THE MANTLE PASSES FROM ELIJAH TO ELISHA: 2 KINGS 2:1-15

SUBMITTED TO DR. JONES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

DIV 1200 OLD TESTAMENT I - ISRAEL’S STORY

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DATE DUE: NOVEMBER 28, 2006
DATE SUBMITTED: NOVEMBER 28, 2006
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1 Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.  
2 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.  
3 The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."  
4 Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the LORD has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho.  
5 The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."  
6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on.  
7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan.  
8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.  
9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."  
10 He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."  
11 As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.  
12 Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.  
13 He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.  
14 He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.  
15 When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. (NRSV)

The taking of Elijah into heaven by the whirlwind and the subsequent passing on of the responsibility, power, and authority to his servant Elisha, as symbolized in the item of Elijah's mantle, is a demonstration of God's providence for His chosen people. There are several parallels of this passage in the Old Testament (with the life and death of Moses) and the New Testament (with the testing of Peter in John 21:15-17). Furthermore, there are several applications of this passage for modern Christians and the church of which they are a part as this paper will attempt to clarify.
The text of 2 Kings 2 itself, stands out from the rest of scripture as a peculiar manifestation of God within His creation, through prophecy, theophany and visible signs of His presence and will. The passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha demonstrates that God is active and present within the events of history. The loyalties of Elisha to both God and to his earthly master Elijah are an example to others of the determination and selflessness that is required for true discipleship. The question in the first half of this text is the same that was asked of the disciples of Jesus during the last days before his arrest and crucifixion: "How far are you willing to follow me?" Elisha's answer is a resounding, "As far as you go, I will go." The narrative also illustrates the blessings that are available to those who would follow their master to the very end. In the case of Elisha, these blessings were the "double portion" that was reserved for the first born who would retain the authority of the father among his children.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Elijah lived and served as God's prophet during the reigns of Ahab and his son Ahaziah during the Ninth Century BC. This was a time of great apostasy against Yahweh, when the people had turned to the Canaanite gods in their worship. Throughout Elijah's life he was called upon by Yahweh to be a "prophet of judgment who sought to turn the nation back to God." In a way, Elijah became the paradigm for those prophets who would follow throughout the remainder of the Old Testament. Elijah had, in the previous book of 1 Kings, been a thorn in the side of King Ahab and his Canaanite wife Jezebel. By this point in the narrative both Ahab and Jezebel are dead and Ahab's son Ahaziah's short reign had just ended when he died after being injured in a fall. Ahaziah's brother Jehoram took the throne because Ahaziah had left no son. This turn of events signaled the beginning of the end of the House of Ahab. Israel's enemies during this time
period included not only the internal threats from the Baal cults set up by Ahab and Jezebel themselves, but the Syrians and Moabites who continually warred against them throughout this tumultuous time. The geographical context of this narrative serves as a tour of the major places of worship and of historical significance for Israel from Gilgal to Jericho and eventually across the Jordan River. These sites are important to the history of Israel in that this is the path by which God's people entered and began the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua. Crossing the Jordan they had camped at Gilgal where they "kept the Passover for the first time in Canaan and renewed the rite of circumcision, and so 'rolled away the reproach' of their Egyptian slavery."

**LITERARY CONTEXT**

The Literary context in which this passage is set is a narrative of transition. In the original Hebrew text there were no breaks between First and Second Samuel and First and Second Kings, but they were united as one continuous narrative. However, because of the transition to a new king and a new prophet in this section of the book, it is a logical point at which to separate the narrative of the Kings into two volumes. As Marvin E. Tate writes, "1 Kings deals with the end of David's reign, the following reign of Solomon, and the division of the kingdom into the north and south. Beginning with chapter 17, the work of the prophets is emphasized. 2 Kings continues the story of the monarchies, leading to the fall of Israel and later Judah into exile. The division into four books is the result of tradition and convenience; the narrative has no major breaks." The books are written as a history, but not in the modern sense of the word. There appear to be specific theological and ideological points that the writer intends to set forth by focusing on particular occurrences in Israel' story.
FORM, STRUCTURE AND MOVEMENT

The form of this passage, as previously stated, is historical narrative. However the literary devices apparent within include symbolism, repetition, foreshadowing, and literary allusions to other books contained in the canon of Hebrew Scripture. The symbolism can be seen in the use of Elijah's mantle as a representation of God's authority and the calling of the prophet (cf. 1 Kings 19:19). Symbolism is also apparent in the chariot and the horses of fire that appear prior to Elijah's ascension in the whirlwind. "The fiery horses and chariot were symbols of God's power in battle. Horses and chariots were the mightiest means of warfare in that day. God was saying in this event that His power was far greater than any military might."

Furthermore, the whirlwind itself acts as a theophany symbolizing the presence of God.

Repetition occurs in the traveling narrative that precedes Elijah's departure from this world. As is often the case in scripture the repetition occurs three times. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to remain behind, three times Elisha refuses. In the literature of the Bible it appears that testing often occurs in a trio. This can be seen in the temptations of Christ (Luke 4), the denials of Peter (John 18), and the restoration of Peter (John 21).

Foreshadowing is also evident in the travel narrative which begins this text. Repeatedly both Elisha and the reader are reminded that Elijah is soon to be taken. The entire passage begins with the declaration of this fact in order to set the stage for what is to come: "When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind…" The mantle also serves to foreshadow the ministry of Elisha which is to come in the following chapters in which he shows himself to be clothed in the God's authority and power.

The literary allusions to other books in the Old Testament present in this passage include
the parting of the waters to cross over to the other side as seen with Moses and the Sea of Reeds marking the departure from captivity in Egypt and the Ark of the Covenant and the Jordan River marking the entrance into the Promised Land. This literary devise acts as a reminder to both Elisha and the readers of the text "that the same God with the same power was still alive and active in Israel" who had been present at the great Exodus and the entrance into the land. As previously discussed, literary allusion can also be seen in the cities visited by the master and his servant and their significance in the recorded story of Israel's entrance to the land.

For the purposes of this paper the structure and movement of the text can be broken down as follows:

a) Introduction: "The Travel Narrative" (2 Kings 2:1-7)

b) Rising Action: "Crossing Over/ Elisha's Request" (2 Kings 2:8-10)

c) Climax: "The Theophany and Departure" (2 Kings 2:11-12)

d) Falling Action: "The Blessing Realized" (2 Kings 2:13-14)

e) Denouement: "The Spirit of Elijah Rests on Elisha" (2 Kings 2:15)

DETAILED ANALYSIS

Introduction: "The Travel Narrative" (2 Kings 2:1-7)

From the outset of the passage it is made clear that Elijah's assumption into heaven is eminent. It is not stated here or elsewhere how this is known, yet all those prophets with whom Elisha and his master meet on the road are conscious of the impending turn of events. The two servants of God are said to be going from Gilgal, which was a place of worship and apparently their domicile at the time in which this passage is set. The Gilgal mentioned could have been the town situated near the Jordan River, but some modern scholars claim that this Gilgal could in
fact be what is now Jiljiliah which lies seven miles northwest of Bethel. The fact that Elijah repeatedly tries to urge Elisha to remain behind indicates that he, like Moses before him in Deuteronomy 34:1-5, desires to leave this world without company of any other but God. However, Elisha remains true to his vow in 1 Kings 19:20 to "follow Elijah faithfully" to the very end. The travel narrative, the route of which was guided by the Lord, took the two men to Bethel, another place of worship where there lived a company of prophets. Bethel, which translated means "house of God," is located near the ruins of Ai and is the site where, in Genesis 28, Jacob received his vision of a stairway reaching into heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. From Bethel, Elijah leads his attendant, by the Lord's command, to Jericho. 1 Kings 16:34 reveals to us that during the reign of Ahab a man named Hiel of Bethel had rebuilt this ancient city to the detriment of his family. The city was accursed under the herem of the Lord after its dramatic destruction at the onset of the conquest of Canaan and was never to be rebuilt (Joshua 6:26). However, this pericope discloses the fact that Jericho, like Bethel, housed a company of prophets. "These groups or schools of the prophets had been established to teach the Israelites the revealed Word of God." Like those prophets in Bethel, those in Jericho question Elisha about his master's fate. Each time Elisha is approached with the question, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today," he replies by saying, "I know, but do not speak of it." By this response he may have meant, "Do not add to my sorrow at this prospect by reminding of it."

From Jericho Elijah and Elisha go to the river Jordan and thus ends the travel narrative. On their arrival they are followed by fifty men of the company of prophets who watch from a distance to see what would transpire.

*Rising Action: "Crossing Over/ Elisha's Request" (2 Kings 2:8-10)*
Upon reaching the River Jordan Elijah rolls up his cloak and strikes the water. "A prophet's cloak symbolized his authority under God (cf. 1 Kings 19:19) with which God clothed and empowered him." This act is reminiscent of Moses reaching out his staff (another symbol of God's authority and guidance) over the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and into the Christian writings of the First Century and beyond, the crossing over of water has initiated newness and transition from one life to the next. Therefore it is very apt at this point that prior to "crossing over" into the realm of God, Elijah leads his attendant in a physical "crossing over" from one side of the Jordan to the other. This repeated rebirth through water can be seen in the flood story (Genesis 7), the crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14), which the Israelites saw as the moment when they were called out to become the people of God, the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3, which designated the transitional point from the wilderness wanderings to the settling of the Promised Land. In the New Testament Jesus exhorts Nicodemus to be born again of the water and the Spirit (John 3) and Peter writes that the waters of baptism represent a similar transition from one life to another.

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:18b-21 NRSV)

After they had crossed over, possibly sensing the end was near, Elijah asked Elisha if there was anything he could do for him before he departed. Elisha requests a double portion of his master's spirit. This was a significant request as it reflected the inheritance law in Deuteronomy 21:17, which stipulated that "the oldest son and successor of his father was [to be] given a double portion" of the estate. By this request Elisha is declaring his desire to carry on
Elijah's ministry as his successor. Some scholars suggest that Elijah was hesitant to pass on his responsibilities to anyone and this is a possible reason for his continual encouragement for Elisha to remain behind during the travel narrative. This also may be the reason for the enigmatic response he gives to Elisha in verse 10: "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." However, it is important to keep in mind regarding this passage that "this was not a condition for Elisha to receive the double portion but the evidence that he would." The other reason this was a difficult thing to ask is that this blessing was not Elijah's to give. God alone bestowed his Spirit on whomever he had called for that purpose. Therefore, it was wise of Elijah to leave the outcome of this request in the Lord's hands.

Climax: "The Theophany and Departure" (2 Kings 2:11-12)

As Elijah and Elisha continued "walking and talking" they were separated by a chariot and horses of fire. This theophany shows the presence and power of God breaking into the created world. As previously stated the chariots and horses represent the power of God over the kingdoms of the world, whose prowess was represented in that time period by the number of chariots and horses within their arsenal. It is interesting to note that despite the artistic renderings of this event throughout Judeo/Christian history, Elijah was not taken up to heaven in the chariot but in the whirlwind. The whirlwind in scripture, like fire, often represents the presence of God. For instance, in Job 38:1 and 40:6 God responds to Job from a whirlwind. This misconception that Elijah was taken up in the chariot can be seen as far back as the inter-testimental period in the book of Sirach 40:9, "You were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire." However, 2 Kings 2 does not say as much.
After Elijah was taken, Elisha continued to watch and cried out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" In this statement it appears that Elisha was making a comparison between "Elijah and the armies of Israel: he was more important to the nation's safety than the horses and chariots." Interestingly, this phrase was repeated again years later by King Joash in 2 Kings 13:14 in reference to the deeds of Elisha himself. The fact that Elisha witnessed the departure of Elijah acted as a sign that God indeed intended for Elisha to inherit the double portion he had requested. Sister Elspeth, O.A.S. has asked if it was possible that Elisha actually witnessed these events. In reply to her own question she writes, "He may have. By the gift of God, many Old Testament saints seem to have seen what it is not given all men to see." Elisha then tore his clothes as a sign of mourning.

**Falling Action: "The Blessing Realized" (2 Kings 2:13-14)**

The text continues by stating that Elisha went and picked up the cloak or mantle that had belonged to Elijah. In this action it appears that Elisha is accepting the responsibility that has been left to him. Just as that very cloak had been a sign of his calling in 1 Kings 19 it here stands as a sign of Elisha's succession as Elijah's rightful heir. As Elijah returns to the banks of the Jordan he asks the question, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" As if Elisha needed more evidence of the Divine will the water again parts. Elisha had indeed inherited a double portion of his master's spirit. This fact is further illustrated by the fact that Scripture "reports twice as many miracles of Elisha as Elijah (14 compared to 7)."

**Denouement: "The Spirit of Elijah Rests on Elisha" (2 Kings 2:15)**

The fifty prophets who had been standing at the other side of the Jordan River had stood as witnesses to these events and they rightly interpreted what they saw. They verified the fact that God had called Elisha to be Elijah's successor by saying, "The spirit of Elijah rests on
Elisha.” This could be seen as a prophetic answer to the question Elisha had asked in v.14 before he crossed over the Jordan, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” The prophets recognize by his miraculous crossing that the God of Elijah is now the God of Elisha. The spirit of Elijah does not refer to the "ghostly" spirit of his master, but the Spirit of God which Elijah had been anointed with as God's chosen spokesman and spiritual leader to His people. This gives some sense of closure to the pericope in that Elisha can be sure of his vocation, not only by the fact that he had seen Elijah taken (which was to be a sign), picked up his master's cloak (as a symbol of accepting the responsibility), and had manifested his same power in the crossing of the River (as a sign that God was with him), but also by the many witnesses to God's will which the fifty prophets represent. The passage ends with the prophets bowing to the ground before him as a sign of their submission to him as their anointed leader. With this final act there is little doubt that Elisha is Elijah successor, both in the eyes of God and in the eyes of His prophets.

SYNTHESIS

The narrative of 2 Kings 2:1-15 stands as a model of the providence and vocation of God within the created world. God shows himself to be active in and concerned for the lives of those he calls, both as a people and as individuals. The central theme of the passage, I believe, is embodied in the symbol of the cloak (NRSV) or mantle (KJV). The cloak is used as a tangible incarnation of the responsibility, power and vocation passed from one generation to the next. Unlike other Biblical examples of blessings from father to son or master to servant, this transaction is passive. The mantle is not passed from Elijah but dropped, allowing Elisha to make the necessary decision to pick it up as a sign of his willingness to carry on the ministry of God in the land. This readiness to continue wherever God may lead is apparent throughout the
pericope. From the start Elisha is given the option to stay behind, yet he makes a conscious decision and an oral vow not to part with his master until God separates them. The determination of Elisha is also seen in his request for a "double-portion" of the elder prophet's spirit. Finally, Elisha's fortitude is seen in the very act of picking up the mantle from where it had fallen.

**REFLECTION: 2 KINGS 2:1-15 TODAY**

There are several applications that are perceptible in this passage of scripture that speak to several different audiences. The first group to which the passage speaks are those who have accepted the faith and have matured in their faith. To these people, the passage evokes the need to pass on what they have learned and what they have been blessed with. As David wrote in Psalm 78:2-7:

> I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

2 Kings 2 stands as a living illustration to this Psalm, which encourages and demands that the faith and traditions be passed on from one generation to the next.

The second group to which the passage speaks are those who have yet to claim their own faith or who have not yet taken up the mantle that is being passed to them. Each person who wishes to be a disciple must, as Elijah did, at some point make a conscious decision to pick up the mantle of the faith. There is a necessity to step out of the shadows of those who have come
before us and to lay hold of the faith as our own. The cloak no longer belongs to Elijah, but Elisha. Just as "The Lord, the God of Elijah" becomes "the Lord, the God of Elisha" we must inherit fully the Lord of our fathers as our own.

Therefore, it can be said that the most important application of this text is to exhort us to pick up the mantle that has been passed to us by those who have come before us in the faith and in turn pass it on to those who come after us.

Some other universal situations that this text speaks to are also evident. First, we can see how we are to face our own mortality. Elisha did not want to speak of the fact that Elijah was leaving him, yet he was willing to go all the way with him. Also, the fact that Elijah knew of his impending departure allowed him to make preparation by asking Elisha how he may bless him. In our modern society, we tend to say as Elisha did, "Don't speak of it," when we are faced with death. We try to find ways of getting around it rather than allowing God to lead us through it.

Second, we can see in this passage an example of how we should respond when tempted to cease the long journey of discipleship. Elijah and Elisha were sent on a long journey with an ending that was uncertain. Over the course of that journey Elijah was continually tested to see if he would continue to follow or stay behind. As Christians we are called to "take up our cross daily and follow Jesus" wherever he may lead (even to death). However, during our journey we are often tested to see if we will remain loyal to the master or stay behind so that we do not have to face what is ahead. As disciples of Jesus we are called to say each day, as Elisha did, "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

Ultimately, the greatest challenge to each of us as Christians that can be found in this narrative can be found in a single question. When we die and people ask, "Where now is the
Lord, the God of *(insert your name here)*? Will there be an answer? Have we passed on the mantle of our faith?

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