

One Man, Forty-Two “Boys” and Two Bears 2 Kings 2:23-25

The Text

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. 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 **tore forty and two children of them**. King James Version

Then Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was going, **young lads** came out from the city and mocked him. They said to him, go up you baldhead; go up you baldhead! When he looked behind him and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two female bears came out of the woods and **tore up forty-two lads of their number**. NASB

The Trouble

Wasn't Elijah a Prophet of God!?!

Shouldn't he be able to control his temper better....or at least less violently?

Don't Kids Say the Darndest Things!?!

It's not polite to call attention to preacher's baldness....but is it a Capital Crime?

Why Would the LORD Be Directly Involved in This Kind of Child Abuse!?!

Doesn't God love kids?

The Truth

Strategic Context

This incident took place during the first days of Elisha's ministry (stepping into the very large shoes of Elijah) as the new national prophet of the Nation of Israel, so it was critical his position/ministry be confirmed by God and respected by the people.

Specific Content Issues

1: The “little children/young lads” here weren't...little children or young lads! They were teenage (or older) gang members (not a gaggle of kindergarten students) who were blasphemously threatening criminal assault possibly even murder against Elisha.

NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible

The Hebrew term used here can refer to young children, but it can also refer to members of “the younger generation” basically 40 years of age and younger. The same Hebrew word in 1 Kings 12:8 describes King Rehoboam’s advisors (“the young men who grew up with him and served him”) who would have been adults in their 30s.

McArthur Study Bible

Not children, but infidels and idolatrous young men in their late teens or twenties.

2: Verbal insults were seen as SERIOUS business in the ANE-particularly here

New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties

This incident was far more serious than a mild personal offense by little boys. It was a situation of serious danger similar to being cursed out by a large group of gang members in an inner-city today. These hoodlums moving in a group of fifty or so, were ready to mock a well-known man of God, so there is no telling what violence they might have inflicted on the citizens of Bethel if they had continued on their riotous course.

3: The bear attack while violent was not necessarily fatal...and would have confirmed Elisha’s status as God’s spokesman to Israel and been a deterrent to others in the future who might be tempted to taunt the prophet of God.

New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties

Perhaps it was for this reason that God saw fit to put 42 of them to death in this spectacular fashion (there is no evidence that Elisha himself, in imposing a curse, prayed for this specific mode of punishment), to strike terror into other youth gangs that were infesting the city and to make them realize that neither the LORD Himself nor any of His anointed prophets were to be treated with contempt. Certainly from that time on, the whole Israelite community became convinced that Elisha was a true prophet and that he bore an authoritative word from God. Even the ungodly king Jehoram son of Ahab treated him with great deference/respect (2 Kings 3:11-13) after this.

Take This To Heart

1: 2 Kings 2:23-25 does not describe child abuse! It is a story about God’s protection of His prophet in the face of insulting, blasphemous, potentially fatal criminal assault.

2: Tough passages demand detailed thinking. Rather than ignoring them we should examine them in context and interpret them accurately (and James and I have been called and trained in ways so we might be able to help).