



Question: "Why did the Prophet Elisha curse the 'youths' for making fun of his baldness (2 Kings 2:23-24)?"

Answer: There are a few key issues we must understand in regards to this account of the youths cursing Elisha. The text reads, "From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. 'Go on up, you baldhead!' they said. 'Go on up, you baldhead!' He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths." It seems unbelievable that God would cause two bears to maul a group of children for making fun of a man for being bald.

First, the King James Version has done us a disservice by translated the term as "children." The Hebrew word can refer to children, but rather more specifically means "young men." The NIV, quoted here, uses the word "youths." Second, the fact that the bears mauled 42 of the youths indicates that there were more than 42 youths involved. This was not a small group of children making fun of a bald man. Rather, it was a large demonstration of young men who assembled for the purpose of mocking a prophet of God. Third, the mocking of "go on up, you baldhead," is more than making fun of baldness. The baldness of Elisha referred to here may be: 1) natural loss of hair; 2) a shaved head denoting his separation to the prophetic office; or more likely, 3) an epithet of scorn and contempt, Elisha not being literally bald. The phrase "go up" likely was a reference to Elijah, Elisha's mentor, being taken up to Heaven earlier in 2 Kings chapter 2:11-12. These youths were sarcastically taunting and insulting the Lord's prophet by telling him to repeat Elijah's translation.

In summary, 2 Kings 2:23-24 is not an account of God mauling young children for making fun of a bald man. Rather, it is a record of an insulting demonstration against God's prophet by a large group of young men. Because these young people of about 20 years of age or older (the same term is used of Solomon in 1 Kings 3:7) so despised the prophet of the Lord, Elisha called upon the Lord to deal with the rebels as He saw fit. The Lord's punishment was the mauling of 42 of them by two female bears. The penalty was clearly justified, for to ridicule Elisha was to ridicule the Lord Himself. The seriousness of the crime was indicated by the seriousness of the punishment. The appalling judgment was God's warning to all who would scorn the prophets of the Lord.

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