

Elisha, the Little Children, & the Bears

One of the strangest bible stories is in 2 Kings. Shortly after Elijah had been taken away by God, Elisha traveled to Bethel to be confronted by “little children” who call him “bald head”. Elisha cursed them, and two bears attacked them. Perhaps I can provide some answers for this...

2 Kings 2:23 Explained

2Kings 2:23 – “And he went up from thence unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head.”

[Bethel] – The center of Jeroboam’s idolatrous worship (1Ki 12:28-33). Elijah was considered their great enemy (1Ki 21:20) which made Elisha the same. Nothing says Elisha actually went in the city. After this incident, who would? He was unwelcome. He went from here to Mount Carmel (2Ki 2:25).

[children] – H5288 – “a boy, a young man”, used of Solomon when he became king anywhere from age 14-20 (1Ki 3:7), of David when he killed the giant in his late teens (1Sam 17:33), Ishmael when he was exiled at age 16-19 (Gen 21:14), and used of men who were spies for Joshua (Josh 6:22-23). They were all male with no females mentioned. These were not toddlers. These were a large group of possibly hundreds of teenagers well capable of killing Elisha. They were idolatrous young men, and were perhaps the children of the 450 prophets of Baal that Elijah had executed (1Ki 18:40).

[go up] – “Go up into the sky like your master and die!” They thought Elijah died (2Ki 2:16) and they wanted Elisha to die too.

[bald head] – For sure, this was derogatory. There are 3 possibilities as to why they said this 1) he was just naturally bald, 2) he shaved his head like a monk, showing his separation to the prophetic office, or 3) HE WASN’T BALD and this was just an insult because baldness was considered a bad thing among the Jews (Isa 3:17 & 24); similar to how today a person can be called “butthead” without their head resembling a butt at all! Elijah was a hairy man (2Ki 1:8), so if Elisha was truly bald, maybe they characterized them as, “The hairy guy and the bald guy”. The point isn’t if he was bald or not, the point is that these young men were hostile towards Elisha. It is written twice, “Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head”, showing that the group was repeatedly chanting, like when the crowd that crucified Jesus said, “crucify him, crucify him!” (Luke 23:21) and Jesus was “lifted UP” (John 3:14).

Paraphrased Summary of 2Kings 2:23

Elisha went from Jericho to the idolatrous city of Bethel, and as he was arriving, a group of possibly hundreds of young men/teenagers came out of the city, perusing him. They mocked him (in a threatening way), saying, “Go up in the sky like your master and die, you worthless piece of trash!”

2 Kings 2:24 Explained

2Kings 2:24 – “And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.”

[he turned back] – Elisha was GOING TO Bethel, the young men were COMING FROM Bethel; they would have met face to face. Why turn back unless he was trying to escape? The group was obviously opposing him while he was trying to get away from them. It’s unlikely that the violent crowd would have let Elisha peacefully walk through their midst, but more likely that he ran from them and turned around to curse them for his defense.

[out of the wood] – “the wood” was on the road to Bethel, not in Bethel. This shows that the young men pursued Elisha. Local tradition places the site of this story near the town of Deir Dibwan and is called, “The Lair of the Two Bears,” about 1.5 km or 1 mile east of Bethel.

[she bears] – “she bear”, H1677 is one word in Hebrew and is translated “bear (slow)”. Its root comes from H1680, “to move slowly”. Another translation for “bear” is H1678. The same word H1677 is just translated “bear” when David killed a bear as “a youth” (1Sam 17:34-36). I wonder why most translations keep it as “female bear” in 2Kings 2:24 and just “bear” in 1Sam 17:34? In either case, the description of the bears was their speed, not their gender or size. I doubt that the one thing Elisha would have noticed about the bears was their gender. Why bears? God said if you walk contrary to Me, “I will send wild beasts among you” (Lev 26:21–22).

[tare] – H1234 “to tear, rip, cut to pieces”. It does not say the bears killed or ate those 42 young men, but we might assume it. The young men threatened him, and a threat on God’s chosen is a threat on God Himself. The punishment mirrored the severity of the crime. A strong message was sent to the city.

[fourty and two of them] – This number implies there were more who escaped from the bears, possibly hundreds. How else could the “slow bears” “tare” such a large number? This also leads me to believe that the young men were chasing Elisha and pushing in to harm him even while the bears started attacking some of them. It’s probably a coincidence but the number 42 has been seen in other bad situations in other parts of the bible (2Ki 10:14 & Rev 13:5).

[children] – H3206 – This word was used of Joseph when he was sold as a slave at seventeen years old (Gen 37:2 & 30), of Benjamin (Gen 43:8), of Absalom (2Sam 18:5), and was translated “young men” in 1Ki 12:8, 12:10, & 12:14. Like 2Kings 2:23, this word does not mean innocent five year old kids, but young men capable of hurting and killing Elisha.

Paraphrased Summary of 2Kings 2:24

The young men chased after Elisha from the city of Bethel out into the forest, cursing him. Elisha, perhaps running for his life, turned and cursed them. Two bears came out of the forest defending Elisha by clawing/biting at the young men who were pursuing Elisha. The number of those wounded/killed was 42.

This story is similar to 1Kings 1:9-16 when fifty armed soldiers were a threat to Elijah. The condition of this situation is described perfectly as; they mocked God, His messengers, and His prophets until there was no remedy (2Ch 36:16).