

2 KINGS

Part One: The Prophetic Ministry of Elisha (Chapters 1-17)

In its introduction to 2Kings, the *Application Study Bible* writes:

“Second Kings continues the history of Israel, halfway between the death of David and the death of the nation. Israel had been divided (1Kings 12), and the two kingdoms had begun to slide into idolatry and corruption toward collapse and captivity. Second Kings relates the sordid stories of the 12 kings of the northern kingdom (call Israel) and the 16 kings of the southern kingdom (call Judah). For 130 years Israel endured the succession of evil rulers until they were conquered by Shalmaneser of Assyria and led into captivity in 722 B.C. (17:6). Of all the kings in both the north and south, only two—Hezekiah and Josiah—were called good. Because of their obedience to God and the spiritual revivals during their reigns, Judah stood for an additional 136 years until falling to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C.” (p.564)

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER ONE

“The Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go intercept the messengers of Samaria’s king, and ask them, “is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron?”’” (v.3)

Because Ahaziah, the new King of Israel seeks advice from an idol, he is judged and condemned by the prophet. When the king sends a group of fifty men after Elijah to capture him, they are consumed with fire from heaven. This shows that the power of the prophet is far superior to the power of the king. In verses 16-17, the prophet pronounces a death sentence on the king for consulting Baal rather than God.

CHAPTER 2: Elisha succeeds Elijah

“Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Ask for whatever I may do for you, before I am taken from you.’ Elisha answered, ‘May I receive a double portion of your spirit?’” (v.9)

In the next several chapters, we will read about the wonders and miracles of Elisha

Verses 1-8. Because Elisha is aware that he is soon going to be separated from Elijah, he follows him in

all his travels. In verse 8, Elijah, with his cloak, replicates the miracle of Moses at the Red Sea by parting the waters.

Verses 9-18. Realizing that he is called to be Elijah’s successor, Elisha asks for a double portion of his prophetic spirit just as firstborn sons in Israel are entitled to a double portion of their father’s inheritance (Dt 21:17).

Assumption of Elijah into heaven. Then Elijah is taken alive into heaven in a flaming chariot and horses. Elijah is worth more than a whole army in defending Israel and its true religion. In tearing his garment in two (v.12), Elisha is expressing his sadness at Elijah’s departure. His ability to divide the water in two shows that he now has the power that God gave to Elijah, something the guild of prophets also recognized (v.16).

Verses 19-25. Two more stories are told to show that Elisha has received God’s power and has been commissioned by God to speak his word. The story of the small boys being eaten up by the bears is intended to communicate that gross disrespect for God’s messenger will not be tolerated by God.

Pause: What spoke to you most in chapter 2? Have you had the experience of having the mantle of leadership being passed on to you? If so, what was that experience like?

CHAPTER 3: Israel, Judah and Edom join forces against the Moabites

“He has the word of the Lord.” (v.4)

The kings of Israel, Judah and Edom join together to fight the Moabites. In the middle of their long journey to do battle, the people and the animals run out of water. Elisha is consulted and he works a water miracle which provides for the thirsty men and their animals (vv 16-18). Then an extraordinary event occurs. When the king of Moab sees that he is about to lose the battle, he takes his first born son and offers him to his pagan god. The remarkable thing about the story is that it seems to have worked. Verse 27 states: “Great wrath” came against Israel and they withdrew. This is a rare case where the Bible seems to admit the power of a pagan god.

CHAPTER 4: The “man of God” works four miracles

“This time next year you will be fondling a baby son.” (v.16)

Elisha performs the following four miracles, each one moving *from problem to solution* via a marvelous deed.

- *From poverty to money sufficient to pay off debts* (vv 1-7). Poor people and debtors are allowed to pay their debts by selling themselves or their children as slaves. Elisha’s kind deed enables the widow of a prophet to escape slavery.
- *From death to life* (vv 8-37). A well-to-do woman from Shunem realizes that Elisha is a man of God and offers him hospitality. She is rewarded with a son. When the son dies, the mother is understandably very upset and lets Elisha know of her anger (v.28). She demands that Elisha come to see her dead son. Anticipating the power of Jesus over death, Elisha raises the dead boy to life.
- *From poison food to wholesome food* (vv 38-41). Just as salt purifies contaminated water (2Kgs 3:19-22), now meal purifies a poisoned stew.
- *From hunger to plenty* (vv 42-44). This story clearly reminds us of Jesus’ miracles of the loaves and fishes. Elisha orders that twenty barley loaves, normally used as a *first fruits* offering, be served on this occasion to feed a hundred starving men. Not only will a few loaves be sufficient to feed the hungry men, but there will be leftovers (v.43). In all these stories, the “man of God” is a Jesus figure who goes about doing good.

The admirable woman of Shunem. In his *Commentary on 1-2 Kings*, Denis Nelson helps us to see the woman of Shunem as one of the most admirable women in the Bible.

He writes: “*She is a woman of substance* (v.8) *capable of building and furnishing a substantial guest lodge. She knows how to take advantage of circumstances* (v.10). *She is an independent woman unwilling to take favors, relying on kinfolk rather than powerful strangers* (v.13), *not subject to unrealistic hopes* (v.16). *She knows how to behave properly* (vv 15,27,37) *and speak properly* (v. 16) *towards prophets. She knows the value of silence at the right moment* (vv 23, 26), *but can make a convincing and impassioned appeal when the time is ripe* (v.28). *She is engagingly maternal* (v.20), *but in a*

crisis acts decisively. Revealing by her actions in verse 21 that her plan is already formed, she hastens straight to Elisha, refusing to talk to subordinates, refusing to be turned aside from what she has planned for the prophet, and in the end is proved right by circumstances. She is one of the Old Testament’s most attractive characters” (p.172).

CHAPTER 5: Naaman comes to faith in the God of Israel

“*Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel.*” (v.15)

This is the beautiful story of a proud pagan general coming to faith in the God of Israel. Naaman was greatly respected by his master, the king of Aram. But he was also a leper. Naaman’s wife had an Israelite girl as a servant who suggested that Naaman go visit the prophet in Samaria. *God often uses little people to do significant things.*

When Naaman and his entourage arrive at Elisha’s door, the prophet refuses to see him. Instead he sends out a message for Naaman to go and wash seven times in the River Jordan. Naaman’s pride now becomes an obstacle to his healing. He is used to being treated with great respect and is outraged that Elisha is treating him as an ordinary person. But his servants persuade Naaman to *obey* the prophet’s word. He does and is healed. “*His flesh became again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean*” (v.14). His physical healing leads Naaman to come to faith in the God of Israel. “*Now I know that there is no other God in all the earth, except in Israel*” (v.15). Pride is replaced with humility. The pagan general sees God at work in the prophet—something the prophet’s own people fail to see.

Elisha refuses Naaman’s gift to show that God’s favor cannot be purchased. In contrast, Elisha’s servant Gehazi tries to cash in on Naaman’s healing. For this he is severely punished (vv 20-27). When Elisha refuses Naaman’s gifts, he asks if he can at least take home with him some of Israel’s soil on which he can worship the God of Israel. In the early church, the Naaman story (an unbeliever coming to the faith through a washing) was presented to catechumens to meditate on as they journeyed to the waters of baptism on Holy Saturday.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the story of Naaman? Naaman’s pride almost got in the way of a great healing. Can you think of how pride can hinder our efforts to develop into mature adults in every aspect of our lives?

CHAPTER 6: More stories of Elisha's supernatural power

"O Lord, open his eyes, that he may see." (v.16)

Verses 1-7. The recovery of the lost ax is another story which shows that the man of God has the power and the knowledge of God. It also shows God's care for us in even the small events of our daily lives.

Verses 8-13. God's power is also at work in these verses. Every CIA agency would love to have Elisha in their ranks. He was even able to bug the king's bedroom (v.12).

Verses 13-23. Elisha is so successful at detecting the plans of the Arameans that the king sends a strong "force with horses and chariots" to capture him (v.14). But Elisha, with the power of God, makes fun of them. He "strikes them blind" (v.18) and he "opens their eyes." Rather than allowing the king of Israel to kill his enemies, Elisha orders that they be given a big party (v.23). The king was not allowed to kill the Arameans as a reminder that it was the power of God and not the power of the king that won the battle. Can you imagine the tales the Arameans told after they returned home! The lesson the king of Israel should be picking up is that obedience to the word of the man of God brings deliverance and good things.

Verses 24-33. Most likely, several years had passed before the Arameans attacked Israel again. The siege of Samaria has gone so long that the people have resorted to cannibalism (vv 28-29). For reasons not given, the king blames Elisha for the disastrous turn of events and sets out to kill him (v.1). In 7:1, Elisha predicts that the famine will end the next day.

Pause: These chapters tell of some amazing feats. What was the most amazing or surprising thing that has happened in your life?

CHAPTER 7: Lepers at the gate

Realizing that they are going to die by starvation or the sword, four lepers decide to flee to the Aramean camp. When they arrive, they discover to their surprise that the Arameans have fled their camp (see vv 6-7 for the reason).

Fearful that failure to tell the good news to the authorities would get them into trouble, the lepers go into the city and inform the gatekeepers that the Arameans have fled. The flight of the Arameans

signals the end of the siege and famine in Samaria. Elisha's word to the king's servant is fulfilled (vv 17-19).

CHAPTER 8: The Shunammite woman is saved from famine

"Restore all her property to her. . ." (v.6)

Elisha advises the widow whose son he raised from the dead to leave Israel with her family because a seven-year famine is coming. When she returns, she seeks to reclaim her property. Fortunate for her, Elisha's servant Gehazi is in conversation with the king at that moment. He intercedes on her behalf and all her property is restored. The unnamed woman is the model of one who takes God and his word seriously.

Verses 7-15. Elisha foretells the death of the king of Aram and how his messenger Hazeal will take over the throne and wreak havoc on the people of Israel. Hazeal suffocates the king (v.15).

Verses 16-29. These verses give a brief account of the reign of two kings of Judah, both judged to be bad kings. Judah is spared because of God's promise to David.

CHAPTERS 9-10: Violent reform of Jehu

"You shall anoint Jehu...King of Israel. ...If anyone escapes the sword of Hazeal, Jehu will kill him." (1Kings 19:16-17)

Chapters 9 and 10 describe the violent reign of Jehu. Though not at all expecting to be elevated to the kingship (v.5), it doesn't take long for Jehu to fulfill the prophets' words concerning the house of Ahab. He carries out seven acts of violence which are interpreted as his attempt to cleanse Israel of evil.

Murder of Joram, Ahaziah and Jezebel (9:16-32). King Ahaziah of Judah is visiting King Joram of Israel when Jehu and his men arrive on the scene. When Ahaziah and Joram (son of Ahab and Jezebel) realize that Jehu is up to no good, they try to flee. Both kings are killed in flight. Joram's body is thrown into the field which his parents had taken from Naboth after they brutally killed him.

When Jezebel finds out that Jehu is in town, she goes into her make-up room to paint her face (v.30). After she yells "murderer!" to Jehu, she is thrown down from her window. But before she can be buried, the

dogs eat her. This is to fulfill the words of the prophet Elijah in 1Kings 21:23.

The purging continues (10:1-17). Jehu's fourth act of violence involves the killing of Ahab's seventy sons (vv 1-11). When the heads of the sons are brought to Jehu, he is quick to point out that he is only fulfilling the word of the prophet Elijah (v.10). Then follows the massacre of Ahaziah's relatives (vv 12-14) and the slaughter of loyalists in Samaria (vv 15-17). All this bloodshed is later condemned by the prophet Hosea (Hos 1:3-4).

Jehu's seventh act of violence is described in verses 18-28. Jehu uses trickery to achieve God's purpose. He sees it as his mission to rid Israel of the evil that the house of Ahab has perpetuated in Israel. His reward is that his son will reign on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation. Even though Jehu may have intended well, in the end the writer judges him for his failure to dismantle the golden calves in Bethel. His fear may have been similar to Jeroboam's: without sanctuaries in the north, the people may go south to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem.

As we study the murderous reign of Jehu, we are once again confronted with the violence manifested in God's holy word. More challenging still is the issue of *God* using destructiveness to cleanse his people of bad leaders and pagan worship. As we try to deal with these chapters, we must remember that in the Old Testament, God has only *partially* revealed himself. *"In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets"* (Hebs 1:1). When we look at the God who revealed himself through Jesus, we find no violence in word or action in the attainment of a particular end. Having said that, we today need no reminder on how easily high-principled revolutions can deteriorate into bloodbaths.

Pause: Most revolutions, including the American Revolution, are bloody. Are such uprisings in conflict with the teachings of Christ—or are they sometimes the only way to bring about a good end, like liberation from oppression?

CHAPTERS 11-12: King Joash of Judah

"When Athaliah, the mother of Ahaziah, saw that her son was dead, she began to kill off the whole royal family. But Jehosheba took Joash and spirited him away with his nurse, from the bedroom where the princes were about to be slain...." (11:1-2)

Just as the courage of certain women saved Moses (Ex 2), so now the courageous Jehosheba saves Joash and David's dynasty from the murderous hand of Athaliah. He is hidden in the temple where the priest Jehoiada anoints him King of Judah. The death of Athaliah inflicted on Ahaziah's other sons now becomes her fate.

The restoration of David's line calls for a renewal of the people's covenant with the Lord and a recommitment of the people to the king (v.17). Once Baal's temple is destroyed, the newly anointed king leaves the temple and moves into his palace.

Chapter 12 describes the tension between the king and the priests over financial arrangements for temple repairs and maintenance.

CHAPTER 13: Reign of Jehoahaz and Jehoash

"Jehoahaz entreated the Lord who heard him...and gave Israel a savior who freed the Israelites from the power of Aram." (vv 4-5)

In reading about the reign of Jehoahaz, we are taken back to the fourfold pattern of *sin, punishment, repentance* and *deliverance*, found in Judges. The king has done evil in God's sight (v.2). God becomes angry and punishes the nation by allowing the Arameans to oppress them (v.3). The king cries out to the Lord (v.4). God has mercy and raises a savior (v. 5). Sadly, as in the days of Judges, the people fall back into their sinful ways.

Verses 10-25—Jehoash. There is confusion regarding the name of this king in the northern kingdom. To distinguish him from Joash in Judah, we will call him Jehoash, a name sometimes given to him in Hebrew texts. Also, scholars point to textual difficulties in this chapter. *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* says that the logical reading of this chapter would involve placing verses 22-23 after verse 7; verses 24-25 after verse 19; and verses 12-13 after verse 21 (p.315).

Jehoash's encounter with Elisha demonstrates again the power of the prophet. That Jehoash takes the prophet's word seriously is a good sign and merits Israel military successes over Aram. The reference to the revival of a dead corpse after it touched the bones of Elisha (v.21) illustrates how the prophetic word can bring life to the sick body of Israel. Stories like this have led Catholics to believe in relics not as having power in themselves, but in what they represent.

CHAPTER 14: “Don’t mess with me, Amaziah.”

“Enjoy your victory, but stay at home.” (v.10)

After defeating the Edomites, Amaziah, King of Judah, tries to pick a fight with the King of Israel: “Come let us meet face to face” (v.8). Amaziah thinks his army can easily defeat the Israelites. Amaziah soon finds out that his ambition was much greater than his ability.

Verses 23-29—Jeroboam II. Even though we know from the prophets Amos and Hosea that Jeroboam’s reign was long and prosperous, he is judged by the Deuteronomist writer to be a failure because he continued the worship practices of his predecessors. (The Deuteronomist writer judged all kings on their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Law outlined in the book of Deuteronomy.)

Pause: Amaziah was guilty of biting off more than he could chew. Do you believe it is better to aim high and miss or aim low and hit? What do you tend to do?

CHAPTER 15: Seven Kings of Israel and Judah

The reign of seven kings is briefly described in this chapter. The five kings of Israel receive a D-grade. All of them are judged as doing “evil in the sight of the Lord” because of their failure to remove pagan worship from the land. The two southern kings, Azariah and Jotham receive a B-grade. On the one hand, we are told that they ‘pleased the Lord’. But during their reign “the high places” did not disappear.

CHAPTER 16: King Ahaz of Judah

“Ahaz...did not please the Lord.... He immolated his son by fire in accordance with the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord had cleared out of the way of the Israelites.” (vv 2-4).

Ahaz, under attack from the kings of Israel and Aram, resorts to offering child sacrifices to win divine favor (v.3). Rather than seeking help from God which Isaiah is pushing him to do (Is.7:1-6), he turned to Tiglath-pileser, the king of Syria for help. Worse still, Ahaz remodeled the temple in Jerusalem after the pagan altar of the Assyrians in Damascus. We don’t need to ask what kind of a grade Ahaz received from the Deuteronomist writer.

CHAPTER 17: The northern kingdom of Israel falls to the Assyrians

“They did not listen, but were stiff-necked.... They disregarded all the commandments of the Lord... provoking him til in his great anger, the Lord put them away out of his sight.” (vv 14-18)

Verses 1-6. Shalmaneser of Assyria advances against Israel. He captures King Hoshea, captures Samaria the capital, and deports its citizens into many places outside of Israel.

Verses 7-23. The Deuteronomist writer, in his typical fashion, explains *why* the Lord allows Israel to be cast out of his sight and deported from their land. They refuse to follow God’s ways. When prophets are raised up to warn them, they refuse to listen. In verses 19-20, Judah is also castigated for not being much better than her neighbors in the northern kingdom.

Verses 24-41. The origin of the Samaritans. In these verses, the Deuteronomist digresses to record the origin of the Samaritans, their mixed blood and their half idolatrous religion. The Samaritans in later ages came to be hated by the Jews because of their tainted origin dating back to this time.

After the king of Assyria brought people from many places and settled them in the northern kingdom, he attempts to get them to follow the ways of the Lord. Since God is the God of the land, appropriate worship should be given to him by the new inhabitants of Israel. The Assyrian king even orders that an Israelite priest be returned from exile to show the newcomers how to worship the God of Israel (vv 27-28). What results are religious syncretism—the people turning to their old gods as they seek to worship the God of Israel? “Distant foreigners were drafted in to take their place; and one of the purposes of verses 24-41 is to lay at their door the blame for the ‘bastardized’ form of Yahwism which later Judah so abhorred in the neighboring imperial province of Samaria” (Graeme Auld).

The Ten Lost Tribes. Israelites in the Northern Kingdom, who were not killed or deported, intermarried with the pagan people that Assyria resettled in Israel. The resulting syncretistic mixing of religions resulted in beliefs and practices quite different from Israel’s heritage. Unlike the exiled

remnant of Judah in Babylon, who will eventually be allowed to return to the Promised Land, the exiled Israelites in effect “disappear.” They will either be absorbed into the foreign peoples among whom they were sent, or, assimilating with the foreigners now living among them in Israel, they will be called “Samaritans.” These northern ten tribes will corporately have no experience of return and are referred to as the “Ten Lost Tribes.” As we shall see, the prophets Amos and Hosea preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during its last years.

Pause: To what extent do you believe that the demise of a nation is tied to its failure to follow the ways of God? Could this happen in America? Is it happening?