

The First Deeds of Elisha

Two Miracles – 2 Kings 2:19-25

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Abstract

After the transmission of the spirit from Elijah to Elisha (2 Kgs 2:1-18), two small stories follow that have preoccupied the exegetes (2:19-22 and 2:23-25), partly because they are two remarkable miracles, partly because the two contrast remarkably strongly. The two stories form a diptych. They tell of the first deeds of Elisha. Do they function as legitimation of Elisha as a prophet, as many scholars claim? The stories contain different signs, suggesting that Elisha's first deeds are too ambiguous, to see him, though following Elijah, as a legitimate prophet.

Keywords: Old Testament, 1-2 Kings, Elisha, Miracles, Healing, Curse

*Dedicated to my promotor, prof. dr. A.J. Denaux,
on the celebration of his 85th birthday on June 21, 2023*

Introduction

After the transmission of the spirit from Elijah to Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:1-18), two small stories follow that have preoccupied commentators, partly because they are two remarkable miracles, partly because the two contrast remarkably strongly (2:19-22 and 2:23-25). The biggest stumbling block, however, is the second, horrifying¹ miracle story in which Elisha curses boys

1 This story is extensively qualified by the commentators. Keith Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1, speaks of "a fairly bizarre scene" only to call the scene "unbearable" on the following page. Steven L. McKenzie,

who mock him, after which two she-bears rip open no less than forty-two of them (2 Kgs. 2:23-25), still in the name of YHWH. This story gets most attention from interpreters. Not incomprehensibly, given what happens. The narratives appear to be directly opposed to each other; I want to show that they are complementary.² The question at the heart of this article is why the narrator begins Elisha's performance with specifically these two very different events.

Delimitation

Delimitation has never really been a point of discussion. Nevertheless, there is good reason to bring the question up, if only to ask—at the beginning of the first scene—which city it plays out in (2:19), and—at the beginning of the second scene—what Elisha's place of departure is (2:23).

We begin with the first scene. From the point of view of the events in the story, that 2 Kings 2:19-22 is a well-rounded unit does not seem to require any further argument: Elisha makes bad water (v. 19) healthy again (v. 22). And, new characters ("men of the city") appear on the scene. From the scene itself, it is not immediately apparent where it takes place. We only hear—at the beginning—of "the city". The reader needs the context: the precise location has been given in verse 18 before the demarcated story begins, when it was said that Elisha is residing in Jericho. The conclusion seems obvious that Jericho is meant with "the city". The scene is therefore closely related to 2:15-18 as it is in 2:18 that the reader finds the topographical designation that is relevant to 2:19-22.

The second scene does start with a topographical indication: "He went from there to Bethel (House of God)." With equal justification one can say—given "from there" (i.e., from Jericho)—that verse 23 is the conclusion

¹ *Kings 16 – 2 Kings 16*, IECOT (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2019), 247, speaks of "one of the most disturbing stories of the HB" (= Hebrew Bible). His shocking character is evident not only to modern ears but also to those of "ancient readers," as Rachele Gilmour, *Juxtaposition and the Elisha Cycle*, LHB/OTS 594 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 100, rightly says.

² Yael Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8, no. 5 (2008): 14; Hartmut Schmid, *Elisha und Elia: Eine Studie zu ihrem Verhältnis in den Königebüchern*, BWM 18 (Gießen: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 225; the two narratives "bilden eine Einheit." In the summary, he goes a step further and says that the two narratives form a unity with 2 Kings 1:1-18. Michael Pietsch, "Der Prophet als Magier: Magie und Ritual in den Elischäerzählungen," in *Zauber und Magier im antiken Palästina und seiner Umwelt*, ed. Jens Kamlah, Rold Schäfer, and Markus Witte, ADDV 46 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 353 characterizes them as a diptych.

of the previous scene. What I want to say is that the narrator links the scenes very closely. That goes for 2:19-22 in relation to 2:15-18 and for 2:23-25 in relation to 2:19-22. A similar topographical designation is found in verse 25. Yet, this is generally seen as the conclusion. But why? If one compares 2:23a (“From there he went up to Beth-El”) to 2:25a, the beginning of the second scene (“From there he went to Mount Carmel”), one could also interpret 2:25a as the beginning of a subsequent scene. Verse 25 performs the same function for 3:1-17 as 2:18 did for 2:19-22. Verse 25 reports that Elisha returns to Samaria. It is in Samaria that Jehoram exercises his kingship over Israel, and where he will consult Elisha because with him is the word of YHWH (3:11f).

Working translation

- 19a The men of the city said to Elisha:
 b “Behold, the staying in the city is good, as my lord sees,
 c but the water is bad and the land is bereaving children.”
- 20a He said:
 b “Bring me a new bowl
 c and put salt in it.”
 d They brought it to him.
- 21a Then he went out to the source of the water,
 b put salt in it and said:
 c “Thus says YHWH:
 d ‘I heal this water
 e and there will be no more death and bereavement of children
 from there.”
- 22a The water was healed to this day
 b according to the saying of Elisha which he had spoken.
- 23a From there he went up to Beth-El (= House of God).
 b When he went out on the road,
 c little boys went out of the city.
 d They mocked him,
 e they said to him:
 f “Go up, baldy!
 g Go up, baldy!”

- 24a He turned around.
- b When he saw them
- c he cursed them in the name of YHWH.
- d Two she-bears went out of the forest,
- e They ripped open forty-two children of them.
- 25a From there he went to Mount Carmel
- b and from there he returned to Samaria.³

Notes on the translation

Verse 19b NRSV translates מושב העיר with “the location of the city”; JPS translates “the town is a pleasant place to live in”. In my opinion, this turn of phrase should be translated as “the staying in the city”. From verse 18, the reader knows that Elisha is staying in Jericho. Previously, Elisha repeatedly rejected a call from Elijah to “stay,” (שב-נא): in 2:2 in Gilgal, in 2:4 in Bethel, and in 2:6 in Jericho. When we hear in verse 18 that Elisha is staying in Jericho,⁴ the reader will be able to conclude that he has now responded to Elijah’s call (ישב). The men of the city refer to that staying, when they say: “Behold, the staying in the city is good, as my lord sees.” The “lord” Elisha who is now staying there, can confirm that.

Verse 19c The verb שכל has two meanings: “to make childless,” “to bereave of children” (Gen. 27:45; 42:36; 43:14; Lev. 26:22; Deut. 32:25; 1 Sam. 15:33; Jer. 15:7), and a secondary meaning of “to have a miscarriage/miscarry” (Gen. 31:38; Exod. 23:26; Job 21:10). The participle משכלת is often assigned the meaning “causing miscarriage” in translation (see also NBG51).⁵ Because there is talk of “the land” (around the city) one can think of miscarriages among the cattle (Gen. 31:38; Job 21:10).⁶ I prefer to translate —Leviticus

3 Schmid, *Elisa und Elia*, 226, reckons v. 25 (p. 254-256), “eine sehr sachlich gehaltene Reise-notiz,” as an independent third section to conclude the chapter. And that while (p. 254): “Mit ׀ִגְלִיִּי schließt V. 25 in narrativem Stil nahtlos (*sic*) an V. 24 an!”

4 Floor Maeijer, “Elisha as a Second Elijah in the period of the Prophetic Actions against the Baal Policy of the House of Ahab (1 Kings – II Kings 11,20).” Excerpta ex dissertation ad Doctoratum in Pontificio Insitituto Biblico (Apeldoorn, 1989), 18.

5 Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 16, and Brian P. Irwin, “The Curious Incident of the Boys and the Bears: 2 Kings 2 and the Prophetic Authority of Elisha,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (2016): 23-35, in particular 31, read מְשַׁכֶּלֶת as “miscarriage.”

6 See also Gilmour, *Juxtaposition*, 99.

26:22 and Ezekiel 5:17 in mind⁷—for “the land will bereave you of your children”.⁸ This translation also provides a direct connection to 2:23-25.

Verse 21a The word מוצא literally means “exit.” Actually, I prefer the literal translation, because יצא, “going out,” is a key word in 2 Kings 2:19-25, occurring as a verb in verses 21 and 23 in the first story, in verse 24 in the second, and as a noun “exit” in verse 21a too.

Vers 24e The verb בקע here (in the hitpa’el) is usually translated “to maul” (NRSV) or “to mangle” (JPS). This is true for predators like lions; but for this the verb טרף is used (Ps. 7:3; 17:22; Ezek. 22:25; Mic. 5:7). Bears however, rip open (בקע, 2 Kgs. 2:24; Hos. 13:8).⁹ This verb is also used by the man of God (Elisha) who weeps because he knows what evil Hazael will do to the Israelites, including ripping open pregnant women (2 Kgs. 8:12); for Menachem who strikes Tiphseh and had all the pregnant women in the city ripped open (2 Kgs. 15:16); and, when Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem, he rips open the city wall (2 Kgs. 25:4).

The first miracle

Miracle stories have four basic moments.¹⁰ Here we find three of those moments. The fourth moment, the reaction of those involved and/or bystanders, is missing in 2:19-22.

(1) The first moment is the emergency in verse 19, expressed by “the men of the city”: “Behold, the staying in the city is good, as my lord¹¹ sees, but the water is ‘evil’ and the land is bereft of children.” The inhabitants of the city are contrasting good and evil, between staying in the city, and the water

7 See Lev. 26:21-22: “And if you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins. I will let loose wild beasts against you, and they shall bereave you of your children and wipe out your cattle... (וְיִשְׁחָדוּךָ)” and Ezek. 5:17: “I will let loose against you famine and wild beasts and they shall bereave you (וְיִשְׁחָדוּךָ).”

8 So too Bodner, *Elisha’s Profile*, 4.

9 Herbert C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 197; Daniel J.D. Stulac, *Life, Land and Elijah in the Book of Kings*, SOTS.MS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 161.

10 Nico Riemersma, *Aan de dode een wonder gedaan: Een exegetisch-hermeneutische studie naar de dodenopwekking in Lucas 7,11-17 in relatie tot 1 Koningen 17,17-24 en Vita Apollonii IV,45*, ACEBT.SS 14 (Bergambacht: 2VM, 2016), 56-57.

11 The men of the city call Elisha “my lord” (v. 19), where the prophets of Jericho spoke of Elijah as “your lord” (v. 16). The men of the city now assign that title to Elisha.

and the land. They are saying that living in the city may be good, but that the water is bad, and the land that has bereaved them of children, seems to be cursed.

(2) The second moment consists of the miracle worker's miracle-working action, in 2:20-21. It consists of two elements: (a) A request/assignment to bring him a new bowl and put salt in it (v. 20a-c).¹² A new bowl to prevent spoilage if possible, with salt in it as a means of purification.¹³ The request is complied with immediately (v. 20d). (b) Then Elisha himself acts: he goes out of the city to the "exit" of the water. Elisha by leaving the city, is tackling the problem at its source. Here he does two things: (i) he throws the salt that he asked for into the 'exit' of the water, (ii) and he also does a divine oracle: "Thus says YHWH: 'I heal this water; there will be no more death and bereavement of children from there.'" He introduces the remedy and leaves its elaboration to YHWH. He then describes the new situation, namely that "there will be no more death and bereavement of children," thus ending the old situation at its source. With "bereavement of children," the word that the men of the city used, is repeated. They did not use the word "death." The reader (with Elijah) can infer from this that the water was bad, because it caused "death."

(3) The third and final moment, the lifting of the emergency, is found at the end of the story, in verse 22: "The water was healed to this day according to the word of Elisha which he had spoken." With this, the narrator—concluding the scene—goes back to verse 21, where some of the same words appeared:

- Then he went out to the "exit" of the water,
 put salt in it
 a and *said*:
 "Thus says YHWH:
 b 'I *heal* this *water*
 c and there is no more death and bereavement of children
 from there."
 b' The *water* was *healed* to this day
 a' according to the saying of Elisha which he had *spoken*.

12 It is not the only time that an object is used in a miracle (flour in 2 Kings 4:41; a stick in 2 Kings 6:6) (Schmid, *Elisa und Elia*, 233).

13 Salt in the water will rather evoke the image of completely undrinkable water. Irwin, "The Curious Incident," 32, speaks of "the counterintuitive nature of Elisha's instructions."

Three things stand out:

(a) Elisha's act, the casting of the salt—seen by various interpreters as a magical act¹⁴—into the “exit” of the water is not the focus of attention, the focus is on the oracle, in particular on the healing of the water by YHWH.¹⁵

(b) The sentence presented as divine speech “there will be no more death and bereavement of children from there” is central. This sentence is not repeated during the performance of the miracle.

(c) As a reader, one expects the final words to read something like “according to the word that YHWH had spoken,” as it does in 2 Kings 4:44, or “thus said YHWH” after 4:43. This wording “according to the saying of Elisha” does not refer back to the content of the oracle (v. 21e-f), but to Elisha's saying (v. 21d-f).¹⁶ In any case, it is clear that this miracle is the result of Elisha's inheritance of Elijah's spirit.¹⁷

(4) In the absence of the fourth moment: a grateful response from the inhabitants of the city¹⁸ for this action by the prophet, the emphasis is now entirely on the miracle that has taken place “according to the saying of Elisha which he had spoken” and that radiates implications “to this day.” The lack of a response may nevertheless be called striking. Elisha has responded to a situation that they presented him with. *His* response to their implicit request for help occupies proportionally more space in the narrative (vv. 20-22).

The second miracle

The second miracle is of a very different nature. There is no emergency. It is about little boys¹⁹ who scoff at Elisha. That's reason for Elisha—not for us! —not only to curse them, but above all to do so in the name of YHWH?

14 Pietsch, “Der Prophet als Magier,” 349-352; Ruth Sauerwein, *Elischa: Eine redaktions- und religions-geschichtliche Studie*, BZAW 465 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 29.

15 The use of the word, “heal,” evokes the image of sickness; the evil lies in the fact that the water is “sickening.” Elisha has diagnosed the water that is called “evil” by the men of the city.

16 According to Roy L. Heller, *The Characters of Elijah and Elisha and the Deuteronomic Evaluation of Prophecy: Miracles and Manipulation*, LHB/OTS 671 (London: Bloomsbury: T&T Clark, 2019), 125: “... the narrator withholds the evaluation of the oracle as being from Yhwh, but rather states explicitly that it is from Elisha.”

17 McKenzie, *1 Kings 16 – 2 Kings 16*, 247.

18 Cohn, *2 Kings*, 16: “... there is no acclamation of his deed by the townspeople”; Heller, *The Characters*, 125: “The story does not end with any sort of confession on the part of the inhabitants of the city.”

19 There is much debate about exactly how old the boys are. I wonder whether age matters much here.

We are dealing with a miracle of punishment, which is completely at odds with the preceding miracle.

The story opens with a change of location by Elisha, who is referred to in this narration as “he”: “He went from there to Bethel,” starting out “from there” where the previous miracle took place: Jericho. In this way, the narrator ties the stories to each other geographically.

(1) The first moment occurs as Elisha goes up the road (to Bethel) (v. 23b), and the little boys go out from the city (v. 23c). Among interpreters there is some discussion about the question of which “city” is referred to in verse 23c.²⁰ Does it refer to Bethel in verse 23a or to “the city” (Jericho) in verse 19a. That “the city” cannot be anything else than Jericho in my opinion, has to do with the fact that otherwise Elisha’s turning in verse 24a cannot be explained.²¹ If Elisha comes from Jericho and the little boys from “the city” (i.e., Bethel), the little boys would meet Elisha. Turning around is illogical in that case.

Going out of the city is followed by mocking directed at Elisha, who has just set out on the road. The first moment is mainly about their mockery of Elisha. The sneer lies in what they say to him: “Go up, baldy, go up, baldy.”²² However, the question is not only how עלה should be rendered, but also what meaning should be attributed to עלה. The translations are very variable: “Go away” (JPS, NRSV), “Get out of here” (NIV), “Go up” (ESV, KJV, NKJV). Translations such as those of the ESV, KJV and NKJV suggest a connection with the same verb in verse 23a. It would be his “struggling”²³ to go “up” to Bethel that invokes the ridicule. That does not seem to me to be the problem. Uwe Bauer renders עלה with “Hau ab,” which means something like “Clear off,” “Get lost!” that would better reflect Elisha’s fury.²⁴ The disadvantage

20 Joel S. Burnett, “‘Going Down to Bethel’: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 296, 297; Koert van Bekkum, “‘Zijn woede duurt een oogwenk, zijn liefde een leven lang’ (Ps. 30:6): Over de ‘straffende’ God van het Oude Testament,” *Theologia Reformata* 57, no. 4 (2014): 365; Robin ten Hoopen, “Tweeënveertig ‘kinderen’ en twee berinnen: De brute dood van de kleine jongens uit 2 Koningen 2,” *Met Andere Woorden* 37, no. 2 (2018): 27, 30, are of the opinion that the boys are from Bethel.

21 Fred E. Woods, “Elisha and the Children: The Question of Accepting prophetic Succession,” *BYU Studies* 32 (1992): 49; Eric J. Ziolkowski, *Evil Children in Religion, Literature and Art* (New York: Palgrave 2001), 15; Gilmour, *Juxtaposition*, 98-99; Uwe FW Bauer, “‘Hau ab, Glatzkopf!’: Bemerkungen zu drei literarischen Analysen von 2 Könige 2,23-25,” *Biblische Notizen* 192 (2022): 61.

22 How different his meeting with the prophets from Jericho. This was respectful (2:5 and 2:15-18) and in recognition of his status as Elijah’s successor.

23 Gilmour, *Juxtaposition*, 100, 102.

24 Bauer, “Hau ab,” 61-62.

of this rendering is that the connection with the same verb in verse 23a and 23b is lost. The verb occurs twice more in 2 Kings 2, both times in Elijah's ascension story (v. 1: "It came to pass, when YHWH caused Elijah to go up by a storm," and v. 11: "He went up to heaven by a storm"). Various commentators are therefore of the opinion that the imperative עלה should be translated as: "Go up, you too (baldy)!"²⁵ The boys would be calling on Elisha to rise up to heaven, too.²⁶ Commentators, it is clear, tend to choose between connecting עלה with the going up to Bethel of 2:23 (ויעל)²⁷ or with Elijah's ascent to heaven in 2:1,11 (ויעל). I don't think that that choice has to be made. Both aspects come into play. Elisha goes up to Bethel which means "House of God." It is therefore not surprising that he is told to "Go up [namely, to the House of God – to God]." He must be found in that house. The jeer is therefore extremely ambiguous.

The mockery is not only in עלה, but also in the way they call him names: "baldy" or "baldhead." Whether he is bald or has shaved himself—as a sign of mourning—the narrator does not make clear. Elijah was portrayed as a hairy man (2 Kgs. 1:8).²⁸ We now get the impression of Elisha as the opposite of Elijah. By calling Elisha "baldy" or "baldhead," they dispute his legitimate succession to the hairy Elijah. He is nothing like Elijah.²⁹

"Hair" stands for strength, masculinity, and potency (see Esau, Gen. 25:25, and Samson, Judg. 16:13,22). The mockery could refer to his powerlessness. That they are not wrong in this is evident from the second element of the divine speech ("There will be no more death and bereavement of children from there") that has not been implemented (a point to which I will return later). Hartmut Schmid is of the opinion that "Go up, baldy, go up, baldy" indicates a rejection of his status as man of God.³⁰ Similarly Fred Woods is of the opinion that "bald head" should be understood figuratively.³¹ Elisha wears

25 Ten Hoopen, "Tweeënveertig 'kinderen'," 27; Klaas Spronk, "2 Koningen 2: Een onderzoek naar ontstaan en opbouw van de tekst en naar de achtergrond van de daarin vermelde tradities," *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 88 (1988): 91, also understands עלה in this way.

26 Also Henk Jagersma, 2 *Koningen [Deel] 1*, Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel (Kampen: Kok, 2008), 48.

27 In 2:2 we heard of "descend to Bethel."

28 NIV "He had a garment of hair" (1:8) (also Hans Ausloos, "Moordlustige berinnen," <https://www.kerknet.be/kerknet-redactie/artikel/bizarre-bijbel-10-moordlustige-berinnen>. Accessed on October 26, 2022. Literally it says that he is "a hairy master" (בעל שער). In Zach. 13:4 there is mention of (prophets with) "a hairy mantle" (אדרת שער).

29 Heller, *The Characters*, 128.

30 Schmid, *Elisa und Elia*, 246, 252.

31 Woods, "Elisha and the Children," 55.

the cloak incorrectly. He is not a man of God, but “a usurper of prophetic authority,”³² comparable to Korah, a name related to קֹרַח, baldhead.³³

(2) The second moment is about Elisha’s reaction to what happened in the first moment (vv. 24a-c). It consists of two elements: First Elisha turns around to see who is mocking him. Hence the story continues with “when he saw them.” However, opinions differ on this view. That it would be a prophetic vision, as Koert van Bekkum suggests,³⁴ is not plausible. A prophetic vision would not require Elisha to turn around. In addition, it says: “And when he saw *them*.” Others believe that it is a magical act, namely the casting of the evil eye.³⁵ The text rather seems to indicate that the turning around is in the service of seeing who are those who are speaking to him in this way. We have heard previously that these are “little boys”—later the narrator uses the word “children” (v. 24e).³⁶ This doesn’t stop Elisha from cursing them, and still in the name of YHWH. A curse that is very much against the grain for many readers/listeners. Among various interpreters, this has led to the view that the prophet, aggrieved in his ego, because he was being called “baldy,” is here thoroughly abusing his prophetic office to punish children. Challenging this view may give the impression that one does not oppose this ruthless performance by Elisha—for a “relatively minor infraction”³⁷ according to Roy Heller. I would first like to attempt to understand what exactly is happening. It seems to me that in order to come to such a curse, the ridicule must be touching on something really essential. Before I consider what this might be, I want to look at the third moment.

(3) That third moment is found at 2:24d-e: “Two she-bears went out of the forest, they ripped open forty-two children from them.” The narrator may not make the role of YHWH explicit, but the reader will interpret the going out of two she-bears as the execution of the curse, without explicitly holding YHWH responsible for it. But to completely avoid “blaming YHWH for the death of a larger number of small boys”³⁸ does not work either. A causal relationship between the curse and the ferocious she-bears is assumed,

32 Woods, “Elisha and the Children,” 51, 53, 54.

33 Woods, “Elisha and the Children,” 53-55.

34 Van Bekkum, “Zijn woede,” 366-367.

35 David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, BJS 301 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 47; Pietsch, “Der Prophet als Magier,” 355-357.

36 Cf. 2 Kgs. 4:32-35, where a similar alternation between “boy” (נער) and “child” (ילד) occurs.

37 Heller, *The Characters*, 126.

38 Wesley J. Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, JSOT.SS 286 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 71.

but not directly stated in the text.³⁹ Often, and not unjustly, it is noted that animals—here not male, but female bears; they are the most furious of bears (2 Sam. 17:8; Prov. 17:12)—execute the judgment of God (Lev. 26:11; 1 Kings. 20:35-36; Ezek. 5:17; Hos. 13:8).⁴⁰ Hans Ausloos links the fact that there are two bears to the equally twofold jeers.⁴¹ Where the little boys went out from the city, one could almost say, as a form of “poetic justice,” the two she-bears go out from the forest, after which they rip open forty-two children. From the fact that it speaks of forty-two “from them,” the reader infers that the group is larger than forty-two. We are given the very precise number of forty-two.⁴² The scene ends horribly.

(4) Of a fourth moment, the reaction to this, we hear nothing or, we seem to hear nothing, because the story simply continues, as if nothing in particular has happened. That can also be called a reaction. Nevertheless, there is a change to be observed, because we are not told, as the reader would expect, of Elisha’s arrival in Bethel. Elisha changes his route. From there he now goes first to Mount Carmel and then “returns” to Samaria. The use of “return” is a little odd given that we have not been told that he was staying in Samaria. How should this change of direction be interpreted? Several interpreters believe that this avoidance of Beth-El (House of God) can only have one reason, and that is the bad conscience of the prophet. As a result of the working out of the curse, he is completely disorientated.⁴³ For the understanding, it is good to bring in the broader context. If we compare the journey from before the ascension of Elijah to the journey after the ascension, it appears that Elisha goes the other way. First from Gilgal to Bethel, then to Jericho and then to the Jordan (2:1-8). After the ascension, Elisha goes from Jordan to Jericho and then to Bethel. If he was in fact making

39 Bodner, *Elisha’s Profile*, 2; Julie Faith Parker, *Valuable and Vulnerable: Children in the Hebrew Bible, Especially in the Elisha Cycle*, BJS 355 (Providence RI: Brown University, 2013), 95: “While the text does not directly link Elisha’s curse with the emergence of the bears, readers infer that the animal’s violence against the children reflects divine punishment.”

40 Irwin, “The Curious Incident,” 42, 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.”

41 Joel S. Burnett, “Going Down to Bethel: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 296; Ausloos, “Bizarre Bijbel#10.”

42 Numerous commentators refer to the forty-two men whom the brothers of Ahaziah serve to kill by order of Jehu (2 Kgs. 10:12-14). According to Johannes Herrmann, “Die Zahl zweiundvierzig im AT,” *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 13 (2010): 51, forty-two is known in Israel as the number of death.

43 Klaus Seybold, *Poetik der erzählenden Literatur im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2006), 53.

the return journey we would expect Elisha to go to Gilgal before going to Bethel.⁴⁴ He will go to Gilgal later (3:38). But something happened in 2:23-25 demonstrating to the reader that that Elisha does not simply continue in the way laid down by Elijah. Elisha is not a copy of Elijah. Some will say that Elisha has lost his way (v. 23b).

The two stories read together

How do these two stories relate to each other? To answer that question, let me first look at the words they share:

(1) Elisha “sees” in both stories, in the first moment. In verse 19b it is the men of the city who apply the word to Elisha who, because he resides there himself, can “see” that to stay in the city is good. What Elisha cannot “see,” and that the men of the city point out to him, is that the water is “evil” and the land is being bereft of children. Elisha does not yet have the prophetic vision. In verse 24a, the narrator tells us that Elisha catches sight of the little boys who mock him when he turns around. In other words, he must turn around in order to “see” them. If Elisha had the prophetic vision, there would have been no need to turn around. In short, in both cases Elisha has to look in order to “see,” in one case the good, in the other the bad.

In both second moments the name of God is used, both times by Elisha, who is not referred to as a “man of God” in either scene. In one case, Elisha uses the messenger formula “Thus says YHWH” with which he makes it clear that he is acting as a messenger of the LORD. In the other case, he acts on behalf of God, this time apparently not for the benefit of the people, but to hurt all those involved as much as possible.

The third moment of both stories has no common word. That is not strange, when one *sees* the enormous contrast.

Two words demand additional attention, viz. the key words of 2:19-25: אצו, “going out” and מן שם, “from there,” which in turn are linked to שם, “there.” “Going out” is an important moment in both small stories. In the first story Elisha “goes out” from Jericho (v. 21a), in the second there is talk of little boys “going out” from Jericho (v. 23b). Elisha’s “going out” is positive: it leads to the healing of the water. The “going out” of the little boys is not positive. They make fun of the prophet by wishing him an ascension just like Elijah’s in Bethel so that there will no longer be a prophet who can act

44 cf. Bergen, *Elisha*, 71, who also points out that the moment begun in 2:1 does not end in Gilgal.

beneficially. This “going out” of the little boys leads to a different “going out,” namely that of the two she-bears who, going out from the forest, rip open forty-two of the little boys. In short, where Elisha’s “going out” “from there” leads to relief from death and bereavement, the “going out” of the children leads to carnage.

(2) The question of how the two stories relate to each other is answered differently. First of all, it may be clear that the two stories have opposite cores: healing versus ripping open. The contrast becomes even greater when one sees that Elisha lets YHWH say in the first episode “from there,” there will be no death and bereavement of children, and then in the second episode Elisha himself goes “from there” to “death.” It is clear that for this reason the second element of the oracle (v. 21f) was not repeated in the elaboration, unlike the first (v. 21e). That promise was not made true by God! This contrast has led several interpreters to propose that in the prophet Elisha we are dealing with two aspects: first he acts as the trustworthy messenger of the LORD, but he also completely abuses his office by cursing in the name of YHWH, the children who mock him.

There is another reading to be argued for: by placing both stories next to each other, the narrator wants to show that prophecy has two sides: a beneficial, life-giving side, as becomes visible in the first story, and an extremely critical, even deadly side, as becomes clear in the second. Klaas Spronk uses the terms “blessing” and “curse” for this. He believes that the two stories illustrate how Elisha, like Elijah, could bring blessings and curses.⁴⁵

Both stories enclose each other in the sense that they begin with a situation reminiscent of a curse: “the water is ‘evil’ and the land is bereft of children” (see, among others, Lev. 26:22 and Ezek. 5:17), and they end with a curse (“and he cursed them in the name of YHWH”).⁴⁶

The two miracles as the beginning of Elisha’s appearance

Finally, it brings me to my main question: why does the narrator initiate Elisha’s prophetic ministry with these two very different events? It is a question that receives little attention in the research. The miracles themselves attract—not entirely incomprehensibly—all the attention. Less attention is paid to the place they occupy in the bigger picture, namely at the very beginning of Elisha’s prophecy, immediately after “Elijah going up to heaven,”

⁴⁵ Spronk, “2 Koningen 2,” 90.

⁴⁶ For further connecting elements and differences, see Schmid, *Elisa und Elia*, 227-228.

as the narrator's formulation reads (2 Kgs. 2:1,11), where we usually speak of "Elijah's ascension." It is not the first scene after the ascent, because there was still the suspicion among the prophets of Jericho whether Elijah had not stayed somewhere after all—the Spirit of the LORD could have taken him up and cast him down either on one of the mountains or into one of the valleys (2:16). They therefore want a search to be undertaken, which Elisha advises against, but which he agrees to after their insistence. The three-day search makes no sense, they do not find him (2:17).⁴⁷ Their mission ends with the return (cf. Lk. 9:2 and 10) of the fifty men sent by the prophets of Jericho and the report that Elisha had remained in Jericho (2:18). At the end of this final part of Elijah's ascension, Elisha confirms that he had already said that the search was futile. After that, attention shifts to "the men of the city" and a new scene begins, with Elisha's first miracle immediately followed by a second. In the final scene of the ascension story (2:15-18), the prophets of Jericho report that Elijah's spirit now rests on Elisha. The question, however, is whether this statement is also reliable:⁴⁸ does Elijah's spirit indeed rest on Elisha, and will he consequently have the same powers that Elijah had? That is the question with which the story of Elijah's ascent ends and the Elisha story begins.

Typically, a prophet's appointment is preceded by a call, instituting the person concerned as a prophet (Isa. 6; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1; Amos 7). Both Elijah and Elisha lack such vocation stories. Their legitimation takes place in a different way, namely through their (first) acts. I use the plural on purpose. Elijah and Elisha differ in that after Elijah's first appearance, also consisting of two miracles (1 Kgs. 17:1-16 + 17:17-23), he is recognized as a man of God. This recognition is by a pagan woman, the widow of Zarephath: "Just now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of YHWH in your mouth is trustworthy" (1 Kgs. 17:24).⁴⁹ Such recognition is absent after both of Elisha's miracles, not after the first and not after the second. In the research it is therefore far too easily said, that in 2:19-25 the legitimation of Elisha as a man of God takes place.

47 Several commentators suggest that Luke's report of his parents' seeking and finding Jesus after three days (Luke 2:45-46) has been derived from 2 Kgs. 2:16-17 (for further parallels, see: Nico Riemersma, *Het Lucasevangelie onder de loep: Opbouw, stijl en theologie* (Middelburg: Skandalon, 2018), 156-166).

48 It is often suggested by the commentators, including Schmid, *Elisa und Elia*, 238, that this is an actual situation while the narrator presents it as a statement by the prophets of Jericho (2:15).

49 For the Dutch translation of 1 Kgs. 17:24, see Riemersma, *Aan de dode een wonder gedaan*, 137.

In a way, we noticed this non-recognition before, when we said that the fourth moment “the reaction to the miracle” does not take place. In both situations Elisha does act as a prophet, as evidenced by the divine speech with the preceding messenger formula: “Thus says YHWH: ‘I heal this water; there will be no more death and bereavement of children from there.’” That the Word of God is reliable in Elisha’s mouth, to use the wording of 1 Kings 17:24, may be suggested by many commentators, but the matter is more complicated. We only find the reaction to the first part of the Word of God: “The water was healed to this day,” but the narrator does not continue with: “And there was no more death and bereavement of children.”⁵⁰ If that was indeed the case, then a response would certainly not have been lacking. That the promise is not fulfilled and that the initial situation (v. 19) continues, becomes immediately clear in the next scene (2:24). Rachelle Gilmour rightly calls it ironic that more death and bereavement of children comes so quickly, and from Jericho, where Elisha had previously said, presenting the Word of God, that there would be no more death and robbery of children.⁵¹

In short, Elisha’s first appearance is ambiguous: one part of the Word of God comes true, the other does not.⁵² Earlier we also saw that Elisha lacked the prophetic vision. That there is no recognition, as after the first two miracles of Elijah: “Just now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of YHWH in your mouth is trustworthy” is therefore not surprising. It is not indisputable that the word of YHWH in Elisha’s mouth is reliable, to use the terminology of the widow of Sarepta (1 Kgs. 17:24).⁵³ In the second scene the situation is different, because now Elisha does not speak a Word of God in response to the mockery of the boys, but pronounces a curse “in the name of YHWH.”⁵⁴ The curse does not miss its object, as the reader can conclude from the sequel. Again, there is no recognition of Elisha as a

50 Cf. Rev 21:4 “...and death shall be no more...”

51 Gilmour, *Juxtaposition*, 99, and further on the same page: “He performs a miracle that removes death and bereavement, but he can just as easily call on the Lord to bring about death and bereavement himself.”

52 Contra Bergen, *Elisha*, 67: “Then the resolution of the problem is announced, as well as a recognition that all (*sic*) has come about according to the word of Elisha” and Gilmour, *Juxtaposition*, 93: “... Elisha is bringing life to this town in its water source (‘there will be no more death and bereavement from there’). It is a powerful miracle, and it corroborates his succession to Elijah as the powerful prophet ...,” and 98: “Now Elisha, who ... reports the message that God has healed the spring of Jericho, has his words confirmed as true.”

53 For an extensive analysis of 1 Kgs. 17:17-24, see Riemersma, *Aan de dode een wonder gedaan*, 134-181.

54 It is the only time in OT that “cursed in the name of YHWH” occurs (cf. 1 Sam. 17:43).

prophet. The reader can certainly confirm this, but will also realize that Elisha's curse was very effective.

I come back to Elisha's journey, which did not continue up to Bethel, but went from there to Mount Carmel. A remarkable move, not least because Elisha, unlike Elijah, has no association with Carmel.⁵⁵ Here it remains a sober announcement, because immediately afterwards Elisha returns to Samaria. What meaning should be attributed to his going to Carmel? The reader is reminded of the confirmation of Elijah on Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:16-46): the story in which it is confessed that "thou art God and that I [Elijah] am your servant" (1 Kgs. 18:36-37). In short, Mount Carmel invokes legitimacy, both of God and of his servant. It is that confirmation that Elisha seems to be looking for, but concerning which the narrator leaves the reader in the dark. Is Elisha hoping for that same ratification that was granted Elijah on Mount Carmel? Why the narrator dismisses it with a sentence is not strange, he does not get there the legitimacy that Elijah received.⁵⁶

On the basis of these two miracles, no legitimization by others of Elisha as a man of God takes place.⁵⁷ And not only that! In the second miracle story, the narrator no longer even mentions Elisha ("My God is salvation") by name. Unlike the first miracle story, which began and ended with "Elisha" (v. 19 and v. 22). It should be clear that the narrator is telling the reader that he will not use in this part of the story the name "Elisha" ("My God is salvation") in vain.⁵⁸

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55 Sauerwein, *Elischa*, 31: "Bereits die grundlose Erwähnung eines Umwegs über die Karmel in 2,25, die erzählerisch ohne Folgen bleibt, verwundert."

56 Heller, *The Characters*, 129, puts it differently: "Elisha goes to the site of Elijah's greatest victory, ... Mount Carmel (v. 25a). Unlike the scene with Elijah, however nothing happens for Elisha."

57 Sauerwein, *Elischa*, 33, also points out that Elisha bears no title in either episode, but this does not lead to an attribution of meaning; Otto Eißfeldt, "Die Komposition von I Reg 16,29-II Reg 13,25," in *Das Ferne und Nahe Wort* (Fs. L. Rost), edited by Fritz Maas, BZAW 105 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1967), 50, therefore incorrectly states that the two pericopes serve as proof that Elisha has become the full heir and successor of Elijah.

58 I owe thanks to Alice Deken for the English translation of this article.

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