

ELISHA'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE SYRIANS

Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER

July 22, 1979

Thomas McDaniel

Background Scripture: 2 Kings 6:8–23

Key Passage: 2 Kings 6:8–10, 15–23

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In this lesson on “Elisha’s Encounter with the Syrians,” we move to the fourth part of Part II on “Decisions That Shaped the Nations’ Future.” The primary concern of this lesson is to explore the question “How do you treat your enemies?” The Christian has an authoritative answer not available to the Israelites: Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). But even though the Christian *knows* the answer, one is not always predisposed to practice what one knows. There are other more attractive and practical options given in the Bible which are compatible with the instinct to fight. Such an option is provided by the prophet Elisha and the traditional theology of holy war, which he advocated most of his life. But a better option, consistent with the gospel of the Prince of Peace, was provided by the exceptional act of Elisha, who on one occasion spared the lives of enemy captives with the command to the king of Israel: “You shall not slay them” (2 Kings 6:22).

A great deal of attention has been given to Elisha’s legendary role as a worker of miracles, but too little attention has been paid to his one attempt to move Israel away from war as the primary instrument for deciding domestic and foreign issues. Probably few people in ancient Israel realized the significance of God’s admonition to David, that he was

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unqualified to build the temple, because he was a man who had shed so much blood.

The previous studies in Parts I and II which focused on Saul, Absalom, Rehoboam, and Elijah should have been sufficient to alert the reader to the tragic consequences of holy war. The swords which felled the Canaanites in the wars of conquest and the wars of occupation were reused in the civil wars of Israel and Judah, in which kinfolk killed one another. The progeny of Abraham found little blessing for itself, and it was able to give even less of a blessing to the other families roundabout.

The hope for peace, ignited by the anointing of Solomon as king over Israel, was nearly extinguished in Israel's civil wars and frequent royal assassinations. But Elisha rekindled the dying ember for a brief moment, in a peace gesture to the Syrians. It was the last flicker of peace to lighten the darkening days of the ten-tribe kingdom in the north. Elisha's capture of enemy forces and his subsequent peace overture in sending them home unharmed and well fed was an astute act that should have been a beacon light for foreign policy. Instead, the event was more like the light of a flashbulb—bright and brilliant, but over in a minute.

Even Elisha himself later abandoned his peace platform and returned to the traditional holy-war theology. On his deathbed he rallied Israel to fight the Syrians: “The Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Syria! For you shall fight the Syrians . . . until you have made an end of them” (2 Kings 13:17).

But the promised victory over the Syrians never really came. Both Syria and Israel fell victim to the military supremacy of Assyria. Ironically, Samaria and Damascus died as

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allies trying to withstand their common enemy. The promise of victory perished in the reality of defeat. Ten tribes learned too late the fallacy of handling violent situations with violence.

The Biblical Setting

The prophet Elisha was active during some of the most violent days of Israel's history. Elijah's violence against the prophets of Baal had fired again the flames of holy war. The house of Ahab governed Israel under the shadow of a death sentence. Ahab's son, Ahaziah, was doomed before he ever became king. Since the prophet of Yahweh had decreed his destruction, it is not surprising that Ahaziah sought the salvation of other gods. He turned to Baal and Baal-zebub and lived up to Elijah's expectation that he would be an idolater. When Ahaziah injured himself by falling from the second floor of his home, he turned to the god of Ekron rather than to the God of Israel. As a consequence, he never got out of bed again but died shortly thereafter, personally condemned to death by Elijah (1:16–18).

Shortly after King Ahaziah went to his grave, "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2:11), and Elisha carried on where Elijah had left off.

A new king now governed Israel, Jehoram (often shortened in the biblical account to "Joram"), another son of Ahab. He was not a good king, but he did better than his father or brother had done (3:2–3). Jehoram gained limited support for his government from the prophet Elisha. This was due mainly to Jehoram's alliance with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, in an expedition against the Moabites. But since Elisha also [page 37] gave equal support to the Edomites in this joint Judah-Israel-Edom campaign, Elisha's commitment to Jehoram was

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only temporary and superficial.

Elisha seemed to be more anti-Moabite than pro-Jehoram. Something of Elisha's own violent spirit can be seen in his directive to the forces which were attacking Moab: "And you shall conquer every fortified city, and every choice city, and shall fell every good tree, and stop up all springs of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones" (3:19). Elisha was extremely talented in stirring up violence. The anti-Moab coalition fulfilled Elisha's directive and left the land of Moab ravaged and enraged (3:26–27).

The real feelings of Elisha toward Jehoram are reflected in Elisha's move to anoint Jehu as king over Israel to replace Jehoram. Elisha gave one of the younger prophets specific instructions to anoint Jehu in secret. The young prophet was to say: "Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel" (9:3). But the young prophet supplemented the simple words of Elisha with words of his own. He transformed Elisha's calm and neutral message into a violent imperative for murder.

Here is what the messenger prophet actually said:

Thus says the Lord the God of Israel, I anoint you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel. And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish; and I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel And the dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel, and none shall bury her (9:6–10).

Elisha's message of seven Hebrew words was expanded by the young prophet. into a fifty-eight word (in Hebrew) diatribe against the descendants of Ahab. It was a most effective speech!

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Jehu responded with all the passion of a holy-war patriot. He moved immediately to annihilate all of Ahab's relatives. Jehoram was killed by an arrow from Jehu's bow (9:24), and the king of Judah (another Ahaziah), who was visiting Jehoram at the time, was captured and killed by Jehu. The queen mother, Jezebel, was hurled to her death and crushed beneath Jehu's horses (9:33). Jehu then treacherously maneuvered the elders of Samaria to decapitate the seventy sons of Ahab and to bring their heads to him in Jezreel. In fearful obedience seventy heads were piled into two heaps before Jehu (10:6–10). The sword of Jehu's holy war was not put down until "Jehu slew all that remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, all his great men, and his familiar friends, and his priests, until he left him none remaining" (10:11).

The appraisal of Jehu's violence is viewed differently by the author-editor of Second Kings and by the prophet Hosea. Although his vengeance is strongly approved in Second Kings, it is condemned in Hosea. The two pertinent passages of Scripture are 2 Kings 10:30 and Hosea 1:4. The former reads, "And the Lord said Jehu, 'Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.'" But the latter text states to the contrary, "And the Lord said to him, 'Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.'" Hosea obviously did not share the holy-war theology reflected in the second book of Kings.

The important question to be raised in the context of this study is, "Where was Elisha during Jehu's holy war, and did

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he approve or authorize such violence?” It is not an easy question to answer since the accounts about Elisha are without fixed chronological markers and the chapter sequence in the Bible may not reflect the historical sequence. The “king of Israel” is frequently mentioned in the Elisha stories, but the particular king is not mentioned by name.

A survey of all the issues by one of the best commentators on this book of Kings led to the conclusion that Elisha’s peace gesture to the Syrians came during the reign of Jehu.¹ The Syrians were kept in check by the alliance of Israel and Judah against Damascus; but with the murder of Jehoram and Ahaziah, the Syrians were able to go on the offensive against Israel and her new king, Jehu. If this reconstruction is correct, Elisha was perhaps an unhappy witness to the violence of Jehu. Since it was his own young prophet disciple who stirred Jehu to action, Elisha may have felt some responsibility for Jehu’s behavior. Elisha was certainly not a pacifist, but the excesses of Jehu may have stirred him to attempt a less violent approach to international and internal politics.

The Syrian king who waged war with Israel was probably Hazael. Elisha had a major part to play in Hazael’s becoming the king of Syria (8:7–15). But there is no reason to credit Elisha with responsibility for Hazael’s murder of the incumbent Syrian king, Benhadad I. Elisha was aware that Hazael would afflict the Israelites once he was in power (8:12). Elisha may have been moved to minimize the Syrian oppression of Israel by peace overtures.

1. John Gray, *First and Second Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), p. 513.

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Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that Elisha was a prophet who inherited a holy-war theology and lived according to that theology for the major portion of his life. But having been a witness to violent events that exceeded all his expectations and control, Elisha attempted to introduce a new policy of peace.

Two actions of Elisha reflect a de-escalation of holy war fever. One was the well-known story of Elisha's healing of Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria (2 Kings 5). Not only was Naaman healed of leprosy, but also through Yahweh's power to heal he became a convert to the God of Israel. He even took two loads of Israelite soil back to Syria with him so that he could worship Yahweh on Israelite "territory." Had Naaman attempted to worship Yahweh because of a convincing holy-war theology or because Yahweh was the true "divine warrior," faith would have been impossible. Israel would succumb to the power of Naaman's own military forces, and both Syria and [page 38] Israel would be destroyed by the Assyrians. Yahweh, the God of war, was about to disappear, but Yahweh, the God of peace and healing, was soon to emerge. Naaman met the God of healing through the ministry of Elisha.

On another occasion, Elisha learned of the plans of Syria to ambush and attack the Israelites. With full knowledge of the enemy's plans, Elisha was able to protect Israelite lives. The Syrian king suspected a security leak. The investigation pointed to Elisha as the informant. Attempting to plug the leak, a task force was assigned to capture Elisha and return him to the Syrian king for appropriate action. Little did the Syrian forces realize that they were on a "mission impossible" assignment. They encountered forces beyond their expectation

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and control—they ended up being captured by Elisha (6:8–18).

At this point Elisha initiated an impossible mission. He defused the crisis and directed hostilities to a peaceful end by feasting with the foreign forces and sending them home (6:20–23). These forces never returned to fight Israel. But other forces did come (13:5, 23–25). Eventually, when Israel was not being attacked by Syria, she joined Syria as an ally in making attacks upon Judah (16:5–6; 2 Chronicles 28:5–8). Elisha had insight concerning the way to treat enemies and had lighted the way to peace, but the theology of conflict was too well and too often employed zealously by men aspiring to political power. Elisha's exceptional act never really made the stage of history.

Interpreting the Scriptures

2 Kings 6:21—“My father, shall I slay them? Shall I slay them?”

It is important to note that the king of Israel was as frightened as the captured enemy soldiers were. If the king mistook the prophet's intentions, he could be put under a sentence of death more swiftly than the Syrian soldiers. Saul had angered Samuel for not killing the enemy king Agag, and Samuel personally hacked the enemy captive to death. Why had Elisha, who had available sufficient military strength at his disposal, captured these men? The question put to Elisha was a genuine question—the king's life depended on doing the desire of the prophet.

2 Kings 6:22—“You shall not slay them.”

The king of Israel must have been very glad he asked Elisha what to do. Had he acted without asking, these men would

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certainly have been executed as easily as Jehu executed the captive King Ahaziah of Jerusalem. The response of Elisha was more surprising than the question of the king. Contrary to the institutions of holy war and the old-time religion of “devoting” people to death, Elisha commanded a reprieve. These men were to be fed and sent home in peace! It was an incredulous announcement.

Why had Elisha brought these men to Samaria? He could have sent them home more easily from Dothan. The reason was certainly that Elisha wanted to make a public demonstration of a proposed change in policy. What could have been a private military miracle at Dothan was transformed into a public peace demonstration in the corridors of the royal palace of the capital city. It was the best public exposure for a shift in foreign policy. The candle for peace had been lit. True, it would not catch fire at this time, but it would never be completely extinguished.

Applying the Lesson to Life

This study of the traditions related to the prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha should alert us to how violent even religious people can be. Political leaders who are inspired to violence by religious people can be as barbaric and brutal as when they are inspired by nonreligious people. The survey of major historic events in the life span of Elisha demonstrates well how easy it is to start a war or a bloody political purge. By contrast, peace efforts are almost impossible to get off the ground. Even Elisha, with all his skill, was able to introduce only a passing period of peace. If we cannot learn from our own history, we can learn from the lessons of Scripture—violence and war are easy to initiate and are then self-

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perpetuating. But peace takes more than miracles to start. Peace comes only with effort—and disappears with ease.

The holy-war theology demonstrated in the biblical traditions ended in failure. There were no winners in the bloody internal struggles for power in northern Israel. Few if any who read this lesson will be tempted to murder for political power. Fewer still will be the number of those in a position to initiate or to terminate great battles against real or potential enemies. Nevertheless, the attitudes of religious people on the issues of war and peace will affect the destiny of nations.

If we romanticize and idealize the warlords of the Old Testament era, we will be much more prone to support political leaders or parties which opt for war as the primary instrument for national policy. But if we can honestly appraise all the biblical material, we may realize that violence and bloodshed were not as unreservedly endorsed as a casual reading of the Bible suggests. Such statements as those commending Jehu (2 Kings 10:30, cited above) must be interpreted in the light of the covenant with Abraham, the condemnation by Hosea (Hosea 1:4), and the New Testament memory verse, the words of Jesus, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

We will not have the power exercised by Elisha to blind the armies of our enemies; but we do have the power to bring light to the nations. We need not lament that we do not have the power to do miracles like Elisha. We have the power to do more—we can live out the gospel of the Prince of Peace.