

Axe and Ye Shall Receive

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2 Kings 6:6

(BHS)

וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִים אֲנָהּ נָפַל
וַיֵּרְאֶהוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם
וַיִּקְצֹב־עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלֹךְ־שָׁמָּה
וַיַּצֵּף הַבְּרֹזֶל:

(NKJV)

So the man of God said, “Where did it fall?”
And he showed him the place.
So he cut off a **stick**, and threw it in there;
and he made the iron float.

Note that the word for “stick” is usually glossed “tree.” In line 4, the verb glossed “float” (*zuph*) usually means “flow,” as if the iron flowed up like a fluid. I picked NKJV since others add Elisha’s name in line 3 for clarification; I didn’t want to confuse you.

In the Baal epic, one of his enemies was Mot (Death); I pronounce it “mote.” Another was Yamm, the sea; he was also called Judge River (*Nahar*). Baal could not defeat these very powerful gods without support. In fact, he died. He was powerless in death until his sister Anath came to his aid.

I think our text plays off of that story. The Jordan is personified. Yahweh’s faithful community (called “the sons of the prophets”) was expanding at the river’s expense by defoliating its banks. The river did not like that at all. At the first opportunity, Nahar grabbed the costly axe head and wouldn’t let go—as Mot opened up his jaws to swallow Baal like a lamb.

But Yahweh didn’t even bother to confront the river directly. He simply let Elisha deal with the situation. In the myth, Baal was held helpless in death. But in our text, in the words of the late Dr. Ray Dillard, mighty Yamm “couldn’t even hold on to an axe head,” and had to yield it up before the prophet.

The word for “stick” in Hebrew is the same word as the trees used for lumber. Perhaps Elisha threw in a log. This strikes me as a dominion thing. It is as if Yamm said, “I’m taking take away your power of deforesting me,” and Elisha replied in effect, “Not only will I denude you, but I can build right into you if I please. We can build a dock here; we can dam you if it serves our purpose!” Something like that is going on I think; some power play, a contest of who is more powerful. And Yamm, intimidated by Elisha, yielded up the borrowed iron.

Much later, Babylon swallowed up Judah. Did God’s people sink down, never to be seen again? No! The hope of the exiles (who preserved this account in 2 Kings) was that if they heeded the prophets, they would also flow right out on God’s promises. Israel is the iron owned by Another. Our exilic text promises their restoration.

Jesus was crucified some centuries after that. He was swallowed in death; not like Baal in a mythological sense, but as a man he really died. But death could not hold him. Mot had no sting, had no claim on him—and thus he rose again. His death on the tree disarmed principalities and powers, and the grave was forced to surrender his body. Jesus is the valuable iron that rose again.

Today, as we evangelize and church plant and grow and expand, Satan does not like it, because every single convert we make comes out of his kingdom. We are defoliating him. We are taking from the banks of Satan. Jesus said, “You must bind the strong man before you plunder his house.” The devil does not like having his house plundered, any more than Nahar liked being

spoilt. And so Satan strikes out against us. He throws up obstacles, tries to take what we need, gives us setbacks, brings persecutions—steals our expensive axe heads. Yet if we stay true to the prophet, stay true to Jesus, we know that in the long run the enemy will be unable to hinder us. The gates of hell will not prevail against the Church.

What is the final meaning of our passage? As it was with that iron, and as it was with Israel in Babylon, and as was with Christ in the grave, so someday it will be with us. Death will be unable to hold on to us. Yamm will give up the dead in it. Mot and Sheol will give up the dead in them. On that Day, when we float up on God's promise, we will experience the ultimate meaning of our text. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!