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2nd Kings 2:23–24, English Standard Version.

²³ He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!” ²⁴ And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.

Funny, disturbing, or a blessing?

Here are verses 23-24 of the 2nd chapter of the Book of 2nd Kings:

²³ He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!” ²⁴ And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys.

First, let's take this English translation at face value: Elisha goes to a place called Bethel, and along the way, a group of little boys come out of the city and tease him for being bald. So, the prophet Elisha curses them, and using the power of God, turns two female bears on them, which then tear to shreds forty-two of the boys. Okay. Your basic, wholesome Bible story.

Now, let's look at what's going on here. We must step back a bit and start, not with Elisha, but Elijah, the first with an “sh” in his name, the second with a “j” in his name. Elijah has been seen a forerunner of Jesus Christ. He was a prophet

and according to the Bible, he never died: he was taken up into Heaven in a fiery chariot. The name Elijah means “Yahweh is my God” or “Yahweh saves”. He lived during the 9th Century B.C. He lived in the northern part of Israel, the part that did not include Jerusalem. During the reign of King Ahab, he denounces the king for his moral crimes, asserts that all people are equal, and declares that all people should worship the one, true God. He prophesizes a great drought that comes as God’s punishment for God’s People worshipping the pagan god Baal. Elisha was a student of Elijah. Elisha, using modern terms, was an activist and a revolutionary. He helped lead a revolt against King Ahab, and Elisha anointed the new king, Jehu. As a young man, Elisha had followed Elijah, and he witnessed Elijah being taken into Heaven in that blazing chariot. It was at that moment that he knew he was meant to carry on the work of Elijah, and in the Bible, we always see the spirit of Elijah working in the background behind Elisha.

Now, for our fun little story. Elisha is going up to Bethel, which means “House of God” or “Holy Place”, the place where God revealed himself to Jacob. But it was also a place that had become filled with idolatry, known for its golden calves that were meant to rival the Temple of Jerusalem down south. Elisha goes there shortly after Elijah has been taken into Heaven. Our story makes it appear that a number of little boys end up being massacred simply because they teased a

man for being bald. First of all, the term that is translated in our Bible as “small boys” is *“nearim qetanim”*. But this term, while it can indeed refer to little boys, can also mean “young men”, including men of military age or men old enough to get married. It would have been better to translate this as “young people”. But they might indeed have been as young as teenagers. However, looking at this story in context, these “boys” were probably associated with the pagan shrine in Bethel, the one meant to compete with the Temple of God in Jerusalem, and that would make them acolytes or stewards of the pagan gods. They were Israelites who had turned away from God. And what about them teasing some poor old guy for being bald? But Elisha was a young man at this time. It has been widely suggested that this passage is meant to tell us that he had shaved his head to honor the memory of the recently gone Elijah. There are men in the Book of Acts who shave their heads in order to purify themselves. So, maybe a large gang of young men who were pagans were terrorizing Elisha for being a faithful Jew, and for being a follower of the great prophet Elijah. Now, maybe it makes more sense that Elijah called on two bears to kill forty-two of them.

But he wasn’t just being vengeful. There is something subtle here. We must always look for an allegory in an Old Testament story. First, remember that the passage says: *And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them*

in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. It does *not* say that Elisha deliberately turned the bears on the young men. Elisha cursed them. Maybe it was God himself who sent the bears. But more importantly, this story tells us about God and the spokespeople that God sends to earth to represent him. The nation of Israel – not the little boys of Bethel - is being put on notice in this story. Elisha is a prophet. He is not to be trifled with. He is to be listened to. No one, absolutely no one, should turn on him. He is a prophet, he is the spirit of Elijah, and he speaks for God.

When I was in grad school, I had a roommate from France. We'll call him Gerard, a common man's name in France. He was very intelligent, hard-working, and kind-hearted. But he had a bit of an odd side to him. As an aside, his mother worked for the French phone company, and when she learned that my mother was French, Gerard's mother started using her free access to international phone lines to call my mother and have long, long talks with her in French. Gerard and I shared a two-bedroom apartment. One day I came home and discovered that he had painted his room bright red without telling me, the person who held the lease, or the landlord. He discovered American garage and yard sales and loved to spend Saturday mornings shopping at them. One day, he discovered a brown track suit and a man's large leather bag at a sale. When he brought them home

and showed them to me, I informed him that the track suit was actually a pair of pajamas, and the leather bag was actually a giant woman's purse. I was not able to dissuade him from going out in public with them. One evening, we were coming home from class, making the long drive from USC in the inner city to the coast, where we lived. Gerard made an illegal U-turn over a double yellow and two L.A. cops pulled us over. One of them told Gerard to hand him his driver's license. Gerard pulled out his bag – his purse – and then pulled out his license. When the cop saw the purse, he told Gerard to get out of the car. Gerard climbed out, wearing his new track suit – his pajamas. As you might guess, the two of us ended up spending a significant amount of time on the side of Venice Boulevard conversing with two officers who were wondering just who the hell we were. One of us, me, was dressed and talking in a seemingly normal way. The other one had an odd accent and was dressed in an unusual way, at least for the 1980's. Perhaps today, the officers would think nothing of Gerard's outfit. Now, the cops did not physically abuse us, and in fact, Gerard was given a ticket that allowed him to spend a Saturday at traffic school instead of paying a fine and getting points on his license. But the officers did make one thing perfectly clear: the two of us were not going to mess with them. We were going to tell them why the hell the driver was out and about, wearing pajamas and carrying a big ass woman's

purse. After seeing my roommate, they pulled me out of the car, as well, and they separated us. I told one of them what happened. Gerard told the other officer how he was so blessed as to come into possession of his track suit and Frenchman's leather bag. Luckily, our two stories were consistent, and they sternly let us go. Believe it or not, after this incident, I still was completely unable to get Gerard to ditch his pajamas and purse.

Look: you do not mess with the L.A. cops – and you do not mess with a spokesman for God. That is the lesson of our Bible passage – not that prophets are cruel men who butcher small children. In truth, Elisha was a servant of the poor. Like Jesus, he served the nobodies of this world. Elisha miraculously turns toxic water from a desert spring drinkable. Elisha pays the debts of a widow and prevents her and her son from becoming slaves. Elisha turns a toxic stew into edible food. Elisha feeds a hundred men with twenty barley rolls. Elisha heals, resuscitates people, and enables childless couples to have children. He calls on God's army of chariots of fire to vanquish the enemy of the People of God.

It is also clear that the story of Elisha in the Hebrew scriptures influenced the telling of the story of the life of Jesus in the Gospels. The story of the feeding of a hundred men is very much like Jesus' feeding of five thousand. Their names have similar meanings. Elisha means "Yahweh saves" and Jesus means "God will

save". They both start their ministries at the Jordan River. They both raise a woman's adult son from the dead. Elisha turns oil into a vast amount of oil and Jesus turns water into a great amount of wine. They both heal lepers. They both end up being betrayed for the love of money. They both give sight to the blind. And they both bring the dead back to life. They both minister to Gentiles, to non-Jews. And, while Jesus left the tomb and arose from the dead, the dead could come back to life by touching Elisha's bones. Like Jesus, Elisha leaves his parents behind so he can minister. They both give up everything to serve. Here is an example of a miracle performed by Elisha. We can see how much he is like Jesus:

³² When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. ³³ So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. ³⁵ Then he got up again and walked once back and forth in the house, and went up and stretched himself upon him. The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. ³⁶ Then he summoned Gehazi and said, "Call this Shunammite." So he called her. And when she came to him, he said, "Pick up your son." ³⁷ She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out.

The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, were not simply stories about God leading his people out of trouble, ordering them to stop their pagan and immoral behavior and communicating this via prophets, and repeatedly punishing his people when they do wrong. Our Old Testament is in many ways reflected in the New Testament. The Old Testament is filled with

stories of God showing grace, love, faithfulness to us, to those who believe in God and live by the laws of God. The Old Testament is often sold by modern people who have superficial knowledge of the Bible as a hateful, violence-filled book that promotes bloodshed. In truth, it is an allegory-filled, metaphor-rich vast history that foreshadows the story of the New Testament. It tells us about our God, who wants us to live holy lives, kind and generous lives, and who no matter what, will not let us go. It tells us about God's determination to follow us, to forgive us, to bless us and cajole us – and lead us into the Kingdom of God, despite our tendency to grow lazy. The Old Testament is about God's faithfulness to us.

Here is something from the end of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has been crucified. He has arisen from the dead. Now, he is on the Road to Emmaus and he comes across two men who start to tell Jesus about the miraculous thing that has just happened when a man named Jesus was crucified and then left his tomb. Jesus is astonished that they are surprised by the story of Jesus:

²⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. ²⁶ Wasn’t it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?” ²⁷ Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

In other words, these people should be aware of the stories of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore, they should have known that one day a Messiah

would come, and he would bring with him the promise of the New Covenant, which offers each of us a personal relationship with God and the everlasting example of grace, kindness, love for all, forgiveness, and redemption.

So, one last time, let's look at this story, translated not so accurately and difficult to comprehend out of context, from the life of the Prophet Elisha, the man who would be seen as the predecessor of Jesus Christ, the son of God, the man who lived only for the love of all people:

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So, is this story funny? Or is it disturbing? Or perhaps it's a blessing! The lesson is simple: Don't mess with a prophet. Don't mess with God. Don't mess with your spiritual future by ignoring the truth that lives within all of us. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for seeing to it that the ancient Scriptures were preserved, so that we could learn of the multiple millennia-long story of your pursuit of our hearts, our minds, and our souls. We thank you for not letting go of us. We thank you for the incredible depth, creativity, beauty, and brilliance of the Bible. Amen.