

ELISHA THE PROPHET

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Reading the life and works of the prophet Elisha superficially, one is easily disappointed. He does not seem to measure up to our expectations of a prophet. Where do we find in him the moral indignation of Nathan, who daringly confronted David over his sin with Bathsheba; or the fury of Elijah with Ahab for the murder of Naboth; or the passion for justice and righteousness of the literary prophets? And yet, 9 out of 25 chapters of the Book of Kings II are devoted to Elisha's career, while the remaining 16 chapters deal with no fewer than 13 kings of Israel (a span of approximately 132 years until its destruction in 722 BCE), and 17 kings of Judah (a span of approximately 289 years until its destruction in 586 BCE).

How do we explain this disparity of emphasis? There can be no question that the author of the Book of Kings was from the prophetic school – talmudic tradition has it that Jeremiah himself wrote it – for whom the career of kings was of secondary, even fleeting, importance, and who was impressed with the achievements of Elisha. Again, on a superficial reading of the relevant chapters, an impression is gained of a hodge-podge of loosely-connected episodes centered on Elisha. However, a more careful study reveals a pattern from which emerges a remarkable man who dedicated his life to one goal: the total elimination of Baal-worship in Israel.

We will note Elisha's growth from a disciple of Elijah to the undisputed leader of the *Bnei Neviim* [disciples of prophets]; his influence on royalty; his high reputation beyond the borders of Israel in Aram; and, his crowning achievement, the toppling of the House of Omri. All this is told by a master-narrator who learned his skill from the author of the Book of Samuel.

FROM DISCIPLE OF ELIJAH TO SUCCESSOR

Elijah's feat of faith on Mt. Carmel, where all the prophets of Baal had been put to the sword (I Kg. 18:20-46), brought him only anguish and frustration, and a threat to his life by the evil Jezebel, consort of King Ahab. Tired of living, he begged the Lord to take his life. He fled to Mt. Horeb, where he experienced a theophany and was charged with three missions: *anoint Hazael*

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king over Aram, and Jehu . . . to be king over Israel, and Elisha . . . to be prophet in thy stead (19:15-16). Of the three mandates, Elijah only implemented the last one.

He found Elisha ben-Shaphat from Abel-meholah¹ plowing with 12 oxen. Elisha went unhesitatingly with Elijah *and ministered unto him* (19:21). It is not stated how long Elisha served as Elijah's disciple, but it is told that he witnessed the sudden appearance of *a fiery chariot with fiery horses, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind* (II Kg. 2:11). A band of *Bnei Neviim* from Jericho, who had been watching from a distance, noticed Elisha donning the mantle of Elijah and *came to meet him and bowed down to the ground before him* (2:15). He assumed leadership over them. His reputation as a man of God was fully established when he cured the poisoned waters in Jericho (2:19-22), and when he caused the death of *little children* who had dared to mock him (2:23).²

One cannot imagine a greater contrast in personality than that between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was a loner. We are aware of the existence of roving bands of the *Bnei Neviim*. We know of Obadiah, an important official in the service of King Ahab, who saved 100 prophets of the Lord from the fury of Jezebel, by hiding and sustaining them in two caves (I Kg. 18:13). Yet we know of no instance of Elijah making contact with any one of them, or even being aware of their existence. He certainly seemed unaware of them when he complained on Mt. Horeb that '*the children of Israel have . . . slain Thy prophets . . . and I, even I only, am left*' (19:14).

In contrast, Elisha assumed leadership of the *Bnei Neviim*, ate with them (II Kg. 4:38-44), helped them to enlarge their abode (6:1-7), and performed miracles for those who were his loyal followers (4:1-7; 4:8-37). In all probability, he also created new cells of *Bnei Neviim* to serve as teachers, exhorting people to serve the Lord.

Who were these *Bnei Neviim*, disciples of the prophets, and what was their function? We meet them for the first time when Saul, secretly anointed by Samuel to be king in Israel, is told '. . . thou shalt meet a band of prophets' [נָבִיאי חֶבְלָה] with a psaltery, and a timbrel, and a pipe, and a harp, before them' (I Sam. 10:5). Later on, we read of *the company of the prophets* [לְהַקְתָּן נָבִיאי֤ם] prophesying and Samuel standing as head over them (19:20). As *Bnei Neviim*, they came into prominence in the life of Elisha.

From this rather scant record, one can make an educated guess about their function. Established by Samuel and trained by him in the rudiments of Israel's faith, they passed through the land and "prophesied" accompanied by musical instruments. That is, as enthusiasts and ecstatics, they attempted to wean the people from idol worship and to strengthen their faith in the Lord.

Elijah was a tragic figure during his lifetime. He was constantly in flight, in fear of his life. His great success on Mt. Carmel, where he convinced Israel of the might of the Lord and the powerlessness of Baal, had no lasting results. In contrast, Elisha succeeded in all his undertakings, and his fame as "wonderworker" or "man of God" spread throughout Israel and beyond it. While the great Elijah was insulted by King Ahab as *troubler of Israel* [עֹכֶר הָאָשָׁר], Elisha was sought by Jehoram and Jehoshaphat, kings of Israel and Judah respectively, to help them in a moment of great need; was visited by Naaman, commander of the army of Aram, to heal him of leprosy; and was visited shortly before his death by King Jehoash of Israel.

It was only after his death that Elijah was revered by Israel as the harbinger of the final redemption. Malachi, the last of the prophets, wound up his prophetic book with: *Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord*. In the final judgment, Elijah became the man of eternity while Elisha was portrayed as the man of the hour.

GROWING INFLUENCE

In the year 1868 C.E., the Moabite Stone was discovered. In its inscriptions, Mesha, King of Moab, tells of his successful rebellion against the King of Israel. The same event appears in II Kings 3, broadly corresponding to that of the Moabite Stone.

King Jehoram of Israel made an alliance with King Jehoshaphat of Judah and the King of Edom, to put down the rebellion. The road of the allied armies led through the wilderness of Edom. They marched for seven days, rounding the tip of the Dead Sea, and no water was left for men and animals. At this moment of great despair, Jehoshaphat requested the presence of a prophet who could inquire of the Lord. *So the King of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the King of Edom went down to him* [Elisha] (II Kg. 3:12). Elisha prophesied that a wadi would be filled with water, and that Moab would be deli-

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vered into their hands. After some initial military successes of the allies, the King of Moab, in desperation, sacrificed his firstborn on the walls of his city, whereupon "a great wrath" came upon Israel. The alliance was broken up, and each member withdrew to his own land.

It can be stated with good reason that, were it not for the involvement of Elisha, this entire episode would not have been recorded in the Book of Kings. This episode, if properly analyzed, was told to indicate the growing prominence of Elisha. The author, ill disposed toward Israelite kings, most subtly enables us to compare this story to what happened years back, during the reign of King Ahab, as related in I Kings 22. At that time, King Jehoshaphat of Judah, on a visit to Ahab, was asked by the latter to join him in an effort to reconquer Ramoth-gilead from the Arameans. The false prophet Zedekiah ben-Chenaanah made himself horns of iron to demonstrate that in such fashion the two kings would "gore" the Arameans. On the insistence of Jehoshaphat, Micaiah, a true prophet, was summoned before them. After some hesitation, he prophesied defeat. Thereupon Zedekiah smote Micaiah on the cheek, and as if this crude insult were not enough, Ahab ordered that he be put in prison *and fed . . . with scant bread and with scant water until I [Ahab] came in peace* (I Kg. 22:28).

Elisha, by contrast, was afforded a highly respectful treatment by royalty. In fact, the verse quoted before, *so the King of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the King of Edom went down to him*, has not been given sufficient attention. It seems to point to an important ingredient in Elisha's personality. Not only does he meet royalty, but also they come down to him.³ No wonder that the author of the Book of Kings held Elisha in such high regard. The true prophet, the messenger of God, wields spiritual authority far above those who have worldly power.

This interpretation of the real significance of this entire episode gains ironic poignancy by the fact that, in the final analysis, the prophecy of Elisha was not fulfilled. The failure of the military enterprise is summed up in the mysterious phrase *a great wrath came upon Israel*, without specifying who was angered, and why this wrath was directed at Israel.

INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

It was a young Israelite girl, captured by roving Aramean bands and brought into the household of Naaman, who was responsible for spreading the fame of Elisha beyond the borders of Israel. Naaman suffered from the dreadful disease of leprosy, and in her naiveté this young girl told her mistress '*I wish master could come before the prophet in Samaria, he could cure him of it*' (II Kg. 5:3). Naaman informed his King, who promptly dispatched him with a letter to the King of Israel, stating: '*When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my courtier Naaman to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy*' (5:6). When the King of Israel read it he rent his clothes, fearing that the King of Aram was seeking a pretext against him.

On hearing about it, Elisha sent a message to the King requesting that Naaman '*come to me, so he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel*' (5:8).⁴ Thereupon, Naaman came with horses and chariots to the house of Elisha who, instead of welcoming him, informed him by a messenger to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman, who had expected a mighty spectacle by the prophet and the use of magic, and probably annoyed by the standoffish attitude of Elisha, stalked off in a rage. It was only upon the urging of his servants that he did what Elisha had bidden him to do, and was cured. Elated, and a changed man, Naaman returned with his entire retinue to Elisha, acknowledging that '*there is no God in the whole world except in Israel*' (5:15).

Naaman asked to take two mule-loads of earth with him to Aram, on which he would offer sacrifices to the Lord alone. Then he added: '*But may the Lord pardon your servant for this when my master [the King of Aram] enters the temple of Rimon . . . and he is leaning on my arm, so that I must bow low . . . may the Lord pardon your servant in this*' (5:18).

This episode, briefly told and masterfully written, contains three layers of significance, not specifically recorded, but left to the imaginative interpretation of the reader. First, we again note Elisha maintaining the proud stance of the prophet and man of God who towers above men holding worldly power. Naaman came down twice to Elisha. The second has religious implications. It is the second instance of conversion recorded in the Bible, the first being that of Ruth the Moabite. Elisha, a true prophet in Israel, must have indicated that Naaman's cure was not accomplished by magic but by the power of the Lord. This sanctifying the Name [מָשָׁה וַיְתִיר] resulted in Naaman's encomium to

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the Lord of Israel and his conversion. Finally, this episode served as a stepping stone in Elisha's rise to fame, enabling him as "kingmaker" to implement his innermost strivings, to eliminate Baal-worship in Israel.

THE KINGMAKER

It is not clear why Elisha was mandated to anoint Hazael to rule over Aram (8:7-15). However, the choice of Jehu to topple the House of Omri is obvious. He was an uncompromising loyalist of the Lord, who would wage a relentless war against Baal. Ahab, under the influence of his wife Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, had erected an altar to Baal in a temple he built in Samaria. So deeply imbedded was this idol-worship in the House of Omri that Ahaziah, son of Ahab, mortally injured when he fell through a lattice of his upper chamber, sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub (the infamous Beelzebub), god of Ekron, whether he would recover.

Elijah, in his relentless struggle against Baal, had caused the slaying of prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elisha fully understood that this was not the proper approach. To eliminate Baal, one had to go to the very source of this evil and root out those responsible for importing his prophets. Jehu's military coup, described most dramatically in II Kings 9-10, was successful. In a bloody and ruthless campaign, which led to the defenestration of the hated Jezebel, he not only eradicated the House of Omri, but also the "Baal of Israel."

Fifty years of Elisha's eventful life came to an end. In a touching scene, King Joash [Jehoash], grandson of Jehu, came to him, crying '*My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof*' (13:14), reminiscent of the words that Elisha had addressed to the vanishing Elijah (2:12).

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The bloody and cruel rebellion of Jehu may have led to disappointment and even to revulsion. The prophetic author of the Book of Kings, so pleased with the downfall of the House of Omri credited Jehu: *Thus Jehu eradicated the Baal from Israel* (10:28). Nevertheless, he leveled severe criticism of him in the following words: *And Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the Lord with all his heart. He departed not from the sins of Jerobam, which he made Israel to sin* (10:31).

After perhaps 50 years, a new type of literary prophet burst upon the scene, beginning with Amos and Hosea. They created an unprecedented spiritual revolution. It may have dawned on the new type of prophet that the ways of Elijah and Elisha were not the most effective ones. To be God's messenger, the prophet was obliged to bring His message to the people, educating them by speech and written messages, addressing himself directly to their consciences. Though not always successful in their own time, the orations of profound moral instruction of these prophets would become the heritage of all humankind.

NOTES

1. Meholah has been re-established in Israel as a religious settlement in the Jordan Valley, about 10 miles south of Beth Shean.
2. Already the sages in the Talmud took Elisha to task for causing the death of the *little children*. "On three occasions, Elisha fell sick: once when he repulsed Gehazi with both hands, the second time when he incited bears against children, . . ." (Bava Metzia 87a). However, I am indebted to Mr. Fred Blumenthal for the following insight. As will be recalled, Elijah was known as a *hairy man*. The *little children* who mocked Elisha: '*Go up you baldhead!*' are to be viewed as small men with little faith who, contrasting Elijah the *hairy man* with Elisha the *baldhead*, denied prophetic authority to the leader.
3. In 1077 C.E., the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV came to the city of Canossa in Italy to do penance before Pope Gregory VII. Of course, there is a difference between the two episodes. Henry IV submitted because the pope had sufficient temporal power to force him. While here, the kings came to Elisha out of respect for his spiritual authority.
4. Please note that it is Naaman who should come to him.

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