



THE EVENING OF THE MONARCHY STUDIES IN KINGS AND CHRONICLES LESSON 8

ELISHA, DOUBLY EMPOWERED 1 of a 3 Part Miniseries on Elisha (II Kings 1-13)

After September the 11th, it was said, the world would never be the same again. I think it is true to say that many people accept that view. Superficially of course, it would appear that there is a lot to be said in its favour. A few years ago the Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington wrote a major work of the future entitled, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order." He argued that whereas for most of the 19th and 20th centuries conflicts were largely conducted between nation states, that is apparently no longer the case. The 21st century, he proposed would be dominated by the conflict of civilizations, and civilizations are defined by their culture and their religion. Islam by definition is an all embracing religion, it is not simply part of life it is life- a total world view. But we in the West face a problem, because for us religion is something private and relative, a matter of take your pick. Cut loose from any intellectual moorings this soon degenerates into irrational mysticism, concern for horoscopes, a dabbling in the occult and the like. And that is what we are seeing more and more in the West. But there is a price to pay for this religious pluralism, as Huntington reminds us, "Peoples and countries with similar cultures are coming together" and "Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart"

But at a deeper level nothing has really changed since September 11th. The concern for sensuality, money, self-interest is still going on as it always has. That is why the Bible is always a contemporary book, mankind does not change fundamentally by itself and neither does God's method for dealing with us.

You see, in many ways our society is not unlike the society in which God's prophets, Elijah and Elisha, found themselves in the 9th century BC....

–“The call of the prophet - I Kings 19:19-21”, Melvin Tinker, St. John, Newland, Kingston-upon-Hull, <http://www.stjohnnewland.org.uk/index.htm>

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF II KINGS

I. Final Acts of Elijah (1:1-2:12)

- A. Elijah predicts death of Ahaziah (1:1-18)
- B. Elijah taken up in whirlwind (2:1-12)

II. Action of Elisha (2:13-9:10)

- A. Picks up Elijah's mantle (2:13-14)
- B. Futile search for Elijah (2:15-18)
- C. Purifies water (2:19-22)
- D. Curses young men who ridicule him (2:23-25)
- E. Jehoram of Israel (3:1-3)
- F. Prophecies against Moab (3:4-27)
- G. Makes oil (4:1-7)
- H. Elisha and woman of Shunem (4:8-37)
- I. Purifies stew (4:38-41)
- J. Multiplies food (4:42-44)
- K. Cures Naaman the Aramean of leprosy ((5:1-27)
- L. Ax head floats (6:1-7)
- M. War with Arameans (Syria) (6:8-8:15)
- N. Jehoram of Judah (8:16-24)
- O. Ahaziah of Judah (8:25-29)

- P. Anoints Jehu as King of Israel (9:1-10)
- III. Jehu of Israel (9:11-10:36)**
 - A. Jehu kills Joram and Ahaziah (9:11-29)
 - B. Jehu kills Jezebel (9:30-37)
 - C. Jehu kills Ahab's 70 sons (10:1-11)
 - D. Jehu kills Ahaziah's 42 sons (10:12-14)
 - E. Jehu kills other relatives of Ahab (10:15-17)
 - F. Jehu kills prophets of Baal (10:18-28)
 - G. Concluding notes on Jehu (10:29-36)
- IV. Series of Rulers (11:1-17:41)**
 - A. Queen Athaliah of Judah (11:1-20)
 - 1. Athaliah's deeds (11:1-3)
 - 2. Jehoida, the priest, overthrows Athaliah (11:4-16)
 - 3. Jehoida mediates a covenant (11:17-20)
 - B. Jehoash of Judah (11:21-12:21)
 - C. Jehoahaz of Israel (13:1-9)
 - D. Jehoash of Israel (13:10-13)
 - E. Death and last miracle of Elisha (13:14-21)
 - F. Amaziah of Judah, Jeroboam II of Israel (Ch. 14)
- V. Israel's last Kings (Ch. 15)**
- VI. Assyrian Captivity of Israel (Ch. 16-17)**
- VII. Judah to Babylonian Exile (Ch. 18-25)**
 - A. Sennacherib of Assyria (Ch. 18-19)
 - B. Hezekiah's Illness (Ch. 20)
 - C. Manasseh's Sin (Ch. 21)
 - D. Josiah's Reforms (Ch. 22-23)
 - E. Babylonian Captivity (Ch. 24)
 - F. Fall of Jerusalem (Ch. 25)

I. THE MAN, ELISHA

During his life Elisha was a humble servant of Elijah and of Jehovah. He saved many, and his vitality was so astounding that even after his death and burial, his dry bones had a life giving force. Seldom has so distinguished a career been told in so few words; the sayings and deeds of Elisha are immortal both in literature and in their moral influence; yet his entire biography covers only a dozen chapters in the Bible.

A. His Background

The name Elisha means "*God is Saviour.*"

Abel Meholah, a town of the upper Jordan Valley, was Elisha's home until his call to the prophetic office (I Kings 19:16-21).

He was the son of Shaphat, evidently a wealthy farmer, for he plowed with twelve yoke of oxen, evidently with eleven servant's, each with one yoke. His desire to bid farewell to his parents may not have been a sign of hesitation on his part but a desire to present a clear testimony to family and friends that God had called him to a great life work. He severed his relationship to the farm by cooking an oxen using the yoke for wood.

B. His Ministry

His ministry as pastor-prophet spanned the reigns of Jehoram (Joram), Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash of the northern kingdom, and thus lasted from at least 852 B.C. to about 798 B.C. a period of more than half a century.

He completed the eradication of Baal worship begun by Elijah, counseled the king of Israel on national policy, and took an intense personal interest in the problems and needs of the individuals with whom his ministry brought him into contact.

He supervised the so-named "schools of the prophets" founded two centuries earlier by Samuel, and thus made what was perhaps his greatest single contribution to the spiritual life of the nation. Around him he was ever caring and large-hearted; around a limited understanding of the divine will he was tolerant and patient; around danger he manifested firm, unflinching courage; around evil he was stern and severe without being vindictive.

Although for a time there seems to have been an encouraging response on the part of the nation to his leadership as a prophet, the reforms he set in motion were short-lived and did not prevent the complete dissolution of the northern kingdom some 75 years after his death.

The life narrative of the prophet Elisha seems, almost, to be one of an uninterrupted succession of miracles, some consisting essentially of supernatural information, and others of supernatural control over men and the forces of nature. In an era of apostasy and Baal worship, these miracles provided a continuing witness to the Lord as the true God and to Elisha as His messenger. Elisha is distinguished in the annals of sacred history as the greatest miracle-working prophet of all time, next to Jesus Christ.

For an unspecified period of time he was a personal attendant of Elijah (II Kings 3:11). He faithfully served Elijah during that period and learned from him. Knowing that the Lord was about to take him Elijah tested his servant's devotion by asking him three times to remain while he went on in turn to Bethel (II Kings 2:2), Jericho (2:4) and then over the Jordan (2:6).

Elisha and the other prophets of the Lord were well aware of what was about to happen and he refused to leave his master. When they reached the far side of the Jordan Elijah asked him what it was that he wanted and Elisha replied: "...a double-portion of your spirit", indicating that he wished to succeed him in his prophetic office. (Given the number of miracles that Elisha performed during his lifetime it is possible that he was also asking for an even greater ministry than Elijah himself had had.)

His story is told in a series of anecdotes about his miracles and ministry. Taken together these stories and historical sketches portray a figure who has been cast in near legendary terms. On a theological level, they demonstrate the sovereignty and power of God at work in spite of the horrible influence of Canaanite Baal worship and in spite of the political scheming and the personal crises of a disobedient nation.

II. COMPARISON AND CONTRASTS WITH ELIJAH

Elijah tended to be ascetic in dress, diet, and living quarters. He had limited contacts with people (at least insofar as the record goes) and was a solitary figure, spending much of his time alone without even a servant (I Kings 19:3; II Kings 1:6). Elisha, on the other hand, seemed to love the social life and lived close to the people he served. Elisha was often found in the company of the "sons of the prophets" (II Kings 4:38-41; 6:1-7) and even with the elders of Samaria (6:32).

Unlike the life of Elijah, who burst upon the stage of history for only a few striking events, Elisha's life is recorded as a steady ministry of over 50 years, during which he constantly ministered to the needs of people, as well as to the spiritual life of the nation as a whole.

Whereas it was seldom appropriate for Elijah to spend time in the presence of Ahab while he allowed the worship of Baal, Elisha spent some of his time with the kings of Israel and on one occasion, the king of Judah as well (3:11). Ahab's son, Joram, put aside the Canaanite deities and worshipped the Golden Calves that Jeroboam had set up (II Kings 3:1-3). Though Joram was far from being a godly king, and at times threatened Elisha's life (6:26-31) at other times he honored him and referred to him deferentially as "my father" (6:21).

In common with Elijah, Elisha's ministry took him all over the place. We know, however, that he had his own house in Samaria (6:32) and the use of an upper room in the town of Shunem (4:8-10) when he was in that region. The upper room arrangement went on much longer than Elijah's with the widow of Zaraphath (I Kings 17:8-16).

He often appears in the company of groups of prophets ("the sons of the prophets," II Kings 2:3-15; 4:1; 5:22; 9:1), and he frequented religious centers such as Bethel (II Kings 2:23), Gilgal (2:1,4,38), and Mount Carmel (2:25; 4:25). The overall impression we get is of a man who is involved in society and the

everyday details of life (6:1-4). He was even willing to lend his aid in recovering a borrowed lost axe head to alleviate the embarrassment of one of his students (6:5-7).

Like Elijah, however, he would not suffer any insult against his office to go unpunished (2:23-24; cf. 1:9-12).

Not only are Elisha's miracles very numerous, even more so than those of Elijah, but they stand in a peculiar relation to the man and his work. With all the other prophets the primary function is spiritual teaching; miracles, even though numerous and many of them symbolical like Elisha's, are only ancillary. With Elisha, on the other hand, miracles seem the principal function, and the teaching is altogether subsidiary.

One final contrast with Elijah is that Elijah did not die but was taken up in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha died as every other mortal and was interred in a tomb.

III. OTHER PROPHETS AND THE "SCHOOL OF THE PROPHETS"

There were definite periods in Biblical history in which the miraculous became more or less common. This time of great spiritual need in Israel and Judah provided the setting for the miracle-working prophets, Elijah and Elisha. In addition, there were many more prophets in existence, though the others are not characterized by their miracles. We have in this period Ahijah of Shiloh, Hanani, Jehu ben Hanani, Micaiah, and many others.

There were specific "schools of the prophets," first mentioned in the time of Samuel, established at Gibeah, Naiotyh, Bethel, Gilgal, and Jericho, where young men were instructed in religion and prepared to guide in religious worship, I Samuel 10:5,19:20; II Kings 2:3,5; 4:38. Many of the "sons of the prophets" taught here became not only religious teachers, but inspired prophets. Amos speaks of his own case as an exception, Amos 7:14,15.

There were also sons of prophets living in various communities throughout the land. These were no doubt the spiritual heirs of the "Schools of the prophets" of Samuel's time who had remained more or less inactive until they had such leadership as Elijah and Elisha could afford. They may have been simply the students at the various "Schools of the prophets." What their functions were we do not know, but they presumably were trained in preaching and singing and certainly in the law.

There were doubtless corresponding schools among the Canaanites and Phoenicians, for example, those who were involved in the conflict with Elijah on Mount Carmel. It seems that these Baal prophets were modeled after the true prophets of God (rather than Hebrew prophetism deriving from Canaanite religious practice). Hebrew prophetism was scarcely ecstatic in nature, and cannot be considered as parallel to other kinds in any respect.

Ahab seemed to have other prophets working for him. The first group he had was definitely Canaanitish and actually called upon Baal in their worship. When Elijah executed these prophets, Ahab replaced them with prophets who claimed to be spokesmen for Jehovah but who had never received a Divine call. In other words, there appear to have been two kinds of false prophets: those who were prophets of false gods and those who were false prophets of the true God. In either case, they were false and were to be shunned or destroyed equally.

IV. THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES AROUND ELISHA

Elisha carried on his ministry against the backdrop of two specters: famine and war. Both of these were signs of God's covenantal curses being carried out on a stubborn and disobedient nation (Lev. 26:17-20; Deut. 28:21-25; cf. I Kings 8:35, 37; 18:2).

A. Famine

The famine is first mentioned in II Kings 4:38. Elisha had earlier solved the town of Jericho's problem with its water supply (2:19-22), but twice now he intervened on behalf of the company of the prophets in order provide them with food. In the first instance one of the company had made the communal meal inedible by adding the gourds from a poisonous plant to the stew. As it appears that the company numbered around a hundred, such an occurrence meant a considerable amount of valuable food was going to be wasted, Elisha therefore performed a miracle and rendered it edible again (4:38-41). In the second incident he miraculously made twenty barley loaves feed a hundred men (II Kings 4:42-44).

B. War

Elisha was heavily involved in the affairs of the nation, and the nation's military. He provided water to a thirsty army (II Kings 3:4-20), was instrumental in routing the Moabites (3:21-27), warned the kings of enemy plans more than once (6:8-12), helped avert disaster at the hands of the Syrians (6:13-7:23), was involved in the overthrow of Ben-Hadad of Damascus (8:7-15) and the revolt of Jehu of Israel (9:1-36), and from his deathbed prophesied Joash's defeat of the Syrians (13:14-19).

1 Moab

Moab, which had been a vassal of Israel revolted during the reign of Joram and the king set out, accompanied by the king of Judah (Jehoshaphat) and the governor of Edom (cf. 1 Kings 22:47). After seven days the army ran out of water and was in danger of dying of thirst in the desert (II Kings 4-10). Fortunately and apparently unbeknown to the king of Israel (cf. II Kings 3:11) Elisha had accompanied them on their march. He reassured the leaders and ordered the men to dig ditches across the valley. The next morning water filled the ditches and the Moabites, thinking that the sun reflecting on the water was the blood of their enemies descended upon them intent on plunder, but were defeated by the coalition (3:12-25).

2. Aram (Syria) and Joram of Israel

During the war with Aram, Elisha's fame brought about a visit from a very important person, Naaman the Syrian general (II Kings 5). We will learn more about this later.

Raiding parties from Aram harried the land of Israel, but for some reason these raids were proving fruitless. The reason, the king of Aram was told, was the knowledge that the Lord gave Elisha of his counsels – even what he said in his bedchamber! (6:12). Thinking that he could solve this problem by capturing Elisha he sent an army to Dothan. Needless to say, the arrival of an army was no surprise to Elisha, who was granted spiritual sight to see an even greater force ready to move in his defense (6:18).

Just as Elisha opened the eyes of his servant to see spiritual things, he closed the eyes of the Arameans and led them blind into the city of Samaria (6:18-20). There he refused to allow the king of Israel to harm them and instead made sure that they were fed and released unharmed. The result was more effective than killing the men, for it seems that they realized that further raid would be just as ineffective (6:22-23).

There was at least one time when Elisha's life was directly threatened. When the King of Aram besieged Samaria the situation became so bad that people began to eat their own children in order to survive. When Jehoram, the king of Israel heard this he set out to find Elisha and put him to death, perhaps because the prophet had earlier allowed the Aramean army to go free. However, within 24 hours the siege was lifted and the famine was over. The only person who failed to enjoy this reversal was an officer of the king who refused to believe that the Lord could do such a thing (6:24-7:20).

When reading the Bible account, it is easy to be confused about Jehoram, for three reasons:

One, he is also known as Joram, and the two names are used interchangeably and without explanation.

Two, neighboring Judah also had a king named Jehoram, also known as Joram, who reigned at the same time. So both names are intermixed, sometimes referring to one king, sometimes to the other.

Third, in II Kings 5:1-8:6, he is referred to namelessly, simply as "the king," leaving the casual reader in doubt of his identity.

C. The Dynasty of Jehu of Israel

The most important intervention of Elisha in the history of his country involved the fulfillment of the third of the commands given to Elijah regarding Jehu (I Kings 19:16).

Joram, the son of Ahab, was king of Israel. He fought against Hazael, lost the battle, was grievously wounded, and returned to Jezreel to recover. There Ahaziah, king of Judah, visited him.

Elisha sent one of the "sons of the prophets" (9:1-3) to Captain Jehu, telling him to anoint the captain as king of Israel; then to open the door and run away as fast as his legs could carry him. Jehu was at mess with the other officers, and they were naturally curious when the excited

messenger sought a private interview with him. No sooner had he returned to the room than they asked him, “*Wherefore came this mad fellow to thee?*” Captain Jehu told them the truth; with one accord they rallied around him, blew trumpets, and announced the revolution. Jehu drove to Jezreel and killed Joram, having him thrown in Naboth’s vineyard. He had Joram’s mother, Jezebel, thrown from the tower and dogs ate her body. “Payday someday” had come.

Elisha is not heard of during the next forty-five years of the reigns of Jehu and Jehoahaz. But on the occasion of Elisha’s sickness and death (13:14-21) it is clear that he had continued to enjoy the esteem of the dynasty that he had helped to found.

Joash (spelled Jehoash in II Kings 13:10), the son of Jehoahaz and grandson of Jehu, waited on him on his deathbed, and addressed him in the words that he himself had used to Elijah: “*My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof*” (cf. 1:12). Following Elisha’s strange command, the king shot an arrow from his bedroom window. This was to symbolize Israel’s victory over the Syrians. He was then instructed to strike the floor with some arrows, which he timidly did three times, thus angering Elisha, who told him he should have hit the ground five or six times, for each strike assured him of a victory over Syria (II Kings 13:14-19). During the period that followed, Joash reconquered the cities his father had previously lost, and defeated the Syrians on three specific occasions, just as Elisha had predicted.

Shortly after his interview with Joash, Elisha died and was buried. God does not insulate us from all the problems of life. He who had helped so many must himself suffer a terminal illness and die. God heals all of our illnesses except the last one...Even that is mitigated by the beautiful truth that we are going to live forever with Him.