

Prophet Elisha

Four years before the death of King Ahab, Elijah appointed Elisha, the son of Shaphat, to be his successor; until the translation of the prophet, the younger man acted as a kind of private secretary and body-servant, accompanying the man of God on his pilgrimages hither and thither; but after the flaming exit of his master, Elisha became Prophet of Israel and held this exalted and dangerous post fifty-five years. He is one of the grandest figures in Hebrew history. His importance and influence are marked by the extraordinary number of miracles he performed; his career was filled with amazing adventures. He must have found life tremendously interesting, for there was scarcely a day without excitement. Although his personality lacks the romantic gloom enveloping the lonely figure of Elijah, the disciple became more powerful than his teacher, exerting a deep influence on both Israelites and aliens. He kept the faith with unswerving passion; the consciousness of his divine mission was so paramount that he spoke to kings and nobles as a plenipotentiary speaks to a vassal.

Elisha, whose name means "El [God] is salvation", was a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was active for a period of some fifty years (c. 850-800 BC) during the reigns of Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash (Joash). The successor and disciple of Elijah, Elisha is remembered in the biblical stories as a man of wisdom and a worker of miracles both on behalf of his nation in times of crisis and in the lives of individuals in time of need.

Elisha was a farmer who lived with his parents at Abel-meholah. Since he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen when Elijah met him, scholars have suggested that his father was a wealthy landowner. Elisha was bald and carried a staff, which was common to rural residents and aided travel in the rugged hills of Palestine. However, unlike Elijah who lived in caves in the desert, Elisha stayed in the cities. A wealthy woman of Shunem provided him with comfortable quest quarters. He also apparently maintained his own house in Samaria. He often appears in the company of groups of prophets ("the sons of the prophets"), and he frequented religious centers such as Bethel, Gilgal, and Mount Carmel. His actions, notably using his staff as an instrument of activity and using music to induce a prophetic trance or state, recall an older era of prophets represented by Moses and Samuel.

Since Elisha left no written works of his own, the Elisha narratives in 2 Kings reflect oral traditions about the prophet that first circulated independently among the people. They were later reduced to written records that were incorporated into the larger work known as the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). Because of their roots in oral tradition, these narratives (and those of Elijah) are not so much concerned with a static presentation of historical facts as with a retelling of the significance of events that swirled around this prophetic figure in relation to the faith of Israel. In their present form, the narratives consist of loosely connected anecdotes about the prophet interwoven with historical sketches of the period. These in turn are placed within a larger theological framework (the Deuteronomistic History) that uses the narratives to present the faith confessions of Israel.

Taken together these anecdotes and historical sketches on one level portray a figure who, through the telling and retelling of his story among the people, has been cast in near legendary terms. On another level, they demonstrate the sovereignty and power of God at work in spite of the political scheming and the personal crises of a nation, and in spite of the adulteration of commitment to God by the influence of Canaanite Baal worship.

Personal and Political Dimensions

Elisha's work within Israel involved two areas: personal and political. As a man easily accessible to the people, he frequently interceded in the ordinary events of life that bring anguish and crisis. The purification of a vital spring, the raising of the Shunammite's only son, the provision of an antidote for the poisonous stew, the healing of Namaan's leprosy, and the recovery of a borrowed axe head demonstrate Elisha's ministry on a personal level. But these stories within the larger context also show the power of God over all aspects of nature, an indirect challenge to the worship of Baal. Similarly, the increase of the widow's oil, the multiplication of grain, and the restoration of the Shunammite's land demonstrate God's power in the economic and social spheres.

But Elisha's greatest work was on what we would call a political level (although from a biblical perspective, political and religious were not different categories). In accepting the hairy mantle of Elijah, Elisha also accepted the commission of Elijah. As his master had been deeply involved in the politics of his day so Elisha went on to complete the tasks assigned to Elijah. He became constantly involved in the affairs of the nation. He provided water to a thirsty army, was instrumental in routing the Moabites, warned the kings of enemy plans more than once, helped avert disaster at the hands of the Syrians, was involved in the overthrow of Ben-Hadad of Damascus and Jehu of Israel, and from his deathbed prophesied Joash's defeat of the Syrians.

While Elisha was often termed a patriot, like Elijah, much of his political involvement was directed at bringing the apostate monarchy and nation back to a recognition of God's sovereignty in the world. Some of the Elisha narratives are often challenged from a modern ethical and theological perspective as not in harmony with true Israelite belief. Yet together they fill an important theological role within the framework of the book of Kings in demonstrating that every facet of life is subject to God's control.