

ELISHA AND THE BEARS

A Critical Monograph on 2 Kings 2:23-25
Abridged by the Author

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"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. And he went from thence to mount Carmel, and from thence he returned to Samaria."

This was a time of acute crisis in the history of Israel. Elijah had become so dejected and discouraged at the religious condition of the nation that he longed to die. In the wilderness of Beersheba, where he had fled from the ruthless Jezebel, he said "...now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers" (1 Ki. 19:4b). Forty days later, at Horeb, while hiding out in one of the numerous caves of the mountains, the Lord spoke to him: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" In utter despair, Elijah said: "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away" (1 Ki. 19:13-14).

Apparently the whole nation had turned its back on God; yet, there were known to God, though hidden from the sight of men, some seven thousand faithful Israelites who refused to bow the knee to Baal (1 Ki. 19-18).

It certainly seems unusual that at such a critical period the prayer of Elijah to be removed from the earth (1 Ki. 19:4) was heard and answered. But in the eyes of God, Elijah had finished his work--and now the young man Elisha was to carry on. This was, indeed, a perilous position and one filled with grave responsibility. Elisha, in his inexperience, was left in the midst of an apostate nation going from bad to worse.

From the banks of the Jordan Elisha retraced the journey which he had taken with Elijah. Stopping first at Jericho he performed a miracle by healing the bitter waters of the city. From Jericho Elisha began the tiresome twenty-mile journey to Bethel. Jericho lies some 1300 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea, while Bethel is situated about 2000 feet above. Hart-Davies gives a very graphic description of this journey. "The brevity of the Scriptural narrative may easily be overlooked. We need to picture in imagination the grim reality--a hot, extremely fatiguing journey on foot, by a young prophet travelling through a hostile district, his heart filled with foreboding as to the future and the consciousness of his own inadequacy for the task set before him."

Now the question can logically be asked--what kind of place was Bethel? Bethel had been a center of apostasy in Israel throughout many generations. The degeneration of Bethel began in the reign of the wicked king Jeroboam. Jeroboam caused a split in the twelve tribes and in order to make the severance complete, he decreed that the rebellious tribes should no longer continue to worship at Jerusalem. Instead, he caused two calves of gold to be made, one of which he placed in Dan in the extreme northern portion of his territory, and the other in Bethel, at the southernmost point, about twelve miles north of Jerusalem.

VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Non-Historical Incident View

Higher critics generally hold that this incident is not historically true. Thus in belief and practice they eliminate it as a part of inspired Writ.

An example of this method is cited by John Urquhart when he quoted from Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament:

Prof. George A. Smith says that "No school of criticism denies the reality of Elisha, or of his services to Israel." "But," he adds, "it would be equally impossible to prove the historical reality of the series of curious marvels attributed to Elisha from sources outside the annals of the kings of Israel. These, however, are practically of no importance to the Christian preacher."²

J. Sidlow Baxter says:

Perhaps no incident in the Old Testament has called forth more criticism than this one. The Lord's enemies have held it up as a trump card in their pack of arguments against the claim of the Bible to be the word of God. A young University graduate recently told a friend of mine that this incident alone was enough to turn him against the Bible. How could we possibly believe that God would send bears to devour little children, just to satisfy the spite of a man who was riled by their innocent banter.³

Julius Bewer has this to say in commenting on the Elijah-Elisha sections of the Bible:

All these Elijah stories are legends which the people told about their spiritual hero, whom tradition ranks only second to Moses among all the great ones of Israel... Some decades later a collection of Elisha stories was made which is now incorporated in 2 Kings 2-8.⁴

Another exponent of the elimination method would be Harry Emerson Fosdick, who combines some ridicule with his deletion:

We do not accept Biblical narratives of the miraculous as an act of faith. We do it, if we do it at all, because we are historically convinced. Approaching the Bible so, there are some narratives of miracles there which I do not believe. To suppose that a man in order to be a loyal and devout disciple of our Lord in the twentieth century A.D. must think that God in the ninth century B.C. miraculously sent bears to eat up unruly children...seems to me dangerously ridiculous. Folk who insist on that kind of literal inerrancy in ancient documents are not Fundamentalists at all; they are incident-~~lists~~.⁵

The attitude of derision is characteristic of many who reject the idea of verbal inspiration. Whereas some of the writers mentioned above may honestly feel that there is no substantial reason for including the incident in the Bible, others add a note of derision to their rejection of its honesty.

Robert Ingersoll, the renowned agnostic, said in one of his lectures:

I find in this Bible that there was an old gentleman a little short of the article of hair. And as he was going through the town a number of little children cried out to him, "Go up, though baldhead!" And this man of God turned and cursed them...And two bears came out of the woods and tore in pieces forty-two children! How did the bears get there? Elisha could not control the bears. Nobody could control the bears in that way. Now, just think of an infinite God making a shining star having his attention attracted by hearing some children saying to an old gentleman, Go up, thou baldhead! And then speaking to his secretary or somebody else, "Bring in a couple of bears now!" What a magnificent God. What would the devil have done under these circumstances?...You hate a God like that. I do; I despise him.⁶

David Simpson reflects the same idea with more polish and subtlety:

Jehovah's...care for the well-being and dignity of his prophet is emphasized, though again the God concept reflected in the narrative reflects a rather crude stage in the religious and ethical development.⁷

William Lyon Phelps refers to the incident at Bethel as one which has left on the character of Elisha an "ineffaceable stain."⁸ He further adds, "It is not recorded that the prophet felt any remorse; at that moment he was more like the wild beasts than a little child."⁹

Others who scorn such action on the part of Elisha are Hicks¹⁰ and Snaith.¹¹

Some hold the story to be legendary and hard to believe, but still feel there is great spiritual value in it, and that it should be retained for this reason.

Robert Horton gives a fair presentation of this view when he says:

Indeed, the marvel of the Bible is, that its myths of creation are among the most searchingly religious parts of the book; and the legendary passages--like the story of Elijah and Elisha...are admittedly the richest in spiritual value and religious teaching.¹²

Raymond Calkins, in the Interpreter's Bible, seems to favor this view:

This story of the small boys who were rude to the prophet has been subjected to various explanations by commentators who have hoped to make it acceptable to proper standards of justice and fairness. It is merely an example of premoral exhortation to respect the prophets as holy men of God. The story compares most unfavorably with N.T. teaching (Matt. 5:44; Luke 23:34) and indeed will not stand examination from any moral point of view...Here is a story from which the Bible reader shrinks...The bears that came out of the woods are the symbol of that inevitable retribution which overtakes vicious behaviour. The boys of this story are the prototype of thousands of youth today. If they can be taught at home, in school, at church, the lessons of reverence and self-control, they may escape the fate which otherwise will overtake them. Lawless youth may not be torn asunder by bears, but they are rent by passions, devoured by appetite, until their characters and careers and all their hopes for happy, useful living are destroyed.¹³

Literal Judgment View

This view holds that the narrative took place in accordance with the will of God as a divine judgment.

C. F. Keil remarks:

All that is necessary is to admit that the worthless spirit which prevailed in Bethel was openly manifested in the ridicule of the children, and that these boys knew Elisha, and in his person insulted the prophet of the Lord. If this was the case, then Elisha cursed the boys for the purpose of avenging the honour of the Lord, which had been injured in his person; and the Lord caused the curse to be fulfilled, to punish in the children the sins of the parents, and to inspire the whole city with a salutary dread of His holy majesty.¹⁴

G. Rawlinson, in commenting on this passage, says, "This was a tremendous homily of Divine justice to the whole population--a sermon that would thunder in the hearts of the fathers, the mothers, and the neighbors."¹⁵

Others holding to this view are Jenks,¹⁶ Butler,¹⁷ Edersheim,¹⁸ Hart-Davies,¹⁹ Baxter,²⁰ and Watts,²¹ to name but a few.

The author of this paper accepts the Literal Judgment View. In presenting the argument, we shall begin with a discussion of the two minor problems and progress to the major problem.

MINOR PROBLEMS

Who Were the Persons Involved?

This question is of utmost importance, because the correct answer will supply us with one of the keys for unravelling this puzzling incident. A casual reading of the passage has often left an impression somewhat like this: An old bald-headed prophet was trudging slowly up the main street of Bethel when he chanced upon some innocent little children merrily playing together. In the midst of their merriment they spy him and shout, more playfully than tauntingly, "Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head!" Instantly the old prophet becomes enraged with their childish banter, and with eyes flashing in anger he whirls around and curses them in the name of the Lord. Suddenly, as if in direct accordance with his curse, two she bears rush out of the nearby forest and "devour" forty-two of the little children. But, is this the correct picture of the situation?

Adam Clarke remarks, "But then, as they were little children they could scarcely be accountable for their conduct; and consequently, it was cruelty to destroy them."²²

It is true that our English translation says they were "little children," but in a case like this we must go back to the Hebrew text. The two Hebrew words translated "little children" are ketanaim and na'arim (plural of na'ar). There are many occurrences of the word na'ar in the Old Testament, but I should like to point out several instances to show how the word is used.

In the familiar story of the offering of Isaac on Mount Moriah, just as Abraham's arm was poised to plunge the knife into his son, the Angel of the Lord appeared and said, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad" (na'ar, Gen. 22:12). At that time Isaac must have been in his early twenties. Later on the word is used again in connection with Joseph: "Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad (na'ar) was with the sons of Bilhah" (Gen. 37:2).

Centuries later, when Ahab and Benhadad, the king of Syria, were on the verge of war, a company of two hundred and thirty-two "young men (na'arim) of the princes of the provinces" (I Ki. 20:14-15) put to rout the Syrians.

Rawlinson makes some very interesting remarks concerning these persons:

'Little children' is an unfortunate translation, raising quite a wrong idea of the tender age of the persons spoken of. On the other hand, Bishop Patrick's assertion that the words are to be 'understood of adult persons, who had a hatred to the prophet,' is quite untenable. Naarim ketanaim would be best translated (as by our Revisers in the margin) 'young lads'--boys, that is, from twelve to fifteen. Such mischievous youths are among the chief nuisances of Oriental towns; they waylay the traveller, deride him, jeer him--are keen to remark any personal defect that he might have, and merciless in flouting it; they dog his steps, shout out their rude remarks and sometimes proceed from abusive words to violent acts, as the throwing of sticks, or stones, or mud. On this occasion they only got as far as rude words.²³

It would seem quite feasible, then, to say that the word na'ar might appropriately be used of anybody up to his late twenties. Ellison says, "Na'ar (child) is used of anyone who has no full

place in society. It may be used of a slave of any age, or of someone too young to marry and set up his own home."²⁴

Now look at the other word ketanaim (plural of qatan), which is translated by our English word "little." Frequently in scripture it is used to denote a younger son. The word occurs in Genesis 27:42, where it is translated by our English word "younger," and is applied to Jacob at the time when he fled from his brother Esau--at which time he must have been about seventy-seven. In Judges 1:13 the word is applied to Othniel, Caleb's younger brother, who certainly must have been more than a "little child" because he was old enough and strong enough to storm and capture singlehandedly the city of Kirjath-sepher.

It should be quite clear by now that these two Hebrew words are characterized by considerable elasticity. However, there are other places in Scripture where both words actually occur together, as they do in our problem passage. Take, for example, Samuel's selection of David to be king:

And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children (na'arim)? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest (qatan), and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse: Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he come hither. And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and, withal, of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to (1 Sam. 16:11-12).

Here David is referred to as the "youngest" of Jesse's "children." Yet, down in verse 18 of the same chapter we are told that David, even at this time, was "...a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person." Certainly it can be argued that David was no mere child, but rather a strong young man well along in his twenties. For further study of the occurrence of the two words together, see 1 Samuel 20:35 and 1 Kings 11:17.

We now conclude that these "little children" were not primarily little children at all, but rather boys and young men whose ages could vary anywhere from twelve to thirty. These persons were old enough to know what they were doing, and cannot be excused for their vicious behaviour on the grounds that they were under-aged.

Besides the rude and insolent young fellows, there is only one other person involved in our story, the prophet Elisha himself.

As has been pointed out, a hasty reading of the passage leaves one with the impression that Elisha was probably getting along in years. But actually "Elisha, when the incident occurred, was certainly not an old man. Very probably he was not more than twenty-five years of age; for he lived for nearly sixty years after the date of this event."²⁵ 1 Kings chapter 19 relates the story of Elisha's ordination to the prophetic ministry by Elijah, and at that time, Elisha was just a young man working on his father's farm. Elijah at that time was an old prophet rapidly nearing the end of his ministry. It is only logical to assume, therefore, that the Bethel incident occurred only a few years after his anointing.

As to the character of Elisha, he seems to have been very merciful, courteous, and completely devoted to Jehovah and the welfare of his countrymen. Early in his ministry he was noticed by a woman of quality, namely, the woman of Shunem, who remarked to her husband, "Behold now, I

perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually" (2 Ki. 4:9). Surely Elisha must have been in close communion with God. In 2 Kings 6 he is revealed as gentle and of noble character.

But, you may say, even though Elisha appears to be a true gentleman in other portions of Scripture, certainly cursing people with a resultant slaughter of forty-two of them is anything but a work of love and tenderness.

This, of course, brings us to the consideration of our second minor problem:

Why and How Did Elisha Curse in the Name of the Lord?

Did Elisha really lose his temper? What was there in the statement of these fellows that made Elisha stop and utter this curse?

The word translated "baldhead" is the Hebrew word of which Keil says, "bald-head (with a bald place at the back of the head), was used as a term of scorn (cf. Isa. 3:17, 24); but hardly from a suspicion of leprosy (Winer, Thenius)."²⁶ Montgomery says, "...natural baldness is infrequent in the open life of the East."²⁷ F. H. Wight remarks:

Baldness was scarce and suspicion of leprosy was often attached to it. Thus when the youth said of Elisha, 'Go up, thou bald head' (II Ki. 2:23), it was using an extreme curse, for the prophet being a young man, may not actually have been bald-headed.²⁸

Baxter explains the situation well when he says:

But whether Elisha was prematurely bald or not, the point is this, strangely enough, that out in the East--even until the present day--the expression 'baldhead' is looked on as the very worst term of insult. Used as a word of insult, it has in it, to the easterner, a spite, a slime, a venom, and an implication of despicableness which make it the lowest of insults.²⁹

Certainly to call someone a "baldhead" was an epithet of utter contempt. This was a deliberate and deep insult to Elisha. As has been pointed out, it is highly improbable that Elisha was prematurely bald. H. L. Ellison³⁰ and Lowther Clarke³¹ have suggested that Elisha would have had his head covered as the usual dress of the prophet of God. In either case, his prophet's mantle would easily have designated him as the chosen one of the Lord. These fellows undoubtedly recognize him and yet they used the most vulgar and cutting of insults. This attitude showed a complete disrespect not only for God's chosen vessel but also for God Himself.

But their cry to Elisha was "Go up!" What did they mean by this expression? Rawlinson feels that they meant for him to "go on his way" and not stop, because the real force of their jeer was not in the words "go up," but rather in the word "baldhead."³² Other suggest that they meant "Go up to Bethel," for Bethel was much higher than Jericho, and was reached by an ascending roadway.

Although admitting that any dogmatic view on this expression must eventually be reduced to conjecture, I personally feel that there is an allusion here to the translation of Elijah. "The opening words of the chapter literally translated from the Hebrew, read--"When the Lord could cause to go up Elijah." The verb rendered "go up," in the taunt addressed to Elisha, is precisely the same as that which occurs in this first verse.³³

News of the translation of Elijah traveled fast by word of mouth along the caravan routes. When the report reached Bethel, there was only contemptuous disbelief. The fact that Elijah, the old troublemaker, was taken up into heaven was just too good to be true. With him out of their way they could continue with their false and iniquitous worship.

Then, who should suddenly appear coming up the road to Bethel but Elisha. Elijah's mantle was in plain view, indicating that the spirit of Elijah was now resting upon Elisha. The young men of the city immediately sensed that Elisha would be just as troublesome as his master. If only he would "go up" where Elijah was--and stay there. God's man is always a thorn in the side of the devil's crowd. Is it any wonder, then, that these young ruffians went forth to meet Elisha with sneers and contempt? They wanted to get rid of him and of all such who disturbed their ways of sin.

Some have suggested that these young lads were only reflecting the teaching of their parents or one of the apostate teachers in the school of the prophets.

It is readily admitted that teenagers reflect the views held by their parents. In this case, the parents were members of a wicked and corrupt society which was bound to influence their posterity.

The main reason, however, for Elisha's curse was that he, as a prophet of God, was duty bound to do so. The citizens of Bethel were walking contrary to the Law and were under the curse of God: "If ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me, . . . I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children and destroy your cattle; and your highways shall be desolate" (Lev. 26:21-22).

In summary, we might say that Elisha was abiding in the law when he cursed the youths and was certainly in the will of God. Then, too, these derisive and contemptuous fellows were asking for the judgment of God by their vile language and their blasphemous insult concerning a miracle of the Lord, namely, the translation of Elijah.

We can now ask the question--How did Elisha curse? Did he use profanity as we would think of it today? How does the Bible use the word "curse"?

The Hebrew word which is translated "curse" has a twofold meaning. It can mean either "to revile," or "to pronounce judgment," depending, of course, upon the context.

Elisha, as the true servant of Jehovah, certainly did not revile or abuse the boys; therefore, it is the opinion of this writer that he asked God to deal with them. This, after all, is the Scriptural way, for God says: "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense" (Deut. 32:35). Elisha did not curse in his own name but "in the name of the Lord." This was the Lord's business as far as Elisha was concerned. Regardless of popular opinion, a careful reading of the story reveals that Elisha had nothing to do with the appearance of the bears and the subsequent calamity.

It should be noted also that we are not told when the bears came out of the woods. It may have been immediately or a number of days later. The circumstances lead the writer to believe, however, that the bears rushed forth soon after the pronouncement of the curse.

As to the actual words of the curse, Elisha may have said, "Let the judgment of God be upon you," or, "May God reward you according to your deeds."

MAJOR PROBLEM

Can We Justify the Appearance of This Story in the Bible?

In the views of this narrative which have been presented, the various forms of the Non-Historical Incident View insist that this story is legendary and cannot be harmonized with a loving God and New Testament teaching. The Literal Judgment View, however, holds that the event actually occurred, that it happened for a specific purpose, and that its appearance in the Biblical record can be justified. The problem then boils down to a yes or no answer. Can we or can we not justify this account?

A.J. McClain remarks, "No scholar has ever denied successfully that the recorded testimony of Christ supports the most absolute and sweeping doctrine of Biblical Inspiration."³⁴ Certainly the testimony of Jesus Christ is worthy of careful consideration, and He believed in the so-called "legendary" stories of the Old Testament. For example, He believed in the accounts of Elijah (Lk. 4:25), Jonah (Mt. 12:40), the flood (Mt. 24:38), and the creation of man (Mt. 19:4), to name but a few. It seems quite logical, then, to assume that Christ Himself believed the story of Elisha and the bears. "For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:18). "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable...for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Some taking the higher critical view hold that although the story "will not stand examination from any moral point of view,"³⁵ it still is rich in "spiritual value and religious teaching."³⁶ Such a view as this would be held by a great many liberal preachers and teachers of today. A compromising, middle-of-the-road position seems to be fashionable and in good taste. These Old Testament stories make good preaching material, but as far as their actual historicity is concerned, they are too fanciful and farfetched.

If this view were pressed to its ultimate conclusion, it would undermine the historicity of the Old Testament Scriptures, which Jesus clearly and emphatically endorsed. Where parables do appear in the Old Testament, their identity is definitely indicated by the context. Paul reminds us: "Now all these things happened (actually) unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11).

The writer wishes now to examine the Literal Judgment View which completely justifies the appearance of this story in the Bible.

The golden rule of interpretation is that we are to take all Scripture at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context in the light of related passages indicate clearly that it did not actually happen. In fact, looking at it from a purely historical standpoint wild beasts were common in those days. People occasionally encountered wild beasts and were mauled and chewed, and such instances would be referred to as "calamities." But, in this story, the curse of Elisha and the attacking bears are connected, which fact makes the story "unbelievable" to many people. Is there any connection here, and if so, why?

As was pointed out in the early portions of this paper, Bethel was the seat of Baal worship and headquarters of idolatry in Israel. Bethel in the time of Elisha was truly the focal point for the calf worship instituted by Jeroboam.

It is quite possible that these "young lads," along with some counsel and prompting from older persons, planned to waylay Elisha and make him look ridiculous and contemptible at the very commencement of his career. We read in verse 23 that these lads "came forth" to meet Elisha. It appears as if this was a deliberately planned attack against Elisha.

Another indication that this was a premeditated assault is found in the number of persons "torn" by the bears. If two angry she-bears attacked a crowd of young people today so that forty-two of them were injured and some perhaps killed, how many would there have been in the crowd at the beginning? For it is only logical to assume that the moment the bears appeared there would be a scrambling in all directions. It would be no exaggeration to say that two escaped for every one that was hurt, which would make the crowd of renegades who followed Elisha number at least one hundred at the beginning. Why were there so many? Because this was a planned reception for Elisha.

We read then that the young ruffians cried, "Go up, thou bald head," which we have already pointed out to be blasphemy--not only against Elisha but against the Lord Himself. They were saying in effect, Ascend, thou empty skull! just as it is pretended your master did! Get out of here--we have no need for you! Ascend, thou empty skull!

Elisha turned and "cursed them in the name of the Lord." It is the firm opinion of the writer that this curse was uttered under a Divine impulse because of the resultant action. The Lord had warned the people in the law that if they walked contrary to Him that He would send wild beasts among them and rob them of their children (Lev. 26:21-22). In the light of this passage, the inhabitants of Bethel were certainly under the curse of the Law. It was not Elisha who brought the bears, but a holy, righteous God. God had warned, but the people paid no heed--so judgment fell. One can easily see now that this was not the revenge of an angry prophet, but rather the punishment of a righteous Judge.

It may be suggested that God could have used some other means of warning them. A slaughter by two angry bears seems too severe. Jenks says:

Had he cut them off by a fever, no one would have objected too strenuously to it; but, it would not have been suited, in any adequate measure, to make the same useful impression on the minds of the survivors, or to inculcate the same important instructions to other ages and nations, as this solemn sentence and immediate execution were.³⁷

This was a judgment designed to wake the people up, lest a worse disaster befall them. A loving God always warns, and pleads before His wrath descends. These blasphemous youths were the direct ancestors of a generation which was swept into captivity because of its abominable sins in the sight of the Lord, notwithstanding the repeated admonitions of His prophets. Not much more than a century later, the threatened invasion of Israel by the armies of Assyria began; so some of the grandchildren of these insulters of Elisha were numbered among those who suffered so tragically (Cf. 2 Ki. 17:6-12).

But they and their successors persisted in flagrant disobedience; they continued to walk in their own ways; they worshipped according to the evil imaginations of their own hearts; they sank deep into idolatry and immorality, until the cup of God's wrath was filled. In the closing chapter of the Second Book of Chronicles there is the pathetic summary of God's dealings with His chosen but rebellious people.

The Lord God of their fathers sent to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending; because He had compassion on His people, and on His dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy (2 Chr. 36:15-16, R.V.).

Yes, we conclude that there is a direct connection between the curse of Elisha and the appearance of the two bears. They were God's fierce instruments to warn a rebellious people--but all to no avail. They also served to vindicate the character of Elisha which had been so venomously attacked by the young infidels of Bethel. Had the sons and the fathers in Bethel taken to heart the lesson which God so strikingly presented to them, the depopulation and devastation of Northern Israel might never have been, or might at least have been postponed.

In summarization we can say that the story of Elisha and the bears most assuredly can be left in the Holy Scriptures as an authentic occurrence. Elisha, the anointed of the Lord, only performed that which belonged to his prophetic office by uttering the curse upon the renegade youths of Bethel. He did not, however, execute the punishment himself; he left that to Him who says, "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense" (Deut. 32:35). It was the Lord who performed this miracle of judgment in direct accordance with the threat of the law in Leviticus 26:21-22. This was a sign for the rebellious and apostate that judgment waits for the scoffers--a testimony to the truth of the words: "The Lord revengeth and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on His adversaries" (Nah. 1:2). The Lord is the one who visits the sins of the fathers upon the likeminded children (Ex. 20:5). "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25b).

PARAPHRASE

And as he laboriously worked his way up the steep and rugged road which led to Bethel, the seat of Baal worship and the headquarters of idolatry, a large mob of young hooligans, urged on by the townspeople, waylaid him. And they began to jeer and ridicule him saying, "Ascend, you empty skull--just as it is pretended your master did! Away with you--you troublemaker! Ascend, you empty skull, if you can! Ha! Ha!" (ver. 23).

And he turned around and looked at the offspring of apostasy and said, "May Jehovah reward you according to your deeds--as Moses has written." And two vicious she bears rushed out of the nearby forest and mangled forty-two of the derisive young renegades, just as the Lord had warned would happen. (ver. 24).

And he continued on to Mount Carmel for a time of spiritual refreshment, after which he went to his home in Samaria. (ver. 25).

DOCUMENTATION

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