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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #82: The Storm Part 1: Preface

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1. Boundaries of the Story

There can be no doubt that our story starts with the first verse of chapter 2: "And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to the heavens...." However, the conclusion is less well defined. Is the end of the story to be found in verse 11, with the words, "And Eliyahu went up in a storm to the heavens," so as to echo the opening words, or should we also include the next verse, which still belongs to the subject of Eliyahu's ascent, with a description of Elisha's reaction to it?

From a certain point of view the latter suggestion seems more logical, since the first twelve verses of chapter 2 all deal with the same, clearly defined subject – Eliyah's ascent – while everything that follows concerns Elisha, who is now alone. However, the question turns out to be less simple than it appears. Verse 13 – "He lifted Eliyahu's mantle... and went back and stood at the bank of the Yarden" – does not seem to introduce a new subject. From the point of view of its content and vocabulary, this verse is a direct continuation of the previous one, to the extent that the name of Elisha, who is the subject of the sentence, is not even mentioned. Likewise, in terms of the subject of this verse and those that follow, Eliyah's ascent continues to pervade the action. Although Eliyahu has left Elisha, the events of the first half of the chapter continue to occupy us: Eliyahu's mantle serves Elisha, and his name is mentioned by Elisha (verse 14) and the sons of the prophets (15) alike; afterwards (verses 16-18) the text describes the search undertaken by the sons of the prophets to find Eliyahu.

It is therefore appropriate that we include within the story of Eliyahu's ascent the description that follows it, up to verse 18, since everything that is recounted in verses 12-18 arises directly from the ascent.

However, this division comes with its own set of difficulties. At the beginning of the unit comprising verses 19-22 (the subject of which is the healing of the water of the Yarden), we read: "The people of the city said to Elisha...", with no mention of the name of the city. Obviously, the city in question is Yericho, but the reader knows this only because this verse comes after the previous unit, where Elisha stays over in Yericho (verse 18). It is to this information that verse 19 alludes in the reference to "the people of the city." Thus, the episode described in verses 19-22 cannot stand alone; it must follow on from the preceding unit.

In the same way, the next episode, described in verses 23-25 (the taunting boys and the bears emerging from the woods), must be connected to the unit that precedes it. It starts with the words, "He went up from there to Beit El..." From where did Elisha go up? It must be that he went up from the city that was referred to in the previous unit, and which is alluded to again later on in verse 23: "And some small boys came out from the city..." Once again, this unit rests upon the previous one, and both are dependent on the name of the city, Yericho, which appears in verse 18.

The missing name of the city is not the only reason to connect the two short units at the end of our chapter with the story of Eliyahu's ascent at its start. Although the later units make no mention of Eliyahu's name, Yericho and Beit El – the cities mentioned in these two units – are two of the stations along Eliyahu's route to the place where he is taken up in a storm. Elisha, who goes back to the place where Eliyahu ascended, crosses the Yarden at the same place where his teacher did so previously, continues on his way towards Yericho, where Eliyahu had previously passed through, and then goes up to Beit El, which is the other place where Eliyahu is mentioned as having passed on his way. Thus, Elisha is retracing Eliyahu's footsteps, in the opposite direction.

All of these factors lead us to posit that chapter 2 is a single narrative, with the route of journeying and returning serving to shape its boundaries, its structure, and its internal unity.

The geographical turning point in the story is in verse 13: "...And he **went back** and stood at the bank of the Yarden." It is from here that Elisha sets off on his own journey – alone and bereft of his master, but retracing his master's steps in the opposite direction. Thus the story is divided into two equal halves: in verses 1-12 Eliyahu and Elisha proceed towards the place from which Eliyahu ascends, while in verses 13-25 Elisha returns alone along the same route. Verses 13-18, describing the various reactions to Eliyahu's ascent, therefore belong to the second half of the story, but the chapter in its entirety should be regarded as a single story.

Elisha's intention in retracing Eliyahu's route is manifest in the scene of him crossing the Yarden. Elisha crosses over the river at the same point where he did so previously, together with his master, using the same mantle, and even invoking Eliyahu's name. It is therefore no wonder that the sons of the prophets, who had previously accompanied Eliyahu and Elisha on their way to the Yarden and had waited on the banks for Elisha to return, regard the disciple's retracing of his steps as proof that "the spirit of Eliyahu rests upon Elisha."

Elisha cannot continue his path as Eliyahu's successor until it is clear to him that his master's ascent is irreversible (at least, at the present stage of history). Therefore he stops at Yericho and stays over there until the sons of the prophets, who are stationed there, report that their search for Eliyahu has yielded nothing (verse 18).

Elisha's presence in Yericho is what gives rise to the appeal by the people of the city for Elisha to solve the water problem. Following this, Elisha resumes his retracing of Eliyahu's journey, and goes from Yericho to Beit El. It is during this ascent that the episode of the boys who jeer at him takes place, along with the attack on the children by the bears.

The two units are less clearly associated with Elisha's desire to retrace his master's steps than the previous units were, and they require some explanation. For the moment, suffice it to say that the key to understanding these events lies in recognizing that this is a continuation of the story of Elisha retracing the steps of Eliyahu, with the figure of the master and the fact that he has just been taken up in a storm to the heavens serving as the foundation for the events that are described here.

The fact that the story as a whole ends with Elisha going to Mount Carmel (and from there to Shomron), rather than returning to Gilgal, which is the story's point of departure, in no way contradicts our hypothesis above; rather, it is the obvious result of the idea that we have asserted.

Had Elisha retraced his previous journey with Eliyahu to the same place from which they had departed, in Gilgal, he would be expressing the exact opposite of his true intention. "Retracing steps" is a concept that is usually perceived, in the biblical context, as a negation of the significance of the original journey. When a person retraces his steps to the place from whence he set out, it is as though he never left there; it is as though he re-establishes the original situation. Clearly, this is not Elisha's intention in retracing Eliyahu's steps. Rather, he means almost the opposite: he means to show that he is Eliyahu's successor. In the same places where Elisha had so recently appeared as the disciple and servant of his great master, he now appears alone, as the prophet who takes the place of the master who is gone.

Therefore, instead of ending his journey in the footsteps of Eliyahu at their point of departure, which would have characterized Elisha's state prior to inheriting Eliyahu's role, he continues in his master's footsteps – those that go back to an earlier time. He goes back to the most important arena of his master's national activity, to Mount Carmel. It was there that Eliyahu achieved his greatest victory in the fight for the nation's soul. By this act, Elisha is demonstrating unequivocally that he has inherited Eliyahu's role.

Translated by Kaeren Fish