

ELISHA ... and the slaughter of the innocents
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(2 KINGS 2: 23, 24)

And Elisha 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. 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. And he went from thence to mount Carmel." At first, this account seems foreign to the nature of God. That He who said " Suffer little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven" should ever fulfil a curse in allowing wild animals to slaughter innocent boys and girls, seems completely inconceivable. Such a thing never happened.

The Determined Rabble

The word used in the Hebrew text is not exclusively used to describe adolescents, and there is reason to believe that a more correct translation would be " youths." The idea that the prophet was being followed by a crowd of children who had just left school-a crowd of mischievous boys and girls who playfully teased the stranger-is very far from the truth. This rabble was composed of unruly young men who had banded themselves together and had followed the young, prophet along the road. They hated righteousness, and resented interference from any spiritual leader. They recognized that the teachings of Elisha were diametrically opposed to all their sensual delights. It is important to remember that their city was a center of idolatry. Bethel, the House of God, had degenerated into a center of heathenism, where men worshipped idols and had become a law unto themselves. When the prophet of the Highest appeared, the young fellows sneered at his approach, and went forth to express their hatred.

The Dastardly Remarks

"They mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head ; go up, thou bald head." It is well to consider that unless misfortune had robbed the young prophet of his hair, it was most unlikely that at this stage of his life he was bald. Yet the crowd repeated the cry, and found in their taunts a certain amount of pleasure. To the casual reader, it would appear that the man of God was somewhat irritable that morning, and to be teased by the young innocents was more than he could endure. But the young men were not referring to the feeble efforts of an old " bald head " trying to climb a hill, but rather to the homecall of Elijah, who had just ascended into heaven. Students will probably know that the worst blasphemy may be found in their cries. It has been said that a fair translation of the text would be, "Go up, go up to heaven with thy master, thou . . . prophet of Jehovah." They were cursing him ; and however unpleasant it may be even to read such words, it is necessary to do so in order to understand the disaster which suddenly overwhelmed the crowd of sinners. The despicable mob resented Elisha's presence in the vicinity ; they cursed him and scorned his authority, and probably contemplated violence. Then suddenly the prophet turned and looked at them.

The Devastating Response

" And he cursed them in the name of the Lord." He knew

ELISHA ... and the slaughter of the innocents that these great sinners would become the fathers of the next generation, and realized also that the whole of his ministry was in jeopardy. Elisha had only recently succeeded to his master's office, and the nation had yet to be taught that he was the Lord's anointed. Such blatant sin demanded rebuke. Yet apart from any curse announced by Elisha, the young people were personally responsible for the disaster which overwhelmed them. The two bears had been frightened. Probably thinking that their young were in danger, they followed their natural instincts and went forth to attack the enemy. Panic spread among the screeching crowd and, utterly confused, the youths rushed in all directions. " And the bears tare forty and two of them." It is hard to decide whether the victims were actually killed or merely wounded. The man of God watched the scene and, when the survivors fled to the nearby city, when the bears ambled back to the woods, he probably bowed his head in holy reverence. The God of Elijah was with him ; there was no need to fear. And wrapping his mantle around him, he proceeded calmly on his way.

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