

Elisha

The Life & Times of Elisha

We know next to nothing about Elisha's early life until sometime around the year 856 BC, when he was probably in his twenties. He appears to have come from a wealthy land owning family, if the number of oxen they had for ploughing is anything to go by (1 Kings 19:19). When the prophet Elijah arrived suddenly his response to his call was immediate. Elijah made it clear that it was up to him whether or not he responded to God's call when Elisha asked permission to say farewell to his parents. To demonstrate his determination to follow Elisha dramatically severed his links to his past life by slaughtering the pair of oxen he was ploughing with and cooked their meat over the wood of his plough and gave it to his friends and relatives. Scripture tells us that he then left and became Elijah's attendant or servant in similar way, perhaps, to that in which Joshua had served Moses (cf. Exod. 24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28).

We hear nothing more of Elisha for at least the next four years, but we can assume that 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 (2 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. Suddenly Elijah was taken away in a whirlwind and Elisha received what he had asked for. Taking up the mantle that he had worn briefly only once before (1 Kings 19:19) he struck the waters of the Jordan and parted them. There the members of the prophetic community met him and despite his objections they insisted on conducting a search for Elijah (2 Kings 2:1-18).

Elisha proved to be of a different character to his former master. Whereas Elijah had been a solitary figure, spending much of his time alone without even a servant (1 Kings 19:3; 2 Kings 1:6) Elisha was often found in the company of the "sons of the prophets" (2 Kings 4:38-41; 6:1-7) and even with the elders of Samaria (6:32). Elisha spent some of his time with the kings of Israel and on one occasion, the king of Judah as well (3:11). While it was seldom appropriate for Elijah to spend time in the presence of Ahab while he allowed the worship of Ba'al, his son Joram put aside the Canaanite deities and worshipped the Golden Calves that Jeroboam had set up (2 Kings 3:1-3). Though he was far from perfect and at times threatened the prophet's life (6:26-31) at other times he did honour the prophet and referred to him deferentially as "my father" (6:21). In common with Elijah Elisha's ministry took him far and wide, but we know 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, an arrangement that went on much longer than Elijah's with the widow of Zaphath (1 Kings 17:8-16). The overall impression we get is of a man who is prepared to be involved in society and the everyday details of life (6:1-4). He was even willing to lend his aid in recovering a lost axe

head for one of his students (6:5-7), but like his master, would not suffer any insult against his office to go unpunished (2:23-24; cf. 1:9-12).

Two external factors dominated the early years of his ministry: Famine and war. We know that 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. 1 Kings 8:35, 37; 18:2). Such curses effect both the guilty and the innocent and in many ways Elisha's activities lifted the burden from those who had been faithful to the Lord.

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 (2 Kings 4-10). Fortunately and apparently unbeknown to the king of Israel (cf. 2 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).

The famine is first mentioned in 2 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 to 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, anticipating a greater miracle later to be performed by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:29-39; Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15).

The lot of a widow in the ancient world was difficult at the best of times, how much more so when the land was in the grip of a drought. The account of Elisha's ministry to the widow in 2 Kings 4 is reminiscent of Elijah's time at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16). This time, however, the widow approaches the prophet and not vice versa and tells him of her misfortune. Her husband had faithfully served the Lord and now he had died, leaving his wife and his children without any means of support. Taking what they had (cf. 1 Kings 17:12; Luke 9:13; John 6:9) Elisha miraculously provided her with the means of survival (2 Kings 4:1-7).

As a reward for providing him with a place to stay when he was in the region Elisha made it possible for her to have a son even though her husband was an old man (2 Kings 4:14). When the child died unexpectedly the woman lost no time in seeking out the prophet on Mt. Carmel, not letting either her husband or Elisha's servant Gehazi delay her in her quest (4:23-26). It is not certain what Elisha intended to achieve by sending Gehazi with his staff. If it was to revive the child (as Gehazi clearly expected), he was unsuccessful (4:30-31). However, in view of the husband's sceptical attitude it may well have been necessary to prevent the child being buried. By placing the symbol of his authority on the child Elisha would have ensured that the body remained untouched until he arrived. The account of the woman does not end with her happy reunion with her son, for we learn later that when the seven year famine was over (8:1; cf. Gen. 41:29) Gehazi introduced her to the king of Israel

who restored to her not only all her lands, but also all the income it had earned during her absence restored to her (8:2-6).

The war with Aram continued and Elisha's fame brought about a visit from a very important person. Naaman the Syrian general was used to having people jump to attention when he asked for something. He clearly felt insulted that the prophet would not even see him when he arrived at his house, especially as he had brought enough money to buy the whole of Israel (5:5; cf. 1 Kings 16:24). When Elisha sent a messenger to tell him to wash himself in the Jordan seven times the general went away in a rage, but later, calmed by his servants he did as the prophet had commanded. The next incident was probably one of the saddest moments in the prophet's career. Elisha had refused any reward from Naaman, but being filled with greed his servant Gehazi ran after the departing dignitary and received from him a reward which he then hid. Elisha knew what he had done (an ability that he did not always possess unless the Lord specifically granted it - cf. 4:27). Calling Gehazi to him the prophet rebuked him and from that day Gehazi received the leprosy that had been Naaman's.

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 bed chamber! (6:12). Thinking that he could solve this problem by capturing Elisha he sent an army to Dothan. Needless to say that 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 defence (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 realised that further raid would be just as ineffective (6:22-23).

Although Elisha generally enjoyed a better relationship with Israel's Royal family than his former master had done, there was at least one time when his 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 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. Such action proves unnecessary as within 24 hours the siege is lifted and the famine 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).

Unlike Elijah Elisha died a natural death at the end of a long illness that confined him to bed. Such was the power of God that he had enjoyed in his life and ministry that even after his spirit had departed a dead body touching his bones was restored to life (13:14, 20-21).

Elisha and Israel's Later History

Elisha's ministry played a pivotal role in the history of the Northern Kingdom. During his lifetime Jezebel and the threat of Ba'alism that his master had struggled against was finally dealt with (2 Kings 9:30-10:30, although the people did not abandon the worship of the

Golden calves (10:31). It was he who carried out Elijah's command and anointed Hazael king of Aram (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:7-15). On his deathbed Elisha prophesied that Jehoash of Israel would defeat Aram only three more times on battle (2 Kings 14-19). Despite a reversal in their fortunes during the reign of Jeroboam II (14:25-27) the Syrians would continue to reduce the size of Israel's territory (8:12-13; 10:32-33; Amos 1:13; Hosea 13:16). In so doing they were carrying out the first instalment of the Lord's judgement on Israel until both nations were swept away by the rising tide of the Assyrian Empire (2 Kings 16:9; 17:5-6; Amos 1:14).

Elijah as an Example to Christians

Elisha received his call to the Lord's service out of the blue, but his response was immediate and dramatic. He severed his links with his past life, burning his plough and slaughtering his pair of oxen. During his early ministry Jesus Christ seems to have alluded Elisha's call (Luke 9:61-62), stressing that to be one of his disciples required even greater commitment. Nevertheless Elisha remains an outstanding example of humility (3:11), who faithfully served his new master until he departed. He showed his determination to receive what he had been promised by the Lord and would let no one distract him from it (2 Kings 2:1-10). When he came into his own ministry he refused the riches that were offered to him by Naaman the Syrian (5:15-16; 2 Tim. 6:6-10) and he was able to see with spiritual insight that he was not alone in his struggle (6:18). The writer to the Hebrews alludes to his ministry as one of the Old Testament heroes that should inspire us to greater devotion, because the promises that we have received are greater than theirs (Heb. 11:35,39-40).

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