

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

impossible, and the Jews unfit for their high destiny of teaching mankind the truth. I trust, therefore, it will not have been without its interest to trace these secondary means by which the Jewish race was made fit for its office of teachers; and if we are to judge of these schools by their fruit, they must have been admirably fitted not only to preserve the patriotic enthusiasm of the people and to deepen their religious fervour, but also to kindle their genius and imbue them with sentiments not merely just and true, but also intensely poetic. But with all its fervour the poetry of the Jews is regulated by the most exact taste and expresses itself in language chosen with the utmost care. It is no small meed of praise that we must bring to the man whose wise heart laid the foundations on which were built such glorious results.

R. PAYNE SMITH.

THE DOOM OF THE CHILDREN OF BETHEL.

2 KINGS ii. 23, 24.

FEW of the Scripture narratives are more perplexing and revolting than this. Little children, two-and-forty of them, ruthlessly destroyed for the mere utterance of a jibe! I suppose no man ever read the story yet without being shocked by the disproportion between the offence and its punishment. If forty or fifty of our children were crushed and maimed by a railway accident, a thrill of horror and pity would run through the heart of universal England. And *this* was no accident, but a deliberate act of vengeance. The Prophet "*turned and looked*" at

the children, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. His curse evoked two she-bears from the wood which skirted the road, who tore and crushed the hapless little lads, leaving them half, if not altogether, dead. The Prophet went on his way through the wood to Carmel,—the rustling leaves quivering with horror as he passed and whispering to each other the dreadful tale,—passing by the poor mangled frames scattered on the road and among the trees, giving no succour, uttering no word of ruth or regret. And we are asked to see in this man a man of God, a friend and servant of Him who is full of all compassion!

It only adds new shades of mystery to the narrative to remember that Elisha was one of the most gentle and kindly of the goodly fellowship of the prophets, that his miracles, unlike those of his great predecessor, were almost invariably miracles of succour and healing. He sweetens the bitter spring of Jericho. He multiplies the oil in the widow's slender cruse. To the hospitable Shunammite he gives a son. He makes the poisonous mess of pottage wholesome and succulent. He saves the host of the three kings. Even when he is laid in the grave he still gives life,—a poor dead man hastily cast into the Prophet's tomb reviving and standing up. And this is the man who cursed little children so that they died!

Now we must not expect, we should not wish, to discharge the Bible narratives of all severity. Human life is full of hard conditions and cruel changes. And if the Bible is to correspond with human life, and apply itself to our actual conditions

and needs, we must look to find in it much of mystery, much even of austerity. Nevertheless we do not expect to find "a man of God" transported with passion and revenge; and still less can we admit that God would put his power at the beck of base and malignant passions. How, then, are we to read this narrative so as to vindicate the ways of God to man, so as to find in it, not a malignant act of revenge, but a solemn and deserved judgment, and even a mercy that rejoices in and over judgment?

Several attempts have been made to explain and vindicate the narrative, no one of which, I think, does more than lighten the difficulty; few of them do so much as that.

Calmet, for example, suggests that the children did not die, that they may have been torn and lacerated, and yet survive. But there is little comfort in his suggestion. For children, "*little* children," torn and hugged by bears, the only mercy would be speedy or immediate death.

Some Commentators have argued that the word here translated "children" often means "young men," and that we are not therefore to suppose that the malediction was pronounced on boys, who knew not what they did, but on youths,—certain "loose fellows," as Keil calls them,—who deliberately intended to insult and deride the servant of the Lord. But the epithet "little" (*ketannim*) prefixed to the word "children" renders such a reading inadmissible; and even were it admissible, it would but lighten, not remove, the difficulty. No doubt it is the thought of so frightful a decree falling on a bevy of little fellows piping out, "Go up, bald-head; go

up, bald-head," innocent of any intentional disrespect to God, guilty indeed of nothing more than gay spirits and bad manners, which most of all shocks us in the narrative; but if the little children *had* been a group of wild lads, trained in idolatry and vice, who meant to insult the Prophet, and to shew that they preferred the easy worship of the Groves to the sober and exacting service of Jehovah, yet, so soon as we remembered how irresponsible most lads and youths are for their religious preferences, how surely they addict themselves to the forms and observances in which they have been nurtured, we should still have been struck with the disproportionate punishment of their offence, though we might admit that the narrative was not quite so difficult and repulsive as before. Even this relief is denied us, however. It was not only "children," but "*little* children," whom the Prophet cursed.

Other Commentators have remarked that in this incident we probably have an organized attempt on the part of the idolatrous section of the Israelites to bring discredit on the ministry of Elisha from its very outset, "to make the new head of the class of the prophets ridiculous and contemptible at the very commencement of his career" (Lange's "Bible-Work"); and that, therefore, it may have been necessary to shew to those who opposed him a severity not requisite afterwards, lest his work should be arrested and brought to nought before it was well begun. Now it must be admitted that the first steps of any great enterprise are commonly the most difficult, and that those who have opposed such enterprises at the outset have often been treated with an exceptional

severity: witness the doom which fell on Ananias and Sapphira in those early days when the Church of Christ was springing into power. And yet we can hardly believe that the career of Elisha would have been wholly marred if the jest of the children of Bethel had gone unrebuked, or, at least, if the rebuke had been somewhat less austere. This hypothesis, like the last, only lightens the difficulty; it is very far from removing it.

Still, other of the Commentators appear to flatter themselves that they have discharged the passage of all difficulty when they have shewn that the sin of these children was punished, not by Elisha, but by Jehovah Himself. Thus the learned Dr. Bähr says: "It was no more Elisha who caused the bears to come (but Jehovah, verse 21) than it was he who caused the waters at Jericho to become healthful. It was a judgment of God which befell these depraved youths and, indirectly, the whole city out of which they came, and it referred back to that threat of the law, 'If ye walk contrary to me, and will not hearken to me, . . . I will also send *wild beasts* among you, *which shall rob you of your children*, and destroy your cattle, and your highways shall be desolate, (Leviticus xxvi. 21, *seq.*)." Now I am far from denying that the curse was *executed* by Jehovah, though it was pronounced by Elisha. No doubt God spake by and through Elisha, or the curse would have fallen back from the insulted heavens on the head of the passionate irritable man who could not endure to be called names, or thought his career put in jeopardy by the sportive derision of a few little children. But is it not strange that those

who attribute the doom of these poor children to Jehovah, do not see that, in that case, the apparent cruelty of the doom grows all the more shocking to us, and needs more than ever to be explained and vindicated? We might conceive of a man, even a man of God, being carried away by ungovernable passion into a sudden madness of revenge, with no worse result than that our respect for him would be seriously abated; but to believe that God Himself is revengeful and cruel would be nothing short of spiritual death.

Can we, then, since all the explanations hitherto offered us have failed to satisfy us, hit on one for ourselves which shall banish from our hearts the haunting sense of discomfort and disapproval with which this narrative, as commonly read, inspires us? Let us at least try for one.

We must remember, then, that it was in Bethel that Jeroboam, "who made Israel to sin," had set up one of the golden calves; and that in the time of Elisha the city was wholly given to idolatry, insomuch that it was known to the prophets as Beth-Aven, *i.e.*, "House of the Idol," instead of Beth-El, *i.e.*, "House of God." In such a city it is easy to understand that the prophets of the Lord would be unwelcome visitors; that their sayings would be made the theme of many a jest, and that even their miracles would be matter for sceptical debate and derision. "As the old birds sing, so the young ones twitter," says a fine proverb; and if the men of Bethel habitually made a mock of the prophets, we cannot wonder that the children of Bethel, consciously or unconsciously, caught up the

tone of their elders. The "little children" could hardly be responsible for crying out, "Go up, bald-head; go up, bald-head," after Elisha in the streets and roads, when their parents were constantly sneering and mocking at the prophets who denounced their sins.

But what did the children mean by the mock—"Go up, bald-head; go up, bald-head"? why did their derision take this form rather than any other? I doubt whether sufficient attention has been paid to this point. Perhaps the very secret of the story may lie hidden here. The term "baldhead" admits of an easy explanation. As Elisha lived fifty years after this visit to Bethel he could hardly as yet have been bald from age. Probably his partial baldness—for, as the children come behind and call him "bald-patch," we may infer that he was bald only at the back of his head—was due to some natural defect or infirmity. We know how eagerly children in their sportive and derisive moods seize on any such deformity, however slight, or indeed on any unusual feature, and make a mock of it, without much thought of the pain they may give; and therefore it is only too easy to understand why the boys of Bethel called Elisha "bald-patch," or "bald-head." Possibly, too, the contrast between Elisha and his master may have been in their minds, since "the long shaggy hair" which "flowed over the back" of Elijah appears to have been a notable feature in his personal appearance (2 Kings i. 8).¹ But what did they mean by the

¹ See Dean Stanley's "Lectures on the Jewish Church," vol. ii, lect. 30.

"*Go up, go up*"? Of course it is open to us to say that, as Elisha climbed the low hill on which Bethel stood, they simply meant "go up the hill;" or, as our boys might call out, "Climb away, bald-head." But I venture to think that the childish mock had a far deeper meaning than this, although the children themselves may have been unconscious of it, or conscious of it only in part. The ascension of Elijah had recently taken place,—his *going up* into heaven. Some report of that strange event had doubtless reached Bethel ere this, if only through the "sons of the prophets," who had a school at Bethel;¹ *they* had known that the Lord was about to "take away" their "master" (2 Kings ii. 3), and had convinced themselves by a protracted and zealous search that he was no longer on earth (ibid. 16-18). It is easy to conceive with what incredulity the idolatrous inhabitants of Bethel would listen to the story of that fiery assumption into heaven, how many jests they would break over it, how the *going up* of Elijah would become the town talk, the standing jest of the place. Children quickly pick up new phrases, and it is not difficult to believe that the children of Bethel would soon be calling out to *each other* even, "*Go up, So-and-so; go up!*" making sport of each other and of the strange story they had heard, and feigning to expect that those whom they thus addressed would forthwith spread their wings and take their flight heavenward. If this were so, and it may well have been so, the sight of Elisha approaching the city must have

¹ Indeed there were many schools of the prophets in the vicinity of Bethel, as the Dean of Canterbury shews in the present number of THE EXPOSITOR.

been a temptation too great for the idle boys of Bethel to withstand. The chance of calling out, "Go up, go up," after *him* was one which they would be sure to take. To bid him follow his master to the skies, to pretend that they expected him to fly upward, and thus at once to deride the story they had heard and the Prophet whom they had been taught to dislike, must have seemed "exquisite fooling" to them. There is no need to suppose that the men of Bethel deliberately set their children on to utter this mock, though many Commentators find signs in the narrative that they had carefully pre-arranged this insult to the Prophet, and instructed their children to utter it; the children, after what they had heard, would be quick enough to invent and ready enough to employ it. Knowing Elisha to be gifted with extraordinary powers, the inhabitants of Bethel *may* have dreaded to offend him by insulting him themselves; they may have been cowardly enough to set their little children on to insult him, hoping that the insult might pass for a mere sally of childish rudeness. But even if the children "came forth" of their own accord,¹ unbidden and untaught by their parents, yet the allusion to the "going up" of Elijah must have been caught from their parents' lips, and shews how they regarded the most solemn and impressive fact of their age. In short, it is as an exponent of the general scepticism and scornful contempt of the men of Bethel for the prophets and the service of Jehovah that we must view the

¹ It is on the Hebrew verb rendered "came forth" that some Expositors lay emphasis, finding in it indications of pre-arrangement and even of rehearsal.

jibe of their children if we would either understand or vindicate the doom inflicted on them.¹

Think, then, what the translation of Elijah was,—how solemn and sublime a fact, how pregnant with the most momentous consequences! Life and immortality had not then been brought to light by the Gospel. Death was still an unsolved problem, an inscrutable mystery. Duly considered, Elijah's translation would have thrown more light on this mystery and have more effectually shorn it of its terrors than any other fact recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures. Here was a man who, without seeing death, had gone up—body and soul, a complete and perfect man—into the unseen world. No one who believed in this translation, this transfiguration,

¹ No *proof* can be adduced that the "go up" of the children was an allusion to the *going up* of Elijah; but, in addition to the probabilities suggested in the text, it may be worth while to mention that the Hebrew verb (הָלַךְ) translated "go up" in verse 23 is closely akin to, and probably comes from, the same root with the verb (יָעַל) in verse 11, which describes how Elijah "went up" into heaven. (See Gesenius on יָעַל). It will be seen from this very number of THE EXPOSITOR that the indications I have given and suggested in favour of this interpretation fail to carry conviction to many minds. See, for example, Mr. Hammond's note on page 465. Till I received his Paper on the Vindictive Psalms I was not aware that the interpretation had been suggested by Abarbanel, or adopted by later Commentators, but flattered myself that I was working out an entirely original conception. But I am glad to have their authority for it, glad also that the readers of THE EXPOSITOR should have both sides of the question put fairly before them. It is a question which every student must determine for himself, and determine not so much by the preponderating weight of argument,—for there is little that is to be called "argument" in the strict sense of the word on either side,—but by the historical probabilities of the case and his knowledge of how men and children are influenced by the conditions and facts of their experience. To me, I confess, the reading of the story given above still seems to be by far the more likely of the two.

of a living man could any longer have taken death to mean annihilation, or could well have doubted that the righteous would live on, uninjured by death, in the joys of the Divine Presence. Hints even of the imperishableness of the bodily form might have been gathered from it. The men of Bethel might have known, what even most of the Hebrew Prophets and Psalmists knew only in the moments of their highest inspiration, that the holy and the good would not see corruption, nor be left to flit, thin ghosts, through the dim Hadean world, but that to be "gathered to their fathers" was to enter on a vital and immortal fellowship. The assumption, the going up, of Elijah was the most impressive, momentous, and hopeful fact of their time. And there was no lack of evidence for it. "Fifty men of the sons of the prophets" had "stood to view" the scene, had beheld him go up on high. Their "school" was close at hand, *i.e.*, the college in which they lived and studied. And yet the men of Bethel turn the most solemn fact of their time into a sorry jest! they habitually speak of it, and teach their children to speak of it, in mockery and contempt! "Go up, bald-patch," is *their* commentary on the most signal and splendid event of which they had ever heard! Can we wonder that the anger of God was kindled against men so sunk and steeped in sin?

But it may be objected, "If the parents, and not the children, were responsible for the sin, if the little children of Bethel did but shew a spirit, or repeat a jest, they had caught from their fathers, why was the curse pronounced, why was the punishment inflicted, on the children and not on their parents?" Such

an objection *may* be taken, I say; but if it be, it can only spring from want of thought, or from the dull unspiritual way in which we commonly conceive the facts of life and death. *Was* there, then, no mercy in the malediction? no mercy for the misguided children? no mercy even for their guilty parents? Did not the curse virtually fall, was not the punishment really inflicted, on the men and women who had virtually committed the offence?

Is not early death, in almost every case, a blessing—a blessing sadly disguised from the bereaved parents indeed, but still a blessing? May not Schiller's fine saying, "Death happens to all, and cannot therefore be an evil," be modified thus? One-third of the human race die in infancy; that which befalls so large a portion of the human race, under the righteous rule of God, cannot be an evil, must be a good. And if we turn from logic to experience, do any, even the best of us, when once we have become conscious of our personal being and responsibility, find life in this world so easy and blessed a condition that we should passionately crave it either for ourselves or for those whom we love? To be taken from the depressing anxieties and feverish excitement, the weary labours and the never-ending conflicts in which we so often suffer defeat; to pass at once from the heaven which lies all about us in our infancy to the heaven of God; to rise, undimmed and unenfeebled by care and bitter memories and exhausting struggles, into that inner Paradise where the little ones and their angels do always behold the face of our Father,—is not this a happiness to gain which even the brief agony of an early death may

well be endured? And if we have this consolation for *all* little children who are taken from us, does it not apply with special force to the forty-and-two little children of Bethel? With *such* homes and such parents, trained to do evil even before they could distinguish between evil and good, why should we shudder, or murmur, because they were snatched swiftly and painfully from the evil to come? Had they lived they could hardly but have "walked in the counsel of the ungodly, and stood in the way of sinners, and sat in the seat of the scornful." Dying, they passed, through a brief agony, from the base and degrading influence of idolatrous homes to the pure and kindly nurture of the home in the heavens.

The curse, then, severe and cruel as it seems, was not without its mercy for the children of Bethel. Was there no mercy in it also for their guilty parents? *They* might have been punished for their sins in their own persons; and then they would have had no more space for repentance: but, punished in their children, their punishment became a call to repentance. Impressively, severely even, they were taught by the loss of their children that God will "by no means clear the guilty;" but they were also taught that He does not "desire the death of a sinner," in that they were spared while yet they were punished, and allowed some little space in which to "turn and live." If anything would inspire them with a salutary awe of sinning against God, it would be the doom which had fallen on their little ones: if anything would win them to penitence, it would be that, while the innocent were taken, they, the guilty, were left.

On the whole, then, I do not think we need any longer regard the doom of the children of Bethel as a mysterious problem before which we can only stand perplexed and shocked, seeing no glimpse of meaning in it, no touch of mercy. Interpreted *thus*, it is no exceptional case; it falls into the same category with most of the judgments recorded in Holy Writ, and presents the same divine characteristic, "mercy rejoicing against" and over "judgment."

S. COX.

THE PARABLE OF
THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD.

ST. MATTHEW XX. 1-16.

I HAVE read with much interest Mr. Sanday's valuable exposition of this parable, which appeared in THE EXPOSITOR for February.¹ But many years ago I was led to adopt a somewhat different line of interpretation. I say "adopt," because I lay no claim to originality in the view which I propose to offer, a view, however, which differs from that of most of the Commentators. I propose to shew *that the time spent in labour represents the amount of labour; and that the amount of labour represents the amount of sacrifice.* This I take to be the key to the Parable.²

One thing is quite certain,—that the Parable is intended to illustrate the principle laid down in the

¹ Pages 81-101 of the present Volume.

² As Mr. Hill appears to me to have lit on a valuable expository thought, which many of us have overlooked, mainly, I believe, from its very simplicity and obviousness, I am happy to offer his brief Paper to the readers of THE EXPOSITOR, as a supplement to the still more valuable Essay of Mr. Sanday—with Mr. Sanday's entire concurrence. At the same time I doubt whether he, or any of us, have as yet found the sole and true key to the parable. Many keys are in our hands