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# ELISHA'S UNBEARABLE CURSE: A STUDY OF 2 KINGS 2:23-25

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of “to curse” or that of a “curse” is found in most African societies.<sup>1</sup> Curses might be pronounced by a parent, by sorcerers or

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dundas, “History of Kitui,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 43 (1913): 528-9; Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), 63; C. W. Hobley, *Bantu Beliefs and Magic: With Particular Reference to the Kikuyu and Kamba Tribes of Kenya Colony together with Some Reflections on East Africa after the War* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1938), 103-4, 145; Gerhard Lindblom, *The Akamba in British East Africa: An Ethnological Monograph*, 2d ed., enl. (Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktockeri, Aktiebolag, 1920; reprint ed., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 171, 182-5, 280, 336, 519, 540; John Middleton, *The Central Tribes of the North-Eastern Bantu*, Ethnographic Survey of Africa: East Central Africa, part v, ed. Daryll Forde (London: International African Institute, 1953), 94; A. Scott Moreau, *The World of the Spirits: A Biblical Study in the African Context* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1990), 12, 112; J. H. Blackwood Murphy, “The Kitui Akamba: Further Investigation on Certain Matters,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 56 (1926): 195; Joseph Muthiani, *Akamba from Within: Egalitarianism in Social Relations* (Jericho, NY: Exposition Press, 1973), 99; Peter Mutisya, conversation with author, 27 October, 2001.

witches, by any wronged or injured party (including the community or relatives of the accursed), or for the violation of some taboo. A strong curse is sometimes thought to be the cause of death.<sup>2</sup> Often people may go to a traditional healer to remove curses.<sup>3</sup> Mbiti observes,

There is one form of justice administered through the use of the curse. The basic principle here is that if a person is guilty, evil will befall him according to the words used in cursing him. By the use of good magic, it is believed, a person can curse an unknown thief or other offender. But most of the curses are within family circles. The operative principle is that only a person of a higher status can effectively curse one of a lower status, but not vice versa. The most feared curses are those pronounced by parents, uncles, aunts, or other close relatives against their 'juniors' in the family. The worst is the curse uttered at the death-bed, for once the pronouncer of the curse has died, it is practically impossible to revoke it. If the guilty person repents and asks for the curse to be lifted, the person who uttered it can revoke it automatically or ritually if it is a very serious one. There are many stories in African villages, telling about the fulfillment of curses where a person is guilty. If one is not guilty, then the curse does not function. Formal curses are feared much in African societies, and this fear, like that of witchcraft, helps to check bad relationships especially in family circles.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, the curse is also found many times in the Old Testament. Gordon defines a curse as "the invoking of a particular fate upon someone in the event of the contravention of expected standards of behavior or, as in the case of the covenant curse, if an undertaking solemnized under oath (curse) is not fulfilled."<sup>5</sup> The concept of "curse" takes on various forms. In some passages the

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 155.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Gordon, "Curse, Malediction," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 4:491.

curse is God's judgment of someone or something, or the act thereof.<sup>6</sup> In many places the curse is God's specific judgment of Israel or individual Israelites for not keeping the Mosaic covenant.<sup>7</sup> In interpersonal relationships a curse is sometimes merely an expression of anger or a verbal reproach.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes the curse is used in the contexts of oaths.<sup>9</sup> Finally the curse is mentioned in relationships between individuals, where several passages describe the act of placing a curse on someone, the curse itself, or the state of being under such a curse.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 8:21; 12:3; 27:29; Ps. 119:21; Prov. 3:33; Jer. 10:10; 48:10; 50:25; Lam. 3:65; Dan. 8:19; 11:36; Mic. 6:10; Nah. 1:6; Hab. 3:12; Mal. 1:4.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 11:26, 28-29; 21:23; 27:13, 15-26; 28:15-68; 29:20-21, 27-28; 30:1, 7, 19; Josh. 8:34; 2 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 34:24; Neh. 10:28-29; 13:25; Ps. 37:22; 78:49; Isa. 10:5, 25; 26:20; 30:27; Jer. 11:3; 17:5; 23:10; Lam. 2:6; Ezek. 21:31; 22:24, 31; Dan. 9:11; Zeph. 3:8; Zech. 1:12; 5:3; Mal. 1:14; 2:2; 3:9; 4:6.

<sup>8</sup> Exod. 22:28; Lev. 24:11, 14-16, 23; 2 Sam. 16:5, 7, 9-13; 19:21; 1 Kings 2:8; 21:10, 13; Job 1:5, 11; 2:5, 9; 3:1, 8; Ps. 38:3; 69:24; 102:10; Prov. 24:24; Isa. 8:21; 13:5; Jer. 15:17; 29:18; 42:18; 44:12; Dan. 11:30; Hos. 7:16.

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 29:12, 14, 19; Judg. 21:18; 1 Sam. 14:24, 28; 1 Kings 8:31; 2 Chron. 6:22; Prov. 29:24; Ezek. 16:59; 17:13, 16, 18, 19; Hos. 10:4.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 9:25; 12:3; 27:12-13; 49:7; Exod. 21:17; 22:28b; Lev. 19:14; 20:9; 24:11, 14-16, 23; Num. 5:18-19, 21-24, 27; 22:6, 11, 17; 23:7-8, 11, 13, 25, 27; 24:9-10; Deut. 23:4-5; Josh. 6:26; 9:23; 24:9; Judg. 9:27, 57; 17:2; 1 Sam. 14:24, 28; 17:43; 26:19; Neh. 13:2; Job 5:3; 24:18; 31:30; Ps. 12:3; 35:4-8, 26; 58:6-8; 59:11-13; 62:4; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 83:9-18; 109:6-15, 17-20, 28; 140:9-11; Prov. 11:26; 20:20; 24:24; 26:2; 27:14; 30:10-11; Isa. 65:20; Jer. 15:10; 20:14-15; 29:22; Hos. 4:2 Anderson calls these "punitive curses" (Jeffrey Scott Anderson, "The Nature and Function of Curses in the Narrative Literature of the Hebrew Bible" [Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1992], 125-8).

There are several passages that are difficult to classify under any one of the above categories. These are: Lev. 5:1; Num. 23:7-8; Judg. 5:23; 1 Sam. 3:13; 26:19; 2 Kings 9:34; Ps. 10:3, 7; 59:12; 102:8; Prov. 22:14; 28:27;

I have chosen 2 Kings 2:23-25 as a text from which to discuss this concept in the Old Testament. Although it affords us one of the clearest examples of one individual placing a curse on another person, it has often been misunderstood. Messner notes:

A casual reading of the passage has often left an impression somewhat like this: An old bald-headed prophet was trudging slowly up the main street of Bethel when he chanced upon some innocent little children merrily playing together. In the midst of their merriment they spy him and shout, more playfully than tauntingly, "Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head!" Instantly the old prophet becomes enraged with their childish banter, and with eyes flashing in anger he whirls around and curses them in the name of the Lord. Suddenly, as if in direct accordance with his curse, two she bears rush out of the nearby forest and "devour" forty-two of the little children. But, is this the correct picture of the situation?<sup>11</sup>

I hope to clarify the many misunderstandings of the passage and in the process, to understand more fully the teaching of the Old Testament on maledictive curses.

## EXPOSITION OF 2 KINGS 2:23-25 AND MALEDICTIVE CURSES

### The Context of the Passage

In 2 Kings 2:19—13:20 the author of the book discusses the ministry of the prophet Elisha. The first subsection in this portion

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Ecc. 7:21-22; 10:20; Isa. 24:6; 65:15; Jer. 24:9; 25:18; 26:6; 42:18; 44:8, 12, 22; 49:13; and Zech. 8:13.

<sup>11</sup> Richard G. Messner, "Elisha and the Bears: A Critical Monograph on 2 Kings 2:23-25," *Grace Journal* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 16. In addition to Messner's article, specific studies on this passage include Jim West, "Beware the Angry Prophet: 2 Kings 2:23-25," *Journal of Biblical Studies* [<http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org>] 1:1 (2001): pars. 1-18; Fred E. Woods, "Elisha and the Children: The Question of Accepting Prophetic Succession," *Brigham Young University Studies* 32, no. 3 (1992): 47-58; and Eric J. Ziolkowski, "The Bad Boys of Bethel: Origin and Development of a Sacrilegious Type," *History of Religions* 30 (1991): 331-58.

deals with the miraculous signs performed by Elisha immediately following the departure of Elijah. Two signs are recorded: the healing of the water (2:19-22) and the implementation of a curse against the s of Bethel (2:23-25). The section is followed by the ministry of Elisha during the reign of King Joram of Israel (3:1—9:3). From what is known about the prophet, he was anointed sometime during the mid-ninth century and lived into the early eighth.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Setting: A Journey to Samaria via Bethel (v. 23a)**

The text begins by stating that “from there Elisha went up to Bethel. . . .” (v. 23).<sup>13</sup> Because Elisha had purified the water in Jericho (cf. 2:18), some scholars hold that the youth were from that city and that the mauling of the bears took place outside of Jericho instead of Bethel.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that the passage does not state specifically what city the youth were from (v. 23), the repetition of the prepositional phrase “from there” in verse 25a suggests that the incident took place outside of Bethel rather than Jericho. This second occurrence of the prepositional phrase “from there” is not translated in the NIV. Verse 25 reads “and he went on *from there* to Mount Carmel, and *from there* he returned to Samaria (translation and emphasis mine).” It would seem odd to report in verse 23 that Elisha went “from there” (Jericho) to Bethel, and then turn around and say in verse 25a that “from there” (i.e. Jericho) he went to Mount Carmel. It would be better to interpret the second usage of

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<sup>12</sup> Elisha began his ministry in the latter part of the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 19:21) and died shortly after the beginning of Jehoash's reign (2 Kings 13:14-20). Merrill dates his anointing to around 855 B. C. (Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987], 380).

<sup>13</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all Biblical quotations are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version* (East Brunswick, NJ: International Bible Society, 1973).

<sup>14</sup> Woods, 49, and perhaps Gwilym H. Jones. *1 and 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984). 389.

“from there” in verse 25 as a reference to Bethel. In short, from there (Jericho) Elisha went up to Bethel,<sup>15</sup> and from there (Bethel) he went up on to Mount Carmel.

It is significant that the events in this pericope took place in the city of Bethel. In the Book of Kings, Bethel was notorious for being the place where Jeroboam set up a rival cult center some 80 years earlier.<sup>16</sup> The cult center that he founded consisted of a golden calf and perhaps a goat idol (2 Chron. 11:15)<sup>17</sup> that the people were encouraged to worship (1 Kings 12:28, 30, 32).<sup>18</sup> He also established

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<sup>15</sup> The site of Jericho is 825 meters below sea level (T. A. Holland, “Jericho,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 3:724) and that of Bethel about 900 meters above (James A. Kelso, et al., *The Excavation of Bethel (1934-60)*, the Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research, 39 [Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1968], 3).

<sup>16</sup> 1 Kings 12:29, 32-33; 13:1, 4, 10-11, 32; 2 Kings 10:29; 17:28; 23:4, 15, 17, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Some feel that the noun עֵיִרָאֵי should not be rendered as “goats,” but rather as “phalluses” (Harris H. Hirschberg, “Arabic Etymologies,” *Vetus Testamentum* 11 [1961]: 381-2) or as “rain gods” (N. H. Snaith, “The Meaning of עֵיִרָאֵי,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 [1975]: 118). Thompson says that they might have been demons (J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles*, New American Commentary, 9 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 255).

<sup>18</sup> Regardless of whether Jeroboam intended the calves to be idols or not, they eventually became that to the Israelites who worshiped there (Hos. 8:5-6; 13:2-3). House has noted that “surely the author’s account of the scene makes sense. Jeroboam knew the prohibitions against idolatry in Israel because Ahijah told him Solomon’s idolatry led to God’s placing him in power (cf. 1 Kings 11:33). He also knew of the temple’s importance as a central sanctuary. . . . It seems probable, then, that the compromises were deliberate. Finally, he had indeed lived in Egypt (1 Kgs. 11:40), where depictions of gods were common. Perhaps Jeroboam did not intend the harm he caused, but he should have foreseen that the only ‘positive’ by-product of the new cult was supposedly to help him stay in power by manipulating the people” (Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, New American Commentary, 8 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995], 185).

his own priesthood (1 Kings 12:31; cf. 13:33) over which he may have served as a high priest (1 Kings 12:33—13:1)<sup>19</sup> at both the cult center in Bethel and its counterpart in Dan (1 Kings 12:31-32). He also set up other sanctuaries (1 Kings 12:31; 13:32-33; 2 Chron. 11:15). Finally, he devised a distinct religious calendar to govern the two cult centers (1 Kings 12:32-33). It stands to reason that the presence of a rival cult center in Bethel would have attracted many of those in the southern part of Israel who did not adhere to a strict Yahwism advocated by the prophets. Even the story of the old prophet in 1 Kings 13 reveals that some Yahwists in Bethel were not as wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord as they ought to have been. The Book of 2 Chronicles reveals that after the non-Levitical priesthood was established in Bethel, many Levitical priests left the country for Judah (11:13-17). Although there was a company of faithful prophets there during the time of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:1-3), in the time of the prophets Hosea and Amos it had the reputation of being a wicked city (Hos. 10:15), of having idolatrous altars and a major temple (Amos 3:14; 7:13), and being a major cult center in Israel (Amos 4:4; 5:5-6; 7:13) whose prophets were opposed to the followers of Yahweh (Amos 7:10-13).

### **The Covenant Violation (v. 23b)**

When Elisha came near the city, "as he was walking along the road, some young people came out of the town and jeered at him." It was not unusual for the residents of Israel to know the whereabouts of notable prophets. An example of this can be found in 1 Samuel 9:12 where some people knew that the prophet Samuel had arrived in their town. When Saul and his servant inquired into the whereabouts of the prophet Samuel, they were told, "He's just ahead of you. Hurry now; he has just come to our town today." Likewise, the knowledge of Elisha's arrival at Bethel may have become public knowledge from the local Yahwistic prophets who would have been aware of the prophet's comings and goings. An

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<sup>19</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 144.

example of this is recorded in 2 Kings 2: 3, where on their way from Gilgal to Bethel, Elijah and Elisha were met on their journey by a company of prophets from Bethel.

Aware of his presence near Bethel, a large group of young people came out of the town to meet the prophet. The author uses two expressions to refer to the young people in this passage. In the first reference (v. 23) the author uses a construction that consists of a noun and attributive adjective (וְנַעֲרִים קְטַנִּים). The NASB translates it "young lads." The noun used in reference to the youth here, נַעֲר, is itself very broad in usage and can refer to a person up to a marriageable age.<sup>20</sup> In this context the attributive adjective, קְטַנִּים, can mean "1) small; unimportant, insignificant; small, weak; 2) young, youngest."<sup>21</sup> Although the combination of these two words almost always refers to a young child (1 Sam. 20:35; 1 Kings 11:17; 2 Kings 5:14; Isa. 11:6), there is one passage where it cannot signify that. In 1 Kings 3:7 King Solomon asks for wisdom because "I am only a little child (נַעֲר קָטָן) and do not know how to carry out my duties."<sup>22</sup> At this point in his life Solomon was about twenty years old,<sup>23</sup> thus showing that the young people in 2 Kings 2 need

<sup>20</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "נַעֲר," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 3:125.

<sup>21</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994-2000), 3:1093.

<sup>22</sup> If the expression here is a metaphor, then it is not a good argument for seeing these individuals as young adults (Dale Ralph Davis, "The Kingdom of God in Transition: Interpreting 2 Kings 2," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 [1984]: 392). There is no reason, however, why it must be interpreted figuratively.

<sup>23</sup> For a defense of this chronology, see Merrill, 243-8. At least two years before he became king Solomon was married to Naamah and his son Rehoboam was born one year after that (1 Kings 14:21; cf. 11:42). Although David described Solomon before his accession as "young and

not be young children as it is sometimes understood. In this light it is indeed possible that the denotation of the adjective is that of stature rather than age. It is used this way in 1 Samuel 15:17 where Samuel refers to Saul's former humility by saying, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel!" Another good parallel to the usage of the adjective in 2 Kings 2 is its usage in Jeremiah 49:17 (note the parallelism): "Now I will make you *small* among the nations, despised among men" (emphasis mine). In short, the collocation of this particular noun and adjective should be rendered "insignificant youth" in 2 Kings 2:23.

In addition to the reference to the young people in verse 23, there is also a reference to them in verse 24 where the author uses the term יְלָדִים. Like the noun נַעַר (v. 23), the noun יְלָדִים is equally broad in terms of the ages it can encompass.<sup>24</sup> Although the noun can refer to young children (e.g. 1 Sam. 4:21; Exod. 2:6), it is also used for adults. A good example is found in Ruth 1:5 where Naomi's married sons are referred to as יְלָדִים. Another example of the use of this noun in reference to adults is found in 1 Kings 12:8, 10, 14 where the noun is used in reference to the advisors of King Rehoboam. These men are described as "men who grew up with him" (1 Kings 12:8) and thus were in his same generation. At the time Rehoboam was forty-one years old (1 Kings 13:21).

In addition to the usage of the words describing the youth, two other observations would lead us to conclude that these youth were not children, but adolescents or young adults. The size of the group<sup>25</sup> and the fact that they came out to meet Elisha suggests that

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inexperienced" (1 Chron. 22:5; 29:1), he is not depicted as a child, particularly in his dealings with Adonijah and the others who attempted to wrest the throne from him (1 Kings 1:49-53; 2:19-35).

<sup>24</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "יָלָד," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 2:457.

<sup>25</sup> Messner observes that forty-two need not be the total number who mocked the prophet, but only the number of youths that were mauled by the bears. He surmises that many more youth were on the scene and all escaped

they were specifically organized to harass the prophet.<sup>26</sup> This was not a group of children.

When the young people approached Elisha they “jeered at him.” The verb which is translated “jeered” only occurs three times in the Old Testament (2 Kings 2:23; Ezek. 22:5; Hab. 1:10). In the usage in Ezekiel the prophet says that “Those who are near and those who are far away will *mock* you, O infamous city, full of turmoil.” In speaking of the Babylonians, Habakkuk says “they *deride* kings and scoff at rulers.” The paucity of usage prevents us from determining any specific connotation for this verb.

The content of their mocking was the exhortation, “Go on up you baldhead! Go on up you baldhead!” The verb  $\text{עָלָה}$  (go on up) could mean “go up, ascend”<sup>27</sup> or “go up, depart . . . withdraw, retreat.”<sup>28</sup> These meanings could be interpreted in one of three ways. First, the idea of “going up” could refer to a “mocking caricature” of the ascent of Elijah into heaven<sup>29</sup> or a challenge to Elisha to ascend into heaven just like Elijah.<sup>30</sup> The idea of

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but the unfortunate forty-two (p. 21). This is correct and is implied by the use of the partitive  $\text{מִן}$  in v. 24. This idea is brought out clearer in the NASB which says that the bears “tore up forty-two of their number” (emphasis mine).

<sup>26</sup> Wiseman, 198. Some commentators feel that it is not a literal number, but merely expressing a large number (e.g. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, 11 [New York: Doubleday & Co., 1988], 38). There is no evidence, however, to suggest that it is not the literal number of youth who came to taunt the prophet.

<sup>27</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 748.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, “1, 2 Kings,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelcin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978-92), 4:178.

<sup>30</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove,

“departing” could simply be an exhortation to leave the city. Neither of these suggestions is plausible because they do not explain why the prophet would bring down such a terrible judgment on the young people who uttered the phrase. Even Deuteronomy 18:19, where the Lord said that “If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account,” does not call for such a severe punishment. A third and better explanation would be to understand the exhortation to “go up” as a challenge to Elisha to enter Bethel and worship at the cult site established by Jeroboam. There are a number of passages where this verb is used for approaching God, regardless of whether a physical ascent is involved or not.<sup>31</sup> Wehmeier observes that “when the location of a sanctuary is involved . . . , the spatial concept is not exclusively determinative; instead the notion of the encounter with the God who dwells ‘on high’ also plays a role.”<sup>32</sup> One of the best examples of this usage is in Hosea 4:15 where the Israelites were exhorted, “Do not go to Gilgal, *Do not go up* to Beth Aven.” The idea in this passage is not so much the actual visit of the city so much as it is the trip to these sites for the purpose of worship. A final example of the usage of the verb עָלָה where the nuance is not purely spatial is in Psalm 24:3, where it is asked: “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?” In this last passage the verb has become a term used for a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

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IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 233; Messner, 19; Wiseman, 198; Woods, 55.

<sup>31</sup> H. F. Fuhs, “עָלָה” *alā*; מָעַל *ma‘al*; מוֹעַל *mo‘al*; מַעְלָה *ma‘leḥ*; מַעְלָה *ma‘lā*;; תַּעְלָה *‘alā*; עָלִי *‘ilī*;; עָלִי *‘illī*; עֲלִיָּה *‘alīyā*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 11:89-90, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 11:89-90; Eugene H. Merrill, “עָלָה,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 3:403.

<sup>32</sup> G. Wehmeier, “עָלָה” *‘h* “to go up,” in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 2:885-6.

In conclusion, this is what the youth were exhorting Elisha to do: to stop and make a religious pilgrimage to the cult site in Bethel.

Having directed their exhortation to Elisha, the young people addressed him as “baldhead.” Some important questions at this juncture are as follows: Was he really bald or was the accusation a mere insult not grounded in fact?<sup>33</sup> If he wasn’t bald, was the insult a figurative reference to their denial of his authority as a prophet, attested by the hairy mantle that he had received from Elijah?<sup>34</sup> If he was bald, what was the cause? Was his baldness hereditary, caused by a disease, or was his head shaven? If his head was shaven, what was the purpose behind it?<sup>35</sup> In regard to the first questions dealing with whether Elisha was bald or not, there is nothing that would indicate that he was not bald. The word used to describe his condition is the adjective קָרְחַל. It means “bald-head (bald on the back of the head . . .).”<sup>36</sup> The only other place this term is used is in Leviticus 13:40-44. In this passage it refers to male pattern baldness:

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<sup>33</sup> Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953): 96.

<sup>34</sup> Woods, 51-3.

<sup>35</sup> Some of the reasons that Elisha might have shaved his head, if indeed this was what he had done, could be: 1) to indicate mourning over the loss of Elijah (Deut. 14:1; Isa. 15:2; 22:12; Jer. 16:6; 47:5 (cf. 48:37); Ezek. 7:18; 27:31 Amos 8:10); 2) as a sign of humiliation (Patterson and Austel, 4:178); or 3) as a sign that he was a prophet (John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*, 2d, fully rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970], 480; House, 260; Jones, 389-90; James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, The International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951], 355; and perhaps Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, New International Biblical Commentary [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1995], 177).

<sup>36</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, 3:1140. This word specifically refers to baldness “on the back of the head” because in Lev. 13:41 the word is used in contrast to the man who has lost hair “from the front of his scalp (פְּנֵי) (מִפְּאֵת) and has a bald forehead (רֹאשׁוֹ גִבְרִי).”

When a man has lost his hair and is bald (קָרַח), he is clean. If he has lost his hair from the front of his scalp and has a bald forehead, he is clean. But if he has a reddish-white sore on his bald head (קָרַחַת) or forehead, it is an infectious disease breaking out on his head (קָרַחַת) or forehead. The priest is to examine him, and if the swollen sore on his head (קָרַחַת) or forehead is reddish-white like an infectious skin disease, the man is diseased and unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean because of the sore on his head.

It is important to note the other word for baldness in this particular passage. It is the noun קָרַחַת which means “bald spot . . . on the back of the head.”<sup>37</sup> The word is only found in Leviticus 13:42-43 and it refers to baldness caused by disease. The usage of both קָרַח and קָרַחַת in Leviticus 13:40-43 suggests that these two words are used for baldness not produced intentionally. To be specific, in discussing hereditary baldness the author uses the adjective קָרַח, but in referring to baldness resulting from disease, he uses קָרַחַת. The use of the term קָרַח strongly suggests that Elisha had male pattern baldness which is not disease-induced.<sup>38</sup>

Since 2 Kings 2 is the only passage where the word קָרַח is used as an insult, it is difficult to determine the connotation of the insult. In this regard it is worth noting that there does not seem to be any

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:1141.

<sup>38</sup> It is worthy noting that both קָרַח and קָרַחַת are used in connection with the words גִּבַּח and גִּבַּחַת. The adjective גִּבַּח means “with receding hair-line, bald on the forehead” and the feminine noun גִּבַּחַת means “receding hair-line” (Koehler and Baumgartner, 1:173). It is interesting that the two adjectives קָרַח and גִּבַּח are used for baldness not caused from disease, whereas the two feminine nouns קָרַחַת and גִּבַּחַת are used for baldness caused by disease. So Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 803.

particular stigma attached to baldness in Israelite culture. This is suggested by the fact that there are two proper nouns related to the adjective קָרַח. These are the names קָרַח (Kareah) and קֹרַח (Korah). Had there been a specific shame associated with baldness it seems unlikely that names would have been constructed from the root קָרַח.

It has been suggested that Elisha was not bald and that the reference to him as “baldhead” was an illusion to the prophetic mantle that had been passed on to him by Elijah.<sup>39</sup> In other words, “they refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the hairy garment that Elisha now wore as a symbol of prophetic authority.”<sup>40</sup> While it is true that most commentators say that Elijah wore a mantle, and no doubt Elisha subsequently came into possession of it when he succeeded Elijah (2 Kings 2:13),<sup>41</sup> the argument that “baldness” is a figurative reference to the absence of its authority is forced. As I have shown above, the noun קָרַח is not used for the absence of a particular garment on the body, but only for the absence of hair on the head. If the young people had wished to draw attention to the prophetic mantle, they could have used a more direct illusion by employing the adjective עָרִים “naked”<sup>42</sup> or עָרֹם “naked, lightly clothed.”<sup>43</sup> These adjectives would be more in line with a prophetic

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<sup>39</sup> Woods, 51-3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Cogan and Tadmor, 26; Thomas L. Constable, “2 Kings,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1:538, 40; Gray, 464; T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, 13 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 22; House, 260; Jones, 378-9; C. F. Keil, “I & II Kings,” in vol. 3: *I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, trans. James Martin, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (N.p.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 286; Patterson and Austel, 4:172; Wiseman, 193.

<sup>42</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, 2:823.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:882-3.

garment worn on the body than קָרַח which is only used for the head.

Is it possible that Elisha wore a tonsure, that his head was shaved as a sign of a prophet?<sup>44</sup> There is an episode in 1 Kings 20:35-43, however, that suggests that this was not the case in Israel. In this passage a prophet disguised himself by first having a man wound him on the head (v. 37) and secondly by wearing a “bandage over his eyes” (v. 38 NASB). Later, when the prophet “hastily took the bandage from his eyes . . . the king of Israel recognized that he was one of the prophets” (v. 41 NASB). Since the exact nature of the bandage is not known,<sup>45</sup> it is not possible to be too dogmatic. But this passage suggests that the tonsure was not a mark of a prophet. The passage makes the point in both verses that the bandage covered his eyes and that it was only when it was removed that he was recognized by the king of Israel. Secondly, the headband must not have covered his scalp otherwise there would have been no point in wounding himself for the sake of disguising himself as a soldier. If the prophet wore a tonsure, would not the king have recognized him immediately, if indeed he had one?<sup>46</sup>

Another factor figuring against the idea that Elisha's head was shaved was the fact that if the young people had wanted to be clear in addressing him as a prophet whose head was shaved, they would have used a construction utilizing the verb קָרַח or קָרַח. Both of these verbs are used in the sense of “to shave”<sup>47</sup> and would have

<sup>44</sup> See n. 35 above, point #3.

<sup>45</sup> The word is only used in this passage in the Old Testament (Koehler and Baumgartner, 1:80).

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the passage in 1 Kings 20, there is another passage in the book that might also suggest that the prophets did not wear a tonsure. In 2 Kings 1:8 it is recorded that when a certain man was described as being clothed “with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around the waist,” Ahaziah knew from that description alone that the prophet was Elijah. If a tonsure was a distinguishing mark, it is odd that this would not be mentioned in the description of the man.

<sup>47</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, 1:193, 3:1140.

been a better choice than the adjective פִּרְקָא if the prophet were wearing a tonsure.

To summarize the discussion of the significance of the insult, I would conclude that Elisha suffered from male pattern baldness which is hereditary and not caused by a disease. Although the insult as a whole implied a denial of his authority, it was not an explicit denial as such. While calling him a “baldhead” was intended as an insult, it was only mildly offensive and the true thrust of the insult is to be found in the exhortation for the prophet to make a pilgrimage to the cult site at Bethel.

### The Curse and Its Implementation (v. 24)

As a result of the youths' exhortation, “he turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the Lord” (v. 24). Elisha had already passed by the young people when the curse was uttered. He undoubtedly did not wish to provoke trouble with them, but the gravity of the taunting was such that he could not withhold it. It is significant that Elisha's curse was uttered “in the name of the Lord.” The preposition translated “in” is used instrumentally and “the name [is] being used or appealed to in the act.”<sup>48</sup> Coupled with the word שֵׁם (name), it is used “as an empowerment formula,”<sup>49</sup> thus, “by the power of.” In short, Elisha was not cursing the youth in and through himself, but through the agency of the Lord (cf. Deut. 18:18).

A helpful parallel usage in regard to cursing by the power of the Lord is found in 1 Samuel 17:43, where in the story of David and Goliath, it is said that “the Philistine cursed David by his gods.” In David's response, however, it is very clear that Goliath's curse, to be brought into effect by his “gods,” would have no effect on David because the Lord was more powerful than the “gods” of the Philistines (vv. 45-47).

<sup>48</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 90.

<sup>49</sup> A. S. van der Woude, “שֵׁם ‘name,’ in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 3:1357.

The opposite of cursing someone in the name of the Lord would be blessing someone in the name of the Lord. These passages can be helpful in furthering the understanding of the phrase. Psalm 129:8 says,

May those who pass by not say,  
"The blessing of the Lord be upon you,  
we bless you in the name of the Lord."

Note that in the second line the exhortation is that the "blessing of the Lord" be upon the reapers mentioned earlier in the psalm. In the third line the blessing is rephrased to come from the one passing by, but "in the name of the Lord." Just as God is the only One who can bring about the fulfillment of a curse, so also is He the source of blessing.

Elisha's response to the mocking exhortation was to call down a curse from heaven. How does his response compare with the way other Old Testament prophets dealt with ridicule and insults? The Old Testament records a number of examples of how prophets responded to verbal attacks like the one recorded in 2 Kings 2. In the many instances when Moses was confronted by the people in anger, his most common response was either to pray or receive communication from the Lord. For example, in Exodus 15:23-25 it is recorded that

When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, the Book of 1 Kings records a comparable instance in the life of the prophet Elijah:

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<sup>50</sup> Other examples of Moses in communication with God in response to the verbal attacks of the people can be found in Exod. 5:20-23; 17:1-4; Num. 14:1-19; 16:1-4, 12-15, 41-45; and 20:2-6.

She (the widow at Zarephath) said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

"Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" (17:18-20)<sup>51</sup>

In some cases the prophet might respond by giving a revelation from God, such as in the following example from the life of the prophet Micaiah recorded in 1 Kings 22:24-28:

Then Zedekiah son of Kenaanah went up and slapped Micaiah in the face. "Which way did the spirit from the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?" he asked.

Micaiah replied, "You will find out on the day you go to hide in an inner room."

The king of Israel then ordered, "Take Micaiah and send him back to Amon the ruler of the city and to Joash the king's son and say, 'This is what the king says: Put this fellow in prison and give him nothing but bread and water until I return safely.'" Micaiah declared, "If you ever return safely, the Lord has not spoken through me." Then he added, "Mark my words, all you people!"<sup>52</sup>

In other instances, however, the prayer voiced by the prophet might involve a request for God's judgment. Such is the case in the following example from the life of Jeremiah:

They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says."

Listen to me, O Lord

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<sup>51</sup> Another example involving the prophet Elijah is 2 Kings 1:13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Amos did the same when confronted by his detractors (Amos 7:10-17).

hear what my accusers are saying!  
Should good be repaid with evil?  
Yet they have dug a pit for me.  
Remember that I stood before you  
and spoke in their behalf  
to turn your wrath away from them.  
So give their children over to famine;  
hand them over to the power of the sword.  
Let their wives be made childless and widows;  
let their men be put to death,  
their young men slain by the sword in battle.  
Let a cry be heard from their houses  
when you suddenly bring invaders against them,  
for they have dug a pit to capture me  
and have hidden snares for my feet.  
But you know, O Lord,  
all their plots to kill me.  
Do not forgive their crimes  
or blot out their sins from your sight.  
Let them be overthrown before you;  
deal with them in the time of your anger (18:18-23).<sup>53</sup>

Although this passage is not stated to be a “curse,” Jeremiah’s response to his enemies’ slander is a close parallel to Elisha’s curse in 2 Kings 2. Just as Elisha cursed the youth for what they said, so also Jeremiah “curses” his enemies for their words.

At this juncture it would be helpful to review the nature of maledictive curses. The following observations can be noted from those passages which involve curses placed on individuals by individuals.

First, a curse was ineffective apart from the will of God. There are a number of passages that teach this. In Numbers 22:8 it is recorded that it was necessary for Balaam to consult God before he could go with Balak and curse Israel (22:8, 38; 23:3, 12, 26; 24:13). When God appeared to him He said, “Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed”

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<sup>53</sup> Another example dealing with Jeremiah’s response to an enemy plot is found in Jer. 11:18-23. Note also how he reacted to the beating he received from Pashhur in Jer. 20:1-12 and his arrest in Jer. 26:7-15 (esp. v. 15).

(22:12). In the same story Balaam exclaims, "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?" (23:8a). This implies that for the pronounced curse to be effective, the individual being cursed must already have been singled out by God for judgment.

An example of God's role in bringing about a curse is found in Judges 9. In this passage it is recorded that Abimelech (a son of Gideon) and his followers killed seventy of his brothers in Ophrah in an attempt to make himself the king of the city of Shechem (vv. 1-6). A brother by the name of Jotham escaped, however (vv. 5). Jotham in turn spoke to the people of Shechem and said, "But if you have not [acted honorably and in good faith toward Jerub-Baal (i.e. Gideon)],<sup>54</sup> let fire come out from Abimelech and consume you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and let fire come out from you, citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo, and consume Abimelech!" (v. 20). In the end Jotham's wish came to pass as Abimelech killed all the inhabitants of the city (vv. 39-49) and Abimelech himself was killed in the city of Thebez (vv. 50-55). The text comments on God's work in the outworking of Jotham's words when the author notes that

God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal's seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers (vv. 23-24).

At the end of the story the author of the Book of Judges notes that "God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done . . . [and] also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness. The curse of Jotham son of Jerub-Baal came on them" (Judg. 9:56-57). Thus, the author says that the words of Jotham quoted in verse 20 were a curse that was fulfilled against both Abimelech and the Shechemites. Like

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<sup>54</sup> Boogaart suggests that Abimelech's murder of his brothers violated a covenant between Jerub-Baal and the inhabitants of Shechem (T. A. Boogaart, "Stone for Stone: Retribution in the Story of Abimelech and Shechem," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 [1985]: 54-55, n. 7).

the passages cited above, Judges 9 illustrates the fact that a curse can only be implemented if it is the will of God in the first place.

A third example of the role of the Lord in curses is found in Judges 17:1-2 where it is recorded:

Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim said to his mother, "The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from you and about which I heard you utter a curse—I have that silver with me; I took it."

Then his mother said, "The Lord bless you, my son!"

This passage gives very little detail on the content of the mother's curse, merely that she uttered one. But it is worthy to note that in her blessing the woman said "The Lord bless you." This may suggest that the Lord would also have been the instrumentality behind the cursing, had it been carried through.

Following Jonathan's defeat of the Philistines at Micmash (1 Sam. 13:23—14:15) and in an attempt to maximize the opportunity caused by the subsequent panic in the Philistine camp, Saul forbade the army from eating until the end of the day when presumably the fighting between the Philistines and Israelites would cease. To enforce the decree he bound the army to an oath such that anyone who ate prior to evening would be cursed (1 Sam. 14:24, 28). Unaware of the curse, Jonathan did eat (1 Sam. 14:16-17, 27-30). Although he was under the curse at this point, it was not until later that Saul realized that someone had violated the oath. He found out that the oath had been violated when he inquired of the Lord concerning the feasibility of a night attack on the Philistines. When the Lord did not respond to that particular inquiry, he knew that someone had not kept the fast (1 Sam. 14:36-39). When it was ascertained that Jonathan was the one who had eaten, he was condemned to die (1 Sam. 14:40-44). In the end, however, the people saved him from the penalty of the curse (1 Sam. 14:45).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gordon has suggested that the removal of this curse may have involved a monetary payment (Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988], 141; see also J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in*

This incident suggests that the mere declaration of a curse does not imply that it will come to pass even if the conditions of it have been fulfilled. In the period of time between the violation of the oath and the moment Jonathan was discovered to have violated it, nothing negative happened to him or to the Israelite soldiers with whom he was serving. Yet the implication is that something might have happened because when Saul inquired on the feasibility of attacking the Philistines at night, the Lord did not respond. The Lord's silence suggests that the violation of the fasting oath had limited the degree to which the Lord would respond to their requests. The Lord did answer Saul's prayer to find out who it was that had violated the oath (1 Sam. 14:41-42). This shows that the oath taken was indeed a very serious matter. Because Jonathan was not punished for violating the oath, however, another implication is that the curse is not set in stone, so to speak. It was possible for the people to intercede on Jonathan's behalf so that the curse for violating the oath did not come to pass. As in the Numbers episode, although the imposition of an oath and curse was taken very seriously, the will of God was necessary before a curse could be put into effect.

Another example of the ineffectiveness of a curse severed from the will of God is found in 1 Samuel 17, a passage discussed briefly above. Goliath's curse, such that David would be killed through the instrumentality of his gods and that his body would be given "to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field" (17:44) did not come to pass because David's God was more powerful than those of the Philistines (17:46-47). Instead of David falling under the curse, it was Goliath himself who would fall under his own curse (14:46; cf. v. 52b). Thus, the mere utterance of a curse was not sufficient to put the curse into effect. Proverbs 26:2 says that "Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow, an undeserved curse does not come to rest." In all of David's imprecatory psalms it is clear that the instrumentality behind the fulfillment of the curse was the Lord. In many cases it is made explicit (Ps. 12:3; 58:6; 69:24; 83:9, 13-16; 109:20). An innocent man or woman need not fear the curse.

Not only was an effectual curse totally dependent on the will of God, but secondly, cursing certain types of individuals was also considered a serious breach of ethics. In Leviticus 19:14 the Israelites were forbidden to “curse<sup>56</sup> the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind.” As with other passages, the implication of this passage is that a curse could in fact be effective. The Israelites were not to curse the deaf because the deaf would be helpless against it in light of their handicap. In Exodus 21:17, the Law proscribed the death penalty for cursing one’s parents: “Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death” (Lev. 20:9; Prov. 20:20).<sup>57</sup> This is a logical extension of the commands to honor one’s parents (Exod. 20:12; Lev. 19:3). In Exodus 22:28b the Israelites were forbidden to “curse the ruler of your people” (cf. 2 Sam. 16:9; 19:21; 1 Kings 2:8-9).

Third, a curse was not to be uttered lightly. In Proverbs 26:2 (cited above) the citation occurs in the midst of a string of proverbs dealing with the behavior of a fool. The presence of 26:2 in that context implies that an undeserved curse is something that only a fool would utter.<sup>58</sup>

Fourth, cursing was practiced and not necessarily denounced in the Old Testament. Cursing is associated with Noah (Gen. 9:25), Isaac (Gen. 27:12-13), Joshua (Josh. 6:26, cf. Josh. 9:23; 1 Kings

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<sup>56</sup> One possible interpretation is that the verb does not denote a curse, but rather an insult (Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 128). If that were true, what would be the point? Since the efficacy of the insult lies in the ability of the recipient to hear it, what good would it do to simply insult the deaf?

<sup>57</sup> Some commentators feel that curse is too strong and render the verb as “dishonor” (e.g. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abrahams [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967], 271). The severity of the penalty, however, would suggest that the curse is what the author has in mind.

<sup>58</sup> Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary, 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 211; R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), 371-2.

16:34), David (1 Sam. 26:19; 2 Sam. 3:29; Ps. 12:3; 35:4-8, 26; 58:6-8; 59:11-13; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 83:9-18; 109:6-15, 19-20; 140:9-11), and Nehemiah (Neh. 10:28; 13:25). It is worth noting that in the passage from 1 Samuel 14 discussed above, that a curse, no matter how invalid, was a serious matter. In that passage the Lord even refused to answer the Urim and Thummim until the matter concerning Saul's curse was resolved (14:37). It should not be surmised, however, that a curse somehow has a life and power of its own that cannot be stopped once it has been uttered.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the curse and the blessing were antithetical. A curse could not be put on someone who was blessed (Num. 22:12; 23:20). On the other hand, a blessing could be pronounced on someone who was cursed as a means of removing the curse (perhaps Judg. 17:2).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For the idea that words do not have a power of their own, see Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of Words in Biblical Writings," *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 25 (1974): 283-99. He draws on Kidner's discussion of the "weakness of words" where he observes that "words are not substitute for deeds; for example, they cannot replace honest work (Prov. xiv. 23). Secondly, they cannot alter facts. . . . Thirdly, words alone cannot compel response. . . . The effectiveness of a verbal rebuke is by no means automatic, but depends on the wisdom of the one who receives it. . . ." (Thiselton, 298, quoting Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1964], 47-8). For more recent discussions, see Rodney R. Hutton, "Magic or Street-Theater? The Power of the Prophetic Word," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 247-60; Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, 95 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 173-6.

<sup>60</sup> So Sheldon H. Blank, "The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950-51): 94-5; Daniel I. Block, "Judges, Ruth", *New American Commentary*, 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 478-9; Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 183; David Frankel, "The Deuteronomic Portrayal of Balaam," *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (1996): 34; Herbert Wolf, "Judges," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979-

In fact, in commenting on Balaam, Nehemiah notes that God turned Balaam's intended curse into a blessing (Neh. 13:2).<sup>61</sup>

Having outlined the nature of maledictive curses in the Old Testament, we now may return to the passage in 2 Kings 2. The implementation of the curse on the youth was immediate and divinely appointed: "Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled<sup>62</sup> forty-two of the youth." The Old Testament describes the bear as a very ferocious animal. One such example is Hosea 13:8a which says that "Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open." In Amos 5:19 it is suggested that the bear was equally as dangerous as the lion when it says "It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear." Although the bear is not mentioned very often in the Old Testament (especially when compared to the lion),<sup>63</sup> the usage of the bear as a figure in the Book of Proverbs (17:12; 28:15) shows, however, that this particular animal must have been common enough such that its behavior was well-known to the inhabitants of Israel.

92), 3:480-1.

<sup>61</sup> The account in Numbers does not mention Balaam uttering a curse.

Early in the account, however, there is an implication that he intended to do so (Num. 22:32-34), despite the fact that the Lord had forbidden it (Num. 22:12).

<sup>62</sup> Brichto holds that the verb does not mean "maul," but rather "dividing," thus he translates it "then two bears erupted from the woods, broke them up" (Herbert Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 198). This is unlikely, however, because the Piel stem of this verb is never used in this way, but always in the sense of "to tear to pieces" (Koehler and Baumgartner, 1:150). Moreover, the mention of a specific number suggests that the youths were mauled, not broken up. Parallel usages, in which the object is a person, are 2 Kings 8:12, 15:16, and Hosea 13:8.

<sup>63</sup> There are nine terms for lions (אַרְיֵה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה, אַרְיָה), whereas there is only one for bears (דָּבָר). The bear is only mentioned four times in two nonfigurative passages, and eight times in figurative usages.

Of the eight species of bears known today,<sup>64</sup> these bears could have been either Asiatic brown or black bears. The last bear sighting in Palestine was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup> Studies of North American brown and black bears suggest that the aggression of these two bears against such a large group would be very unusual.<sup>66</sup>

Did the youths' mocking exhortation justify a curse whose implementation was so severe? If the insult was grounded in the command to go up and worship the false gods at the cult center set up by Jeroboam, then the curse imposed upon them was justified for the Law had very severe penalties for any attempt to lead the Israelites into idolatry. The death penalty was stipulated for anyone or any group that would lead the people astray in this way (Deut. 13:1-10, 12-16; 17:2-7; 18:20). Prior to the writing of Deuteronomy there are several examples of how these types of people were dealt with. In the incident of the golden calf the Levites slaughtered about three thousand of the perpetrators and in addition to that, the Lord struck the people with a plague (Exod. 32:25-29, 35). In Numbers 25 the Israelites again fell into idolatry and again many men were put to death and many others died as a result of a plague (vv. 1-5, 8-9). If this is viewed as the background to Elisha's curse, it helps one to see that the exhortation of the young people was not a simple request uttered by innocent little children.

Disobedience of the Law resulted in covenant curses and one of those curses was destruction from wild animals (Lev. 26:14-39; Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68). Lev. 26:22 says, "I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy

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<sup>64</sup> "Bear Species Descriptions," At the International Association for Bear Research and Management Web Site, [www.bearbiology.com](http://www.bearbiology.com).

<sup>65</sup> Edwin Firmage, "Zoology," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1143.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Herrero, *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance* (New York: Lyons Press, 1985), 13, 15, 125, 210. It must be noted, however, that Herrero's research dealt with North American bears and that aggressiveness varies among species. The species of bear that inhabited Israel in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC may have been more aggressive than bears today.

your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted." The same idea is mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy where the Lord says, "I will send against them the fangs of wild beasts, the venom of vipers that glide in the dust" (32:24b), and

You will sow much seed in the field but you will harvest little, because locusts will devour it. You will plant vineyards and cultivate them but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes, because worms will eat them. . . . Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and crops of your land (28:38-39, 42).

This curse is reiterated in the prophets. In response to the waywardness of Judah, Jeremiah concludes, "Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them, a wolf from the desert will ravage them, a leopard will lie in wait near their towns to tear to pieces any who venture out, for their rebellion is great and their backslidings many" (5:6; perhaps also 8:17). In the Book of Ezekiel the Lord says that "I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. . . ." (5:17; see also 14:15, 21; 33:27). In the Book of Joel God punishes the disobedience of the nation by means of a severe locust plague (Joel 1). Crop pests as covenant curses are also mentioned in Malachi 3:11. In short, the curse imposed upon the youth of Bethel was in accord with the type of punishment one would expect from the covenant curses found in the Law of Moses.

### **Conclusion: Continuation of Journey to Samaria (v. 25)**

After the young people were mauled, the text concludes by saying that Elisha "went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria." Elisha went to Carmel because there was most likely an altar to Yahweh there (cf. 1 Kings 18:19) and it was a place of retreat (2 Kings 4:25). The text says that he "returned" to Samaria because it was the place in which Elisha did most of his ministry.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> In terms of his ministry, Elisha was to be found in the desert of Edom with the army of Israel (2 Kings 3:8; cf. v. 11), in Shunem (2 Kings 4:8), at Mount Carmel (2 Kings 4:25), in Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38), in Dothan (2 Kings 6:13), in Jericho (2 Kings 6:1; cf. 2:4-6, 19-22), and in the city of Samaria (2 Kings 6:19-20, 32). A verse in the latter passage suggests that this might

## CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION TO THE CHURCH

On his way from Jericho to Samaria the prophet Elisha was met near Bethel by a large mob of young adults intent on forcing him to worship the calf shrine of Bethel. As a result of their violation of the covenant laws regarding incitement to idolatry, he put them under a covenant curse and as a result forty-two members of the group were mauled by a pair of bears.

Although it has not been the purpose of this paper to give a detailed exposition of the concept of the malevolent curse in the Old Testament, nor to address thoroughly every issue related to curses in African traditional religion, it would be helpful to relate the findings to common pastoral concerns and to encourage further reflection in this area. How might this passage apply to the church today, particularly in the realm of curses? The New Testament is clear that Christians are not to curse others, no matter who they are or what they have done. Paul reminds the Romans to “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14; see also Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:28; 1 Cor. 4:12; James 3:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:23). Similarly, there are many other passages that exhort a believer to be kind, such as 1 Thessalonians 5:15: “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else” (cf. Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12; 2 Pet. 1:5-7). So many times curses

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have been the base of his ministry as he had a house there (v. 32). In 2 Kings 5:3-4 Namaan’s Israelite servant said that Elisha was “the prophet who is in Samaria.” Furthermore, Elisha’s main dealings seemed to be with the kings of Israel (2 Kings 3:11; 5:8; 6:10, 12, 21, 31; 7:17-18; 9:1-3; 13:14-19).

1 Kings 19:16 says that Elisha was originally from Abel Meholah. If Edelman is correct, the best site of the ancient village of Abel Meholah is Tell Abu Sus in the Jordan valley 15 kilometers south of Bethshan (Diana V. Edelman, “Abel-Meholah,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1:11).

are used to exact vengeance, and in this regard the Word of God is clear: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). Even in Old Testament times personal revenge was limited and hatred of enemies was not taught (Exod. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:17-18, 34; Deut. 32:35; Prov. 20:22; 24:29). In fact, there is at least one passage that teaches kindness to enemies (Prov. 25:21). If God has commanded us not to curse, this would suggest that no curse could be pleasing to Him. It would also indicate that there is no reason for a believer to fear a curse. In this regard, it should be an encouragement for such an individual to know that not only are all Christians indwelt by the Spirit (John 14:16-17), but to conquer this fear they have the weapons for God's protection against Satan (John 17:15; Eph. 6:16), the power of prayer (Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18), and the Word of God (Matt. 4:4; 2 Pet. 1:2).

Granted, Christians should not curse or fear a curse from another, but could the Lord Himself place a person under a curse for severe disobedience as in the case with the youth in 2 Kings 2? The answer to this is also negative. The first reason why we cannot fall under a curse like the one in 2 Kings 2 is because it was a covenant curse. Covenant curses were specific judgments that would befall Israel should she fail to keep the stipulations found in the covenant. While the Mosaic law along with all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17), Christians are not under the jurisdiction of the law like Israel (Acts 15:5 [cf. 10-11, 28-29]; 2 Cor. 3:3, 6-18; Gal. 3:3, 5, 10-13; 5:1-6, 16-18; Col. 2:6-23; Heb. 8:8-9, 13).<sup>68</sup> The covenant

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<sup>68</sup> The law was given to the Israelites and it was they who entered into covenant with God to obey it and suffer the consequences of disobedience (Exod. 19:5-8; 24:3-11; cf. Deut. 27:9). While the goodness of the law is not disputed (Rom. 7:12; 1 Tim. 1:8; James 1:25), the church has not entered into a legal contract with the Lord on the basis of the Mosaic covenant. Rather, the church is under the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25) which replaces the Old. In commenting on Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31-34), the author of Hebrews observes, "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first obsolete;

courses certainly illustrate for us the consequences of disobeying God's word. Although the consequences of disobedience are often pointed out in the New Testament (1 Tim. 1:18-20; Rev. 2:14-16), the possibility of the covenant curses coming upon a believer, however, is not entertained. Paul says that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:13).

In addition to not being under the Mosaic covenant and the covenant curses that have fallen on ancient Israel, the second reason that Christians cannot come under a curse from God is that there are no injunctions in the New Testament commanding us to curse others. If the covenant curses were still in force, we would expect to see commands in the New Testament urging church leaders to put the wayward under curses in order to discourage sin. This is not the case, however.

There are, however, some passages that imply that curses might be acceptable under certain circumstances. In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul says, "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord" (NRSV) and in Galatians 1:8 he says, ". . . : If anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!" (NRSV, see also v. 9).<sup>69</sup> I do not think that either of these passages would constitute an invitation to pronounce curses, because neither passage is a *command* to practice cursing. Nowhere does Paul or any other writer in the New Testament invite the reader to do the same. The curses cited above were not uttered because of personal injustices levied against the apostle or because these people were not walking in a honorable manner (although they indeed may have been), but for not loving the Lord and for preaching another gospel! Both of these curses were directed against the false teachers. The only way to eternal life is trusting in Jesus as Savior, and thus until a person believes, he is already under the wrath of God (John 3:36). Distortions of the Gospel, such as the background of the Galatians passage, would also fall under this kind of condemnation.

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and what is obsolete and aging with soon disappear" (8:13).

<sup>69</sup> Some other instances of curses are Matt. 25:41; 26:74; Mark 11:14 (cf. v. 21); 14:71; Acts 23:14; Rom. 9:3; and perhaps 2 Timothy 4:14.

The person who preaches another gospel is not only not trusting in Jesus himself, but is leading others away from the true way of salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 3:17). In conclusion, in spite of the fact that there are some curses recorded in the New Testament, the absence of teaching on the practice of cursing would suggest that Christians should proceed very cautiously in this area.

In the absence of a curse, would evildoers have nothing to fear and wickedness have the freedom to run rampant? Absolutely not! For unbelievers there is a judgment awaiting them in the future (2 Thess. 1:6-10). For backslidden Christians, the absence of a curse should be no comfort, for the Lord will discipline them with a view to their sanctification (Heb. 12:4-11; Rev. 3:19). In this process the Lord may also use the church. The church may practice spiritual restoration (Gal. 6:1), rebuke and instruction (2 Cor. 7:8-10; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim. 2:25), excommunication (1 Cor. 5:2, 7, 9, 11, 13; 2 Thess. 3:14; Titus 3:9-11), and in some cases handing the individual over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4-5). The goal in each case, however, would be that the person would be led to repentance and back to life of walking in the Spirit. In fact, these trials should actually be seen as blessings from a spiritual perspective because they are difficulties that God uses to bring the wayward back into the fellowship of the Lord and other believers.

In regard to the rearing of children, the Word of God is clear on the crucial role of parental discipline (e.g. Eph. 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:4). In the light of the injunctions on not cursing and the absence of injunctions for cursing, however, should parents resort to the curse as a tool in cases of severe disobedience? I will leave it up to the reader to decide.

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