

Onward to Mordor: 2 Kings 2:1-12

## **Why does Elijah try to spare Elisha? Does he simply prefer to die alone?**

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

“Go back, Sam. I’m going to Mordor alone!” “Of course you are,” responds Sam, “and I’m coming with you!” He plunges into the river, gets in over his head and almost drowns before Frodo pulls him into the boat. Once Sam catches his breath, he explains: “I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. Don’t you leave him, Samwise Gamgee, and I don’t mean to.”

As dogged as Sam, Elisha would not leave Elijah alone, although Elijah tried to shed Elisha like a pesky gnat. Why? Biblical narrative habitually refrains from reporting motivations and feelings. Was he sparing Elisha? Did Elijah simply prefer to die alone? When Jesus, who like Elijah had miraculously fed the hungry and healed dozens and gotten cheeky with the powers that be, said, “I go to prepare a place for you,” did the disciples think of Elijah trudging off to die alone?

What complex feelings stir when a great leader, a wise sage, a stellar saint departs? Is our grief less because we know that the leader is with God? Or is our grief heightened because of the sanctity lost, or because of the liberation of the heart that was learned at the feet of the one we loved and lost? We cannot know if Elisha felt delight or dread in Elijah’s being whisked away into the heavens.

We sing “Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home,” although in all the annals of history we know of only one chariot that accompanied a homecoming. This chariot defies explanation—as the author no doubt intended. Too much of our preaching is confident, because we foolishly think our task is to make the mysterious clear. Elisha could do nothing to explicate the things of God except point to the mystery, shrug and thereby usher people into the presence of the holy and living God. Not surprisingly, it is the mystifying Elijah who shows up in the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. The preacher had best close his eyes, shake her head, hem and haw, and then the sermon will be pitch-perfect.

Most of us have seen no chariot of fire, no phantasms like Moses and Elijah. We still “mourn in lonely exile here.” Did Elijah feel lonely, even if his loneliness was self-imposed? I think of Roland Murphy, the Carmelite Old Testament scholar who was my dissertation adviser and lifelong mentor. He shared a lot of wisdom with me; I never made an important decision without exploring things with him. But he did not, as he could not, vouchsafe to me what his dying moments were like, or what he saw when the door of this life closed and he took the first step of his journey into . . . we do not know. He died on the feast day of Elijah—fitting for a Carmelite, and a Hebrew Bible guy! Were there chariots or some dimly lit, beautiful silence? We trust, perhaps because we harbor in our souls some mysterious confidence that all must be well with someone who lived so well and loved us so well.

Elijah had his protégés, but 2 Kings narrates the life of only one. Elisha, pitifully and rather heroically, asked the dying Elijah for a “double share” of his power. Commentaries explain how an oldest son would receive a dual portion of an inheritance. But I prefer to think Elisha knew that with Elijah gone he would need not only his own resources or what he had soaked up from Elijah over the years, but an extra dosage. Evidently he received that extra dosage. Elisha’s miracle output exactly doubled Elijah’s, 16 to eight!

Jesus promised the disciples that they would do “greater things.” How could anybody top Jesus? Of course, the church has never competed with Jesus, because the church *is* Jesus. We are the body of Christ down here. “Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours.” The remarkable narrative in 2 Kings 2 invites us not to trust in our divinely endowed skills or to put our abilities to work for God, but simply to make a promise to plunge headlong into the water, to refuse to let the other alone: “I’m coming with you.” Feeling a bit foolish, having loved and lost, and with no real idea what the future might hold, we emerge from the water, and a mantle is draped around our shoulders. At first it doesn’t fit; we pray for a bigger share, some burst of power we know won’t really be enough. And the mantle?

Gandalf rather unwisely left the course of affairs in Middle-earth to the diminutive, fun-loving, timid Hobbits. “Despair, or folly?” said Gandalf. “It is not despair, for despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not. It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope. Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy!”