

From the beginning they had been taught both the law and the gospel. 'God loves you; therefore love and obey Him. Christ died for you; therefore die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore live to God, till you live with Him in glory.'

. . . This is the scriptural way, the *Methodist* way, the true way. God grant we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left.

JOHN WESLEY, 1751.

ELISHA AND THE BEARS

The story told in 2 Kings 2: 23-25 with the usual O.T. economy of words, often causes uneasy feelings. Elisha is miscalled by some mischievous children, so he rounds on them, curses them and God duly sends a couple of bears to create havoc among the children. Such is a common conception of the story. Is it accurate, or does it miss the point?

During the war there appeared an unpretentious volume called 'The Severity of God' by D. E. Hart-Davies. A chapter in this is devoted to a study of the passage such as would be good for us to apply more often to the text of Scripture. The following notes along lines indicated by Hart-Davies are given not as a definitive exposition of the passage, but as an illustration of a great principle of interpretation enunciated by Wycliffe: '*It shall greatly help to understand Scripture if thou mark not only what is spoken or written, but of whom and to whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what intent, in what circumstances, considering what goes before and what followeth.*'

First then, of whom and to whom are the words spoken? The principal persons involved are the prophet Elisha and a group called *na'arim qetanim*. Elisha, let us remember, has just succeeded to the office of Elijah: and, scanty as our records of the period are, we can see something of the position which Elijah occupied in Israel. He was the representative par excellence of the worship of Jahveh. He was the man whose very person was an offence to the compromising king of Israel (cp. I Kings 21:20). In him were met together the pure worship of the Living God and unrelenting opposition to impure or idolatrous worship.

Hart-Davies perhaps assumes too readily that the *na'arim* were around twenty years old. But let us note that *na'ar* usually means *lad* or *youth*, and even though it is here qualified by *qaton* the R.V. margin, 'young lads' seems a fair translation. (cp. I Kings 3:7). There is no suggestion that these were young children who did not know yet how to 'choose the good and refuse the evil.' Further, they were *representative* of the spirit of the age and place, as we shall see.

Now, with that words? We are concerned, first with what the hooligans said to Elisha and then with his reaction. What the youths called out was not just an uncomplimentary personal remark. Natural baldness is uncommon in the Near East, and is not associated in the Bible with old age. (see on this, R. A. S. Macalister asst. Baldness in H.D.B.). In any case, Elisha was a young man. Among the Arabs today, "bald-head" is used as an extremely offensive and indecent remark. There are two possibilities: either Elisha was not bald at all, and the mockers are deliberately reviling the prophet: or, as Stade long ago suggested (Z.A.T.W. 1894) they were actually mocking the shaving of the head or tonsure which marked him out as a prophet of God. And when they say 'Go up,' they are mockingly inviting him to ascend to the sanctuary.

Elisha has been the recipient, not of personal insult, but of abuse as representative of the High and Holy God. His reply is therefore in the name of God. As the hooligans had reviled God, so the curse of God falls upon them. This has many a parallel in the Scriptures: to take no other, Paul's dealings with Elymas in Acts 13: 6 ff. are surely an example of the same thing. Nothing could be further from a display of bad temper: it is a solemn reminder of what a fearful thing it is to fall into the hands of the Living God.

At what time and where did this incident take place? It took place at a time of high crisis for the kingdom of Israel, when her allegiance to Jahveh was in the balance. Elijah had won the great battle against the Tyrian Melqart: now the battle was for pure worship and righteous conduct against laxity and syncretism. And the scene of the encounter is outside the Bethel sanctuary. What Amos thought of the Bethel worship rather later, we know well enough. Quite probably the youths were returning from the shrine, devoted to Jahveh in name but full of practices that were an abomination to Him. Their abuse is excited by the sight of the man of God going up to the sanctuary, and no doubt by the thought of the 'sermon' that he would deliver there.

The outcome was, as we know, that forty-two of the offenders were mauled by the bears. This shows how many were involved. (Was it part of a religious procession from the shrine?). If so many were mauled, far more must have escaped.

We are left wondering what the effect was in Bethel and its neighbourhood. Here was a salutary lesson for the boys, their parents, the society of which they were representatives, and for the sanctuary. Whether they heeded it or not, there was surely in this terrible event, a demonstration of the goodness of God leading to repentance.

A. F. WALLS.