

ELISHA AND THE RAIDERS: A STUDY IN UNDERSTATEMENT

Sometimes the best little stories get lost in the sweep of a larger narrative. Even people who are pretty knowledgeable about the history of the Israelites overlook such little gems as Elisha's encounter with some raiding Syrians.

This self-contained episode can be found in the Jewish scriptures at 2 Kings 6:8-23. (In some Bibles make that 4 Kings 6:8-23.) It's one of those stories where the good guys win. But on the way there's some intrigue, a little dry humor, and one or two surprising twists.

Here's the setting: Nomadic raiders from the direction of Damascus were in the habit of crossing the borders of northern Israel and ambushing the royal troops.

At one stage of the game, however, they found that their surprise forays were repeatedly being avoided by the strategically deployed Israelite platoons. The enemy king was chagrined. He suspected a fifth-columnist within his own ranks.

But his men put the finger on an outsider, the Israelite prophet Elisha. "You could make plans in the privacy of your bedroom," they told their king, "and Elisha would divine your secret and warn the king of Israel."

(How the Syrian king's servants knew about Elisha's prophetic powers we are not told. The ancient story-teller apparently wasn't interested in such incidental details!)

But the enemy king decided to put a stop to Elisha's prophetic counter-intelligence. He sent a SWAT team to the prophet's hometown to kidnap him.

The next morning in the village of Dothan, about ten miles from the Israelite capital of Samaria, Elisha's butler woke up, walked outside for some fresh air, saw the enemy troops, and ducked back inside. "How are we going to get out of this?" he stewed.

But the prophet just prayed that his servant's eyes would be opened, and his valet was then able to see that the surrounding foothills were covered with fiery chariots and horses protecting them.

Elisha said another prayer: "Lord, strike these commandos with blindness." Then he walked outside, told his now-blinded potential kidnappers that they were in the wrong town, and offered to point them on the right road.

Gullibly they followed the prophet all the way to Samaria. When they regained their sight, there they were: caught like pigs in a poke.

The Israelite king offered to lynch the captives, but Elisha rejoined that they were *his* POWs, not the king's. Instead, he suggested they treat the captives to supper and send them home.

Which is exactly what they did. End of story.

All in all, it's a nice little story. Obviously it was told to enhance the reputation of Elisha and his God. Conspicuous by their absence are the names of the king of Syria and the king of Damascus. They're not even mentioned, nor is the name of Elisha's butler.

Less conspicuous but just as revealing is the low-key way the story is told. It's a droll scene when Elijah strolls out to his near-sighted would-be captors and offers to draw them a map.

There's something charming about the sequence of his prayers, too. First he prays that his servant's eyes be opened. And they are. Then he prays that his attackers eyes be closed. And they are. Then he prays that they see the pickle they've been led into. And they do.

The ultimate put-down is the way the captured enemy is treated: Give them some supper and send the home like so many naughty boys.

In a nutshell, these are all symptoms of good story telling. In less skillful hands this incident could have been turned into a bombastic piece of prosy.

We could have been bored with a series of pompous prayers or editorial comments on divine retribution and the folly of opposing the Lord's people.

Instead, what we find preserved in the biblical literature is a model of understatement. If the story-teller wanted to glorify the Lord and his prophet, he could hardly have found a better vehicle than this gently ironical anecdote.

Sometimes a whisper makes a bigger impression than a shout. And that's certainly true in the case of Elisha and the befuddled raiders.