

the sons of the prophets

2 Kings 4:38-41

4:38 And Elisha came again to Gilgal: and there was a dearth in the land; and **the sons of the prophets** were sitting before him: and he said unto his servant, Set on the great pot, and seethe pottage for **the sons of the prophets**. **4:39** And **one** went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered thereof wild gourds his lap full, and came and shred them into the pot of pottage: for they knew them not. **4:40** So they poured out for the men to eat. And it came to pass, as they were eating of the pottage, that they cried out, and said, O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat thereof. **4:41** But he said, Then bring meal. And he cast it into the pot; and he said, Pour out for **the people**, that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot.

2 Kings 6:1-7

6:1 And **the sons of the prophets** said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us. **6:2** Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye. **6:3** And **one** said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. **6:4** So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. **6:5** But as **one** was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. **6:6** And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim. **6:7** Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it.

neglected disciples?

The young men who aligned themselves with and studied under Elijah and / or Elisha were called “the sons of the prophets.” They, of course, were not physical descendants of the great prophets. Rather they freely chose to serve the Lord under God’s special spokesmen of their time. So they referred to the prophet over them as “master” as well as “father” (2 Kgs. 2:3, 5, 6:5). In addition, they are referred to as the prophet’s “servant” or “servants” in 6:3, 6:15, and 9:4.

Most of the sons of the prophets appear in Second Kings with Elisha rather than in First Kings with Elijah, though many of Elisha’s helpers switched to him when Elijah was removed from them to heaven.

in Elijah’s time	in the period of overlap	in Elisha’s time
1 Kings 20:35	2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7	2 Kings 2:15, 4:1, 38, 5:22, 6:1, 9:1

According to 2 Kgs. 2:7 there were at least 50 sons of the prophets at one time, and perhaps there were many more. (Compare 4:38 and 4:41.) A few individuals among them are singled out here and there, but for the most part they appear together as a group.

To best appreciate this study, it helps to relate Elijah to John the Baptist, Elisha to Jesus, and the sons of the prophets to Jesus’ disciples.

negatives

One of the outstanding characteristic of the sons of the prophets in chapters four through six was their poverty. They did not have enough money (4:1), food (4:39), or housing (6:1-2). And in chapter five, Gehazi famously asked Naaman for a talent of silver and two changes of garments for two poor, young men of the sons of the prophets.

Since famines were common (4:38, 8:1-2), many of the people were poor. Though there were some moderately wealthy believers who helped Elisha, none of them were ever called a son of the prophets (4:8-10, 42).

Apparently most of the sons of the prophets were fairly young and some of them were probably still single men. (See 4:1-7, 5:22, 6:15-17, and 9:1-4.) This may partly explain why very little is recorded about what they did. (Maybe they were too young to have done much.)

The “certain man of the sons of the prophets” who went to King Ahab with a vivid, negative message in 1 Kgs. 20:35-43 seems to be a special case. He was a unique, wounded prophet, and he appears to have been sent by God without a direct command from Elijah. (None is recorded in the passage.)

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A () **The sons of the prophets did not have much.**

- A-1 () They were all poor (4:1-7, 5:22, 6:5).
- A-2 () Their gathering place was too small (6:1-2).
- A-3 () They lived off the land (4:1-7, 39, 42-44, 6:2).
- A-4 () They probably could not afford to buy good tools (6:5).
- A-5 () They borrowed things (4:3, 6:5) like Jesus in Mark 11:6.
- A-6 () Elisha had to help them repeatedly (4:1-7, 38-41, 6:1-7).
- A-7 () Many left the group because of the lack of food (4:38-44).

B () **The sons of the prophets did not accomplish much.**

- B-1 () They were sometimes careless (4:38-40, 6:5).
- B-2 () They did not do well without Elisha (4:40-41, 6:3).
- B-3 () They damaged the Jordan River ecosystem (6:4-5).
- B-4 () They were followers rather than leaders (4:38, 6:1-3).
- B-5 () They were not respected by political leaders (9:1-3, 11-13).
- B-6 () Most of them were not prophets (1 Kgs. 20:35-43, 2 Kgs. 4:38).

positives

It is easy to criticize the somewhat inept sons of the prophets (4:39, 6:5). But to overly do so is to forget that these young men were part of God's team and plan. Rarely are they seen apart from either Elijah or Elisha, and never were they outside of God's plan.

Where was God when the iron axe head fell into the Jordan River (6:5)? Of course, the Lord was right there with his prophet, Elisha, fully ready and able to meet the need. The Jordan was deep enough and muddy enough at that point for a miracle to be required, and that miracle was for the glory of God.

The miracles of Elijah and Elisha were to show that the Lord, the God of Israel, was the true and living God (1 Kgs. 18:20-21). Sometimes God's power was demonstrated toward Israel's enemies, such as in the healing of Naaman in chapter five and the blinding of the Syrian army in chapter six. But there were far more miracles that were seen by Israelites only. The healing of the stew in 4:38-41 and the floating of the iron axe head in 6:1-7 were two of these. Thus Elijah and Elisha mainly ministered to Israel which included the sons of the prophets and their families (C-7).

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C () **The sons of the prophets were with Elisha.**

- C-1 () They acknowledged Elisha as Elijah's successor (2:15, 23-24).
- C-2 () They did not act alone (1 Kgs. 20:35-43, 2 Kgs. 2:16-18, 6:1-2).
- C-3 () They feared God (4:1) and listened to Elisha's teaching (4:38).
- C-4 () They saw Elisha perform miracles (2:14-15, 4:40-41, 6:6-7).
- C-5 () They were like Jesus' disciples in the New Testament.
- C-6 () They did not betray Elisha like Gehazi did (5:20-27).
- C-7 () Elisha's main ministry was toward them (2:12-9:13).

D () **God was with Elisha and the sons of the prophets.**

- D-1 () Elisha agreed to go with them to the Jordan (6:3-4).
- D-2 () Elisha helped them grow in their faith in God (6:1-7:20).
- D-3 () God repeatedly met their needs through Elisha (4:1-7, 41, 6:6).
- D-4 () Elisha went with one of them to anoint Jehu to be king (9:1-13).
- D-5 () Elisha's last recorded words were spoken to them (13:14-19).
- D-6 () 13:20-21 shows that they served God even after Elisha died.

conclusions

worksheet answers

We do not know if all the sons of the prophets were poor, but all the examples in Second Kings chapters four through six were clearly so (A-1). That said, there is no indication that any member of the group ever left because of the lack of food (A-7).

Gehazi was rejected because of his greed. (See 5:20-27.) But he was never directly called one of the sons of the prophets though as Elisha’s servant, he may have been one. As the sons of the prophets resemble Jesus’ disciples in some ways (C-5), Gehazi resembles Judas (C-6).

The sons of the prophets in Second Kings are somewhat like Jesus’ disciples in the Gospels. But there is no Scripture to prove that Elisha’s followers continued to serve the Lord after Elisha died, like the disciples did in the Book of Acts (D-6). Moreover, Elisha’s last recorded words in 13:14-19 were addressed to King Joash rather than to the sons of the prophets (D-5).

Were Elijah and Elisha trying to start a new “church” through the sons of the prophets? To some extent they were, since the northern kingdom where they ministered was far from God. Even so, line C-7 is only partly correct.

So what?

One of the key facts about the sons of the prophets is that none are mentioned before Elijah or after Elisha. Thus, compared to these two, most other Old Testament prophets had few, if any, student helpers.

before Elijah	during Elijah’s time	era of overlap	during Elisha’s time	after Elisha
no “sons of the prophets”	1 Kings 20:35	2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7	2 Kings 2:15, 4:1, 4:38, 5:22, 6:1, 9:1	no “sons of the prophets”

The ministries of Elijah and Elisha were quite unique. No other prophets in the biblical record worked as closely with disciples until John the Baptist (and the Lord Jesus) appeared in the New Testament.

The main point to be draw from Elisha’s (and Jesus’) ministry to disciples seems to be that calling people back to God requires more than just a strong message. It requires discipleship through personal teaching and interaction in addition to public ministry. — Moreover we see through the disciples of Elisha and Jesus that serving God usually involves being an active member of a biblical fellowship / church.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
