equation is clearly established by the linkage of Bethel, prophet, and covenant curse found elsewhere in 1–2 Kings. In 1 Kings 13:1-2, a man of God travels to Bethel and proclaims that in the future, human bones would be burned on the altar there. This pronouncement and its later fulfilment in 2 Kings 23:15-16, stand as the prediction and application of the covenant curse of Leviticus 26:30 and demonstrate that if the prophetic word is ignored, then covenant curse will eventually ensue.¹⁸

Despite the disapproval of Gray¹⁹ and others, what we witness Elisha undertaking in 2 Kings 2 is what we see the prophets doing in their oracles throughout prophetic literature – pronouncing covenant

¹⁷ In the following verse, God gives humans the plants for food, something that is undone in the covenant curses of crop failure and famine (Gen. 1:29; see also Lev. 26:4-5, 19-20).

¹⁸ I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for drawing this latter connection to my attention.

¹⁹ Gray, *I and II Kings*, 428-29.

curses.²⁰ What makes the action of Elisha stand out so dramatically is the fact that his proclamation is recorded in narrative and is immediately realised whereas the curses of prophetic literature are embedded in literary oracles with fulfilment typically only a future possibility. In both cases, however, it should be observed that it is Yahweh who brings the curse to pass.

As others have noted,²¹ the episode of the boys and the bears is part of a larger narrative comprising 2 Kings 2:1–25. 2 Kings 1:18 is a source citation which draws to a close the story of Ahaziah. This and the change of subject in the next verse identifies 2:1 as the beginning of a new section. Similarly, 2 Kings 3:1 contains an accession formula for the new king, Joram, a feature that changes the subject and thus initiates a new section. This leaves 2 Kings 2 as a distinct unit dealing with the departure of the prophet Elijah and its immediate aftermath. Within this block of material three sections are discernible: (1) the ascension of Elijah and the transfer of authority to Elisha (vv. 1-18); (2) the problem of the tainted water at Jericho (vv. 19-22); and (3) the incident at Bethel of the boys and the bears (vv. 23-25).

While some have regarded the various sections as originating in distinct traditions, the final form of the chapter shows clear signs of literary unity.²² Overall, geographical movement proceeds from the Central Hill Country²³ through Bethel, Jericho and ultimately to

²⁰ E.g. Ezek. 5:7-17, a prophetic oracle which is built around multiple covenant curses.

²¹ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, Vol. II, 381-82.

²² See most recently, Lissa M. Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, AOTC 9 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 301-302.

²³ Given the geographical mirroring in the passage, the Gilgal mentioned is most likely to be associated with a site in the hill country (perhaps Jiljulieh, northwest of Bethel, M.R. 171-160 or any one of a number of hill country sites of the same name) rather than the more famous site near Jericho that was associated with the circumcision of the Israelites at the time of the conquest (possibly Khirbet el-Mafjar, M.R. 193-143). If the Gilgal mentioned is the latter, then the travels of the two prophets make no geographical sense, resulting in a westward journey of 22km and a climb of over 600 metres only to immediately return via the same route and proceed to the final destination in Transjordan. Given the status of Bethel as one of the highest elevations in the Central Hill Country, there are very few places from which to 'go down' to the city (2 Kgs 2:2). This is especially a problem if one posits that the Gilgal in question is the site in the Jordan Valley near Jericho. It may be the case, as Burnett intriguingly suggests (Joel S. Burnett, "Going Down" to Bethel: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History', *JBL* 129 [2010], 293-97), that the term 'go down' is used to avoid the sacrilegious statement that two prophets of Yahweh 'went up' to a city famous as an idolatrous high place, a solution that would

Transjordan and follows the same pathway back into the hill country. After the ascension of Elijah, the movement reverses, with episodes in Jericho and Bethel, before the final destination of Samaria. Apart from providing geographical balance, the references to Bethel and Jericho in 2 Kings 2:3 and 5 at first glance stand out as abrupt, formulaic, and unnecessary to the narrative of Elijah's ascension. Mention of these cities at this point in the text, however, serves an important theological function within the chapter. If the narrative as a whole is about the transition from Elijah to Elisha as bearer of the prophetic word and the recognition of this within Israel, then verses 3 and 5 are important in that they establish that each community named had the benefit of an authentic prophetic witness. Indeed, a company of prophets is present in both Bethel and Jericho and each relates specific information to Elisha that demonstrates that they are legitimate recipients of the divine word. This is especially important since neither location was renowned for Yahwistic piety. Indeed, both cities were ones with tainted reputations in ancient Israel. Jericho held the dubious honour of being the first city in the Promised Land to be attacked by the invading Israelites (Josh. 6) and one considered worthy of nothing less than total destruction.²⁴ The city also suffered under the stigma of having been cursed by none other than Joshua himself (Josh. 6:26).²⁵ Bethel was similarly tainted. Although it first appears in the Hebrew Bible as the place where God appeared to the fleeing Jacob (Gen. 28:11-19), its fame as the location of one of the calf shrines of Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:28-33) earned it the disparaging nickname, Beth Aven ('House of Sin/Disaster') (Hos. 4:15; 5:8; 10:5). Earlier in 1 Kings, the royal shrine of Bethel had come under prophetic censure with disastrous consequences for the one bringing the condemnation (13:1-32). As cities that brought to mind the idea of rebellion to Yahweh, therefore, Jericho and Bethel were well and truly matched. Neither city would be expected to be particularly responsive to the word of the prophet of Yahweh. The two brief scenes of 2 Kings 2:3, 5 then, place Bethel and

apply to departure from any site by the name of Gilgal regardless of its location or elevation.

²⁴ Josh. 6:17-18, 21. See also 8:26-27; 11:11-15 where the conquered cities were either not burned or where plunder could be retained.

²⁵ See also 1 Kgs 16:34 which notes that it was a man of Bethel who dared to test Joshua's curse.

Jericho on the same revelatory footing and provide a basis for judging their actions with regard to the prophet Elisha later in the chapter.

In the case of Jericho, the people of the town stop the passing Elisha to complain that, despite the advantageous location of the city,²⁶ its water is bad (וְהַמַּיִם רָעִים) with the result that, ‘the land is bereaved’ (וְהָאָרֶץ מְשַׁכֶּלֶת). Some discussion has occurred over how to understand the latter phrase. The AV, RSV, and NIV relate the verb מְשַׁכֶּלֶת (‘bereaved’) to the land itself and understand it to mean that the land was agriculturally unproductive, a view shared by a number of commentators.²⁷ Focusing on the predominant connection between the verb שָׁכַל and human reproduction, Provan and others interpret the phrase to mean that the tainted water was the cause of *miscarriages* in the women of Jericho.²⁸ This latter view is the one that fits best with the meaning of the term שָׁכַל as well as the overall shape of the narrative. Given that the term הָאָרֶץ (‘the land’) can sometimes indicate ‘nation’ or ‘people’,²⁹ the view that sees this verse as referring to problems with childbirth is to be preferred.³⁰

In response to the plea, Elisha asks that the people of Jericho bring a new bowl and fill it with salt. Many commentators note here that the use of a new bowl implies some sacral function and that salt is sometimes associated with purification.³¹ While this may be the case, the more immediate point to be appreciated is that adding salt to already tainted water will not render it pure. For the people of Jericho, this would have been even more obvious given their proximity to the יַם הַמֶּלַח (‘Salt Sea’; i.e., ‘Dead Sea’), the waters of which were

²⁶ Jericho (Tell el-Sultan, M.R. 192-142) is situated near the Jordan River a short distance from the fords at the mouths of Wadis Nuei'meh and Qilt. A route via the ridge north of Wadi Qilt meant that Jericho was well connected via Bethel to the Central Benjamin Plateau, the major crossroads of the hill country.

²⁷ Snaith, ‘II Kings (Exegesis)’, 196; Gray, *I and II Kings*, 427; Fritz, *I & 2 Kings*, 237; Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 14, 23.

²⁸ Montgomery and Gehman, *Books of Kings*, 355; Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 11 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 36; Cohn, *2 Kings*, 16. Josephus seems to have believed that the waters of Jericho caused both famine and miscarriage (*Jewish War* 4.460-65).

²⁹ Amos 7:10, לֹא-תוּכַל הָאָרֶץ לְהִכִּיל אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרַי (‘the land is not able to bear all of his words’).

³⁰ Here it is also tempting to wonder if the idea of miscarriages relates to the curse placed on Jericho that said that the one who rebuilt it would do so at the cost of his firstborn (Josh. 6:26; 1 Kgs 16:34).

³¹ E.g., Gray, *I and II Kings*, 427; Fritz, *I & 2 Kings*, 237-38.

devoid of life and undrinkable. Despite the counterintuitive nature of Elisha's instructions, the people of Jericho obey the word of the prophet without comment or complaint.³² Elisha throws the salt into the water, it becomes pure, and human fertility and life returns to Jericho. In the context of the chapter as a whole, the episode of the tainted waters of Jericho and their healing by Elisha stands as a confirmation of the fact that Elisha has indeed inherited the prophetic mantle of Elijah. In addition, the manner in which the people of Jericho, (1) seek out the aid of the prophet; and (2) follow through in obedience despite the unlikely solution he proposes, demonstrates that *blessings* accrue when Israel is obedient to the words of Yahweh's prophet. The episode of the tainted water thus provides a *positive* testimony over against the *negative* one conveyed by the episode of the boys and the bears.³³ The connection between these two brief vignettes is further confirmed by the fact that each shares an element of the covenant curse from Leviticus 26:22. In Leviticus, the curse of *wild animals* (חַיֵּית הַשָּׂדֶה) taking over leaves Israel *bereaved* (וְשָׁבְלָהּ). In the episode of the tainted water, the obedience of the people of Jericho to the word of the prophet brings an *end to their bereavement* (לְאַיִתָּהּ מָשָׁם עוֹד מָוֶת) (2 Kgs 2:21). In the case of the attack on the children of Bethel, animals that fall within the category of חַיֵּית הַשָּׂדֶה emerge to fulfil the curse spoken by the prophet and bereave the parents of Bethel of their children. In short, the two episodes are connected in that each includes a *portion* of the curse from Leviticus 26:22. In the first episode, obedience to prophetic authority *ends* bereavement; in the second episode disrespect for the same authority *causes* bereavement. The juxtaposition of Jericho and Bethel shows that the state of curse need not be permanent. By their positive response to the prophetic word, the people of Jericho are able to shed the mantle of divine curse. By contrast, the way in which the people of Bethel continue to reject and ridicule the prophet means that the curse remains with them and becomes even more severe.

³² Cf. the later reluctance of the Syrian general Naaman to bathe in the waters of the Jordan River in obedience to the prophetic command.

³³ See Aucker, 'Putting Elisha in His Place', 92 and Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings*, 4 who also see contrast as the intent behind the juxtaposition of these two short narratives.

4. Obedience to Prophetic Authority and Covenant Blessing Illustrated (2 Kings 2-8)

Continuing to work backwards through 2 Kings 2, we come to the first section (vv. 1-18) in which Elijah is taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Up to this point, Elisha has been Elijah's assistant and protégé.³⁴ Now, as Elijah is about to depart, his assistant asks that he be given a double portion of his master's spirit, in other words that he be made the prophet's primary heir.³⁵ Confirmation that this has happened is found not only in Elisha's ability to replicate Elijah's miracle of parting the Jordan (v. 14), but also in the words of the company of the prophets at Jericho: 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha' (v. 15). Given the above, 2 Kings 2 may be understood to accomplish three things: (1) it establishes Elisha as Elijah's true heir; (2) it demonstrates that obedience to the prophetic word will bring covenant blessing; and (3) it shows that disregarding the prophet will lead to covenant curse.³⁶ These principles are then further illustrated in the Elisha stories that make up chapters 3 to 8.

The principles established by the episodes of 2 Kings 2 are applied on a far grander scale and to much greater effect in the following chapter in which the prophet Elisha appears travelling with the armies of Joram of Israel, Jehoshaphat of Judah, and the king of Edom in a campaign against Mesha of Moab. As in the previous chapter, water features prominently. When the army runs out of water, Jehoshaphat requests a prophet of Yahweh be brought so that the kings can inquire of God, an action that parallels the manner in which the people of Jericho seek out Elisha's assistance when *they* lack water. When Elisha is presented, Jehoshaphat's response is enthusiastic – 'The word of the LORD is with him' (3:1) – royal confirmation of Elisha's prophetic legitimacy established before a more modest audience in the previous chapter (2:15). As with the earlier episode with the people of Jericho, the directions given by the prophet are counterintuitive. In the dry and barren Arabah south of the Dead Sea, Elisha tells the kings to dig pits – this even though he promises that the kings will 'see neither wind nor rain' (3:16-17). Despite the unlikely advice, the kings obey and the

³⁴ In 2 Kgs 3:11, for example, Elisha is described retrospectively as the one 'who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah'.

³⁵ See also Deut. 21:17.

³⁶ See also Amos 2:11-16; 7:16-17.

following morning water inexplicably appears from the direction of Edom, flooding the Arabah and filling the newly-dug reservoirs. In an unexpected twist, the sun shining on the water takes on the appearance of blood and tricks the enemy into believing that the three kings had turned on each other. The Moabites foolishly advance and in the ensuing battle are routed by the armies of Israel and Judah, an outcome that corresponds to the covenant blessing of victory over and pursuit of ones enemies – ‘You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword’ (Lev. 26:7; see also Deut. 28:7). The episode of the Moabite campaign, therefore, demonstrates on a national scale and before a royal audience what the previous chapter does in a more localised way before a humbler audience, namely, that Elisha is a true spokesperson for Yahweh, that his help should be sought, and that obedience to the prophetic word, no matter how unlikely it may sound, will result in covenant blessing.

The stories of Elisha’s activity that follow in chapters 4–8 might be seen to illustrate in a variety of ways that the three basic principles noted above are true. From the realm of kings, the next scene moves to the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum. Here too, the same principles apply. In 4:1-7, a widow is told to gather many jars and fill them from one tiny jar of oil. As was the case in the previous chapter where Israel’s army was told to dig containers to be filled, here the widow is told to collect jars that could not possibly all be filled from her one small container of oil. Despite the improbable instructions, she obeys the prophet and finds blessing. In 4:8-37, a woman who has shown generosity to the prophet, despite being on the cusp of poverty herself³⁷ is given the security of a son. When the son dies the woman personally seeks out Elisha who restores the child to life, ending the woman’s bereavement.³⁸ Elisha’s ability to end an outbreak of poisoning (4:38-41) and feed a multitude (4:42-44) show that he has the power of Elijah. The healing of the Syrian general Naaman shows that even non-Israelites can experience blessing when they submit to the word of the prophet (5:9-15; especially 11-14; see also Deut. 28:21-22). The king of Israel experiences the covenant blessing of military success when he follows the instructions of the prophet (6:8-23; see also Lev. 26:6a). When the king of Israel recognises the presence of

³⁷ In v. 14, we learn that she has no son and that her husband is old, leaving her with little in the way of physical and economic security.

³⁸ Lev. 26:9.

covenant curses (invasion, famine, cannibalism; 6:24-29; see also Lev. 26:25-26, 29) and acknowledges that his troubles are brought on by Yahweh (6:33), Elisha demonstrates that he can bring deliverance (7:1). The officer of the king who doubts the prophetic word suffers death (7:2, 17-18). Viewed in this way, the stories of Elisha have the collective effect of establishing not only the legitimacy of the prophet, but also the principle that obedience to the prophetic word yields blessing while rejection results in covenant curse.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing examination of the episode of the mocking children of Bethel and their sudden and violent fate demonstrates that, far from being an unpalatable Biblical oddity, this short episode is well integrated into its immediate context and initiates themes subsequently developed in 2 Kings. Following on the heels of Elijah's ascension, the story helps establish Elisha's prophetic legitimacy and the principle that disregarding the prophetic voice will lead to covenant curse while obedience will yield blessing. In reaching out to the prophet and following his instruction, the people of Jericho see their tainted waters healed and are able to shed the state of curse that had long characterised their city. By contrast, the negative response of the people of Bethel results in covenant curse. In the chapters that follow, the author illustrates this principle across a broader canvas, demonstrating that it applies to the high and low and to Israel and the nations. The episode of the boys and the bears stands therefore as an example of the literary and theological interests of the author artfully realised in the final form of the text.