

# **Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – February 11, 2018**

## **[2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:1-12](#) & [Mark 9:2-9](#)**

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

### **Reflection Questions on 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:1-12:**

1. The prophet Elijah has been associated with the Messiah in both Jewish and Christian traditions. How does the concept of Messiah differ between Jews and Christians? How does Elijah relate to your conception of the Messiah?
2. Many of us have taken or will take this final journey with a loved parent or mentor, or know someone who has. In what ways is the story of Elisha’s companioning Elijah to his ascent to heaven like a scene from hospice care? Consider the characters and their reaction to the situation.
3. At both Bethel and Jericho, a “company of prophets confront Elisha with the question of whether he knows that “today the Lord will take your master away from you.” How do these prophets (and Elisha) know this? Why does Elisha instruct them to keep silent?

### **Reflection Questions on Mark 9:2-9:**

1. Have you ever had a mystical experience when you felt that you were in God’s presence? Can you describe the experience? Were you afraid? Did you think of any biblical stories, prophets or images? Or was your experience beyond description?
2. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration is clearly full of symbolic meaning. What is the significance of these two leaders from Israel’s past? What does Peter’s ill-fated idea to build dwellings for each of the three indicate about its effect on him?
3. How does this passage mark a turning point from the liturgical season of Epiphany, with its emphasis on miracles and the Good News of God’s kingdom, and the season of Lent, with its emphasis on Jesus’ journey to suffering and the cross?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**

## Commentary on 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings 2:1-12 (From *Homiletics*; "Elijah and His Stratolaunch" – Feb. 11, 2018)

Elijah's ascent to heaven in a whirlwind, 2 Kings 2:1-18 (from which today's lesson, 2 Kings 2:1-12, is taken), is the fitting climax to the stormy career of one of the most vividly portrayed figures in the OT. The prophet Elijah is depicted as a fierce defender of Yahwism during the ninth-century B.C. reign of King Ahab of Israel, a Yahwism bequeathed to Israel from Moses and which brought Israel as a chosen people into existence. Elijah, whose name means "Yahweh is my God," sought to purify and preserve Israel's ancestral faith from both internal and external threats of religious syncretism from various influences of Canaanite cults.

Although the figure of Elijah exerted considerable influence on later Israelite, NT and Jewish tradition, the cycle of stories about his life and career is relatively brief, encompassing less than six full chapters (1 Kings 17-19, 21 and 2 Kings 1:1-2:18). He is introduced abruptly as an opponent to Ahab's introduction of the cult of the Canaanite storm god Baal into the worship of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 17:1; cf. 1 Kings 16:32-33), and the bulk of the narratives about him focus on his aggressive opposition to Israelite apostasy, especially among the ranks of the Israelite nobility and royal house.

Elijah was a native of the region of Gilead (from "Tishbe," an uncertain Hebrew word which the translators of the Greek Septuagint took to be a town, 1 Kings 17:1), where the brand of Yahwism he came to defend in later life may have been preserved with a higher degree of purity than the Yahwism of Ahab's court, which was gradually becoming intermingled with the Baal religion of which Ahab's Phoenician wife, Jezebel, was a devotee.

Following a paralyzing drought and famine, during which Elijah demonstrates repeatedly that it is Yahweh rather than the fertility god Baal who actually holds the power of life and death (1 Kings 17), Elijah confronts the prophets (probably priests) of Baal imported by Jezebel in a dramatic display at an altar on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:20-40). Elijah's triumph is short-lived, however, and he is forced into hiding at Beer-sheba, at the southern edge of the southern kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 19:1-3), as far from Jezebel as possible in the area controlled by the Hebrews.

While on Mount Horeb -- another name for Sinai, where Yahweh's covenant with Israel was first established (Exodus 19-34) -- Elijah experiences a divine theophany (appearance) accompanied by wind, earthquake and fire (possibly an unusually severe thunderstorm). Emboldened by that divine appearance, he locates and designates his prophetic successor, Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21).

After two more confrontations with apostate Israelite kings (one final encounter with Ahab over Naboth's vineyard, 1 Kings 21:1-29, and his denunciation of Ahaziah, Ahab's successor, for his consultation with the cult of Baal-zebul, 1:1-18), Elijah's career comes to its climactic close with his awesome ascent to heaven.

The story opens with the almost pedestrian temporal clause, "Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind ..." (v. 1), suggesting that the story of Elijah's ascent was a well-known feature of the prophet's hagiography. The Hebrew word translated whirlwind, *se'arah*, occurs for the first time in the OT in this passage and occurs elsewhere mainly in contexts from late periods (e.g., Ezekiel 13:11, 13; Zechariah 9:14; Job 38:1, 40:6; etc.). The word usually denotes the tempest or whirlwind as an instrument of divine wrath (e.g., Isaiah 29:6; Jeremiah 23:19; 30:23; Ezekiel 13:11, 13), and as the word for an ordinary storm, the word occurs only in late psalms (107:25, 29; 148:8). The use of this word for whirlwind, therefore, clearly signals that it is no ordinary blast of wind that brings about Elijah's translation to heaven (as the company of Jericho prophets suggests later in the story, vv. 16-18).

Elijah's departure occurs during a journey from Gilgal with his disciple, Elisha (v. 1). The Gilgal mentioned here was probably not the same place where the Israelites crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua (Joshua 4:19), but was a town about 7 miles north of Bethel, to which Elijah says he is being divinely summoned (v. 2).

The journey / departure narrative is highly structured around a series of episodes involving locations important in the history of Yahwism: Bethel, Jericho and the Jordan. Each episode consists of the following elements:

- (1) Elijah tells Elisha to stay at their current location while he journeys on alone in response to a divine summons (vv. 2, 4, 6);
- (2) Elisha refuses, under oath, to leave Elijah (vv. 2b, 4b, 6b);
- (3) the pair continue to their next destination (vv. 2c, 4c, 6c);
- (4) where a company of local prophets meets them and tells Elisha that the Lord is about to take Elijah from him (except for the Jordan, vv. 3ab, 5ab);
- (5) to which Elisha replies that he knows this and bids the prophets to keep silent (vv. 3c, 5c).

It is impossible to say with certainty whether there is a deliberate echoing of the journey of Abraham and Isaac (and servants) toward Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1-19), although such a connection would not be inappropriate in the present context, since the focus of the story is less on Elijah's departure and more on Elisha's gradual emergence as his legitimate and worthy successor (just as the point of the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is the word "near" rather than "sacrifice" -- the important part is what's left, not what's taken).

The Hebrew phrase translated "the company of prophets" (vv. 3, 5, 7) is actually "sons of the prophets," using familial language to describe a class of individuals, just as "sons of gods" in Psalm 29:1 refers to "heavenly beings" (as the NRSV translates). The company of prophets was a prophetic guild attached to a local shrine (such as those at Bethel and Jericho and probably at the Jordan as well, at the Gilgal mentioned in Joshua), whose leader was addressed as "father," as Elisha addresses Elijah here (v. 12, another echo of the Abraham-Isaac story; cf. Genesis 22:7).

When they reach the Jordan, Elijah strikes the water with his rolled-up mantle and the water parts (v. 8), a clear echo of Moses' actions at the Red Sea during the exodus. Elijah's gesture confirms his status as a true prophet in the Mosaic tradition, and Elisha's similar gesture later in the story (vv. 13-14) confirms his legitimacy in that same line.

Curiously, Elisha requests that he inherit a double portion of Elijah's spirit as a final gift from the elder prophet (v. 9), as though Elijah exercised proprietary rights over his spirit, an idea foreign to the biblical portrayal of genuine prophecy. In classical prophecy, it is not the prophet's spirit that exercises power, but the spirit of the Lord acting through the prophet. Elisha's request may contain a subtle criticism of the younger prophet on the part of the narrator.

Elijah's diplomatic reply indicates that Elisha's request is not his to grant (v. 10). If Elisha is able to see Elijah's departure, his request will be granted not by Elijah but by the Lord. If Elisha is unable to see Elijah's departure, his request will be denied, also by the Lord. Elijah does not suggest that the charismatic power that characterizes a genuine prophet is his to dispense or withhold.

The "chariot of fire and horses of fire" that accompany Elijah's stormy ascent (v. 11) are described by Elisha as "the chariots of Israel and its horsemen" (v. 12), an expression that is unique not to the story of Elijah but to the story of Elisha, occurring only here and at 2 Kings 13:14 (a deliberate echo of this story). What is being designated is unknown, but the phrase most likely refers to the heavenly army (commonly called the "heavenly host") that fights on Israel's behalf at the Lord's command, a fitting honor guard for one of the Lord's staunchest earthly defenders.

The narrative concludes with Elisha tearing his garments in two (v. 12), a traditional sign of mourning (Genesis 37:34; etc.).

## Commentary on Mark 9:2-9 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Jesus, the Transformer" – Feb. 15. 2015)

Mark 9:2-9 recounts the transfiguration of Jesus upon a high mountain. This account is nestled within a portion of Mark that paves the way for the crucifixion (8:22-10:52). Three times in this section of the gospel Jesus predicts his coming death and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). Despite the dark note that these predictions sound, the account of the transfiguration provides a moment of glory in an otherwise increasingly dark story.

The opening to this pericope in 9:2 provides a time reference for the events that follow. These things occur "six days later." This mark of time is strange for Mark's gospel where such indicators are rarely used. Furthermore, this is a rather curious introduction since what came immediately prior was not a specific event but rather some general teachings from Jesus (8:34-9:1). Thus, it seems likely that Mark intends that these six days be understood figuratively rather than literally.

The audience to the transfiguration is a select group of the Twelve. Only Peter, James and John are witness to the event. This is the same elite assembly that was invited to observe the healing of Jairus' daughter (5:37). The phrase "by themselves" is a characteristically Markan insertion that occurs elsewhere in the gospel, often translated as "privately" (4:34; 6:31-32; 7:33; 9:28; 13:3). Where it is used elsewhere, the phrase usually indicates secretive conversations that are conducted between Jesus and the Twelve alone, apart from the pressing crowds. It is now only a handful of the Twelve who are present to view the transfiguration. The translation "he was transfigured" (as in the NRSV) is a good rendering of the passive Greek verb at the end of 9:2. Often in the NT, passive verbs serve as an elliptical way to indicate divine causality (i.e., God is understood as the performer of the action in question). By this reading, the transfiguration is the result of direct divine action.

Verse 3 provides a detailed description of the effect of the transfiguration on Jesus' clothing: his garments become whiter than they could possibly be bleached. In the book of Daniel, white and sparkling clothing is a mark of a transcendent being (Daniel 7:9; 12:3). It seems that Mark intends a similar effect. It is notable that where this pericope occurs in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' face is also described as taking on a luminous appearance (Matthew 17:2; Luke 9:29). It seems likely that both Matthew and Luke are attempting to make clear the parallel between Jesus and Moses as the latter is described in Exodus as descending from Mount Sinai with a face that is shining as a result of an encounter with the divine (Exodus 34:29). Mark, however, makes no mention of Jesus' face, only his clothing. Yet, if Mark does not make the potential parallel between Jesus and Moses clear, the sudden appearance of both Moses and Elijah in verse 4 firmly connects Jesus with his OT predecessors.

The transfiguration of Jesus and the sudden appearance of Elijah and Moses have the expected effect of confusing the disciples. After Peter speaks in verse 5, verse 6 explains that Peter did not know what to say. Such an explanation is warranted after Peter inexplicably asserts that the disciples' presence is good and offers to build three dwellings. Some commentators have suggested that the dwellings (literally, in Greek, "tents") that Peter volunteers to construct might be allusions to OT features such as the feast of tabernacles (Leviticus 23:43) or the tent of meeting (Exodus 33:7-11). While this possibility cannot be ruled out, it perhaps is more natural to understand Peter's statement as yet another example in Mark of the disciples appearing to be clueless. Frequently, in this gospel, Jesus' disciples are portrayed as failing to understand or needing to seek further clarification in order to comprehend Jesus and his teachings (e.g. 6:35-38; 8:14-21; 9:32-37; 10:23-31; 11:21-22; 14:18-21). Given the predominance of the tendency throughout Mark to call the disciples' competence into question, it would not be surprising if Peter's statement here was meant to be yet another example of a time when some of the Twelve failed to understand adequately what Jesus was trying to teach them.

Nonetheless, Peter's confused speech is overtaken by another voice, this one from a cloud. A reader who is familiar with the OT might pick up a resonance here of Exodus 24:15-18 which also describes a cloud on a mountain. In that case, the cloud evinces the Lord's presence with Moses. Here in Mark, the cloud also seems to signify the presence of the divine. The voice from on high may be reminiscent of the occasion of Jesus' baptism in Mark where a voice from heaven identifies Jesus as a beloved son (1:11). Likewise, a

voice from on high again identifies Jesus as a beloved son here in 9:7. Unlike the voice at the baptism, however, this voice also provides instructions: "Listen to him!" Jesus' identity as God's son will be repeated once more in the gospel as the centurion witnessing the crucifixion pronounces Jesus as the son of God (15:39).

As immediately as Jesus' transfiguration and the appearances of Elijah, Moses and the heavenly voice happen, these phenomena disappear again. Verse 8 narrates the departure of these wonders, and only Jesus is left behind with Peter, James and John. It would be natural to expect these three disciples to be eager to share their experience with others. However, as they descend the mountain, Jesus prohibits the disciples from talking about what they had seen "until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead."

The command to silence is not unknown in Mark's gospel. After healing Jairus' daughter, Jesus issues a similar command (5:43). Likewise, after healing a deaf man, Jesus orders silence (7:36). Indeed, Jesus has warned even unclean spirits and Peter about publicizing his messianic identity (3:12; 8:30). Thus, for an audience who has been following along in the gospel thus far, Jesus' command to remain silent is hardly odd. Rather, this has become a typical characteristic of the Markan Jesus who would prefer to keep his identity and miraculous deeds under wraps. As the rest of the gospel narrative will show, however, this identity becomes known to the wrong people and eventually results in the arrest, crucifixion and death of the narrative's protagonist.

## Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).