

We return to our super-heroes of the Old Testament. Three weeks ago we reflected on Elijah. He is, I suspect, fairly well known (in so far as any Old Testament figures are well known in our post-Christian, biblically ignorant world). He is the fiery prophet who was taken up to Heaven in a fiery chariot, having called down fire from heaven and encountered God, not in raging fire, earthquake or howling wind but in the still, gentle breeze. But who knows anything about his side-kick and pupil Elisha? Anyone who has heard of Batman can name his protege -Robin; Millions of people follow in Marvel comic or on film, the adventures of Iron-Man, Captain American, the Black Widow and the whole gang of *Avengers*, (though for some of us that title will always belong to John Steed and Emma Peel) but who can tell me one story associated with this prophet, Elisha, disciple of Elijah, other than the one we heard in our first reading that was alluded to by Jesus in the Gospel-passage?

You have quite a few to choose from: he heals a spring, turning its bitter waters sweet; he saves a widow from destitution when she cannot pay her debts by making oil flow as long as she can obtain jars to contain it; he nullifies the poison in a stew allowing his disciples to eat during a famine; he multiplies twenty loaves to feed a hundred people; he recovers a borrowed axe by making it float. He does all this, tricks that would make David Copperfield jealous, power that would turn The Hulk green, and you have hardly heard of him!

He was also a sensitive soul who got upset when some lads shouted abuse at him and called him "Baldy". So he called upon bears to come and deal with the lippy scallywags, and forty-two were killed. I have often wondered if this story influenced William Shakespeare to write his most famous stage direction: "Exit, pursued by a bear".

That curious episode apart, Elisha shows himself to be a friend of children, by miraculously giving a Shunammite childless woman a son and then raising him back to life after he has died, rather as his master had raised a widow's son.

A dab hand at the miraculous, Elisha also has political skill, saving the nation when the king cannot do so. Samaria the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel was under siege and the inhabitants were dying of starvation. One unhappy woman ate her child, and demanded of the king that a neighbour hand over her child to her as they had agreed. Elisha announced that there would be abundant food the next day. An aide to the king laughs at him and receives a warning that his disbelief would have dire consequences. The besieging army think they hear reinforcements coming to liberate the town and they flee from their camp. The starving Samaritans rush into the camp, trampling the credulous aide to death, and there is food in abundance as the

prophet had foretold.

Even after his death Elisha continues to work miracles. A corpse comes into contact with his bones and is revived, even though no one asked.

Elisha has more in common with a character from a fairy story as an historic personage. He might have been a real figure, a charismatic leader of bands of disciples who grouped around holy places; but his story has been much embellished in its retelling, making him a super-hero of old, as credible as Thor or Iron Man. These fictional characters have a massive audience who thrill to their impossible feats which are always ultimately successful, defeating the evil genius and saving the world; yet people hear about Elisha and dismiss the Bible as nonsense.

Elisha was a super-hero, “the man of God” as his name translates; about whom people told stories of mighty power, all of which demonstrate his super-hero credentials.

The Bible is the Word of God, but that does not mean that every word is to be taken as the literal truth, telling us as it was. Just as novels, films, and drama-documentaries attempt to reveal the truth to us in a variety of ways, so the Bible uses many literary conventions, include ones with mass popular appeal like fiction, legend and even fairy story to proclaim the supreme power of God.