

ELISHA AND THE TWO SHE-BEARS

BY H. S. DARLINGTON

THERE is an odd passage in the Old Testament¹ wherein it is said that two she-bears came to the aid of Elisha when he was taunted by little children for being bald. Because of their unkind remarks Elisha, in the name of the Lord, cursed the impolite little children, whereupon two she-bears came out of the woods, and tore the bodies of forty-two of them. The good prophet was then able to proceed on his way from Bethel to Mount Carmel without further molestation.

On the face of it the story is purely mythical, and Elisha is represented as a heartless monster who by his sorcery called up two savage bears to slaughter the children of a village along his road. In this account we have the cryptic fiction of some secret order of priesthood who were wont to tell the laity of their doings in terms of myth and wonder. In order to seek a point of penetration so as to lift the veil off the body of the tale, it might be feasible, first of all, to give some consideration to the folkloristic significance of hair and the lack of hair.

Now, Elisha was the understudy of Elijah who is said to have been a "hairy man" and to have worn a garment of hair, or possibly the pelt of some shaggy haired animal such as that of the bear or the lion. Elijah probably belonged to some order of shamans who vowed never to cut the hair off their heads and faces, lest the power they received from the spirit they served should forsake them. One such order of priests was known as the Nazarites; and Samson of the famous locks was a member of this society. His "power" or strength was contingent upon his retention of his long locks, for when they were cut he was weak. In other words, there is supposed to be some manner of power in hair itself. However, that notion is a folkloristic one, for the rational minds of men inform them through practical experience of the fact that hair in itself has no more power or strength than in a thread of similar diameter.

¹ II Kings ii: 23-24.

The foregoing consideration should reveal to us that the mythical kind of "hair" in which there is great power, is not truly hair at all; but in some particular use or appearance it may bear a likeness to hair. A streak of lightning descending to the earth has much the suggestion about it of a red hair, or of a hair on fire; and in such a "hair" there is indeed great power or strength. Consider, for example, the Maidu belief: When a tree had been struck by lightning they believed that a hair was to be found there, but that nobody but a doctor could discover it. The doctor, or medicine man, kept the hair and later, when need arose, burned it to cause rain. Only a doctor could safely approach a tree that had been struck by lightning.² If we but give a moment's consideration to this Maidu bit of folklore, we observe that the doctors made the people believe that they had uncanny sight to find the lightning hair of fire that had entered a tree and had become invisible to ordinary eyes. When such a wonderful hair is again set on fire it is transformed once more into lightning which serves then to cause a rainfall. The doctor tells his patients that the power of the lightning cannot harm him for he has been adopted or initiated as a "son" of the god Thunder. In such a case the shaman is a "little Thunder" and can function in rain-making just as the deity in the cloud customarily does. But, in that case the human being who has been initiated into some order, or into some school of medicine men, should have about his person some evidence of hairiness, for hair is potential lightning, hence strength of a mystical kind. The man who has been adopted by Thunder and is, therefore, immune to lightning, with which the lodge of Thunder is filled, should not only be long haired and long bearded, but also should ordinarily wear a garment of hair. A shaggy bear-skin ought to lend its potential lightning-strength to the wearer if he has been initiated into the secrets of Thunder, the shamanistic "father" of the wonderful but hidden lodge in the dark stormy cloud. In the end or at death the more advanced of the priests who worship the Thunderer shoot upwards from this earth and enter a storm-cloud where, seemingly, they become one with their deity. Such was the fate of Elijah, but Elisha was buried as a thunderstone in the earth.

In America, the Pawnee tell a myth about a wonderful boy who

² P. L. Faye, "Notes on the Southern Maidu," Univ. Calif. Anthro. Series, Vol. XX, 1923, p. 53.

climbed a tree at which he saw the lightning striking. In the crotch or in a hollow of the tree he found certain strange beings. He pulled out a human being painted red, wearing a buffalo robe and having a black lariat tied round his waist. This being said his name was Thunder. The boy pulled out another being who was Lightning, and then another called Loud Thunder, and lastly Wonderful Lightning.³

In this instance we find that Thunder or Lightning wears a buffalo robe, that is, a shaggy covering of hair. The lariat is one braided from hair of the mane or tail of a black horse, and is, as it were, the very soul of the lightning. This hairy robe and the lariat were transformations of the lightning shafts that entered the tree.

The Tillamook⁴ tell of a fisherman who went up the river to catch salmon. He heard a bird calling him. It was the Thunderbird, who transformed into a man wearing a bearskin. Thunder was heard as often as this strange person shook the bearskin. This Thunderbird took the man away to his whale-skin lodge where he kept him for a year.

Plainly enough, this instance shows us that the Thunderer wears a bearskin robe, or he transforms into a bear. The man he initiates, into his whale-skin lodge and its secrets, is the doctor who is made a "son" of the "father" who owns the lodge. That is, the initiate is made over into the likeness of the master of the lodge, as a son is like his father. In this case the kidnapped man was made into a priest of Thunder before he was returned to his people to practise healing and divination. The rumbling sound in a storm-cloud is the growling of the bear. Bears and storm-clouds hover round the tops of the mountains, and both at times, literally will roll down the slopes of the mountain. The teeth and claws of the bear are considered to be the "thunderstones" with which Thunder does his destructive mischief.

The priest of Thunder is assimilated to Thunder and, therefore, should have long hair and an uncut beard, for in his hair lies his power and the strength of his magic which makes the dead come to life. The notion that lightning can restore the dead, or that a

³ G. A. Dorsey, *The Pawnee (Mythology)*, I, Carnegie Inst. 1906, p. 149.

⁴ Franz Boas, "Notes on the Tillamook," Univ. Calif. Anthro. Series. Vol. XX, 1923, p. 13.

priest as a little Thunderer can bring the dead into activity again, seems to be due to the fact that after the spring thunderstorms, wherein the gardens and fields are struck with the shaft or rod of Thunder, all nature which seems dead all winter comes again into life and beauty. One can readily see that Thunder himself would be greatly insulted if he were reproached for being bald-headed, for that would mean that he was powerless, and could strike down nobody with his shafts of fiery hair. Similarly, the priests of Thunder would feel insulted if called bald-headed, for it would be the same as saying that they were quack doctors with no ability to heal the sick, restore the dead, to cause the rain, or to perform magical deeds and clueless murders.

The Nisenan, a Californian tribe, say that Thunder is always moving from place to place, and can be seen at times crossing the sky during storms. He hears everything, hence one must be careful in speech, for it is particularly dangerous to curse him. He only kills wrong-doers, however. On a certain occasion when a drunken man lay in the round brush-house trying to sleep off his debauch, Thunder happened to rumble a little, whereupon the drunken man cursed him, shot a gun at him, and called him "bald-headed." Thunder, being incensed at this, determined to punish the man, but not to kill him. Thereupon he struck the man slightly, burning him a little, and rolled him over in the dirt. Thunder covered with smoke then arose from the brush lodge and ascended like a balloon. From his higher position he then rumbled and banged away again. The drunken man was cured of his tendency to curse Thunder and ever afterwards when storms arose he hid from Thunder.⁵

This, then is the parallel instance we are seeking, for here the insulted Thunder strikes his detractors with fiery shafts of lightning. Now, if Thunder had a priest who was wearing a bear's robe, or two such robes, it might well enough be said that a bear or two bears came forth from the darkness of the wooded distance, and attacked and tore the man who called Thunder "bald-headed."

Elisha probably had two bear skins, for no doubt he had one of his own, besides Elijah's. The moment that Elijah ascended into the cloud when grasped by the hand of Lightning or Thunder, he let his hairy mantle fall upon the shoulders of his successor, Elisha. Therefore, it seems probable that Elisha had a "double portion" of

⁵R. L. Beals, "Ethnology of the Nisenan," Univ. Calif. Anthro. Series, Vol. XXXI, pp. 381-383.

the Thunder-spirit upon him, even as he so wished to have. This double portion took the form of two bears, or two she-bears when called into manifestation before ordinary men at the moment Elisha turned about and cursed the little children who ridiculed him. Elisha showed them that he could function not only as a "Little Thunder," but as a "Double Thunder," and could strike them down with lightning shafts which he could direct with the omnipotence of his mind, for he was an adopted "son" of the Grand Master of the Thunder-lodge. The lodge is practically always considered to be a mother, hence the cloud as a "bear" is a "she-bear," for the cloud is also the lodge, or the wife of the Grand Master. The lodge-mother gives birth to her sons when fully initiated, and thus they would be cub-bears if the cloud is a bear. The father is the genius of the storm, and is commonly called Thunder because of his ability to speak in loud tones, rather than to be called Lightning because of his brilliance.

A thunder-priest usually makes claim to being able to make the rain fall when it is wanted. Elijah is represented as a rain-maker who won a contest in opposition to the priests of Baal. He brought the lightning as fire down from heaven upon the altar of sacrifice, and on Mount Carmel he brought on a veritable flood after a protracted drouth. Elisha seems not to figure so much as a rain-maker, but no doubt he could have opened the floodgates of heaven had he desired. A bald-headed man could not possibly have brought the rain, for the rain may be thought of as coming with a thunderstorm when red hairs are seen as lightning streaks between the clouds and the earth. There is, therefore, some real hard sense in the Baganda law that banishes all bald-headed persons to the special province of Kitongole where they are doomed to stay until their hair grows again.⁶ These bald-headed people evidently interfere with the needed rains and the field crops.

At the time Elisha was taunted by the little children he had just come from the Jordan where he witnessed the ascension of Elijah into the cloud. This is to be taken as a symbolic way of saying that the body of the dead or slain Elijah was sent up to the clouds in the smoke of his funeral pyre. Elisha was, therefore, in mourning for his immediate master, and accordingly, after the custom of the Jews, would "make a bald spot between his eyes." That is he would

⁶ J. F. Cunningham, *Uganda and its People*, London 1905, p. 234.

have torn out some of the hair on the fore part of his head as a sign of mourning. Probably he was not actually bald, for he would no doubt have been so superstitious that he would not have believed in his own powers if he were truly bald all over the top of his head. It would have meant to him that Thunder whom he called Yahveh, had wholly abandoned him.

The prophets of Yahveh seem to have had colleges or lodges at Carmel, at Bethel, at Jericho, and at Gilgal. Probably there was one across the Jordan at the place where Elijah died and was cremated. Formerly there had been a lodge at Bethel, but apparently at the time Elisha walked the road past that town, there was no lodge of Yahveh there, but on the other hand, a lodge of priests of Baal and Astarte. Leaving Jericho, Elisha had come to Bethel where the hostile "little children" mocked him by calling him "bald-headed." These "little children" were grown men, for they were the "sons" of the "father priest" or the prophet who had charge of the lodge and college of Baal. These men as shamans of a rival order and a rival deity knew that he was telling the laymen that a miracle had occurred and that Elijah had not really died at all. They knew the esoteric meaning of the tale, for they also used similar stories to keep their laymen mystified. These "sons" of the prophet are also to be viewed as his "little children." One finds that Paul liked to pose as the "father" of his congregation and refer to his converts as "little children."

And just as Elijah before him showed the prophets of Baal how much greater Yahveh was than Baal as a dropper-down of lightning, and sender of rain, so now Elisha resolved to show these unseemly students of the mysteries of Baal how powerful he and his Thunder-deity were. He turned about in the road and cursed the little children with the result that two she-bears rushed out of the woods and tore forty-two of them. If they were strong in their assimilation to the Thunder deity, they could not have been injured by the lightning, and the storm-bears would have caressed them instead of tearing them. Thus was Elisha vindicated; and to himself he had proved that Yahveh does not abandon his shamans when, in mourning for a rain-priest, they have made a bald spot between their eyes.

The words of the taunters were: "Go up you baldhead, go up you baldhead." By this expression they did not mean that he should continue on his way up Mount Carmel, for rather they meant that he

should try to do what Elijah had just done — ascend to heaven. These sons of the prophet, as initiates to the mysteries of Baal and Astarte, knew of the hoax in the ascent of Elijah, and were suggesting to Elisha that he, too, ought to be slain and burned on a pyre so that his smoke might go up as an offering to the nostrils of Yahveh. They knew that lightning was supposed to have taken Elijah up, and that a bald man could not reasonably lay claim to having any ability to rise into the clouds, for he lacked lightning power.

There crops up the question why the number forty-two is specifically given as the number of students in the college at Bethel, all of whom are supposed to have been struck by lightning? Could it be that the acceptable and maximum number of students or brothers in a shamanistic training school, under the tutelage of a fatherly priest, was set at forty-two? If so, perhaps the idea arose in Egypt, where Osiris as the father of men, and the slain god, is said to have been cut up into a number of fragments. Commonly he was divided into fourteen but others say sixteen, and still another account says forty-two. One of these fragments was supposed to have been preserved in each of the principal temples. These forty-two temples were located in the forty-two nomes or districts of the land. Although Osiris was dismembered it was believed that he would be resurrected when all forty-two parts came to a coalescence or integration whereby his spiritual body, rather than his material body, would be reconstituted, and a new Unity achieved. No doubt there was a priest for each of the forty-two temples and the forty-two fragments. If these men met in secret conclave at times, in a secret hall of initiation, they would figuratively at least have restored Osiris to cosmic functioning again. In Christian terms where one or two are gathered together there the Christ will be; so it seems the Egyptians believed that in the assembly of forty-two priests as parts of the total spirit of the slain deity, the godhead in perfection would be reestablished. Every soul seeking union with Osiris had to be tried before forty-two judges who assisted Osiris, and these it seems are the brothers of a fraternity who pass on the character of the candidate for initiation into the ultimate mysteries of the god and of the doctrine of unity with him. Hence from Egypt, probably came the notion of having forty-two students or brothers in a fully constituted lodge of rain-makers.

In summary: The forty-two children torn by the two she-bears, were priestly brothers in an initiation school for doctors who sought for adoption by Thunder, but who knew him as Baal instead of by his "true" name Yahveh. Elisha as a partly bald man called up a thunder-storm, and the lightning struck the false "sons of the prophet." This in itself was a wonder, for a bald man should not normally have any power at all to provoke a thunderstorm. Thus, Elisha was an exceptional priest and Yahveh an exceptional Thunderer.