

DEEP END - HIGHLIGHTS (text not audio)

2 KINGS 2 - ELISHA AND THE BEARS

One of the difficult passages in 2 Kings is when Elisha calls down a curse on 42 boys who were mocking him. The passage reads like this:

“From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. “Get out of here, baldy!” they said. “Get out of here, baldy!” He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria”. (2 Kings 2:23-25)

We cannot solve all the problems of the passage, but it is significant that he meets the “boys” or "young lads" at Bethel, one of the places where Jeroboam set up his golden calves as an alternative for the Northern Kingdom going to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:25-33).

However, the crucial thing is who are the “boys” or "young lads"? Interestingly, the Hebrew word (na'ar) sometimes does not need to be translated this way. In fact it is often translated "official" or "steward" and often doesn't say anything about age.

Mephibosheth's servant Ziba is a “na'ar” of Saul's house (2 Samuel 16:1), but he is clearly not a boy since he has fifteen sons of his own !(2 Samuel 19:17).

Boaz would have been a fool to put a "boy" in charge of his reapers, but his foreman is called a “na'ar” in Ruth 2:5-6.8

The most likely answer is that the forty-two “mauled” by the bears (we are not told how severely) are servants at the shrine at Bethel, the shrine devoted to golden calves (“naar” in this case possibly meaning “officials” or “stewards”). And this would explain why they were so aggressive towards Elisha.

This is important because Elisha is not a man who punishes “boys” or “young lads”, but instead calls down curses on the "officials" (priests?) of the idolatrous shrine of Bethel (that eventually became so wicked that they went as far as sacrificing children to Moloch).

In addition, these 42 men knew from the long ministry of Elijah and Elisha that they were servants of Yahweh who had repeatedly demonstrated that he was the true and the living God - the God who’s covenant was being trampled underfoot daily by the idolatry of the shins at Bethel. And to insult Elisha was to insult the God that he represented.

Finally we should note that Elisha’s actions are not those of personal vengeance, but rather they continue to demonstrate that the idols at Bethel are impotent, whereas Yahweh even controls the beasts of the forest. His action parallels that of Elijah. He is demonstrating the continued supremacy of Yahweh over that of the Baals of the Northern Kingdom. And to do that was as much an act of mercy as it was of judgment.

(Much of the above is based on Peter Leithart’s work)
