

ELIJAH AND ELISHA: PART II

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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During their approximately six years together,¹ Elijah is a formative influence on his disciple Elisha. The latter follows literally and figuratively in many of his mentor's ways. That said, Elisha ben Shaphat likewise breaks new ground, showing that, as he comes into his own, he allows his own personality and interests to blossom.

Nearly 3,000 years ago, the prophet Elijah erupted upon the scene in mid-ninth-century BCE Samaria without warning and without fanfare. Abruptly, he proclaims his prophecy to King Ahab: *"As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding"* (I Kgs. 17:1). Without waiting for a reply or response, Elijah quits Ahab's presence at God's command and departs eastward, crossing the River Jordan. He heads for the Wadi Kerith, where he goes into hiding.

Elijah is a powerful, extraordinary, and impressive figure. He dresses in distinctive clothing and is instantly recognizable (II Kgs. 1:8). Though essentially a loner, he occasionally has an unnamed attendant. Towards the end of his time, as depicted in First Kings, he designates his successor Elisha and advises him.

At the close of his (biblical) prophetic career,² Elijah's departure is even more dramatic than his entrance. Again, crossing the Jordan amidst *a fiery chariot with fiery horses . . . Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind*. He leaves behind a mystified audience (II Kgs. 2:11, 16-18).

ELIJAH AND ELISHA: SIMILARITIES

Elijah appoints Elisha ben Shaphat to be his successor, and serves for a time as Elisha's mentor. Many of the acts of Elisha replicate the work of Elijah. Although Elisha follows the path of his direct exemplar, Elijah, he takes some time finding his prophetic footing. Elijah had a special cloak which he had thrown over Elisha's shoulders when he delegated him as a disciple (I

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Kgs. 19:19). Yet immediately after this, Elijah retrieves the garment. Just before he ascends to heaven, Elijah takes the mantle and strikes the Jordan to stop it flowing so that he and Elisha can cross over on dry land. When Elijah ascends, he leaves the cloak behind. Elisha takes that item of clothing and, invoking "the God of Elijah," strikes the Jordan and splits it in two (II Kgs. 2:13-14). Elisha then travels from Jericho, via Beth El, and on to Mount Carmel and Samaria, "two major sites of Elijah's activity. It thereby further associates him with the activities of his master."³

Although done subtly, the text connects the two men on the occasion of Elisha's appointment. He is plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. That number reminds the reader of the twelve stones that Elijah set up at Mt. Carmel (I Kgs. 19:19-21; 18:31-32) as well as the not-so-subtle connection to the twelve tribes.

When Elijah ascends to heaven, Elisha calls out "*Father, father, Israel's chariots and horsemen!*" When Elisha is dying, King Joash of Israel visits him and repeats those same words (II Kgs. 2:12; 13:14). Just as Elijah is known as a wonder-worker in his post-biblical existence, so is a miracle associated with Elisha after his death. Someone being interred is placed in Elisha's grave: when the corpse touches Elisha's bones, it revives and stands up (II Kgs. 13:20-21).

Elisha duplicates some miracles performed by his mentor for a number of reasons. He wishes to honor Elijah's memory, he seeks to realize his own power, and he wants to be seen by others as a prophet of God in his own right.⁴ Several of the miraculous deeds ascribed to Elisha, including the multiplication of oil and bread (II Kgs. 4:4-5, 43-44), and the resuscitation of the Shunammite woman's son (II Kgs. 4:33-35), have precedents in the Elijah cycle of stories (cf. I Kgs. 17:14-16, 20-22).⁵

In addition, both prophets interact with the rulers of their day – Elijah with Ahab and Jezebel (I Kgs. 17:1; 18:1-2, 17-19, 41; 19:1-2; 21:17-24), Elisha with King Jehoram of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah (II Kgs. 3:13-19). How they act with them, however, marks some of the differences between the two prophets.

Although Elijah is the better known of these two figures, in some ways Elisha is an even more active prophet than his predecessor. According to the medieval commentator, Rabbi David Kimḥi, Elisha performs 16 miracles in comparison with the eight performed by Elijah.⁶

They also have different approaches to working with other people. Elisha is more lenient and humane with enemy soldiers than Elijah was under similar circumstances. Elisha allows the Aramean soldiers to return to their land in safety, whereas Elijah lets fire consume those who sought to apprehend him (II Kgs. 6:21-23; II Kgs. 1:9-12).

Elijah often acts alone, even without attendants. By contrast, Elisha is often associated with a company of prophets and/or is attended by a named servant, Gehazi. Elisha seems to live in a community of prophets. Elijah is very self-reliant. With one exception, dispatching his servant to look west for a sign of rain, Elijah performs his prophetic acts alone. By contrast, Elisha often delegates someone to bring the prophetic message (I Kgs. 18:43-44; II Kgs. 4:43; 5:8, 10; 9:1-3).

Elisha likewise sees to it that God's earlier command to his mentor, that Elijah himself should anoint Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu ben Jehoshaphat as king of Israel, events that did not take place, are now implemented under Elisha's watch (I Kgs. 19:15-16; II Kgs. 8:7-15; 9:1-6).

In terms of their physical appearance, the prophets also differ: Elijah is described as being hairy, while Elisha is bald (II Kgs. 1:8; 2:23).

Whereas the Bible is silent about Elijah's pre-prophetic history, not even mentioning his father's name, the text indicates that Elisha ben Shaphat came from a wealthy family. When they meet, Elisha is plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. Before he actually joins Elijah, Elisha slaughters the oxen, boils their flesh and gives it to some hungry local people. At a time when poverty was widespread, this was an extraordinarily generous act (I Kgs. 19:19-21).

Elisha is clairvoyant and advises the kings of Israel on military matters. He does so reluctantly, since he has nothing but disdain for Jehoram. He mocks the king and tells him to seek advice elsewhere. However, when Jehoram invokes the name of God, Elisha relents and answers, but he does so with little grace. Elisha tells Jehoram, "*Were it not that I respect [your fellow monarch and ally] King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I wouldn't look at you or notice you*" (II Kgs. 3:14). Nonetheless, Elisha tells the kings how they will

succeed in defeating their common enemy. Elijah, by contrast, has frequent stormy exchanges with Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab calls Elijah a *troubler of Israel* (I Kgs. 18:17) and Jezebel is so furious with Elijah that she threatens to have him killed (I Kgs. 19:2). "In general, one may say that Elijah was a warrior and preacher, while Elisha was more the statesman and man of action."⁷

That Elijah was a formative influence on Elisha is clear; and, to some extent, Elisha consciously replicates the wondrous acts of his master. There are, however, significant differences in their prophetic roles. Elijah was the more dramatic (and probably the more charismatic) of the two. His public confrontation with the prophets/priests of Baal, culminating in their massacre, was a major event in the religious history of his time. Likewise, his ascent to heaven and his post-biblical career were unique. Yet in some ways, Elisha's career as a prophet had a greater long-term effect on the political history of Israel. Elisha advised the monarchs of his day, both the king of Israel and the king of Judah. Elisha arranged the anointing of Jehu ben Jehoshaphat and Hazael king of Aram. Anointing Jehu brought down the House of Omri after a nearly fifty-year period.

Although Elisha patterned certain of his miraculous acts after those of his mentor Elijah, in many ways their prophetic styles differed. Each prophet was distinctive, bringing a special message and approach to his role.

NOTES

1. The Bible does not tell directly how long Elisha ben Shaphat served as a disciple to Elijah the Tishbite. Elisha is appointed at the end of I Kings 19. Chapter 20 details a war between the king of Aram and the king of Israel. Chapter 21 relates that the events described there *occurred sometime afterward* (v. 1). Chapter 22 begins with the statement that three years have passed since the Aram war and ends with an explanation that Ahaziah, who succeeded Ahab, only reigned for two years (I Kgs. 22:1, 52). In II Kings, chapter 1 provides further details of Ahaziah's death and chapter 2 describes Elijah's ascent to heaven.

2. At the close of the Book of Malachi, the prophet reports that Elijah will come before *the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents* (Mal. 3:23-24). Elijah has an even richer career in the post-biblical era, when he returns to earth and performs miracles: see TB *Ta'anit* 21a, *Kiddushin* 40a. According to both Jewish and Christian tradition Elijah will announce the coming of the Messiah (TB *Sanhedrin* 98a; Matthew 11:7-15, Mark 6:14-16, Luke 1:17). Elijah also attends Passover *Sedarim* and is present at circumcisions: see Moses Aberbach and Dov Noy, "Elijah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972

edn.) 6:635-640. See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1910), "Elijah."

3. Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007) p. 275.

4. In the Christian scriptures, some of the wonders performed by Jesus suggest that Elijah and Elisha (who lived centuries earlier) were his exemplars. Thus, Jesus resurrects the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17; cf. I Kgs. 17:17-24; II Kgs. 4:32-37) and specifically mentions Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26). Just as Elijah and Elisha miraculously fed widows, so does Jesus miraculously feed people (I Kgs. 17:13-16, II Kgs. 4:1-7; Mat. 14:16-21, 15:32-38). See also Walter Brueggeman, *I & 2 Kings, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000) pp. 302-4.

5. See Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2 Kings, Anchor Bible 11*; (New York: Doubleday, 1988) p. 59; Brueggeman, *I & 2 Kings*, pp. 322-325.

6. Kimhi (Radak) on II Kings 2:14.

7. Yehoshua M. Grintz, "Elisha," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972 edition) 6.666.



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